



Tell the Story Only You Can Tell

The Common Application Essay Question #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.

According to the Common Application the prompts are designed to be straightforward and engaging. The instructions say, “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?”

The questions ask you to reveal something that distinguishes you or sets you apart from others in your own voice. They are not asking for something too elaborate or complicated, but something that is uniquely your own. The first question allows you to write about any moment that has shaped who you are as a person:

How to answer this question:

First of all, you don’t want to tell your whole life story! In the 250-650 words the Common Application essay allows, there is not enough room to tell everything. Most students write application essays that are too broad and too general. Something like, “I immigrated from the Philippines when I was in fifth grade. My parents worked very hard to support us...”

Most of us think about our life in broad, generic brush strokes that sound like many other people. How can you take that larger story and convey something important about who you are in just 250-650 words? First, take the time to explore all the smaller stories you might write about. Start with broad experiences: what did you do in grade school? Middle school? High school? What were the big events in your family’s life?

Once you identify the broad experiences that show who you are—what you believe in, what you are committed to, what your community counts on you for—break these experiences down into specific moments of growth and change. For example, describe the details of your first meal in the United States after you emigrated from the Philippines. Your response to the Common Application essay should focus on **individual moments from your life, not experiences**. When you are writing about these individual moments, make sure you show how these moments shaped who you are as a person.

Here’s an example that worked:

Paul Irizarry was a student at Manhattan Village Academy and the Opportunity Network when he participated in a Story2 course as part of a pre-college program at the University of Rochester. As part of an icebreaker activity, I asked students to introduce themselves and tell something that would help me remember them. Paul said, “When I was in middle school the principal made me shave off my Afro.” In the course—and in his essay—Paul described his confrontation with the principal, and his subsequent discussion with his parents, asking them to take him out of Catholic school and let him attend public school. I still remember the way I felt, almost as if Paul was standing up for my freedom and my choices when he stood up to that principal. Paul’s story made him stand out in the admission process, and he earned admission and a full scholarship to Middlebury College.

Find your own Defining Moments and use them to shape a personal essay that reveals your character.