

HOW TO WRITE YOUR COLLEGE ESSAYS

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Introduction

Every year, millions of students across America sit down at their desks, open up their laptops, and start to type their personal statement essays. Although an infamously short essay, it might be one of the most important things a student has written up until that point in their life. No pressure. For some students, talking about themselves is a breeze. For most students...not so much. It can be very difficult for students to write about themselves—to *define* themselves—within 650 words. Students might have so many questions and so little answers, others might not even know what questions to ask. But for all of these problems, there are solutions. Millions of students have applied to colleges in years past, and so can you! That's because you have this guide to answer your questions, aid your writing process, and create an essay that not only will impress colleges but also make you proud of yourself.

How Much Does My Essay Matter?

How much your essay actually matters to admissions offices can vary depending on the college. For example, Ivy League and elite schools that require submission of SAT scores might care slightly more about your SAT than schools that don't. Currently, about 80% of schools do not require SAT scores so if a student doesn't submit them their essays carry more weight. Usually, essays contribute to 25% of a student's application but that could be even more with the absence of SAT scores.

Additionally, schools that are more selective tend to consider essays more than less selective schools. Less selective schools start by looking at GPA and test scores and then read the students' essays. That being said, schools that are more selective prioritize essays and extra-curriculars, which account for 30% of a student's application.

What do Colleges Look for in Personal Statement Essays?

Your personal statement should demonstrate the qualities, skills, and values that you've cultivated over your life and how those skills have prepared you for attending college. Colleges don't want to read about the person you think deserves to go to their school, they want to read about who you are. Your voice should come through so much in your essay that it is like you are speaking

to your admissions officer. Your character and values should be woven into your essay. At the end of the day, colleges want to know you—not just the things that have happened to you. They should not finish your essay not knowing anything about who you are

Dos and Don'ts

Before you begin to write your essay, keep in mind some Dos and Don't's. Most "don'ts" might be able to still work. But it's about *how* you write, less of what you write

- Don't:

- Write about drugs, drama, divorce, death
- Curse or swear unless you believe it is absolutely essential to your essay, even then, it should not be extremely aggressive
- Rely on cliches
- Talk about your resume
- Share your deepest secrets

- DO:

- Write about growth
- Write about your failures and hardships
- Write about your successes
- Write about who you are
- Show, don't tell

Where to Start

Open a Word document, a Google Docs, a piece of paper or whatever you find best to write. Now, open your favorite web browser and Google 'Common App personal statement essay prompts'. Now copy and paste into your document or write down on your piece of paper. Now you know what your prompts are. You will answer one of them for your personal statement essay. They are as follows:

- 1) Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

a) Values that might go well with this prompt are family, work ethic, culture, tradition, pressures, success, art, music, or community.

- 2) The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
 - a) *Some things to avoid for this prompt might be a challenging class or sports injury.*
 - b) *Colleges want to see growth and perseverance, so this prompt is a great opportunity to show how you demonstrate that.*
- 3) Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
 - a) *This prompt is a great opportunity to think outside of the box. This prompt can be deeper and more introspective with the right story.*
 - i) *Belief about yourself or your life*
 - ii) *Belief about others*
 - iii) *Belief about the world*
- 4) Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
 - a) *This might be the only area where it would be okay to talk about death. Although grief has a profound impact on everyone, this death in particular would need to spark growth and change. It would also be wise to avoid talking about a significant other.*
 - b) *This is also a great opportunity to think outside of the box; not everyone in our lives can seem like they are helping us at first, but they can still be someone who helped you grow.*
 - c) *Remember, the focus of this essay is you, not someone else.*
- 5) Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

a) Again, growth is essential here. This prompt is not an opportunity to brag about your success, but to explain the impact of your success on yourself and others.

6) Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?

a) This should be an interest that will grow with you. Your fascination should have some sort of product, whether that be physical or internal to you.

7) Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design

a) Maybe you have a narrative essay from another class about yourself that could work well with this prompt and not the others. After polishing it could fit this prompt.

This part of the process can be overwhelming. It can be nerve-racking to try and pick the right prompt that will help you express who you are to colleges. But the good news is: you can write more than one essay and try out more than one prompt. Then you pick the essay you like the best and submit that one. Or, you could write your first essay and realize that a different prompt fits it better. Throughout the writing process your ideas and plan might change and that is perfectly fine. It means you are making progress and shaping your essay to be exactly what you want it to be.

But how do you pick your prompt? First, make a list of things that are important to you. This list can consist of things about your character that you feel make you stand out, values that you are proud to have, interests you have that fascinate you, or

Remember: On the Common App, there is an opportunity for you to write about your circumstances and situations. So, if you feel as though there are other things you can write for your personal statement essay but still want to include information about any situation you are in, you still have a chance to do that. Or your circumstance essay could go into detail about what exactly you went through, whereas your personal statement essay can be how it affected you.

situations or things that have happened to you.

From that list, you then organize those ideas under the prompts to help give you an idea of what prompt will support your story the best.

Example:

Students' List

Values

- Independence
- Creative Expression
- Friends and Family
- Self-Improvement
- Community
- Generosity
- Tradition

Character

- Integrity
- Honesty
- Accountability
- Perseverance
- Compassion
- Empathy
- Curiosity
- Courage

Events/Experiences

- Impactful Project
- Community Work
- Bullying
- Club Activity
- Working
- Family Life
- Medical Experiences

After you complete your lists, you will find anecdotes from your life that show at least one item from each list. Ask yourself:

- What events in my life have changed a small part of who I am?
- What events in my life have changed a large part of who I am?
- What in my life has caused me to have the values that I have?
- Have I always had the same values? What caused that to change?

By asking these questions, you should be able to find events in your life that have shaped who you are, even if it is in small ways. After you brainstorm a few ideas, connect those ideas to your values, character, and experiences.

Anecdote: Overcoming social anxiety

Value(s): Self-Improvement

Character: Perseverance



Prompts:

2) The lessons we take from obstacles...

- Growing and overcoming

3) Reflect on a time when...

- Changing your mindset about your life and yourself

Structure

There are two general kinds of structures that students use for their essays. You do not have to be confined to either of these, but your essay will be clearer with organization. So, even if you don't pick either of the following structures it is still essential to have some sort of organization to your essay.

Story: A story structure reads like an actual story, with your voice woven in to explain how that experience affected you. It generally starts with the usual beginning, middle and end. However, one of the ways to take risks in your essay is maybe mixing up the timeline and begin with the ending and explain how you got there.

Example:

The most exciting time to live in Vermont is mid-February. This is the time when one is given the privilege of a 30-minute walk to school in sub-zero temperatures, with a 30-minute trudge home in the dark after a long day. It's been four months since winter began, and it'll be two more until it's over. The firewood is being rationed to keep the house at a barely livable temperature, a steamy 50 degrees, and colds are so rampant that people lose half their body weight in phlegm each day. Yet, however dull Vermont may seem to students and teachers as they wrap themselves in layer after layer of flannel, make no mistake, today is the beginning of an era. Today is the day when Isaac (that's me) starts his job of putting smiles on grim faces as the reader of the morning announcements.

“But Isaac, that job is super boring! You just read what’s written on a piece of paper,” is what an uninformed person might say, someone who obviously doesn’t know about my passion for annoying the tired and melancholic with smiling positivity. While expression and humor has not historically been a part of this process, and while ad-libbing has been strictly advised against, I go for it anyway. And why not? The worst possible outcome involves only a stern lecture and an expulsion from the job.

Fortunately, there is not much going on this week, which means I have some wiggle room with what I can say. The loud buzz of the intercom whines throughout the school, and the silent apprehension of the day is met, somewhat unexpectedly, with a greeting of 20 “yo’s” and a long, breathy pause. I artfully maneuver someone else’s writing into my own words, keeping the original intent but supplementing the significant lack of humor with a few one-liners. I conclude by reminding everyone that just because the weather is miserable today does not mean that we have to be as well.

Luckily, the principal loves it. And despite the fact that I urge everyone to interrupt my history teacher’s classes to wish him a happy birthday, I get to keep my job for another day. I have people coming up to me left and right, telling me that I made them smile. When I hear that, I smile back.

For the rest of the month, I work to make sure that people hear my message: even though we are at the time when school and winter are beginning to seem endless, there are still reasons to grin. I urge people to attend basketball games or sign up for spring sports. I announce birthdays and other special events. Before every day, I make sure I have a message that will make people think, “you know, today might not be so bad after all.” After my month ends, the announcements have been changed. The next readers tell jokes or riddles, or sing songs and invite others to sing with them. I watch the announcements evolve from an unfortunate but necessary part of the day to a positive and inspiring event. It is now more than just a monotonous script; it becomes a time to make sure that everyone has at least one thing to smile about.

Life shouldn’t have to be a dreary winter day; it should be the satisfaction of a good saxophone solo or the joy of seeing one’s friends every day at school. It is the enthusiasm of a biology teacher, the joy of a sports victory, and even the warm messages of a disembodied voice on the intercom. I use that message to help freshman feel less nervous at their first race or to encourage my friend to continue taking solos in jazz band. And in the most dismal time of year, I use that message in the daily announcements.

Montage: This could be a few short stories surrounding the topic or your values and how those were shaped. These can be memories, symbols, or figures in your life that have shaped who you are.

Example:

My laptop is like a passport. It is plastered with stickers all over the outside, inside, and bottom. Each sticker is a stamp, representing a place I've been, a passion I've pursued, or community I've belonged to. These stickers make for an untraditional first impression at a meeting or presentation, but it's one I'm proud of. Let me take you on a quick tour:

"We <3 Design," bottom left corner. Art has been a constant for me for as long as I can remember. Today my primary engagement with art is through design. I've spent entire weekends designing websites and social media graphics for my companies. Design means more to me than just branding and marketing; it gives me the opportunity to experiment with texture, perspective, and contrast, helping me refine my professional style.

"Common Threads," bottom right corner. A rectangular black and red sticker displaying the theme of the 2017 TEDxYouth@Austin event. For years I've been interested in the street artists and musicians in downtown Austin who are so unapologetically themselves. As a result, I've become more open-minded and appreciative of unconventional lifestyles. TED gives me the opportunity to help other youth understand new perspectives, by exposing them to the diversity of Austin where culture is created, not just consumed.

Poop emoji, middle right. My 13-year-old brother often sends his messages with the poop emoji 'echo effect,' so whenever I open a new message from him, hundreds of poops elegantly cascade across my screen. He brings out my goofy side, but also helps me think rationally when I am overwhelmed. We don't have the typical "I hate you, don't talk to me" siblinghood (although occasionally it would be nice to get away from him); we're each other's best friends. Or at least he's mine.

"Lol ur not Harry Styles," upper left corner. Bought in seventh grade and transferred from my old laptop, this sticker is torn but persevering with layers of tape. Despite conveying my fangirl-y infatuation with Harry Styles' boyband, One Direction, for me Styles embodies an artist-activist who uses his privilege for the betterment of society. As a \$42K donor to the Time's Up Legal Defense Fund, a hair donor to the Little Princess Trust, and promoter of LGBTQ+ equality, he has motivated me to be a more public activist instead of internalizing my beliefs.

"Catapult," middle right. This is the logo of a startup incubator where I launched my first company, Threading Twine. I learned that business can provide others access to fundamental human needs, such as economic empowerment of minorities and education. In my career, I hope

to be a corporate advocate for the empowerment of women, creating large-scale impact and deconstructing institutional boundaries that obstruct women from working in high-level positions. Working as a women's rights activist will allow me to engage in creating lasting movements for equality, rather than contributing to a cycle that elevates the stances of wealthy individuals.

“Thank God it’s Monday,” sneakily nestled in the upper right corner. Although I attempt to love all my stickers equally (haha), this is one of my favorites. I always want my association with work to be positive.

And there are many others...When my computer dies (hopefully not for another few years), it will be like my passport expiring. It’ll be difficult leaving these moments and memories behind, but I probably won’t want these stickers in my 20s anyways (except Harry Styles, that’s never leaving). My next set of stickers will reveal my next set of aspirations. They hold the key to future paths I will navigate, knowledge I will gain, and connections I will make.

Combination: Sometimes, your story isn’t one event and takes place over a long period of time, combining story telling and montage by giving snippets into that story.

Brain Dump

Once you come up with a few ideas for the topic of your essay and decide a general structure, you are almost ready to start writing. This part of the process can also scare students, but the most important thing to remember when writing your first draft is that your essay does not have to be perfect. In fact, it should be far from it. Your first draft should be a brain dump. You take the topic you chose and just write about it for as long as you can. Try to look at your topic from every angle and just write. Do not worry about the word limit, you will be able to edit and revise.

Another important thing to note is that while writing your brain dump, you might make different choices from what you originally planned. Maybe there are different values you want to highlight, a different prompt you want to answer, a different structure you want to try, or maybe even a different story all together. That is okay. The goal of your brain dump is to just get all of your thoughts out on the page.

After your brain dump, you are going to go through what you've written and highlight or underline the most important parts. This doesn't mean you are getting rid of anything important, but it means that you are only cutting down

on words and helping your essay become more focused. After that, you will also strikethrough any extra or irrelevant information you don't think you need. Don't erase or delete anything yet, you might discover later that you actually want to keep those parts in your essay.

Example:

The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

Title

Things did not go according to plan. Which was terrible because I love plans. Let me explain. Since before my freshman year of high school I have been involved in theatre. Whether it was small acting classes at a local church, middle school musicals, and of course high school theatre, it has always been my favorite art form. And when I got to high school, I was immediately engulfed by Theatre Troupe 2898, and I decided that I loved it, and I wanted to do everything I could to make it the best it could be. ~~It is such an important community to me, in it I've learned how to communicate, collaborate, and create.~~ My freshman year, I ~~grinded out set build hours and participated in all the shows earning me the coveted award of 'Rookie of the Year'.~~ **And so began my master plan. It had three phases, all of them concerning being a troupe officer. Phase 1: Be elected Points Master my sophomore year. Phase 2: Be elected Treasurer my junior year. Phase 3: Be elected President my senior year.**

Phase 1 went according to plan. As Points Master, I got to impose my organizational will on our points system and revamp it to not only digital form (goodbye crusty binder, hello Excel spreadsheet) but also a system that will be easier for Points Masters for years to come. ~~The 15-slide instructional Canva presentation I made helped too.~~ One thing about being an officer was that people were coming to me for advice and for help. **This made my role even better because I got to give back to the people around me.** I helped newcomers prepare for auditions, I often noticed bullying or harassment situations and helped people get out of it. ~~I handled things. I love handling things.~~

Phase 2 went according to plan. I'm a firm believer that hard work pays off, and it really did. I was once again elected as an officer, this time increasing my rank to Treasurer. **As Treasurer, I really wanted to continue to make the troupe better, because this was the year that**

Do I Need a Title?

No! There is no requirement to have a title for your essay. Some students find that it is an important part of their essay while others don't. However, it is important to prioritize not wasting your words on a title, especially with a 650 word limit. If you decide you want to use a title it should be one of the last things you

would get me elected President. I ran fundraisers, workshops for middle schoolers interested in theatre, and continued being a pillar for advice in the troupe. Every month, I organized to sell pizza after school once a week every week. To some people, it might seem like a lot to run a school wide fundraiser every week, but it was so fun for me because I love having a project, especially when it helps with what I care about.

Phase 3 did not go according to plan. I worked for weeks to write a perfect presidential speech. I spent months campaigning amongst my troupe. It is the responsibility of the President to direct the summer show, (which is always Shakespeare). I focused on scheduling and technical aspects as well as the fun acting parts. I focused on new ideas and growing the troupe. I spent three years building my credibility and strengthening the troupe and helping it grow. All of which was part of my plan.

And then I lost the election.

I remember the moment. I was sitting outside on my deck, my entire family eagerly awaiting the results. And when they came out, my name wasn't on the list of officers. Everything I had worked on for three years felt irrelevant and stupid. At rehearsal the next day, I was surrounded by the very people who didn't vote for me. I considered quitting theatre completely; I certainly wasn't going to be a part of the summer show and be reminded every day I wasn't the one directing it.

Things did not go according to that plan. I ended up doing the show. I signed up for costumes crew hoping for low commitment and easing myself back into things. Just like everything else lately, that didn't go according to plan either. I was asked to be a crew head, which was a brand new experience. I was a little hesitant, but I decided why not? I spent my summer designing costumes, leading my crew, and working to make every actor happy. I know that people say you can't make everyone happy, but I got pretty close. Even though I didn't get what I wanted, on a deeper level I really did. Since I was no longer an officer, people didn't complain about me. Great! As costumes head, I got to use my handy dandy spreadsheet to keep track of actors and costumes (which were color coded to show the relationships between characters) and I got to impose my organizational will *again* and reorganize the post-natural disaster appearing costumes closet. And I didn't have to read a word of Shakespeare, which I hate.

Things did not go according to plan. Which was actually okay because one thing I love more than plans is when things work out in the end. No, I wasn't elected president, but I learned that not being president didn't hinder my opportunities or hinder doing the things that I loved. I was still offered a leadership position, I still got to work with others, I still got to organize and coordinate, I still got to be creative, and I still got to contribute to the Troupe I did all that for. That's the point. I learned how to pivot and adapt. To play to my own strengths. Losing doesn't hurt anymore because I healed by doing what makes me feel like I've won. I wish I could say I

planned for that to happen, but I've learned that sometimes the best plans are the ones we don't even know about.

After Your Brain Dump

After you finish your brain dump and mark up your essay you are officially done with the toughest part of writing your essay! The next step is to make a checklist of the things that need to be added or emphasized in your essay. These are your values, character, and experiences that you brainstormed earlier. If these changed during your brain dump, then add the new ideas to your check list instead.

Checklist

- Hook
- Integrity
- Independence
- Generosity
- Community Work
- Symbol
- Anaphora
- Theme

Literary and Rhetorical Tools

Many students often want to include literary and rhetorical tools such as symbolism or anaphora to make their essay seem more sophisticated or impactful.

These tools are great ideas as long as they are relevant. Do not put in a symbol or a metaphor if it doesn't make sense just for the purpose of putting it in.

Here are a few examples that students could use:

- Parallelism

- o Parallelism is the use of matching sentence structures with multiple sentences or within sentences. These sentences could also be used to tie together an essay by having one at the start of an essay and one at the end.
- o Example: "I came, I saw, I conquered" -Julius Caesar

- Metaphor

- o a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable.
- o Example: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." -William Shakespeare

- Allusion

- o an expression designed to call something to mind without mentioning it explicitly; an indirect or passing reference.

- Example: The opening line of *Moby Dick* "Call me Ishmael." is a reference to the Ishmael from the Bible, who is often considered an outcast, much like the *Moby Dick* character.
- **Foreshadowing**
 - be a warning or indication of (a future event).
 - Example: Han Solo saying, "I've got a bad feeling about this." multiple times in the original Star Wars trilogy right before something goes wrong for the characters.
- **Symbolism**
 - the use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities.
 - Example: The green light in 'The Great Gatsby' that represents Jay Gatsby's desire for the American Dream and for Daisy Buchanan.
- **Anaphora or Epistrophe**
 - These are forms of repetition. Anaphora is repeating a word/phrase at the *beginning* of clauses; Epistrophe is repeating it at the *end*.
 - Anaphora Example: "It rained on his lousy tombstone, and it rained on the grass on his stomach. It rained all over the place." - J.D. Sallinger, 'The Catcher in the Rye'
 - Epistrophe Example: "...of the people, by the people, for the people..." President Abraham Lincoln, 'Gettysburg Address'
- **Juxtaposition**
 - the fact of two things being seen or placed close together with contrasting effect.
 - Example: " That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind." -Neil Armstrong
- **Allegory**
 - a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one.
 - Example: 'Animal Farm' is an example of a political allegory for communism.

Polishing

After your brain dump and adding in any tools you want, you are on to revising and polishing your essay. Here are the steps for revision:

- 1) Re-read your essay all the way through.
- 2) Check for grammatical and spelling errors.
- 3) Get rid of any information that isn't the most important.

- a. Long descriptions
- b. Unnecessary words and adjectives
- 4) Revise necessary sentences to be clearer and more concise
- 5) Ask for help
 - a. Some of the best resources are the people around you, so asking for feedback will help you write a great essay.
 - b. Ask your teacher(s).
 - c. Ask your close friends and family to read your essay. These people know you the best and should be able to help make sure that your voice comes through.
 - d. Ask people who you don't know very well. Remember that the admissions officers reading your essays have never met you. So, asking people who do not know you as well will help to make sure that your essay is understandable.

Finishing Your Essay

Declaring your essay as “done” may seem easy but making sure that it is exactly how you want it to be can be difficult. This is why revising and having your checklist from the beginning is so important. Another idea is to take a break from your essay. Maybe it isn't completely done yet, but you don't want to burn out. Plus, if your brain isn't occupied with your essay you could come up with ideas for it without even thinking about it or even open up your mind to new perspectives.

Changing your essay is completely fine too. There's a chance you will discover that you want to change your structure, or your hook, or maybe your entire story. You might want to start all over again and write a completely new essay. This is very normal. The hard truth is: you probably will end up not wanting to submit your first essay you write. And that is completely fine. It is very rare students submit their first essay. Some will write two while others will write ten. Which if you think about it, makes sense. You are writing your personal statement essay for the first time, how often are people good at things on their first try? It takes practice. So, write as much as you can about yourself. Take time to think about each essay. Take breaks. But most importantly—do not get discouraged. Trying to write your essay more than once is a part of the process. In the end, you will write an essay you are proud of, but just like everything, it takes time. Besides, maybe one of your essays doesn't work for your personal statement but it could be used for something else, like another essay for your application or a scholarship essay.

'Why Us' and Supplemental Essays

Just when you think you are done with your essays for college, there's more! Many universities (especially selective universities) have more than one essay they'd like you to write. Many of these have the infamous 'Why Us' essay where you are asked to explain why you are the perfect fit for that school.

Example Prompt:

1. Describe the unique qualities that attract you to the specific undergraduate college or school (including preferred admission and dual degree programs) to which you are applying at the University of Michigan. How would that curriculum support your interests? *(Required for all applicants; 100 word minimum; 550 word maximum.)*

Colleges want to accept students who want to go to their school. 'Why Us' essay is actually an opportunity. You don't want an essay that makes it look like you don't care. So, it is important to actually research that school, their programs, extra-curriculars, and their professors. There are also red flags

Don't:

- Mention that your family went to that school.
- Rant about how the school is prestigious.
- Say the campus is nice or that you like the dorms or the college town.
- Talk about pursuing Medical, Law, or Graduate school. (Focus on your undergrad).
- Refer to the school as 'you' or say things like "I want to go to your school because..."
- Read the goals or mission of the school off of the website and copy them word for word. Instead *show* how you exemplify those values.

Do

- Emphasize how your passions align with classes, programs, and opportunities available at the school.
- Mention how you plan to participate at the school.
- Explain short-term and long-term goals with the school.
- And only maybe explain what you plan to do with your education post-grad.

How to Write It:

First, make a list of characteristics of your dream program. This could be things like a living-learning community or hands-on learning. Remember that this is about how you are a perfect fit for the school, so you want to integrate yourself into your essay by making sure you emphasize talking about the things you already like about learning.

For example, maybe you are someone who wants to go into Political Science. Political Science is a combination of many things: government, history, politics, economics. Take what you love about those and write about it. Then find things about the school that align with what you love about the topic. For a Political Science major there might be classes available that are about comparative government. That can be a focus or a reason why you want to go to that school. Having a good statement about yourself personally and tying that to the school you are applying to will help you illustrate to admissions officers why you are a great fit for that school.

So how do you start your 'Why Us' essay? Here are some ideas:

- Have a relevant statement about yourself
 - o **Passion:** Someone applying for an education major might say: 'I have always had a passion to learn, just as I have always had a passion to teach.'
 - o **Values:** Values you have that match the program, for example a journalism major might say: 'Truth, knowledge, and awareness have always been concepts I strive for, especially through writing. In a world full of misinformation, those very things matter the most.'
 - o **Perspective:** A different take that the school promotes. For example a computer science major might say: "Many people think that being confined to a computer limits us, or that advancements in technology. But to me, computers open a world for everyone not just online, but in real life too.'
 - o **Academics:** Perhaps a student is very academically focused. A biology major might write "To some, biology is a collection of facts in a textbook; to me, it is a continuous process of rigorous inquiry. I am driven by the academic challenge of turning a hypothesis into a discovery and contributing to the ever-evolving body of scientific knowledge"

Use your opening statements to find programs at the school that align and promote those passions.

From there, combine the things that matter to you, who you are, and the programs and classes at the school that match it.

Research is a super important part of this. Make sure you are using the school website to look at professors and classes. Be sure to name them in your essay. Being specific is one of the most important parts of a 'Why Us' Essay.

How to Research Programs

- Look at school websites
- Look at websites for your prospective majors
- Look at faculty lists
 - o Many schools will have a 'get to know' or something similar for professors

Don't:

- Contact students to see how they "like" the school, what you want is specific details from the school itself, not from the biases of students. Even if you ask about their program, they're likely to give vague answers when you could find more details on the school website.
- Use AI.
- Do a quick Google search.
- Just throw in names of professors without knowing anything about them or their classes.

Other Supplementals

Many universities also have more than just a 'Why Us' essay. Many prestigious universities have more questions and prompts for you to answer in order to apply.

Example Prompt:

At the University of Michigan, we are focused on developing leaders and citizens who will challenge the present and enrich the future. In your essay, share with us how you are prepared to contribute to these goals. This could include the people, places, experiences, or aspirations that have shaped your journey and future plans. *(Required for all applicants; 100 word minimum; 300 word maximum.)*

Break Down into Questions:

- In what ways are you a leader?
- How do you challenge the present?
- How do you enrich the future?

Come Up with an Anecdote:

Brainstorm

- People
- Places
- Experiences
- Aspirations

Then, you are going to use that anecdote to answer the questions you wrote. By breaking down the prompt into questions, you help yourself organize and fully answer the prompt.

Using Resources

Online, there is an abundance of resources for writing college essays, but which ones do you use?

Use

- Free Guides
- Articles
- Student examples

Avoid

- Anything that costs money
- Social Media
 - o Your algorithm knows you well, so it is going to show you people and accounts who claim to have any sort of answer for college essays, applications, or secrets on how to get it. These are often made to make you feel like you aren't doing enough to compel you to buy their courses or counseling. Do not fall for it. They do not want to help you. They want clout and money.
- AI
 - o It is understandable to use AI for research purposes, however your effort in researching schools will show in your essays. Colleges can tell what is authentic, so try to avoid AI.

- Do NOT use AI to write your essay for you. Admissions offices are looking for AI now more than ever. Even one sentence of AI can cause you to get rejected from any school.

Good Luck!

Now that you have ideas and hopefully a plan for all of your essays, it is time to start writing. This process could take a week or it could take months, but it is important to keep writing and stay determined. And to also start early. Early acceptance deadlines are usually the November of the year before you graduate, so you want to stay on top of all of the writing you have to do! Good luck with your writing and remember to stay consistent!

Works Cited

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