



Choosing to Act

The Common Application Essay Question #3

Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?

I've just finished reading Donald Miller's *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*, a gem of a book that I urge you to read, perhaps before you take on the third Common App essay question.

Miller writes, "In nearly every story, the protagonist is transformed. He's a jerk at the beginning and nice at the end. If the character doesn't change, the story hasn't happened yet. And if story is derived from real life, if story is just a condensed version of life, then life itself may be designed to change us so that we evolve from one kind of person to another."

Something rocks you, and you see the world differently. You see yourself and your purpose differently. I think that is what this question is really asking about. Kay Rothman, the brilliantly loving college counselor at the New York City Lab School, said to me recently, "Very few high school seniors have enough experience to answer this question well."

I agree with her. But if you've had one of these moments, you will know. I once interviewed an applicant for Princeton whose parents had kicked him out when he told them he was gay. He had lived with a friend for a while, and was applying to college from a homeless shelter.

"How did you find the courage?" I remember asking him. "Would you do it again?"

"I just couldn't live a lie anymore," he said, looking directly into my eyes.

The keywords in this question are "reflect," "challenged," and "act." It's almost a series of questions, inviting you to describe a time that you took on something established, what you did, and what you learned: there is the challenge itself, what caused you to act, and then—this is the "reflect" part—would you do it again?

First, what is the issue, the belief or idea that you challenged? Perhaps it was a time you stood up for something for the first time, like calling your friends out for bullying. Perhaps it was the intersection of something personal and political, and perhaps the stakes are high, like the young man who came out to his parents and lost his home.

The most important thing is to write about personal and intellectual changes in a way that connects with people who may not agree with you. How do you show your passion, commitment, and value to the community to someone who disagrees with you completely?

To engage your reader, whatever their beliefs, take them into your world and show them very specifically what your world looked like before the change, what catalyzed the change, and how your world was different afterwards. You can do this by choosing one moment that typifies life before and one that reveals life after.

There is a huge difference between saying "I believe" and showing your belief in action. The danger in this question is shifting to an analytical essay and arguing for your own beliefs like you would in English class. People who are leaders in debate and public speaking find themselves quickly down this rabbit hole. But the question asks you to "reflect" and even to challenge your own actions with the phrase "would you make the same decision again?" It is not asking you to argue for your beliefs, but to describe a time you took action to challenge a belief or idea.

What does this change mean about who you will be in a campus community? If you tell a story about the moment you took action, your reader will get a very clear picture of what they can count on you for. That is one of the most important things college admissions officers are trying to ascertain from your essays: What will you do when you are confronted with new situations? Not what will you think or even what will you say, but what will you do? How will you act?

And what if you are not a person who challenges beliefs and ideas? Well, then, I encourage you to explore what life would look like if something was so important to you that you chose to act.