

# **WRITING THE COLLEGE APP ESSAY & UC RESPONSES**

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**SEPTEMBER 2019**

A black and white photograph of a chessboard with a hand moving a dark chess piece. The board is partially obscured by a red overlay with a diamond pattern. The text 'THINKING AHEAD' is written in white, bold, uppercase letters across the center of the red overlay. The background is a bright, out-of-focus white surface.

**THINKING AHEAD**

The college application essay, or personal insight response, brings a **personal face** to your application.

Spend a lot of time on it. You'll probably write at least 4–5 drafts.

Think hard about what makes you dissimilar or shows **uniqueness** from the larger pool.

It's **not what, but how** you write about it.

The essay/personal insight response needs an “aboutness”—something that involves **conflict and growth**.

All prompts/questions require the reader to focus on struggle or change.

Reach hard for **insight** that doesn't come off as typical. You have to be self-aware.

Share a little of yourself and **reflect** on the ways you've developed.

It's not "who I am", but "**how I've become** who I am."

You can't tell it all, so **pick one of your "many selves"** to craft on the page

**Expose yourself** in honest, intimate, compelling ways = This is who I am.

It's OK to share your **flaws** or weaknesses.

**Be honest and open**, but don't write about anything that might make the reader too uncomfortable or which may portray you negatively.

**What** did you do, and why?

**What learning,** insights, perspectives, maturity, personal growth did you gain as a result?

**How have you applied that** to your life's journey?



The most effective responses provide **new information** not found elsewhere in app

Or explains more fully something listed in app

Focus must be on **YOU** – the impact on you and your impact on others

## 10 Essay Topics to Avoid:

1. Romantic relationships
2. Religious beliefs
3. Passionate political views
4. The importance of a college education
5. Trips abroad, unless truly noteworthy
6. “The big game” or “My unfortunate athletic injury”, unless a really original spin on it
7. Psychological condition or risky behavior that might be considered a risk



# PREWRITING

Before beginning to write, **make a list** of your personal attributes and values that you want to communicate in your essay.

**Brainstorm ideas** for the essay prompts that you are considering.

Pick a prompt that you have strong, **enthusiastic feelings** about.

**Write a spontaneous first draft** without inhibitions or concern for structure.

You will edit and shape future drafts to get it to the final version.

Put it aside for a week, and then rewrite from scratch.

**Or, brainstorm** everything you can think of that relates to the topic.

List lots of ideas *and* examples for your topic.

Group those ideas into related categories.

Focus on 1–3 ideas and develop a thesis or focus.

Make an outline and begin writing.

**Develop a clear structure**, with a major point or focus for each body paragraph.

**For private and out-of-state colleges**, you can use either a conventional essay format, or a looser structure where your thoughts and writing flow logically.

The best essays stay **small and close**.

Consider using something trivial or anecdotal to open onto something big, which is revealing your story and who you are (non-UC essays only. UCs just want you to get straight to the point).



What difficulties did I face or am I currently facing?

What negative effects did I experience as a result?

What actions did I take to change or improve my situation?

What positive skills, qualities, values, and/or resources did I develop as a result? How did this make me grow as a person? (1/4 – 1/3 of essay)

For the private and out-of-state college topic “Why do you want to attend our college?”, **read the mission statement and website** thoroughly.

Learn about & mention the **unique character and features** of the school, such as interesting courses & professors in your major, clubs, etc.

Be honest and share your **personal reasons** for wanting to go to their college.

If you are applying to an **engineering or nursing program**, show in one of your essays your qualities or experiences that relate to that profession.

Show how your **interest and passion** developed over time.

It is very important to tell the **specific aspects** of the school that have motivated you to apply there.

If you can plug in another school's name into that essay, you need to research more closely its unique features.

A vintage Remington Standard typewriter is shown from a front-facing perspective. The typewriter is black with a white keyboard and a white carriage. A sheet of paper is inserted into the carriage. The typewriter is placed on a wooden desk. A red, semi-transparent overlay is positioned in the center of the image, containing the word "WRITING" in white, bold, uppercase letters. The overlay is shaped like a wide, shallow 'V' or a similar geometric form. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# WRITING

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Remington Standard

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**For private or out-of-state colleges**, begin with **a great short lead**, such as an anecdote or an intriguing opening line.

**For the UCs**, you can slip in a thesis or a lead—or you just can dive right into the topic.

Do not repeat the prompt.

Maintain a **clear, continual focus** on one experience in depth. Don't ramble.

Do **scaffolding**: a process to go deeper.

At almost each statement, ask yourself:

“What’s that about? Why did I do that? Why did I think that?”



Use a **conversational tone** and unique voice.

Write in a natural fashion, without artifice. Let your personality out.

**Don't do a "humble brag."** But don't undersell your great qualities either.

**Don't demonize/blame others** or make yourself a victim.

Write a **simple but memorable ending**.

You could tie it back to your lead, present another idea or anecdote that grows logically from what you've written in essay, or perhaps include a relevant quote.

Avoid a vague, predictable conclusion (e.g., "I learned a lot").

This year's Common App essay prompts:

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 & 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.

A vintage Remington Standard typewriter is shown from a front-facing perspective. The typewriter is black with a white keyboard and a white paper carriage. A large, semi-transparent red overlay is positioned in the center of the image, containing the text "THE UC PERSONAL INSIGHT RESPONSE" in white, bold, uppercase letters. The typewriter is placed on a light-colored wooden surface. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# THE UC PERSONAL INSIGHT RESPONSE

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Remington Standard

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What do the UCs want from your responses?

To express **who you are, what matters** to you, and  
what you want **UC to know**

To go **beyond academics**

To **provide context** – your individual experiences  
& environment

**Not an essay** - no thesis or topic sentences  
needed

**Choose 4** of 8 questions; 350 words max each

Respond directly with **focus and clarity**

Align with the **14** comprehensive review  
**factors**

1. **Academic GPA** in all A-G courses
2. **Scores** on the ACT with writing or SAT Reasoning
3. Content of and performance in courses **beyond minimum A-G**
4. Number and performance in UC-approved **honors/AP** courses
5. Identified by UC as being ranked in **top 15%** of class
6. Quality of **senior year** schedule
7. Academic **performance relative to opportunities** at high school
8. Outstanding **performance in 1+ academic subject** areas

9. Outstanding work in 1+ **special projects** in an academic field
10. Recent, marked **improvement** in academic performance
11. Special **talents, skills, achievements and awards**
12. Completion of **special projects within the high school** curriculum or in conjunction with special school event
13. Academic achievement in light of **difficult life experiences** or special circumstances
14. **Location** of a student's secondary school and residence

Discuss recent events, or past **events that continue to impact you** in daily academic or home life

Use 1-2 concrete, **specific**, detailed examples

**Focus on insights**, perspectives, personal change, growth

**THE UCs WANT YOU TO AVOID.....**

Acronyms

Quotations

Philosophy

Creative writing

Titles/Restating prompt

Flowery language

Story Telling/Scene Setting

Jokes/Sarcasm

1. Describe an example of your **leadership experiences** in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes, or contributed to group efforts over time.
2. Every person has a **creative side**, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem-solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.

3. What is your **greatest talent or skill**? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?
4. Describe how you have **taken advantage** of a significant educational opportunity or worked to **overcome** an educational barrier you have faced.
5. Describe the most **significant challenge** you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge.



6. Describe an **academic subject that inspires you**. Describe how you have furthered this interest inside and/or outside of the classroom.

7. What have you done to make your school or your community a **better place**?

8. Beyond what has already been shared in your application, what do you believe **makes you stand out** as a strong candidate for admissions to the University of California?

**The “Additional Comments/Info” section** in both the Common App and UC application is where you can share:

Additional clarification on important details of your application

Unusual circumstances affecting your academic record

Anything else you have not had the opportunity to include elsewhere in your application



**EDITING**

Good writing is **insightful, concise and specific**—does my essay do that?

Have I **repeated stuff** on my activity list?

Is there fat in my sentences and/or **redundancies**?

Did I use good **sentence variety and smooth transitions**?

Have I used correct **spelling and grammar**?

**Show to 2–4 people** for feedback.

Put away essay for a few days, then **re-read and revise**.

Arrive at your final version well before the application deadline.

How will college admissions officers evaluate your writing?

**Basic writing competency**; organization and evidence of your points

Your **ability to self-reflect and show insights** into what you've learned, how you've grown

**Memorable and unique writing**; creative and original thought (non-UCs only)

Your **fit with the college** (non-UCs only)

*Write Your Way In*, by Rachel Toor

*College Essay Essentials*, by Ethan Sawyer

<http://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/how-to-apply/personal-questions/freshman/>

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