

If you're having trouble coming up with ideas, below is a list of questions I use to help my students brainstorm essay material. The idea is to read each prompt and jot down whatever comes to mind, then choose one or two ideas to develop for 15 minutes or so — each. It's ok to skip a few where nothing is coming up for you.

The whole exercise can take anywhere from 1-30+ min per prompt and result in some excellent ideas to use in your short and long application responses. I've designed these questions to be helpful to personal development and self-awareness, too, so writing about them can have a cathartic, journal-like feel that eases some of the stress and anxiety of applications.

1. When do you feel happiest? Why do you think that is?
2. What are the biggest obstacles in your path to your ideal future?
3. How would your closest friend describe you?

4. How do you deal with frustration?

Tip: it can be helpful to think of frustration as simply the idea that something different should be happening than is actually happening.

5. Which intellectual areas can you benefit from developing?

6. Which emotional areas can you benefit from developing?

7. Describe a strong childhood memory. Why do you think it's so vivid?

8. How do you respond to change?

9. What's one specific way you've grown as a person in the past year?

10. What do you bring to your community?

11. What physical place has importance to you? Why?

12. What is your favorite (kind of) game? What specifically do you appreciate about it?

13. What person close to you has had a significant, positive impact on who you are today? Why?

14. What is one of your best qualities? How do you use and develop it?

15. Who is someone you have helped or would like to help someday? How did or would you assist them?

16. What item in your room most catches your eye? What meaning does it hold for you?

17. What's a topic you could talk about for hours? Why do you think you could talk so easily at length about it?

18. When you think of the word "punchable," what or who comes to mind? Why do you think that is?

19. What's something that's true that very few people agree with you on?

20. What's something that makes you feel proud?

21. What's something that gives you satisfaction?

22. What are you afraid of? Is your fear blocking you from doing what you want? What do you think your fear(s) could be trying to signal you to learn?

When you get ready to write a full draft, keep these tips in mind:

Do:

- remember it's a first draft, so don't stress about it, enjoy the process
- avoid critiquing as you go, just keep going
- get to the point without being flowery
- write something you'd be interested in reading
- stay focused and relate everything you say to your thesis
- include precise, related references/examples & analyze each carefully
- use the active voice
- check your [punctuation](#)
- be as clear and concise as possible
- be consistent in your level of formality or casualness
- draw the reader into your world and your way of seeing things
- when your draft is ready, ask many peers and available adults to be your readers and editors; try to learn from how they're seeing it how you could say it better

Don't:

- use jargon without clearly explaining it; usually simple words are stronger
- generalize (boring) or forget to include specific examples
- list your extracurriculars or other information that is available elsewhere in your application
- use passive voice or inconsistent tenses
- include unnecessary, pretentious, or unrelated references

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You may also be interested in...

- [SAT FAQ: Your Guide to the SAT Tests](#)
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