



# Greater Good Communication

## ESSAY TOPICS Fall, 2020

**Almost any life experience can be turned into a college application essay. Your essay needs to reveal something about you that is not revealed elsewhere on your application. It needs to introduce you to the colleges you want to attend and convince them that you will be an asset to their community. Your essay needs to display introspection, self-awareness, and the ability to learn and grow. You can accomplish these goals with just about any topic.**

**Here are some of my favorite topics:**

**A negative situation I turned into a positive:** I got stuck in Latin because of a scheduling issue, and I ended up learning how to think; I had to move to a new state my senior year, and I ended up reinventing myself and now I like myself more; My friends kicked me out of the group, so I made new friends and learned to recognize the qualities of true friendship. And on and on. There are millions of opportunities in this vein. Being able to “turn lemons into lemonade” is such an admirable quality.

**A very unique thing about me:** My obsession with insects, D&D, sourdough starter, the Godfather Trilogy, makeup tutorials on YouTube... and on and on. These eccentricity essays are so fun to read.

**How XYZ movie, song, or book inspired me to change my life.** I recommend this often, and no one takes me up on it! I think this topic could give a student a great opportunity to reveal who they are in the context of a movie, song, or book that moved them.

**The pop culture moment I did or did not get into:** Students seem afraid to write about pop culture, like it's too shallow. I think these zeitgeisty things offer great potential to explore your inner life through the lens of a trendy moment: My obsession with Hamilton; Why I didn't like Hamilton; Why I love K-Pop; Why I hate Harry Potter; My life as a Marvel superhero wannabe; Why Dr. Who is the best TV show ever etc.

**What I learned at my part-time job:** I beg students to write about their high school jobs, but they rarely want to. I think students don't realize how much they are learning at their job, how much it teaches you about life and builds your character.

**I started my own business, and here is what I learned:** This is a solid topic, just be sure to remain humble and focus on the journey, the challenges, and your motivation, not how successful you are.

**My relationship with social media:** I have never had a student dare to write about this, but I think it has potential. Colleges are struggling to understand GenZ and their relationship with social media, and I think this essay would actually get read from start to finish, unlike some other topics.

**I saw an injustice or problem and did something about it:** I have worked with several students who have done a great job with this topic. Sincerity is key. So is humility. The goal is not to showcase yourself in a hero role, but to focus on the actions you took and why you were inspired to take them.

**My journey to embrace my gender/sexual identity:** Campuses are trying to understand rapid cultural shifts in gender and sexual identity. I would think an essay on this topic would be welcome in helping college officials understand identity from different perspectives. However, just because you identify as LGBTQIA+, you of course do NOT have to write about it! Some topics are too personal.

**Perceived negative aspects of me that are actually positive:** I'm a slob, but my messy room belies an organized mind; I play a lot of video games, but through games I have learned XYZ; I spend a lot of time on Instagram, but it has helped me understand the person I do not want to be. I have had students who were struggling with their original topic shift to this one with great results.

**A wild, crazy thing that happened to me and what I got out of it:** Sometimes you just have a great story you want to tell. The key, of course, is to tell it well. A student wrote about a road trip gone bad, and it was funny and memorable and showed him to be a person who can think on his feet and find humor in a miserable situation. Another student wrote about an opportunity to meet Chance the Rapper that did not go as planned.

**Offbeat essays.** Some essays defy categorization, and that originality is immediately a strength. I had a student write about how she was born in the wrong era and should have been coming of age in the 1940s. It was fun and showed off her love of history. A colleague shared a student's essay called, "My life as a Netflix teen drama," and it was clever and funny about a first love that fizzled. The first line was something like, "So I got a really big thing out of the way before going to college, and I will be a much wiser and more resilient freshman as a result."

**Origin of my name.** This essay topic has worked well for several of my colleague's students. It's another way to allow the reader an unexpected entry into your history and your inner life.

**BE PREPARED TO DIG DEEP: These essay topics are frequently chosen, and you need to really dig deep and offer something revealing and memorable to make your essay stand out.**

**Politics:** This used to be on my "avoid" list, but I am moving it, for now, as we are in a unique moment in history. A lot of students are writing about their political awakening. You need to tap into who you are and where you are headed to make this topic work.

**Sports:** How I won/lost the big game; How I improved at my sport; How I tried a sport and failed but learned a lot. How I started a team at my school. All these sports angles have been written about millions of times. Offer something fresh and unexpected.

**My love of theater, music, gardening, baking, running or other common hobby:** Drill down to what it is about this interest that feeds your soul. This topic can feel like you are taking the easy way out. You need to earn the reader's respect in the first paragraph.

**Why I chose XYZ career path.** This is a doable and appropriate topic, but keep in mind that admissions officers have read it all. Offer a memorable narrative of the journey that led you to have a clear vision of your future career.

**Covid-19 and me:** I am sure a lot of students are going to write about Covid-19 as a defining time in their lives. Aspire to offer something fresh, original, and from your unique perspective.

**Why XYZ social justice cause matters to me.** I could not decide which list to put this on. This one can go very wrong if it highlights your privilege and your ability to recognize injustice but not act on it. You need to show some real passion and action.

**What I learned from my beloved pet:** Writing about the human-pet bond can be effective and moving, but you have to show your vulnerability. It can feel like a cheap, manipulative topic otherwise.

**My struggle with a life-threatening or chronic illness:** Every illness is unique to every person, so you need to make your story unique to your personal journey. You do not have to end with the discovery that you are actually "lucky" to have had this illness. It is fine and normal to end believing that the illness sucks. There are little epiphanies within your journey that you can focus on. One student wrote about having to do chemo and radiation and why he preferred chemo. I liked the essay for its analytical style and absence of self-pity.

**Coping with the loss of someone close:** Grief hits everyone so differently. Focus on your unique walk through grief to make this very personal essay topic work. Don't feel like you have to end the essay having overcome grief. Grief is a lifelong journey, and your essay will cover just a portion of the journey. Remember that you do not have to write about the loss of a parent or

sibling if that is something you experienced. You are allowed to write about anything you want, and some topics may be too raw and personal.

**My parents' divorce:** This is tough one to make stand out, but your very personal story can go a long way in illustrating who you are. It's a relatable topic.

**Really, really challenging topics:**

I recommend steering clear of essay topics about your struggle with mental illness. I don't want unconscious bias to creep in when the admissions professional reads your essay. I also recommend avoiding the "My inspiring mission trip to XYZ developing country." This topic has been chosen so many times and can rub readers the wrong way by highlighting your privilege and, often, lack of self-awareness.