

## Adapting Your Essay to a Prompt + Word Count

**Retrofitting** = modifying something that already exists for a new or altered purpose. For example, during the COVID-19 global pandemic of 2020-2021, millions of grocery stores **retrofitted** checkout lines with plexiglass partitions to reduce the airborne spread of the virus between customers and cashiers.

Retrofitting doesn't mean tearing something down and reconstructing it from the ground up. It means making small, possibly temporary adjustments to something that's already a very stable and functional construction.

This guide is designed to help you retrofit your **completed** essay to a prompt to make sure that it complies with the specifications of the college essay prompt used by a particular college (or college application system, like the Common App or Apply Texas) -- including word count.

This retrofitting guide is one of the flex elements of the Stories of Self college admissions essay curriculum, meaning it is optional and can be done at whichever point in the sequence seems most logical for you.

**You should have at least a first draft** before using this guide, but you can also have a finished, final draft -- maybe even one that you've already submitted to a different college or system. **If you're writing your essay long ahead of time, come back to this guide when you're ready to apply.**

The basic elements of this guide are as follows:

1. What are prompts? What are college application systems?
2. How do you break down a prompt?
3. How do you adapt an essay to a prompt?

## What Are Prompts? What Are Application Systems?

The **prompt** is the question or idea that you are being asked to respond to in your essay.

A **college application system** is a way to apply to multiple colleges and universities at once, without having to fill out personal information, upload your resume, and make your teachers or counselors submit new letters of recommendation every single time you apply

to a new college.

The most famous and widely used college application system is the Common App. More than 900 colleges and universities in the U.S. participate in the Common App, including both public universities (state schools) and private colleges (like religiously affiliated schools and small liberal arts colleges, or SLACs). To find out if the schools you're interested in participate in the Common App, go to their website, [commonapp.org](http://commonapp.org), and click on FIND COLLEGES. You can also consult with your school's college counselor for help, if applicable.

**If you're a Texas student**, you already know that Texas likes to do things its own way.

ApplyTexas is the college application system for schools in Texas.

- Most of the major public/state school systems in Texas, like all the University of Texas campuses, all the Texas A&M campuses, and all the Texas Tech campuses (and others!), use ApplyTexas, not the Common App. A couple will also take the Common App.
- Private schools in Texas (for example: Rice University, St. Mary's University, Baylor University, Austin College, etc) will often participate in both the Common App and the ApplyTexas systems.
- A number of two-year institutions, like community colleges, also participate in ApplyTexas (but not the Common App).

To find out if the Texas schools you're interested in participate in ApplyTexas, go to their website, [goapplytexas.org](http://goapplytexas.org). You can also consult with your school's college counselor for help, if applicable.

**Here's how an application system works:** there's a basic, universal application to fill out and submit external documents like transcripts and letters of recommendation. That basic application will go to each school you select to apply to.

Then, individual colleges select supplemental items that they would like submitted to them in addition to the basic application. In terms of the essay, in both the Common App and ApplyTexas systems, colleges can choose from a list of possible prompts. To see the current prompts, go to the website for each application system. Generally, the Common App provides around 7 possible prompts. ApplyTexas provides 3 prompts, which are different depending on whether you are applying for the first time or as a transfer or international student. With both application systems, colleges will either choose the prompt they want you to respond to or allow you to choose one from the list to write your essay about.

## What About Other Essays?

Sometimes schools request additional essays or short answers on topics that might include:

- Why this particular school is exciting or a good fit for you
- Why you're interested in your major and what your career goals are
- The chance to explain any major gaps or inconsistencies in your transcript (for example, a much lower GPA than your average GPA in a particular semester, or a leave of absence)
- Questions related to a scholarship at that school you want to try for
- And others!

Often, these essays are shorter and more straightforward -- they need to be well-written and carefully planned, and they might contain some narrative (for example, referencing defining events that motivated you to pursue a certain career path), but they are not expected to be as creative or colorful as the main, narrative college essay. And they should **not** repeat the same story you tell in the main essay! You might find it really helpful to return to the work you did in Stage 2: Prewriting to find additional experiences to discuss in these answers.

**For help with these application systems, scholarship applications, supplemental essays, and so on -- including verifying all of the above information -- PLEASE consult college counselors at your high school (if applicable) or communicate directly with the college's admissions office!** Things may change or get updated, and the purpose of this workshop is to help you write your personal narrative essay, not advise you on the full application process.

To summarize:

- Most colleges and universities participate in an application system like the Common App or ApplyTexas.
- The application system provides a list of options for narrative essay prompts for schools to choose from.
- Sometimes schools allow applicants (meaning: you) to choose their own prompt from the application system's list.
- Sometimes schools require additional, often shorter, essays on other topics. That's not our focus here, but you might be able to use the exercises from Stage 2: Prewriting to help.

## How Do You Break Down A Prompt?

**All college essay prompts are looking for the same basic information about you!**

Admissions officers use the essay to get a sense of the person behind the GPA, test scores, and extracurriculars, so that they can imagine what that person might contribute to the campus community.

That means that **all essay prompts** are really just slight variations on a **master prompt**.

The **master prompt** of all narrative college essays is:

Tell a story about yourself or your life that demonstrates the essential qualities, values, and passions that make you who you are.

Different essay prompts just ask for a slightly different focus -- a focus on challenges, for example, or a focus on identities.

You break down an essay prompt in three basic steps:

1. Read the prompt and highlight keywords. Besides major **nouns**, pay attention to anything that references **time** (e.g. “from your childhood” or “in the future”).
2. Define the keywords for yourself in your own words
3. State their goal -- what it seems they are looking for -- in your own words. Their goal will ALWAYS include “qualities, passions, and values.”

As an example, here’s a breakdown each of the Apply Texas prompts:

### Essay A

#### 1. ID Keywords

Tell us your story. What unique **opportunities** or **challenges** have you experienced throughout your high school career that have shaped who you are today?

#### 2. Define Keywords

**Opportunities:** things you’ve gotten to do (travel; leadership; special programs; activities)

**Challenges:** things that have been difficult (academic, personal, or professional struggles)

**Throughout high school:** should focus on something that’s happened in the past few years or that started when I was young and is still ongoing

#### 3. State the Goal

- They’re trying to find out how my qualities, values, and passions have been formed by: **good or bad things that have happened to me in high school.**

## Essay B

### 1. ID Keywords

Most students have an **identity**, an **interest**, or a **talent** that defines them in an essential way. Tell us about yourself.

### 2. Define Keywords

**Identity:** a social group I belong to (ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, sexuality, generation, socioeconomic class, subculture)

**Interest:** hobby or passion (knitting, running, photography, etc)

**Talent:** something you're good at (singing; standing on your head)

### 3. State the Goal

- They're trying to find out my qualities, values, and passions have been formed by: **who I identify with, how I spend your time, or what I'm good at.**

## Essay C

### 1. ID Keywords

You've got a ticket in your hand – **Where will** you go? **What will** you do? What **will happen** when you get there?

### 2. Define Keywords

**Will:** tell the story of an imagined future event rather than a real past event




### 3. State the Goal

- They're trying to find out how my qualities, values, and passions: **may play out in new scenarios, based on an imagined scenario.**

As you can see, all the prompts are designed to reveal the same basic things by slightly different means! Therefore, it's very simple to adapt one core essay to the prompt an individual school prefers.

If you look at the Common App prompts, you can see that prompt #1 is very similar to Essay B from ApplyTexas, and prompt #2 is very similar to Essay A. A good resource that helps break down Common App prompts is [www.commonapp.org/apply/essay-prompts](http://www.commonapp.org/apply/essay-prompts).

Here is a blank template for breaking down prompts. Write or copy/paste the prompt(s) into Step 1: ID Keywords. Circle or highlight the keywords, then define keywords and state the goals of prompt in Steps 2 and 3. Then continue the breakdown in the other two columns, following the ApplyTexas example above.

<b>1. Write out or paste the prompt and highlight the keywords.</b> 	
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<b>2. Keyword</b>	<b>What It Means</b> 
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<b>3. State the Goal -- What are they trying to learn about me?</b> 	
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## How Do You Adapt An Essay To The Prompt?

If you have a personal narrative essay that presents a story from your life that you feel is a wonderful medium to deliver the message of the qualities, values, and passions that you really want your reader to come away from your essay knowing about you -- chances are, you won't have to do much to adapt the content to fit a prompt.

(You might still be working on reshaping the structure of your essay or refining your writing style -- that's not the same thing as adjusting to fulfill the requirements of a prompt.)

Here's a basic process for making sure your essay is fulfilling the prompt's requirements:

1. Take your completed draft and analyze it against the keywords in the chosen prompt. Where does it align to what the prompt is asking for? Where does it not align, or where could it align better?
2. Do you need to change anything? (You might not have to!) If not, you're done!
3. What do you need to change, and how could you change it? It's likely that tweaking just a sentence or two -- or changing the opening and/or concluding paragraphs -- might get the job done.

Here's an example of adapting to the ApplyTexas prompts:

## Story I'm Telling + Qualities I'm Showcasing

### Cleaning vacation rental properties on summer Saturdays as a housekeeper.

*Showcasing work ethic, integrity, & capacity for joy*

#### Apply Texas Prompt:

**Essay A:** Tell us your story. What unique **opportunities** or **challenges** have you experienced **throughout your high school career** that have shaped who you are today?

**How could I adapt it?** Having to wake up early all summer long to clean buildings is a challenge, and I did it in high school! **No need to adapt.**

#### Apply Texas Prompt:

**Essay B:** Most students have an **identity**, an **interest**, or a **talent** that **defines** them in an essential way. Tell us about yourself.

**How could I adapt it?** Make the essay about my “talent”: making a bed flawlessly to 5-star hotel-level standards. Change one-two sentences to specifically mention talent.

#### Apply Texas Prompt:

**Essay C:** You've got a ticket in your hand – Where will you go? What will you do? What will happen when you get there?

**How could I adapt it?** Make the essay about how I've never taken a vacation (I'm the one making things nice for others on their vacation!) -- I don't know where I'd go, but this is how I'd leave the place for the cleaners . . . **Revise opening & concluding paragraphs.**



And here's an example of adapting to different Common App prompts from real student Gayatri:

## Story I'm Telling + Qualities I'm Showcasing

**My growth from someone with internalized misogyny issues to someone who is confident in their femininity.**

*Showcasing open-mindedness, ability to change and reflect, ability to have complex and nuanced views on complex ideas (in this case, gender expression)*

### **Prompt(S) My Essay Needs To Respond To:**

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

### **How Could I Adapt It?**

Focus on the gradual realization and the events accompanying it. **No adaptation necessary.**

### **Prompt(S) My Essay Needs To Respond To:**

Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?

### **How Could I Adapt It?**

Focus either on the Girls Who Code mentor or the peer mentorship from the Fem Lit club (whichever was more impactful). Perhaps start with the GWC mentor and then talk about how your relationship with Fem Lit was informed because of that other relationship? **Change body paragraph anecdotes and tweak the introduction.**

### **Prompt(S) My Essay Needs To Respond To:**

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?

### **How Could I Adapt It?**

Reframe the essay to be less about your own personal struggles but rather outside adversity. **Keep the intro anecdote, but rework the body paragraphs to add different anecdotes that focus on external adversity.**

YOUR TURN! Here’s a template for making a plan to adapt your essay to one or more prompts.

**Story I’m Telling + Qualities I’m Showcasing**



**Prompt(s) my essay needs to respond to:**

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**How Could I Adapt It?**

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