

Common App Essay Template & Workbook

A structured guide to help you craft a personal, compelling Common App personal statement.

PART 1: BRAINSTORMING & TOPIC SELECTION

Instructions: Before you write, explore potential topics. Complete this section for 2-3 different ideas.

Idea 1:

Core Experience/Story:

Briefly describe the moment, challenge, interest, or relationship you might focus on.

text

Why It Matters to You:

What did you learn about yourself, others, or the world?

text

What It Reveals About You:

List 3-4 qualities or values this story demonstrates (e.g., resilience, curiosity, empathy, leadership, perspective).

1.

2.

3.

4.

Idea 2:

Core Experience/Story:

text

Why It Matters to You:

text

What It Reveals About You:

1.

2.

3.

4.

Topic Selection Check:

Which idea feels most:

- **Genuine** to your voice?

- **Revealing** of your character?

- **Unique** to your perspective?

- **Rich** with specific details?

My Chosen Direction:

PART 2: THE NARRATIVE ARC – STRUCTURING YOUR STORY

Use this framework to outline your chosen essay. **Aim for 550-650 words.**

1. THE HOOK (Paragraph 1)

Start in the middle of a moment. Use sensory details.

Guiding Prompts:

- What did you see, hear, or feel in that key moment?
- What was the immediate conflict, question, or surprise?
- Avoid starting with “I have always...” or dictionary quotes.

Your Draft Hook:

text

2. THE CONTEXT & “BEFORE” (Paragraph 1-2)

Briefly set the scene. Who were you before this experience?

Guiding Prompts:

- What was your initial mindset or expectation?
- Why was this situation significant or challenging?

Your Draft Context:

text

3. THE TURNING POINT/REALIZATION (Paragraph 2-3)

This is the heart of your essay. Show a shift in understanding.

Guiding Prompts:

- What specific action did you take or observation did you make?
- What new insight dawned on you? (Show, don’t just tell the lesson).

- Use a short line of dialogue or a concrete detail to anchor it.

Your Draft Turning Point:

text

4. THE “AFTER” & REFLECTION (Paragraph 3-4)

How did you change? How does this insight apply more broadly?

Guiding Prompts:

- How did your actions or perspective change afterward?
- How does this single experience connect to a larger part of your identity or worldview?
- Don’t just list achievements; show how your motivation evolved.

Your Draft Reflection:

text

5. THE FORWARD LOOK (Final Paragraph)

Connect your past story to your future in college.

Guiding Prompts:

- How will this aspect of you engage with a college community?
- What kind of learner, roommate, or community member will you be?
- End with an image, a hopeful question, or a quiet statement of purpose.

Your Draft Conclusion:

text

PART 3: CRAFT & REVISION CHECKLIST

After your first draft, review each point.

Voice & Authenticity:

- Does it sound like **you**? Read it aloud.
- Have you removed clichés and overly formal language?
- Is the tone appropriate (reflective, not arrogant; honest, not overly self-critical)?

Show, Don't Tell:

- Instead of "I became a leader," do you show yourself organizing the team?
- Instead of "I am resilient," do you show yourself getting up after a specific failure?
- Instead of "I love chemistry," do you describe the reaction that captivated you?

Focus & Depth:

- Is your essay about **ONE** core story/idea explored deeply?
- Have you cut irrelevant background or secondary events?
- Does every sentence serve the main narrative?

The "So What?" Test:

- Would a reader know what you **value** by the end?
 - Would they understand how you **think** or **learn**?
 - Does it reveal something not found in your activities list or transcript?
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PART 4: FINAL FORMATTING & POLISH

Before Submission:

- **Word Count:** Confirm it's between 250-650 words.
- **Paste Test:** Copy draft into a plain text editor to fix hidden formatting.
- **Font:** Use a standard, readable font (Times New Roman, Arial, Calibri).
- **Spacing:** Single or double-spaced for easy reading.
- **Proofread:** Check for typos, then have **two people** proofread it.
 - **Reader 1:** For grammar/spelling. (Done: ____)
 - **Reader 2:** For overall meaning and impact. (Done: ____)

Final Step: Let the essay rest for 48 hours, then read it one last time with fresh eyes.

Remember: The best Common App essay is not about the most extraordinary event—it's about your extraordinary reflection on an event. It's your story, told in your voice.

You can copy this template into a document to fill out digitally or print it to write by hand.