**Decoding the Common App’s Essay Prompts by Tal Aviezer (Adapted)**

Remember that all of the essay options below are designed to offer you, the college applicant, a chance to tell your own unique story. The five prompts offer five different paths, but all are intended to inspire reflection on your part – to “prompt” you to tell a detailed, specific, and thoughtful story that will reveal something to the reader about who YOU are, beyond what can be communicated by your grades, your test scores, and your high school transcript. Each prompt presents its own opportunities and pitfalls.

***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.***

**Choose this prompt if…**

…you have a unique story in your past that strongly defines your present. Were you born in a different country? Did you move often throughout your childhood? Were you adopted? Was your life touched by serious illness or an injury? Did you learn English as a second language? Do you have a special aptitude in an artistic or athletic area? Are you a mentor? Do you have a special skill such as sign language, ballet dancing, or video editing that has played a defining role in your life?

**Watch out for…**

…Self-pity, or recounting tragedy for the sake of tragedy. It’s fine to talk about adversity or sadness or challenges you have faced, but it’s vital to discuss how past difficulties resulted in change and growth, and what you learned from them. Alternatively, if you’re sharing a positive story from the past or discussing a special aptitude, be sure to stress how lessons learned or skills acquired can be applied to your present and future life.

***2.* The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. *Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?***

**Choose this prompt if…**

…You have experienced an instructive failure. And who hasn’t? There’s nothing very unique about not succeeding in every endeavor; what matters is what you took away from a situation where the outcome did not meet your expectations. Did your team lose the championship game? Were you defeated in a debate? Were you defeated in a school election? Miss out on a job or a part in a play? Great! What did you learn from that?

**Watch out for…**

…A lack of perspective. This essay can be a dangerous one for some students. If losing that playoff soccer game was “the worst pain” you’ve “ever felt in your life”, then you’ve had a pretty painless life so far. Similarly, if the lesson you learned from losing was to “make sure” you “never lose at anything ever again”, then you really haven’t learned anything from the experience of defeat and are not prepared to deal with similar situations in the future. It’s important to demonstrate maturity and a sense of perspective here. Some setbacks and failures are inevitable and unavoidable in life; we want to know what you learned from this one in particular that can be applied to future experiences.

***3.    Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?***

**Choose this prompt if…**

…You had a memorable experience when challenging the views of a parent, teacher, sibling, or other authority figure, or if you made an important statement opposing a political, religious, or cultural belief. Note: It’s okay if in the end you decided that you were in the wrong! This prompt is a great opportunity to tell a story about a time you expressed yourself at some risk of punishment, opposition, or embarrassment because you felt it was important to do so.

**Watch out for…**

…Being disrespectful. This essay may prompt you to write about a time you strongly disagreed with someone or questioned a belief system that you saw as flawed but which others may highly value. Be sure that in your essay you treat the people with whom you disagree as human beings; demonstrate the ability to view the situation from their perspective, even if ultimately you conclude that that perspective is one that you oppose. The essay reader will appreciate your wisdom, maturity, and ability to examine multiple sides of an important issue on which you took a stand.

**4.       Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.**

**Choose this prompt if…**

…You have the ability to clearly identify and explain a challenge, and to offer solutions. This prompt gives you a lot of range; perhaps you were able to solve a problem confronting your family or in your school or among your friends. Or perhaps you have identified a social or ecological issue in the wider community and you have ideas on how it could be addressed. Either approach is valid here. But note the qualifier about “personal importance”; we need to know how and why this problem caught YOUR attention – why does it matter to YOU? And don’t forget to explain what the results of your solution were – or what they could be, once your solution is implemented.

**Watch out for…**

Low stakes. It can be very compelling for the reader to follow your process of identifying, tackling, and ultimately solving a problem. But you should focus on a problem that has urgency and importance, and also be detailed in your analysis and your solution. “My brothers were fighting over an ice cream and I got them to share” doesn’t quite capture the level of specificity and personal importance that is needed here. “My school did not have a cheerleading team that welcomed special needs students, so here’s how I created one” DOES fit the bill.

***5.    Discuss an accomplishment or event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.***

**Choose this prompt if…**

…You experienced an important milestone on the road to adulthood. This could take many forms – did you transition from camper to counselor? Get your first job? Act as a parent to a younger sibling? Were you called upon due to circumstances to accept adult responsibilities at a young age?

**Watch out for…**

…Transitioning before you transition. The truth is that some college applicants really haven’t fully transitioned from childhood to adulthood, and you can fall into a trap here by prematurely proclaiming yourself to be an adult. Before tackling this question, ask yourself honestly, “Is my childhood over?” If the answer is really “yes”, you probably have a very good essay for this prompt. If the answer is “I don’t know”, “sort of”, or “ask me that again in two years”, then you may want to select a different prompt.

***6.    Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?***

***7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you’ve already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or own of your own design.***