

August 2013
New Common Application essays

Prompt #1. Some students have a background or a 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. The first student I showed this to said, "This is the diversity question." It could be, if that's an essential feature of someone's identity, but the question is much more open-ended. It invites you to talk about anything from being a triplet to growing up in Alaska; from growing up on a farm to having a particular medical condition.

Prompt #2. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn. Discussing "failure" is a tricky proposition. You don't want to seem like someone who fails regularly or spectacularly. But if, for instance, you have academic absence to explain (you flunked out of school and then returned and are now a great student), this might be a good place to tell that story, with the emphasis on "what you learned." There are other "failure stories" that are fine too.

3. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again? I think this is a great question for students who are activists and others who have challenged policies promoted by church, school, government, or their families. The incident you describe could be speaking up at Thanksgiving dinner or organizing a campaign to promote sex education or LGBT tolerance. Be sure to keep the focus on what you did, and not the details of the issue. You're not trying to persuade the reader to take your side. You're describing your role in challenging an idea.

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? This seems to be a popular question, and can encompass anyplace from a science lab to a swimming pool. I try to steer students away from places that are too comfortable. "I feel perfectly content in bed listening to my iPod and watching *The Hunger Games*" is a topic I would avoid, unless there is a specific backstory that would make this set-up "meaningful." In other words, it might represent a triumph of some kind.

5. Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family. Several weeks ago, I was surprised to see an essay counselor on-line say that since people don't become "adults" until they are older, this question seems misguided. I couldn't disagree more. At every age, we are always marking transitions, and there are rarely any clear lines. There are indeed specific moments when children feel more grown up and when teenagers feel more like adults than they did the day before. The question is an occasion to consider such a moment, experience, or accomplishment.