

# Campus Academic Resource Program

## Teaching Credential Application Essays

This handout will:

- Discuss how to interpret teaching credential application essay prompts.
- Provide an example of a prompt.
- Provide an example of a sample response with critique.
- Discuss how to establish fit with a credential program.
- Critique a few clichés in the genre and suggest alternatives.
- Provide a practice prompt.

### Interpreting Prompts

When applying for teaching credential programs it is important that your essay is carefully planned and well written. It is essential that your essay respond to the provided prompt, not what you wish the prompt were. If you are applying to more than one program, make sure that each essay responds to the specific prompt of the respective program rather than using the same essay for each application. Use the following steps as a guide for interpreting an essay prompt:

1. Print out a copy of the prompt or download the pdf.
  - a. Highlight, underline, or number the key component parts.
  - b. Write/type notes in the margins to brainstorm thoughts and identify key ideas.
  - c. Make a checklist of key components of the prompt to reference while outlining your essay.
2. After reading the prompt carefully, begin brainstorming and then outlining your essay.
3. Before you begin the first draft, make sure that the outline responds to each aspect of the prompt. Check again after you have completed the essay.
4. Format your response according to the formatting instructions exactly. The committee members reading your application are looking to make sure you can follow directions.

### Sample Prompts

Familiarizing yourself with the structure of prompts will help you be better prepared to begin your essays. The following is the prompt for the San Francisco State University Single Subject Credential Program. This prompt contains questions commonly addressed in teaching credential application essays:

*Submit a typed essay (1-3 pages double spaced). Some questions to consider when formulating your essay: Why do you want to be a teacher? What experiences have prepared you to teach in a linguistically diverse, urban setting? What personal qualities do you possess and what experiences have you had that have prepared you to work in a collaborative environment such as a high school or a cohort in the Single Subject Program?*

- This prompt includes three questions, so however you brainstorm (bubble maps, free-writes, etc.), separate the different questions and generate material for each one. Then, develop an outline.
- Don't let the questions dictate your structure. Not all questions are equal.
  - For example, the key question in the above prompt is "Why do you want to be a teacher?" Answer the other questions keeping this overarching idea in mind, so that

## Campus Academic Resource Program

### Teaching Credential Application Essays

your essay is cohesive and guided by a central theme. For example, a reason you might want to be a teacher is because you enjoyed your experiences working with underserved, linguistically diverse communities. Such as response will allow you to discuss experiences relevant to the prompt while addressing the overarching question of why you want to be a teacher.

### Sample Response

The following essay is a sample response to the San Francisco State University prompt and includes critique.

I have always felt drawn to English and have made strong connections in school with my English teachers. It was this love for the subject and respect for those who taught it that led me to become an English Education major at San Francisco State University. Through this program I have been exposed to strong pedagogy focused on social justice and have had opportunities to develop skills necessary to being an effective teacher. These experiences have motivated me to continue my education at SFSU by applying to the Single Subject Credential program.

*This introduction gives some important preliminary information about the writer in a concise manner and provides a brief overview of what the essay will be about.*

One experience that I found especially inspiring was the course *Academic Literacy and the Urban Adolescent*, which introduced me to the term “social justice educator.” Through my engagement in this course I learned the potential for English, as well as education as a whole, to advocate for students and support them in becoming civic actors. Being an educator is a very demanding career and offers a unique set of challenges that call for creativity, patience, and commitment. I believe that the English Education program and other programs I have worked with in San Francisco have prepared me well to face the challenges of teaching in an urban setting.

*This paragraph is strong in the way it uses an example of a specific course and what the writer learned from it. While this paragraph implies why the writer wants to become a teacher, this could be made more explicit since it is directly asked in the prompt.*

Through the process of achieving subject matter competency, I have gained a theoretical understanding of education as well as practical skills for becoming a teacher. My coursework has taught me how to develop and present engaging activities as well as design units that include an essential question, scaffolded activities, and a rubric, all of which lead to an authentic task. I have also studied the Common Core State Standards in order to understand what students are expected to learn and to incorporate this knowledge into creating activities. In developing such activities, I have had the opportunity to work with a diverse group of colleagues, which has taught me the value of collaboration and learning from different perspectives.

*This paragraph provides specific examples of what the writer has learned and begins to discuss experiences the writer has had that will prepare them to work in a collaborate environment. This last point could be elaborated on more. The writer should consider how their collaborative experiences have allowed them to grow personally and what qualities they possess as a result that will prepare them for being a teacher.*

# Campus Academic Resource Program

## Teaching Credential Application Essays

In order to prepare myself to serve diverse student populations, I have worked with programs in San Francisco including AVID, SF Promise, Mentoring for Success, and 826 Valencia. Through my involvement with these programs I have had the opportunity to work with students from many different cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. I have always loved working with kids, and these experiences only reinforced that.

*This paragraph sets up well for a discussion on relevant experiences; however, it does not elaborate on these experiences. Any experience discussed should be elaborated on so that the significance of it is clear. The writer should consider questions such as: What did I learn from these experiences? What challenges did I face and how did I overcome them? How did these experiences solidify my plan to become a teacher? Also, the writer should avoid using clichés such as “I love working with kids.” See the section of this handout titled “Avoiding Admissions Essays Clichés” for more information on this.*

Many of the skills I have acquired over the past few years come directly from my experiences in the English Education program. I am eager to continue learning from an institution that has already supported my personal and professional growth to such a high degree.

*This conclusion explains why the writer is interested in this specific program. If this essay were for a research institution, the writer might also mention specific faculty whose work they are interested in.*

### Establishing “Fit”

It is important that you establish your fit with the program in your essay, and more importantly, the profession of teaching. Here are a few examples of strategies aimed at establishing your fit.

- Remember that the committee members reading your application are most likely professors in the education department. Ask yourself what educators likely think makes for an ideal teacher and why they should welcome you into the profession.
- Research the program by exploring the website, visiting the department in person, and/or connecting with faculty and students.
  - What makes you interested in *this* program? You want to be more specific than “because it’s a great school.”
  - Read some of the faculty’s work to get an idea of what the department values and focuses on. Reference work that interests you in your essay, but do not come across as being overly praiseworthy of the faculty.
  - Look into the course requirements for the program. Is there anything specific about the program that appeals to you?
- Demonstrate you have a passion for teaching. Recount an anecdote that demonstrates your suitability to the profession, perhaps about a teacher who inspired you or a memorable experience you have of working with students.
- Whether or not this is your plan B, do not make teaching come across as just a back up plan. For many, teaching is a dream job, and if any aspect of your essay suggests to the readers that you feel teaching is beneath you, this will reflect poorly on you.
  - Do not make disparaging comments about “bad teachers”--you are new to the profession, so harsh criticism of seasoned practitioners can count against you,

## Campus Academic Resource Program

### Teaching Credential Application Essays

especially if you mime media criticism of “slacker teachers,” or entrenched incompetency in the school system.

- Do not take on controversial education positions; you may alienate your audience, or come across as naive or uninformed. Remember that the professors reading your application are professional education policy researchers, many--or even most--of whom are also K-12 teaching veterans.
- Do not suggest that your background (whether it is a prestigious former career, graduate training, or the pedigree of your alma mater) makes you a better candidate for the spot in the program than anyone else.

### Avoiding Admissions Essay Clichés

Since this is the only opportunity in your application to discuss who you are as an individual, an ideal statement of purpose is one that stands out as unique. If your essay is overly trite or filled with clichés, it will not impress the committee tasked with reading it. However, embedded in a cliché is often a worthwhile thought. Here are a few examples:

- *Do not say* you “love working with kids.”
  - *Instead*, identify specifically what you enjoy about working with the age group you intend to teach—the rewards and the challenges.
- *Do not say* that you’ve wanted to be a teacher “as long as you can remember.”
  - *Instead*, tell a story that demonstrates this early fascination with teaching and emphasize how your education philosophy has evolved over time and become more nuanced.
- *Do not say* that you want to “help others” and/or “make a difference.”
  - *Instead*, be specific. How do teachers help others and provide a vital social good? Be analytical about the value of the teaching profession and what you would see as your mission as a teacher.
- *Do not* wax lyrical about how you do not mind living in poverty as a teacher because of how much you love teaching.
  - Though there are clear caps to their salaries, teachers live well above the poverty line and make roughly the median household income after a few years of experience. Especially if you are applying to a program that sends its graduates to work in low-income communities, statements along these lines mark you as lacking social awareness.
  - *Instead*, consider mentioning that your ambitions lie in developing your craft as an educator and helping students succeed rather than landing an upper-middle class salary.

### Activity: Practice responding to a prompt.

The following is a prompt for the UC Santa Barbara Multiple Subject Credential program. On a separate piece of paper, practice responding to the prompt.

# Campus Academic Resource Program

## Teaching Credential Application Essays

Please write a separate response to each question below and title each response with the question.

1. Write a brief autobiography as a way of introducing yourself to the TEP faculty. In 500 words or less explain how your background, skills, talents, and experiences have influenced your values and hopes for the future.
2. In 250 words or less answer the following question: “What are your greatest fears about the classroom, students or yourself?”
3. In 250 words or less describe what excites you about embarking into the teaching profession.

### Tips For Your Response

- Especially for the first two prompts you are asked to answer here, it is worthwhile to pursue the same strategy outlined above. Separate each of the prompts into their component parts while brainstorming and outlining.
  - 1) Separate into: background, skills/talents, and experiences. For the sake of brainstorming and outlining, make notes on each of these components to be sure you address the entire prompt. Then, ask yourself what the connection is to your values and hopes for the future. When composing your essay, these components will likely overlap. Considering discussing these three components through one cohesive theme, such as social justice.
  - 2) Separate into: classroom fears, students, and yourself. For the sake of brainstorming and outlining, make notes on each of these components to be sure you address the entire prompt. This prompt is tricky because you risk coming off as incompetent if you are too frank. Instead, highlight your awareness and insights into the challenges of teaching, and emphasize how you plan to overcome your fears and misgivings.
  - 3) Even though this prompt only asks one question, without a list of specific items to discuss, you cannot just write a rambling essay of how excited you are to become a teacher. When you brainstorm, identify specific aspects of teaching that are exciting and decide which best lend themselves to a nuanced and complete description in your essay. This could also be an opportunity to demonstrate an awareness of challenges you anticipate to encounter and how you look forward to meeting them.

## Campus Academic Resource Program

### Teaching Credential Application Essays

#### Works Cited

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