

# Sample College Application Essay Prompts

We have prepared this handout of actual essays written by current Harvard students who attended secondary schools in the UK (with names changed for anonymity) in order to provide some guidance to schools and applicants. Because the university admissions processes in the US and the UK are markedly different, we have received requests for some sample essays and tips for writing them and hope they will be helpful.

Here is the Common Application description of the essay and the current and recent prompts used:

“The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic, and helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice. What do you want the readers of your application to know about you apart from courses, grades and test scores? Choose the option that best helps you answer that question and write an essay of no more than 650 words, using the prompt to inspire and structure your response.”

- 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 failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
- 3) Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?
- 4) Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?
- 5) 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.
- 6) Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

Your essay for a US university *might* be the same one you would write for the UCAS system, but perhaps not. We are interested in your academic successes and future plans, but also want to understand what makes you tick as a person. What are your hopes, dreams and fears?

Our advice is to choose two or three topics, write a quick first draft of each essay and then show them to your best friend, mother, teacher or anyone who knows you well. Ask that person if your voice and personality come through in the essays and which one sounds the most like *you*. Then take that essay and polish it off!

As you will see from the following sample essays, these students have written about lessons learned from time spent in Northern Ireland, Nigeria, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and a dairy barn. What will you write about?

**Personal Essay Prompt: Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.**

### Essay #1

My upbringing in Northern Ireland, a small corner of the world, has affected who I am in many fundamental ways. For a start, I've learnt that it's possible to catch pneumonia and get sunburnt in the course of one afternoon; so I always over pack. So too have I discovered that "I'll pop the kettle on" is a sufficient emotional response when confronted with most situations. Northern Ireland has had, as most know, a troubled history – so troubled, we simply call it 'The Troubles'. During this time, individually and collectively as a nation, we suffered. It was assumed that no lasting solution would ever be found and most gave up trying, with stalled talks becoming a perennial disappointment. Yet a renewed, focused and determined effort was made by the British, Irish and American Governments to bring about peace, which was finally achieved through the Good Friday Agreement. It was signed in 1997, a few months after my birth.

My generation is the first generation of peace – it's all we've known, and thankfully 'The Troubles' for us is merely a scarring reminder of what came before. We have so much to thank the tireless efforts of diplomats for, for without their commitment the change witnessed in the 18 years subsequent would be unimaginable. Twenty years ago, who could have foreseen Martin McGuinness paying tribute to the late Ian Paisley as "a friend?" While there are still sizeable problems in our political system, the distance we've come shows the good that diplomacy, politics, compromise and a will to succeed can do – and it is this, more than anything else, which has shaped the path I want to follow at College and my career beyond. There are so many places in the world in a similarly bad or worse condition that are consigned to the 'Can't Help Box' – a damning view of our pessimism about the capacity for change. I've grown up seeing the work it takes to heal places scarred by division and violence, but can personally attest that it's worth it. With that in mind, as I came to realise what it took for where I live to achieve peace it taught me always to persevere – that if people tell you something is "unachievable" it is only so by the standards they set for themselves, so I always tried to work harder and aim higher than everyone else. I don't want to be bound by what others determine to be "too difficult."

So I've thrown myself in. I've worked with MLAs and MPs on education reform, got involved with organisations and campaigns like the UK Youth Parliament that encourage activism and social progress, even founding my own to try and engage other young people in issues affecting them. My determination to do all of this, and my optimism that change can be brought about, is fuelled by my background in Northern Ireland. Life here has also taught me to value of friendship and cooperation. For years, the metaphorical and physical walls placed between Protestants and Catholics hindered understanding, friendship, and community. It is only when we understand each other that we can begin to overcome our problems together. I was blessed to grow up with the influence of my Granny, who always pushed me to meet people from "the other side", and I am proud to have been part of so many projects that promote the importance of tolerance, understanding and friendship across historic divisions.

It may seem foolish to be proud of a background in a place infamous for bomb scares and paramilitary violence, but I am. My experiences here have shown me what's important in life: determination, resilience, optimism, passion and having "a bit of 'craic" (a uniquely Northern Irish type of fun). I wouldn't change my background for the world.

## Essay #2

“Nigeria?” exclaimed the man sitting next to me, failing to mask his confusion. “Yes, Nigeria” I said, confirming that I had enjoyed my years spent in Nigeria the most. My fellow traveller remained stupefied, and to some degree, offended: how could I prefer the squalor of Lagos to the elegance of Melbourne, Aberdeen, or Houston? Had I answered him, I might have explained that there was a beauty that arose from the apparent chaos – an observation that taught me the importance of learning through experience rather than relying on what others have said.

To my mind, this sentiment is best embodied in the Nigerian dish, Suya. In rickety stands alongside polluted streets, thin slices of chicken, obtained from dubious sources, are marinated in a myriad of seasonings before being grilled above a makeshift fire. Few would risk taking a bite of this culinary adventure. Yet, to me, Suya is a delicacy, a prime example of exquisite cuisine. A sprinkle of sweetness, followed by a tidal wave of spice, Suya is unlike anything I have ever tried. If you are willing to put your fear aside and place your curiosity first, as I have learnt, then Nigeria, like Suya, becomes a rich medley of flavour and colour.

Where better to find such an explosion of colour in Lagos than in Lekki Market? Ghanaian textiles of orange, green, and red, mahogany-coloured handcrafted sets of ducks, and tall, slim statues of African soldiers in green and blue colonial uniforms; Lekki had it all. With its dirt floors, wooden shacks, and conspicuous absence of Apple logos, it was no Houston Galleria, but for me it was *human*. Lekki was not selling comfort, but culture. It reminded me that there was more to life than Gameboys, television, and pocket money. It was also a reminder that we are all inter-connected. Behind the face of every merchant, I could see a family needing support, children hoping for food. Two hundred Naira could feed a child for a day. It could also get me an extra slice of pizza at lunch. I did not have to know these children personally to be conscious of the fact that my choice to buy a slice of pizza over craftwork from their parents could be the cause of a child going hungry. These faces taught me that the impacts of our choices, however apparently personal, are never truly one’s own.

Above all though, what I most appreciated about Nigeria was its people. When my brother and I were younger, Femi, our driver, would place us on his shoulders and run around as if we were his own kids. We knew that he did not live an easy life, and yet he was not begrudging of us. We went to private school whilst his children would be lucky if they went to school at all. Femi did not resent us; rather he had nothing but love for us. Growing up all over the world, my brother and I experienced how difficult it was to be welcomed into a new culture, and ironically, we were best received in the country with which we had the least in common. It became clear that the Nigerians that I met had a sense of community and mutual care that I have not often come across in such abundance; there is much we could learn from them. Clearly, there is truth to be learnt everywhere, so long as we can keep an open mind, a lesson I always try to bear in mind.

Prior to moving to Nigeria, I had shared the same sentiments as the man sitting next to me on the plane. Fortunately, my time in Nigeria forced me to challenge these views, and in doing so, opened my eyes to the importance of independent thought. As such, I will never cease to challenge both my own views and those of others.

**Personal Essay Prompt: Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?**

**Essay #1**

The most life-changing lessons waiting to be discovered lie beyond the snug bounds of monotony and routine – beyond the classroom. This truth is something I recognized only recently, after electing to immerse myself in the world of dairy farming. Initially I was anything but content. I will confess, I was apprehensive. Encountering a strange new environment is always unsettling to a certain degree. However, beyond my immediate tentativeness, this experience challenged me to take a fresh, creative approach to learning, and develop a personal resilience and drive which I would never have attained otherwise. For these reasons my time at the dairy farm holds a distinct, fond place in my memory.

The first thing that struck me was the smell – an overwhelming stench of cow manure – earthy tones of putrid grass which assaulted my nostrils. Then the symphony began – the rhythmic hissing from overhead pipes marked the beat, with the staccato clipping of hooves, rain-song of pellets hitting metal and incessant mooing of disgruntled cattle all merging in an intense crescendo. White tiles stained with unidentified brown splashes surrounded the beasts, whose bodies radiated wisps of steam with their every exhalation. Cold cups sucked at pink flesh, as the small transparent spheres flooded with white fluid, emptied, and flooded once more with the metrical throb of the dairy parlour.

Attached as I became to the familiar hum of the dairy, my most treasured time was, undoubtedly, calving. I vividly remember my first one – the expectant cow stood panting in agony as her every sinew struggled to contract and squeeze the calf from her body. ‘Grab the legs and pull,’ the overall-clad farmer insisted. Locking my freezing hands around the slippery hooves protruding from the cervix, I slowly coaxed the hefty calf free with a few tugs. The moist, thick membrane-enclosed body finally slumped to the hay covered ground in a flurry of white. Having been lured to maternal attentiveness by her calf’s distinctive scent, as well as the oxytocin overflow of the birth, the dazed cow outstretched her tongue to clean her young. Little pointy ears, dark eyes and a russet coat were all unveiled. A peculiar, blissful wave of satisfaction overcame me. I had delivered new life into the world! Here, the blur of detached, unanimated words, diagrams and numbers of the classroom suddenly became thrilling. The stationary anatomical depictions were brought to life – networks of muscles, bones, arteries and organs all delicately interacted to create the life before me. My mind traced the movement of the scaffolding Hydrogen, Nitrogen and Oxygen atoms, which I had pencilled so many times, from the hypothalamus, to the bloodstream, and to their final destination – the target cells.

This learning journey transformed the whine of the suction cups, the rattling of the pipes, and chaotic clinking of hooves on the milking parlour floor into my idyllic soundtrack. Even the pungent but somehow sweet smell of silage is nostalgic. Indeed, this time cemented my dream of becoming a veterinarian – the intellectual tests, the physicality and the sheer variety of outlandish situations which arise all endeared the profession to me.

There were many immediate physical reminders of my time at the dairy farm: the stench that gripped onto my clothes, and offended the noses of my family members on the journey home, as well as the yellow dribbles of iodine which stained my callused and burnt hands for days. Nonetheless, after these fleeting souvenirs faded into obscurity, I was left with one prevailing and utterly indelible lesson – to animate stationary words and diagrams memorised from pages,

and inspire an academic creativity, you have to learn from thought-provoking people, and, above all, place yourself in situations which break free from the norm. The most unconventional of environments can bring lessons far superior to those we learn in our classrooms.

## **Essay #2**

Over 3,000 shows every year across 300 venues. Thousands of performers drawn from 47 countries around the globe. The largest international arts festival in the world. There is no place I am more content than at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe every summer.

It seems an odd juxtaposition at first; Edinburgh is an old, medieval city. History oozes out of every vein, from the cobbled streets to the magnificent stone castle that so dominates the skyline. Yet, for three weeks every August it is engulfed by an electrifying torrent of cutting-edge, experimental music, theatre, dance and comedy. I have seen shows performed entirely in darkness, entirely in silence, and even one where nothing happened at all! It is a heady mix of the beautiful and the daring, and I leave Edinburgh each year with radically altered perceptions of art, of culture, and indeed of life in general.

There's a great deal of nostalgia tying me to the festival. I have visited every year for as long as I can remember. The gradual transition from having to wait in a coffee shop with my mother while my father and brother watch a risqué comedian I was too young to see, to actually witnessing the powerful and taboo-breaking performances that populate the Fringe seems to me inextricable from the process of growing up itself. This bohemian, spirited atmosphere has helped define me, both as an aspiring playwright and as aspiring academic. There is a beauty in encountering new ideas, new perspectives, and new analytical frameworks for looking at the world. Fundamentally, a healthy mind is one that actively confronts itself with the unfamiliar.

It was only three years ago that I began performing at the Fringe Festival as well as attending. Being part of a community of twenty actors just as invested in creativity and beauty as you are is an incredible experience. Many have become some of my dearest friends and, this coming summer, five of us intend to go a step further and write, organize and put on our own show from scratch entirely independently. Here is a chance to not just absorb the eclectic discourse of the Fringe, but to actively contribute our own creative voice to it. Economists frequently talk of a 'marketplace of ideas', as if inspiration were a discrete product that can be traded and bartered between socio-economic actors. There is no marketplace of ideas. It is a festival, a celebration of innovation to which all can lend the weight of their own experience, and from which all can learn equally.

Too often we associate contentment with tranquility. We think of the New England log cabin, surrounded for miles and miles by sublime wildernesses. We think of isolation, of peace, as if we alone are enough to make ourselves happy. Perhaps some people can do that, but I cannot. I need bustle. I need energy. I need to be assaulted, barraged by a stream of exotic ideas that are not my own. It is not peace, but a kind of intellectual chaos; daring; beauty. Then and only then am I content.