



Common App 2019/2020 Essay Prompt #4: *Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma — anything of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.*

As a sophomore in high school, I began looking for part-time work after school in order to earn a little money and begin saving for college. I would often tutor junior high students in subjects related to English and writing, as I had always excelled in these areas and enjoyed literature, poetry, and creative writing. I generally found this work enjoyable and quite lucrative, yet there was one student whose behavior presented me with an ethical dilemma.

This student, who I will call Kyle, had been struggling in his English classes. His mother hired me to help him prepare for classes and improve his overall English abilities, especially his writing. Although he was quite intelligent, he struggled to organize his thoughts well or come up with elements like topic sentences or creative examples in long-form essays. When I started tutoring him, Kyle did not seem interested in English, and it was therefore hard to motivate him. I began by helping him find the answers to the questions on his homework, and I also helped him compose longer essays on various topics.

Over time, however, I found that he was relying on me to supply the answers to the questions, putting little effort in himself. This turned into an ethical dilemma when we were working on a research essay about a country. Kyle was assigned to write about Iceland, and despite working with him to search the internet for interesting features of Iceland, Kyle's mind was a blank when it came time to put pen to paper.

Because he was unable to start the essay, I helped him by providing an opening sentence. Then, to get more ideas flowing, I would add more and more ideas, coaching him to present his own ideas. I soon realized, however, that I was essentially writing this essay for him. This was clearly unethical from my point of view, as Kyle's mother had hired me not to simply help with his homework, but rather to strengthen his English abilities and mold him into a better writer.

I was confronted with two options: I could continue helping this student, knowing that his improved grades would reflect positively on me as a teacher, and that I could keep this well-paying job indefinitely; or, I could refuse to continue doing his work for him, explaining the situation to his mother and quite possibly losing this part-time job, which I sorely needed at the time.

In this case, as with many ethical dilemmas, the least ethical option—continuing to contribute much of the content of the student's homework—was the easier path to take. Choosing to confront the student, on the other hand, could result in an unpleasant situation and the potential loss of much-needed employment. Fortunately, though it provided me with considerable frustration and anxiety, I quickly decided that I would need to pull back, confront the student, and tell his mother about what was happening.

It wasn't the most consequential of ethical dilemmas after all, but the experience has always stuck with me. I could feel myself being moved by forces beyond my control towards a position that I went against my beliefs. This gave me insight into how people can gradually be pulled in directions, whether through their career field, their friend group, or other factors, that may conflict with their own individual proclivities. I always remember this ethical dilemma when I find myself transitioning to a new place in my life, as it helps me be able to stand tall and act with confidence and clarity of purpose.

