



Teasing out Transitions

The Common Application Essay Question #5

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

This question looks easy right? I've read a lot of student essays this summer, and many students' first impulse is to start with this topic. But this question seems to get easily derailed. Why? I see many students turning this topic into a goody two shoes essay, writing with a parent or teacher looking over their shoulder and trying to please them.

It's true of all admissions and supplement essays—and especially this prompt—that you need to get past the obvious to write an essay that connects with admissions officers and shows them who you are.

The big problem here is the word “accomplishment.” Your achievements will show up in the Activities + Awards section of the Common App. And, in general, big accomplishments are less interesting than more complex and ambiguous moments of learning and change. Often it's a matter of how you frame what we call your Defining Moments: the moments that shape who you are today, the moments that have created the person you will be in college.

Here's how to avoid the dangers inherent in CA Question #5:

Avoid the obvious: any essay that includes the words “that is the day I learned” is sure to flop. Find a story that reveals what you learned without hitting your reader over the head with it. Often a moment when you learned one of life's less obvious lessons can show something quirky and unusual about you.

Focus Out: Get out of your own thoughts, and use details, dialogue and description to explore the world around you. Imagine that you are guiding the reader through your world. What important things will they understand about you from the world around you?

Have a discussion: When an essay seems a little flat, try introducing another character. What did they say? What did they experience at your big event or accomplishment? Dialogue instantly draws the reader into your experience, almost like a third person in the room while you are talking to someone else.

Create tension: “Event” and “achievement” are pretty neutral. Is there some aspect to the story that adds some tension—perhaps overcoming an obstacle, or rising to a challenge of some kind?

Reasons to believe: Most important, what does this moment show about your character? What do you want the reader to know about you after reading the essay?

Remember, the most important job of your essays is to reveal your character. Make sure, when talking about accomplishments, that you go past the event or achievement itself to reveal what the accomplishment means not just to you but about you.