



SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAYS 101

Writing a supplemental essay can be a daunting task for anyone applying to college. You want to stand out, but not in a bad way. You want to convey genuine interest in the college, without sounding generic. The supplemental essay is one of the only parts of your application that you do differently for each college, and if you're applying to your dream college, that 300- or 400-word limit may seem extraordinarily restrictive. You may also find that the topic you chose for your common, coalition, or other across-the-board application essay overlaps with the supplemental essay topic. Trying to give a full picture of yourself — across standardized and supplemental essays—is a key component of your college application. Across all the essays you write, there will ideally be places to expand on your intellectual growth, your extracurricular experiences, and your personal story. One or two of these elements can be connected to any of the essays that make up your portfolio. If a college asks for a supplemental essay, the one you write must provide some explanation of why you want to go to that university. This shows that your application has intention.

Balancing all of the things you want to tell a college between several prompts can be challenging. In theory, the Common App essay tells a college virtually everything they need to know about who you are beyond your academic statistics. Colleges without supplemental essays might not be able to spend as much time on every essay, which is why the Common App essay is so important, but supplemental essays should help build out your narrative without repeating what you've already written. To help you figure out what you want to say about yourself and where, Invictus Prep has made the Narrative Synchronization tool, linked [here](#), to help you keep track of what you're saying to each school. This will enable colleges to have the most complete picture of you possible.

There are a lot of topics to try to juggle between your essays, and at Invictus Prep, we know that can be a challenge. Here are some examples of the most common supplemental essay prompts along with some tips and tricks for putting your words to paper.

The “Why This College” Essay

Why are you interested in Bryn Mawr?

—Bryn Mawr College

Some schools are pretty straightforward with their essay prompts. They want you to tell them why they should pick you, not only based on your merits in high school, but because of what you believe you'll gain from their specific environment. Sometimes, a student who could really make good use of a university's resources despite having a lower GPA and lower test scores will win out over someone who has the numbers but not the passion.



If you're applying to a Reach school you really want to go to, spending time on this essay is going to be your best bet. Some of the most compelling arguments are derived from lots of research into the university and what their experience can offer. This means getting into the nitty gritty.

Let's use Northwestern University as an example. Many students might know that the university has a huge amount of money to spend on undergraduate research, because it's advertised in big bold letters on their promotional materials. Few if any students are going to be interested specifically in doing undergraduate research at the Global Poverty Research Lab, where Matthias Doepke writes groundbreaking papers on the economics of parenting and its effects on development and gender equality. If research is in your wheelhouse, pointing out a few professors and a research lab is your best bet, because those professors may be some of the world's leading scholars in their field. Something along the lines of 'Only at Northwestern can I get hands-on learning experience in this field from professors as distinguished as X, Y, and Z' is a compelling argument.

If you aren't going to college because you're interested in something related to research, there are still tons of other topics to discuss. Go to the website for a department or program you're interested in and poke around. Follow links and see where they go. Maybe the university has a partnership with a business you want to explore, or a unique study abroad program that you find intriguing. There are so many opportunities that schools have to offer—picking out one or two to really expand on streamlines your message and shows that you've put in the work to find out what the college can do for you. Noting location and the opportunities a city provides is another topic to discuss—so long as you explain how you'll take advantage of those opportunities. The most important thing is to show that you're familiar with the university and that, if you go there, it will be a *uniquely* transformative experience.

Not every college will give a "why" prompt, but most of them will. For the colleges where it's the only supplemental, you'll have to include other topics, to show off a little and to demonstrate how your past experiences have led you to apply to this college. The 'why' essay is also the most research-intensive of the main classes of supplemental essays. Invictus Prep has created a spreadsheet organizer, linked [here](#), to help you lay out what you like about each school and what you've learned about each program. It's also a helpful tool to help you distinguish between what different schools offer and figure out where you want to go.

The Major Essay

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?

—University of Michigan



Depending on who you are, the ‘why this major’ essay may be the easiest or the hardest type of essay for you to write. Some people know pretty much exactly what they want to study and picking out a few of the many reasons they love their desired field can be challenging. For most, however, the major essay can feel like grasping at straws. There are two main things that you should cover in your essay: a personal reason you want to study that topic and why the school in question is a particularly good fit. In most cases, the “why this college” essay and the major essay are not asked by the same university, so your answers to these two questions can be fairly similar.

A great place to start with this essay is learning the layout and offerings of your degree program. Go beyond the admissions department information and read through the undergraduate program page. Many undergraduate departments are affiliated with research labs, hands-on learning experiences, or community outreach initiatives. Some programs have particular philosophies championed by the faculty or a particular subfield in which the researchers specialize. Demonstrating passion for the specifics of the program can center the conversation on why you would be a good addition to the campus without straying from the “why this major” topic.

You may feel unsure about what you want to do, and it’s okay to voice some of that trepidation in your essay. A good way to pivot from a ‘major’ to your excitement about learning is to frame your college goals in terms of your vocation. A vocation may be something very specific, like becoming an environmental lawyer. It could also be sharing your creativity with the world or helping people become financially independent. College is about developing skills so you can contribute to society and to your community in the way that you want to. It’s understandable that you won’t know the exact pathway to fulfilling your vocation, but showing that you have one is valuable. There are many ways to think about the vocation question, which is why you can let your individuality shine in this essay. Most educators, including college admissions officers, want to feel like they are fostering the next generation. Show them why you are going to be a valuable part of that generation. It may sound like a tall order, but every career provides value and the opportunity to do good.

The Community Essay

At Cornell CALS, we aim to leave the world better than we found it, so we seek out those who are not simply driven to master their discipline, but who are also passionate about doing so to serve the public good. Please elaborate on an activity or experience you have had that made an impact on a community that is important to you. We encourage you to think about community broadly - this could include family, school, or local and global communities.

–Cornell University, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

Every college is its own little microbiome. It’s composed of all sorts of people and lots of different moving parts. College can feel like the step between leaving childhood and entering the real world. The college administration



is there to protect you, but you are legally (and arguably socially) an adult. For this reason, some colleges choose to judge you based on whether you will be a good fit for their one-of-a-kind community. There are two primary ways you can display this. One is to discuss your past and present experiences at school, home, work, et cetera. The other is to put yourself in the shoes of your hypothetical self at the college. Ideally, both of these approaches will flow together, and you will show the essay reader that you are the type of person who would seek out members of the college community and add value to their lives. In a way, the community essay is the anti-college essay, and it is perhaps the most difficult. You have to put the focus on the people around you while showing who you yourself are. The community essay should have a sense of humility and appreciation. Instead of showcasing your accomplishments, you must show how your experiences with your peers have led to your growth.

There are many ways to write a community essay. Maybe when your grandmother was recovering in the hospital, you and your family got together to throw her a birthday party. Let's say that's a day that contributed to your passion to be a nurse. In that example, you don't even need to be the one who threw the party—you just need to explain how it helped you discover the person you want to be. Maybe you have a funny story about a friend group or team at school that can lead into a discussion about how others have helped you become more confident. That confidence may have motivated you to pursue your dream of being a politician who majored in political science at X, Y, or Z University. The community essay must be personal to you—there's no way to fake it by talking about your awards or demonstrating how much you know about the history of the university. If you're a highly academic person, you could write about the academic community and how you want your studies to be interdisciplinary. Some ideas you have may initially seem weird, or like they don't fit, but if you put your own spin on them, you can do something the admissions committee hasn't seen before while highlighting your strengths. The community essay is one where you can really dig deep into the experiences of the nearly two decades you've been alive. If you're anxious about it now, let the prompt sit in your mind for a little while, and a good idea will surely hit you.

The Extracurricular Essay

Explain, in detail, an experience you've had in the past 3 to 4 years related to your first-choice major. This can be an experience from an extracurricular activity, in a class you've taken, or through something else.

—University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

We've all heard some version of the magic formula for getting admitted to the school of your dreams: get good grades, do well on your ACT or SAT, write a good essay, and, more recently, do lots of extracurriculars. Whether a few extracurriculars or many is the best way to get accepted we may never know, but it is certain that being able to say *how* they've helped you grow is key. You've likely spent a considerable amount of your free time doing



extracurriculars like sports, clubs, volunteering, or maybe even starting a business. The extracurricular essay is a place to explain in detail why you've chosen to do your particular activities. More specifically, it is a place to delve into what you've learned about yourself, others, and the world around you. Something to keep in mind when thinking about all your essays, but this one especially: the college experience is about developing as a person—intellectually, socially, emotionally, and in so many other ways. The students colleges are looking for are those who continuously mature into impressive adults. Showing that you are the type of person who learns from their experiences suggests that you will continue to do so as a college student. During your time in college, high school extracurricular experience might inform the help you give another student or your passion for a university club. The extracurricular essay is a perfect place to showcase your skills and achievements and explain how they've helped you become the person you are today.

In order to convey deeper meaning in your essays, try to focus on one or two extracurricular activities. If two activities come together in your essay, it can show that your experiences have impacted your appreciation for or performance in both. A dual approach shows that, rather than staying on the beaten track in each of the clubs or sports you've done, you've found ways to apply differing experiences to something new. If you go this route, try to think of two extracurricular activities that might not typically go together—this will exhibit some of your creativity.

If you don't think any two of your extracurricular activities really complement each other, you can also write a great essay focusing on just one. The essay doesn't have to be simply "this is what I did... this is what I learned." While those are some of the themes you should make clear to your reader, you can also tell a story or paint a picture of something seemingly unrelated to your personal growth. Show that you can write a compelling story and link it to your learning experience in an unexpected way. Most of the essays admissions officers see claim that the applicant is an excellent choice because of all the things they have done and the passion they have. One way your essay can stand out in the crowd is by recounting an experience that shows *how* you are creative and intelligent, not simply saying *that* you are creative and intelligent. The extracurricular essay is a great place to do this, because it's all about things that have happened in your real life. There's a lot of room for storytelling.

The Leadership Essay

Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes or contributed to group efforts over time.

—University of California System

An offshoot of the extracurricular essay is the leadership essay. It has many of the same themes, but it asks you to show how you have helped people around you thrive. The leadership essay is a hybrid between the



extracurricular essay and the community essay. It's similar to the extracurricular essay because it asks you to elaborate on how your experiences have led to your personal development. It's similar to the community essay because it asks you to share what you've learned from your experiences with others. There are many ways you can lead others, and they don't necessarily have to be traditional. Being the captain of your debate team or the treasurer of your prom committee can show initiative and make a good essay topic, but there are lots of unconventional leadership roles. For one reason or another, a student may take on a leadership role at home. COVID-19 had a significant impact on students' home life. If you had a parent who was temporarily unable to manage the household, or siblings or a family business that needed your attention, those experiences can display your leadership, often leadership that occurred outside of a structured environment. Even if you have a traditional leadership role in one of your extracurriculars, think also of the ways you've had to lead and enrich your community, big or small, outside of school. Being a problem-solver and being emotionally intelligent are impressive qualities that many people neglect to highlight in their essays.

The Intellectual Curiosity Essay

The Stanford community is deeply curious and driven to learn in and out of the classroom. Reflect on an idea or experience that makes you genuinely excited about learning.

—Stanford University

The intellectual curiosity essay is very similar to the major essay, but it asks you to consider your academic career in a broader context. Think about the idea of being a lifelong learner and about the power of knowledge in everyday life. School may not be your favorite thing, but try to think about education in all parts of your life, at all ages. You could begin with a memory from early childhood and connect it to later experiences. Think about the ways in which college is a time to explore—discovery for the sake of discovery, discussion for the sake of discussion. Imagine you're a tenured professor at a university, paid to study whatever topic you desire, and think about what you would do. Unlike the major essay, which tends to be grounded in the real world and an eventual career, the intellectual curiosity essay gives the writer freedom to make connections between the world around them and their future studies.

The intellectual curiosity essay can also be the perfect place to mention future internships, plans to audit different kinds of classes, and intentions to do interdisciplinary studies. Talk about your research aspirations. If you are a career- or results-oriented person, think about the ways that far-flung pieces of knowledge have inspired you to innovate. Maybe your dream of being a treasure hunter informs your passion for being an archaeologist. If the major question isn't asked by the same university that gives this prompt, this is an opportunity to talk about why you are passionate about your major. It is important that you display a strong passion for your chosen field, especially if its degree program is particularly competitive at the university in question.



The Diversity/Equity Essay

Duke's commitment to diversity and inclusion includes sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. If you would like to share with us more about your identity, you can do so here, or use any previous essay prompt you feel is appropriate.

-Duke University

The diversity essay is a difficult one to do well. There are many ways that colleges approach this topic, from questions about embracing a diverse community to questions about how a part of your identity impacts you. This essay is all about how you feel you are seen and how you choose to see other people. The most straightforward version of this essay will acknowledge and celebrate diversity while espousing tolerance. Although these themes are somewhat essential, it is easy to write a very cliched essay about diversity, so moving beyond cliché can require a bit of soul-searching. Some questions you may ask yourself: Which are stronger, the differences I feel between myself and other people or the differences they see between themselves and me? In what ways does my identity inhibit or help my engagement with others? Have I benefited from diverse experiences in my life? If not, what excites me about, or how am I preparing for, the diverse environment that college will provide? How do/can the values of home and familiarity thrive or suffer in diverse surroundings? Is that thriving or suffering a good thing?

Many people see this essay and feel uncomfortable. Connecting such a personal part of yourself to college can be difficult. In the U.S., it can connect to political divides as well. At its core, though, this essay is all about your unique qualities and your determination to thrive in an environment with all sorts of people. Sell yourself as a team player and as a person with a unique perspective. If you want to be a doctor, talk about including all types of people in medical trials. If you want to be a computer programmer, talk about developing websites that are accessible for the elderly, a disadvantaged group not very involved in the college admissions process. There are lots of ways to put a unique spin on your essay while showing that you are the type of student who will respect, and grow within, a diverse community.

The Open-Ended Essay

Established in 1978 in a renovated gas station in Burlington, VT, Ben and Jerry's is synonymous with the ice cream business. The company's success and unique brand identity are due in part to their one-of-a-kind flavors. Which Ben & Jerry's ice cream flavor (real or imagined) best describes you?

– University of Vermont

There is not much direction to be given on the open-ended essay save a link to an encyclopedia. On most open-ended essays, you can talk about *almost* anything you want. Start with every topic in the world and whittle



them down to what you think showcases you. This type of essay may seem daunting—and, in fairness, it is—but it is designed so that you can start almost anywhere that feels natural and make it about who you are as a person. The open-ended essay is probably the most fun you’re going to have on your college essays. Between your second community essay and your ninth ‘why’ essay, try to enjoy writing the quirky essays that college admissions counselors throw at you. They are probably going to be your favorite to write and their favorite to read. Make a joke, indulge your weirdness, or go down a rabbit hole. It’s up to you.

Tips On Writing Multiple Essays For One School

Most schools, if they have supplemental essays, will only have one to three. Some colleges, typically less selective ones, don’t have supplemental essays at all. That means you have to figure out how to consolidate the themes you’ve chosen into the essay prompts you’ve been given. Furthermore, there are many essay types that universities won’t feature together because they cover the same general themes. For example, you typically don’t see a college ask for both an equity essay and a community essay. In fact, the prompt may blend them together. The extracurricular essay and the leadership essay are also typically not seen together. The intellectual curiosity essay and the major essay are typically not paired. Because of these overlaps, it’s a good idea to have several stories or topics that you can adapt to different essay questions and use to introduce key selling points of your application.

Invictus Prep has generated a Supplemental Essay Grouping Tool, linked [here](#), that can help you organize your essays and figure out what you want to talk about where. The essay groupings above are just a suggestion. Try to think about the key experiences and aspirations that stand out and speak to your individuality. There may be multiple ways to group your experiences well. Taking the time to plan out your essays this way will not only save you time—it will make it easier to take the same experiences or topics and expand on them differently based on the specific questions asked by different prompts.

In Conclusion....

Keep in mind that these are just a few approaches to writing your supplemental essays. There are tons of ways you can answer the prompt while showing the admissions committee who you are. This guide includes three links to spreadsheet tools, all designed by Invictus Prep to help you organize an approach to your supplemental essays. Adding due dates may also be helpful. We recommend completing them in the following order:

- [Supplemental Essay Grouping Tool](#)
- [Narrative Synchronization Tool](#)
- [‘Why’ Essay Research Organizer](#)



Whether you're planning on writing four or forty supplemental essays, it's always a good idea to map out a project before you start it. Speaking to a college counselor at your high school or at Invictus Prep is a great way to flesh out your plans and streamline the application process.