Common Application Essay Questions for 2013-2014

1. Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their

application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

2. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons

did you learn?

3. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you

make the same decision again?

4. Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience

there, and why is it meaningful to you?

5. Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from

childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

Which Essay Prompt Should You Choose?

To paraphrase the advice given in the announcement, you should choose the essay prompt that best allows you to tell the application readers something about you that they won’t get from your high transcripts and test scores. Note that these are all “touchy-feely” topics, not questions about your SAT scores or where you placed in the Math Olympics.

This type of reflection is often hard for young people to do well (the hardest topic to write about is usually you!), but just know that college admissions officers aren’t perfect, they know you’re not perfect, and you’re frankly more interesting when you show something other than how perfect you are. It’s okay to reveal a weakness or a fear, or to share something that seems silly, as long as it helps admissions officers feel like they got to know you better and it makes it easier for them to imagine you walking around their campus a year or two from now. Being real is better than simply being impressive.

Common Application Word Limits

You must submit only one essay, and it must be no more than 650 words. This is big news in its own right: The word limit was just 500 words last year! Trust us: Those extra 150 words can make all the difference in the world when you’re trying to whittle down your story. You don’t need to use all 650 words… As The Common Application folks say, “650 words is your limit, not your goal.” If you can tell your story in an impactful way in just 400 words, then great. Some of our all-time favorite admissions essays are also some of the shortest we have seen.

Note that there is actually also a minimum word limit: 250 words. The system won’t accept anything shorter than that, although we doubt many college applicants will end up with first drafts shorter than 250 words.