College Essay Prompts

**Directions**: Below is a list of college essay prompts. Some have been used in the past by Common App, while others are from the 2017-2018 school year. Choose three prompts you want to answer. Highlight or underline the prompts.

1. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.
2. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
3. Describe a person you admire and explain why.
4. What is a book you love, and how has it impacted your life?
5. What do you consider to be the single most important societal problem? Why?
6. How has your family background affected the way you see the world?
7. Briefly describe your long- and short-term goals.
8. Why do you want a college education?
9. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
10. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
11. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
12. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?

**Writing the College Essay**

* This is a daunting task for most students. Nearly every college requires at least one college essay (some require more). Some colleges will give you specific prompts while others will allow you to choose your own.
* The best, most successful college essays are the essays that worked! But what makes a college essay noteworthy?
  + Building from a narrow, concrete focus 🡪 most authors start with an event or a description then expand out to make a broader point.
  + Knowing how to tell a story 🡪 some of the experiences in college essays are one-of-a-kind, but most deal with the stuff of everyday life. What stems them apart is the way the author approaches the topic.
  + A killer first sentence 🡪 this is the hook. Suck the reader in.
  + A lively, individual voice 🡪 Writing is for readers. In this case, your reader is an admissions officer who has read thousands of essays before yours, and will read thousands after. Your goal? Don’t bore your reader.
  + Show vs. telling 🡪 It’s not good enough to claim that you’re a dedicated student. You need to show your dedication through a story, through your language.
    - I am mad (that’s a tell sentence) vs. I felt my skin flush; the heat that hit my chest was sudden and terrible. I curled my fingers into my palms, digging my nails into my skin to prevent myself from screaming at the woman who had managed to hit my parked car.
  + Technical correctness 🡪 No spelling mistakes, no grammar mistakes, no syntax issues, no punctuation problems – your essay needs to be proofread and formatted to perfection.

**Sample 1 – Costco Girl**

Prompt 1: Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

Managing to break free from my mother’s grasp, I charged. With arms flailing and chubby legs fluttering beneath me, I was the ferocious two­ year old rampaging through Costco on a Saturday morning. My mother’s eyes widened in horror as I jettisoned my churro; the cinnamon sugar rocket gracefully sliced its way through the air while I continued my spree. I sprinted through the aisles, looking up in awe at the massive bulk products that towered over me. Overcome with wonder, I wanted to touch and taste, to stick my head into industrial sized freezers, to explore every crevice. I was a conquistador, but rather than searching the land for El Dorado, I scoured aisles for free samples. Before inevitably being whisked away into a shopping cart, I scaled a mountain of plush toys and surveyed the expanse that lay before me: the kingdom of Costco.

Notorious for its oversized portions and dollar fifty hot dog combo, Costco is the apex of consumerism. From the days spent being toted around in a shopping cart to when I was finally tall enough to reach lofty sample trays, Costco has endured a steady presence throughout my life. As a veteran Costco shopper, I navigate the aisles of foodstuffs, thrusting the majority of my weight upon a generously filled shopping cart whose enormity juxtaposes my small frame. Over time, I’ve developed a habit of observing fellow patrons tote their carts piled with frozen burritos, cheese puffs, tubs of ice cream, and weight­ loss supplements. Perusing the aisles gave me time to ponder. Who needs three pounds of sour cream? Was cultured yogurt any more well-mannered than its uncultured counterpart? Costco gave birth to my unfettered curiosity.

While enjoying an obligatory hot dog, I did not find myself thinking about the ‘all beef’ goodness that Costco boasted. I instead considered finitudes and infinitudes, unimagined uses for tubs of sour cream, the projectile motion of said tub when launched from an eighty foot shelf or maybe when pushed from a speedy cart by a scrawny seventeen year old. I contemplated the philosophical: If there exists a thirty-three ounce jar of Nutella, do we really have free will? I experienced a harsh physics lesson while observing a shopper who had no evident familiarity of inertia's workings. With a cart filled to overflowing, she made her way towards the sloped exit, continuing to push and push while steadily losing control until the cart escaped her and went crashing into a concrete column, 52” plasma screen TV and all. Purchasing the yuletide hickory smoked ham inevitably led to a conversation between my father and me about Andrew Jackson’s controversiality. There was no questioning Old Hickory’s dedication; he was steadfast in his beliefs and pursuits – qualities I am compelled to admire, yet his morals were crooked. We both found the ham to be more likeable–and tender.

I adopted my exploratory skills, fine-tuned by Costco, towards my intellectual endeavors. Just as I sampled buffalo­chicken dip or chocolate truffles, I probed the realms of history, dance and biology, all in pursuit of the ideal cart–one overflowing with theoretical situations and notions both silly and serious. I sampled calculus, cross-country running, scientific research, all of which are now household favorites. With cart in hand, I do what scares me; I absorb the warehouse that is the world. Whether it be through attempting aerial yoga, learning how to chart blackbody radiation using astronomical software, or dancing in front of hundreds of people, I am compelled to try any activity that interests me in the slightest.

My intense desire to know, to explore beyond the bounds of rational thought; this is what defines me. Costco fuels my insatiability and cultivates curiosity within me at a cellular level. Encoded to immerse myself in the unknown, I find it difficult to complacently accept the “what”; I want to hunt for the “whys” and dissect the “hows”. In essence, I subsist on discovery.

Strengths: begins with a story, imagery, strong vocabulary, a philosophical approach to writing a college essays (this student was accepted into 5 Ivy League schools)  
Word count: 658

**Sample 2 – Just Keep Folding**

Having explored the myths from ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt, my curiosity was piqued in eighth grade by a simple legend from Japanese lore. If you fold one thousand paper cranes, the gods will grant you one wish. I took it as a challenge. My previous forays into origami had ended poorly, but I was so excited to begin my quest that this detail seemed inconsequential. My art teacher loaned me a piece of origami paper and, armed with an online tutorial, my quest began. Like an early prototype of the airplane, I ascended towards my dreams for a glorious moment before nose-diving into the ground. The first crane was a disastrous failure of wrinkly lines and torn paper. Too embarrassed to ask for another, I turned to my stack of Post-it notes. By the third attempt, I ended up with a sticky pink paper crane. Holding that delicate bird, I was flooded with triumph and elation.

The first two hundred cranes were all crafted from Post-it notes. Armed with a pack of highlighters, I decorated each piece of paper individually. I folded cranes at home, between classes, and in the car. My fingers were permanently sticky from the glue I scraped off every square. Slowly, my collection grew: first ten, then fifty, then one hundred. Before the task could become monotonous, I started experimenting. How small was it possible for a crane to be? Smaller than a golf ball? Smaller than a dime? Small enough to sit on the end of a pencil? Any size was attainable. I could make a crane smaller than almost any arbitrary form of measurement. Soon I could finish a crane in fifty seconds or with my eyes closed. Anything square and foldable became my medium. Paper towels, candy wrappers, and aluminum foil joined my vibrant menagerie of carefully folded paper. I was unstoppable; that wish was as good as mine.

By six hundred cranes, the increasing demands of high school academics caused my pace to slow. I despaired. I wouldn’t let this be another ambitious project that I couldn’t finish.

My cranes mattered to me. As an outlet for expression, they served as a way to defuse frustration and sadness, and a source of pride and joy. Their creation allows me to bring beauty to the world and to find a sense of order in the bustle and chaos of life. There is a lot of beauty to be found in tiny things. I’m reminded that little gestures have a lot of meaning. I have given away cranes to my friends as a pick-me-up on bad days, and I have made cranes to commemorate people, such as the dark green crane I made the day my grandmother died. They are a symbol of hope to remind me what I have accomplished.

So, I pushed myself to keep working and to keep folding one crane at a time. My determination paid off, and in the summer after sophomore year, my passion was reinvigorated. One month before the end of junior year, I folded my thousandth paper crane. As I leaned over the open drawer brimming with origami pieces in a multitude of sizes and colors, I felt a rush of satisfaction and triumph. Not only was 1,000 cranes an achievement in its own right, but I proved to myself that I can finish what I start.

The world is filled with big numbers. College tuition, monthly rent, and car prices deal in the many thousands. Those figures are incomprehensible to someone who has never interacted with anything so large, and I wanted to understand them. A thousand will never simply be a number to me: it is hundreds upon hundreds of hand-folded cranes combined with years of effort.

So what did I wish for? It turns out, I didn’t need the wish. I learned I have the power to make things happen for myself.

Word Count: 650

Admissions Officer: “What was most impressive about this essay was not the accomplishment of making 1,000 paper cranes, but how much we were able to learn about her through this simple anecdote. We determined she is someone who perseveres, as seen through the personal growth that arrived from her initial failure and eventual completion of a goal on top of the demands of high school. We learned she is kind and caring—traits exemplified through sharing cranes with friends having bad days and those made to commemorate people she lost. Her essay also showed us she is curious and willing to experiment, like testing out how small she could make cranes. These characteristics stood out and gave us an idea of how Jodie will contribute to our community, which is important in a holistic process where we try to learn about the whole student.”

**Sample 3 – Growing Strawberries in a High School Locker**

One day this year, as I was walking by my perpetually empty locker, I was struck by an idea. I cannot identify what sparked its conception, but as my idea started to grow, thinking of possible solutions and analyzing and assessing feasibility issues began to consume me. My father calls this a “designer’s high,” and it was very familiar to me. I’ve experienced it often while collaborating with my robotics team, and in the hours I’ve spent with my father on design concepts for his prefabricated homes. Still, nothing I had worked on before was similar to the feeling this “out of the box” idea had triggered.

Growing strawberries in a high school locker seemed fairly simple at first. Despite knowing that this is not the typical habitat for strawberry plants, I knew from my green-thumbed mother that strawberries are among the easiest fruits to grow. Many students and teachers became interested in my project, yet were skeptical of my botanical prowess and quick to conclude that a plant could not possibly receive its basic necessities in a locker, which didn’t have proper ventilation, was hot and humid, and was shielded from both sunlight and any source of water. Still, I was determined to make this work. The unfriendly habitat and logistical obstacles did not deter me.

My horticultural roots stem from my mother and elementary level biology. It wasn’t until this year that my knowledge expanded beyond this casual level into a realm where biology, chemistry, and physics found beautiful, synergistic intersections. I was determined to apply what I had learned and got to work.

Due to the lack of electricity and direct sunlight, I decided to use a solar panel paired with a light sensor on the outside of my locker to power a strong, blue LED light, which is best for photosynthesis and plant growth. A friend taught me how to solder and helped me create the solar panel setup, which turns on the blue light only when it is dark outside so the plants experience the proper light cycles. I also set up a system to slowly water the plants automatically. This involved a series of drip bottles—which another friend had for his old, now deceased, pet guinea pig—arranged to drip into each other and then onto the soil.

Having addressed the issues of light and water, I focused on the need to circulate air. Leaving the door closed would provide essentially no circulation and would create a hot and moist environment, making the plants more susceptible to mold. After experimenting with various designs and a 3D printed prototype, I came up with an extension of the latching mechanism on the inside of my locker, which I called the “strawberry jamb.” The jamb, which I cut using our school’s CNC router, sufficiently boosts airflow by allowing the door to remain ajar about two inches while still maintaining the integrity of the existing locking mechanism. I made a beautiful wooden box, emblazoned with the laser-cut engraving “Strawberry Fields Forever” and provided proper drainage onto a tray inside the locker to avoid water damage to school property. The strawberry plants are now growing in my partially open locker providing a topic of conversation and much commentary from students walking by.

What began as a seemingly improbable idea fed my passion for creative thinking and mechanical engineering. This project not only allowed me to practically apply isolated academic principles I had studied, but it also pushed me to traverse multiple disciplines to creatively solve problems. Furthermore, its uniqueness beckoned for community input and collaboration, allowing me to access resources to achieve fiscally responsible solutions and ultimate success. For me, it was invigorating to propel a project that many deemed impossible into the realm of possible. I intend to continue to explore and invent because only then are new realities possible.  
  
Word count: 643  
Admissions Officer: “This essay not only provided us with background on the student’s academic interest—mechanical engineering—it also gave us a sense of the kind of student he would be on the Homewood campus. His account of successfully growing strawberries in his locker showcased his ingenuity, sense of humor, and, most crucially, enthusiasm for collaborative work. He lets the details of his story illustrate that he’s a team player, which is much more powerful than merely telling us directly. The combination of personal and intellectual anecdotes made it easy to imagine how this student will contribute to our campus life both in the lab and in the residence halls, which is exactly what the committee looks to the personal statement to do.”

**Your Assignment:** You will be writing a college essay in steps while experimenting with your narrative-telling abilities. Please follow the directions below, come to our final class sessions prepared, and post your finished essay on Google Classroom no later than 8:50 on Friday, June 9th. As per usual, no late assignments will be accepted. This assignment is a Writing grade (your last one!)

1. Choose your favorite three prompts from the provided list.
2. For **each** prompt, write an introduction. Come to class on Monday, June 5th with your three introductions written – one per page in your journal.
3. In class on the 5th, we will do a round-table review. Your peers will help you choose which two introductions are your best.
4. Once you have narrowed down your options, **you** decide which of the two essays you want to continue.
5. We will work on your rough draft in class on the 5th and the 7th. Come to class on **Wednesday the 7th** having at least half of your college essay complete (hand-written is fine – we’ll be finishing it in class).
6. We will peer edit your rough draft on the 7th.
7. Your final draft is due Friday the 9th by 8:50 posted as a Google Doc on Google Classroom. If you posted a Word Doc instead, I cannot add comments.

**Rubric:**

* Prompt is included above the essay. (5 points)
* The essay has an interesting, pertinent title. (5 points)
* The essay has a narrow, concrete focus and is not too broad. (10 points)
* The essay is a narrative – it begins by telling a story or providing a description, with an interesting hook, then expands into the author’s deeper meaning. The narrative is personal, well-written, using detailed imagery, and strong vocabulary. It is creative, showcasing a clear tone and authentic voice. (60 points)
* The essay is within 500-700 words. A word count is included at the end of the essay. (10 points)
* The essay is free of syntactical, grammatical, and mechanical errors. It has clearly been proofread and edited. (10 points)