



/ **EXPLORE  
AMERICA**



**Your path to  
a standout  
college essay  
starts here.**

When you travel, you'll get to know the world better, and yourself. Most importantly, you'll get a new perspective on your place in the world. Add it all up and it's the perfect opportunity to start thinking about your personal essay for your college applications. Follow these exercises to use your tour as inspiration for an essay admissions officers can't resist.

P.S. These exercises work for more than college essays. Think high school applications, résumés, cover letters, or just some good old self-awareness.

## BEFORE YOU GO: INTERNAL EXPLORATION

What makes your college essay stand out from everyone else's? You do, of course. That's why effective college essays are personal; they reflect who you are and what matters to you. So who are you? Here are 3 exercises to help you figure it out.



1. **Set a timer** for 5 minutes and write down every interesting thing you can think of about yourself. It can be big (you're a world record holder) or tiny (you were born 7.6 pounds on 7/6). The more you write, the more likely you are to come up with something original or unexpected.



2. **Look through your EF tour itinerary** and pick 3-5 things you're really excited to see or do. For each, write 3 sentences explaining why you're looking forward to it. Remember, get personal. Are you an artist? A nature lover? A history buff? How does that play into where you want to go?



3. **Ask friends and family** to help. Use InstaSnapFace or whatever and ask them to either complete the sentence, "The three words that best sum up [insert name here] are..." or send you three pictures that capture your personality best. Confused by their responses? Use your mouth to ask them to explain.

**Bonus tip:** Look at the essay prompts for your college applications before you travel. You don't need to pick one yet, but it's smart to know what's coming your way.

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## ON TOUR: DISCOVERING YOURSELF THROUGH TRAVEL

How does where you are inform who you are? There's no simple answer, but we know from experience that students who travel usually return with a better understanding of themselves. Find a few moments during your tour to try the following and you'll start to see themes that matter.



1. **Stand still.** Close your eyes for two minutes. What do you hear, smell, sense? What do you like and dislike? What catches your interest? Try this in a few (safe) places—coffee shops, museums, rainforests, etc.—and you'll start to realize that the things that capture your attention reveal what matters most to you.



2. **Stare at a local...**discreetly...and imagine you are them. Observe the world from their perspective. How would you be different if you lived their life? How would you be the same? Try this with different people—students, businesswomen, old men in the park, the homeless—to refine what you discover along the way.



3. **Keep a journal** (call it a notebook if it makes you feel better) and every morning write down the most unforgettable moment from the previous day. Describe the moment in 50-100 words, then list 3 reasons you liked it so much. Are there any patterns in what catches your interest?

**Don't forget:** Your tour is supposed to be fun. If you spend too much time worrying about your college essay, you'll miss out on the best experiences.

## BACK HOME: TRANSLATE, VALIDATE, AND WRITE

You're home. Your tour was great (right?). You learned a lot about your destinations, made new friends, tried new things and, we hope, opened your mind and expanded your comfort zone. You've gotten to know the true you. So let's harness all that awesomeness and write a great essay. Here's how to get started.



1. **Set a timer** for 10 minutes and write down everything you can about your favorite experiences from tour. Get specific about what you did, what you learned, and how it made you feel. Most importantly, include how these moments connect, inspire, or explain other parts of your life.



2. **Talk to the people that know you best.** What changes did they see in you when you got home? What were you most excited to talk about? Sometimes it takes someone else's eyes to see yourself clearly. Write down the observations that feel most accurate or interesting to you.



3. **Complete the following sentences.** They'll help you hone in on a topic that truly resonates with you (whether it has to do with your tour or not). Plus, any of these could serve as the main point of your essay.

Before this tour, I never would have...

I'm curious to learn more about...

Three words I used to think about myself are...

Three words I think about myself now are...

I'll never think about [blank] the same way again, because...

The most confident I felt on tour was when I...

I discovered I have a passion for...

I now feel more connected to [city or person], because...

I realized one of my strengths is...

I'm no longer afraid to...

I'll think about [a specific moment, location, etc.] every time I...

I'm now more determined than ever to [blank] because...



4. **Look at the prompts** on your college application. Bet you're seeing plenty of ways to pepper in your thoughts from above, huh? So go ahead, pick a prompt and start writing. Remember, it's not about your tour. It's about you. You might not even mention your tour. Just use what you learned about yourself along the way to craft your story. And don't worry about perfection. Get your thoughts out first and edit later.

**Bonus tip:** If your tour doesn't make it into your essay, you should still mention it as part of your application. Trust us, it'll pique your readers' interest. So, add it to your activities section, or use it as a line in your résumé and attach that to your app. Need inspiration? Here's a blurb to get you started:

*Educational tour to [Location] – Immersed myself in a new culture, broadened my perspective on the world, and gained confidence in my abilities to navigate new challenges and experiences.*


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We want to hear from you! If you have any questions or comments about your experience using the UnCommon App, send them over to [experiential.learning@ef.com](mailto:experiential.learning@ef.com)



## More ways to make your college app shine

Good news: The exercises on the previous pages will help you write a killer college essay. *Great* news: There are tons of other ways an EF tour can help you impress college admissions officers.



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### 1 EARN HIGH SCHOOL CREDIT

With EF's personalized learning guide, you can submit a post-tour project for academic credit. The project will add a touch of your own unique personality to your college application, and the credit will demonstrate your willingness to go above and beyond. Get the details at [efexploreamerica.com/credit](https://efexploreamerica.com/credit)

### 2 EARN COLLEGE CREDIT

You know what really stands out on a college application? College credit. Through EF's partnership with Southern New Hampshire University, you can earn three college credits by taking a course on global perspectives. It's a great way to enhance your on-tour learnings. (Plus, completing a college course before college is a major confidence booster.) Learn more at [eftours.com/snhustudent](https://eftours.com/snhustudent)