



BETTER COLLEGE APPS

Introspection Worksheet

Introduction

Many students struggle with identifying a good topic for their essay. Conventional wisdom says to start by brainstorming a list of potential topics, and chances are you have already started a mental list of ideas. You might think you only have a few choices for topics, based on your activities or experiences, or you might have started writing a rough draft or two. We advise, however, that you put down your list of topics and back away from it. Forget that exists for a moment. Seriously, thinking about this initial list tethers you to certain ideas that **might not actually be your best options**. Take a minute to let go of those.

Now you can begin brainstorming with a clean slate.

Our strategy is this: start with thinking about what you want to show in **your entire application, not just one essay**. Every single thing in your app has one purpose - **to tell more about you**. Filling out the rest of the application by rote and focusing solely on the essay is short-sighted and will leave so much potential untapped in your application.

An admissions officer's goal is to understand you fully, in the context of your background and the rest of the applicant pool. They will begin this with assessing your academic abilities and potential. Then they will evaluate how you will fit into the student body they're trying to curate. All of this can be somewhat broad and diverse and touch on several institutional goals. But they will dig deep to find out what each applicant is like, what your core values and motivations are, what kind of student you will be, how you will contribute to the vibrant and intellectual campus community they're building, etc.

Your goal with this introspection worksheet is to ascertain how to powerfully **tell your story** in a manner that will fit these criteria. The **entirety of your application** (again, not just one essay) aims to showcase your abilities, qualifications, and uncommon attributes as a person in a positive way. Before you begin outlining or writing your application, you must determine what is unique about you that will stand out to an admissions panel. All students are truly unique. Not one other student has the same combination of life experiences, personality, passions, or goals as you do; your job in your application is to frame your unique personal attributes in a positive and compelling way. How will you fit on campus? What personal qualities, strengths, core values, talents, or different perspectives do you bring to the table? What deeper motivations/beliefs or formative experiences can you use to illustrate all of this?

You might not immediately know what you want to share about yourself. It's not a simple task to decide how to summarize your whole life and being in a powerful and eloquent way on your application. Therefore, it is always helpful to start with some soul-searching and self-examination. This takes additional time and effort rather than jumping straight into your first draft. But it is also a valuable method to start writing a winning application that stands out from the stack. By the time you're finished, you should have several different topics or stories around which to build your application.

You cannot gracefully fit all you want to communicate into one essay. Instead make sure your vision is clearly conveyed somewhere in your application. Each component only needs to carry a small part of your message. Your essay is the most dynamic component, but every section is vital to the overall effectiveness of your application.

Note: once you begin writing, remember that you shouldn't address any of this directly. Be indirect and subtle, and use examples/stories and details to make your main points. Don't chisel them into stone tablets and bash the reviewer in the face or yell "Look how smart I am!" That also means you shouldn't say "I'm a great team player and I can't wait to contribute at X College!" Instead, show an example of a time you worked on a team effectively and let the reviewer form their own conclusions. We will cover this in greater detail in our essay guide, but it's worth noting here as it's part of the process of picking a topic.

Introspection

This worksheet will help you examine yourself and discover potential topics, stories, or characteristics to highlight in your essays and application. It will also help us learn about you and help you decide how to present yourself. As you consider each of these questions, focus on your core values, aspirations, foundational beliefs, personality traits, motivations, passions, and personal strengths.

There are a lot of questions, and we DO NOT expect you to answer them all. Not even close. You should only respond to the ones that speak to you, spark a memory, or inspire some facet of yourself that you want to share. We recommend that you read through all of the questions first, then go back and write down answers to a couple from each section. Don't write long answers to these questions; simply jot down your thoughts. The goal is not to actually write your essays now, but to brainstorm your thoughts in an unfiltered and natural manner, to start ideas flowing. We suggest that you spend about an hour on this, then stop and re-evaluate. If you finish and feel that you don't have enough material, review the questions again and brainstorm some more.

- 1. The Basics**
- 2. Interests**
- 3. Relationships**
- 4. Superlatives**
- 5. A Brighter Future -- College and Beyond**

6. **Personality and Strengths**
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8. **Connecting Introspection to The Coalition Application**

1. The Basics

These introductory questions help you start the introspection process and narrow your focus. They also help us get to know you better and provide advice to steer you in the right direction. This is the only section we ask you to answer all of the questions. However, if you have completed our Resume and Information Worksheet, there's no need to duplicate your answers; please only list other information not contained on that form.

1. **Summarize your educational experience.** *What kind of high school did you go to or what has your experience been since high school? (homeschool, elite private school, top public school, disadvantaged school, gap year, non-traditional student, transfer, international student, etc)*
2. **List all special classes you've taken since starting high school.** *This includes AP/IB/Dual Enrollment or other special classes.*
3. **List any classes you've taken that are not "official".** *Examples could include CPR/First Aid, online certifications, workshops related to a hobby or interest, religious classes, or anything else you've taught yourself to do. List any skills you have such as languages, musical instruments, coding, performing arts, etc.*
4. **List ten major or unique things you've done since starting high school.** *Anything goes for this, including everything from unofficial sports to saving the princess to writing fan fiction. You can consider work, school, clubs, sports, hobbies, skills, religious activities, charity/volunteering, etc.*
5. **List any awards or honors you've received.** *Include everything from co-student-of-the-day to Nobel Prize.*
6. **List accomplishments or personal achievements that might not be included in a college application.** *This could include personal milestones, weight loss, and creative accomplishments like websites, compositions, or casual hobbies.*

2. Interests

This section helps you identify your interests, find your passions, and explore what is important to you.

1. **What are your interests?** *What do you love to explore or learn about?*
2. **What are you curious about?** *How have you pursued that curiosity?*
3. **If you were on a first date, how would you describe yourself?** *What would you talk about? What interests from the other party would really pique your curiosity and make you want a second date?*
4. **What do you like to read about?** *What websites do you visit frequently? What books have you read lately?*
5. **List three books and three movies that spoke to you.** *What characters in literature or film do you most identify with or admire? Why?*

6. **What are your hobbies?** *What do you do for fun? List five things you would like to do on a free Saturday. What about an entire free week?*

3. Relationships

Relationships can be very telling about a person, and examining yours can help you see yourself through a different lens.

1. **Who in your life do you like being with most?** *Who has impacted you the most?*
2. **Think about other superlative people in your life.** *This includes who you trust most, learned most from, depend upon most, are most grateful to, spend most time with, invested most in you, etc. For each of these, think about how and why that person is so significant to you.*
3. **What are some adventures or mishaps that built those relationships?** *In thinking about why that person matters to you, what funny or endearing story could you tell?*
4. **List the three strongest or most important relationships in your life.** *What is so important about them?*
5. **List three people who inspire you or you see as role models and why.** *What is so attractive about them? What do you have in common with them? How do you wish you were more like them?*

4. Superlatives

Introspection is challenging, but it's often easier to start thinking in terms of superlatives. Think about some of the superlatives in your life – what are the most meaningful things about you?

1. **What moments were most memorable, formative, enlightening, enjoyable, or valuable?** *What are your favorite memories? Why?*
2. **What physical possessions, experiences, dreams, or lessons could make your superlatives list?**
3. **Think about what things, people, or circumstances in your life are really unique, fascinating, different, or outlandish.** *Are there any that really have a lot of "cultural flavor" (whatever your culture is)?*
4. **What items or stories from this list could make up your "two truths" in "Two Truths and a Lie?"** *"Two Truths and a Lie" is a game where each person lists two truths about themselves and one lie. The other players have to try to identify the lie. Which two truths would be most interesting to someone who just met you?*
5. **List three of the strongest or most controversial opinions you have.** *What have you done to stand up for these beliefs or opinions?*
6. **What opinions, beliefs, or ideas do you have that have changed since you started high school?** *How and why did they change? What did you learn from that experience?*
7. **List two ways you stand out from your peers.** *Assume 50 students are randomly selected from your high school. List one or two subjects, disciplines, or topics for which you would likely have the most expertise in that group.*

8. **What do you value the most in your life?** *What would be the hardest to lose or give up? What things are you most grateful for? Why are these things important to you?*
9. **What are you most passionate about?** *Why? What do you wish you were more passionate about?*
10. **Do a quick Google search for “core values”. Pick a list and identify at least five that you connect with the most. Sometimes it helps to start with ten or more and then narrow this list down. Now that you have a list, think about why each of those is important to you. What stories or examples from your life illustrate your dedication to these core values?**

5. A Brighter Future - College and Beyond

Now turn your focus on college specifically. College is among the biggest decisions and investments you will ever make so analyzing your process and rationale can be very illuminating into how you think, prioritize, and plan. Thinking beyond college can also help you see the big picture of your life and what you want from it. These questions can be especially helpful for the “why” essay prompts.

1. **List five potential majors you are interested in pursuing.** *Rank them if you can. Why are you interested in studying these majors?*
2. **List five things you hope to get out of college.** *Keep your focus beyond prestige, career, and salary.*
3. **List five things you want to change or improve about yourself by the time you finish college.** *How will you pursue this?*
4. **List five colleges you are interested in attending.** *What are the most important factors to you in deciding on a college, e.g. cost, location, academics, rankings, etc?*
5. **How do you define success?** *What things would make you feel successful one, five, or ten years from now?*
6. **If you were given a million dollars to skip college entirely, would you do it? What would you do instead of college?**
7. **List five potential careers or jobs that you might want to have someday.** *If you want to take this a step further, look up some job postings on Indeed.com or another job board to see more specifics.*
8. **List five goals or dreams you have for your future.** *These could be academic, personal, or professional.*
9. **What are three things you would change in the world?** *What about your city? Your high school? Your family? Yourself?*

6. Personality and Strengths

It can be hard to measure yourself or define who you are as a person. Identity goes beyond your interests and involvement. The following questions will help you explain not just what you do or what you like, but who you are. Throughout this process, you should focus on your positives and strengths because your application should present the very best you on your very best day.

1. **List at least three personal strengths such as persistence, organization, or charisma.** *These can be anything - the point is to think about yourself. Now add one story or example that demonstrates each strength. If you can't think of any, Google "personal strengths" and browse some lists.*
2. **List five ways your friends would describe you.** *These could be personality traits, interests, etc. If one of your friends was completing your college application and essays for you, what would they write about you?*
3. **List five academic things you've learned in high school that fascinated you.** *Think more broadly than just subjects or facts. For example, "How deals are made in politics" rather than some specific facet of history/government/politics.*
4. **List five non-academic things you've learned in high school that fascinated you.** *These could be skills, facts, events, or something personal about your religion, ancestry, family business, etc.*
5. **What is the biggest challenge you have overcome? How did you grow or learn from it? What accomplishment or achievement did you work the hardest to complete?**
6. **Think about a time you really felt loved, valued, and appreciated.** *What made you feel that way and why was it so powerful?*
7. **What is the kindest thing you have ever done? What is the kindest thing someone has done for you?**
8. **What events or experiences have evoked an emotional response in you?** *What makes you tired? What really energizes you? What makes you stressed or relaxed? What makes you confident or afraid? Are there other important event-emotion links you can note?*
9. **Are you an introvert or extrovert? Why? What stories or examples would show this? What do you like about being an introvert/extrovert?**
10. **Would you rather be an extremely well-rounded "renaissance man" or a top expert in a niche?** *If you had to pick a niche, what would you choose? What things have you done that made you more well-rounded?*
11. **What things are you proud of or made you feel satisfied with yourself? Why? How have you cultivated or pursued those things deeper?**
12. **Are you detail oriented or big picture focused?** *How do you break a problem down into components to solve it? How do you aggregate disparate pieces of information to form conclusions?*
13. **How are you actually different from other people's perception of you? What is surprising about you?**
14. **Think about what is unique about you and your background.** *How did it prepare you for success in college? Teach you unique or interesting things? Build your strengths and abilities? Make you a perfect fit for one of your school choices?*
15. **College applications are often more powerful and believable when they show a little vulnerability. What makes you feel vulnerable? What experiences in your life could you share that are moments of weakness, failure, struggle, hardship, or challenge? What stories might you share on a fifth date, but not on a first? What things about you would you be uncomfortable with everyone in your school knowing, but fine with your close friends knowing?**

7. Connecting Introspection to The Common Application

Once you have finished your soul searching, sit down and make three lists:

1. **A list of stories, examples, anecdotes, conversations, quotes, relationships, etc** that you think might make for good essay material. This can include anything from your responses to the above questions, ideas you already have, or whatever else you want to add.
2. **A list of things you want to say about yourself in your essay and application.** This could be related to your application theme/narrative or whatever else you feel is important. Focus on core values, motivations, personal strengths, foundational beliefs, personality traits, passions, aspirations, etc. Again, the introspection questions above ask about some of these. You can also do a Google search for each of those words with "list of" and you'll see tons of ideas and examples, e.g. search "list of core values" or "list of personal strengths."
3. **A list of potential essay topics or outlines.** Aim to have two to three ideas for different approaches you might want to take. It can help to envision how items from lists 1 and 2 will fit into each outline. Once you start a rough draft, you will aim to express the things from list 2 and use the things from list 1 to show and demonstrate them.

Below are the current prompts for the Common Application essay. Students filling out the Common App must select one of these. The next step in introspection is to answer **all of the prompts** with a brief sentence or two (e.g. 280 characters or less). Hopefully you will notice that many of the questions you've already answered or considered can be used as building blocks for the prompts below. Which answer has the most potential to showcase the best you have to offer to an admissions officer? Which answer highlights your passions, your motivations, your core values, and your uniqueness? Try not to think about which essay is the easiest to answer - in fact, that might be your worst choice. Reread our introduction to review your application goals. Also before you decide on a prompt, read the section in our Essay Guide on application arcs. If there are multiple prompts you feel have promise and fit your arc, go deeper into outlining your essay to see which is the most compelling.

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. 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?
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.

8. Connecting Introspection to the Coalition Application

Again, you will find that many of your introspection answers can easily transition into an essay for the current Coalition Application prompts listed below. Try answering each of these prompts briefly to discover which can easily convert your introspection ideas into a compelling essay.

1. Tell a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it.
2. Describe a time when you made a meaningful contribution to others in which the greater good was your focus. Discuss the challenges and rewards of making your contribution.
3. Has there been a time when you've had a long-cherished or accepted belief challenged? How did you respond? How did the challenge affect your beliefs?
4. What is the hardest part of being a student now? What's the best part? What advice would you give a younger sibling or friend (assuming they would listen to you)?
5. Submit an essay on a topic of your choice.

Note: Approach Coalition prompt #4 with extreme caution. It's very difficult to write a compelling essay for this one while retaining a tone of acceptable humility and likability. The appearance of arrogance will not serve you well, and neither will complaining about the hardest part of being a student now. If you really want to answer this prompt, we would encourage you to consider submitting an essay on a topic of your choice and address these themes with a more indirect and subtle approach.

9. Additional Resources

If you're looking for additional guidance and resources, we offer a full package of the five guides described below. These are \$45 when purchased individually, but you can get the set for just \$20 when you use discount code **reddit**. Save over 50% on 150 pages of our best advice, written in our approachable, practical, just-the-good-parts style. We also offer essay reviews and consultations on our website.

1. **Stand out from the Stack: A Guide to Writing Winning Essays** – A thorough, practical, 62-page guide that maps the whole essay-writing process from start to finish. We address the best essay strategies, common pitfalls, and how to creatively craft a compelling essay that showcases you effectively.
2. **Understanding Extracurricular Activities** – Our guide delves into how admissions officers view ECs, what activities to pursue, how to maximize their value, and how to describe ECs in your app. We cover depth and breadth, do's and don'ts, and myths and facts – everything you want to know about the extracurricular section of your application, in a detailed 35-page guide.
3. **Guide To Honors And Awards** - This 11-page guide will help you maximize the value of your honors and awards. It has tips on what awards to include, how to describe them, how colleges evaluate them, and what to do when your awards section feels underwhelming.

4. **How to Get Top Letters of Recommendation** – You won’t be the one writing your letter of recommendation, but there’s still so much you can do to ensure you get a good one – 24 pages worth, in fact. We discuss who to pick as a recommender, how to prepare a “keynote page” and request a recommendation, and what makes a letter of recommendation exceptional.
5. **Acing the Interviews** – This comprehensive, 18-page guide explains what colleges are looking for in interviews, how to prepare, and how to maximize your ratings. It’s worth it just for the three simple steps to ensure a top-rated response to EVERY interview question. To further solidify your confidence and understanding, it also includes a practical list of Do’s and Don’ts as well as Commonly Asked Interview Questions and strategies for acing them.