

Writing the “Why Us” Essay

The Why Us essay is a unique type of supplement. Colleges use them to find out if you’re a good fit. Some are just interested in what attracts you to the school. Others specifically ask you to reflect on the school’s opportunities and activities, while still others want to know why you’ve chosen a particular major.

What Do They Look Like?

You will find Why Us prompts in the applications for many colleges and universities. Here are a few examples:

Tufts University

Which aspects of Tufts’ curriculum or undergraduate experience prompt your application? In short, “Why Tufts?”

New York University

We would like to know more about your interest in NYU. What motivated you to apply to NYU? Why have you 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 also tell us why you are interested in these additional areas of study or campuses. We want to understand – Why NYU?

Cornell University College of Engineering

For you, what makes Cornell Engineering special? Why do you want to attend Cornell Engineering?

Bushnell University

Why are you interested in Bushnell University?

Carnegie Mellon University

Many students pursue college for a specific degree, career opportunity or personal goal. Whichever it may be, learning will be critical to achieve your ultimate goal. As you think ahead to the process of learning during your college years, how will you define a successful college experience?

Wake Forest University

How did you become interested in Wake Forest University? Feel free to tell us about any contact that you had with Wake Forest that was important to you.

Santa Clara University

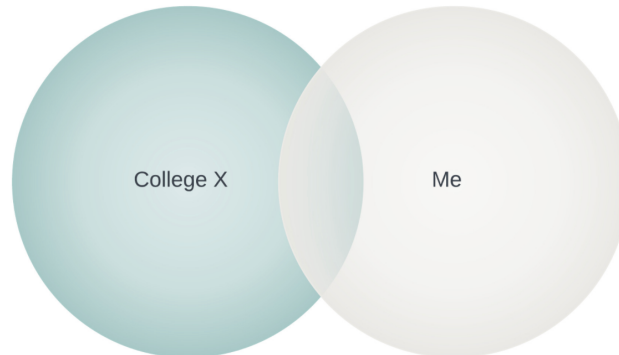
Briefly describe what prompted you to apply to Santa Clara University. Based on what you know about SCU and our Jesuit mission to educate citizens and leaders of competence, conscience, and compassion, how do you envision your life at SCU and beyond?

Johns Hopkins University

Founded in the spirit of exploration and discovery, Johns Hopkins University encourages students to share their perspectives, develop their interests, and pursue new experiences. 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 Hopkins. You can use the illustration below as a thought-starter. As with all essays, focus on content before structure and polish. Make sure students understand the purpose of this type of essay.

How Should I Answer?

The Why Us prompt has also been called the “dating” essay. The goal is to demonstrate that you and this school or program or major belong together.



No matter the prompt, your answer needs to address both areas:

1. College X: What attracts me to this college, major or program?
2. Me: What do I want readers to know about me, and how can I illustrate that? How does what I know about the program mesh with what I want readers to know about me? How can I illustrate this intersection in stories or anecdotes?

Do the Research

Whether you visit the school’s website, talk to alumni or current students, tour the campus, or watch a webinar, do your research! Many students have very little idea what a school offers academically, socially, or culturally when they apply. Sometimes students choose a college because of the location or its status. This is not what admissions officers care about. They may need to know you will be comfortable in a big city, but they are more interested in you, and how their college or program fits you.

Do you have the chops to succeed academically? Are there any clubs and activities to support your interests? Why do these factors matter to you?

You might even apply because you feel at home inside the football stadium and love listening to stories around the Thanksgiving dinner table from Dad, Aunt Lisa and Cousin Diana, all enthusiastic and accomplished alumni. Colleges want students to be comfortable for many reasons, but this type of answer is never sufficient. It does not really respond to the prompt.

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

To begin, make sure you understand the prompt. Consider the difference between Carnegie Mellon’s prompt and the prompt from Tufts.

| | Carnegie Mellon | Tufts |
|---|---|---|
| The prompt | Many students pursue college for a specific degree, career opportunity or personal goal. Whichever it may be, learning will be critical to achieve your ultimate goal. As you think ahead to the process of learning during your college years, how will you define a successful college experience? | Which aspects of Tufts’ curriculum or undergraduate experience prompt your application? In short, “Why Tufts?” |
| What is this prompt asking you to consider? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degrees • Careers • Your goals • The process of learning • The college experience | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Tufts curriculum • The undergraduate experience at Tufts |
| Thought starters | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What degree/major(s) are you interested in? What are they called at CMU? • What career(s) are you interested in? Why? • What does “the process of learning” mean to you? • What will make a successful college experience for you? Consider academic, social, cultural, and other elements that matter to you. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you know about the school’s curriculum? How is this related to your goals and interests? Curriculum can include majors, classes, etc. • What is special about the undergrad experience at Tufts? The undergrad experience could include living/learning opportunities, academic possibilities, activities, etc. Why does that appeal to you? |

Brainstorm Ideas

Using this chart as an example, create a chart of your own with the same headings. Consider the different categories noted in the prompt (academic, social, intellectual, cultural, etc.)

| The School (What attracts me to this college?) | Me (What do I want readers to know about me?) | Stories (How does what I know about the program mesh with what I want them to know about me?) |
|---|---|---|
| Survey classes supplemented by smaller learning opportunities | I am independent enough to make the most of large settings and also stay engaged in a small group | I took language courses at the community college last year. I had to keep my own schedule, turn in assignments without prompting, etc. For English, I took a junior/senior seminar at school, where every student had to participate in discussion and even lead the discussion sometimes. The day I lead our session on <i>She's Come Undone</i> was fun and invigorating. |
| Opportunity to explore areas I'm not familiar with | I am curious about so many things | I am always going to programs at the art museum, library, etc., whether they are about composting, poetry or investments. |

How to Modify a Why Us Essay to Fit Another Prompt

Because these prompts are so common, you might have to write more than one “Why Us” essay. Some are short – 100 words – while others can be much longer – 400 words or more.

This is what we suggest:

- Begin by noting how the new prompt is similar to or different from the other school’s Why Us prompt.
- Use your other essay or essays as a starting point for this one, but add examples and details that fit this school.
- Make some notes about what you are interested in and what this school offers that address those interests (academic, social, intellectual, cultural, etc.)