

Special Report: How to Pick Your Perfect College Essay Topic



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Only 15 per students per Summit, or you can work with me 1-on-1.

Don't Know What to Write?



"Many a night, I found myself slouched in a black, leather chair, staring at a blank computer screen, wanting to scream or cry. The systematic, flashing cursor of an empty Word document always seemed to taunt me. I would sit, letting my emotions wash over me, as my mind raced urgently to create a story."

Those were the opening lines of my college essay that got me accepted at Brown University (and a slew of other places, including all of the University of California schools).

Looking back at those words now, over a decade later, the feeling I have towards writing today is as true as it was then. And so it is with all the hundreds of students whom I've helped navigate this college process. We don't know where to begin our stories, so the blank screen seems to sneer at us.

It feels a little meta to be writing about not knowing what to write, but this article will take you through the exact process I've honed over more than ten years to help identify and brainstorm the best topics for your personal statement.

Read on, intrepid student, if you hope to discover how to determine whether your chosen topic is worthy or substantial enough. You'd be surprised what counterintuitive topics work.

Take solace in knowing that you're not alone if you don't know what to write. I count myself among that group.

THE SECRET QUESTION COLLEGES ARE REALLY ASKING

Refer back to this guide often as you think deeply about possible topics. Don't discount ANYTHING at this stage; just record everything. But as you narrow in on your choice, remember, the invisible question ALL colleges are asking is, "Why should we admit you? What will you do for us? How will you be an asset to our community?"

It doesn't matter how they word their prompt, the real question is how you will serve them. They don't care about you per se; they care about how you will fit into their idea of a positive college community and beyond. So as you craft your story, always keep sight of the main goal, which is answering that invisible question.

You don't have to come right out and say it like, "The way I am most eager to contribute is ____." However, you do need to hint heavily at the positive qualities, insights, or experiences you'd bring with you.

WHERE TO FIND INSPIRATION

Now, remember, choosing a topic is just the start. But it's the most critical step because choosing a bad topic and expending all that blood, sweat, and tears writing it will exhaust you. You likely won't have the willpower to write a whole new essay. Even if you do, it definitely won't be as strong as if you just started with a strong topic.

One thing I did was buy a few books that collect successful college essays. Then I read through about 200 essays before I wrote my first word. When I got stuck, I read more essays. While some believe reading other people's essays leads to subconscious plagiarism, I disagree. I find it incredibly helpful to see what topics others have written about, which will get your gears spinning. Their ideas will remind you of things from your own life, one of which will become your final topic choice. Good luck!

What Colleges Are Looking For

To know what to write, you have to know what colleges are looking for. They want to:

1. Determine what kind of person you are.

This means expressing your identity, values, struggles, growth, realizations, dreams, passions, talents, or achievements. It doesn't mean you need to tell colleges everything—that's impossible in the limited space allotted—but it means you must choose carefully about what to put in and what to slice out.

2. Assess what value you'd add to their community and greater society.

Colleges yearn to know how you will contribute to their school and the world. As much as people want to tell you the college essay is a "you" essay, it's really not. It's a "them" essay, as in what can you do for them, the colleges? Heed President John F. Kennedy's words: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

3. See if you can write well.

I love quotes, so in the words of Samuel L. Jackson's character from the film *Pulp Fiction*, "English, motherf---r, do you speak it?!" This is where it helps if you'd paid attention in writing class. Time to put your eloquence, sophistication, and wit on display. Proper grammar, punctuation, and mechanics matter.

But which of those objectives is most important? It depends. Different schools will judge the essay differently. Some care more about who you are as a person, while others care more about whether you can form coherent, logical thoughts. In fact, each school will weigh the essays differently. At one school, the essays may account for 30% of your overall admission package, whereas another school will peg it at 10%.

Since you won't know the individual preferences of your readers, do your best to hit all three objectives. Aim to produce impressive *and* well-written content.

No Need to Be a Special Snowflake: Using Average Things to Show Extraordinary Traits

There are many myths about what the college essay should embody. You might hear advice like, “You gotta write about leadership” or “you need to discuss your biggest accomplishment” or “make sure to talk about how you endured hardship.”

Nope, nope, and nope.

I mean, you could (and if you do it right, it’ll be great). But you really don’t have to.

The thinking behind their advice is to present yourself in the most impressive way, but the truth is, there are many other (and often better) ways to come off impressively.

Take the girl who just got accepted into five Ivy League schools and Stanford in 2016. Guess what she wrote about. Her adventures at Costco. Yeah, Costco, the super retailer. But her true story was about her resourcefulness and inquisitiveness. Click to read her full [Costco essay](#).

Now while I think there’s much to improve about her essay, like creating a better balance between her Costco framework and the real heart of her message, my point is you don’t have to write about conventional topics. In fact, it’s better if you don’t because it’ll instantly make you stand out.

At the same time, don’t rely on a gimmick. If you have a cool premise but no significant point behind it, then don’t use it, no matter how interesting. Gimmicky essays are a surefire way to the rejection pile.

One of my favorite essays was about a girl taking a shower. Showering is perhaps the most routine thing anyone can do, but she used this framework to discuss how the shower was a safe haven for her, a sanctuary in a crowded household. She reflected

on everything from philosophical existential matters to her academic and social lives. The shower was merely a clever structure to discuss deeper matters.

Another essay was about the kid's dad making him pancakes every morning and the life lessons gleaned from that. One of the most heartfelt essays I helped someone with was about a simple conversation the girl had with her pastor about the importance of crying and expressing ourselves vulnerably.

Notice how there's nothing inherently impressive about any of these topics. Students freak out because they think they are squarely average. Not a special bone in their bodies. That may or may not be true, but as I just described, it's very possible to take ordinary events and turn them into creative stories that showcase your best qualities.

Mundane topics often turn out to be the most authentic, interesting, and impressive stories. You don't need to have cured cancer, or interned for the President of the United States, or founded the next Facebook. What you do need is a clear system to help you pull out these overlooked experiences and details from your life.

That's what I've been doing for over ten years. By interviewing my students, I tease out these qualities and memories that they haven't thought about for years. I help them revisit the ideas they've immediately dismissed as unworthy college topics (when, in fact, they've turned out to be excellent ones).

The goal is not necessarily to write about an extraordinary topic. If you have something extraordinary, well, great, then that can be your ticket. But 99% of the time, successful essays (even to the Ivies) are about ordinary topics, written extraordinarily.

Making a Nickname for Yourself

While you don't need to choose an extraordinary topic, you do need your essay to be memorable. That means by the end of your essay, someone should be able to assign you a nickname, like the "Pepsi straw guy" or "kid with wavy hair" or "broken van girl" or "guy who broke into a car."

This nickname will likely be how the admission officers will refer to you when discussing your application. If they can't easily reference you, how likely do you think they will want to continue talking about you? Not long, my friend.

That's why straightforward essays aren't worth their ink. They are altogether forgettable, unless the story itself is somehow compelling. Allowing your essay topic to form a nickname is the easiest way to go. Molding your essay around a nickname forces you to create a more creative framework, but you have to be careful that you aren't all glitz and no substance. Gimmicks alone are worthless, but a creative shell with real meat inside will open doors for you.

Remember the saying, "All that glitters is not gold." But real gold that is covered in filth won't be noticed either. You need both form and function.

Without knowing beforehand who wrote your essay, any close friend should be able to identify that the essay belongs to you. So think of experiences or memories—the more detailed and specific, the better—that define you. Inside jokes or identity level experiences are best.

Don't Be Envious of Those Who Went Through Disaster

Around the time of Hurricane Katrina a few years back or the 9-11 World Trade Center attacks, I heard many students groan, "Man, I wish that happened to me! Those kids are so lucky because now they have something amazing to write about."

I don't know about you, but I'd rather have my home intact and my family members alive than have something to write about. But, I get it. The frustration is real: It's insanely hard to think of something good to write about when nothing special seems to have happened to you.

Here's the thing, though. Admission committees were swamped with nearly identical essays on these disaster situations. How much do you really think a student writing about the hurricane stood out from Student #99999 writing about the same thing? Unless you have something uniquely profound to say about such disasters, don't write about it.

Plus, the fact that disaster never shook your world doesn't mean you don't have worthy experiences. The point of this article is to show you how to find those hidden gems, events, or qualities you likely overlooked.

10 Essay Types That Work

Although there are an infinite number of ways to write a winning essay, I'd like to share with you a few battle-tested essay types that just work.

To convey who you are and how you'd contribute (remember, that's what colleges want to discover), you can write about:

1. Identity
2. Personal Quality Traits
3. Passions/Interests
4. Memorable Encounters/Experiences
5. Meaningful Objects
6. Values
7. Revelations or Epiphanies
8. Conflicts/Challenges
9. Accomplishments
10. A Special Someone

I'll cover each type in depth, replete with specific examples, in the coming sections. Turn the page for the good stuff.

Essay Type #1: Identity

I was known as a writer in high school and even voted “Most Likely to Be the Next NY Times Bestseller” by my class. Everything I did was for the sake of writing, so my identity was that of a writer. I wrote my essay on what writing meant to me. Obvious choice? Sure. Did it work? You bet. Was my essay perfect? Hell no. I cringe just reading it today, but it still successfully conveyed what I was all about.

Other identities may include your sexuality. I had a student who wrote a heart-felt essay about being gay, revealing his mindset of compassion and exploration to take on the world.

Or perhaps you’re known as the band or theater geek. Or you love cars or a particular sport. Or you’re a Disney aficionado. Or you’re a really short guy. Or an abnormally tall one. Or an Asian guy with curly hair (rare!). Do you love swimming? Or playing cards or chess? Do you run your own business? Do you love making things to sell on Etsy? Do you bake?

Look, you don’t need an identity like Malala Yousafzai, the 17-year old who won the Nobel Peace Prize after being shot in the head (and surviving) while fighting for educational rights for all women. If that’s you, congratulations, your identity is so powerful that you’re probably going to get into every college.

But most students are more average, so rest assured, your identity can be more commonplace too (and still be successful): the youngest or oldest sibling, or an identical a twin (my gosh, the possibilities of exploring what it’s like growing up as a twin). Are you known as the caretaker of your family?

You don’t need some crazy special identity like “first transgendered ethnic teen who was disfigured in a fire.” The key is to think beyond the obvious labels. If obvious titles like “student” or “Hispanic” or “captain of the basketball team” don’t do it for you, then think more deeply.

Did something ever happened to you that redefined your world? One essay was about life after the student’s house was destroyed when the cliff it was built on literally collapsed.

The main thing about "Identity" essays is not to choose something that only happened to you once or twice. Remember, you are what you do. So an identity is something that is a frequent or constant thing in your life, not "Oh yeah, that happened to me once."

Essay Type #2: Personal Quality Traits

Many students are caught up in this myth that you need to tell the story of a specific incident. While that can work, you can also pull in multiple incidents to illustrate who you are. The key is to focus on conveying a quality trait about yourself. That's the message, not the specifics of what happened plot-wise.

The [Costco essay](#) I mentioned earlier was a "Personal Quality Trait" type essay. She revealed to us that she possessed a deep inquisitiveness, which is a characteristic any college would want its students to have.

Brainstorm as many adjectives or phrases that describe your qualities: creative, innovative, resourceful, diligent, meticulous, compassionate, encouraging, optimistic, logical, rational, problem-solving, unconventional, leader, social, etc.

Ask your friends, parents, teachers, and siblings what they think of you. Now, usually you'll end up with a long list of words, but many of them feel so general that they don't seem to lead to any good college essay topics.

For example, let's say you decide your trait is "creative." So your goal is to write an essay that exhibits your creativity, but that itself isn't a specific college topic. You are still missing the essay framework to demonstrate that you are indeed creative. Start to brainstorm instances when you were creative. Remember the old writing adage: show, don't tell. You don't want to simply claim you are creative; you need to illustrate it by taking the admissions committee ("adcom") through specific examples of your creativity. Any of those examples are potential grounds for a college topic.

One of my students wrote about his "love for nature." His outdoorsy personality led him to explore different camping trips his father took him on, lessons he learned about the balance of our ecosystem, lessons of patience from learning to fish, and much more.

Or there was one kid who wrote about his quality of "taking risks." In his early childhood, as his father and he drove home, his father would allow the son to direct

the car, essentially allowing him to “steer,” even if it meant getting lost. This built up this student’s love for exploration, which he connected with more current examples of how he explores life.

A recent essay that earned admission into Johns Hopkins University (JHU) was about the quality of “adapting to circumstances.” This student told the story about how during a service trip in Texas, his team had gotten locked out of the car. Everyone turned to him to figure out what to do because he was the one who was capable of handling unexpected circumstances. He discussed how, all his life, his family was unpredictable and how he learned to cope with these circumstances.

“Persistence” is another great quality. One girl also earned admission into JHU by writing about her inability to tie a cake box at her job at a bakery. But she persisted. If this is how she approaches trivial tasks, how much more would she never give up on important things?

Essay Type #3: Passions/Interests

Are you obsessive about anything? Do you absolutely love promoting eco-friendly campaigns or the vegan lifestyle? Are you passionate about politics? Do you love making model cars? Do you compete in professional chess tournaments? Do you find yourself baking treats every weekend? Do you love Speech and Debate?

I'm not saying you need to write about one of your extracurriculars, though it's okay to. If you have a less formally recognized passion, like sewing, that is still perfectly acceptable to write about. One successful Stanford essay was about this computer nerd who had a secret passion: making men's ties. Hell, another successful Stanford essay was about some guy's love for video games! Of course he connected his video game obsession with strong quality traits like problem-solving, creativity, and more. The key is in your essay's execution!

For me, I wrote about writing, so my essay could also be considered a "Passion" type essay too. Notice many of these essay types are interrelated. Writing about a passion naturally leads to discussing quality traits, and vice versa. These things can also be considered your identity.

Essay Type #4: Memorable Encounters/Experiences

Did you ever have something happen to you that you'll never forget? I'm not necessarily talking about life-altering moments, though those work too. Even small things. Like, I remember the time I biked with my cousins to Target to buy action figures. My mom got soooo mad at me for wasting money and biking without adult supervision. I'll never forget that!

I also remember the time when I was five and was so jealous of a classmate who seemed to have every McDonald's happy meal toy. So one recess, I decided to enlist the help of my best friend to steal these toys. We crawled on our bellies, avoiding the yard supervisor, but of course, we were eventually caught. The funny thing? After learning of my crime, the kid's dad offered some toys to me for free.

There are more poignant memories too. Like the time one of my friends died in first grade. He just collapsed as we were playing handball. I remembered how I loved his glitter crayons that I noticed he had at his birthday party just a month prior.

Childhood memories are goldmines for college essays. One student of mine wrote about how when she was a little girl, she would steal bank deposit slips and then set up her own imaginary office at home. She loved playing pretend business woman, which led to her current activities in high school. As long as you connect childhood memories back to the present time, you'll be fine.

Another student wrote about her family tradition of playing Pictionary and what that symbolized for her.

Your experience or encounter doesn't have to be profound; it just has to be insightful. You don't need to write about the time you stopped human trafficking in your city or defused a bomb (because for most students, you never did anything remotely similar). And you don't have to. Ordinary memories make excellent fodder for insightful exploration. Think back to happy times, sad times, exciting times, or scary times.

Maybe the time you borrowed your sister's dress and ruined it? Is there anything you

learned from that—think bigger picture like the value of relationships or something—
that could benefit colleges?

Essay Type #5: Meaningful Objects

Objects are often sentimental. They hold special meaning in our hearts and lives. If you ever had something that meant a lot to you, that could be a good college topic.

One student wrote about a special bracelet his grandmother bought for him. He wore it every day for years because he loved the feeling of empowerment it gave him. He liked to pretend it was something like a Power Ranger transformer, allowing him to morph into a superhero (by which he meant a compassionate friend, leader, encourager, etc.).

A great brainstorming exercise you can do is to think of all the things that mean something to you or remind you of something in your life. Just look around your room. If there were a museum of your life, what exhibits and objects would be on display? Be as specific as possible. And don't say clichéd objects like your phone or your computer.

For example, I might include my Kinko's copy card—this was back in the day before FedEx acquired Kinko's, an office copying service. I loved the warm sensation of freshly printed pages off the printer. It was a physical symbol of the hard work I'd put into writing a story.

Or I'd choose a stuffed bear dressed like Houdini, the great magician. I used to love magic and even thought I might become a magician when I grew up. I practiced magic tricks for many years, performing in front of small crowds.

I might choose my Boy Scouts neckerchief ring or my camping backpack, both of which symbolize my time in scouting. I could write an essay on any number of events that occurred in scouting.

Or maybe a Rubik's cube. I used to be able to solve a 3x3 cube in about a minute. It symbolized my dedication to puzzles, my persistence at learning the patterns, and many other potential traits.

Thinking of these objects will inspire you to think about the memory behind them.
Then go a step further and connect those memories to quality traits about yourself.
Now you have the skeleton of a good college essay.

Essay Type #6: Values

We all care about certain things. These values can overlap with your quality traits. For example, you may value creativity and see yourself as a creative person. Or you value logic and problem-solving skills. But sometimes values are something separate. Maybe you value “educational rights for women.” I had one student who wrote an essay about how her old-fashioned dad did not see any point for her to attend college. Yet, she clearly valued education and a more progressive world, so her essay was all about how she defended this value.

Another of my students had a best friend that he realized was a DREAMER, someone who was born in the United States but held no legal citizenship because their parents were illegal immigrants. This student became an activist for this cause, even though he himself was not a DREAMER.

One of my students was an adopted child, so she wrote an essay about how she valued positive social work, foster care systems, and strong family values. She was passionate about creating a better environment for children.

Maybe you value protecting our environment, increasing literacy, fighting homelessness, assisting our veterans, or something else. Any of these things are strong potential topics for your essay.

Essay Type #7: Revelations or Epiphanies

A common roadblock to coming up with topics is that many of you feel you haven't done anything noteworthy, nothing colleges would care about anyways. If I haven't alleviated your fear of that by describing multiple examples of people who wrote about quite ordinary scenes in their everyday lives, then perhaps this essay type will appeal to you. You can talk about a realization you had, an insight you gained, or a lesson you learned by witnessing or experiencing something.

One of my New York students tutored low-income Hispanic students for the SAT at his local church on Sundays. The reality was, his actual volunteer work wasn't anything too impressive, yet he gained admission into Columbia, Duke, and other elite schools. That's because his essay focused not on his work but on his epiphany. He described how society's stereotype of the "lazy Hispanic" was wrong and that these families often had legitimate struggles that impeded academic success. These students worked to support their families, which came at the cost of attending school or doing homework. Education was an expense, not an investment for these families. My student recognized the systemic failure of our greater educational system, so he gained a heart for educational reform.

Another student who got into JHU wrote about her experiences with stereotypes in both America and Japan. Coming from Texas, she was greeted in Japan by ignorant ideas of "gun-slinging" violent Texans. At the same time, she confronted her own ignorance about Japan, despite studying the country intensely before her study-abroad experience. She also talked about her own mother's views of stereotypically corrupt Chinese governments. Ultimately, this student took a basic study-abroad trip to discuss the greater revelation about needing to expose ourselves to more than a singular narrative, lest we believe the stereotypes.

A student who recently got accepted to Brown discussed the cultural paradoxes she faced as a Lebanese-American spending two weeks in her father's home country. She questioned whether a population of 5 million could possibly be as homogenous in their internal beliefs as they outwardly showed, when they all prayed together. She

explored her own privilege of being able to choose certain parts of her religion to adhere to, while discarding parts that were inconvenient. Ultimately, she wrote a deeply introspective essay about national identities and its implications, which connected to her passion for theology.

“Revelation” essays are typically much drier and even harder to execute well though. Unless you are a truly deep thinker who can express complex thoughts succinctly, I would stay away from this type of essay. That said, if you can accomplish this sort of essay, you stand to gain massive points for how incredibly intelligent, sensitive, and introspective you are. Done well, these are some of the best essays.

Essay Type #8: Conflicts/Challenges

The ability to overcome challenges and grow from them is insanely attractive to colleges. But you have to make sure your challenge is worthy or that it's a symbol for a larger trait. This challenge might be a personal failure you faced. Discuss what lessons you learned from that and the impact it had on your growth.

One student of mine wrote about her Graves disease, a condition that greatly physically and mentally weakened her. However, she discussed how she loved riding horses and how the activity helped her conquer her condition. She rose to the challenge and even began to encourage other younger riders, many of whom weren't even physically disabled.

Another recent student of mine discussed her dyslexia, a condition that makes it easy to mix up words when she reads. She told a powerful story of dealing with the situation working in her grandparent's shop, to figuring out unconventional reading strategies, to eventually channeling her unorthodox patterns into art, in which she excelled precisely because of her outside-the-box approaches.

Challenges don't all have to be about sickness or disorders though. One essay I'll never forget is about a girl who idolized her older sister. Then one day, the older sister disappeared without explanation, never to return. This student died inside and grew resentful for believing in her sister, especially how she taught her to dream. Angry, she disavowed all dreams for a time. As she grew older though, this student developed a more mature worldview and learned that there needs to be balance: dreams are necessary to find purpose in life, but we shouldn't let unrealistic ambitions disillusion us. The essay landed her at Harvard.

Another student discussed the challenge of switching swim teams. She had grown up with one swim team her whole life, deeply devoted to them. But when she moved across town, she was forced to join the rival swim team. It was a tale of coming to terms with change and learning to grow with the circumstances. She explored themes of friendship, memories, betrayal, acceptance, and optimism for the future.

The best stories always feature conflict, and adcoms are suckers for stories of redemption or overcoming seemingly insurmountable odds. So if you were able to rise, you will win hearts. However, don't choose trivial conflicts or challenges like overcoming a B on your math test. As important as grades are, spending your main essay talking about them is such a lost opportunity to paint a deeper picture of yourself.

You also don't want to simply pull on heartstrings by describing Grandma's death or how hard your life is. Death or major illness is too often a cheap way to write college essays. Unless you have something unique and significant to say about it, pick a different topic. Colleges don't want to hear you complain. They want to hear you endure and overcome.

Essay Type #9: Accomplishments

These are generally my most disliked essays, simply because they tend to come off as bragging. Furthermore, these accomplishments are usually already described in the resume or activities section, so it's a waste of precious space to talk about something the admission committee can already see in another part of your application. Unless you have a specific story you want to pinpoint within your accomplishment, I would shoot for a different topic.

However, identifying all the accomplishments you have is a great way to slip in details in a larger story. Rather than make your whole essay about how you accomplished this one great thing once, you use various accomplishments as evidence of whatever larger story you're telling.

These accomplishments should be unique, impactful, and non-cliché. A story about studying hard and earning an A, leading your volleyball team to win the championship, or becoming ASB President are unworthy topics for your main essay.

And if you do decide to go with an "Accomplishment" essay, it's still better to couch your accomplishment in a different framework. Rather than come right out and say, "Look, here's what I achieved," it's better to hint at it, while focusing your message on other things, like your personal qualities or the realizations you gained.

For example, one kid served as a student ambassador between America and Russia. But rather than solely focusing on what he did in his ambassador program, he structure his essay around taking a run early in the morning around Russia. He talked about the hotel staff that he had asked to wake him, speaking Russian, up at 5am for his run. He discussed people he encountered on his run too and the comparisons to people in America. Finally, he ended by talking about the tense encounter he had with his Russian counterpart, a serious teen ambassador who was not amused by the general apathy and ignorance of Americans. Even though the student's accomplishment was quite impressive and unique, his essay framework allowed him to discuss personal qualities and realizations instead.

Essay Type #10: A Special Someone

No, I don't mean your boyfriend or girlfriend, if you're lucky enough to have one. I certainly didn't in high school :(

A "special someone" is a person who has impacted your life by being a catalyst for positive change, a mentor, or even an adversary. It should be someone who has challenged you or made you rise, someone who helped you realize something, like a deep lesson about life. Of course it could be your bf/gf, but that just feels like a cop-out. You'll probably just end up writing a sappy essay on how wonderful he or she is, which misses the point entirely (which is why colleges should accept YOU, not your bf/gf).

Parents, relatives, or teachers are another common "special someone," but unless they have done something truly unique, I would choose a different person. Raising you, encouraging you, providing food and shelter for you, taking you to sports practice, and any other generally normal function does not constitute unique.

In general, I recommend most students NOT to write about a "special someone" because it's too easy to get sucked into writing about the other person, rather than his or her impact on you. But if you really have someone in mind, then go for it. This is probably one of the trickiest essay types to write well, so 99% of people fail at this topic.

30 Brainstorming Questions to Ask Yourself

I also wanted to leave you with some guiding questions to get your creative juices running. I won't ask you pointless questions like "What are you passionate about?" or "What is your identity?" Those questions are too broad to really guide the thinking process, but hopefully some of these below will help:

1. What singular trait or accomplishment are you most proud of about yourself?
2. What is something you do every day (or frequently) that seems to define your life?
3. What are your biggest strengths and weaknesses?
4. If you could be the ideal version of yourself, what would that look like specifically? What career? What personality? What projects are you doing? Who are your friends? Who are you engaging with?
5. What are things you look forward to most? What makes life worth living for you, beyond spending time with family and friends?
6. What upsets you? This can reveal things you hope to change about the world's condition or people's attitudes.
7. What are some of your weird quirks/idiosyncrasies? How do they define you?
8. What are some of your favorite childhood memories? Doesn't have to be overtly "impressive" to colleges.
9. What stories about you do your family or friends constantly bring up?
10. What are some of your favorite inside jokes you have with friends?
11. What is the most important thing you hope to achieve? What value is most important for you to uphold?
12. What is an example of your creativity?
13. How, precisely, do you lead others? What is your leadership style? Tell us about the situation.
14. What thoughts do you have about your religion, race, class, environment, and culture?
15. What social issues are most important to you?
16. What quote do you live by, and why?
17. Who inspires you, and why? Think about the values they embody or the achievements they've done.

18. What is your greatest life lesson so far?
19. What are some of the most meaningful objects to you? Why are they important?
20. If you could be known for three things, what would you want people to remember about you at your funeral?
21. What is something you would never change about yourself? What is the one thing you would change, and why?
22. Given unlimited time and money, and no other responsibilities, what would you find yourself doing?
23. If you had fifty billion dollars, how would you use it?
24. What places have you travelled, and what were your most memorable experiences there?
25. What is the most meaningful movie, song, event, book, or artwork to you? Why?
26. Which character, real or fictional, do you connect with the most? How do you see yourself in him or her?
27. What did you use to believe but no longer do?
28. What was a time you changed your mind on something important?
29. Who is your favorite superhero? Why? What would you do if you had his or her powers?
30. What makes you extremely uncomfortable, and what have you done about it?

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