Essays give the college a holistic picture of the applicant. If you are applying to colleges in the US which use the Common Application, you will have to write two types of essays, the Common Application essay, and supplemental essays.

**The Common Application Essay**

This essay will be sent to all the schools you list on your Common App. It is a 650-word long essay on one of seven prompts, and is meant to be a personal essay. It is meant to give the college a glimpse into who you are beyond your SAT, ACT, and KCSE statistics, into what drives you.

Quite simply, this essay is meant to be **you**.

While it is difficult to summarize all that makes you in only 650 words, this essay gives you the opportunity to choose what is essential to your being and express it to the college or university.

Here are the prompts for the 2017-2018 application to give you an idea of what is expected of you:

1. 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.   
  
2. 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?   
  
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?   
  
4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.   
  
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.   
  
6. 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?

7. 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.

**How to Write the Common App Essay**

Our main impulse when receiving a prompt is to write on what comes to mind first, and then work on the language you use to express it. You will have to suppress your urge to use all the vocabulary you have learnt, and prioritize the idea over its expression. Avoid the pressure to churn out draft after draft, and instead think critically about what you want the essay to convey about you. What makes you unique? What makes you stand out? An essay that focuses on these things in a simple and powerful way always wins over one that is expressed in beautiful language but lacks depth.

Writing the Common App essay is a journey of self-discovery. Realize the importance of introspection in coming up with a winning idea. Everyone’s creative process is different, and so we do not have one recommended route that all students must follow to come up with a winning essay, but consistency is key. Your first draft may be the one that seals the deal, or your ninth may be the first sign of a good essay. *It’s okay.* Just keep writing. Relish the journey. You will get there.

**Dos and Donts**

Avoid tired and cliché ideas. Stories such as how you were academically promising throughout your school life, or how you saved a girl from FGM are generic and boring.[[1]](#footnote-1) Moreover, all the students applying are brilliant academically, and so you are not saying anything new. One of my mentors told me that if I left my essay in a room, anyone picking it up should be able to identify it as mine, and not one that could belong to just anyone. Your story needs to be memorable, one that will have an impact on the person reading it.

Now that we have dismissed generic stories, you may be tempted to write over-embellished, dramatic stories like those you see in movies. Dear student, no one will believe that you saved an entire village from extinction by a lion that was more aggressive than Mufasa, believe me. Avoid book-like and movie-like story lines that are often not true. The point of this essay is not to toot your horn, but to offer a more autobiographical view of who you are. Let who you are toot your horn to the admission committee. In addition, this can be counted as plagiarism, which we will discuss next.

Plagiarism is an absolute no-no! I cannot emphasize this enough. Make sure your work is original. Do not steal ideas from other people’s work, be it websites, books, other people’s essays, or magazines. It is morally wrong to present others’ work as your own. Additionally, when you are caught (note I said when, and not if), the consequences are severe.

Have mentors or peers read through your essay from its initial stages. Discuss your story with someone else. If you cannot say, in two sentences, what your essay is about, chances are you need to go back to the drawing board. Once your idea is cogent in your mind, have your mentors look over how you put it down. Listen to their feedback, and where it is contradictory, ask them to elaborate so that you know what to improve.

**Supplemental Essays**

These are school-specific questions that help the Admissions Committee determine whether you are a good fit for the school. Depending on the school you are applying to, they may range between one and more than three in number. They are typically shorter in length than the Common App essay, ranging from 50 words to about 500. They typically require you to:

1. **Why School X**

These are the most common supplemental essays. They basically are asking you to discuss your interest in the school. For these essays, discuss your passion for the school and what drew you to apply there. Is there an attribute that can be ascribed to the school that attracts you? What unique experiences do students there have that you would love to experience? Get a feel for what the school is about. An essay on why you would like to attend Columbia University, for example, is markedly different from one on why you would like to attend Williams College, even though both are ranked highly. Prestige, rankings, location, weather and beauty are not unique to any one school, and so you should avoid these as reasons. A good rule of thumb is to explain why you are attracted to the school interwoven with what you will contribute to the vibrancy of the campus through your abilities and talents. In this regard, the internet is your greatest resource as most of us will not have the opportunity to visit the schools beforehand. The college’s website is your first stop, but it should not be your last. Websites like College Niche and College Confidential[[2]](#footnote-2) are useful for reviews from current students. In addition, the Kenyan community at these colleges can be your greatest resource. You can find Kenyan students with whom you have mutual friends and speak to them about their experience to be able to better visualize yourself on campus and write a great essay.

1. **Why Course X**

These essays require you to state your interest in a field of study. This can refer to either a specific major, or a specific undergraduate school in the university. What specific resources have you found through your research that attract you to pursuing the course you want to at that college? Which faculty members might you love to work with? What research would you like to do, if any? Which facilities would you love to make use of? What opportunities are afforded to majors that you will not find elsewhere? Which of your prior experiences in this field have convinced you that this is the right major for you? You can talk about how your interest in the subject area began and blossomed, or about what drives you to pursue study in the area, or your prior experience in the field These supplements tend to be longer than the first kind, because they require you to demonstrate your depth of intellectual interests. Show depth in this type of essay. Reasons such as, “I like engineering because I used to do well in Math and Physics in high school” are not deep at all.

1. **Personal Interest Supplements**

These are shorter versions of the Common App, and can be about absolutely anything! Students have been asked to write on topics as diverse as:

- Pick one woman in history or fiction to converse with for an hour and explain your choice. What would you talk about? (Barnard College)

- Every name tells a story: Tell us about your name--any name: first, middle, last, nickname--and its origin. A paragraph to a page in length is ideal. Thank you! (Dartmouth College)

-Using a favorite quotation from an essay or book you have read in the last three years as a starting point, tell us about an event or experience that helped you define one of your values or changed how you approach the world. Please write the quotation, title, and author at the beginning of your essay. (Princeton University)

1. **Extracurricular Activities Essay**

These are pretty straightforward, and require you to discuss extracurricular activities you were involved in in high school, or what you have been doing since you graduated from high school. The main challenge with these essays is length, as some schools may require an essay of 150 words while others give an allowance of 250-400 words. Strive to express depth and meaning in these essays: an essay on a club you made a long-lasting impact in is way better than one in which your only achievement was being the Chairperson.

1. **Short Takes**

These are brief questions you are to answer as part of your application. Examples include:

Please respond in just a few words (no more than 50 characters) to each of the questions below:

1.The two qualities I most admire in other people are:

2. I am most proud of

3. I couldn't live without

4. Who or what inspires you?

5. What do you wish you were better at being or doing? (Yale University)

These questions may seem easy, but your answers to them tell a college a lot about who you are. Again, always aim for depth. If you do choose to use humor, make sure it is:

-Actually funny

-Relatable

-Not racist or offensive to women and minority groups such as the LGBTQ community

All the best writing your essays!

1. In very rare cases, students have successfully brought new perspectives to generic stories with their own personal experiences. With a mentor, determine if your story fits into this category. If so, then write your story. If not, kindly redraft your essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Take the chancing threads on College Confidential with a LARGE grain of salt. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)