



## 5 Tips to Answer Essays about Failure

### The Common Application Essay Question #2

The lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

I was an impetuous child and often leapt before I looked. Like the time in first grade I used the perfume from my mother's dressing table to make "chemistry experiments" with my friends. My father separated me from my fuming mother and said, "Everyone makes mistakes, Carol. Smart people learn from their mistakes."

When I speak at high schools, I always get asked about this question. "It's a trick," students often say, "If I really tell them about my mistakes, they'll reject me right?"

No, I don't think so. It takes a lot of courage and maturity to write honestly about your own moments of failure. I can still remember an admissions essay I read at Rutgers from a young woman who wrote about getting pregnant in eleventh grade and choosing to have an abortion. My hands shook as she traced the path of her decision to be the first person in her family to attend college. "I want to have children later," her essay concluded, "but not now." I looked around the table, and one of the committee members was wiping her eyes; another whispered, "Wow." One by one, we shook our heads yes, and we admitted her.

If you have a moment of failure that changed the way you look at the world, you need to write that essay out. Afterwards, you can decide if you want to send it to colleges. Here are some tips to write successful essays about moments when you experienced failure:

**Avoid the obvious:** No essays about learning how to study and then getting an A in Calculus. This is too predictable, too cliché, and too boring.

**Write without judgments or excess emotions:** Tell what happened in the most straightforward way possible. Use specific details, dialogue and description to convey the experience in a way that connects with your reader.

**No grandstanding:** There are few things more annoying than someone who thinks he or she knows everything. Whatever else you learned, hopefully you learned some humility too.

**No tidy morals at the end:** The idea is to draw your reader in and share your experience with them. Trust your reader to get the message. Avoid the temptation to sum it up for them at the end.

**Show what you learned:** Can you find a later experience that shows what you learned from your mistake? Learning that results in transformed action is infinitely more powerful than a lesson that takes place only in your own mind.

This question is really asking what can I count on you for as a result of your learning? Admissions officers around the country are building communities. Revealing your mistakes—and the different actions you take downstream from your mistakes—shows admissions officers the type of student you will be at their college. Revealing that is never a mistake.