

# Personal/Creative Essay Assignment – Quarter 2

**Options (choose ONE):** 1) 5 minute satire script (see old/past handout) 2) Common App / Florida state university / college essay prompt / Medallions of Excellence Prompt 3) Photograph Essay 4) Sense of Place Essay

**Length: 450-750 words [Include your word count] (typed, double-spaced, standard margin, standard font; submitted to Turnitin.com; class 21727047 & pass/key = rohol).**

**General Directions:** Have fun (or not) with this one. After making your decision on which type of essay to embark upon, make a decision on the other basic aspects of writing: your choice of tone; this would clearly be tied to your narrative voice (serious, reflective/sentimental, sarcastic/bitter, humorous, etc.). Also, your selection of tone / “voice” should be appropriate for whatever you intend for the desired effect of the essay (the reader weeping for the state of mankind, the reader ready to go out and take on the world, the reader heartbroken over your loss/gain/new awareness/discovery about [fill in the blanks]). Your usage of other rhetorical strategies, literary devices, use of the rhetorical triangle, etc should organically/logically branch out from your initial decisions about the essay. 1) Write vividly; use small details; 2) Write towards your passion; 3) Connect with your actual audience (be distinctive/memorable/honest); 4) Be willing to take a chance

*I will be grading the paper holistically, depending on your topic choice I will be considering some of the following questions:*

Is there a clear sense of story (personal narrative)? & Is the paper organized in a sensible or purposeful manner?

Is the writer’s voice authentic and/or natural? Does the use of autobiographical detail provide evidence of reflection and insight?

Is the paper interesting and/or intriguing? Are the events, people, and places vividly and realistically portrayed through use of sensory details?

Are there any problems with language, tone, or writing technique/style that distract the reader? Is it well-written with a variety of sentence structure and length as well as precise and rich language?

Is this the kind of paper the student would be proud of?

This 100 pt grade should help you as long as it is effortful, honest, moving/powerful and effective in use of rhetorical tools. If you submit this essay in Q2 it will be graded or used as a grade in Q2 otherwise it is due January 17 as a Q3 grade.

## OPTION 2: College essay

**Prompts from the Common Application** – (2019-2020 prompts are the same as 2018-2019); PLEASE reCHECK

<http://www.commonapp.org> (INSTRUCTIONS: 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. The application won’t accept a response shorter than 250 words.

- a. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, please share your story.
- b. 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?
- c. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
- d. 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 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.
- e. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
- f. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging 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?
- g. 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.



## WRITING THE ESSAY:

Sound Advice From An Expert

by: Parke Muth

*Senior Assistant Dean and Director of International Admission  
University of Virginia*

*(From U.S. News and World Report)*

Fast Food. That's what I think of when I try to draw an analogy with the process of reading application essays.

The bad. Ninety percent of the applications I read contain what I call McEssays - usually five-paragraph essays that consist primarily of abstractions and unsupported generalization. They are technically correct in that they are organized and have the correct sentence structure and spelling, but they are boring. Sort of like a Big Mac. I have nothing against Big Macs, but the one I eat in Charlottesville is not going to be fundamentally different from the one I eat in Paris, Peoria or Palm Springs. I am not going to rage about the quality of a particular Big Mac. The same can be said about the generic essay. If an essay starts out: "I have been a member of the band and it has taught me leadership, perseverance and hard work," I can almost recite the rest of the essay without reading it. Each of the three middle paragraphs gives a bit of support to an abstraction, and the final paragraph restates what has already been said. A McEssay is not wrong, but it is not going to be a positive factor in the admission decision. It will not allow a student to stand out.

A student who uses vague abstractions poured into a preset form will end up being interpreted as a vague series of abstractions. A student who uses cliché becomes, in effect, a cliché. If we are what we eat, we are also what we write.

Not only does a preset form lead to a generic essay, so

does a generic approach to what is perceived as the right topic. Far too many students begin the search of what to write about by asking: What does my college want to hear? The thinking goes something like this: If I can figure out what they are looking for, and if I can make myself look like that, then I'll improve my chances.

Several years ago we asked students to describe an invention or creation from the past that was important to them. Our No.1 response - at least a thousand people - was the Declaration of Independence. This might make some people think that our college bound students are wonderfully patriotic, but given that my institution was founded by Thomas Jefferson, I have a better answer. My guess is that a significant portion of the people who chose the Declaration did so because they thought we would want to hear about how much they admired Thomas Jefferson. While this may be a noble sentiment or, in some cases, a cynical maneuver, it ultimately meant that we had a thousand essays that sounded pretty much alike and therefore did not affect the admission decision. We are not looking for students who all think the same way, believe the same thing, or write the same essay.

Too often, however, students who want to avoid sounding generic with respect to form or content choose exactly the wrong remedy; they think that bigger topics - or bigger words - are better. But it is almost impossible, in 500 words, to write well about vast topics such as the death of a loved one (see excerpt: "the bad"). I am not advocating longer essays (just remember how many applications admissions officers need to read); I am advocating essays with a sharp focus that allows for detail. Detail is what differentiates one essay from another, one applicant from another.

Instead of detail, however, students try to impress us with big words. In trying to make a topic sound intellectual, students resort to the thesaurus and, as a result, end up sounding pretentious or at least insecure about using the voice they would use to describe an event to a friend. The student assumes that these "impressive" words intensify the experience for a reader rather than diminish it. Before students send off their essay, they should always read it aloud to someone who knows them well; let that person decide if an individual's voice comes through.

The good. A good essay is not good because of the topic but because of the voice. A good writer can make any topic interesting, and a weak writer can make even the most dramatic topic a bore.

Students need only to recall the difference between two simple concepts - showing and telling. A good essay always shows; a weak essay always tells. By showing, a writer appeals to all of the senses, not just the visual. To show means to provide a feast for the eyes, ears and, depending on the essay, the mouth, nose or skin. But rather than telling a reader what show is, it is much easier to show what showing is.

The student whose essay appears below, an example of "the good," has undertaken the task of describing - that is, of showing, in detail - the deterioration of her father as he gets treated for cancer. I do not know of a single member of our staff who was not deeply affected by this essay, the whole of which is as well done as the excerpt. What is impressive about the essay is the willingness of the writer to carefully notice everything that is happening. She opens with a sound, that coughing, and then creates a visual scene that we can see clearly. I said before that writing about death and sickness is perhaps one of the most difficult topics to tackle in a college essay, but here we have an example of why this topic can demonstrate not only writing ability but the courage to face a terrible situation head-on with intellect and power. Compare this with the other essay about death. There, even though the writer was saturated with emotions, he was merely telling us, in abstract terms, what he felt.

A writer who shows respects the intelligence of the reader; a writer who tells focuses on the ideas, or the perceived ideas, behind the details. He or she is more concerned about demonstrating the ability to be abstract than the ability to be precise. In a short, personal essay, precision is power.

The risky. Any student who has already learned the basics of showing should think about taking a risk on the college essay. What kind of risk? Think about starting an essay with: "I sat in the back of the police car." Or, as in the example (below): "The woman wanted breasts." These first sentences use what journalists call a hook. The sentence reaches out from the page and grabs our attention. It creates a bit of controversy and an expectation that the writer might be willing to take academic risks in the classroom. A good hook does not mean that a good essay will follow, but it does mean that a reader will look forward to seeing what will unfold.

A risky essay can border on the offensive. In some cases, as in the excerpt, it is possible that a few readers might write off an applicant based upon questionable taste. That is the danger of taking a risk. People wonder if they will be penalized if they do take a risk in an

application. They want to know, in other words, if there is any risk in taking a risk. Yes, there is. I can say, however, that my experience in the admissions field has led me to conclude the great majority of admissions officers are an open-minded lot and that to err on the side of the baroque might not be as bad as to stay in the comfort of the boring.

The best essays are crafted not from a formula for success but by a voice that is practiced. Those who are willing to take a risk, to focus on that part of the world that matters to them and to show the passion and the practice it takes to write about it well, will help their chances of admission through their essay.

#### Excerpts from essays to U.Va.

*The bad: From an early age, we accept death as the inevitable, but do not comprehend its actual denotation. Death is the impending future that all people must eventually grasp. In my early teens, my grandfather tragically perished. As a youth who did not identify with such a cataclysm I was saturated with various emotions. Initially, I was grieved by the loss of a loved one and could not understand why this calamity had to befall upon my family. I always considered death to have a devastating effect, but was shocked by the emotional strain it places upon an individual.*

*The good: The coughing came first, the hacking in the middle of the night. Then there were the multiple doctor visits, each one the same: the little white rooms with magazines where I tried not to stare at the bald, gaunt woman across from me. One of the white coats finally said something, steadily, forecasting an 80 percent change of rain. The list of second opinions grew too long to count, looking for someone to say the right thing. Finally, there was relief in hearing the name of a kinder killer: lymphoma.*

*The risky: The woman wanted breasts. She had fame waiting on her like a slave, money dripping from her fingertips and men diving into her being. Yet she wanted breasts because the world wanted her to have a bust. She looked at the big black and white glossy of herself arching on a silken carpet and knew that the world would be satisfied with her airbrush deception.*

*This woman is us. My family has been in existence for nearly 20 years now, and we are aging and losing our own breasts and tight face - the giddy happiness of a child's unconditional love for his family, the young family's need for each other. Yet, we are constantly pressured by society's family icons into compromising our change and age instead of accepting it.*

**UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA prompts: Please submit one essay. Remember to keep within the 500-word maximum length. 2019-2020 Essay Topics**

- h. Tell a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it.
- i. Describe a time when you made a meaningful contribution to others in which the greater good was your focus. Discuss the challenges and rewards of making your contribution.
- j. Has there been a time when you've had a long-cherished or accepted belief challenged? How did you respond? How did the challenge affect your beliefs?
- k. What is the hardest part of being a teenager now? What's the best part? What advice would you give a younger sibling or friend (assuming they would listen to you)? - ROHOL SAYS THIS IS A HORRIBLE PROMPT
- l. Submit an essay on a topic of your choice.
- m. 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.
- n. 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?
- o. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
- p. 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.
- q. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
- r. 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?

**s. MEDALLIONS OF EXCELLENCE PROMPT (ask me) – often is “What I Hope to Accomplish In Life”**

- t. Anatole France said, "If 50 million people say a foolish thing, it is still a foolish thing." On what subject do you disagree with most people, and why? (Northwestern)
- u. Defend your least conventional belief. (University of Virginia)
- v. You have just completed your 300-page autobiography. Please submit page 217. (University of Pennsylvania)
- w. Sartre said, "Hell is other people," while Streisand sang, "People who need people are the luckiest people in the world." With whom do you agree? (Amherst)
- x. What have you undertaken or done on your own in the last year or two that has nothing to do with academic work? (Northwestern)
- y. Tell us about the neighborhood that you grew up in and how it helped shape you into the kind of person you are today. (Yale and the University of Chicago)
- z. "Write about a time when life threw you a curve and how you handled it."
- aa. Describe the beginning and development of your faith and its impact on your life. (Wheaton U)
- bb. Nicholas Boileau, in *Satires*, writes, "Honor is like a rugged island without a shore; once you have left it, you cannot return." How does this definition compare to your personal perception of honor? (Wake Forest)
- cc. If you were given the time and resources to develop one particular skill, or talent, or area of expertise, what would you choose to pursue and why? (Princeton)

### **3) PHOTOGRAPH ESSAY**

**Directions:** Quite simply, find a photograph of special meaning to you. THE PHOTOGRAPH (or a copy of it) MUST BE INCLUDED WITH YOUR ESSAY. Using the cliché about pictures and how they are worth 1000 words, tell the story of the picture as you go through as many aspects/details of the picture as possible. See the sample essay below for ideas about how to approach the assignment because the approach to your narrative may be the most significant decision with this option.

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*The following excerpt from a novel focuses on a single photograph of a father and son taken in 1942 by a family friend.*

Even without the shadow that partially obscures the child's face, it would be difficult to read much into its full anonymous curves. The sun is directly overhead, so that the cap's brim shadows most of his face. Only the eyebrows, cheeks, and nose catch the sun directly, making them appear touched with the dead white of clown's paint. This, in turn, may lead us to see more sadness in the eyes than is really there, as though they have been baffled witnesses to some

violent tableau. The chin is tucked downward so that the eyes must glance up to greet the camera, giving to the entire figure a quality of uncertainty, of barely contained fear. Even the timorous lip-trembling half-smile contributes to this effect. But perhaps he is only uncomfortable. The folds in his plaid jacket and trousers suggest they are made of wool, and the shrubbery visible in the photograph suggest midsummer, and with the sun overhead, the wincing look on the child's round face may be the result of coarse wool chafing his skin. At any rate, he seems uncomfortable and shy, with feet pigeon-toed awkwardly together. The single detail that argues against this impression is that he has hooked his thumbs into the pockets of his jacket, and surprisingly long, lean fingers lend the gesture a note of adult confidence, even of swagger. These hands, which will later be much admired, are thus unconsciously arranged in a posture that will become habitual. There is another photograph, taken a quarter century later, in which the hands are identically arranged, thumbs hooked into the pockets of a midnight-blue tuxedo jacket. And yet, taken in its entirety, there is little enough visible in the child's picture to provoke narration. Indeed, the cap, the chubby, boyish face, the sagging jacket, the wrinkled trousers are assembled into an almost anonymous image of a well-fed, modestly well-dressed little boy. Those who knew his son at the same age would have seen an astonishing similarity to the child who poses here, but the son is not born until nearly two decades after this photograph is made.

"Stand just there, by your father," Juanita says. The boy moves stiffly to the left, never taking his eyes from the camera in her hands. "Closer, now." He inches his left foot out, and brings his right up to join it. Then he ducks his head to avoid the stabbing rays of the sun, but still keeps his eyes firmly fixed on the camera, as though it is the only presence here besides himself, its twinkling eye his trusty guardian. Suddenly his slight body stiffens as a large hand is placed firmly between his shoulders. It feels immense, and he thinks it could crush his back as easily as it crumples an empty package of cigarettes. And now his own hands, which had hung loosely at his sides, feel weak and threatened. They will never possess the strength of the densely muscled, tightly tendoned hand that rests sinisterly on his back. He fears that as he grows they will remain weak and small, never capable of seizing with carefully aligned thumbs the leather-wrapped handle of a golf club, of grasping the butts of revolvers, the ivory steering wheel of an automobile, the wooden T of lawnmower handles. Yet he cannot be ashamed of them, for they are sturdy enough, capable of holding open the pages of a book, of guiding pencils and crayons into recognizable approximations of houses and horses and dump trucks. Unsure though he is of their ultimate abilities, the child nonetheless takes premature joy in the work of hands, and cannot be ashamed of his own. Therefore, he brings the slightly forward, hooking his thumbs into his jacket pocket, and lightly curling his fingers down against the plaid of the fabric. The trembling that began in them when the man's large hand was placed between his shoulders is stilled now.

**Another sample, though your approach must be in essay form:**

**Ancestral Photograph**

Jaws puff round and solid as a turnip,  
 Dead eyes are statue's and the upper lip  
 Bullies the heavy mouth down to a droop.  
 A bowler suggests the stage Irishman  
 5 Whose look has two parts scorn, two parts dead pan.  
 His silver watch chain girds him like a hoop.

My father's uncle, from whom he learnt the trade,  
 Long fixed in sepia tints, begins to fade  
 And must come down. Now on the bedroom wall  
 10 There is a faded patch where he had been --  
 As if a bandage had been ripped from skin --  
 Empty plaque to a house's rise and fall.

Twenty years ago I herded cattle  
 Into pens or held them against a wall  
 15 Until my father won at arguing  
 His own price on a crowd of cattlemen  
 Who handled rumps, groped teats, stood, paused and then  
 Bought a round of drinks to clinch the bargain.

Uncle and nephew, fifty years ago,  
 20 Heckled and herded through the fair days too.  
 This barrel of a man penned in the frame:  
 I see him with the jaunty hat pushed back  
 Draw thumbs out of his waistcoat, curtly smack  
 Hands and sell. Father, I've watched you do the same

25 And watched you sadden when the fairs were stopped.  
 No room for dealers if the farmers shopped  
 Like housewives at an auction ring. Your stick  
 Was parked behind the door and stands there still.  
 Closing this chapter of our chronicle

30 I take your uncle's portrait to the attic.

## 4) *A Sense of Place Paper*

There are many issues involved in the intent of this assignment.

First, this topic allows you to explore in a personal way one of at least two possible definitions for your sense of place: a literal one and a figurative one. The literal possibilities would approach the "sense of place" label as a very specific location either geographically or within your own household or personal history. The figurative possibilities would view "sense of place" in a more creative, fluid way as a state of mind, your sense of place in the world, or your purpose in life.

In any case, think of a place to which you have a strong attachment. It can be any place on earth: the neighborhood in which you grew up, a park or parking lot where you hung out, a shopping mall, a pristine mountain top or a popular beach, a favorite hunting or fishing spot, a memorable vacation destination, the state fair, the football stadium where you spent Friday nights, that place near your home where you went to get away from everything and everyone. The possibilities are endless.

The two basic possibilities of a literal and/or a figurative sense of place may intertwine within your essay as well. Either way, it would be a good idea if this is the "place," literally or figuratively, where you discovered who you were/are or where you feel most real or at peace.

This "place" may have changed periodically throughout your lifetime and that change could be included in your response.

As you can tell, this assignment intends to provide a great deal of freedom for you, the writer, as you grapple with this topic. There are clearly no right or wrong answers or any strict directions I can give. In a sense, this paper becomes a personal narrative or reflective essay and a possibility for future college admission essays.

In one other way, this paper allows me, your teacher, to read something that you have written which is outside pure academic study and formal essay writing. This is a way for me to learn something about you which is not found through tests or even class discussion.

### **A Walk on the Rails by Desarae Baker, Simms High School**

The warmth of the sun permeates me as I walk down the worn dirt road. Abandoned buildings slump on their foundations, as if they know they have outlived their usefulness. Fields that once-upon-a-far-away-time yielded lavish crops lie barren, and more than a few people have taken on a defeated look.

The high plains just off the eastern front of the Rocky Mountains is beautiful country but it has never been an easy place for people to establish themselves. When I was younger I saw these monuments of time as a large playground. Down the street from my first home in Vaughn, behind a thick barrage of trees, I found an abandoned trailer and in seconds it became a dark dungeon where a horrible beast might take me, the innocent princess, prisoner.

Today, looking farther down the road, I'm not captivated by thoughts of dragons or dreams of being a princess. The road ends abruptly but I knew it would and I follow the tracks that run beside it. I know the way so well I could reach my destination blindfolded. Like I've done so many times before, I try to balance as I walk on the rails. As I move forward, years fall away like the pebbles thrown to the side by the trembling roar of freighters which frequently pass across this same path.

I hurry down the hill a little recklessly. I run through knee-high weeds down to the bank of the Muddy Creek. The dark-brown water cascades and tumbles off the rocks. I walk along the bank, kicking at tufts of crab grass. It may be the only thing that will grow here now, but I remember hearing somewhere that this whole area was once thick with vegetation. No one would know that now, looking at the noxious weeds and eroding creek bank. The weeds are all I have ever known.

I climb over rocks to reach the cement slab just beneath the bridge. Years ago, taking shelter under the bridge, a small, wet girl hid from the rain. It didn't matter that the rushing water competed wildly with the thunder she hid from, the bridge was still her only refuge. Eventually, the grey drizzle began to wane. She knew Mommy would be mad, but she really tried not to get dirty. "It's not my fault it rained, it was the clouds' fault," she said to herself, rehearsing. But even as she thought of ways to get out of trouble, she began considering the games she might as well play since she was already wet.

Ten years ago, I played often on the tracks of the Muddy Creek railroad bridge. Despite the warnings of my worried mother, it was a perfect place to explore the jungles of Africa or the mysteries of outer space. Here the belief that pennies could derail a train kept my piggy bank full. I usually managed to get soggy clothes to the washer before my mom saw them, although a carelessly tossed shirt occasionally got me into trouble. Still, going to the bridge was worth it.

A lamenting bird cries overhead, and I come back to the reality of the cold hard concrete I'm sitting on. The structure has withstood the mighty fray with time, so far. From its unstable beginnings, to the present, it has endured and remained firm. At first the creek was only a minor inconvenience in the great rail race. Bigger problems lurked, so the planners paid little attention to engineering the bridge. But although workers complied with orders of construction at the beginning of each new day, the land had made its own demands. Unseen beneath the the valley grasses a layer of mud offered too little support for the bridge to stand.

The original piling plan of fourteen feet had to be doubled just to find ground solid enough to hold the structure. When it was finally completed the bridge fulfilled its many purposes. The train stopped in every town to pick up mail, milk, and people. All three shared a drafty and often cold boxcar on the swaying journey down the valley. Bill Norris, son of homesteaders, remembers waiting with his father at the station in Fort Shaw for the day's mail.

The train wove its presence into the memories of all the citizens of the valley. These memories are foundations upon which lives are built. Although an old bridge won't much affect the future, it has touched many pasts.

Time, which used to march slowly in single-file as if on parade, lately seems to slip through open fingers like sand. With each falling grain a person has changed, a city grew, or worse, a town died. Not much has stayed constant. Still, some things, like this old railroad bridge, remain to remind us of the world that once was. This bridge is but a small piece of the jigsaw puzzle known as Sun River Valley. Without any of these small pieces, who would ever put the picture together again?

Most of the important landmarks and historical places in the Sun River Valley are dilapidated, run down, or gone. Extinct from the earth and no longer a part of the generational hand-down of memories, these things often die with the people who remember them. Efforts to keep the monuments alive now exist, but I only wish they would have been started long before now.

Personal experience is the soul of a town. Such places in our tiny communities should be preserved and taken seriously. I see the gazebo condemned and broken. Once it was the intersection of hundreds of lives, a combination fast food drive-in and gas station. I wonder how many years before it is carted off to the dump with no more regard than for any piece trash we discard every day. At one time it was the focal point of activity and many people have memories of what happened there. It is part of their knowledge of each other, but now it's a splintered old building on the side of the highway, reduced to a pile of rotting lumber and rusted metal.