

THE COMMON APP ESSAY

What Admissions Officers Are Looking For

The Common App personal statement helps admissions officers understand the person behind the application. Strong essays reveal personality, perspective, and the experiences that shape how a student thinks. An extraordinary story isn't necessary. Authenticity is key.

THE QUESTIONS I ASK

Do I learn something about your student that I couldn't learn from the rest of their application? What makes them unique? What do they value? What is interesting about them that helps me understand who they are?

What We're Looking For	Strong Evidence	What May Need Work
Authentic Voice	The student's personality comes through in their observations, humor, word choices, and imperfections. The writing feels natural and unmistakably their own.	Excessive editing, generic language, or artificial sophistication has obscured the student's voice.
Personal Insight	The reader discovers something meaningful about the student's character, values, or perspective.	The essay describes an experience without revealing much about the student.
Reflection & Growth	The student thoughtfully explores a realization, experience, or change in perspective.	The essay explains what happened without exploring why it matters.
Specificity & Detail	Concrete, purposeful details bring the student's experiences and observations to life.	Broad statements, clichés, or vague descriptions replace meaningful examples.
Narrative & Focus	A compelling, coherent story develops a central idea and holds the reader's attention.	The essay tries to cover too much, loses direction, or reads like an activities list.
Individuality	The student's observations and perspective make the essay distinctive and memorable.	The essay could have been written by almost any applicant.
Beyond the Application	The essay reveals something distinctive about the student's personality, values, interests, or perspective that isn't apparent elsewhere in the application.	The essay repeats accomplishments, activities, or information already communicated elsewhere without offering new insight.

AUTHENTICITY IN THE AGE OF AI

AI can produce polished writing, but polish alone cannot establish authenticity. The experiences, observations, humor, and reflections that give an essay meaning must come from the student.

A strong college essay should sound like a thoughtful 17-year-old, not a professional writer, a parent, or a chatbot. The student's natural voice, including its quirks and imperfections, is an asset worth protecting.

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

College Board BigFuture — [What Colleges Look for in Application Essays](#)
Common App — [2026–2027 Essay Prompts](#)