

UC Essay

What do you want UC to know about you? Here's your chance to tell us in your own words.

Directions

- You will have 8 questions to choose from. You must respond to only 4 of the 8 questions.
- Each response is limited to a maximum of 350 words.
- Which questions you choose to answer is entirely up to you: But you should select questions that are most relevant to your experience and that best reflect your individual circumstances.

Keep in mind

- All questions are equal: All are given equal consideration in the application review process, which means there is no advantage or disadvantage to choosing certain questions over others.
- There is no right or wrong way to answer these questions: It's about getting to know your personality, background, interests and achievements in your own unique voice.

Questions & guidance

Remember, the personal questions are just that — personal. Which means you should use our guidance for each question just as a suggestion in case you need help. The important thing is expressing who are you, what matters to you and what you want to share with UC.

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.

Things to consider: A leadership role can mean more than just a title. It can mean being a mentor to others, acting as the person in charge of a specific task, or a taking lead role in organizing an event or project. Think about your accomplishments and what you learned from the experience. What were your responsibilities?

Did you lead a team? How did your experience change your perspective on leading others? Did you help to resolve an important dispute at your school, church in your community or an organization? And your leadership role doesn't necessarily have to be limited to school activities. For example, do you help out or take care of your family?

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.

Things to consider: What does creativity mean to you? Do you have a creative skill that is important to you? What have you been able to do with that skill? If you used creativity to solve a problem, what was your solution? What are the steps you took to solve the problem? How does your creativity influence your decisions inside or outside the classroom? Does your creativity relate to your major or a future career?

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

Things to consider: If there's a talent or skill that you're proud of, this is the time to share it. You don't necessarily have to be recognized or have received awards for your talent (although if you did and you want to talk about, feel free to do so). Why is this talent or skill meaningful to you? Does the talent come naturally or have you worked hard to develop this skill or talent? Does your talent or skill allow you opportunities in or outside the classroom? If so, what are they and how do they fit into your schedule?

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

Things to consider: An educational opportunity can be anything that has added value to your educational experience and better prepared you for college. For example, participation in an honors or academic enrichment program, or enrollment in an academy that's geared toward an occupation or a major, or taking advanced courses that interest you — just to name a few. If you choose to write about educational barriers you've faced, how did you overcome or strive to overcome them? What personal characteristics or skills did you call on to overcome this challenge? How did overcoming this barrier help shape who are you today?

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?

Things to consider: A challenge could be personal, or something you have faced in your community or school. Why was the challenge significant to you? This is a good opportunity to talk about any obstacles you've faced and what you've learned from the experience. Did you have support from someone else or did you handle it alone?

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 has my life changed at home, at my school, with my friends, or with my family?"

6. Describe your favorite academic subject and explain how it has influenced you.

Things to consider: Discuss how your interest in the subject developed and describe any experience you have had inside and outside the classroom — such as volunteer work, summer programs, participation in student organizations and/or activities — and what you have gained from your involvement.

Has your interest in the subject influenced you in choosing a major and/or career? Have you been able to pursue coursework at a higher level in this subject (honors, AP, IB, college or university work)?

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

Things to consider: Think of community as a term that can encompass a group, team or a place — like your high school, hometown, or home. You can define community as you see fit, just make sure you talk about your role in that community. Was there a problem that you wanted to fix in your community?

Why were you inspired to act? What did you learn from your effort? How did your actions benefit others, the wider community or both? Did you work alone or with others to initiate change in your community?

8. What is the one thing that you think sets you apart from other candidates applying to the University of California?

Things to consider: Don't be afraid to brag a little. Even if you don't think you're unique, you are — remember, there's only one of you in the world. From your point of view, what do you feel makes you belong on one of UC's campuses? When looking at your life, what does a stranger need to understand in order to know you?

What have you not shared with us that will highlight a skill, talent, challenge, or opportunity that you think will help us know you better? We're not necessarily looking for what makes you unique compared to others, but what makes you, YOU.

The University of California (UC) system has announced sweeping changes to the essay portion of its admission applications.

Gone are the traditional two personal statement prompts. In their place are a set of short-answer questions that applicants can choose from.

In the new application, prospective students will be given eight questions related to different aspects of applicants' personal qualities, life experiences, and educational backgrounds. Exactly four of the prompts must be completed, each with a response of up to 350 words.

In announcing the new changes for undergraduate applicants, UC emphasized that replacing the traditional personal statement with the new "personal insight questions" would add flexibility to the application and let applicants write more personally meaningful and revealing essays.

Specifically, because they will now choose which questions to answer from a larger pool of possibilities, applicants can opt to address the topics that are most personally relevant. Because there are more questions to answer (in less detail), applicants also have a chance to cover a wider range of topics.

For UC, the desire to bring out more personal responses on topics applicants have chosen to write about was a major motivation for the change. According to the school system's [Personal Insight Questions FAQ](#), "we felt it critical to ensure that the written responses received from our applicants truly provided the type of reflective and personal insights we value so greatly."

Of course, there's another side to the changes that may leave some applicants less than thrilled: because the questions are no longer generic, applicants also won't be able to adapt generic college admissions essays to their UC applications. Rather, they will have to spend more time crafting essays tailored to UC's unique format. Per the FAQ, it is intentional that the new format "reduces the chances that students will take a generic essay that they've created for other colleges or class assignments and simply transpose it to the UC application."

All questions will be weighed equally during the application process – there will be no inherent advantage to answering any particular question over any other question. Therefore, the best questions to answer are simply the ones that speak most to a given applicant's situation.

The eight [personal insight questions](#) cover an array of topics:

- Leadership
- Creativity

- Talents and skills
- Taking advantage of educational opportunities
- Overcoming challenges
- Favorite academic subject
- Community involvement
- Unique qualities

Transfer applicants will answer the same set of questions, but with a slight twist: one of the questions is required for transfer students: *“Please describe how you have prepared for your intended major, including your readiness to succeed in your upper-division courses once you enroll at the university.”*

Applicants can highlight their strengths by strategically choosing topics from the broader set of questions. Working on the application, an important decision to make will be which four questions best round out your application and emphasize both the breadth and depth of your experience.

Beyond the fact that choosing which questions to answer now becomes part of the application process, UC hasn’t yet released much advice to students on how the essays they write should take into account these changes. The school system has said that the new format will necessitate a slightly different approach, and they plan to release presentations, webinars, and other materials on this topic over the course of the spring.

One thing that hasn’t changed is that UC still advises students to start working on the personal insight questions early and write as clearly as possible. They have a [list of writing tips](#) on their website.

On the application itself, each prompt also contains a blurb elaborating on what to consider when answering the question. For example, here’s the first personal insight question along with its “things to consider” blurb:

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.**

Things to consider: A leadership role can mean more than just a title. It can mean being a mentor to others, acting as the person in charge of a specific task, or a taking lead role in organizing an event or project. Think about your accomplishments and what you learned from the experience. What were your responsibilities?

Did you lead a team? How did your experience change your perspective on leading others? Did you help to resolve an important dispute at your school, church in your community or an organization?

And your leadership role doesn’t necessarily have to be limited to school activities. For example, do you help out or take care of your family?

Additionally, UC is providing a supplementary personal insight question brainstorming [worksheet](#) designed to help get applicants thinking about possible topics for their responses. The worksheet contains the following exercise for the first personal insight question: 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?

Like other materials from the UC, the personal insight question worksheet encourages applicants to use their “unique voice.” Based on how much the school system has underscored the importance of personal touch in the new questions, one takeaway from the changes seems to be that UC is looking for less generic essays that express more fully who applicants are.

Besides giving applicants more say in what they write about, the new criteria also target topics admissions officers are interested in more specifically. Each question is associated with at least one of the fourteen [comprehensive review criteria](#) the UC uses to evaluate applicants. For example, the first personal insight question (about leadership – see above) speaks to “experiences that demonstrate unusual promise for leadership” from the comprehensive review criteria.

The change from personal statements to the personal insight questions is significant for UC since the school system rarely revises its essay prompts. In fact, the essay portion of the application was last modified in 2008, and the school system has never experimented with short-answer questions before. But UC is clearly hoping for a win-win that lets students choose what they write about and makes life easier for admissions officers by having the essays draw out particular qualities and experiences that factor into admissions decisions.

Because the new questions target narrower areas than the previous personal statement prompts, which were broad and general, UC advises that you rework your essays to fit the new questions if you’ve already gotten started with the old prompts.

If you haven't worked on your essays for the UC applications, you'll still want to start them with plenty of time to spare. Although the essays are short, they cover a lot of territory, so you want to make sure you have strong answers on all four of the prompts you choose.

As you're planning out how to balance your time between UC and other schools you're applying to, you might want to consider doing the UC questions early in the process. Because they cover so much ground and require that you reflect on many of your qualities and past experiences, they can double as a nice brainstorming exercise to get you thinking about a wide range of different topics that might come up in the longer essays required by other schools.

The personal insight questions will make their debut on the application for fall 2017 admission. This year's application will be released on August 1, 2016, but there's no reason to wait: the complete questions are already out and can be found [here!](#)

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By Niels V.