



College Application Essays and Personal Insight Questions

Yes, They Read them!!



Presenter:

Karla Whitaker

kkwhitaker@ucsd.edu

WHEN ARE WRITTEN RESPONSES REQUIRED?

UC Application

- Answer 4 of 8 prompts

Private Schools,
Common Application

- 1 Essay Prompt

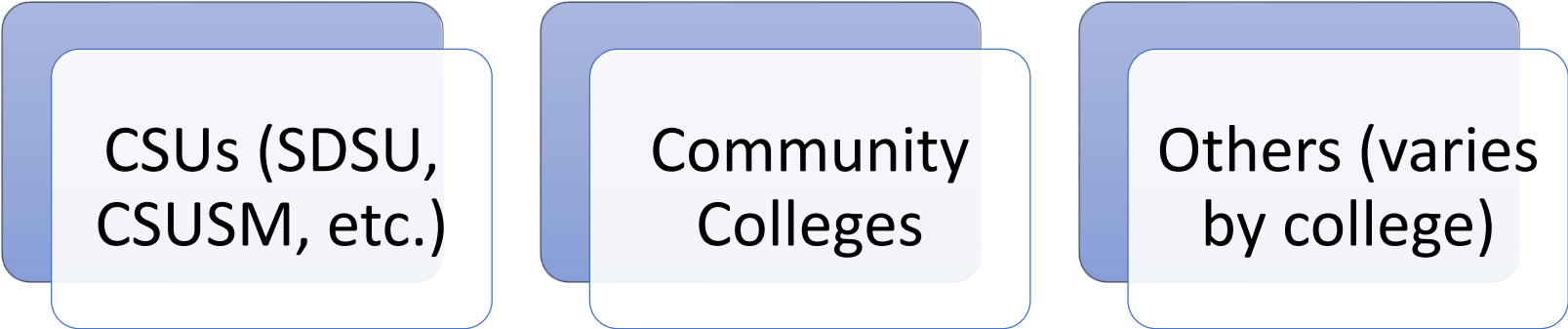
Scholarships

- Often 1 Essay Prompt

Program Applications

- Varies

WHEN ARE THEY NOT REQUIRED?

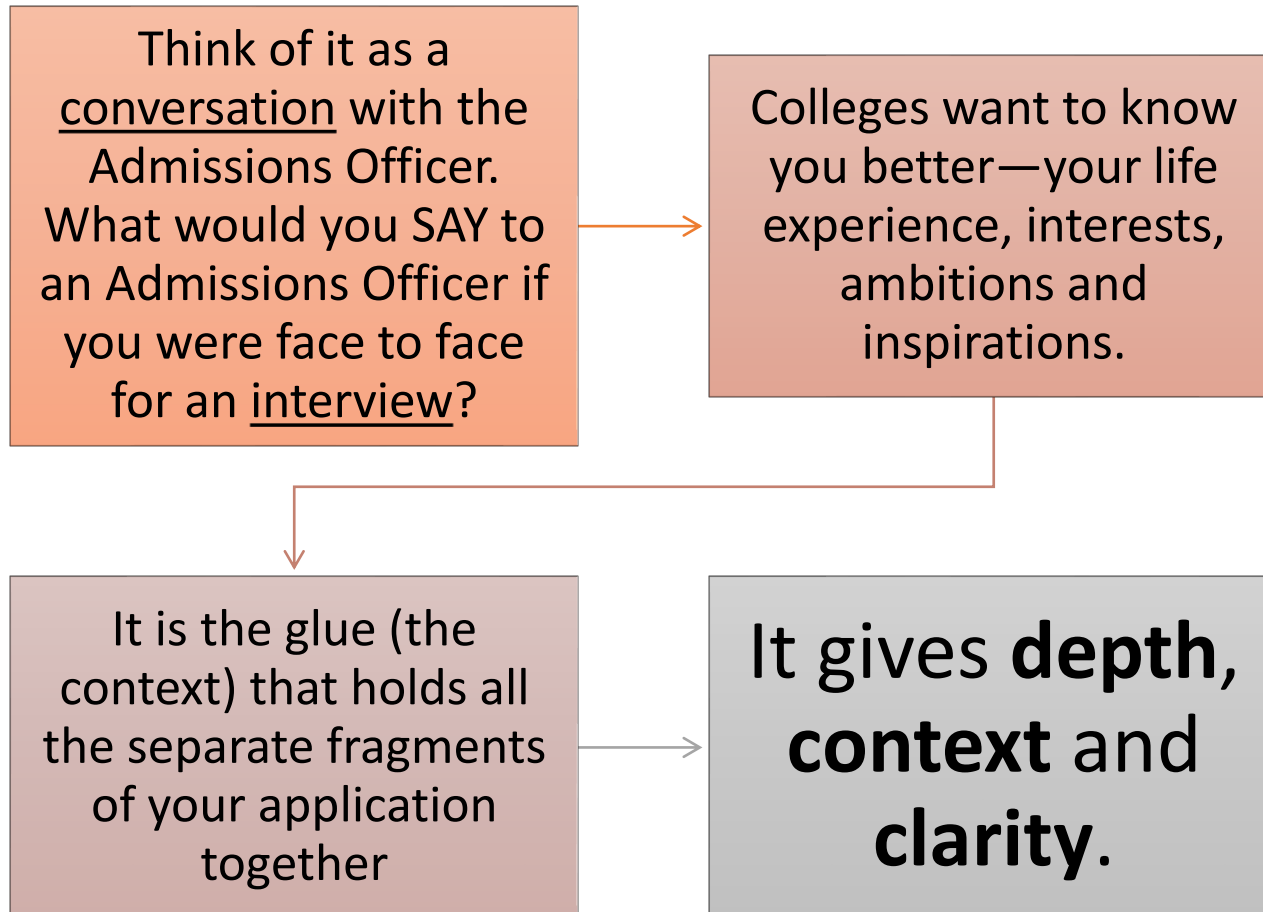


CSUs (SDSU,
CSUSM, etc.)

Community
Colleges

Others (varies
by college)

Why are they asking?



UC Personal Insight Questions

Inside an admissions officer's brain...

How is this
student going to
be an asset on
your campus?

Picture yourself in college

- Does your PIQ response relate to your **major, minor** or **career**?
- Does your PIQ response relate to **clubs** you will join, start or lead?
- Does your PIQ response relate to **community service** you will perform in college?
- Does your PIQ response relate to how you will **interact** with fellow students, staff and professors?
- Does your PIQ response relate to how you will approach **studying, groupwork**, or **academics**?



What the PIQs are...

- Their voice, their story
- An opportunity to provide context
- Reviewed for content, not structure
- A snapshot
- **PERSONAL**



Tips for answering UC Personal Insight Questions

| | |
|--------|--|
| Share | Share NEW information not already covered elsewhere in your application. |
| Use | Use specific, concrete examples, but not “scene-setting.” They don’t need to be in the moment with you. |
| Be You | Use YOUR OWN AUTHENTIC VOICE . Use “I” and “My” and “Me.” |
| Answer | Answer the question, “So what?” You play a sport. So what? You play an instrument. So what? You love an academic subject or a club. So what? Colleges want to know how you’ll enrich their campus. |



What the PIQs are not...

- **An audition**
- **An academic essay**
- **A vocabulary quiz**
- **Creative writing pieces**
- **A retelling of one's entire life**

AVOID

- Acronyms
- Titles
- Quotes
- Dialogue
- A “hook”
- Writing about someone else
- Story-telling
- Scene-setting
- Flowery Language
- Jokes and Sarcasm
- Summarizing other parts of your application

What Schools Look For

- Thoughtful, incisive **reflection** – some sense of who the student is.
- Any of the following personal qualities: leadership, creativity, initiative, innovation, passion, persistence, maturation, tenacity, self-discipline, motivation for academic success, and commitment to others.
- Students who have done **activities to enrich their education**.
- Students who have had meaningful participation, not just a listing of activities. **Quality over quantity** should be the general guideline.

What Schools Look For (cont.)

- Community-based awareness. Students who have demonstrated a sensitivity to and respect for differences, e.g., through **sustained community service**.
- Students who are informal **leaders** – the type of student who makes things happen – a catalyst who motivates others, who initiates or takes responsibility for something that meets a perceived need.

EXPLAIN

Don't complain

**Extremely important for Prompts 4 and 5.
Don't write all about the challenge. Write
about how you overcame it.*

Be AUTHENTIC
rather than
strategic



UC Personal Insight Questions

- There will be 8 prompts.
- You can answer any 4.
- Limit: 350 words each.
- Choose the four that best showcase who you are.
- All questions are given equal consideration in the application review process, which means there is no advantage or disadvantage to choosing certain questions over others.

The UC technical stuff

- 350 word maximum per prompt (*Word Count/Character Count*)
- Do not try to compose your PIQs while filling out the application online. Write your essays/responses in Word **first**.
- Save to a safe place like Google Docs.
- Use Spellcheck, and then have at least two people read your essay for grammar, spelling, content and flow.
- When you're sure you're ready to submit it, copy and paste it into the online application. PLAIN TEXT! (Application won't save font type, font size, special characters, images, etc.)

For the UC System, it is not read for mechanics, spelling, grammar or style.

However, you should proofread and edit. **Even though it's not scored on this, it will not make a good impression if it's full of errors.*

How
important
is
grammar?

Additional Comments Section

- Is **not** required. Do not fill it out unless you truly need to.
- It is not your opportunity to answer a fifth prompt!
- It is for information not found elsewhere on application
- It might explain gaps and deficiencies
- Open format

Quickwrite #1: Leadership

- How do you define “leader”? List three words that you think describe what a leader is.
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- Do any of these words apply to you? How? Is there a time in your life when you displayed any of these traits?

UC PIQ # 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.

Quickwrite #2: Creativity

- Can you think of a time your viewpoint was unique compared to others? What was the issue or problem from your perspective? How was your approach different from another person's?
- Was there ever a problem where your intuition and imagination guided you to the solution?
- Do you have a passion for music, theater, visual art, dance, etc.? What have you gained from it that has affected other parts of your life?

UC PIQ # 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.

Quickwrite #3: Talent

- List three of your talents or skills:
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- Were these talents or skills the same a few years ago? What changed? What improved?
- Which of the three talents or skills is the most meaningful or important to you and why? Does the talent come naturally or have you worked hard to develop this skill or talent?

UC PIQ # 3

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

Quickwrite #4:

Opportunities and Barriers

- **Educational Opportunities**: List any programs or additional classes that have better prepared you for college:
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- **Educational Barriers**: Have you faced any barriers or challenges related to school and/or your schoolwork? How did you overcome or strive to overcome them? List three personal characteristics or skills you had to call on to overcome this challenge:
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- *Feel free to write about either an opportunity or a barrier. It's OK if you've experienced one and not the other*

UC PIQ # 4

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

Quickwrite #5: Challenges

- Have you had a difficult experience in your life? How did you get through it? What did you learn going through this experience?
- If you're currently working your way through a challenge, what are you doing now and does that affect different aspects of your life? For example, ask yourself, "How was my life changed at home, at my school, with my friends, or with my family?"

UC PIQ # 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?

Quickwrite #6:

Inspiring Academic Subject

- Do you have a passion for one specific academic subject area, something that you just can't get enough of? If that applies to you, what have you done to further that interest? Discuss how your interest in the subject developed and describe any experience you have had inside and outside the classroom — such as volunteer work, internships, employment, summer programs, participation in student organizations and/or clubs — and what you have gained from your involvement.

UC PIQ # 6

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

Quickwrite #7: Service

- Have you contributed to a positive change at your school or in your community?
- What steps have you taken to accomplish this? Remember, even small changes can have a big impact.
- Why were you inspired to act?
- What did you learn from your effort?

UC PIQ # 7

What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?

Quickwrite #8: Originality

- List three of your **personality traits**. How would friends/family describe you?
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- What do you **value** in your life? What's important to you?
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- What are you **passionate** about?
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - What **items or possessions** do you **cherish**? List them here and think about why they're meaningful to you:
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.

Quickwrite #8: Originality continued

- Does anything overlap?
- Is there one thing that stands out?
- Are there any that you would want to share more information about?

UC PIQ # 8

Beyond what has already been shared in your application, what do you believe makes you stand out as a strong candidate for admissions to the University of California?

UC Personal Insight Prompts

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

UC Personal Insight Prompts

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.
7. What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?
8. Beyond what has already been shared in your application, what do you believe makes you stand out as a strong candidate for admissions to the University of California?

Final UC Tips

Write early. Get feedback.
Start with 8; narrow to the
best 4.

Don't "recycle" your Common
Application essay. Admissions
officers pick up on that.

Choose the four prompts most
relevant to your experience and that
best reflect your individual
circumstances.

UCs do not want creative writing,
although other universities might.

Hazy

My dad worked very hard,
so I want to be a good
student.

Adds concrete details to be exact

Growing up, I watched my dad work two full-time jobs to save money so I could go to college, which motivated me to attend after school tutoring four times a week to maintain an exceptional GPA.

Peer Review a Friend's Essay

- How did the essay make you feel?
- Did it provide NEW information? What did you learn?
- Was it clear and concise/Did it flow well?
- Would you admit this student? Yes/No?

Case #1: Leadership


During the summer of this year (senior year) I applied for summer staff, a position that our school offered to seniors to help freshman transition from middle school to high school. I realized that being a leader wasn't as easy as it sounded. My time with the freshman made me realize who I am and who I want to become. Everything that I thought would go wrong went wrong. I had to understand that these freshmen were in a completely new environment that they had to adapt to. Over the next few hours, I gathered all my thoughts and tried to recall what my experience as a freshman was like and relate it back to the current situation. Now I have a better understanding of where everyone is coming from. I figured that stubbornness played a big role in their attitude so I shared my experiences of being a freshman, which got the freshman students to understand the importance of this event. This experience helped me realize that leaders have to be patient in order to get their points across.

Word count: 180

Case #1: Leadership

Is this a missed opportunity or value-added response?

Missed Opportunity

- 
- Could explain what their idea of leadership is
 - Provide more details on their role
 - Elaborate on what went wrong and how they found a solution to “fix” them

Case #2: Leadership

During the presidential election, the nation continued to deepen its polarization, resulting in a hostile political climate and unprecedented fear in those without legal status. In the midst of this crisis, I became part of an initiative to formulate a project that would help students who found themselves in this state of insecurity. For months I met with representatives from community organizations, and a few peers to come up with an efficient and prolonged solution to the issue. We began drafting a resolution to make my school district a sanctuary district. This was only part of the initiative, as I worked to gather more members of the community who would contribute to the project by helping spark public interest in the idea. Once formalizing the language to satisfy the interests of all students, my team and I moved to propose the resolution to the school board district. Beginning the campaign with a rally, continuing with public comment, and ending with reading the proposal, we made sure that we were representing “nuestra gente” every step of the way. Eventually, the resolution to make my school district a sanctuary district was passed unanimously.

Word count: 191

Case #2: Leadership

Is this a missed opportunity or value-added response?

Value-added

- Goes from broad, general context to very specific details about their process
- Provides concrete examples on how they made their community a better place
- Clear, concise and direct

Case #4: Academic Subject

During my junior year, I took an Ethics of Philosophy class and quickly became interested in exploring the subject more. This was the first time I had been exposed to a discussion on such a topic and the first time I was able to see the varying viewpoints on social issues in the world. From the lessons I learned in this class, I have been able to establish my own world view and take an active role in being a part of my community. I learned to link my own experiences with the world and express my thoughts and opinions in a constructive way. Since taking this introductory philosophy class, I have been volunteering beyond my school's required community service hours. I was a marketing volunteer at a cancer prevention center where we reached out to the community for donations. I also volunteered at a local library helping teach people to read. This allowed me to not only connect with my community and explore different literary genres, but it also gave me a way to connect with my father who has always been an avid reader. With a philosophical outlook, I started to reflect on these volunteer experiences more thoughtfully and enjoyed them a lot. Philosophy has taught me so much about myself and how to connect with people, whether it be with my teachers and family members or with those in my local community. I've learned how fragile and broken our society is, while also learning the importance of thoughtfulness and kindness. To continue this interest, I plan to major in Sociology so I can study the application of philosophical theories and establish a career focused on helping others and making our society a better place. By focusing on a career helping others, I hope to become a mature, tolerant, patient and well-educated citizen in our society.

Word count: 308

Case #4: Academic Subject

Is this a missed opportunity or value-added response?

Value-added

- Provides examples of steps taken in developing their favorite subject
- Draws parallels from volunteer experiences to academic subject



Case #5: Significant Challenge

Ivy is a resilient plant that grows in some of the harshest environments; it is also my middle name. I was born to victims of drug addiction, who proved quite incapable of attaining sobriety and raising a newborn. Their time with me ceased after a few unmemorable months when my father's half-lit cigarette engulfed our small apartment in flames. As a result of the fire, my grandparents ushered me away from my father's life and the only ways I perceived the world: chaotic and unpredictable. They introduced me to homemade meals, weekend jigsaw puzzles, and "comfort". Yet, the past tremendously weighed on my grandparents, as they sought to mend the severed relationship with my mother. This became apparent when they sensed she had become sober and was ready for a life of stability. My grandparents moved me out, and throughout 2nd and a fraction of 3rd grade, I lived with my mother and younger brother in another state. For months, I was fairly content, but my mother soon became more and more absent, our home less and less of a home. My mom was using again. Through isolation and false senses of dependence, my childhood was challenging. Consistently, I blamed myself for my parents' behavior and questioned the motives of their actions. I was stuck in a state of solitude for most of my life, which affected how I saw myself and others. After regularly attending therapy in middle school though, I began developing strong relationships with my peers, school, and family. I could finally flourish. Of course, ivy grows best in warmer climates and richer soil, unlike in the winter, when its growth is halted. My situation never stunted my growth. Like ivy, I am persistently growing stronger and stronger, no matter what the environment. I've chosen a path of intellect and success, stability and hope. My winter has passed. I will never stop growing.

Case #5: Significant Challenge

Is this a missed opportunity or value-added response?

Missed Opportunity



- Scarcely connects their past experience to current situation and how it has affected their academic achievement
- Good metaphor and detailed background, but student needs to provide steps and results on how they overcame their challenge

Case #6: Educational Opportunity

Throughout my high school career I have taken advantage of every educational opportunity presented to me both inside and outside of school. Each educational endeavor that I participated in was greatly beneficial, in particular, Upward Bound. I joined Upward Bound my junior year after an extensive process including an application, interview, parent interview, high GPA requirements, essay, letters of recommendation ultimately granting only ten students acceptance. I have learned so much in the limited amount of time of participation.

Upward bound gave me the opportunity to complete Communications 101 at my local community college, receive tutoring in my challenging classes like AP calculus, visit multiple colleges, participate in enrichment classes during the summer such as calculus and physics, receive one-on-one college guidance, attend multiple SAT preparation classes, experience educational overnight trips to visit colleges, and more. These services provided by Upward Bound help me feel immensely prepared for postsecondary education. I was elected as one of three senior leaders of the Upward Bound's senior class, which helped me build leadership skills by: organizing meetings, updating peers, and providing communication between my peers and administrators. Throughout all of these experiences I was able to meet like-minded peers and learn so much about myself.

Not only did Upward Bound help me to excel academically, but also socially; through this program I have been able to experience various cultures and learn how to effectively communicate with people from unique backgrounds, a skill I will carry with me for life. Through discussions and interactive classes I have been exposed to different cultures contributing to my gain of cultural competence, especially regarding Latino cultures. This will benefit me greatly in the future considering I want pursue a career in the medical field and I want to be able to relate to all of my future patients no matter their ethnicity or culture.

Participation in Upward Bound motivates me to reach my full potential and gives me confidence that I will exceed in my college journey.

Case #6: Educational Opportunity

Is this a missed opportunity or value-added response?

Value-added

- Addresses the question and answers it in detail
- Demonstrates growth both academically and socially
- Clear, concise and genuine
- Draws parallels to their intended career



Case #3: Educational Opportunity

Entering my freshman year, I took part in one of history's most epic boxing matches. In my corner was an eighth grader who thought she knew everything, especially what was best for herself. In the other corner? Her parents, who actually knew what was best for her. The battle? Whether I should participate in my school's International Baccalaureate program, built on "unique academic rigour and emphasis on students' personal development". I strongly opposed it, my parents enthusiastically supported it. "DING!" The first round began. I threw my first punch. "Everyone says I'll have no life! I won't have time for any extracurriculars!" My parents attempted to dodge: "You just need effective time management!" But my jab still connected; I claimed the first round. I launched the second round with an uppercut. "Everyone hates IB; they wish they never did it!" But this time my parents quickly deflected and fiercely counterattacked. "Don't compare yourself to everyone else! You've always been different and you love a challenge." They were right, I was extremely competitive and thrived on challenging myself. They clearly took round two. Round 3 quickly approached; I could feel myself losing strength. This time my parents struck first. "IB is a great way to make close friends!" Right hook. "IB will give you an international viewpoint!" Left hook. "IB WILL PREPARE YOU FOR COLLEGE!" Knockout. And the best decision I could've made. While IB was challenging enough (featuring an entire schedule of honors classes), we also had to complete 75 CAS (Creativity, Activity, Service) hours each year, an Internal Assessment for every class, an extended essay (a 4,000-word, collegiate graduate-level research project) and special IB exams for each subject. By my senior year, only 40 hard-working students, we forged a family with an unbreakable bond. We all had to do those exhausting tasks, we struggled and pushed through them all together. That, was the beauty of the IB program.

Case #3: Educational Opportunity

Is this a missed opportunity or value-added response?

Missed Opportunity

- Too much dialogue
- We do not need to be in the moment with the student
- Does not provide enough detail in the results of their educational opportunity

There is
no “one
size fits
all” for
every
college

University of California campuses want you to answer questions about yourself. They do not want an “essay.” Don’t consider it a “piece of writing.”

However, every college/college system is different so the type of essay another college wants might be very different from what UC wants.

Ask yourself: what is this other college seeking? Creative writing? A unique story? Diversity on campus? Spiritual faith? Unique talent? Competitiveness?

Other
Universities

Common Application

- Can be found at www.commonapp.org
- Hundreds of **private universities** use the common application.
- For the essay portion, seven prompts are given. Students may choose any **one** prompt.
- Response should be 250-650 words
- Common App allows you to upload your essay from Google Drive
- Page 3 of your handout

Common Application 2019 Essay Prompts

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?
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.

Common Application 2019 Essay Prompts

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

How are Common App Essays different from UC PIQs?

- Common App is an ESSAY.
- *UC PIQs: answering questions.*
- Common App responses can be creative writing.
- *UC PIQs should not “set the scene”, use flowery language, include dialogue, etc.*
- Common App: you only submit ONE essay (250-650 words.)
- *UC PIQs: you submit 4 short responses (350 words each.)*

Examples of scholarship application prompts

- Briefly describe your long- and short-term **goals**.
- How will your **study** of _____ contribute to your immediate or long-range **career** plans?
- Why do you want to be a _____?
- Explain the importance of (**your major**) in today's society.
- Why are you a good candidate to receive this award? How are your **values** aligned with the values of (**the organization granting the scholarship**)?
- If you had the authority to change your school in a positive way, **what specific changes would you make** and why?
- Describe how you have demonstrated **leadership** ability both in and out of school.
- From a **financial** standpoint, what impact would this scholarship have on your education?

For Future Questions:

- Karla Whitaker

kkwhitaker@ucsd.edu

Sharing via Google?

swagsandiego@gmail.com