Which Application Platforms and Prompts Should You Choose?

The summer before senior year is the ideal time to write the main college application essay because once school starts, seniors are likely to find themselves busy enough preparing supplementary essays and/or essays for schools that still use their own proprietary applications.

While almost 700 colleges and universities in the U.S., Canada, China and many other countries use the Common Application (https://www.commonapp.org), the schools that don't use it are a diverse group. Among them are Elon, Georgetown, James Madison, Rutgers, and the Universities of Pittsburgh and Texas, to name just a few. The University of California schools all share their own proprietary application (https://admissions.universityofcalifornia.edu/applicant/login.htm).

To access other proprietary applications, go to the individual college websites and click on the link for "Admissions."

The Universal Application (https://www.universalcollegeapp.com) has been around for a while and is an option for 34 schools, all of which also use the Common Application except for University of Charleston (WV), Fisher College, Landmark College, Milwaukee School of Engineering, Southern Vermont College, and University of Wyoming. In some ways easier to use than the Common Application, it is less popular primarily because most applicants opt for a platform they can use for more schools so they don't have as much duplication of effort.

A new platform, the Coalition Application (http://www.coalitionforcollegeaccess.org/students.html) was introduced in the fall of 2016 by 80 participating colleges, most of which presented it as an optional alternative to the Common Application. Only three schools required all their applicants to use the Coalition Application in its first year: the Universities of Florida, Maryland, and Washington.

For the 2017-18 application cycle, more schools will be allowing students to use the Coalition application, and it remains to be seen who will use it exclusively. This platform is distinguished primarily by the fact that it has a "locker" where students may store supplementary materials for upload prior to each submission if they wish to use it to enhance their application. For the time being, though, it is unclear how willing admissions officers are to look at what type of supplementary material.

Once you know where you plan to apply, check out which applications each school on your list uses and look for the essay prompts. Fortunately, many of the prompts are sufficiently broad that even if they don't include "Topic of Your Choice," you will probably be able to come up with a topic that you can use almost everywhere with some modifications. Note that the length recommendations and restrictions vary from one application to another, so the most common modifications students usually have to make are in length.

Choose a prompt that enables you to demonstrate a passion and/or your capacity for reflection and self-awareness. Then bring these aspects of your personality to life wherever possible by telling a story or stories about something you've experienced and your thoughts and actions in response to the experience(s). Keep in mind that the prompts are just vehicles to get you going so you can write something deeply personal that will enable admissions officers to get a sense of who you are as a person and what you will bring to their campus community.

For most students, a major advantage of using the Common Application is that most high schools link it to their Naviance programs so the transcript and teacher and counselor recommendations are all submitted electronically once the student makes the requests with a few clicks. The speed and accuracy of the submission process is enhanced when applications are handled in this way.

Be aware, though, that a great many schools using the Common Application ask students for additional essays beyond the main one, and these are not always that easy to find. They are most often accessed with a click on the school-specific "Supplement," but they are sometimes hidden in the school-specific "Questions" section, so it is wise to read through each school's application requirements in their entirety as early as possible after August 1st, when the schools are supposed to have their updated versions posted.

Go ahead and create a login for yourself at each of the applications you think you may use. When you have a chance, begin filling in the demographic information and the Activities section, and peruse all the questions. Remember to save your information when you sign off. You will be able to return to it and modify it as much as you wish until you actually submit the applications along with a payment.

You may also wish to create a login at https://www.zeemee.com, a platform that enables students to create a sort of digital resume. This free platform (which I wrote about in December 2016) has been continuing to gain popularity. A number of colleges have a place on their applications where students are invited to upload a ZeeMee profile if they have one, and students who create them are increasingly including the link to it in the "Additional Information" section of other applications as well. A visit to the website will give you a better understanding of how this works. The idea is to create something fun, so it should not be labored over or professionalized. Nonetheless, knowing ahead of time what kinds of things you

might be able to put into a ZeeMee profile will enable you to mull it over for a while and locate materials for possible later use.