



College Essay
Brainstorming

Introduction

Writing essays is one of the most daunting aspects of the college admissions process. There is so much pressure to think of the perfect topic to paint yourself in the best light, to create a clear, concise essay that gives the person reading it a perfect introduction to who you are as a person, and to craft a perfectly constructed, error-free essay. Phew - that's a lot!

The truth is, there's no such thing as the "perfect" essay. Everyone has a different story to tell and everyone will tell their story differently. What's important is that the stories you tell in your college essays give the admissions officers a chance to hear your voice and get to know who you are, beyond what's written on your transcript and application.

One of the biggest hurdles in the essay writing process is coming up with an idea or a topic for your essay. You might read through the prompt options and feel like you don't have an answer to a single one. Or maybe you have an answer for all of them and don't know which one is best. That's why we start the brainstorming process without even looking at the prompts. You'll answer questions and do some serious self-reflection so that when it's time to choose a prompt to respond to in your essay, your pages are full of the accomplishments, ideas, proudest moments, and best qualities that you'll use to write a stand-out essay.

After completing this workbook, you'll have:

- Increased your self-knowledge so that writing about yourself feels natural
- Categorized your ideas into themes so that you know which experiences to write about for different types of essay prompts
- Brainstormed specific examples/stories that support the main themes you will address in your essays
- A game plan for what to write about for Common App Essay, UC Personal Insight Questions, and individual schools' Supplemental Essays

Happy Writing!

Step 1

ALL ABOUT YOU

What are your strongest personal qualities?

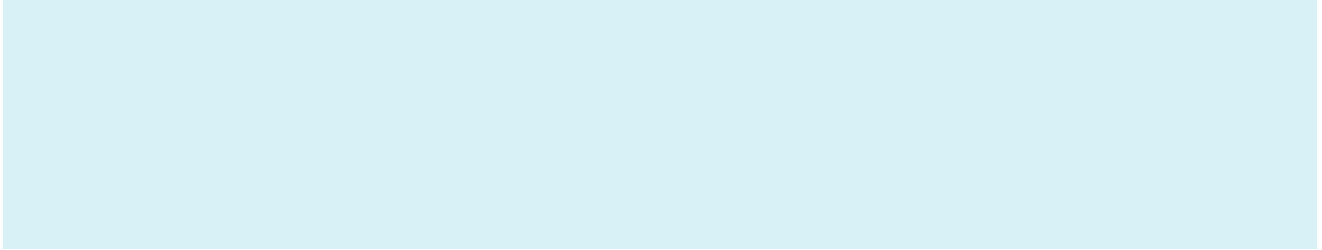
What are your weaknesses/challenges?

What are your primary interests (academic and personal)?

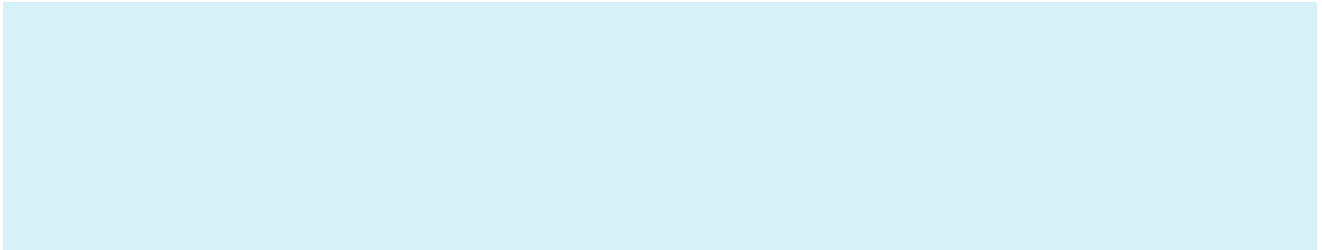
What makes you different from your friends?

Step 1

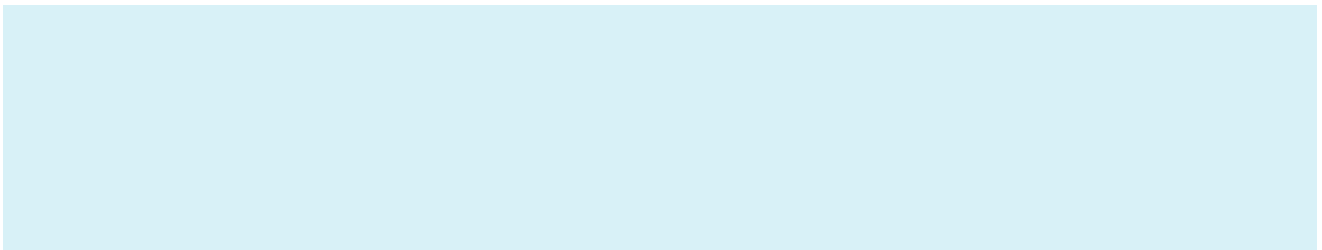
What do your parents think are your essential strengths/qualities?



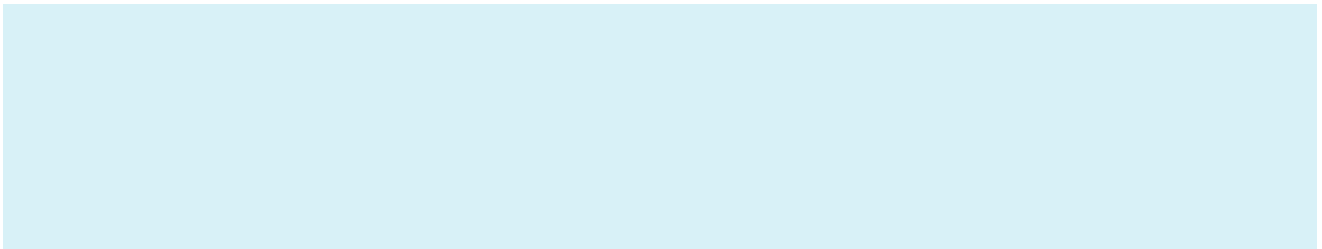
What does a college need to know about you that is not on your app?



What is your favorite thing about your life?

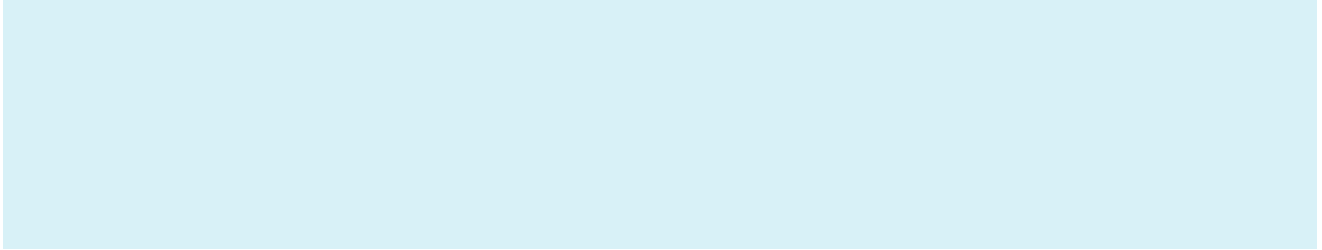


What change would you like to make in yourself?

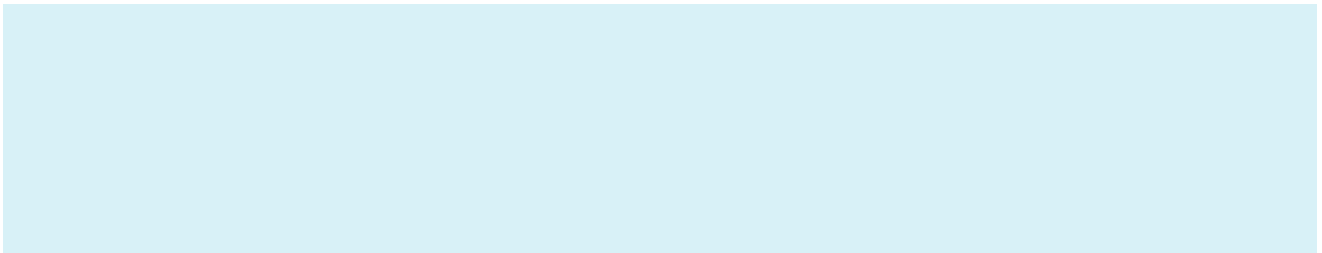


Step 1

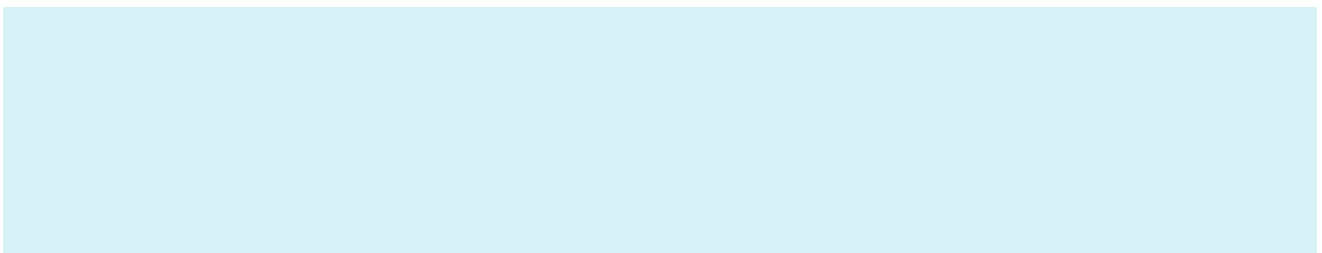
What change would you like to make in your community or school?



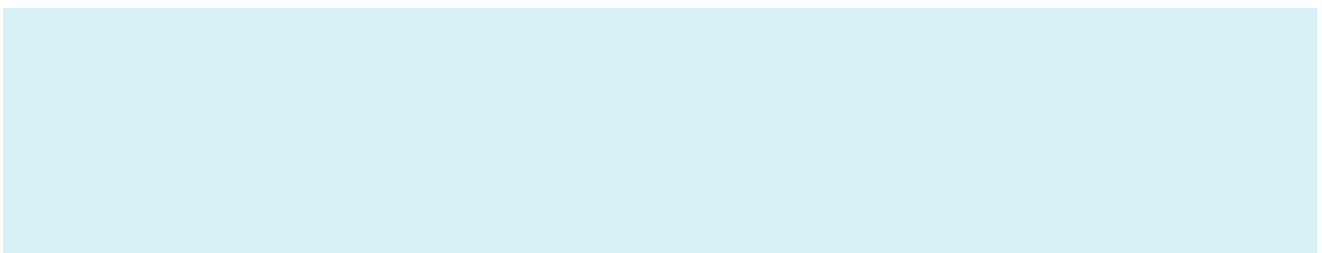
What change would you like to make in the world?



What do you have that is unique to offer a school?



What makes you the happiest?



Step 1

What makes you the saddest?

What has made you feel proud?

Do any ideas swim around in your mind regularly? Or lately?

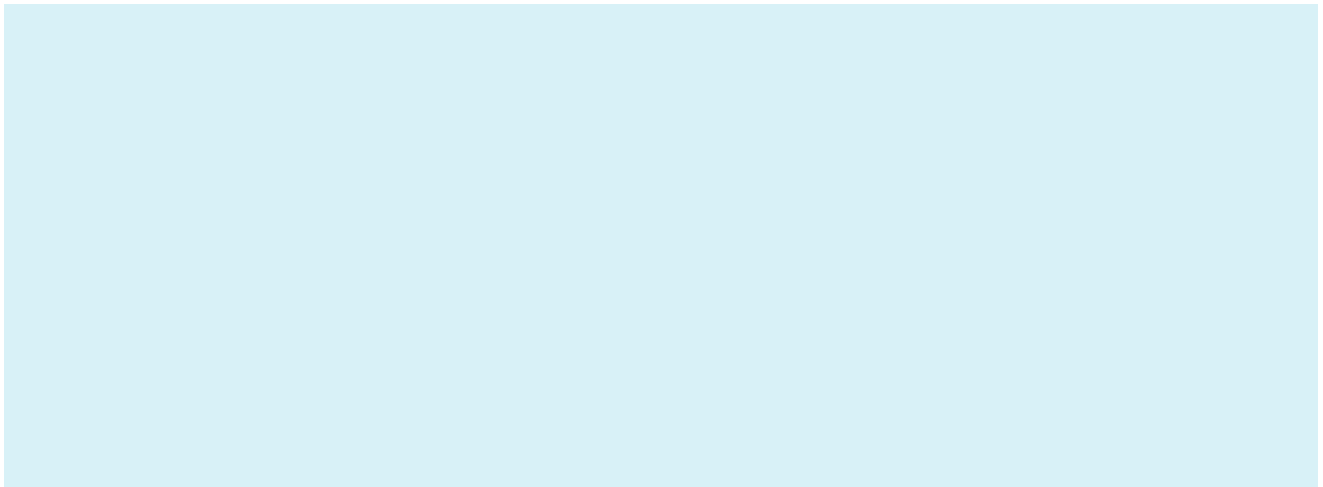
How do you spend your free time?

Step 2

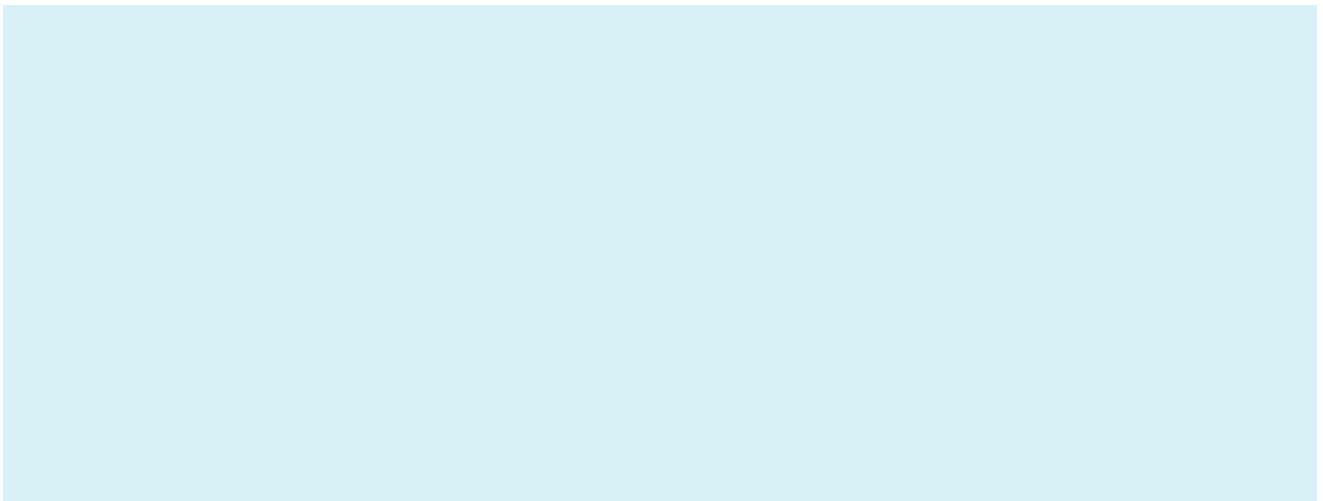
EXAMPLES

Specific examples are key to an effective college essay. In Step 2, you'll think about specific instances/situations/experiences from your life that illustrate the qualities and ideas you discovered in Step 1.

What have been your most challenging times? Can you think of any obstacles you've had to overcome, either academically or personally?

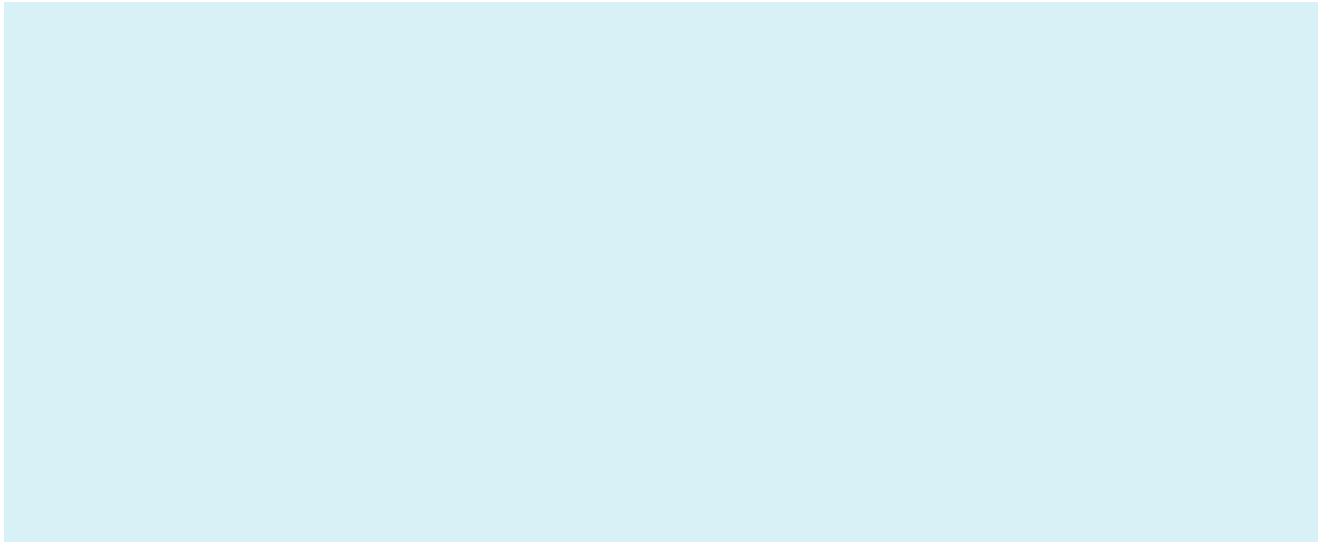


Are there any instances from your life that stand out as highlighting your deepest fears or insecurities?

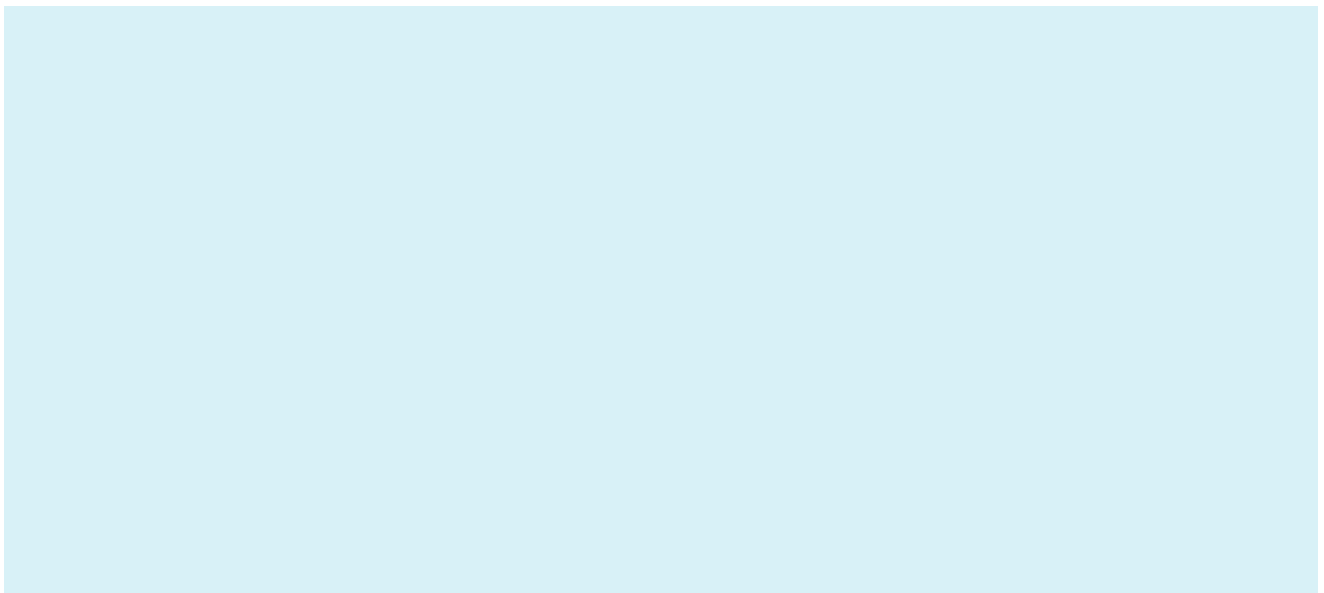


Step 2

When have you felt most proud, both personally and academically? Why did you feel so proud in those moments?



What are your dreams for the future? What in your life so far has led you to those dreams? What have you done so far to get you closer to achieving your dreams?



Step 3

ISOLATE THEMES

Consider your thoughts and experiences as ways to demonstrate leadership, perseverance, community service, spirituality, philosophies, ambition, sensitivities, obstacles, unique academic thought, etc.

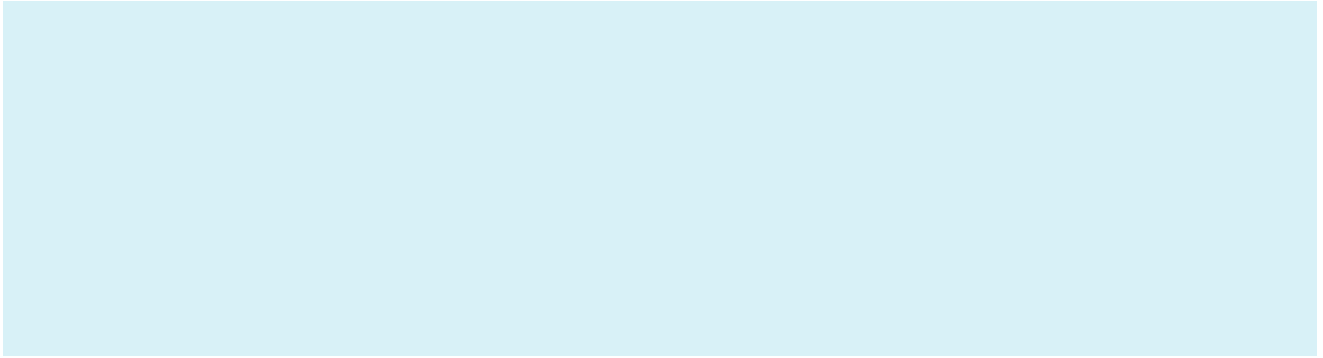
What common themes do you notice running through your responses to the questions in Steps 1 and 2?

Which of your qualities/experiences demonstrate leadership?

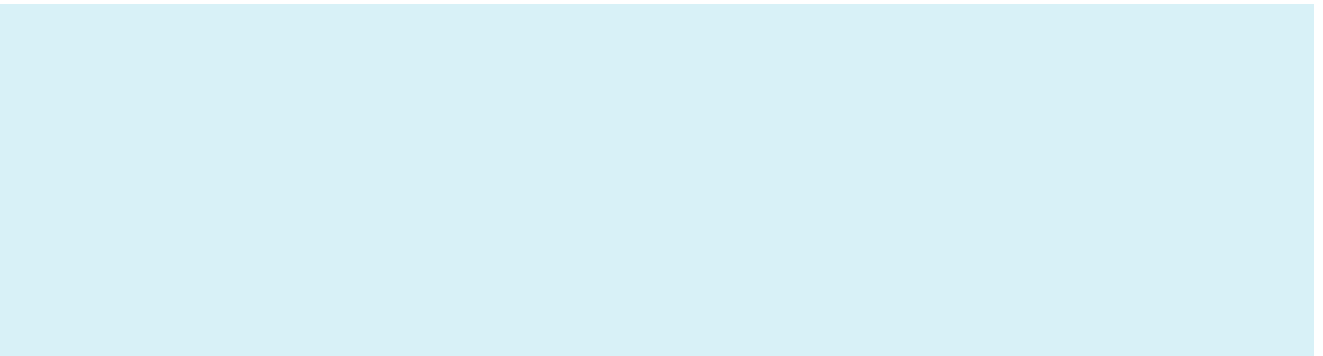
Which of your qualities/experiences demonstrate your approach to academics?

Step 3

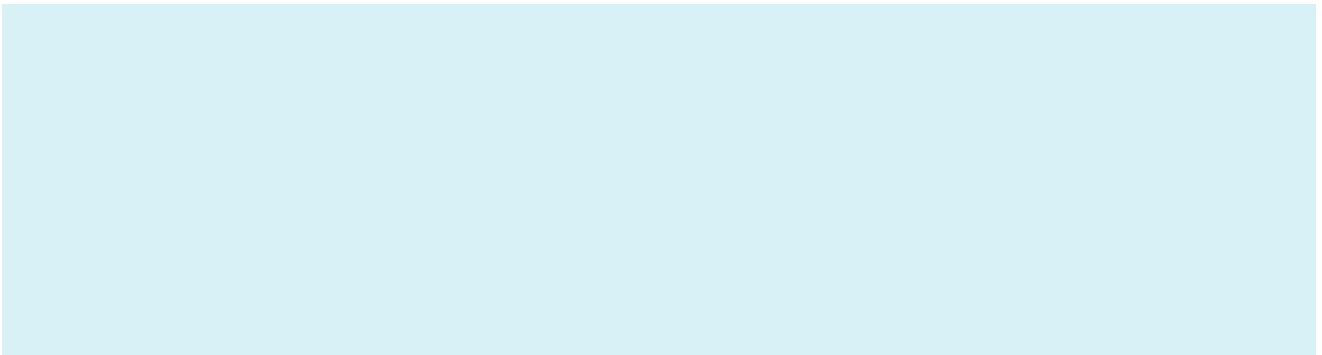
Which of your qualities/experiences demonstrate perseverance?



Which of your qualities/experiences demonstrate community involvement?



Which of your qualities/experiences demonstrate your spirituality or life philosophies?



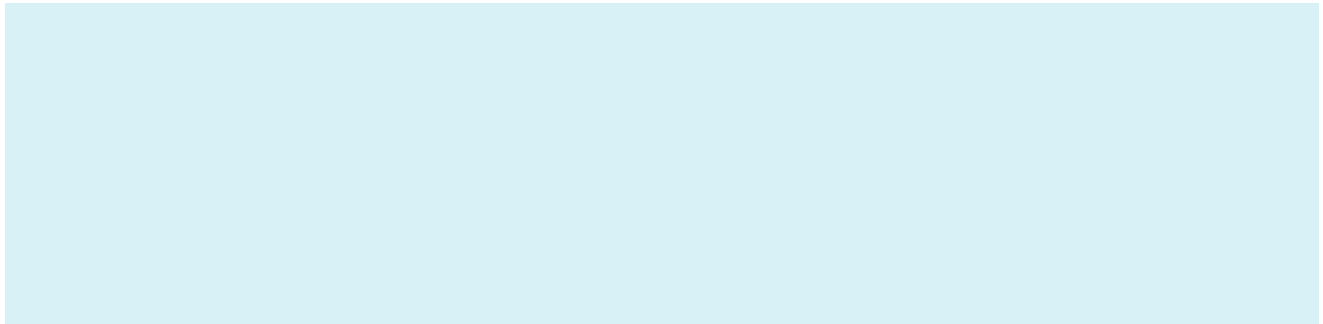
Step 4

BRAINSTORMING WITH PROMPTS

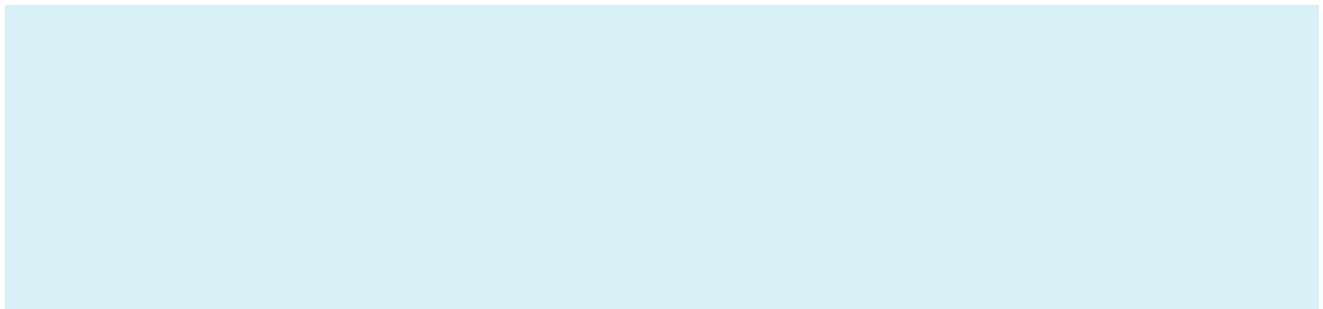
In this step, you will read through the prompts for the Common App Essay and the UC Personal Insight Questions. Jot down ideas and experiences from the first three steps that you can include in an essay response.

Common App

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.



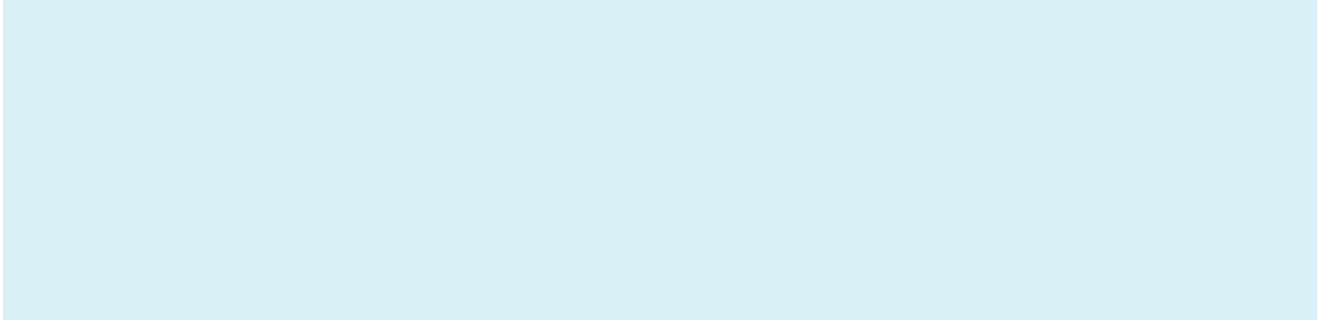
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?



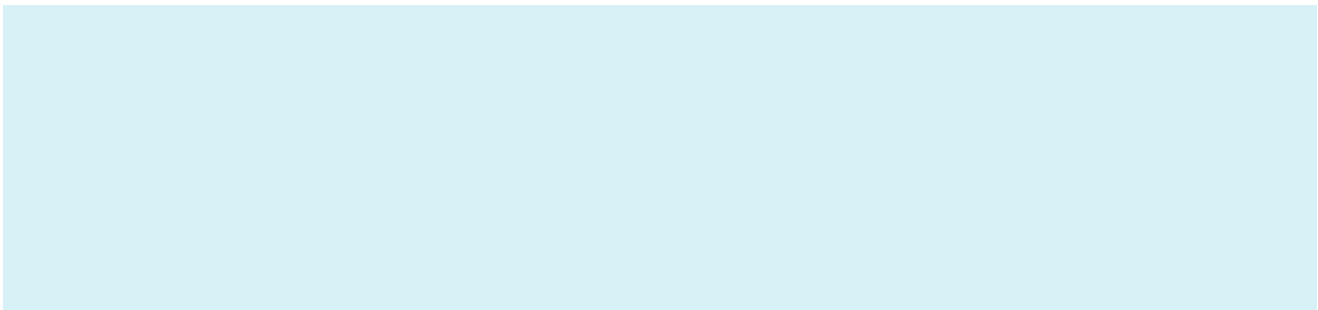
Step 4

Common App

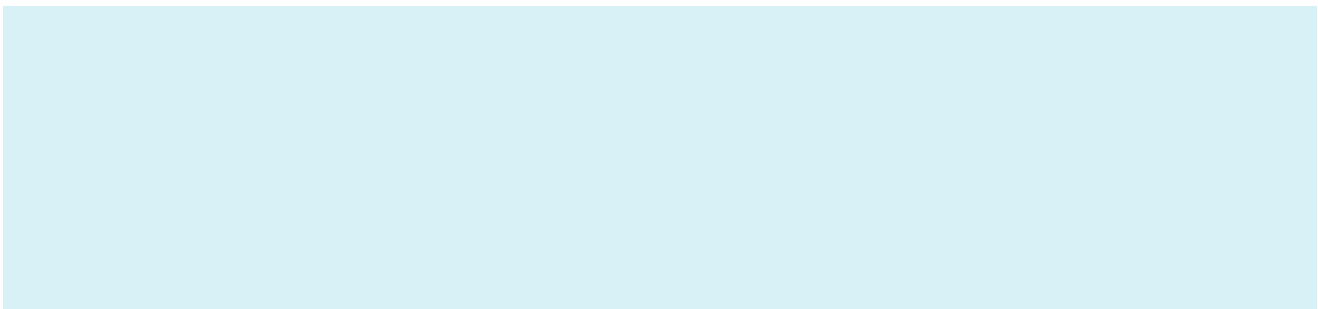
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?



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.



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



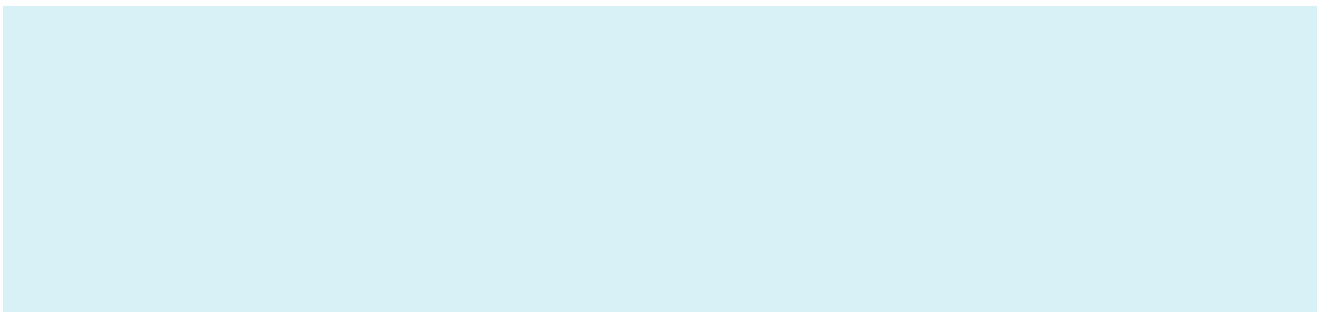
Step 4

Common App

6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that 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?



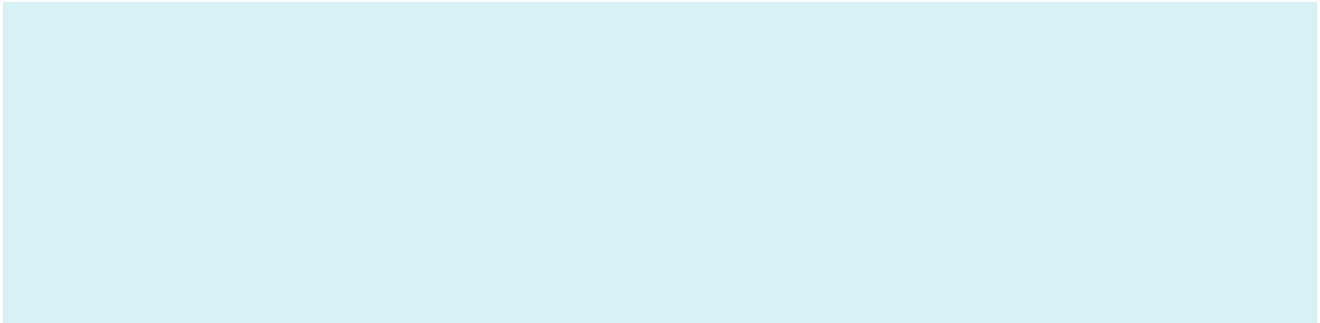
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.



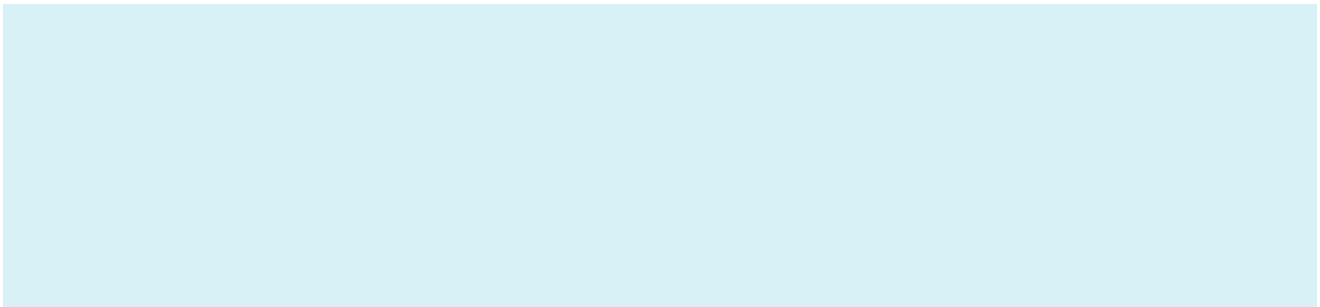
Step 4

UC Personal Insight Questions

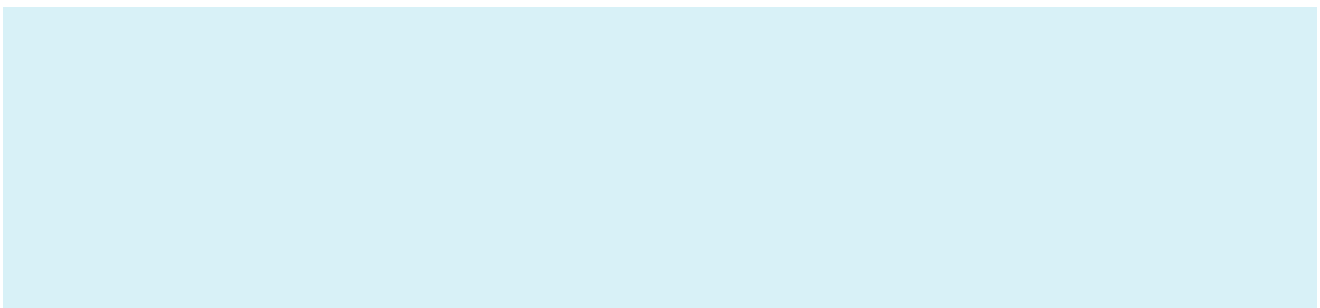
1. Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes or contributed to group efforts over time.



2. Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.



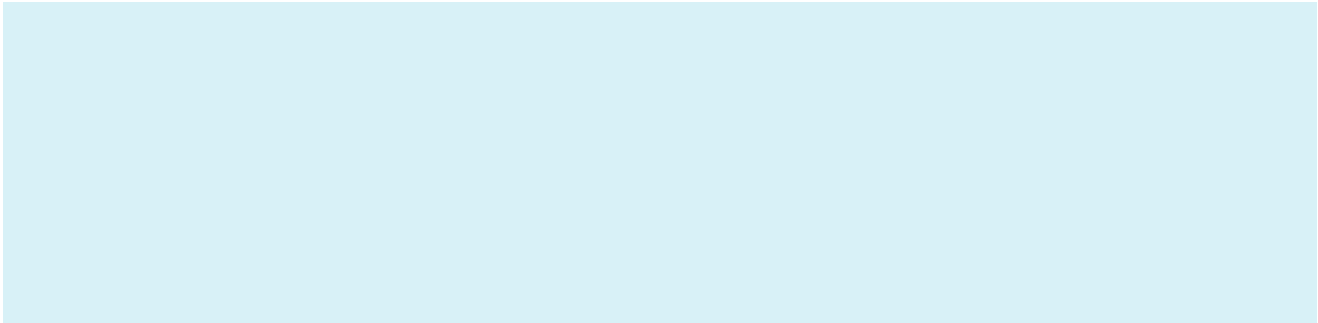
3. What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?



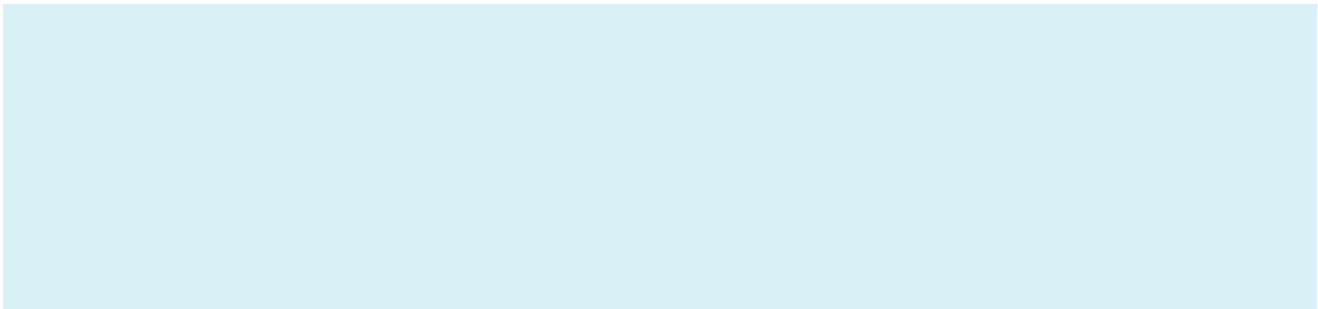
Step 4

UC Personal Insight Questions

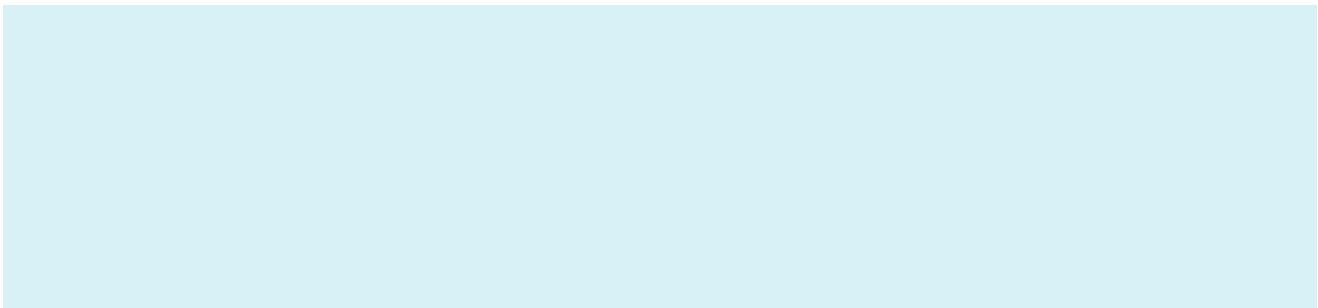
4. Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.



5. Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?



6. Think about an academic subject that inspires you. Describe how you have furthered this interest inside and/or outside of the classroom.



Step 5

CHOOSING A PROMPT

In this step, you will evaluate your responses to Step 4. Read through your responses and decide which ones will make the strongest, most compelling essays. Below are some tips for determining which responses are strongest for each type of essay.

Common App

There are seven Common App Essay prompts, but you will only choose ONE to write. Every college that uses the Common App and requires an Essay will read your Common App Essay.

The Common App Essay is 650 words. Choose a topic about which you have a lot to say, as well as several specific examples to use to demonstrate your main points.

You may want to consider writing more than one Common App Essay in the early stages of your writing process. Sometimes it turns out that certain topics are not as well suited to an essay topic as you may have initially thought.

Remember that this is a college's opportunity to get to know you. Choose the prompt that will give the admissions officers the best glimpse into who you are.

Common App Essay Choice(s):

Step 5

UC Personal Insight Questions

There are eight Personal Insight Question prompts, but you will choose FOUR to write. Every UC Campus you apply to will receive the same set of responses. You may not personalize your responses to a specific campus.

Each Personal Insight Question response is 350 words. This is much shorter than it seems! Choose a topic about which you have one strong specific example to demonstrate the main point.

The UC chooses these prompts because they want to know the answers to these specific questions. Choose the prompts which you can answer directly, not one you think you can make mean something else to sneak in information about yourself that they did not ask for.

Personal Insight Question Choices:

-
-
-
-

Final Thoughts

You've made it through one of the hardest parts of the college essay writing process – figuring out what to write. Now that you're armed with some terrific topics and the specific stories/examples to help you write a stand-out essay, the rest will be a breeze! Just kidding. But what you've done IS half the battle. You've likely never had to do much writing about yourself before, so all of this brainstorming is getting you ready to use a muscle you probably haven't used before. Doing this pre-writing brainstorming and thinking has set you up for success when it's time to sit down and write your essays.

A note about supplemental essays

There is no separate section included in this workbook for the supplemental essays that are unique to individual schools. Not all schools have supplemental essay requirements, but for those that do we have tried to include questions in this workbook that speak to common themes among various schools' supplementary prompts. Once you've worked through all of the questions here, you should be able to highlight responses that will apply to most schools' supplementary essay prompts.

Happy Writing!