



ROSTRUM

How to Write the **Perfect Common App Essay**

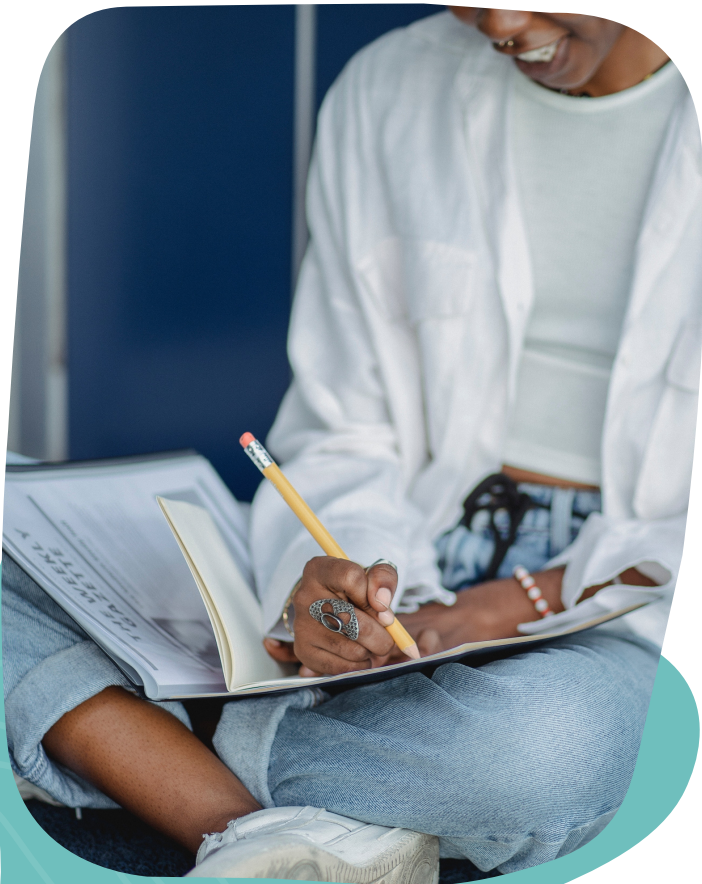


A Rostrum Education Publication

Who are you?

This question plagues the life of every teenager who is faced with the daunting task of writing a college admissions essay for the US- especially, the Common App essay.

This is a personal essay, ideally reflective, creative and narratively sound, that is meant to summarise your life experiences so far using a clean, concise example. I like to describe it as a trailer to your high-school experience, which accurately reflects what your core qualities are, what is important to you, your worldview and yes, you guessed it correctly.



This essay is not the only piece of writing that matters in your application. However, it allows the admissions team to gauge whether the personal details you have provided add up with the story you have to tell about yourself- this essay is all about consistency.

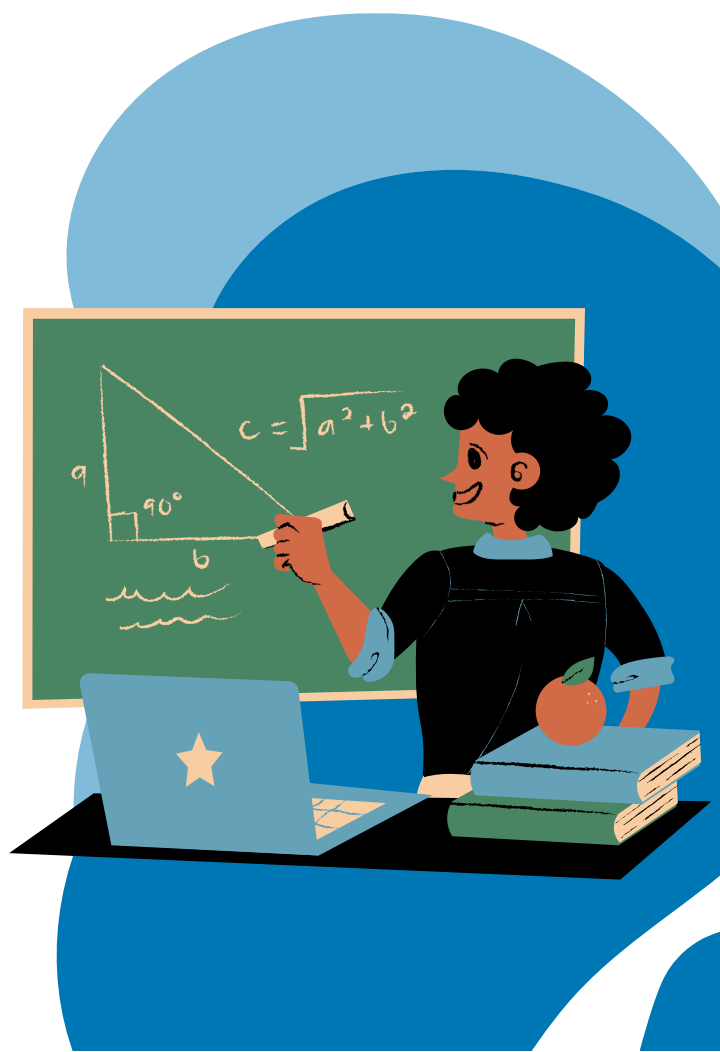
I could tell you prosaically the typical, tedious “*how to write a Common App Essay*” spiel, but in true personal essay style, I will tell you a story instead.

The Story

In 2020,

I met a student who was a **mathematical and coding genius**. He was dedicated to his studies (his grades corroborated this), won multiple contests and Olympiads, had multiple public speaking accolades to his name and led important student clubs and initiatives. He was popular, humorous, and ambitious. He was scared of absolutely nothing- except this essay. He was convinced that he wanted to pick one of these activities he was a part of and write about a predictable competition or contest. Even though that would usually be acceptable and fit the prompt, I was against it. It might make an acceptable Common App essay, but not a stunning one. Not a star essay. If he was to write about something basic, without layers or reflection, it wouldn't be the best use of this space which is meant to be your way to communicate your personality to the admissions team. So, we parked the I-went-to-a-competition-and-won essay and brainstormed together.

Sometimes, when you are in **high school**, it might seem that you have nothing else to write about. But we began to talk about things enjoyed outside of school- movies, music, books. We also talked about his favourite food, his family life and his friendship group. I learnt about his multicultural background, his quirky little habits (**reading upside down**) and his love for Iron Man. We also explored how he loved to doodle, how he usually processed and expressed his emotions and his learning experiences. And finally, we chanced upon his love for art.

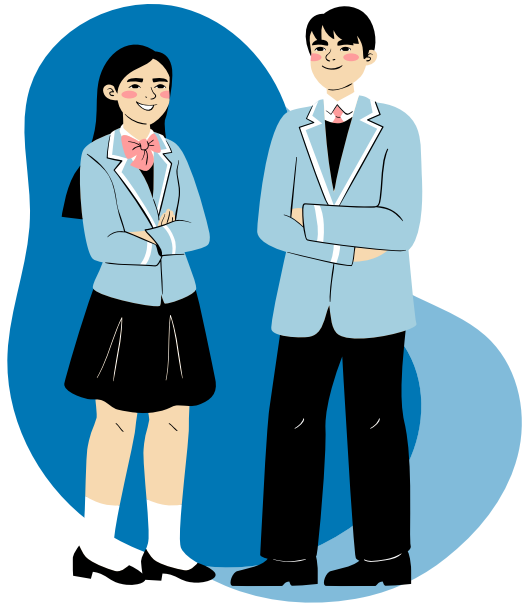


He spent hours making painstakingly particular pointillism pieces, which all had unique themes. It was an aha! moment. We spent the next few weeks crafting a narrative about how he expressed himself through these pieces, and at the end of the process, there was a feeling of having achieved something tremendous- and a happy acceptance from his dream school!

That year, I embarked on many such self-discovery journeys with teenagers and we came up with inspiring, exciting, sophisticated and even funny essays that got them into well-renowned colleges and universities. A boy who loved- loved- food wrote about his love for food! We were at lunch and became inspired by the simple yet elegant (and versatile) grilled cheese sandwich and created a wonderful narrative about his similarly versatile personality together. There was also a boy who was laid back and always sort of nodded and shrugged when I asked him about what he liked- but then he revealed that he felt calm when he played basketball.

We took that and spun a tale about the art of meditative basketball that took him to a hyper-selective university. From early morning walks and journaling to rajma chawal and Lego, my students have found their answer to “who are you?” in surprising and successful ways.





What is the format for a Common App essay?

As I mentioned earlier, **the Common App essay** is meant to be a personal essay, not an academic one. Resultantly, there is no traditional or correct **“format”** to write this essay. The word limit is important- make sure to adhere to it and avoid unnecessary filler words.

Structure-wise, these essays can go in two major directions.

1 Wide

this is when you pick multiple incidents or ideas with a theme that connects them.

2 Deep

this is when you pick one incident and go into detail about it.

It doesn't matter which way you decide to go if you are making sure to put enough of your personality into the piece.

Remember to explicitly state your learning or “point” towards to end (or even the beginning, as I love to do sometimes!).

For example, if you have written an essay where you are describing your early morning walk in detail, you need to mention what that did to you at the end, or it won't make much sense. Your morning walk where you interacted with different people at a tea stall, played squash, enjoyed breakfast alone and read a chapter of *To Kill a Mockingbird* before 7 am demonstrates that you have learnt, at the mere age of **16/17/18**, to complete half your tasks for the day before the rest of the world even wakes up. Isn't that an absolute asset for you to have at college?



I know we all work extremely hard to learn **SAT** vocabulary words and would love to show off how many of them we can use, but this essay isn't the best place for it. I suggest sticking to simple, effective sentences that convey your point accurately. I also believe that simple language has the power to be more interesting or curiosity-inducing than something out of a thesaurus or academic paper.

For example- read these and decide, if this was the first sentence of an essay that you were reading as an (often tired) admissions officer, which one would catch your eye?

Option 1

*I am a voracious **reader** and **devour** fiction literature daily, most commonly enjoying classics.*

Option 2

*I lead a double life. In one I am **Yashodhara**, writing essays for students, and in the other, I'm Jane Eyre falling in love or Elizabeth Bennet, putting her foot down when it counts.*

As you can tell, simplicity makes a world of a difference!



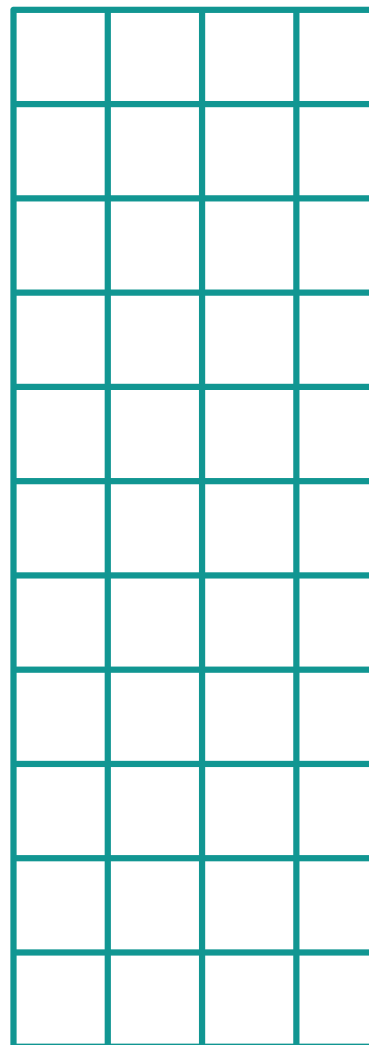
The Common App provides students with a few prompts they can pick from. Please remember to read through these and decide how your essay is answering the question in mind if you are picking one of the more leading prompts.

Here are the prompts for this academic year:

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



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



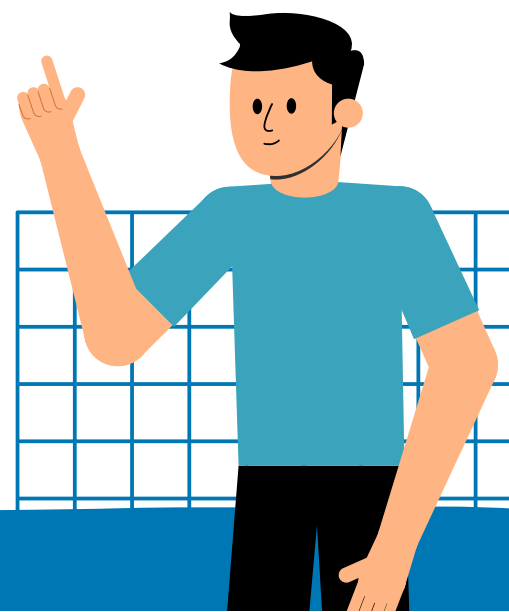
There is no right way to write this essay, but there are several ways you can do it wrong. An experienced admissions counsellor would be able to guide you through avoiding these mistakes once you have an idea, but in the mean time, here are some tips from my practice that might help you in your journey.

Do's

- Be creative, but appropriately. Do not write poetry or attach drawings. Instead, use figures of speech such as metaphors and motifs to make the writing interesting.
- Write formally and accurately- this includes correct grammar and formatting. Even though this is not an academic essay, it is important to polish it.
- Print it out and read it to yourself. The accidental "Ther"s and "Frm"s have a way of sneaking into your final draft.
- Be authentic. And this might sound silly, but it's the most important one. So far, admissions officers have already learnt about your background, grades and read your recommendations. You do not want to sound like someone you're not.

Don'ts

- Avoid writing about generic topics such as playing a sport, the death of a pet, failing an academic opportunity/exam or weight loss. Your experiences are 100% valid, but this essay is not your space to explore this. Instead, pick an aspect of yourself that you are happy to discuss with a stranger.
- Overshare! Period. Don't do it.
- Write about someone else. If your dad is your hero, then he should be going to Harvard, not you.
- Generalize. This is a common mistake that applicants make. You went skydiving and that made you a better person and changed your life. Great. But how? That is what the essay is about.





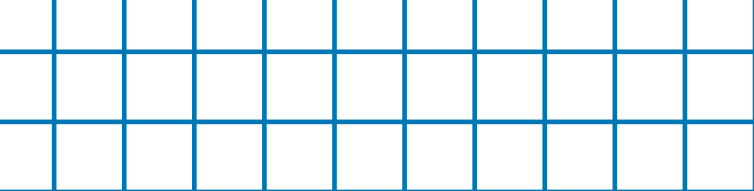
What do I really need to do, though?

Translation: What is the structure of a Common App Essay?

You need to, *first and foremost*, begin the process years before grade 12. However, if you're already a 12th grader, don't worry- you can make it if you follow these simple steps which have been verified and refined over the last several years. (and they work!)

- Keep a personal **journal/ diary** where you note down your favourite things- movies, books, documentaries, poems, quotes, ideas, cartoon characters, food items, vacation memories, jokes, realizations or even dreams. **The right admissions counsellor (aka me or our other wonderful mentors at Rostrum!) will know what to do with this book full of liquid gold with endless essay potential. Knowing yourself is the first step, always.**
- **Work backwards.** Don't pick an essay to fit a prompt, but decide your story and then choose a prompt later. **This allows you to be freer with your brainstorming and writing process.**
- **Drafts, drafts, drafts!** I had a student who went to an Ivy League school who went through 60 drafts of her essay. **You might not need as many, but remember that the more time you spend on it, the better the final result will be.**





- Learn how to write in your own voice. We are often used to writing in a **sombre, academic tone and this essay should be the opposite of that**. If you're a sarcastic person, it could have a tinge of sarcasm. If you're an artistic person, you could do something cool by using a painting metaphor or using beautiful words (e.g. gossamer). The options are endless!
- Not to toot my own horn, but **find a mentor! Writing this essay, or any essay for college admissions, can be daunting for someone who hasn't done much reflective writing before**. Having a mentor who can guide you through this new way of thinking can be your ticket to attending your dream school abroad!



Ready to get started ?

Here's an example
essay



On Sara and Soy Sauce

Strangely, I owe who I am to soy sauce.

Staring intently at the high shelf, I try not to tip over while reaching for the almost empty, oh-so-familiar bottle of 'Kikkoman' soy sauce. Trying not to wake anyone up, I get all my ingredients ready for chicken adobo, my recipe of choice for the night, with soy sauce making up its base. This was just another one of my midnight cooking exploits, where I experimented with new recipes. When I first started cooking at 11 years old, I didn't have much success. That was until I discovered liquid gold- soy sauce.

Since that day, I haven't served a bad- or bland- meal again.

Chicken adobo is just one of my kitchen creations. I have an extensive list of other delicacies that I love to create, where soy sauce adds magic. In many ways, I am like this condiment- versatile.

I write with intention, whether it be creative, journalistic, or editorial writing. I want to be a changemaker- the addition of my perspective seasons my work, like soy sauce does with crunchy wantons. My aim is to write in a way that challenges the preconceived notions my reader might have about sensitive topics. From writing about vaccine equity to the recent developments of LGBTQIA+ rights all around the world, I feel at home while sharing my thoughts.

I use intriguing titles and simple language to make my writing accessible and present well-researched information on these topics to provide a multi-faceted view. I always make sure to frame my writing in a way that the reader is interested till the very end; just as I always make sure to add a heaping spoonful of soy sauce to my Thai basil chicken to give it a quintessentially Sara kick.

While soy sauce is good when added to dishes like Vietnamese shaking beef and Korean braised ribs, it's also delicious as a dipping sauce with dishes like Filipino lumpia and Chinese soup dumplings. Similarly, my attempts at being versatile do not end at just writing. Fashion, for me, is another way I like to express myself.

Everything from mixing and matching fabrics and prints to creating different styles of winged eyeliner, the simple act of dressing up to go somewhere- even if it's the grocery store- is as exciting as finally serving a perfectly cooked soy-braised salmon platter.



I am the designated stylist in my household- reliable and resourceful, like soy sauce is, when you need to spruce up a boring plate of leftover chow-mein. I help my family and my friends style themselves for a range of events- from birthdays to Diwali parties. Styling people close to me, not only helps me become a better stylist, but also gives me an opportunity to spend quality time with them.

Just like soy sauce is to Asian cuisine, writing and fashion is to me. Writing about everything from current trends on fashion to why sustainable fashion is better for our planet; bringing beautiful things into the world is essential to me.

As I levelled up in my cooking journey, I watched soy sauce work miracles with it's savory versatility. I watched it make all dishes more- better. I wondered- couldn't I do just the same thing? I owe my zeal to be more to soy sauce.

Just like soy sauce, my journey to be versatile may never end.

It has taught me how to be the magic ingredient in any situation I might be in- to write ethically, style diligently and bring joy, and food, to peoples lives. I rest the now empty bottle of the 'Kikkoman' soy sauce on the table as I sit down for my midnight meal.

The delicious chicken adobo and rice are the perfect reward for a good night's work.

Yashodhara Kundra
Councillor @Rostrum





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