

826LA Personal Statement Training Workshop

Training materials include:

Volunteering Opportunities
Personal Statement Prompts from UC
Quick Guide
Tips for Students Writing College Essays
College Essay No-No's

UC Application

There are two prompts, for which students may write a total of **1,000 words**. They may divide the words as they wish, but the shortest essay **cannot be less than 250 words**.

Prompt 1: Describe the world you come from—for example, your family, community OR school—and tell us how your world has shaped your dreams and aspirations.

Tips:

- 1) Students may define their world in a way other than the three listed (family, community, or school).
- 2) Students may try to write about all three, don't let them! Instead, focus on the OR of the question and try to lead them toward writing about only one aspect.
- 3) Can include life outside the classroom.
- 4) Will need to brainstorm things they might write about.
- 5) Answer the entire question; it is essential that they answer the second half of the question.

A GREAT technique for this prompt:

- Ask for a person in their world
- Ask for how that person would describe the student in one word
- Ask the student to tell a story about a time they acted like that word

Prompt 2) Tell us about a personal quality, talent, accomplishment, contribution or experience that is important to you. What about this quality or accomplishment makes you proud and how does it relate to the person you are?

Tips:

- 1) Must tease out *why* students are proud of the quality or trait.
- 2) Must answer second part—what makes you proud and how does it relate to person you are?
- 3) Don't turn this into a list of great qualities.
- 4) Coming across as genuine, honest, and real is important.
- 5) Writing about an accomplishment or experience is generally easier than writing about a quality. Don't let them write an essay about how nice they are—that's not interesting, thoughtful, or reflective!

What is a gem of a story, what is gold?

- An incident or example that shows character, determination and the point of action.
- At the heart of the story is the student's actions: not just a realization story, or a want for a better future story, but a story that shows action (especially for prompt 2)
- It's the story that makes them stand out--it gets beyond what happened to them (crossed the border and started learning English at age 13 and is now the first in her family to graduate from high school), it gets to how they did that, how they paved the way for themselves, or how they utilize resources, how they overcame.

BIG TIP TO SHARE: Every word, every sentence needs to say something about them. No cliché sentences, no general statements.

What to do if...

...You are sitting next to a student who has not written anything yet!

1. Decide on which prompt they want to/should start with. Read the prompt, highlight or circle the major parts of the question that they need to answer.
2. Spur the conversation by saying something like: “Tell me more about you. I want to know what makes you, you. If I could scan your memory and find the most stand out experiences, things that are unique to you, I would, but I can’t so you need to tell me some important things.” Reassure them that with a conversation, with them being open and honest, you will help them find something important and unique to write about.

Other Questions: Where do you live, how do you get to school, how do you spend your free time, who is a really important person in your life, and what have they helped you with, what is the biggest disappointment in your life, what is your greatest accomplishment?

3. While they are talking, you should be taking notes and asking more questions. Your job is to dig deep to find the gem of a story. You should try to get there fast.
4. Once you hit gold, you need to start an outline. You might only have 20 minutes with a student, so gauge your time. A first session is a productive one if you spend time in conversation and leave them with a detailed outline that they can take with them to write a first draft on their own. And if you have time, they should start writing their first draft.

REMEMBER, THE OUTLINE NEEDS TO ADDRESS THE PROMPT DIRECTLY.

The goal of a first time session is to help them get to their gold, figure out the story of it and match it to answer the prompt directly, then create an outline that does that.

5. Always keep asking:
WHY?, HOW?, HOW DOES THAT MAKE YOU FEEL?

Anecdote from a tutor:

Then I found stories in: Have you ever moved? (One student had moved 9 times and wrote about that), What was the most unusual/dramatic thing that ever happened to you? (One student, the daughter of a nurse, had to help her mother save the life of an elderly patient and she wrote about that), What was the biggest disappointment you've had (One student had been selected to play on an elite city-wide soccer team but couldn't get a ride to the practices so had to decline the invitation--he wrote about how just knowing he was good enough to be selected had been a huge thrill)

...You are sitting next to a student who has a draft, or a first paragraph:

If they have not worked with you or an 826 tutor yet, it's likely that their first draft will be underdeveloped. It's ok to start over, but you have to be gentle.

- 1) Read the prompt together. Without reading their paper, ask them to tell you what they wrote about first, and have them explain how it answers the prompt.
- 2.) After discussing, read what they wrote together and point out anything that they said out loud to you, but didn't write in their draft.
- 3) This will lead to a story that is an improvement of what they already started. Tell them what you liked in their draft, where you see their essay going, and how to make it better. Get excited about what they shared with you and then make a new outline.

The Best Essays ...

- Are about one thing, really focused.
- Show rather than tell. Sometimes it is not necessary to explicitly spell out what is important.
- The essay is not the place to list all of one's accomplishments. Don't repeat information from other parts of the application.
- Spend the time to make the essay stand out.
- Do not try to compose online. For schools that require electronic submission, write the essay in a word processing program, copy and paste into the application. Do not try to compose online.

Challenges and how to work with them

This is most likely the first time students are being asked to be so honest and reveal so much about themselves. We often encounter conversations that are difficult for students and hard for us too. We often need tissues at these sessions, and here are some examples of those moments, and how to work through them.

Traumatic experiences:

Border crossing, sexual abuse, abandonment, low self-esteem, gang violence, street violence, etc.

If these come up, offer support right away with tact and patience. Don't overdramatize the situation or oversympathize with them, but take the time to address that they experienced something really difficult. Ask if they need to step outside and offer to get them tissue.

If it's way too hard for them to talk about, then it may not be the best topic because it's the first time they are processing such a traumatic experience and it's too much to handle. And most of the time, these are stories that weren't resolved because of *their* action, sometimes it's hard to make it the gem story.

You can explain that in a very sensitive way. Let them know you'd like to ask different questions to find a different, easier topic for them to write about.

But, if they can talk about it, then you need to find a way for them to reach the gem. What did they do after the trauma, how have they overcome?

If anything extremely serious comes up that you think the teacher should be informed about, please talk to Julius or Marisa or the teacher right away.

Immigration, learning English, first in family to go to college

Many students will be the first in their family to graduate high school, go to college, and their hopes and dreams are to make a better life for themselves and their family. Because almost all the students we work with can write that exact same essay, our job is to help them craft something that is unique to their experiences.

-Explain why they need to make it more unique and specific, but first validate their experience and wants.

- Ask them questions: How did you learn English? Why did your family come here? Where did you live when you first moved here? How do you hope to help your family in the future? What makes you different from your family and friends?

-Find the point of their action/unique aspects and go from there.

tutor anecdote: For example, one student came to the aid of an elderly relative at a hospital emergency room because she could speak to the doctor and help fill out documents (to the prompt, "Talk about a meaningful experience...") In another case, in the process of talking about how she wants to get a good education so she can have a better life than her parents, one student mentioned that she rides 2 hours each way from the city of Bell to school so she can go to a better school (Global Studies) She ended up writing about how she uses that time, what she sees along the way, how she studies and does homework on the way home.

When the essay is too general and not actually saying anything about them

Don't let them write 5 paragraphs describing their community (violence, poverty, gangs, etc.) They can describe that in a few sentences, but the majority of their essay needs to be about them.

Ask them how these things have effected them. What is their role in the community? Have they ever experienced something first hand?

Don't let them write 5 paragraphs explaining their parent's divorce.

Tell them to condense what happened in the past (the description, detail of events) in a couple of sentences. The majority of their essays needs to be about THEM. What was their involvement in the divorce, how did it make them feel, how did that effect their health, school, etc? How did they overcome that challenge?

You are not solely responsible for getting students in to college

Sometimes it can feel frustrating that because of lack of time, we aren't able to help them craft a winning essay. But remember, it is not your responsibility to get them in to college. Much of their prior history is what will determine their eligibility. We are there to help them tell their story and answer the prompts.

Because this might be the first time they are looking at themselves so acutely, and the first time they are thinking about and writing their stories, experiences, failures, and achievements, we are serving as the support of that crucial moment of self realization, appreciation and understanding.

Also, they can and will use these essays to submit for scholarships and for Cal State EOP applications.

Example of a good outline

Prompt#1

WORLD

family: dad left when you were 7

had no guidance, couldn't look up to your older brother, mom was busy at work started to fight at school, felt lonely, depressed, and confused

Mom wanted to give up on you, you saw how serious it was and started going to counseling
Enjoyed counseling, really listened to the feedback-counselor said you were good at analyzing yourself
you made changes: x, y, z

HOW SHAPED YOUR DREAMS

You learned that life is worth living and you have to be your own hero because you don't have anyone to be there for you. You want to study psychology and learn and teach non violent ways of coping and healing.

You would be creating this as student is talking to you. You would write this all out and give it them at the end of a brainstorming session so they can use it to write their first draft.

General Tips

- Each essay must be unique. Keep in mind: **thoughtful and reflective**
- Read over the training packet and bring it with you to college essay sessions.
- Know the prompts! Don't let each essay be a surprise; it's much easier to guide students when you have a good grasp of what the question is asking.

Tips for Working with Students

- Get the student to tell you what s/he wants readers to know about him/her.
- Listen for excitement/animation in what students say about him/herself.
- You may have to ask students to tell about themselves, or about a typical day in their lives.
- When they need to start over, find something in what they've written to preserve.
- Always start with the positive.
- Have students read the essay aloud.
- Remind them that a real person is going to be reading this and the reader wants to read a story they will remember, have an emotional response, and understand who the

student is as a person.

The Best Essays ...

- Are about one thing, really focused.
- Show rather than tell. Sometimes it is not necessary to explicitly spell out what is important. Tell a story! Start with a hook, but never use something cliché like, “briiiiing” of an alarm clock.
- Don't repeat information from other parts of the application. The essay is not the place to list all of one's accomplishments.
- Spend the time to make the essay stand out not by using mature vocabulary or fancy writing devices, but because they tell a good story and really bring out what the student has learned from their experiences

Common Mistakes

- Don't spend most of the essay talking about a family member, this is about the student.
- Repetition—Make certain to show different sides of self in the two responses. Don't talk about the same topic in both essays.
- Don't tailor responses to one campus
- Don't just write about your neighborhood, you must explain how the neighborhood's conditions effect you.
- Don't write about why your SAT score is low. But if your GPA is low during your sophomore year, then you should write about challenges that happened that year to show them why.

TIPS FOR STUDENTS WRITING COLLEGE ESSAYS

(tutors: share these tips with your students)

1. **RELAX.** Writing your college essay can be intimidating. In fact, it may be the first time you've ever written a personal essay, which is always a little bit scary. Try to remember that every high school senior who is applying to college is in the exact same boat—and remember, we're here to help! Hopefully that will make the process a little less daunting.
2. **Be honest.** Writing that is honest and personal draws the reader in. An admissions officer who reads hundreds of essays a day can almost always tell when an essay is dishonest or sounds like you're trying to be something you are not.
3. **Be personal.** When all is said and done, you want to be able to read your essay and say, "this sounds like ME."
4. **Be consistent.** Your application and essay shouldn't be the same but they should reflect each other. This tip doesn't always work out—you may want to write about something that isn't even mentioned on your application—but don't contradict yourself by writing an essay about how being captain of the football team changed your life if you don't list football as one of your activities.
5. **Don't try and guess what the admissions office is looking for and write to fit their format.** Other than word count, limitations and possible style rules (i.e. font, margins, etc.) there is no 'format'. They are looking for YOU. Think of your essay as an opportunity—you chance to tell a potential college something very important about you that they won't learn from your application.
6. **Keep an open mind when picking an essay topic.** An activity you hated and are sure you never want to be involved in again may make a good essay topic because you learned an important lesson from it.
7. **Focus on your strong points.** Maybe writing isn't one of your strengths. That's okay. Not everyone who goes to college is destined to be an English major or a writer. The freshman class at every college is made up of all types of students. An admissions officer who reads essays has that in mind. Tell him/her, in your own voice, what you have to offer the freshman class.
8. **PROOFREAD.** Use the dictionary, spell check and read your essay aloud to yourself or someone you know. If you have time, put your essay away for a few days and come back to it with fresh eyes and ideas.
9. **Write about WHY not WHAT.** Instead of writing about WHAT you did (your application does that), write about WHY you did it. Don't repeat your application. Expand on it. Tell the college something new.

COLLEGE ESSAY NO-NO'S (AND OTHER HELPFUL TIPS)

Below is a list of 10 essay topics to avoid. Some of these topics contain subject matter or ideas that are inappropriate for college applications. Others are extremely popular topics; if you chose one of these, you won't stand out from the other applicants when the admission officer reads your essay:

1. Your relationship with your girlfriend or your boyfriend (or how it ended)
2. Your religious beliefs
3. Your political views
4. Sex
5. How great you are
6. The importance of a college education
7. Your SAT scores
8. Big ideas that you have not given much thought to before
9. "The Best Game of my Life" or another athletic incident written in glib style
10. Your trip abroad, unless truly noteworthy

There are always exceptions, and some students can create enough context and detail that the reader does come away knowing something important about the 17- or 18-year old writer.

- Make sure that you do not use clichés in your college essay (e.g. "My hard work really paid off"; "It (or he, or she) made me who I am today." Tutors can help you spot any clichés that you may have used in your essay.
- Avoid using words that sound like they were plucked out of the thesaurus. The admission officers know you're a high school senior, and they want to hear *your words*. (Two example words that are overused in college essay applications: plethora and epiphany.)
- Pay attention to your beginnings, and make sure they're strong. An essay about swimming or crew might begin with an alarm clock sound (i.e., Brrrrring!), but this beginning doesn't tell much about the student's experience or observations.

Other mistakes you don't want to make:

- Writing about the death of a relative you didn't know very well for the dramatic impact.
- Writing about a dead relative you *did* know well without saying anything about yourself.
- Keeping your writing at a superficial level without letting it come from the heart. (Team sport essays are at high risk here.)
- Choosing a topic you don't feel passionate about.
- Not answering the question (VERY important!).
- Letting anyone else add his or her "voice" to your writing.
- Choosing a deeply personal topic to write about (parents' messy divorce, coming out in high school, sexual abuse) without getting feedback from a trusted adult. -This is the hardest thing of all—knowing when a topic is just too personal and revealing, although it is of great importance to you.
- Perhaps the biggest pitfall of all is blowing off the essay because you think that "no one really reads them." Not true! A good essay can boost an application that may not stand out in a

field of highly qualified and competitive applicants.

Dos and Don'ts in writing college application essays
From college admission deans

Marjorie Hansen Shaevitz

DO

1. **Write revealing, concise essays** that inform, enlighten and amuse.
2. **Present yourself as genuinely humble, modest**, perhaps even self-effacing.
3. **Be yourself.**
4. **Answer each and every aspect of the essay question** as best you can AND within the character/word limit provided.
5. **Come across as mature, positive, reflective, intelligent**, down-to-earth, curious, persistent, confident, original, creative, hard-working and thoughtful.
6. **Demonstrate evidence of your having real knowledge about a college** and its many resources, including courses, programs, activities and students.
7. **Write about anything that is counterintuitive about yourself**, e.g., you are a football player who is totally into poetry, a young woman who is a computer or physics geek, a macho guy who wants to be an elementary school teacher.
8. **Compose an essay, give it to others to read and edit**, and then do a final edit before you declare that it is done.
9. **Use a variety of words to describe something or someone**, e.g., Charley, my friend, my buddy, my schoolmate, he, him.
10. **Explain what needs to be explained**, as in an illness, a learning disability, a suspension, a one-time bad grade, a family tragedy, a major challenge you have had.

DON'T

1. **Write too much, ramble on**, thinking that more (words) is better. It is not.
2. **Brag, boast, toot your own horn**, or come across as arrogant.
3. **Write what you think college admissions people want** instead of what you really think.
4. Go off writing about what you want to say rather than what the question asks AND **ignore the specified character/word counts.**
5. **Come across as immature, negative, superficial**, shallow, a phony, glib, a slacker, insecure, whiney, judgmental or disrespectful.

6. **Give the impression that you know little about a college** by writing trite, inaccurate or inconsequential things about it.
7. **Make something up about yourself** just to impress the admissions readers.
8. **Write an essay** and consider it done **without** looking for punctuation or grammatical errors and **having it edited by at least one person.**
9. **Use the same words over and over**, e.g., my friend, my friend, my friend, my friend, my friend.
10. **Make excuses for anything**, including a bad grade, an infringement of rules, a suspension, whatever.