

Edward said states



What Should I Write About? So you know which schools you're interested in, and you've looked over the applications and read all the essay questions. Chances are you're wondering, "What in the world should I write about?" You're not alone. In fact, it is safe to assume that everybody who has ever had to write an essay for a college application has asked that very question. Unfortunately, the applications don't give you much guidance. Most of the essay questions are so open-ended that you can write about virtually anything.

Since this essay might be the most significant writing you've ever done, the freedom to choose a topic can be paralyzing. Although picking a topic will seem daunting at first, it's not impossible. The key is to narrow your focus and write about something close to your heart. If you follow this plan, you'll create a lively essay that shows the admissions committee your intelligence and personality. But finding a great topic is not something you can do in five minutes. It will take a little work.

Essay Questions from the 2005 Common Application Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you. Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence. Describe a character in fiction, an historical figure, or creative work (as in art, music, science, etc. that has had an influence on you and explain that influence. A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in the

college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you. Topic of your choice. Not-So-Common Essay Questions

According to astronomer Carl Sagan, “ Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known. What unknown would you like to see revealed in your lifetime? Why is this of personal importance? (Northwestern University) In *The Moviegoer*, a novel by Carolina alumnus Walker Percy, the narrator observes: “ The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not stuck in the everydayness of his own life. . . . To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair. ” Are you “ onto something” now? If so, what is that something, and why is it important to you? University of North Carolina) On Mars, the latest TV fad among the native lifeforms is Trading Bodies. You're picked to play. Whose body would you inhabit and why? (University of Virginia) Have you witnessed a person who is close to you doing something that you considered seriously wrong? Describe the circumstances, your thoughts, and how you chose to respond. If you discussed it with the person, was his/her justification valid? In retrospect, what, if anything, would you have done differently and why? Duke University) Do you believe there's a generation gap? Describe the differences between your generation and others. (Denison University) What is your academic passion? (Wake Forest University) Prewriting: Think, Think, Think Early on—say, four or five months before applications are due—start thinking about possible topics. Go about your normal routine, but tuck the topic question in the back of your mind. Note what you're interested in and appreciate in this world. Carry a notebook to jot down thoughts.

Give it time, and chances are you'll come up with some good stuff. If, on the other hand, you wait until the night before the application deadline to choose your topic, you'll find yourself staring at your computer screen in a cold sweat, frantically wondering whether you should write about your love of the rainforest, that time you stole second base in junior high, or maybe, um, what your bedroom decor says about you. If you wait until the last minute, it's highly unlikely that your essay will be a thing of beauty and interest.

Choosing an essay topic takes time. Brainstorming Brainstorming is the process of getting your ideas and thoughts down on paper. Brainstorming doesn't have to be logical or tidy—you can scribble down (or type) ideas in any way that makes sense to you. And don't worry about editing as you brainstorm. No one is going to see this part of the process except you, so let the good ideas and the not-so-good ideas flow freely. When you're brainstorming ideas for your college application essay, let your mind wander.

Think about issues that matter to you; important moments in your life; high school experiences that stand out in your mind; and places and people that left an impression on you. Jot down emotions you often experience, verbs that mean something to you, and smells that bring back strong memories. Don't limit yourself to happy experiences: Not all good stories are happy stories. Maybe one of your keenest memories is sitting and crying on the steps outside the school auditorium after you found out you didn't make the varsity team.

If a moment was meaningful and you can write with your emotions, your reader will feel connected to your story. The goal is to mine your life for a

subject that will pour out instead of trickle. People brainstorm using different methods. Below, you'll find explanations of several different methods. Maybe one method will do the trick for you, or maybe you'll find a combination of methods works best. Make a List Many people prefer to use the straightforward list-making approach as a starting point. To use this method, simply jot down possible essay topics.

After you have a long list, go back and pick out the most promising ideas. To get the ball rolling on your topic search, write down responses to the following: The 10 coolest places you've visited Your 10 most memorable high school experiences The 5 most difficult moments in your life The 5 most exciting moments The 3 most awkward moments Your 5 best accomplishments The top 5 words your parents, friends, or teachers would use to describe you The 5 most important influences on your life Your 5 favorite books Your 10 favorite activities

Connect the Words If you think visually, you might want to brainstorm by writing a word or phrase in the middle of a blank piece of paper. Spend ten minutes looking at this word or phrase and writing down everything that comes to mind all over the page. Stop when your ideas stop flowing. Then circle or draw lines between ideas that are connected. Do this again with a new sheet of paper with a new word or with a word from your first list.

Repeat as necessary. Draw a Timeline Here's another visual brainstorming method: write a timeline of your life.

Then go back and underline or highlight the high and low points. Also, note any other epiphanies or pivotal moments. Don't worry if no single experience

changed your life; that's not usually how it works anyway. You can write a thoughtful essay about a change that happened over time, focusing on a particular incident to illustrate your point. Tell a Story from Your Life Pick a word that describes you and write it or type it at the top of a piece of paper. Then write down the title of five stories about yourself that you could tell to illustrate that word.

Pick the title you like the most and write that at the top of a new piece of paper. List all the details you might include in that story. Imagine the smells, sights, and sounds that set the scene. Push yourself to come up with all possible details (you can always eliminate some later). Don't stop until you have exhausted all possibilities. Free-Write Some writers call free-writing "the mind dump," because it means dumping everything that comes into your head onto a piece of paper. To free-write, start with a vague idea, like why your favorite subject is French.

For a period of ten or fifteen minutes, write down everything that comes to mind. Don't worry about grammar, style, or making sense. Just keep writing. If you have nothing to say, just write I have nothing to say over and over again until something else pops in your head. When the ten or fifteen minutes are up, take a break and then go back and reread your words. Underline or highlight everything that is interesting or promising. Free-write as much as you can until you have a good crop of ideas.