



Your Greatest Influence

Think back to four years ago when you were a high school freshman. You were probably in a new school and surrounded by many unfamiliar faces. At the same time, there was some excitement about high school and what the next four years would have in store. Does this sound familiar?

Now, think about where you are now--surrounded by friends and classmates, involved in your school and community, and a high school senior who is applying to college! Over the past four years, much has changed and you have certainly been influenced by important people, books, and events in your life. Colleges are interested in how you have changed, grown, and adopted as a person, which is why many will ask about these influences.

Influence Essays are less common than they used to be, since the Common Application eliminated the prompt, "Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence" in its 2013 update. Even so, many colleges continue to have influence themed prompts as choices for supplemental essays.

Choosing Your Influence

For many students, family serves as the strongest influence. This means that they are the most obvious (and frequently used) topics for Influence essays. Family relationships can sometimes feel too intimate to share with outside readers, and it's particularly challenging to write about people who may be reading your essays before you send them in.

Because of this, it is a good idea to brainstorm other people, books, classes, or events that have influenced you.

Start from the present day: What are you curious about? What ideas are you committed to? How do you spend your time? Once you answer these questions try to trace them back in time and you will begin to remember the people, events and other factors that influenced you along the way.

How to Write About an Influence

The biggest mistake students make in writing influence essays is focusing on the person, book, or event that did the influencing instead of focusing on you as an individual. The effective Influence essay shows how you have been influenced and how you have acted upon that influence.

A successful Influence Essay reveals your character and personality in two ways:

- Showing what matters to you and how you view the world.
- Describing a specific aspect of your personality through your interests and commitments. This helps readers get to know you and distinguishes you from other applicants.
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Here are some more tips for writing about influential people:

- Consider writing about a person you do not know but think about frequently, or someone who is no longer living but who influences you as much as a living person (or more).
- It is easy for Influence Essays to get vague and general. Demonstrate the character's influence on you by showing yourself and/or your influence in action. Don't try to capture the person in full. Focus on the elements that resonate most with you.
- Influences can be passive or active. Someone may have given you helpful advice, or they might have inadvertently set an example that you followed.
- Bad examples can be interesting influences! Consider someone who set an example of something you didn't follow, or a negative influence that you later challenged.

Other Influences

The first influences that come to mind are often living people. An influence could also be someone you've never met, such as an historical or literary figure or a deceased relative who lives on in family lore.

An event could influence you too. So could a movie, book, work of art, or an idea. In that case, make sure you to write a narrative essay--a story about your response to the influence--and not an analytical essay. One of the most memorable Influence essays I've ever read was from the point of view of the Influence, watching a young woman 100 years later responding to his art.

Sample Prompts

Below are a few sample prompts that some colleges use:

Pick one woman in history or fiction to converse with for an hour and explain your choice. What would you talk about? – Barnard College

Describe the world you come from—for example, your family, community or school—and tell us how your world has shaped your dreams and aspirations – University of California