
Writing Supplemental Essays

Supplements come in all shapes and sizes. Some are straightforward, while others require some creative thinking. Here are tips for writing several different types of supplemental essays. Also keep in mind that supplements work together, along with your personal essay. Think of all the essays for a particular school as a package, helping you present a more complete picture of who you are, beyond what you have accomplished.

Community Essays

Some schools want to find out how you have been shaped by your community or how you might contribute to the campus community. As one senior admissions representative explained, "We have an amazing, vibrant, thriving community made up of students in athletics, strong academics, research, over 1,200 student clubs and organizations. We want to know what applicants do in their community, church, high school, synagogue, and mosque. What are they going to do on our campus to make a difference in the world?"

For example:

University of Pennsylvania

At Penn, learning and growth happen outside of the classrooms, too. How will you explore the community at Penn? Consider how this community will help shape your perspective and identity, and how your identity and perspective will help shape this community.

Swarthmore College

Swarthmore students' worldviews are often forged by their prior experiences and exposure to ideas and values. Our students are often mentored, supported, and developed by their immediate context—in their neighborhoods, communities of faith, families, and classrooms. Reflect on what elements of your home, school, or community have shaped you or positively impacted you. How have you grown or changed because of the influence of your community?

University of Richmond

Spiders are essential to the ecosystem. How are you essential to your community or will you be essential in your university community?

University of Michigan

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.

Before Writing Your Essay, Figure Out What You Want to Share

For the University of Michigan prompt, we ask students to jot down their answers to the thought-starters below before writing a full essay. You can answer similar questions for most Community prompts. Read the prompt carefully to make sure you are responding to all of its parts.

1. List the communities you are a part of (school groups, religious, family, ethnic groups, etc.) “Community” can mean many things; try to get as specific as possible.
2. Which of these communities feel important and meaningful? (that’s usually a small group—my community youth group; my local cousins who get together every Sunday night; the other volunteers at the senior center)
3. Answer as many of these questions as you can:
 - Who am I in each community?
 - How has each community shaped me?
 - How have I grown or changed as a result of being in that community?

Your answers will lead to an answer to “*What do I want readers to know?*” For example, if you’ve become more of a leader because you are the oldest of the cousins, you might want readers to know you are a strong leader, trustworthy and independent.

4. Once you know what you want readers to learn about you, choose a story from the community that illustrates that.
 - E.g., Last summer, I took all the cousins to the beach alone. Our parents trusted me to make sure everyone swam safely and didn’t get too much sun.
 - That was the first time I was entirely responsible for that group.
 - VERY IMPORTANT: How has being a part of that cousins’ community brought me to this point? Because My aunts and uncles have trusted me with their children since I was young, I’ve learned responsibility and independence, which I apply in many different situations.

Diversity Essays

Some colleges present opportunities for students to discuss how they will contribute to a diverse, equitable and inclusive campus. While these prompts sometimes sound similar to the community essays described above, pay attention to what each school specifically asks you to focus on.

Your response to this type of essay will vary, depending on your life experience. If you are from an underserved community, you don't have to share traumatic or heroic experiences to prove your worth. If you are from a community that is well-represented at the school and feel like "I'm not diverse! What should I say?" you can still answer prompts like this effectively. Be honest, and share what feels authentic and comfortable. Your readers already know where you come from. This is a chance to show them who you are. Consider these examples:

Duke University

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 to help us understand you better, perhaps related to 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.

Pomona College

We believe that everyone has something to contribute and receive from a diverse community. Why is belonging to a diverse and inclusive college community important to you?

Rice University

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 is heavily influenced by the unique life experiences and cultural tradition each student brings. What life perspectives would you contribute to the Rice community?

University of San Diego

Here at USD, we believe that our campus community and the communities we engage with are integral parts of who we are as a university. Our students come from all walks of life, have experienced very different realities and bring with them an array of unique perspectives. Some of these perspectives are underrepresented and underserved by higher education. What contribution have you made to your high school and/or local community that best exemplifies your awareness and commitment to creating a diverse and equitable community?

Before Writing Your Essay, Figure Out What You Want to Share

For the University of San Diego prompt, we ask students to jot down their answers to the thought-starters below before writing a full essay. You can answer similar questions for other diversity prompts. Read the prompt carefully to make sure you are responding to all of its parts.

1. What does it mean to you to promote a diverse and equitable community?
2. What unique perspective and experience will you bring to the campus?
3. Are you a member of a group or hold a perspective that is underrepresented or underserved by higher education? How have you used your perspective and experience to build understanding and engagement? (This does not mean taking responsibility for educating those whose views and experiences are well-represented.)
4. Are you part of a group or hold a perspective that is very well represented and served by higher education? If so, what have you done to show that you are aware of and committed to creating a diverse and equitable community? Did you participate in a discussion? Attend an event? Challenge an assumption? Have you stood on the sidelines, but in college plan to take responsibility for your own education about groups and perspectives different from your own?

Activity Essays

Sometimes, colleges want to know more about how you spend your time, beyond what you can squeeze into your brief descriptions in the Activities section. When asked, “Which activity would you continue in college?” or “Tell us about one significant activity,” you will have the chance to write more about why you like it or why it is important to you. Consider these examples:

Vanderbilt University

Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences.

Princeton University

Briefly elaborate on an activity, organization, work experience, or hobby that has been particularly meaningful to you.

University of Florida

Please provide more details on your most meaningful commitment outside of the classroom while in high school and explain why it was meaningful. This could be related to an extracurricular activity, work, volunteering, an academic activity, family responsibility, or any other non-classroom activity.

Before Writing Your Essay, Figure Out What You Want to Share

As with all essays, make sure you know why you are sharing a story or example before just diving in with a full draft. If you want to write about tennis because you won six championships, that information is likely already in your application. If you write about how hard you worked to get along with your new doubles partner, and as a result you became a better team player, that's worth including, because it's something readers wouldn't already know about you.

For the University of Florida prompt, we ask students to write their answers to the thought-starters below before writing a full essay. You can answer similar questions for other similar prompts. Read the prompt carefully to make sure you are responding to all of its parts.

1. Look at your Common App activities list. Which of these activities would you consider particularly meaningful?
2. What other commitments do you have, beyond those on your activities list? Which ones feel meaningful to you?
3. Choose 1-3 of your activities or other commitments to explore in more depth. For each, answer these questions.
 - How would you describe them?
 - What do you do?
 - Why?
 - How does this commitment affect you?
 - How does it affect others?
4. Pick one of the three to write about in your essay.

Issue Essays

Even if a college asks you to discuss an issue that is relevant to you (racism, poverty, domestic violence, food insecurity, gun control), admissions officers still want you to reflect on that issue from a personal perspective. Here are two examples:

University of Virginia

Rita Dove, UVA English professor and former U.S. Poet Laureate, once said in an interview that "there are times in life when, instead of complaining, you do something about your complaints." Describe a time when, instead of complaining, you took action for the greater good.

Boston College

Students at Boston College are encouraged to consider critical questions as they pursue lives of meaning and purpose. What is a question that matters to you and how do you hope Boston College will help you answer it?

Before Writing Your Essay, Figure Out What You Want to Share

Are you passionate about social justice? Do you follow politics like a veteran pundit? Are you a vegetarian or an advocate for people experiencing homelessness? These are important issues, but unless you can explain what you have done or how you grapple with the issue, this essay won't be effective. What have you done to combat racism in your community or family? Why did you become a vegetarian? How has it affected your daily life? How will a specific school's curriculum help you engage more deeply with an issue you care about? Answers to questions like these demonstrate reflection.

Creative Essays

Students generally either love or hate creative essays. Here are sample prompts from the University of Chicago, the leader of the creative, provocative prompt:

- What if the moon were made of cheese? Or Neptune made of soap? Pick a celestial object, reimagine its material composition, and explore the implications. Feel free to explore the realms of physics, philosophy, fantasy...the sky is the limit!
- What's so easy about pie?
- It's said that history repeats itself. But what about other disciplines? Choose another field (chemistry, philosophy, etc.) and explain how it repeats itself. Explain how it repeats itself.

Students who attend UChicago like questions like this. But if you can't bear the question, it might be a sign that UChicago is probably not a good fit. The idea is to have some fun with this essay. "Write it any way you want," the school tells students. "We think of (the creative prompt) as an opportunity for students to tell us about themselves, their tastes, and their ambitions. They can be approached with utter seriousness, complete fancy, or something in between."

Other schools offer creative prompts as well. Here are a few examples:

University of Vermont

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?

Emory University

If you could witness a historic event (past, present or future) first-hand, what would it be, and why?



Wake Forest University

Give us your top ten list. Start with your theme and then post top ten list 10 down to 1.

Before Writing Your Essay, Figure Out What You Want to Share

We tell students to spend some time free writing before they decide what to write about in a creative essay. These are the simple instructions we give them: Set a timer for 15 minutes and see what you come up with. Do it again. Repeat this timed free writing two or three more times. Be playful and willing to be surprised. Don't try to write an essay yet; just see what emerges. Once you find something you like, work on a first draft.

“Why College X? or Why This School?” Essays

For more on “Why Us” essays, where you tell readers why you are interested in their school, program, or opportunity, check out the resources in the “Why Us” section of this guide.