

YOUR GUIDE TO COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

THE COMMON APPLICATION:

SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY GUIDE



A PUBLICATION OF THE ADMISSIONS ANGLE

WHO ARE WE?

THE FACES BEHIND THE ADMISSIONS ANGLE



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Alex and Noelle founded The Admissions Angle in 2019 with the goal of sharing proven strategies for successful college admissions and making such information as accessible as possible. Prior to starting The Admissions Angle, Alex and Noelle both spent several years working at a prestigious college consultation firm in the beating heart of one of the most competitive student bases in the world: Seoul, South Korea. There, they learned what it takes to build a strong college application and how to help students find a college that is their perfect match.

Today, Alex and Noelle work with students and families around the globe to help them cultivate the most compelling, personal, and competitive college applications possible. They are widely considered to be experts at strategic admissions, essay crafting and editing, and academic counseling, but they consider themselves to be mentors, first and foremost. The contents of this guide are the product of years of carefully honed expertise and are intended to serve as a guide for students who are ready to share their best selves.



IN THIS GUIDE...

ALL THE BASICS TO HELP YOU UNDERSTAND AND BRAINSTORM SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAYS FOR COLLEGE APPLICATIONS

- 01** Introduction
- 02** The Why Us Essay
- 03** The Why Major Essay
- 04** The Community Essay
- 05** The Diversity Essay
- 06** The Extracurricular Activity Essay
- 07** Other types of essays
- 08** Resources

WHAT ARE SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAYS?

Colleges ask for supplemental essays so that they can get to know you better! They offer you the opportunity to tell stories about yourself, show off your glowing personality, and expand upon the rest of the items in your application.

WHAT IS AN ESSAY ARCHETYPE?

Each college asks different questions, but oftentimes, these questions can be categorized into models that share common characteristics. These models are called archetypes, and they allow you to use similar templates to write many essays.

HOW CAN I USE THIS GUIDE?

In this guide, we will offer you the basics of some common essay archetypes, examples of prompts, and lists of tips to help you construct your most effective supplemental essays. We have broken the essays down into five different archetypes, which will allow you to engage in meaningful research and ensure that you are including the types of details that the schools are looking for.

THE WHY US ESSAY

The WHY US Essay asks students a simple question: Why do you want to go to THIS school and not THAT school? This is one of the most common supplemental essays, but to answer it effectively, you'll need to do significant research.

EXAMPLE PROMPTS:

- Please tell us what you value most about Columbia and why. (300 words or less)
- Use this space to share something you'd like the admissions committee to know about you (your interests, your background, your identity, or your community), and how it has shaped what you want to get out of your college experience at Johns Hopkins. (300-400 words)
- In 300 words or less, help us understand how you might engage specific resources, opportunities, and/or communities here. We are curious about what these specifics are, as well as how they may enrich your time at Northwestern and beyond.

WHY US DOs AND DON'Ts

DO: Be specific! Name the department that you are applying to. Name the organizations you'd like to join. Name some student traditions or landmarks on the campus.

DO: Be personal! Tell an anecdote that connects you to the school or campus.

DO: Consider what the school values. Read about each school's values, honor code, motto, and overall philosophy.

DON'T: Be general, focusing on things outside of the campus such as location, weather, reputation, or history.

DON'T: Use phrases that could be attributed to any institution, such as "great professors" or "amazing academics".

DON'T: Use the same essay for every school you're applying to.

DON'T: Make lists. Choose 2-3 details that you'd like to focus on.

WHY US

THE WHY US ESSAY

Think of the Why Us as a relationship between you and the school, with some give and some take. What can you do for the school, and what can the school do for you?

THE WHY US ESSAY TIPS:

WHY US essays vary significantly in length, so it is impossible to give a one-size-fits-all template. However, this model is a good place to start:

- **INTRODUCTION:** What first interested you about the school? Name 2-3 specific and unique things that you like about the school. These things will provide the body information for your essay.
- **BODY:** Expand upon those 2-3 things while peppering in pieces of your own experience. Consider what you have already done to demonstrate your interest in the institution. For example, if you are looking forward to experiencing a school's undergraduate maker laboratory, discuss some of the impressive things that you have already made as well as the things you would like to make.
- **CONCLUSION:** Express enthusiasm and mention again connect to something personal, like a school's tradition that you are excited to engage in or an annual scavenger hunt, bike race, or other rite of passage.

QUESTIONS TO RESEARCH

These questions will give you a framework for the types of details that you will want to incorporate into your **WHY US** essays. You will need to answer these questions for each school you plan to apply to. Even if the school does not require a **WHY US** essay, these details are important to work into other essays to demonstrate your knowledge of the institution.

- What is the full name of the college you are applying to?
- What school are you planning to apply to within the college?
- What are the central themes of the school's motto or honor code? Is it the type of place that values tradition? Interdisciplinary learning? Community? Leadership?
- What are some campus landmarks and what traditions are associated with them? If you visited the campus, what was your impression of it?
- What are some interesting and quirky facts about the school?
- What are some notable opportunities that the school offers, such as special centers, institutes, technologies, or partnerships?
- What extracurricular opportunities does the school offer that you are interested in exploring?
- Who are some notable alumni from the school, and why do they inspire you?

WHY MAJOR?

THE WHY MAJOR ESSAY

The WHY MAJOR Essay asks students why they are applying for a particular major or department, and how a degree in this field will support their future career.

EXAMPLE PROMPTS:

- Please explain why you wish to study in the academic areas you selected at Rice University. (150 words)
- Brown's Open Curriculum allows students to explore broadly while also diving deeply into their academic pursuits. Tell us about an academic interest (or interests) that excites you, and how you might use the Open Curriculum to pursue it. (250 words)

NOTE: Sometimes, schools will combine the WHY US and WHY MAJOR prompts into one compact essay. For this, you will need to fuse the two essays.

EXAMPLE PROMPT:

- We would like to know more about your interest in NYU. We are particularly interested in knowing what motivated you to apply to NYU and more specifically, why you have applied or expressed interest in a particular campus, school, college, program, and/or area of study? If you have applied to more than one, please tell us why you are interested in each of the campuses, schools, colleges, or programs to which you have applied. We want to understand - Why NYU? (400 words)

NOTE: WHY MAJOR is a common essay archetype, but if questions about your course of study are not asked explicitly, make sure that you are working these details into another essay, such as WHY US

THE WHY MAJOR ESSAY

Think outside the classroom! Yes, mention specific courses and professors, but also consider the types of extracurricular opportunities associated with your chosen major. This is where you will make valuable professional connections.

THE WHY MAJOR ESSAY TIPS:

Like the WHY US essay, WHY MAJOR essays vary significantly in length. But no matter how much or how little space you're offered, you will want to include these details:

- Write about how you first became interested in this specific field of study: If it's engineering, how do you know you want to be an engineer? What fascinates you about it? If it's psychology, who do you hope to help, and what specific instance first piqued your interest? If it's English, what do words mean to you? When was a time when words were especially valuable?
- Discuss activities you've done related to the major: What do you hope to get from the program? What have you already done to prove yourself a worthy candidate? Work the experience into the phrasing, rather than using standalone examples.
- Mention certain professors, classes, research projects, etc. that align with your interests and are a part of the department you're applying for.

QUESTIONS TO RESEARCH

These questions will give you a framework for the types of details that you will want to incorporate into your WHY MAJOR essays.

- What major or majors are you applying for?
- Who are two professors within the department whose work you admire? What courses do they teach? What is their field of research? What are the names of their most recent publications?
- What are a few courses that you look forward to taking? Make sure these courses are unique and preferably upper-division, since this is where schools start to set themselves apart.
- What are some student organizations that are connected to the major? What do you hope to glean from a relationship with such organizations?
- What internships or extracurricular opportunities are offered in conjunction with the major? Why are you interested in these opportunities?
- What are some long-term career goals that are supported by this major? Think specific, but also think broad: how will an education allow you to effect positive change in your community?
- How have your academic and extracurricular activities supported your interest in this major?
- What makes this major unique at your chosen institution as opposed to other institutions?

COMMUNITY

THE COMMUNITY ESSAY

The COMMUNITY Essay asks students: What can you contribute to the our school's community? What do you hope to gain from this community?

EXAMPLE PROMPT:

- At Brown, you will learn as much from your peers outside the classroom as in academic spaces. How will you contribute to the Brown community? (250 words)

The COMMUNITY Essay can also ask students to write about a way in which they have contributed to their community.

EXAMPLE PROMPT:

- Columbia students take an active role in improving their community, whether in their residence hall, classes or throughout New York City. Their actions, small or large, work to positively impact the lives of others. Share one contribution that you have made to your family, school, friend group or another community that surrounds you. (200 words)

Alternatively, the COMMUNITY Essay can ask students to describe a community that they come from or that they call home.

EXAMPLE PROMPT:

- Everyone belongs to many different communities and/or groups defined by (among other things) shared geography, religion, ethnicity, income, cuisine, interest, race, ideology, or intellectual heritage. Choose one of the communities to which you belong, and describe that community and your place within it. (UMichigan, 300 words)

THE COMMUNITY ESSAY

Colleges are communities! They are looking for students who will be enthusiastic, involved participants, and the best way to prove that you will be a good community member is to show how you've *already* been a good community member. Think: LEADERSHIP.

THE COMMUNITY ESSAY TIPS:

The following suggestions will help you develop details to write a compelling **COMMUNITY** essay.

- Focus on both the things that you **HAVE** done and the things that you **WANT** to do. What is the relationship between these things? For example, if you participated in a lot of environmentally focused community service activities in high school, how can you apply that service to your college experience? What is an organization you can join?
- Demonstrate leadership through activities. Use one of your leadership roles in this essay, if you can, but be careful not to be repetitive with any extracurricular or why major essays.
- Think big and small. What are the small details that you can account for in this act of service? What are the big extensions of how you want to see this change in the world?
- Be specific. What are the deliverables on your community engagement? What did you **DO**? How can you use this engagement at college? Name specific initiatives you want to get involved with!

QUESTIONS TO RESEARCH

These questions will give you a framework for the types of details that you will want to incorporate into your **COMMUNITY** essays.

- What official positions have you held within your school?
- What official positions have you held within your community?
- What leadership activities have you engaged with in your school?
- How have these leadership experiences prepared you to participate in the college environment?
- What does the ideal college environment look like to you, and what would you like your role within that environment to be?
- What is the biggest challenge you have faced in a position of leadership?
- What has been your biggest accomplishment related to a position of leadership?
- What changes would you like to see in your community?



DIVERSITY

THE DIVERSITY ESSAY

The DIVERSITY Essay essentially says that at college, diversity is valued. How will you contribute to this vision?

EXAMPLE PROMPTS:

- Rice is lauded for creating a collaborative atmosphere that enhances the quality of life for all members of our campus community. The Residential College System and undergraduate life are heavily influenced by the unique life experiences and cultural traditions each student brings. What life perspectives would you contribute to the Rice community? (500 words).
- Duke University seeks a talented, engaged student body that embodies the wide range of human experience; we believe that the diversity of our students makes our community stronger. If you'd like to share a perspective you bring or experiences you've had that would help us understand you better, perhaps a community you belong to or your family or cultural background, we encourage you to do so here. Real people are reading your application, and we want to do our best to understand and appreciate the real people applying to Duke. (250 words)
- The process of discovery best advances when people from various backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives come together. How do you see yourself contributing to the diversity of Caltech's community? (250-400)

NOTE: The DIVERSITY Essay is the fastest growing essay prompt, appearing on more and more lists each year. Needless to say, diversity is a critical component to the admissions process. Before you begin to tackle what you bring to the diversity equation, take a moment to consider why colleges value diversity so much. What are the advantages of a diverse student base? How will your presence on campus support this vision?

THE DIVERSITY ESSAY

THE DIVERSITY ESSAY TIPS:

Use the following tips as a guide to help you write a meaningful DIVERSITY Essay:

- There is unlikely to be a singular quality that makes you unique. Consider the intersection of these qualities: For example, computer scientists are common. Lacrosse players are common. But what about a lacrosse playing computer scientist?
- Support your diversity with tangible proof and deliverables (i.e. your activities and what you accomplished with them). For example, how does lacrosse complement computer science and vice versa? What has one taught you about the other?
- It can be tempting to rely on identity to demonstrate diversity. However, we generally advise against this, for three reasons: First, you have probably mentioned it somewhere else. Second, it's better to focus on the things you CAN control (e.g. activities, talents, etc.) than the things you CANNOT control (e.g. race, sexuality, etc.). And third, it's best not to conflate ideology with identity (e.g. political soapboxing). This said, think of the context that your identity has given to your experiences and opportunities.
- Bring in different organizations or initiatives that you want to join or get involved with. Even better, discuss an initiative that you would like to start! What about a club that builds a special app for managing statistics for athletic teams?
- Think about the qualities and perspectives cultivated through your interests. Why are these perspectives desired by the school you're applying to? Then, find out what qualities your school values based on your research. Think of how your diverse perspectives support those values

QUESTIONS TO RESEARCH

These questions will give you a framework for the types of details that you will want to incorporate into your DIVERSITY essays.

- What are all the activities or identities that have shaped who you are today? Where are the compelling intersections among those activities or identities?
- How have your activities complemented one another?
- What is something that you truly value that you want to work toward in college? How could this be of benefit to the school?
- What are some significant challenges that you have encountered as a result of your interesting interests?
- What do you think makes you unique? Why is this something that the college is looking for?
- What do you think you can teach or demonstrate to other people?
- How would your friends describe you?

THE EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITY ESSAY

The EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITY Essay asks students to elaborate on an activity or work experience that was particularly meaningful.

EXAMPLE PROMPTS:

- Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences. (Harvard, 50-150 words)
- Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences. (Vanderbilt, 200-400 words)

WHAT MAKES AN ACTIVITY "GOOD"?

- **Length of participation** - Longer is good
- **Depth of participation** - The more hours per week, the better
- **Achievement** - Activities wherein you have awards, rankings, or positions of leadership are good
- **Authenticity** - Activities wherein you are legitimately involved and which do not feel contrived are good
- **Cohesion** - Activities that correspond, in some way, with other aspects of the application are good
- **Strategic value** - Activities that are pertinent to the major you are selecting are good. Alternatively, activities that you participated in deeply but that are not connected to your major can also be good in terms of adding dimension to your application

NOTE: The activity that you choose to write about should be one that appears high up on your Common App activity list. Think top-three.

THE EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITY ESSAY

The EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITY Essay should be treated as another opportunity for students to tell an anecdote. Why tell what happened when you can bring your reader into the story?

THE EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITY ESSAY TIPS:

Use the following tips as a guide to write a memorable EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITY ESSAY:

- It is good if the activity you are discussing is something that the school offers and is strong in. For example, if you are writing about volleyball and the school offers intramural volleyball, this is good. If the school doesn't offer anything volleyball related, this is not good.
- Try to mention the qualities that your activity has bestowed upon you, revealing your character. For example, a literary magazine could build collaborative skills, while robotics could build attention to detail.
- Treat this essay like a mini-personal statement that is focused on your activity. This would include: Introductory anecdote -- Context -- Problem -- Lesson -- Conclusion.
- If it's feasible to do so, try to connect your activity to another activity. For example, maybe one sport introduced you to another sport, or an activity led you to discover an amazing opportunity.

QUESTIONS TO RESEARCH

These questions will give you a framework for the types of details that you will want to incorporate into your EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITY essays.

- Why do you like the activity?
- What have you accomplished in this activity?
- What kind of hardship have you overcome in this activity?
- How are you planning to extend with activity into your college career?
- What opportunities opened up to you as a result of your participation in the activity?
- What changed over the course of your participation in the activity?
- When was a time that your activity particularly challenged you?
- What does the school offer that is related to your activity?
- How has your activity positively influenced other aspects of your life?
- What character traits are necessary to be successful in this activity? In what ways do you embody those traits?

OTHER TYPES OF ESSAYS

With colleges getting more creative each year, it is impossible to offer a comprehensive list of all essay prompts. However, we have compiled a few tips for some lesser-used, though still common, essays.

THE BACKGROUND ESSAY:

This essay asks students to talk about an environment that helped shape who they are.

EXAMPLE: Describe the world you come from; for example, your family, clubs, school, community, city, or town. How has that world shaped your dreams and aspirations? (MIT, 200-250 words)

OUR ADVICE: It can be tempting to talk about your family or hometown, but we suggest taking this opportunity to talk about a particular accomplishment and how your environment allowed that accomplishment to take place. Don't make the mistake of turning this essay into a deep dive on someone who isn't you! When in doubt, tell a meaningful anecdote.

THE FUN ESSAY:

This essay asks students to talk about something they do for fun.

EXAMPLE: Caltech students are often known for their sense of humor and creative pranks. What do you like to do for fun? (250-400)

OUR ADVICE: Most students do their best to turn this into a poorly disguised academic essay with answers like, "read instruction manuals" or "take classes on Coursera." Answers like these come across as disingenuous and inauthentic, so we suggest answering honestly, but with one caveat: What is something *unique* that you like to do for fun?

Answers to this question should reveal something favorable about your character, so consider how your hobby reflects upon you. Pick something that reveals how you are active, creative, contemplative, or even domestic. Kitchen experiments, gardening, or foraging mushrooms are all fair game in this prompt.

OTHER TYPES OF ESSAYS

THE CHALLENGE FOR SOCIETY ESSAY:

This essay asks students to talk about the most significant problem in the world.

EXAMPLE: What is the most significant challenge that society faces today? (Stanford, 50 words)

OUR ADVICE: When we think of problems facing this planet and the people who inhabit it, many topics immediately come to mind: climate change, wealth inequality, and privacy, to name a few. So if you want to stand out on prompts like these, you'll have to think outside the box. What are the root causes for some of these problems? What is ideologically missing from the equation? And finally, how is this connected to the major you're applying for or your future career goals?

THE SELF CHALLENGE ESSAY:

This essay asks students to talk about an experience in which their views were challenged.

EXAMPLE: Share about a time when you questioned something that you believed to be true. (Emory, 150 words)

OUR ADVICE: This essay is fundamentally about challenging assumptions, but whatever you do, don't fall into the trap of painting yourself in an unfavorable light. For example, it is not a good idea to talk about a time when you misjudged a person. Likewise, it is best to avoid topics around politics, religion, or matters of opinion. Instead, focus on a situation that forced you to take a different approach and what you learned from doing things in an unexpected or unconventional way.

THE FAVORITE ESSAY:

This essay asks students to talk about their favorite book, movie, song, etc.

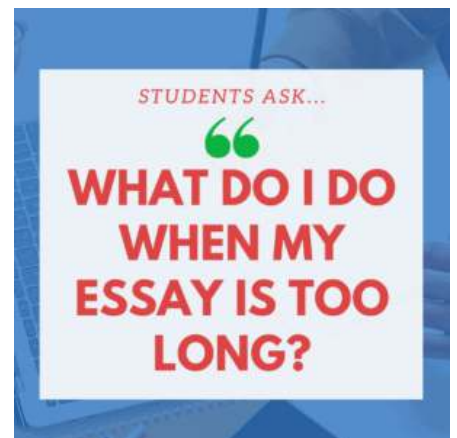
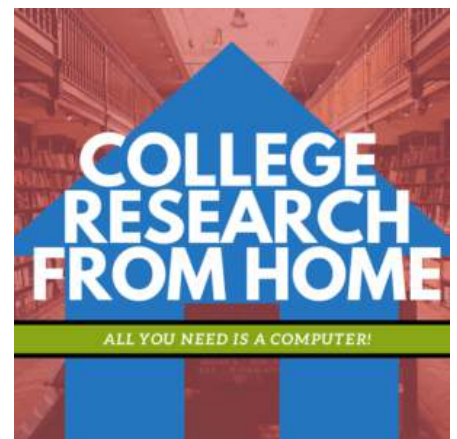
EXAMPLE: You're relaxing on a Friday night. Suddenly, your favorite song pops into your head. What is it? (Pomona, 50 words)

OUR ADVICE: This essay is a wonderful opportunity to tell the college something deeply personal about yourself. Don't choose something that others are likely to choose! Consider that junior and senior year English classes across the country often read the same books. Don't write about one of those! Instead, dig deep, find something that is reflective of your values, choice of major, and career goals, and write about that. For songs and movies, talk about a piece of art that conveyed a message that you appreciated or fundamentally shifted your point of view.

RESOURCES

THE ADMISSIONS ANGLE BLOG

For more resources on all things college admissions related, check out The Admissions Angle blog!



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