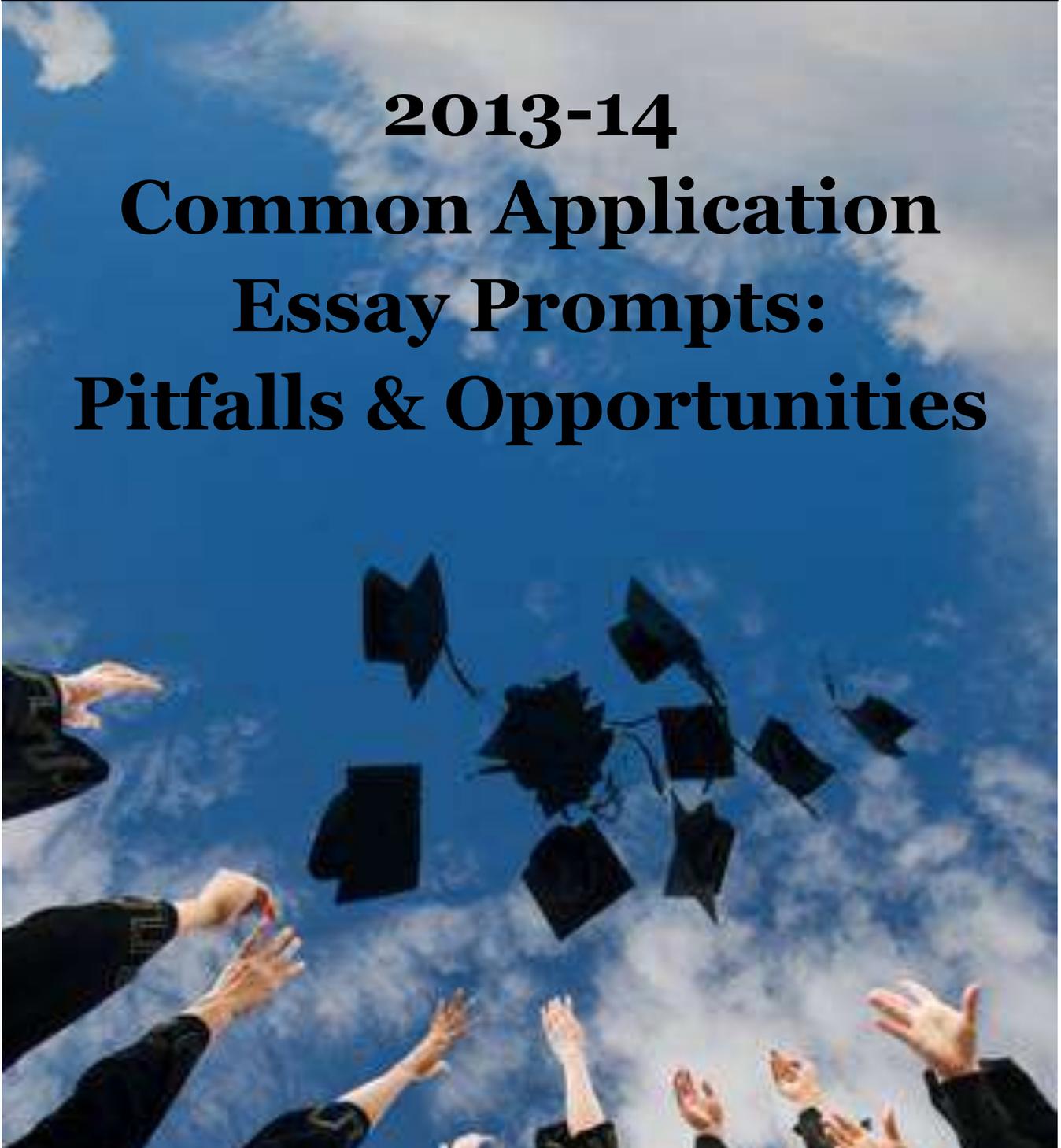


**Selective College Acceptance Counseling**

**2013-14  
Common Application  
Essay Prompts:  
Pitfalls & Opportunities**



**[www.getaccepted.org](http://www.getaccepted.org)**

## Selective College Acceptance Counseling

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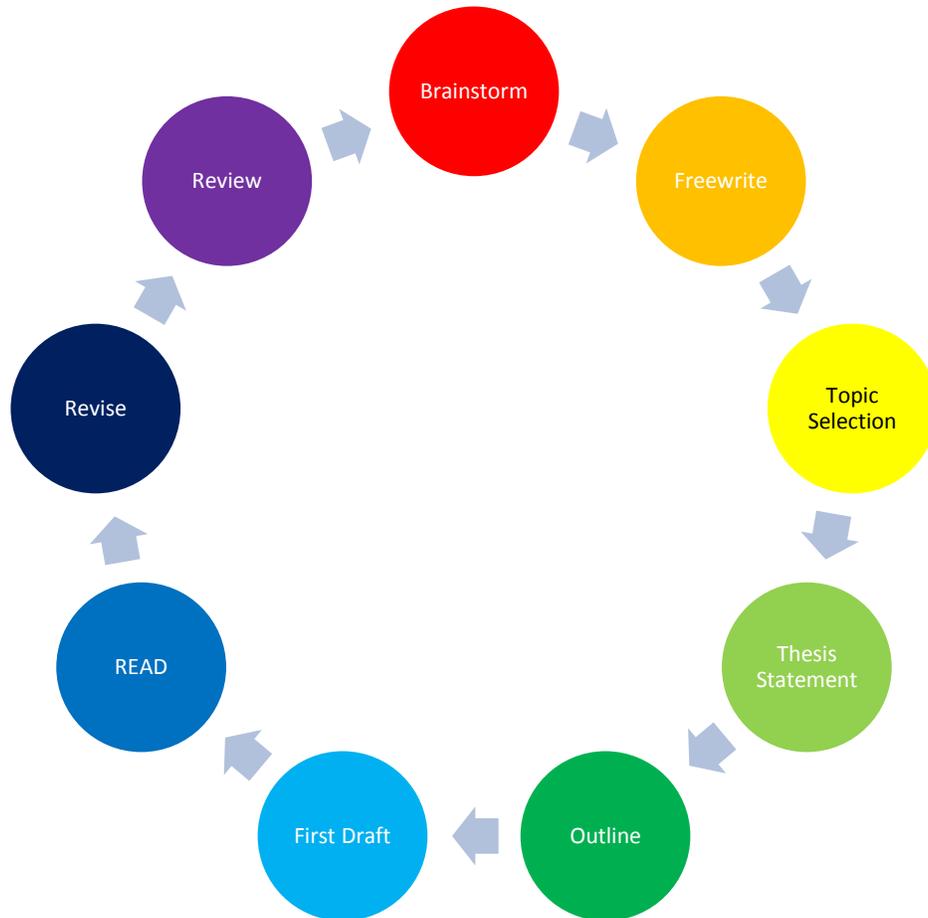
Holly is a seasoned educational leader with over 15 years' experience as a high school principal, guidance counselor, and teacher. She taught literature and composition at the college level for five years and is an award-winning locally published author. Holly holds Masters Degrees in Marketing and Educational Leadership. She is a certified School Administrator/Supervisor and holds Secondary Teaching Certificates in 7-12 English and Social Studies.

Dozens of Rochester-area students have submitted successful applications to America's Top 50 Colleges with Holly's guidance. In the past four years, her students have been admitted to:

- Cornell University
- University of Southern California
- UC Berkeley
- University of Rochester
- Rochester Institute of Technology
- Notre Dame
- Boston University
- United States Military Academy

Holly has counseled a diversity of exceptional students including; international students, scholar athletes, peer leaders, musicians, fine artists and civic-minded students. Almost half of her students received full scholarships to their college of choice.

# College Essay Writing Process



**Brainstorm:** Read over the questions and THINK about how you might approach each one

**Free write:** Jot down ideas for each of the topics you are considering without judgment

**Topic Selection:** Match your best idea to the prompt most closely related to what you want to write about

**Thesis Statement:** Write a topic sentence indicating what you are going to show about yourself

**Outline:** Organize your ideas to match the prompt and PROVE your thesis statement

**First Draft:** Get it down on paper, computer, tablet, just write; don't worry about the word count yet

**READ:** First, read it yourself and revise as needed, then show it to 2-3 others (Parent, counselor, friend) to read

**Revise:** Now craft your revised draft into a clear, concise essay of 650 words or less

**Review:** Ask your English teacher to give a final check of conventions; it must be perfect

# Thoughts on the 2013-14 Common Application Essay Prompts

May 20, 2013

Instructions for the new 2013-2014 Common Application Essay prompts read as follows:

*“The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice. **What do you want the readers of your application to know about you apart from courses, grades, and test scores?** Choose the option that best helps you answer that question and write an essay of no more than 650 words, using the prompt to inspire and structure your response. Remember: 650 words is your limit, not your goal. Use the full range if you need it, but don't feel obligated to do so. (The application won't accept a response shorter than 250 words.)”*

There are five new prompts:

- *Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.*
- *Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?*
- *Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?*
- *Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?*
- *Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family. ([www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org))*

As an Independent College Counselor with Selective College Acceptance Counseling, I work with students targeting highly-selective colleges. In the past, you may have heard me say that choosing the right essay prompt was about tailoring your selection to the types of colleges being targeted. In fact, I thought the old essay prompt; “Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you” was the best choice for most students applying to Top 40 colleges. I have been asked, which question I will recommend now. The answer is not so clear.

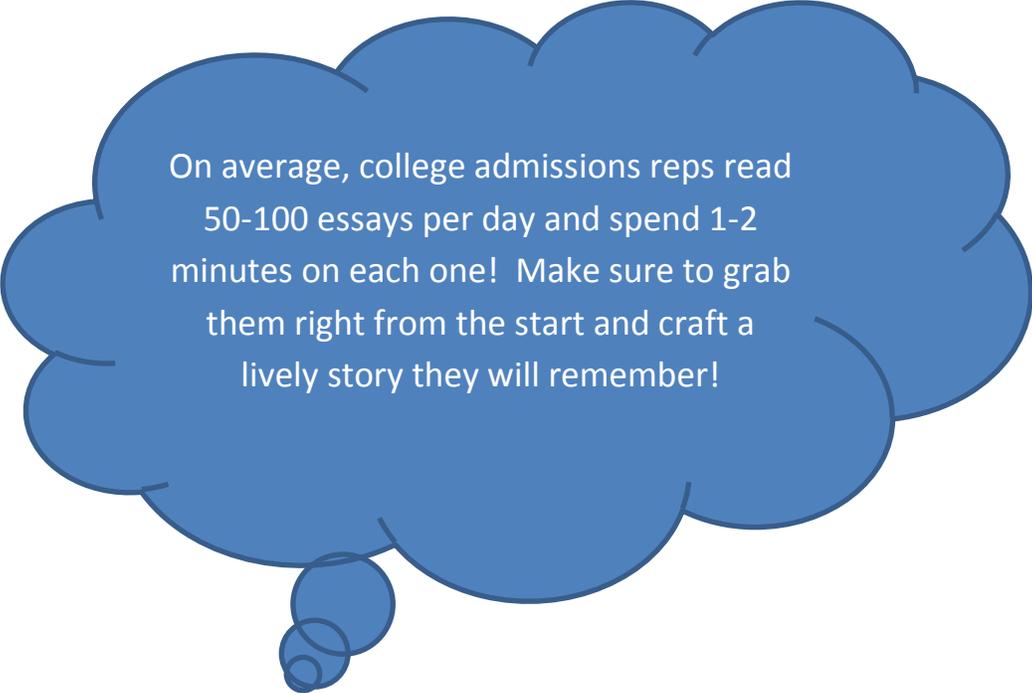
The new writing prompts are more personal and require a deep knowledge of your students’ background and experiences. I no longer believe there is a blanket “best prompt” It depends so much more now on the individual student and his or her story. Here are my thoughts about the pitfalls and opportunities contained in these seemingly innocuous questions. I’ll work backwards:

### **The Rite of Passage Question:**

- *Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.*

*Pitfall:* This seems like a question choice fraught with opportunities for cliché'. I am picturing hundreds of essays on Bar Mitzvahs and Quinceañeras ...thousands more on getting your driver's license or (dare I say) prom night. YIKES! As adolescent psychology tells us, the brain doesn't reach maturity until somewhere between the ages of 22-24. Empirically, the transition from childhood to adulthood does not occur until after college. So, I would caution any 16-18 year-old from proclaiming that they have reached maturity. This prompt could be used to point out that even though you had experienced some rite of passage, you have realized that you are only at the beginning of the journey to adulthood. For the most part, I would advise students to avoid this question.

*Opportunity:* There is an opportunity here for a student who has been saddled with adult responsibility at a young age to share his or her story. I, myself, took on the responsibilities of grocery shopping, cooking and cleaning for my father and brother at the age of 12 due to my parents' divorce. At the time I entered college, most thought of me as mature beyond my years. Of course, once I was freed from those responsibilities, I went a little wild and failed out of the first college I attended. I believe college admissions representatives have seen this type of behavior before. So, the challenge is to prove that once you are free, you won't lose your head!



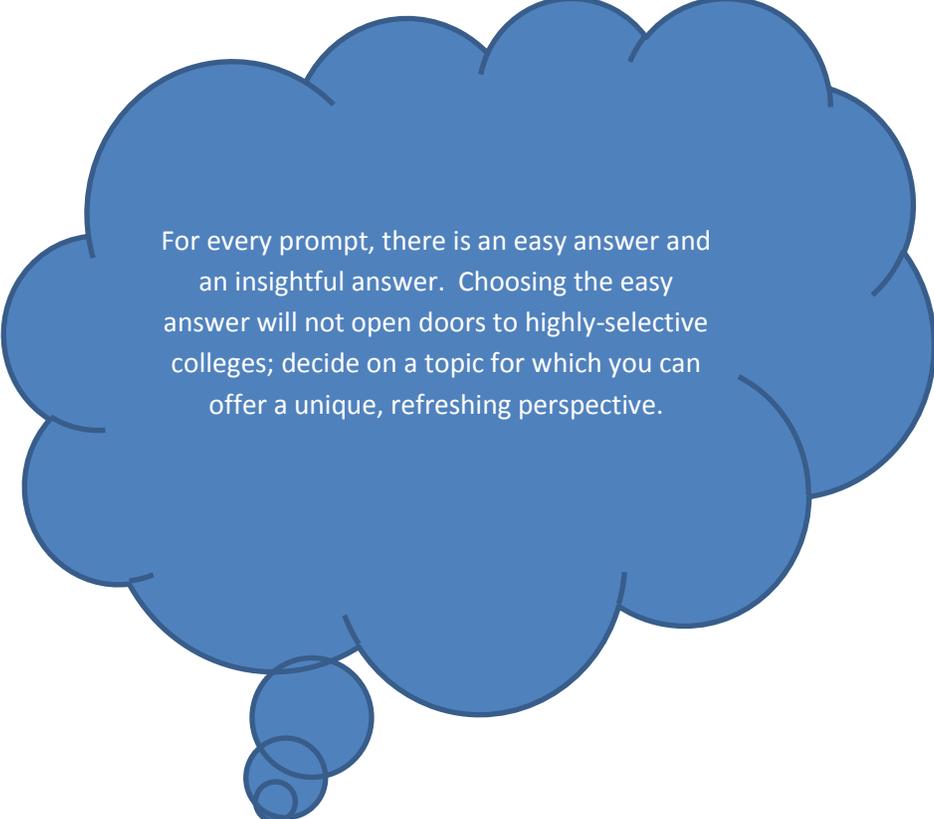
On average, college admissions reps read 50-100 essays per day and spend 1-2 minutes on each one! Make sure to grab them right from the start and craft a lively story they will remember!

## The Zen Question

• Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?

*Pitfall:* Need I say it....I am seeing thousands of essays about the moments after a sports victory, or sharing an ice cream cone with your best friend on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. Again, for the most part, moments of true contentment occur later in life. Students applying to highly-selective colleges are driven, motivated, and striving for a larger goal that lies somewhere in their future. Although we have all had brief moments of contentment, the hunger to do more, and be more, and accomplish more soon brings us out of the contented present and into dreaming about and working towards the future (at least it had better!).

*Opportunity:* I think there is an opportunity here to write a future-tense essay about how content you WILL feel when you receive your acceptance letter from your first choice college, or find the cure for cancer, or otherwise meet your goals. This would need to be crafted carefully and written to include a visualization of where you would be and what you would be feeling in vivid detail. Beyond the scope of most teen writers, but maybe I'd recommend it for a few with strong prose skills.



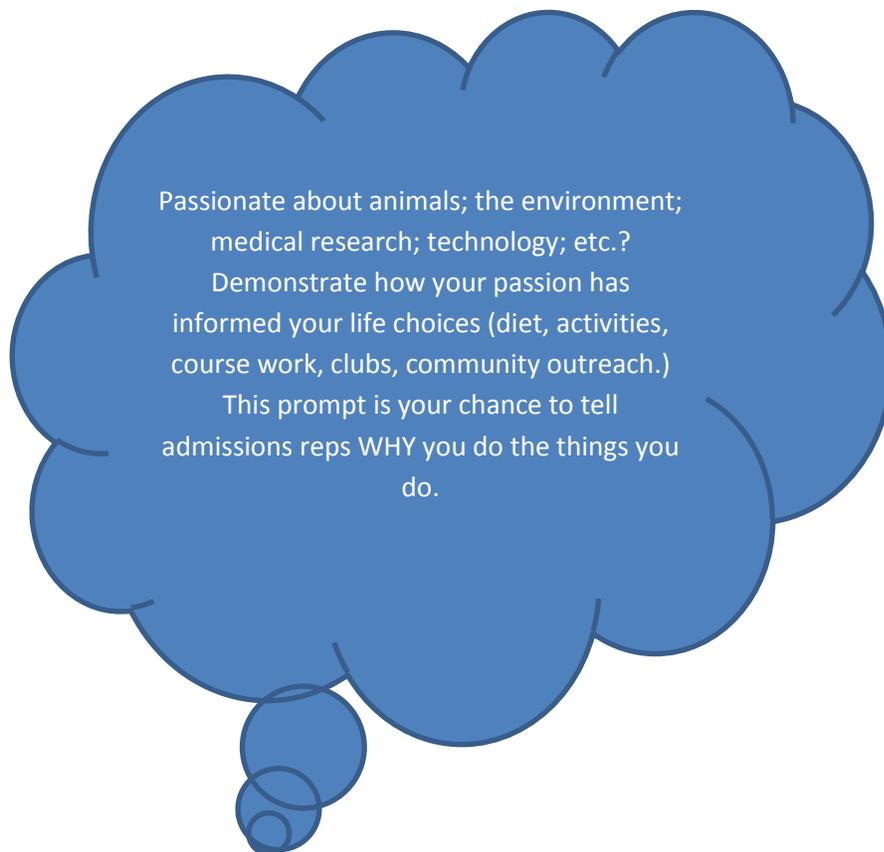
For every prompt, there is an easy answer and an insightful answer. Choosing the easy answer will not open doors to highly-selective colleges; decide on a topic for which you can offer a unique, refreshing perspective.

## The Rebel Question

- *Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?*

*Pitfall:* James Dean need not apply! It is important that students do not position themselves as “rebels without a cause.” This question does give students a chance to explain anything reported on his or her disciplinary record. It is an opportunity to demonstrate that you were standing up for your beliefs or fighting for justice when you received that three-day suspension! Tell your story, explain your motivation; give it a positive spin. Not sure this will impress and much as explain, but that explanation could be crucial for certain students.

*Opportunity:* In the absence of the need to explain away a blemish on your record, this is an opportunity to talk about community activism and can be a way for the civic-minded student to share what he or she is passionate about. I will advise students to give this question serious consideration.

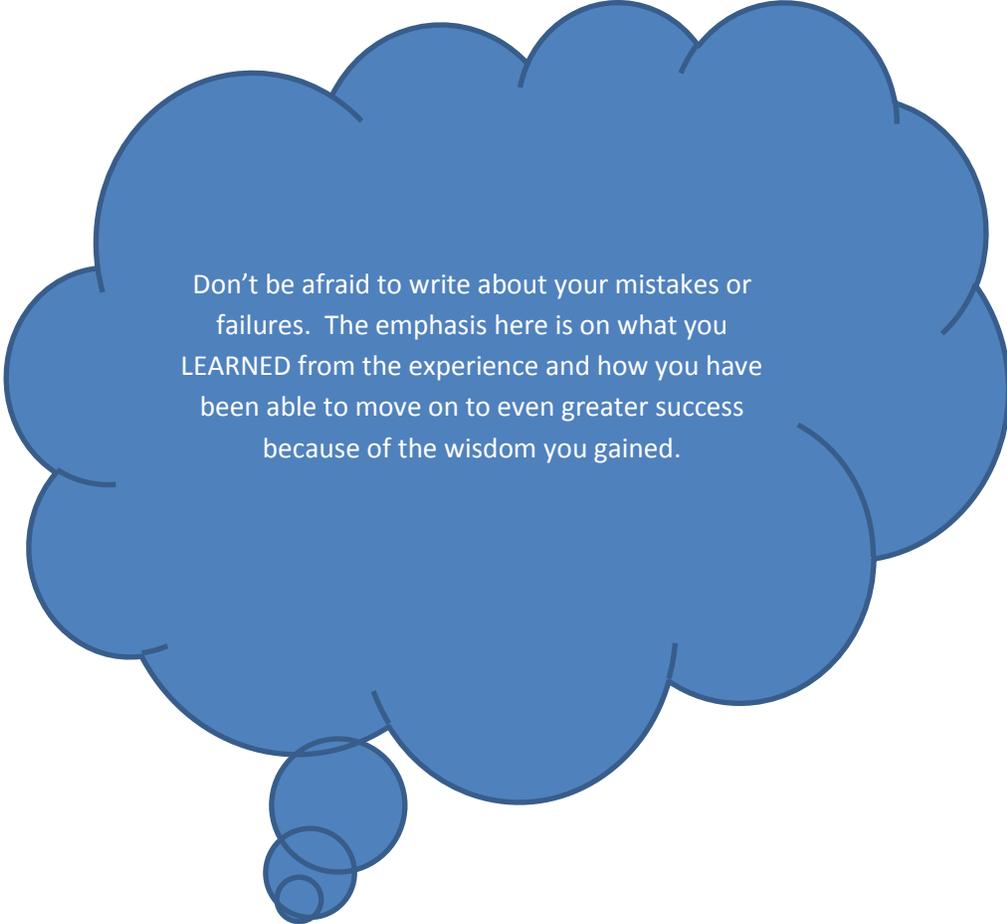


## The Edison Question

- *Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?*

*Pitfall:* I can see many students using this question as an opportunity to explain away a bad grade; “I earned a” C” in AP Physics and this is why....” Ok, but what did you LEARN from that. The danger is in placing the blame for your failure on anyone besides yourself. My teacher didn’t teach, or didn’t like me or whatever, but I was able to overcome it and still pass the class. NO!

*Opportunity:* If at first you don’t succeed, try, try, again! It is well-known that Edison failed thousands of times in his quest to invent the light bulb. His persistence and ability to learn from each mistake set him apart as a great man. Students can use this question to do the same. Definitely on my list of questions worth exploring.



Don't be afraid to write about your mistakes or failures. The emphasis here is on what you LEARNED from the experience and how you have been able to move on to even greater success because of the wisdom you gained.

### **The Breakfast Club Question**

• *Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.*

*Pitfall:* Um..... like, that you will answer this as a character from *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes). My parents raised me to be a (fill-in-the-blank) and that is why I am who I am. In the book, *The College Hook*, Pam Proctor actually recommends that students use one of "The Top Ten College Hooks" as way to "package" themselves for college admissions. Her hooks are:

- The Athletic Hook
- The International Hook
- The Music hook
- The Political hook
- The Technology Hook
- The Humanitarian Hook
- The Science Hook
- The Writing Hook
- The Drama Hook
- The Multicultural Hook  
(Proctor)

I think it is a mistake for students to label or categorize themselves for college admissions officers. They are not casting a movie and not looking for "types". As these new questions highlight, college admissions reps are looking for unique, mature, articulate students who can think critically about how their experiences have shaped who they are and influenced who they will become.

*Opportunity:* At the end of "The Breakfast Club", Anthony Michael Hall's character reads the letter he wrote in response to a prompt very similar to this one; "Who are you?" The answer he gives is brilliant:

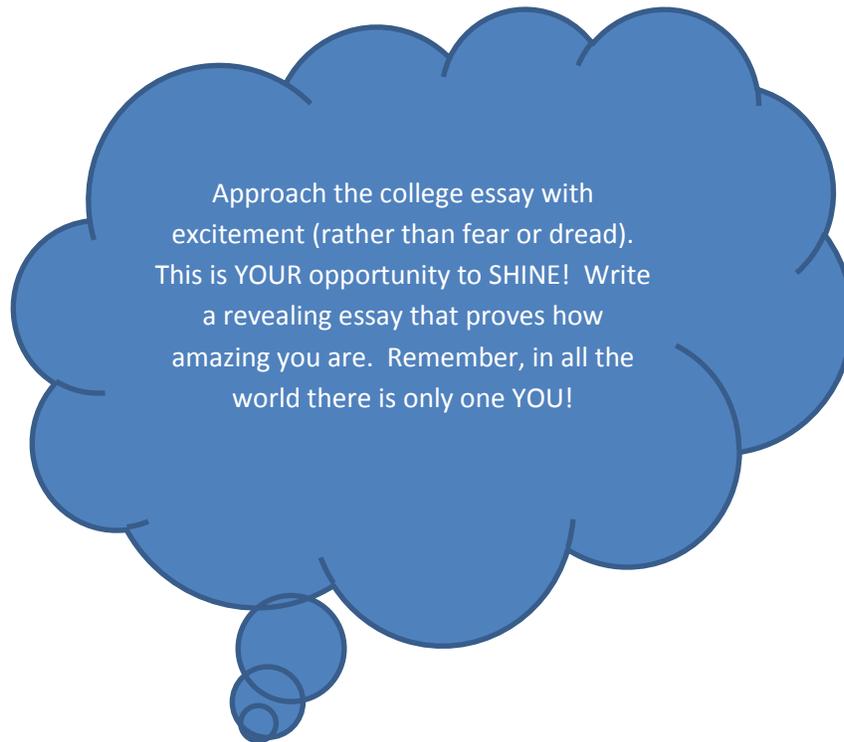
*"Dear Mr. Vernon, we accept the fact that we had to sacrifice a whole Saturday in detention for whatever it was that we did wrong. What we did WAS wrong. But we think you're crazy to make us write this essay telling you who we think we are. What do you care? You see us as you want to see us... in the simplest terms and the most convenient definitions. You see us as a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess and a criminal. Correct? That's the way we saw each other at seven o'clock this morning. We were brainwashed. But what we found out is that each one of us is a brain, and an athlete, and a basket case, a princess, and a criminal. Does that answer your question?"*

*Sincerely yours, the Breakfast Club."*

The opportunity with this prompt is for students to demonstrate how they have been able to move beyond the situations or circumstances which sought to define them to become something unexpected.

## Conclusion

Overall, I feel that these new questions are challenging and require a higher level of eloquence and self-knowledge than in the past. It will be tricky for students to answer these questions from a unique perspective as there are any number of stock answers admissions reps are expecting (and dare I say dreading). I love that the instructions guide students to the question that “*helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice*”. That is the question the BEST question to answer; and the reason my summer workshop is called “Distinguish Yourself on the Common App!”



## Citations:

"<https://www.commonapp.org/CommonApp/Docs/DownloadForms/2013/EssayAnnouncementFinal.pdf>." *The Common Application For Undergraduate College Admission*. The Common Application, 05 Feb. 2013. Web. 05 May 2013.

Hughes, John, dir. *The Breakfast Club*. Universal Studios. Hollywood, CA, 1985. Motion Picture. Screen Play.

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# Selective College Acceptance Counseling Presents

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