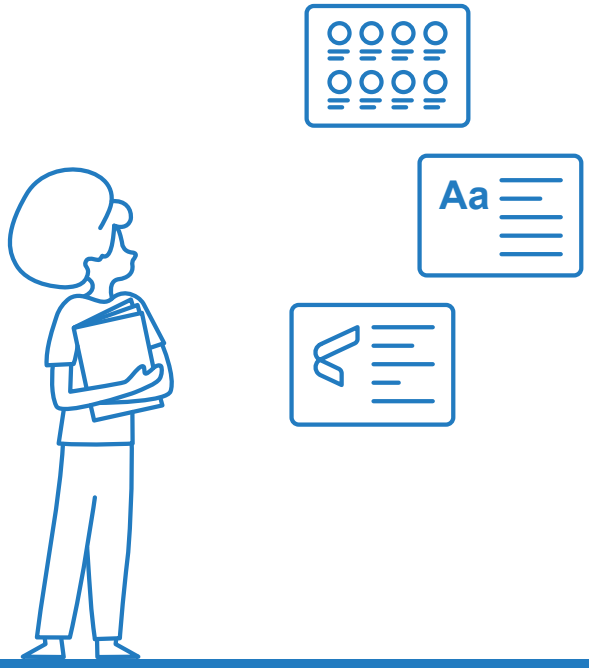
Telling your story

How to approach the essay

The Common App essay instructions ask you what you want the readers of your application to know about you apart from courses, grades, and test scores. You have 7 prompts but endless possibilities to tell your story. Here are some ideas to inspire your thinking.



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

Think about

- Your community, environment, family, and culture
- What you're deeply curious about and how you spend your time
- What makes you proud
- People and experiences that have shaped your life

Ask yourself

- What's missing from the rest of my application?
- Is there context to help colleges understand who I am?

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?

Think about

- All obstacles: big, small, personal, and societal
- Hardships faced by family or friends that also impacted you
- Unresolved challenges you're still struggling with

Ask yourself

- How did I cope? How did I grow?
- Who helped me?

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Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?

Think about

- Anywhere you spend time: school, clubs, work, home, place of worship
- Everyone you interact with: friends, teammates, family, teachers, coaches

Ask yourself

- Did the experience clarify or change my values?
- What was the impact on my relationships?
- Did I surprise myself—or anyone else?

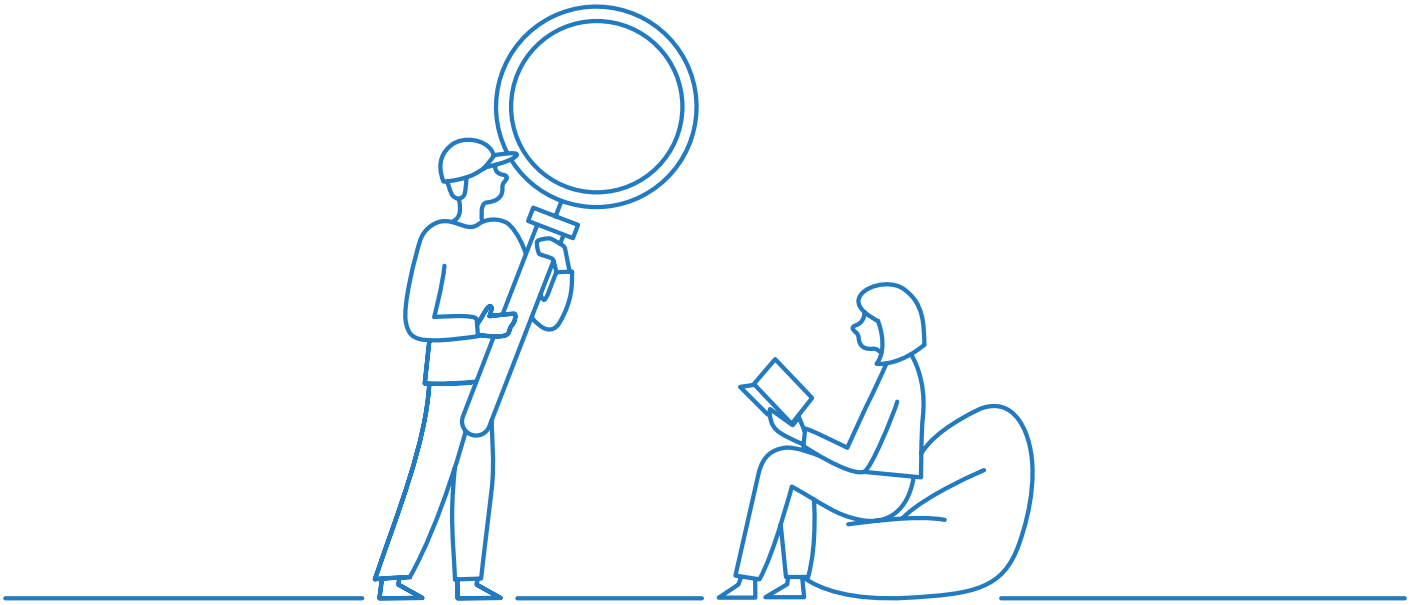
Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?

Think about

- All types of interaction: Compliments, criticism, gifts, advice, support
- People who know you well and people who don't

Ask yourself

- What made the interaction surprising?
- How did I feel?
- How did I react?



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Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

Think about

- The full range of your achievements, both public and private
- Small or everyday experiences that had a powerful impact on you
- Times when you were surprised by what you learned or discovered

Ask yourself

- How did I change?
- How can I continue to grow?
- How can I share what I learned with others?

Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging 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?

Think about

- How you choose to spend your free time
- Your hobbies, your classes
- What you read, what you write, what you create

Ask yourself

- How did my curiosity start?
- What does this interest tell others about me?
- What does this interest tell me about myself?

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Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

Think about

- What you want to share, not what you think colleges want to hear
- Topics that reveal who you are and what matters to you

Ask yourself

- Does this essay provide new information to my colleges?
- Is there anything left unsaid in my application?

Thank you to former high school college advisor Alice Kleeman and the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Making Caring Common Project for their inspiration and contributions to this resource.

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