Many scholarship applications ask for a **personal statement**. Here are some **common essay prompts** to get you started. The first 5 are the Common Application essay prompt choices, which are designed to encourage reflection and introspection. The Common Ap length limit is 650 words.

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. (growing up in an interesting place, dealing with an unusual family situation, a passion you have)
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? (your ability to learn from failure shows grit)
3. \*Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea.  What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again? (the answer need not be yes, gives a window to your personality)
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. (could be a future problem)
5. \*Also the Fall CWA prompt: Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family. (remember one does not become an adult overnight, maturity comes over a long train of events and accomplishments/failures, but this prompt is good if you have a particular event to highlight. Avoid the “hero” essay about the season-winning touchdown or brilliant performance in the school play).
6. Leadership/Group contributions: Describe examples of your leadership experience in which you have significantly influenced others, helped resolve disputes, or contributed to group efforts over time. Consider responsibilities to initiatives taken in or out of school.
7. Knowledge in a field/creativity: Describe any of your special interests and how you have developed knowledge in these areas. Give examples of your creativity: the ability to see alternatives; take diverse perspectives; come up with many, varied, or original ideas; or willingness to try new things.
8. Community service: Explain what you have done to make your community a better place to live. Give examples of specific projects in which you have been involved over time.
9. Handling systemic challenges: Describe your experience facing or witnessing discrimination. Tell us how you responded and what you learned from those experiences and how they have prepared you to contribute to the OSU community.
10. Goals/task commitment: Articulate the goals you have established for yourself and your efforts to accomplish these. Give at least one specific example that demonstrates your work ethic/diligence.

### Prompt #1 Handiwork

I made slipcovers for my doll house furniture when I was ten.

I had a nice matching set for the living room—a sofa, an arm chair, and an ottoman—all in a gray and pink floral pattern. I didn’t dislike the furniture, but on a rainy Saturday, I decided it was time to switch things up a little bit, so I dug out some scrap material—navy blue—along with some thread, a needle, and a pair of scissors from my mother’s sewing desk. A few days later, my doll house family had a nice, newly reupholstered living room set.

I’ve always been a crafter. From the early days of Kindergarten macaroni ornaments, to making my own prom dress last year, I’ve had a knack for creating things. For drafting sketches, drawing plans, making calculations, gathering supplies, adding finishing touches. There is something so satisfying about holding something you, and you alone, have made—something that was just an image in your mind until you set about to bring it into existence, to create something new, something different. I’m sure there are hundreds of doll furniture sets out there in that same gray and pink, but there is only one with fitted (albeit with sloppy stitching) navy blue covers. There’s a sense of pride there, however small.

I’ve been lucky to have the time, the energy, and the resources to be artistic, to craft things. My family has always encouraged my efforts whether I be sewing a Christmas gift or building a bookcase. As my projects have evolved, I’ve come to realize that making things, useful or otherwise, is very much an important part of who I am.

It allows me to make use of my imagination, creativity, logic, and technical skills.

And it’s not just about making something for the sake of making something. I feel a connection to my mother’s family, from a rural village in Sweden, when I make candles. I feel a connection to my grandmother, who passed away last year, when I use the thimble she gave me when I was thirteen. I feel resourceful when I use leftover wood scraps from our new barn to make coasters for the coffee table. Crafting for me is not just a hobby, not something I do when I’m bored. It’s a way to use my environment, to discover tools, and shortcuts, and new ways of looking at things. It’s a chance for me to use my head and my hands to make something pretty, or practical, or fun.

I don’t plan on majoring in art, architecture, design, or anything remotely craft-based. I don’t want it to be my career. I think a part of me is worried that I’ll lose my love of making things if there’s homework involved, or if I have to rely on it for a paycheck. I want it to stay a pastime, to stay a way for me to relax, enjoy myself, and cultivate a sense of independence. I’ll never stop being a crafty person—I’ll always have a box of colored pencils, or a sewing kit, or a cordless drill on hand. I don’t know where I’ll be in twenty years, or even ten. But I know wherever I am, whatever I’m doing, I will be the person I am because of that little girl, patiently sewing together tiny pieces of fabric on her bedroom floor: creating something great, something new, something entirely her own

**Prompt 2- Striking Out**

I've played baseball ever since I could remember, but somehow, at fourteen, I still wasn't very good at it.

You'd think that ten years of summer leagues and two older brothers who'd been the stars of their teams would have rubbed off on me, but you'd be wrong. I mean, I wasn't completely hopeless. I was pretty fast, and I could hit my oldest brother's fastball maybe three or four times out of ten, but I wasn't about to be scouted for college teams.

My team that summer, the Bengals, wasn't anything special, either. We had one or two pretty talented guys, but most, like me, were just barely what you could call decent. But somehow we'd almost scraped through the first round of playoffs, with only one game standing between us and semifinals. Predictably, the game had come down to the last inning, the Bengals had two outs and players on second and third base, and it was my turn at bat. It was like one of those moments you see in movies. The scrawny kid who no one really believed in hits a miraculous home run, winning the big game for his underdog team and becoming a local legend. Except my life wasn't The Sandlot, and any hopes my teammates or coach might've had for a last-minute rally to victory were crushed with my third swing-and-miss when the umpire sent me back to the dugout with a "strike three - you're out!"

I was inconsolably angry with myself. I spent the entire car ride home tuning out my parents' words of consolation, replaying my strike-out over and over in my head. For the next few days I was miserable thinking about how, if it hadn't been for me, the Bengals might have been on their way to a league victory, and nothing anyone said could convince me that the loss wasn't on my shoulders.

About a week later, some of my friends from the team got together at the park to hang out. When I arrived, I was a little surprised that no one seemed to be mad at me - after all, I'd lost us the game, and they had to be disappointed about not making it to the semifinals. It wasn't until we split into teams for an impromptu pickup game that I started to realize why no one was upset. Maybe it was the excitement of reaching the playoffs or the pressure of living up to my brothers' examples, but sometime during that game, I'd lost sight of why most of us played summer league baseball. It wasn't to win the championship, as cool as that would have been. It was because we all loved to play. I didn't need a trophy or a Hollywood come-from-behind win to have fun playing baseball with my friends, but maybe I needed to strike out to remember that.

### Prompt 3 - Gym Class Hero

I’m not really an athlete. I’m all for a rousing game of badminton or tennis, and I enjoy cross-country skiing and hiking, but I enjoy these activities as recreation.

I don’t find enjoyment in testing my physical limits to the point of pain. I’m not competitive by nature; I rarely challenge others, or find myself face-to-face with an opponent. Except, to my surprise, if that competitor, that challenger, is simply myself. “Ok, I need some folks to run a mile,” Mr. Fox, the PE Teacher, bellowed over the 40-odd preteens loitering around the playing fields behind Lafayette Middle School.

We were working through a unit on track and field events. Up to this point, I had managed to avoid participation. “It’s four times around the track. Any takers?” A couple people raised their hands and began assembling at the make-shift starting line. “Well, let’s get a few more out there,” he continued. Looking over the rest of us, he made a quick assessment and called out, “Johnson. Patterson. VanHouten. And, uh, Baxter.” I froze. Were there any other Baxters in my class? No. Only me. And, to my dismay, I heard myself saying “Ok!” as I made my way to the track, my heart already pounding, my stomach in knots, with zero confidence in myself. I couldn’t do this. Where did my doubt come from? No one ever said to me, “Oh, you can’t run a mile.” I don’t even remember any askance looks, any raised eyebrows implying I was out of my depth.

Middle-schoolers can be a cruel bunch, but not that day. There was just that voice in my head, as clear as a bell: “You’ll never be able to run a mile. You can’t even climb stairs without getting winded. It’s going to hurt. You’ll probably pass out. You could never run a mile.” A whole mile? That voice was right. It was, in my mind, impossibly long. What was I going to do?

I ran a mile. There was nothing else to do; I didn’t have time to question it, or come up with an excuse. Sometimes challenging a belief is as easy as just doing something. It wasn’t a conscious “I’m going to challenge this doubt and insecurity I have.” I just started running. Four laps around the track—it took me thirteen minutes. Which, as I research it now, is not particularly impressive. But at the time, I was pretty proud. For someone who never ran, I was just happy I finished. I didn’t feel great; my legs were shaky and there was something rattling around in my chest, but I had proven myself wrong. I could run a mile. Of course, I ended up throwing up about five minutes later. Even if I had new-found confidence and a sense of accomplishment, my body wasn’t quite ready for it yet.

I’m sure there’s some lesson to be learned there—something about not pushing ourselves too far, too fast. About knowing and assessing our limitations. But that’s not the important moral of the story. I discovered I wasn’t always right. I learned that I was too critical of myself, too cruel, too unforgiving. Yes, I’m not going to the Olympics anytime soon. Yes, I’m not going to set any records for track. But—once I stopped telling myself no, and just got on with the task at hand, I surprised myself. And that’s something I’m carrying with me into my future: the ability to shut off those doubting voices, and sometimes just going for it. I may surprise myself by discovering I can do much more than I thought possible.

### Prompt 4 - Grandpa's Rubik's Cube

My grandfather was a puzzle junkie. All kinds of puzzles—jigsaw, Sudoku, crossword, riddles, logic puzzles, word jumbles, those small twisted pieces of metal that you try and separate. He’d always say he was “trying to stay sharp,” and these puzzles occupied a lot of his time, especially after he retired. And for him, it often turned into a group activity; my brothers and I would help him sort out the edge pieces for his jigsaws, or flip through the heavy dictionary he kept in his office, looking for synonyms for “bastion”. After he passed away, we were sorting through his possessions—pile to keep, pile to donate, pile to sell—and found a box in an upstairs closet with nothing in it save an assortment of Rubik’s Cubes.

Some of the cubes were solved (or had never been started), while some of them were mid-solve. Large ones, small ones, 3x3s, 4x4s, and even a 6x6. I never saw my grandfather working on one of them, but I wasn’t surprised to find them; puzzles were his life. Before we donated the cubes to the thrift store, I took one; grandpa had managed to get one side—yellow—completed, and I wanted to finish it for him.

I’ve never had the knack he had for solving puzzles. It wasn’t just games he could solve; he worked as a plumber for forty years, and was good at getting to the bottom of all sorts of problems at work. His workshop was full of projects he had started fixing, from broken radios and clocks to cracked picture frames and lamps with faulty wiring.

He liked investigating these things, discovering how they worked, so he could fix them in his own way. That’s not something I inherited. I keep every owner’s manual, every installation and user guide; I can’t look at something and know how it works, how to fix it, how to rig up a solution.

But I’m determined to solve this Rubik’s cube. I have no idea how long that will take, or how I’ll do it. I know there are books and websites dedicated to the math behind it, to coming up with a logical solution. But I’m not going to read any of their advice. I’ll give it a shot, working slowly, with plenty of mistakes (and probably some frustration). And, as I’m trying to solve it, I’ll be sharing a connection with my grandfather. It’s a small and simple way of remembering him, and honoring one of his favorite pastimes.

I don’t think I’m going to take up puzzling as seriously as he did—although, down the road, who knows? Maybe it’s in my genes after all. But this one puzzle, this one problem to solve, is my way of keeping him with me. It’s something I can take to college, to my first apartment, to pretty much any place I could go. And, with time, I hope it will help me understand more about my grandfather as a person. By taking up this puzzle, maybe I’ll learn to see the world the way he did—how anything can be worked through, can be improved. He was the most stubborn, tenacious, dedicated person I’ve ever known; if being able to eventually solve this Rubik’s cube gives me a quarter of his resolve and patience, I’ll be happy. I may not be able to solve it. I may continue to twist those plastic squares for years without getting any closer to a solution. Even if I can’t solve it, if I just don’t have it in me, I will have tried. And for that, I think my grandfather would be very proud.

Prompt 5 - **Buck Up**

Susan Lewis is a woman that very few people would consider a role model for anything. A fifty-something high-school dropout, she has little more to her name than a beat-up truck, a Jack Russell Terrier and a ragtag herd of aging and/or neurotic horses with which she's run a largely unsuccessful riding lesson program for twenty years with no business plan to speak of and little hope of ever turning a profit.

She curses like a sailor, is perpetually un-punctual, and has an erratic and often terrifying temper.

I've taken weekly riding lessons with Sue since middle school, often against my own better judgment. Because for all her seemingly unredeemable qualities, she inspires me - not necessarily as a person I'd strive to emulate, but simply for her unwavering perseverance. In the five years I've known her, I've never once seen her give up on anything. She would sooner go hungry (and sometimes does) than give up on her horses and her business. She sticks to her guns on every issue, from political views to hay prices to her (frankly terrible) business model. Sue has never once given up on herself or her horses or her business, and she never gives up on her students.

My dad lost his job not long after I started high school, and horseback riding quickly became a luxury we couldn't afford. So I called Sue to tell her that I wouldn't be riding for a while, at least until my father was back on his feet.

I hadn't expected an outpouring of sympathy (Sue, as you may have guessed, isn't an overwhelmingly sympathetic person), but I certainly wasn't expecting her to yell at me, either.

Which was exactly what happened. She told me in no uncertain terms that I was ridiculous for thinking that money should stop me from doing something I loved, and she would see me bright and early Saturday morning regardless, and if she had to drive me to the barn herself that she would, and I'd better be wearing a good pair of boots because I'd be working off my lessons until further notice.

Her refusal to give up on me said more than I could ever put into words. It would have been easy for her to just let me leave. But Sue was never a person to take the easy way out, and she showed me how to do the same. I worked harder in Sue's barn that year than I'd ever worked before, earning every minute of my riding time, and I'd never felt more proud of myself. In her own stubborn way, Sue had shared with me an invaluable lesson in perseverance. She may not be much of a role model in any other respect, but Susan Lewis does not give up, and I strive every day to live by her example.

**A critique of “Buck Up”**

**The Title** We'll begin with the first thing any reader will notice: the title. If you think titles don't matter, think again. A [good title](http://collegeapps.about.com/od/essays/a/college-application-essay-titles.htm) can immediately pique your readers' curiosity and grab their attention. The title frames and focuses the words that follow. A missing title is a lost opportunity and a weak title is an immediate handicap. Unfortunately, coming up with a good title can be remarkably difficulty.

Jill's title "Buck Up" is good in some ways. For one, it's playful as Jill uses the phrase "buck up" in the idiomatic sense of showing some courage or backbone, but the word "buck" also relates to a bucking horse trying to throw its rider. Where the title falls a little short is with its clarity. We really don't know what the essay is about based on the title, and we can appreciate the title only after we have read the essay.

**The Topic**. I love the focus of Jill's essay. So many essays on an influential person have a tone of hero worship as the writer tells us how wonderful Mom or Dad or dead Grandma or Coach or Uncle Harvey is.

Jill, however, focuses on someone who in many ways isn't even likable. Susan Lewis is unreliable, rude, poorly educated, and terrible at running a business. She is, as Jill points out, an unlikely person to choose for an essay on an influential person.

By focusing on Susan Lewis, Jill has accomplished two important things: she has crafted an essay that isn't typical, and she has shown us that she can recognize the positive in a person who has a lot of negatives going for her. Put into other words, Jill has shown that she is a creative and open-minded thinker, two qualities that will impress the college admissions folks.

Finally, Jill successfully does all that the prompt asks -- she doesn't just describe the influential person, but also explains the influence. We learn that through Susan Lewis's influence, Jill has grown to appreciate hard work and perseverance.

**The Tone**. Striking the right tone can be a big challenge in an essay like Jill's. Jill has focused on a rather ridiculous woman, so it would be easy to come across as mocking or condescending. Indeed, Jill is quick to point out many of Susan Lewis's shortcomings. The essay's light and playful tone, however, comes across as loving and appreciative, not deprecating. Jill is clearly a skillful writer, and she has managed to provide just the right balance of levity and seriousness.

**The Writing**. "Buck Up" is not a perfect essay, but the flaws are few. I'd get rid of a couple of the cliché or tired phrases such as "sticks to her guns" and "back on his feet." The phrase "curses like a sailor" is also a bit overused, but I thought it added a colorful touch to the description of Sue. In the first sentence of the essay, "that" should really be "who" since the relative pronoun refers to a person, and in the second paragraph, I find the logic of "because" in the second sentence confusing. These are all small issues, but the essay, like any essay, does have room for improvement.

In general, however, Jill has proven herself a talented writer. From the very first paragraph, the essay has a pleasing variety of sentence types ranging from short and punchy to long and complex. The language is playful and engaging, and Jill has done an admirable job painting a rich portrait of Susan Lewis in a few short paragraphs. Every sentence and paragraph adds important details to the essay, and the reader never gets the sense that Jill is wasting space with a bunch of unnecessary fluff. This is important, for with the 650-word limit on Common Application essays, there's no room for wasted words. At 478 words, Jill is safely within the length limit.

What I most admire about the writing is that Jill's personality comes through. We get a sense of her humor, her power of observation, and her generosity of spirit. A lot of applicants feel like they need to brag about their accomplishments in the essay, yet Jill shows how those accomplishments can be conveyed in a pleasingly understated way.

**Final Thoughts** It's always important to keep in mind why colleges ask applicants to write essays. On a simple level, they want to make sure you can write well, something that Jill has demonstrated effectively with "Buck Up." But more significantly, the admissions folks want to get to know the students they are considering for admission. Test scores and grades don't tell a college what type of person you are other than one who works hard and tests well. What's your personality like? What do you truly care about? How do you communicate your ideas to others? And the big one--Are you the type of person we want to invite to become part of our campus community? The personal essay (along with the [interview](http://collegeapps.about.com/od/theartofgettingaccepted/tp/college-interview-questions.htm) and [letters or recommendation](http://collegeapps.about.com/od/theartofgettingaccepted/tp/Letters-of-Recommendation.htm)) is one of the few pieces of the application that helps the admissions folks get to know the person behind the grades and test scores.

Jill's essay, whether deliberately or not, answers these questions in ways that work in her favor. She shows that she is observant, caring, and funny. She demonstrates self-awareness as she narrates the ways in which she has grown as a person. She shows that she is generous and finds positive qualities in people who have a lot of negatives. And she reveals that she gets pleasure out of overcoming challenges and working hard to achieve her goals. In short, she comes across as the type of person who would enrich a campus community.