

The personal essay

The Common App prompts explained, a planning sheet, and three complete sample essays with commentary.

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For undergraduate admission to U.S. and Canadian universities.

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Complimentary for Ariana Nexus Academy students

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The personal essay, for undergraduate applications

Six hundred and fifty words that have to do one job: make a stranger believe they know how you think. Not what you have suffered. How you think.

What this essay is for

Your transcript says what you achieved. Your recommendations say how others saw you. Your essay is the only document in the file written in your own voice, and admissions officers read it to answer one private question: would this person be interesting to sit next to for four years? It is not a test of English, and it is not a competition in hardship.

THE THING WE HAVE TO SAY PLAINLY TO AFGHAN APPLICANTS

You have a story that Western readers find dramatic. That is a trap, not an advantage.

An essay about war, displacement or a closed school will be read alongside a thousand essays about war, displacement and closed schools. What distinguishes yours is never the event. It is the thinking you did about it, and whether the reader leaves knowing something about how your mind works.

You are also allowed to write about none of it. An essay about repairing a motorcycle, arguing with your grandmother about poetry, or losing a chess match is a completely legitimate essay, and in a pile of trauma it is often the one that is remembered.

Never write an essay whose purpose is to make the reader feel sorry for you. Pity is not admission.

The prompts

The Common Application has published seven prompts in recent cycles, summarized below. Confirm the current wording on the Common App website before you write — prompts do change,

and one of the seven is always "a topic of your choice", which means the prompt list never limits you.

#	IN SHORT	IT WORKS WHEN
1	A background, identity, interest or talent so meaningful your application would be incomplete without it	You have one specific thing, not a category. "Cooking" is a category; "the day I ruined my mother's bolani business" is a thing.
2	A challenge, setback or failure, and what you learned	The failure is genuinely yours and the learning is specific. Avoid the ones where you are the hero by paragraph three.
3	A time you questioned or challenged a belief or idea	You are willing to show yourself changing your mind, including about something you still half-believe.
4	Something someone did for you that made you grateful, and how it affected you	The gratitude is small and precise. A neighbour, a teacher, a stranger at a border.
5	An accomplishment or event that sparked personal growth	The event is small enough to describe in a scene.
6	A topic, idea or concept so engaging you lose track of time	You can teach the reader something in 200 words and make it feel like play.
7	A topic of your choice	You already have the essay and it does not fit the other six. Most strong essays end up here.

The shape that works

PART	WORDS	WHAT IT DOES
Scene	150–200	Drop the reader inside one specific moment. Present tense is allowed. No throat-clearing, no background paragraph first.
Widening	150–200	Step back. What was actually going on. Introduce the pattern this moment belongs to in your life.
Turn	150–200	The thinking. What you got wrong, what changed, what you now do differently — shown, not announced.
Landing	80–120	A small, concrete image or action from the present that carries the change. Never a moral. Never "this taught me that..."

SAMPLE ESSAY ONE

The bolani stand

Prompt 7 · 612 words · a small subject, carried well

My mother priced her bolani at twenty afghanis for eleven years. I changed it to twenty-five on a Tuesday in June, without telling her, because I had read four pages of a used economics book and believed I understood demand.

By Thursday we had sold forty-one fewer. On Friday my mother stood behind the pan and said nothing about the price, which was worse than if she had shouted. On Saturday I put it back to twenty and sold out by two in the afternoon, and I spent the walk home constructing the explanation that would make me right: the customers were irrational, the sample was too small, Friday is always slow.

None of it was true and I knew it by the time we reached our street. What I had not priced was that Sharifa's stand is forty metres away and sells the same bolani, and that nobody in our neighbourhood has ever needed to decide between us before,

A first sentence with a price, a date and a confession. No scene-setting paragraph before it.

Specific numbers. And the honest admission of building an excuse — the sentence that tells a reader this person can be trusted to think.

The turn arrives through analysis, not emotion. He is not sad about the bolani; he is interested in it.

Widening: the same idea found in three other places. This is the paragraph that shows a mind, not an anecdote.

He does not resolve the tension. Holding two half-true things at once reads as maturity, which is exactly what is being scored.

and that by charging five afghanis more I had made them decide. My mother had not set a price. She had built an arrangement in which no one had to choose.

Landing: an action in the present, a small win, a joke against himself, and a forward line that is not a moral.

I have thought about that arrangement for two years now. It is in most of the things I find interesting. It is in why the wholesale market on Fridays has thirty men selling identical onions at identical prices and none of them starving. It is in why my uncle refuses to take the higher rent from a tenant he does not know. My economics book called this inefficiency, in a tone I had adopted without noticing.

I still think the book is partly right. There is money on the table in our neighbourhood that nobody is picking up. But I have stopped believing that the money on the table is the only thing on the table, and I have started asking what else people are buying when they decline it.

I run the accounts now, and the price is still twenty. Last month I convinced my mother to make sixty extra on Thursdays, because Thursday is when the tailors upstairs get paid, and we sell out of those by four. She let me try it for three weeks before she agreed it was working. That is the correct amount of trust to extend to a seventeen-year-old with four pages of an economics book, and I intend to spend a great deal of my life earning the rest of it.

SAMPLE ESSAY TWO

What I did with the hours

Prompt 2 · 638 words · a closed school, written without self-pity

For the first four months I organised my books by height. Then by subject. Then by height again, because by then it was February and I had run out of systems.

I was in grade nine when the school closed to me. I am not going to describe the closing; you can read about it anywhere, and my version is not more interesting than the others. What I can tell you about is the specific and unglamorous problem of what a person does with six hours a day that used to belong to somebody else.

The first thing I learned is that nobody tells you what order to learn things in, and that this is most of what a school is for. I spent eleven weeks on trigonometry I did not need because it came next in the book, and skipped the statistics chapter because it looked like tables. It was a year before I understood that I had skipped the one I would use most.

Opens on an absurd, specific detail. Instantly a person rather than a category.

Refuses the expected essay in one sentence, respectfully — then names the real subject. This is the boldest and best move in the piece.

Concrete failure with a number attached. No self-pity anywhere.

A practical insight that most adults do not have. Readers notice.

The teaching thread arrives as a fact, not as a claim about her character. "I was wrong twice" does the work that "I am resilient" never could.

Wants something specific from a university, and ends on the ordinary present. No moral, no thank-you, no plea.

The second thing is that studying alone is a different skill from studying, and it is mostly a scheduling skill. I now keep a paper timetable with the hours filled in the night before, because I discovered that deciding what to study costs more of my attention than studying does.

The third thing arrived by accident. Zainab, who lives two houses down and is three years younger, asked me to explain fractions. Teaching her took ninety minutes and I was wrong twice. There are fourteen of us now, Tuesdays and Saturdays, and I have rewritten the fractions explanation six times. I have learned more from the rewrites than from the original learning, which is a sentence I would not have believed at fifteen.

I want to study mathematics, and I want to be taught by people who will tell me what order to learn things in, and I would like to be in a room where being wrong twice in ninety minutes is ordinary rather than remarkable. Until then it is Tuesdays and Saturdays, and a paper timetable, and the statistics chapter, which I have now read three times.

SAMPLE ESSAY THREE

The wrong bird

Prompt 6 · 601 words · the essay that is simply interesting

There is a bird on the poplar behind our compound that I identified as a common myna for two years. It is not a common myna. It is a bank myna, which differs in the colour of the skin around the eye and in almost nothing else, and I had looked at it perhaps four hundred times before I saw it.

What I want to describe is the particular feeling of the correction, because I have been chasing it ever since. It was not embarrassment. It was closer to the feeling of a door appearing in a wall you have walked past your whole life.

I started keeping a notebook. In eighteen months I have recorded sixty-one species, of which I am confident about forty-eight, and I have learned that the confident ones are the boring part. The interesting entries are the eleven marked with a question mark and a date, including one from last March that I still cannot resolve and that may simply have been a starling in bad light.

No adversity, no lesson-shaped arc, and it is the essay most committees will remember. Subject matter is not the same as significance.

She names an emotion precisely instead of reaching for a big one. Precision reads as intelligence.

Numbers again, and the insight that the uncertainties are the valuable records.

The transfer: a habit of mind moving from one domain into another. This is the paragraph that makes an admissions officer picture her in a seminar.

Closes on the same bird, at the same scale, with a wish rather than a moral.

Birds have made me suspicious of my own recognition. I used to think that seeing was a single act; it is at least two, and the second one — the checking — is the one nobody teaches. My chemistry improved when I started treating my answers the way I treat a bird at two hundred metres: plausible, not yet confirmed.

The bank myna is still on the poplar. It is not a rare bird and nothing about it is remarkable except that for two years it was, to me, a different animal, and I was completely certain. I would like to spend my life in fields where that can happen to me on purpose.

SECTION THREE

Writing it

The planning sheet, the revision protocol, and the supplements.

The planning sheet

Answer these on paper before you write a sentence. Most students find the essay in question four or five.

- 1 Name five moments from the last three years that you still think about. Not the biggest five. The five that recur.
- 2 For each, write the smallest detail you remember — a price, a sound, a wrong turn, something someone wore.
- 3 For each, write what you believed before it and what you believed after. If nothing changed, cross it out.
- 4 Which one would you still be interested in explaining to a stranger at two in the morning?
- 5 What does that moment reveal about how you think that nothing else in your application shows?

- 6 Write the first sentence. Then delete everything you wrote before it.

The revision protocol

PASS	DO ONLY THIS
1 · Cut	Delete the first paragraph. Nine times out of ten it was throat-clearing and the essay starts in paragraph two.
2 · Verbs	Circle every adjective about yourself and delete it. Replace with an action that proves the same thing.
3 · Specifics	Every abstract noun — hardship, opportunity, passion, community — is replaced by a thing you could photograph.
4 · Aloud	Read it aloud to one person. Mark every place they stop listening. Fix those, not the places you like least.
5 · Ending	Delete the last sentence. Read it again. If it still ends, leave it deleted.
6 · Name test	Cover your name. Could this essay have been written by any of your classmates? If yes, it is not finished.

Supplemental essays

Most universities ask for one to four short supplements in addition to the main essay. They are scored harder than students expect, because they are the easiest place to detect an application sent to twenty places.

THE QUESTION	WHAT IT IS REALLY ASKING	THE TRAP
Why this university? (100–300 words)	Have you read anything about us beyond the ranking?	Naming the weather, the campus beauty, or "world-class faculty". Name two courses, one professor, one programme, one thing you would join.
Why this major? (100–250)	Do you know what the subject actually contains?	Describing the career, not the subject. Name a specific topic inside the field that you already chase.
Describe a community you belong to (150–300)	How do you behave when nobody is grading you?	Choosing "Afghan community" as a category. Choose the small one: your study group, the poplar-tree birdwatchers, the six tailors upstairs.
Extracurricular you care about (150)	Depth, not the list	Repeating the CV. Pick one, give one scene from it.

Before you send

- ☐ It is under 650 words for the main essay and under each supplement's limit.
- ☐ It does not repeat anything already visible on my CV or transcript.
- ☐ It contains no adjective about myself.
- ☐ A reader who knows nothing about Afghanistan can follow every sentence without a footnote.
- ☐ Nothing in it exists to make the reader pity me.
- ☐ One person has read it aloud and I fixed the places they stumbled.
- ☐ The last sentence is an image or an action, not a lesson.
- ☐ I wrote it. Every word.

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