



Collegewise Guide to College Essays

Our Best Advice for the
Most Common Essay Prompts

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Introduction

College applications can feel overwhelming, especially when you're staring at a blank page and dozens of essay prompts. The good news? You don't need a "perfect story." What admissions officers want is simple: a clear, authentic picture of who you are, what you value, and how you'll contribute to their community.

This guide was created with the help of former admissions officers from each of the schools and systems covered here, along with expert advice from a team of veteran college counselors and former admissions officers. That means the strategies you'll read aren't just guesswork—they're drawn from people who actually sat in the admissions rooms, read thousands of applications, and voted on who got in. Their perspectives shape every section of this guide.

Here's what you'll find inside:

- **Four Foundational Collegewise Essay Tips:** Every college essay—for every school, prompt, and student—will be stronger if you follow our four foundational tips.
- **Common Essay Prompt Archetypes:** A breakdown of the most frequent supplemental essay types (e.g., "Why Us," "Why Major," activity essays, and community essays), with strategies you can apply to any school.
- **UC Personal Insight Questions (PIQs):** Advice from former UC readers on why PIQs should sound like interview answers, not stories, and how to emphasize impact, community, and self-advocacy.
- **American University supplemental essay:** Guidance on how to share a belief, hobby, idea, issue, or topic about which you're excited using only the allotted 250 words.
- **Cornell's supplements:** Detailed advice on why Cornell cares so much about purpose—how your goals connect to each specific college within the university, and how to approach the community essay with honesty and self-awareness.

- **The Faith-Based Essay Prompt:** Our recommended approach to answering religiously affiliated schools' prompts about your personal faith.
- **George Washington University Supplemental Essays:** Guidance to navigate GW's optional essay prompts about changing the course of history and engaging in meaningful dialogue about a topic of importance.
- **University of Michigan's "Why Us" essay:** Guidance on how to avoid generic answers and show real alignment with Michigan's resources, values, and opportunities.
- **Stanford's supplements:** Insights from former Stanford readers on how to write the famous "Excited to Learn" essay, the roommate letter, and short answers in a way that actually showcases your curiosity and personality.
- **The "Why Major?" Prompt:** A deep dive into our best guidance for prompts asking about how you came to select your intended major and/or how you plan to pursue it at the school.
- **Vanderbilt's supplement:** Former admissions perspectives on why leadership and residential engagement matter so much at Vanderbilt, and how to show you'll thrive in their "living-learning" residential college system.

Each section will give you:

- **What admissions officers are actually looking for** (not just what you *think* they want).
- **What strong answers include**, with concrete strategies and examples.
- **Common mistakes to avoid**, so you don't waste words on things that won't help you.
- **Tips, examples, and structure advice** you can use to get started.

By the end, you'll have not just a set of guides for these schools, but a playbook for how to think about any essay prompt you face. You'll understand what makes an essay stand out in committee, how to avoid the clichés that fall flat, and how to use your own story—no matter how "ordinary" it may feel—to write something genuine and compelling.

Two authors, two voices, one shared take on college essays

You'll notice the sections in this guide don't have one unifying voice or structure. That was intentional on the part of the authors, Christopher and Kevin, and it reveals one of the most important lessons in college essays. Christopher and Kevin are different people; Christopher's sections sound like *Christopher*, Kevin's like *Kevin*. Like their respective sections, your college essays should sound like *you* (more on that in the next section with *Four Collegewise Foundational Essay Tips*).

But the authors both *think* the same way about college essays. In fact, they critiqued each other's sections, and both endorse all the advice that follows from here. Whichever sections are most applicable to you, you're in good essay hands.

Four Foundational Collegewise Tips

No matter what the essay's prompt, length, or associated school, you'll write strong essays if you follow these four Collegewise tips. We won't repeat these throughout this guide, but they are the bedrock of our college essay advice.

1

Honest beats impressive.

There's nothing wrong with impressing people. But there is such a thing as trying too hard to impress people. That's where so many otherwise good students go wrong in their college essays.

When writing their college essays, too many students ask themselves, *What would sound good? What do colleges want to hear?*

A staggering number of students arrive at the same conclusion. They'll take an activity or experience they're proud of and tell a story about how it helped them learn valuable lessons or develop admirable traits. It may feel original to the writers. But for admission committees, the end result is several hundred thousand unique college applicants writing identically clichéd college essays.

That's why baseball players, student body presidents, and editors of school newspapers fall into the trap of writing about how their activities taught them the importance of teamwork and committing to their goals.

National Charity League members, Key Club officers, and students who volunteered on blood drives end up writing about how the experience gave them an appreciation for helping others.

Students who've traveled anywhere outside of the continental United States write about how seeing a different place broadened their horizons.

Essays like those aren't just overused—they're often not honest. "Baseball taught me the importance of hard work and commitment" may technically be a true statement for a baseball player. But if that life lesson never occurred to him until he sat down to write his college essays and tried to guess what might sound impressive, it's not really true.

Colleges would rather have heard about the celebratory dinner with his family after he threw a two-hitter, or what it was like riding the bench for two years just waiting for a chance, or how he practiced his curveball two hours a day all summer until he knew it was one of his best pitches.

Don't try to guess what the admissions office wants to hear. That's the fastest way to write an essay every other student will write. Instead, just tell the truth.

2

Tell a story only you could tell.

To make your essay stand out and help the reader get to know you better, share a story the admissions officer hasn't read yet. Two ways to do that:

- Share an experience so remarkable, no other teenager in the history of college applications has gone through the same thing.
- Add as much detail to your story as possible so that nobody else could tell quite the same story.

Most 17-year-olds don't have a story that absolutely no other applicant could share. But your experience playing on the basketball team, running for student body treasurer, going on a family vacation in an RV, volunteering at a hospital, or working a part-time job are not the same as every other kid who had those experiences. Details help you take ownership of a story and make it yours.

For example, a cross country runner doesn't own: "Cross country is a grueling sport. During the summer, I ran seven miles a day just to get ready for the season."

But she would own: "Last summer, I ran the seven-mile loop through the hills behind my house so many times that the park ranger actually knew my name. (I know hers now, too—it's Karla.) When I was gone for five days on vacation with my family, Karla later told me she'd started worrying that something might have happened to me on the trail. She actually considered doing a search."

If you can't come up with enough details to own a story, it's probably not the right choice for a college essay. That doesn't mean the subject wasn't valuable in some way. If you played varsity basketball for two years and loved every minute of it, list it proudly on your application. But if you can't think of a basketball-related story you own, pick a different topic for your essay.

3

Don't repeat information from the rest of your application.

A lot of students write essays about something mentioned elsewhere in their application just to make sure the admissions office notices it. Unless that essay shares something new, it's like telling a stale story you've already told.

College essays should share new information the admissions office wouldn't know from just reading the rest of your application. Colleges know that editors of school newspapers work well with people. They know helping the less fortunate feels good, that football is hard, and that holding a leadership position requires some leadership skills. Sharing stories the colleges already know just wastes an opportunity to help them get to know you better.

The best ways to make sure your essays don't repeat information:

- Pick a topic that has not been mentioned anywhere on your application, or
- Share new information about something you already listed.

One Collegewise student, Raquel, wrote an essay sharing that her festive family loved celebrating together so much, they were the only Mexican-American family she'd ever known who threw an annual St. Patrick's Day party, one to which her grandmother always arrived with her Chihuahua, "Chiquita," in tow.

Colleges didn't need Raquel to explain the concept that family is important. But the great lengths to which her extended family would go just to spend time together was brand new information colleges never would have known about Raquel.

Another Collegewise student, Kenny, was a proud Boy Scout. He wrote an essay about the fact that his friends had nicknamed him "Dr. Kenny" because he carried a first-aid kit with him everywhere he went.

The colleges already knew Kenny was a Boy Scout because he'd listed it on the application. They didn't need him to explain what Boy Scouts do. But the story about Kenny carrying the first-aid kit everywhere he went (and the surprising number of times it had come in handy), was new information.

Repeating a story in an essay is like serving leftovers at a dinner party. Keep it fresh and give your reader something new to chew on.

4

Sound like you.

When writing college essays, some students mysteriously transform themselves into aging philosophers. They mention how they were enchanted by lush scenery during their travels, how they experienced a profound epiphany during a volunteer shift at the homeless shelter, or the moment on the soccer field when a teammate was injured and they realized that soccer was, after all, just a game.

None of those stories sound like the teenagers who wrote them.

College essays aren't formal, academic pieces of writing like those you write in your English classes; they should sound like you, so the reader can figuratively hear your voice and get a sense for your personality. The admissions officers are trying to get to know you, and they don't expect you to think or sound like anything but a teenager.

We're not suggesting you should write your essays the same way you would text message a friend. We're saying you should relay the world the way you really see it, in your own voice. Colleges will find you much more charming if you're honest than they will if you try to be something you're not.

Here's a good way to strike the right tone without being too informal.

1. For everything you write in your college essays, ask yourself, "Would I say these words to someone else?"

No athlete in the history of high school sports has ever said the words, "I personally feel very fortunate to have participated in varsity athletics because it has taught me the value of committing to my goals."

If you wouldn't say it to someone else, don't write it in your college essays. That will keep you from being too formal.

2. Pretend you're telling your story to your favorite teacher.

If you'd tell a story one way to your high school principal and another way to your best friend, your favorite teacher is probably the happy middle ground. Go to that middle ground when you're writing your college essays.

 Too formal:

"I found chemistry to be a particularly challenging subject, as my natural academic strengths lie with writing."

 Too informal:

"I hate Chemistry. I'd rather jab a pen in my eye than go to my chemistry class."

 Just right:

"Chemistry and I just don't get along. I don't know what it is about my brain, but it works a lot better when I'm reading Shakespeare than it does when I'm trying to make sense out of the periodic table."

Common Essay Prompt Archetypes

Not every school has the same prompts, but most of them recycle a handful of archetypes. If you know how to tackle these common essay types, you'll be prepared for almost anything. Below are four of the most frequent kinds of questions—and how to approach them anywhere you apply.

1. The "Why Us?" Essay

(e.g., "Why do you want to attend this university?")

What Admissions Officers Want:

They don't want flattery. They already know their ranking, their football team, and their famous alumni. They want to know:

- Do you understand this school's specific resources, philosophy, or programs?
- Can you make a credible case that you'll thrive in their environment?
- Have you done your homework—or is this a generic essay you could paste into five other apps?

How to Approach It:

- **Start with alignment.** Lead with what you're seeking in a college (collaboration, research access, a flexible curriculum, a performance-driven culture, etc.).
- **Name specifics.** Mention 2–3 distinctive resources (labs, studios, programs, communities) and explain why they matter to you.
- **Show your work.** Tie each resource back to your own experiences or goals. "Because it looks good" is not enough—explain how you'll actually use it.
- **End with contribution.** Schools want to know not only what you'll take but what you'll add—whether that's energy in discussion, a perspective from your background, or leadership in a particular community.

Common Mistakes:

- Listing random professors/courses without genuine interest.
- Writing an essay that could fit any school.
- Over-focusing on social life or prestige instead of academics.

2. The "Community" Essay

(e.g., "Tell us about a community you belong to and how it has shaped you.")

What Admissions Officers Want:

They're trying to figure out:

- Who are your people?
- How have they influenced you—or how have you influenced them?
- What perspective will you bring to their campus community?

How to Approach It:

- **Define "community" broadly.** It could be family, culture, religion, geography, identity, an online space, a club, or even a niche passion.
- **Focus on values and lessons.** What did this community teach you about resilience, inclusivity, creativity, or responsibility?
- **Show growth.** How has it shaped the way you see the world, solve problems, or relate to others?
- **Bridge to college.** Show how those lessons will shape what you contribute in college classrooms, dorms, or student groups.

Common Mistakes:

- Trying to "invent diversity" if you don't feel it. (Better to focus on inclusivity—how you welcome others and value differences.)
- Staying generic ("My community values hard work"). Be specific—use a story, tradition, or memory.
- Forgetting to show how it connects to what you'll bring to campus.

Final Takeaway

Across all these archetypes, admissions officers are looking for the same thing: **authenticity, impact, and growth.**

- **Authenticity:** Write in your real voice about what you actually care about.
- **Impact:** Show what you've done, not just what you hope to do.
- **Growth:** Reflect on how experiences have shaped you and how you'll carry those lessons forward.

If you can keep those three things at the center of any essay, you'll not only answer the prompt—you'll stand out as someone who dares to grow.

3. The "Why Major?" Essay

(e.g., "Why do you want to study X?")

What Admissions Officers Want:

They're not asking for a career plan. They're asking: *What genuinely excites you intellectually?*

Admissions readers want to see:

- Curiosity that feels authentic, not forced.
- A through-line from your past experiences → what you'll study in college → how you might use it beyond.
- Reflection, not résumé regurgitation.

How to Approach It:

- **Begin with the spark.** Where did your interest start? This could be small—a class project, a question you couldn't stop Googling, an experience at home.
- **Show your curiosity in action.** Describe how you've explored it since—through coursework, clubs, independent learning, or even quirky rabbit holes (Stanford officers loved "slice of your brain" answers).
- **Tie it to academics.** Show how you'll keep exploring it in college (labs, research opportunities, cross-disciplinary connections). Keep it about *learning*, not just career outcomes.
- **Reflect.** End with why this field matters to you and what kinds of questions you hope to keep asking.

Common Mistakes:

- Writing only about career goals ("I want to be a doctor, so bio major").
- Listing achievements instead of exploring *why* the subject matters to you.
- Making it sound like a box you're checking, not a passion you'll bring with you.

4. The "Expand on an Extracurricular Activity" Essay

(e.g., "Tell us more about an activity you care about.")

What Admissions Officers Want:

They already see your activities list. This essay is about **depth over breadth**. They want:

- A sense of why this activity matters to you.
- Impact—what changed because of your involvement.
- Personal growth—what you learned about yourself.

How to Approach It:

- **Pick something real.** It doesn't have to be your most prestigious activity. A quirky club, a job, or a family role can be powerful if you care about it.
- **Zoom in.** Instead of summarizing four years, highlight a moment, challenge, or breakthrough that shows your role and growth.
- **Explain the impact.** Did you influence others, solve a problem, or create something lasting? Leadership can be loud or quiet.
- **Tie back to you.** How did this shape your character, skills, or outlook? What will you carry with you to college?

Common Mistakes:

- Just describing duties ("I was president and ran meetings").
- Choosing the "flashiest" activity if you have nothing meaningful to say about it.
- Writing a résumé entry instead of a reflection.

Authors' note:

We do an even deeper dive on this prompt in the next section.

5. The “Academic Interests/Why-this-major?” Essay (An Even Deeper Dive)

Authors' Note: While we've covered the "Why Major?" essay above, we expanded on that prompt with an entirely separate section here because (1) The prompt is required by a number of schools, and (2) Different iterations of the prompt called on us to adjust our advice accordingly.

It's not surprising that so many colleges have essay prompts that ask you about your academic interests. Whatever you envision your college experience to be like, it will inevitably involve learning. That's the piece of your envisioned college future they're hoping to unpack with a prompt about your academic interests or choice of major.

Prompts like these generally take two forms:

1. Prompts that ask about your academic interests *without* mentioning the specific school:

Why are you interested in the major you indicated as your first-choice major? (250–300 words)

- University of Texas - Austin

Please explain why you wish to study in the academic areas you selected above. (150 words)

- Rice University

Discuss an academic topic that you're excited to explore and learn more about in college. Why does this topic interest you? Topics could be a specific course of study, research interests, or any other area related to your academic experience in college. (250 words)

- University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill

Share more about a personal academic interest or career goal. (Optional prompt, 300 words maximum)

- College of William and Mary

2. Prompts that ask about your academic interests *at this particular school*:

Describe how you plan to pursue your academic interests and why you want to explore them at USC specifically. Please feel free to address your first- and second-choice major selections. (Approximately 250 words)

- University of Southern California

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? (100–550 words)

- University of Michigan

Why do you want to study your chosen major, and why do you want to study that major at Georgia Tech? (300 words maximum)

- Georgia Institute of Technology

Brown's Open Curriculum allows students to explore broadly while also diving deeply into their academic pursuits. Tell us about any academic interests that excite you, and how you might pursue them at Brown. (250 word limit)

- Brown University

So let's get into the best approach to take with an academic interest prompt, and along the way, I'll make distinctions between the school-specific and non-school-specific versions.

What's behind these prompts?

For any college essay prompt, there's always a reason—not always an obvious one—why the college is asking. For the academic interest prompt, they're looking for evidence of your *engagement* with learning.

Engagement isn't reflected on a transcript because it's emotional. It's your curiosity. It's your genuine excitement to learn what interests you. While your transcript shows you can do the work, your engagement highlights your capacity to enjoy what you're doing.

One of the best parts of college is the opportunity to learn what you want to learn. Not the same old drudgery of plodding through homework assignments just to get them done, but diving into things that fascinate you, that make you excited to go to class and learn them from professors who've spent their professional lives studying this subject matter.

Students who love to learn make the most of the opportunity in college. Will you actively seek out the subjects that interest you? Will you be an engaged student who's excited to be there? Will you visit professors during office hours, meet with your academic adviser, and talk to TAs when you have questions?

That's why engagement can't be measured on a transcript. Straight-A students can get those grades without necessarily being engaged. C-students can underachieve with their GPA but have off-the-charts engagement for a subject that grabs hold of them.

So whatever the school and their version of the prompt, you need to find and communicate your genuine engagement with the topic.

Mine for engagement

Engagement shows up when you're willingly or even excitedly making efforts to learn about something, whether or not you've been assigned to do so. You and this interest have a story together, one that might include the past, present, and future. So we'll focus on three particular slices of this story that tend to be ripe with opportunities to highlight this engagement.

- The origins and development
- Examples highlighting your genuine curiosity or excitement
- How you plan to pursue the interest in college (if the prompt asks for this slice)

Show the *origins* and *development* of your interest

Good relationships all have a story behind them. How did you and this interest meet? How and when did it become clear that you liked each other? That's the origin and development portion of the story.

The origin is the beginning. What story can you tell to show how you and this topic got started together?

For example:

"I've never seen my father angrier than the day I took our family's internet router apart just to see how it worked. I was 12 years old, and Monday Night Football was just about to start. It wasn't the first time I'd done something like that, but it was the first time I wasn't able to put something back together quickly. No internet meant no football, so the pressure was on. It took me three hours, but I successfully reassembled the router just in time for my dad to see his beloved Giants lose. I never made that mistake again, but I've also never stopped trying to learn how things work."



This example comes out and admits this wasn't the first time the applicant had taken something apart, but origin stories don't always start at what was technically the beginning (people can be friends for years before they decide to date each other). Look for an example that shows the spark in the early days.

The development of an interest shows how this intellectual relationship might have deepened over time. Like this:

"My junior year of high school, I volunteered to lead a fundraiser to send our volleyball team to compete in a tournament 150 miles away. And while I enjoyed organizing the car wash and the donation drive, what I really loved was crafting personal emails to ask for donations, writing the regular updates I sent to people who were supporting us, and penning the travel blog I wrote during our one-week stay. Every day, I thought about new ways to share our story with people who might be interested. Yes, we raised money. But we also raised interest. People who had never cared about our team started caring. We developed a following of loyal supporters, and 18 teammates who'd never played volleyball outside of our hometown got to participate in a tournament with over 100 teams. That experience was the first time I started to understand the power of the well-written word."



Those examples are specific. They're believable. And they have a lot more "oomph" than "Engineering is interesting because I've always liked math and science," or "I learned about communications by taking AP English."

Think of a time when you were really interested in what you were learning. What made you so interested? Was the subject itself fascinating? Did a teacher make it fascinating for you? Did it have relevance to something else you were doing (like the example above of the fundraising writer)?

How did you treat this interest differently than you did those topics that didn't light you up? Did you visit the teacher after class, do additional reading to learn more, take outside courses, practice on your own, participate in class, or even just look forward to that particular class every day?

Go where your legitimate examples point you. Maybe you became interested in business listening to your mother talk about the challenges of owning a law firm with her business partner. Maybe you started a small car washing business in your neighborhood that now earns you all your summer spending money. Maybe you read the Wall Street Journal, or have dabbled in the stock market, or just enjoy reading books about tech titans.

Wherever you were learning for learning's sake, making real efforts to feed your curiosity because you chose to learn more about the topic, that's engagement in practice and almost certainly a ripe example for your story.

Highlight your current interest (maybe even excitement) for this topic

Origin and development are the story of how you got here today. Now it's time to look for any examples of how you currently engage with the topic. Remember, "engage" is the operative word here. The best examples have some emotion behind them.

True mathletes get giddy when they talk about theorems. Students who really love politics can talk about it for hours with fellow politicians. A real Civil War buff can tell you all about their favorite battles.

How do you currently demonstrate your interest in this topic, something you do driven by more than just a desire to get a good grade? Don't discount an example that might seem silly to you. The fact that you and your fellow math geeks solve problem sets together on the weekends is exactly what engagement looks like (most math majors would tell you you'd be right at home with them).

As always, details make the stories come alive, especially when communicating emotional outcomes.

Here's an example without details:

"I truly enjoy working on complex math problems. There is no better feeling than persisting through difficult formulas and eventually working out the right answer."

Look what happens when the details show up:

"My friends and I are the only people I know who have fights about math. Not physical fights (none of us are tough enough for that), but arguments. We spend a lot of our lunch hours sitting at what we call the 'coolest table' working through problem sets for the Math Club, and you'd be surprised how worked up we get about it. But I love it. I love that I can sit at a table with some of the smartest people at my school and argue about the best way to solve a complex math problem. And the best part is, nobody is ever angry when they're proven wrong. We love math too much to be mad when someone shows us a faster, better way to solve the problem."



If the prompt asks about your plans at this particular school

We've covered the past (origins and development) and present (current highlights of your interest) parts of your story. If the prompt asks about your plans to pursue this interest in college, now it's time to focus on the future.

Common mistakes

The two most common mistakes students make here are identical to those for the "Why this school?" prompt:

1. Use generalities that could be true for lots of colleges.

"Great professors," "Small classes" or "A well-respected program"—vague answers like those don't indicate that you've learned much about the college.

2. Recite specifics you grabbed from the website (likely just to answer this prompt).

It might be tempting to just grab some facts from the website and spit them back in your answer, but that won't communicate the kind of connection you're trying to express to the school.

#2 can still work if you back it up with the personal, detailed stories we've discussed above. Stories like this earn you some credibility. But it will still fall flat if you oversimplify your response with something like:

I am specifically interested in the Marshall School of Business because I want to take classes with award-winning professor Kristen Jaconi.

Really? You're applying here because of *one* professor? If that's true, you'd better back it up with some examples that help the reader see the obvious connection. Otherwise, you'll need to dig a little deeper.

To be specific for any school will require that you do some research on your academic program of interest.

Where to start

To find and express your reasons for pursuing this interest *at this school*, consider these questions, and where necessary, do some related research on the school or program:

- Imagine yourself studying and learning in college. What do you envision yourself doing? How does that answer change, or become clearer, when answering for this particular school?
- Have you really investigated your chosen major? Have you looked at what classes are required, what will be expected of you and what types of students seem to flourish there?
- Do you notice anything different about this school's curriculum, approach, or offerings when compared to your other schools?
- Did you read or find anything that fed your excitement? Anything that made you think, "OK, that sounds pretty great."
- And most importantly, do you see any opportunities to tie what you're saying you want to do in college with any examples you brainstormed above?

Here's an example that draws from the applicant's origin and development story shared above (remember, this is just part of the mining for stories process, not necessarily the response as reflected on the application).

USC's Business program is now officially STEM-designated, which is perfect for me. I previously thought I was going to major in Mechanical Engineering until I had that great internship over the summer. Now I want to be on the business side of a STEM-based field. I believe that even executives need to speak the literal and figurative STEM language to understand their business and to communicate with engineers and scientists. And USC's is the only business program that weaves the quantitative and analytical focus of STEM into its undergraduate business offerings. The Experiential Learning Center looks great for me, too, especially given how much that real-world experience of my internship lit me up. Negotiation, problem solving, presenting, etc. seem like critical skills in business but a lot of other colleges' business programs don't even mention these. USC really seems like a place where I could wake up and be excited to go to class that day.



Bringing it all together

So now you've explored potential stories around three areas of this interest: (1) The origins and development, (2) Examples highlighting your genuine curiosity or excitement, (3) How you plan to pursue the interest in college.

Now you need to crash your available stories against (1) What the prompt is asking for, and (2) The prompt's word limit. This will clarify which stories to use, and how much detail to allot for them.

School-specific, or not?

Your decision of which stories to use, and how much to share about each, depends on whether or not the prompt is school-specific.

School-specific

If the prompt *is* school-specific, here are the examples to draw from the relative importance of each, from most to least important.

- How you plan to pursue it at this particular college.
- Examples highlighting your genuine curiosity or excitement.
- The origins and development.

You don't necessarily need to address them in that order, and if the word length is short, you might even discard #3 as it's the least important. Make sure you nail the specifics about how you plan to pursue the subject at this particular college. If you've still got space and you like your examples, layer in those from #2 and maybe even #3.

Not School-specific

If the prompt *isn't* school-specific—without any ask to describe how or why you will engage with the topic at *this school*—the topics to consider are the same, but the priorities for each shift. From most to least important, focus on:

- Examples highlighting your genuine curiosity or excitement.
- The origins and development.
- How you plan to pursue it in college (with or without specific mention of the school)

Remember, your response may not follow that order chronologically. The above list just means that you should use more of the allotted words to discuss your plans to pursue this topic in college than you do either of the other topics.

If the word limit will only let you do the first one or two, that's fine. You just need to illustrate your genuine engagement as it is represented *today*. The origin and development, as well as your plans to pursue in college, can support that current status, but they shouldn't be the focal point.

What if you don't know what you want to study?

If you're choosing an Undecided/Undeclared option for your major (assuming your school in question offers one), you can still tackle the prompt. You'll just focus on your interests, without necessarily committing.

What are you interested in learning more about? If you could pick courses from any areas of study at a particular college, what are some courses you might want to take? Why?

Even students who have absolutely no idea what they want to major in still have subjects that interest them more than others. Embrace the opportunity to share more about these interests, including their origin and development if there are stories there, without outright committing to study them in college yet.

A few examples

Here's how our students and their stories explored above could then be shaped into responses for particular prompts.

Why are you interested in the major you indicated as your first-choice major? (250–300 words)

- University of Texas - Austin

I'm applying as a Communication and Leadership major because I want to develop my existing love of writing and pair it with real-world skills I can take into whatever career I eventually choose. I've always loved to write, but my junior year of high school, I volunteered to lead a fundraiser to send our volleyball team to compete in a tournament 150 miles away. It was the first time I'd ever used my writing to accomplish a broader goal for a larger group. While I enjoyed organizing the car wash and the donation drive to raise funds, what I really loved was crafting personal emails to ask for donations, writing the regular updates I sent to people who were supporting us, and . . .

... penning the travel blog I wrote during our one-week stay. Every day, I thought about new ways to share our story with people who might be interested. Yes, we raised money. But we also raised interest. People who had never cared about our team started caring. We developed a following of loyal supporters, and 18 teammates who'd never played volleyball outside of our hometown got to participate in a tournament with over 100 teams. That's when I started looking for other opportunities to use my writing to help groups get where they were trying to go. I handled all the communications with the vendors for our Spirit Day. I wrote my retired AP Spanish teacher and initiated a conversation that led to her agreeing to do an independent AP study with my friends and me over the summer. And the volleyball blog is still alive and well, with 16 new entries chronicling our preparing for what we hope will be a championship season. I'm starting to understand the power of the well-written word when used to help the greater good. And that's exactly what I want to spend my time exploring, honing, and practicing in college.



Describe how you plan to pursue your academic interests and why you want to explore them at USC specifically. Please feel free to address your first- and second-choice major selections. (Approximately 250 words)

- University of Southern California

The STEM-designation of USC's Business Administration program will allow me to seamlessly combine my interest in both business and engineering, and to pair them with real-world experience. Ever since I disassembled our family's internet router (much to my father's chagrin), I've had a fascination with how things work. But I learned something about myself during my summer internship at QSC Audio—I'm even more interested in the business that drives technology and engineering than I am in the disciplines themselves. While I enjoyed hearing the engineers debate solutions to technical problems, when an overseas manufacturer ceased operations and our COO included me in the team's efforts to figure out how we could still produce over a million units by quarter's end, I lost track of time at work. I loved the complexity. I loved the high stakes. I loved the challenge of facing an interesting problem with no obvious, engineering-driven solution. I imagine eventually declaring an emphasis in "Leadership + Innovation" or "Marketing" knowing that I'll also be developing the necessary quantitative and analytic skills called for in STEM fields. I want to get involved as soon as possible in the Experiential Learning Center programs to practice real-world problem solving, negotiating, and presenting, all of which I saw as critical to business success at my summer internship. It's this combination of opportunities to learn and practice the craft of business, all with a STEM-focused curriculum, that makes me so eager to get started as a Marshall School of Business student.



6. The Faith-Based Essay

Applications to religious-affiliated schools often include essay prompts inquiring about your religious faith. Here are a few examples:

Notre Dame

How does faith influence the decisions you make?

Whatever your relationship with faith and religion, we want to know about how faith has shaped you. Has faith informed your values? Inspired you? Challenged you? Compelled you to look at something in a new or different way? The vibrant community of Notre Dame is made up of students from a variety of faith backgrounds and religious traditions. Perhaps your faith is something you've grown up with, or your spirituality has changed throughout your life. Alternatively, maybe you do not consider yourself to be religious, but encountered faith through a friend or experience. Regardless, tell us about your journey. (50 words)

Pepperdine University

Pepperdine is a Christian university where all are welcomed and encouraged to challenge each other in the pursuit of truth. Students, faculty, and staff members from all backgrounds participate in conversations of faith inside and outside of the classroom. Considering that Pepperdine is a Christian university, why are you interested in attending and how would you contribute to conversations of faith on campus? (300–500 words)

Seattle Pacific University

Why are you interested in attending SPU and how do you hope your faith will grow or be developed in SPU's Christ-centered education? (100–500 words)

Getting to know you and evaluating your fit

Like many essay prompts, faith-based questions are almost always trying to do two things: (1) Help admissions readers get to know you, and (2) Assess your fit with the school. But not all faith-based prompts, or religious-affiliated schools, are created equal. Here's how to approach the prompts and find your most compelling stories to share.

First things first—let's talk about fit.

It's a lot easier to communicate your fit with a school when you, well, fit with the school. Not all religious-affiliated schools are created equal, and there are varying degrees to which each expects to weave faith in general—or a specific religious ideology—into a student's learning and living experience.

Take our sample prompts above as an example:

Notre Dame welcomes "students from a variety of faith backgrounds and religious traditions," and acknowledges the applicant may "not consider yourself to be religious." The prompt is also optional and limited to 50 words.

Pepperdine's prompt mentions twice that they are a Christian University but also says "all are welcomed and encouraged to challenge each other in the pursuit of truth."

And Seattle Pacific specifically mentions their "Christ-centered education."

You get to decide how flexible (or inflexible) you're willing to be around how well the role of faith at your chosen colleges matches your own. But it's important to understand the role faith plays—in class, on campus, among the student population, etc.—when applying to any religious-affiliated school. And it's always easier to express your honest reasons for applying to *any* school than it is to try to reverse engineer a response designed to impress.

At a minimum, here are some qualities you should know about each religious-affiliated school you're applying to:

- What does the school's mission say about its commitment to a particular religious ideology?
- Are students of all faiths (or who do not consider themselves affiliated with a specific faith) enrolled at this school? If so, to what degree are they expected to engage with a faith that may not match their own?
- Is faith woven into the academic experience? Are students required to take courses focused on faith or a specific religion?
- Are students expected to attend religious services on campus?

Again, you get to decide how much weight you place on the answers to any or all those questions. But if your answers for any school reveal a significant mismatch to what you're looking for, you might reconsider applying to that school.

This research is also a place where AI can be your friend. Using our sample schools above, type the following into ChatGPT:

How are the missions of University of Notre Dame, Pepperdine University, and Seattle Pacific University aligned? In what ways do they differ?

You'll see right away that there's plenty of overlap, but also some important distinctions unique to each school. And you can then dive deeper into how each weaves faith into academics, student life, activities, etc.

Now, you'll move on to a critical element of all faith-based prompts: the role of *your* faith in *your* life.

Brainstorming

It's counterintuitive, but the best way to approach prompts like these is *not* to read the prompt and get started answering the question. It pays to do a little brainstorming first—without feeling prompt-restricted—to find a few good stories you'd like to share. Then you can match your best stories with the appropriate prompts.

Just about every college essay prompt is seeking to learn more about *you*. Faith-based prompts are no different. Addressing them begins with a thoughtful exploration and description of the role your faith plays in *your* life.

Here are a few questions to get you started. For each, share your honest answer and back it up with any specific examples from your life.

1. What is the role of faith in your life today?

Forget about the prompt and the school for now. Just consider this question—what role does faith play in your life today? If you were describing this to a friend, with no fear you'd be negatively judged, what would you say? Specifics and honesty are important here.

Consider these questions, and any specific examples that would support your answers:

- Do you regularly attend services at your church, synagogue, mosque, etc.?
- Do you make efforts to learn more, or to engage more deeply, with a particular religion?

- How, if at all, does your personal faith influence your daily life—the decisions you make, the values you hold to be true, the way you treat other people, etc.?
- Is religion an important value for your family? Is it something you share together?

Remember, you're not actually answering the prompt yet, so don't second-guess your answers by crashing them against what you think might be a good response. If your honest answer about the role of faith in your life is, "I go to church a couple times a year because it's important to my parents, but it's not really important to me," that's a perfectly honest, valid answer.

As you consider these questions, look for details or anecdotes that illustrate and support your answers. You don't necessarily need to share all (or any, in some cases) of these specifics when you answer the prompt. The idea is to gather specific examples you can choose to draw from depending on what each prompt is asking for. And as always, details help you take ownership of your story.

For example, it's one thing to say, "Faith is very important to me." But details can make that story your own, like this:

I go to church every Sunday. I'm a lector at my church. I've been a youth group leader for the last two years. I read my Bible and I pray every night. My Italian family is Catholic and it's an important part of our ancestry and our family values. This is who I am, and I can't imagine my life without my faith at the center of it.



2. What is your experience living the values your faith espouses?

Individual faiths typically embody a set of values. What has your experience been *living* those values? Do you embrace and make efforts to follow them? Are there any you struggle with or outright reject?

For some students, their efforts, successes, and struggles to live their associated faith's values are an important part of their faith story.

For example, a central concept of Islam is respect for elders; honoring parents is seen as a sacred duty, second only to worshiping God. Maybe you've had an experience that tested or reinforced these core values for you? If so, that's relevant to your personal story of faith. Get specific and mine for details.

3. Has your answer above evolved or changed over time? How?

Change or evolution can often provide rich details to a story. In the case of faith, maybe you've come to appreciate, or integrate, or dedicate yourself to your faith in ways you haven't always done. What led to that shift? How is your life different now than it was before the shift took place?

For example, a former Collegewise student who's now a graduate of Notre Dame wrote one of his essays about his decision to quit the varsity football team in 10th grade because he realized he was "not someone who wanted to be congratulated for trying to take someone's head off." He rededicated time that would have been allotted to football to joining and eventually leading his church youth group, a decision that crystallized the importance of faith in his life and eventually led to a much deeper commitment to both the youth group and to the church itself.

4. To what degree did your faith play a role in your selection of colleges?

Did you begin your college search knowing you wanted to attend a religious-affiliated school? Was it a non-factor that played no role at all? Something in between? Did your interest shift over time as you got deeper into your college search?

Again, we're not trying (yet) to match your reasons to a particular school. But the examples—and more importantly, the specifics—can help you illustrate your reasons for applying to a particular faith-based school.

For example:

I didn't consider faith to be important when I started my college search. But when I visited Pepperdine, it was the first time I had a sense of what my college experience might be like if I attended a school with other students whose Christianity is an important part of their lives the way mine is for me. I love the idea of not only being open about what I believe, but also exploring it more deeply alongside other students. I could see myself being excited to attend weekly services, to learn more about the Bible in classes, to participate in weekly Bible study sessions with a group of friends. I realized that learning about my chosen major and eventually getting a degree are just one part of what I want from my college experience. I want to learn more about myself and my faith along the way, too. And that's when my college list started to change from what I thought I wanted then to what I know I'm looking for now.



Remember, the answers only work if they're sincere. So resist the urge—just for now—to point your answers towards pleasing any particular college or matching with their related prompt.

5. To what degree, if any, are you interested in faith-based perspectives that might be different from your own?

Maybe you envision yourself thriving in a college community where everyone embraces the same faith? Maybe you're still exploring the role you want your faith to play in your life and are curious to learn from others who connect to different faiths from your own? Maybe you're secure in what you believe but also can see value in learning from others' perspectives?

Whatever the answers are, stay honest and be as detailed as you can be.

Be wary of proselytizing

One word of caution to keep in mind when you respond to your prompts—be careful making the leap from "Here's what *I* believe" to "Here's what *everyone* should believe." Unless you're applying to a school where one religion is so integral to the mission and education that the students and faculty openly share a common commitment, it's likely that some students, faculty, and yes, even admissions officers won't necessarily share religious values identical to your own. College essay prompts are almost always invitations to help the readers get to know *you* better. Be open and honest about what *your* faith means *to you*. But don't leave the reader with the impression that you won't respect others' right to make their own choices.

Match your answers—and your examples—to each prompt.

If you've thought deeply about the above questions and written some specific examples from your own life for each, you've already employed the Collegewise secret weapon of thoughtfully considering yourself, your life, and what you hope or expect to gain from your college experience, all independent of your attempts to answer a specific prompt. With that perspective and the relevant examples ready to go, now you can get prompt specific.

1. Read the prompt carefully and note exactly what it's asking for.

Effective answers to any version of "Why this college?" always share details about (1) Who you are; (2) What you're looking for in a college; and (3) How those answers match with a particular school. But not every prompt asks you to speak to each piece equally, or in some cases, at all. So it's important to note exactly what the prompt is asking for.

For example, Notre Dame doesn't ask you to share *why* you're applying to Notre Dame or what role your faith *will play* in your college experience; they're only asking about the role faith *has played* in your life up until today. And you're only given 50 words to work with. Don't waste words telling them what you love about Notre Dame—focus on the story of you and your faith. If you've thoughtfully considered the questions posed in sections above, your fit with Notre Dame will be *implied* by your answer without explicitly stating it.

For example, the Notre Dame graduate mentioned above wrote about quitting the football team in 10th grade to get more involved with his youth group—a compelling response to Notre Dame's prompt. It *implied*, but never explicitly *stated*, why Notre Dame was a good place for him because the prompt didn't ask for that part of the story.

Pepperdine and Seattle Pacific, on the other hand, specifically ask *why* you're interested in attending each school. But the specifics of each prompt are quite different.

Pepperdine asks how you will "*contribute to conversations* of faith on campus." Conversations are two-way streets; you need to listen, hear, *and* share to "contribute." A good response will speak specifically to how and why you want to be part of those conversations.

And Seattle Pacific asks not just *why* you want to attend, but also how you "hope your faith will *grow* or *be developed* in SPU's *Christ-centered* education?" Your examples of the role of faith in your life (a la Notre Dame's prompt) might *support* your answer. But the focus needs to be how you want your faith to grow or evolve in college, and specifically how SPU's Christ-centered education aligns with that vision.

Each is a faith-based prompt with a slightly different focus. While your examples to support your answer may overlap, make sure each response speaks to the specific information the prompt is asking for.

2. Find your honest response.

Again, imagine you were speaking with a friend you trust. For each prompt, how would you describe your answer *to them*? The answer may or may not reveal anything new or compelling you haven't already explored above. But this approach ensures you avoid that dreaded mistake of trying to guess what a college wants to hear and then parroting back what you expect will resonate.

3. Match relevant examples above to your honest answer.

Review your answers and related details in the sections above. Where do you see overlap between (1) The specific information the prompt is asking for; and (2) Your honest answer to the prompt, and; (3) Your examples that back up your honest answer? The overlap between the three is where the magic is.

Maybe you noted above that the role of faith in your life only became clear to you when your parents forced you to attend youth group meetings, that you soon realized just how much comfort and community you found with students who shared the same faith, and that you've only gotten more involved since. That's exactly the kind of personal faith-focused story Notre Dame is asking for in their prompt.

For the Pepperdine response, you could take that experience and use it as a supporting example to why learning and exploring faith *with other students* became such an integral part of your college search, how you recognized that opportunity at Pepperdine, and how you see yourself contributing to their Pepperdine-specific opportunities for faith-based conversations.

And for SPU, you might speak to the notion of your faith growing or deepening, how this experience revealed that, for you, faith needs to be nurtured and cared for, not ignored or taken for granted. You could then speak to why you want to continue that journey in college, and specifically to how you envision engaging with SPU's Christ-centered education in pursuit of that goal.

It's the same example, but relevant in different ways for each individual prompt.

A Muslim or Jewish or Hindu student could potentially draw on examples that speak to Notre Dame's prompt because it only asks about the role faith plays in *your* life, not necessarily the role of *Catholicism* in your life.

Now, what if that same Muslim or Jewish or Hindu student decided Pepperdine was a good fit for them?

In addition to asking how a student plans to contribute to faith-based conversations, Pepperdine's prompt also acknowledges that while they are a Christian university, "all are welcomed and encouraged to challenge each other in the pursuit of truth," and that, "Students, faculty, and staff members from all backgrounds participate in conversations of faith inside and outside of the classroom." So this student could speak to why that search for truth resonates for them, how it might align with their own religious beliefs and values, and how they hope to engage in Pepperdine-specific opportunities to learn from and contribute to conversations with students from all faiths.

Final words of encouragement

Faith is an inherently personal choice. What you believe, how you came to believe it, how you hope it might grow or evolve in the future—these are ultimately stories about *you*. Whatever role faith has played in your life, and whatever you envision for your faith during and after college, be honest with yourself and with your colleges. Even if you don't have it all figured out yet, that's OK—be honest about that, too. Thoughtful introspection paired with honest reflection almost always lead to responses that resonate with admissions readers. As long as you pair those efforts with an equally informed and deliberate selection of colleges to apply to, you should have plenty of good options come decision time.



Advice for Specific Schools' Prompts

The University of California (UC) Personal Insight Questions

The UC PIQs

Introduction

The University of California (UC) system asks all applicants to answer four out of eight Personal Insight Questions (PIQs). These short-answer responses are one of the few chances you have to share your personality, values, and impact beyond grades and test scores. While your academics and coursework are the foundation of UC admissions, PIQs allow you to add depth and context.

Think of them as short written interview questions—direct, authentic, and focused. Each one is a chance to show who you are, how you solve problems, and how you'll contribute to the UC community.

This section will walk you through:

- The best practices for approaching PIQs
- Detailed advice for each of the eight prompts
- Common mistakes to avoid
- Strategies for students at every grade level

By the end, you'll know how to write responses that not only answer the questions clearly but also leave admissions officers with a strong sense of who you are.

Note for transfer students: UC PIQ 6 — the academic subject prompt — is not an option on the transfer application.

General best practices for UC PIQs

- **Treat PIQs like interview questions.** Avoid long storytelling. Instead, answer the question directly, then use one or two examples to show yourself in action.
- **Focus on impact.** Show how your actions made a difference—to yourself, to others, or to your community. Readers are looking for evidence of growth and contribution.

- **Highlight self-advocacy.** UCs want students who know how to navigate challenges, seek resources, and advocate for themselves. Make this clear, especially in prompts about challenges or opportunities.
- **Be concise but meaningful.** You only have 350 words per PIQ. Every sentence should either answer the question or add a meaningful example.
- **Be authentic.** Write in your own voice. Admissions officers read dozens of applications per day—clear, authentic responses stand out.
- **Don't recycle essays.** Avoid pasting in your Common App essay or generic content. PIQs are unique and should be answered with UC's values in mind.
- **Add variety across your four responses.** Choose prompts that together highlight different parts of your life—leadership, creativity, academics, resilience, and community impact.

Pro Tips for Writing PIQs

- **Structure each PIQ like this:** Quick intro → One (or two) strong example(s) → Reflection/Impact.
- **Be reader-friendly:** Admissions officers skim fast. Make your writing easy to follow.
- **Vary your prompts:** Show different sides of yourself across your four responses.
- **Imagine the reader:** You may be the 200th PIQ they're reading that day. Clarity stands out.
- **Use your authentic voice:** Write as you speak—formal essays feel flat.

Looking Ahead (For Younger Students)

If you're in 9th or 10th grade, start keeping track of moments of leadership, creativity, resilience, and impact. Get involved in activities you care about and look for opportunities to make meaningful contributions. When the time comes to apply, these experiences will give you authentic stories for your PIQs.

Prompt-by-Prompt Guidance

01 Leadership Experience

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

What UC Readers Look For: Leadership is not limited to formal titles. Admissions officers value evidence of initiative, responsibility, and impact—whether that's mentoring a younger student, organizing a community event, or leading a team project.

Best Practices:

- Show how your leadership created a positive impact on others or your community.
- Highlight decisions you made, obstacles you overcame, or ways you supported a group.
- Conclude by reflecting on what leadership taught you about yourself and how you'll apply that lesson in college.

Common Pitfall: Just listing a title (e.g., club president) without explaining what you actually did. Focus on actions, not labels.

02

Creativity

Prompt: Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem-solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.

What UC Readers Look For: Creativity isn't only about art. It includes problem-solving, innovation, and original approaches to challenges. Readers want to see how creativity shapes your thinking and how it will benefit a UC campus.

Best Practices:

- Explain how creativity shows up in your daily life—through academics, hobbies, or problem-solving.
- Connect creativity to your perspective on the world or how you collaborate with others.
- End by explaining how your creativity will make you a stronger student or community member at UC.

Common Pitfall: Only describing what you create, without explaining why it matters or how it shapes your thinking.

03 Greatest Talent or Skill

Prompt: What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?

What UC Readers Look For: Growth and dedication. This isn't about natural ability—it's about persistence, improvement, and impact. Readers want to see evidence that you've worked to refine this skill.

Best Practices:

- Focus on the process of improvement—what steps did you take to get better?
- Share an example of how you've applied this talent in real life.
- Reflect on what this skill means to you and how it influences your goals.

Common Pitfall: Writing only about sports or test-taking without deeper reflection. Unless sports are central to your identity, focus on skills that connect to broader impact.

04 Educational Opportunity or Barrier

Prompt: Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.

What UC Readers Look For: Initiative, resilience, and adaptability. They want to know how you seized opportunities or worked through barriers to keep moving forward academically or personally.

Best Practices:

- Be clear about the opportunity or barrier—describe it directly.
- Explain what actions you took to respond—did you seek help, create a new path, or adapt your approach?
- Show how this shaped your academic interests, goals, or mindset.

Common Pitfall: Using this space to explain one minor grade drop. Save that for the Additional Info section, in just a sentence or two.

05 Overcoming a Challenge

Prompt: Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?

What UC Readers Look For: Evidence of resilience, problem-solving, and self-advocacy. Readers want to know that you can handle setbacks and use resources effectively.

Best Practices:

- Be honest about the challenge, but don't dwell on hardship. Focus on how you responded.
- Show self-advocacy: Did you seek support, find resources, or develop new coping strategies?
- Explain what you learned about yourself and how you'll use those tools in college.

Common Pitfall: Writing about a challenge without closure. Make sure to show growth and reflection, not just the struggle.

06 Academic Passion

Prompt: Think about an academic subject that inspires you. Describe how you have furthered this interest inside and/or outside the classroom.

What UC Readers Look For: Authentic curiosity and evidence of exploration. Readers want to see how you've gone beyond what's required in class.

Best Practices:

- Describe specific ways you've pursued this interest—projects, research, clubs, internships, or independent study.
- Tie your interest to future goals, but don't get too specific about one UC major (keep it broad enough to fit multiple campuses).
- Show why this subject excites you and how it connects to your values or ambitions.

Common Pitfall: Only describing classroom performance. Go further—show passion beyond grades.

07

Improving School or Community

Prompt: What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?

What UC Readers Look For: Tangible impact. They value students who contribute to their communities, whether in big or small ways.

Best Practices:

- Provide specific examples of how you improved your school or community.
- Show both the effect on others and how the experience changed you.
- Even small actions can matter if they show initiative and care for others.

Common Pitfall: Writing about generic community service without personal impact. Be clear about how your actions mattered.

08

Additional Information

Prompt: Beyond what has already been shared in your application, what do you believe makes you a strong candidate for admissions to the University of California?

What UC Readers Look For: This is a chance to fill in any gaps and highlight unique qualities or experiences that didn't fit in the other prompts.

Best Practices:

- Use this space to share something not covered elsewhere.
- Show how your experiences, values, or perspective will make you a strong contributor to UC's community.
- Be specific about qualities or commitments that define you.

Common Pitfall: Repeating points from earlier PIQs. Each response should add something new.

Red Flags and Missed Opportunities

- Don't waste 350 words explaining one bad grade—Use "Additional Info" for that, briefly.
- Don't blame others. Take responsibility and focus on growth.
- Don't overshare or include inappropriate personal details.
- Don't be generic. Each PIQ should add distinct value to your application.
- Don't try to impress with big words or formal tone—clarity and authenticity matter more.

American University

Being a college admissions officer is a lot like being a fortuneteller. Freshman applicants, presumably 17 or 18 years old when they apply, will be 22 when they graduate four years later. You'll learn and grow a lot during that time, especially if you lean into everything the right college has to offer. That's why matchmaking between student-and-school is so important. When you pick schools that fit what you hope or expect to gain from your college experience, you'll have a lot more admissions success than you will by trying to reverse engineer yourself to become what you think a college wants you to be.

American University's supplemental essay prompt gets right to the heart of this matchmaking. Beneath the seemingly general prompt and the limited (250 word) word space for you to work with is an invitation to highlight personal traits shared by those students who flourish at AU.

Unpack the prompt

There's a lot to unpack in this seemingly simple prompt:

American University students identify as changemakers and describe themselves as passionate. Elaborate on a belief, hobby, idea, issue, or topic about which you're excited (250 words max).

First, they come right out and tell you about two traits shared by successful AU students.

- **American University students identify as changemakers...**

Changemaking is at the heart of leadership. Leaders envision a better future—for their school, club, community, neighborhood, city, state, etc. They take responsibility for chasing that change. And they rally the others who want the same thing to follow them.

- **... And describe themselves as passionate.**

"Passionate" means "showing or caused by strong feelings or strong belief." It's the difference between the casual fan who watches a baseball game once a year and the fan who never misses a game, wears their lucky jersey on game days, and can't sleep the night before the playoffs. When you're passionate about something, you don't dabble. You don't plod through it because you think it will look good on your college applications. You do it because it's in your bones.

"Passionate" means, for you, there is real energy and emotion behind whatever it is you're doing or thinking about.

- **Elaborate on a belief, hobby, idea, issue, or topic...**

While "Belief, hobby, idea, issue, or topic" covers a lot of ground, it really doesn't invite you to tell them how much you loved participating in National Charity League, playing on the basketball team, or volunteering on a blood drive. The reader knows you did those things because the Activities section of the application gave you plenty of opportunity to share that side of yourself. I'm not suggesting you can't touch on one of those activities here. But if you do, make sure you're sharing new information about the interest that speaks to what the prompt is asking.

- **... About which you're excited (250 words max).**

Excited means "enthusiastic and eager." While it generally has a positive connotation, you can absolutely be excited about something that isn't inherently positive, especially when you want to make it better (there's the *changemaking* again). An oncologist can get excited about the latest and most promising treatments. But it doesn't mean they love cancer.

Where passion meets action

The best responses will speak to two components: Feeling and doing.

Feeling is where the passion comes in. You need to demonstrate some emotional engagement with whatever you choose to share.

But doing is where you walk your talk. Whatever you claim to be passionate about, what actions have you taken to feed that passion? If the aforementioned baseball fan told you how obsessed they were with their team but then revealed they hadn't watched a game all season, the purported obsession falls apart. Caring deeply about something almost always means *doing* something to demonstrate it.

Changemakers blend passion with action. Wherever your passion and action meet, that's a good place to start with this prompt.

1. Identify your passion(s)

You can't fake passion, so it's best to start by identifying one or more of yours and then pairing it to the ensuing action. Here's a good exercise to get you going:

"Did we just become best friends?!"

Imagine you met someone new at school. Someone you hit it off with and enjoy talking to. Then they bring up something—a *belief, hobby, idea, issue, or topic*—and you immediately feel like your friendship just progressed ten steps in five seconds. You instantly understand more about each other and how much you have in common. You feel like your conversation and your friendship are off to the races because you've each found one of your people.

What did they bring up? What could they mention that would make you think, "Did we just become best friends?"

List as many as you can think of that would elicit this kind of reaction. Don't edit the list based on what you think is a good answer (yet). Anything is fair game at this stage.

So your list could look something like this:

- The Dodgers
- Reproductive rights
- A desire to travel the world
- The Real Housewives
- Fighting the patriarchy

2. Pair it with action

What actions have you taken to feed each of those interests?

Action can take many forms including those that are less physical and more intellectual, like reading, learning, listening, and discussing. If you were actually having this discussion with your new friend, what would you say?

Again, don't edit yourself. If your action around the Dodgers is that you and your dad watch a game at Dodger Stadium 4–5 times each season, put it on the list. If you've never been more prepared for, engaged in, or even enraged by the in-class discussions that took place when your AP Government class discussed the current state of abortion rights in the U. S., put it on the list.

Do your friends make a ritual of watching *The Real Housewives* together so you can make snarky comments about just how mentally unwell so many of the featured players seem to be? It goes on the list.

Maybe you've never had an opportunity to travel where you'd like to go, but you keep a mental list of every location you'd like to visit and exactly what you'd like to see while you're there—you can list that, too.

If you can't find an action to pair with your purported passion, ask yourself again what you'd talk about if this topic had come up with your new friend. If the truth is that you'd both agree you have a shared interest, but you wouldn't have much to say or share beyond that, that's OK. But in that case you should probably eliminate this topic from the passion list.

3. Give it the sniff test

We always advise that applicants answer every essay prompt as honestly as possible. But it's also important to keep in mind what each prompt is looking for so you can share the best of your honest responses.

The fact you think *The Real Housewives* is the best show in the history of television is both fun and revealing—perfect for one of those lighthearted prompts about a note to a future roommate or something you do just for fun. But remember, this particular prompt mentioned *changemakers*. You don't necessarily need to share something that involves making change. But whatever you share should demonstrate that you're the kind of person who will eagerly and thoughtfully engage with topics of *some* consequence.

Now, if your interest in the show stems from your frustration about how women are portrayed in mainstream reality TV shows, that's got some gravity to it. But if your enjoyment is mostly about watching the fights and how they throw wine on each other, you might leave that response for a different school's more lighthearted prompt.

As you review your updated lists of passions and their related actions, ask yourself: Which of these pairings illustrate that I'm the kind of changemaker American University is looking for?

Putting it all together

250 words isn't a lot of space to play with. So make sure you get to the point and speak to both the passion and the action.

Here are two very different responses, each of which effectively and compellingly addresses the prompt.

Example 1:

June, 2022 was the first time I ever heard my mom discuss politics. The Supreme Court struck down Roe vs. Wade, and I could tell how troubled she was by it. She told me something I'll never forget: "I've always hoped you would grow up in a world that was better for women than the one I grew up in. But the world took a giant step backwards this week."

That opened the door for us to have a conversation about just what this was really about for women. It's about bodily autonomy and self-determination. It's about gender equality and power dynamics, health risks, socioeconomic justice, and privacy concerns. Most troublingly to both my mom and me, it's about male-dominated institutions making binding decisions about female reproductive experiences, experiences these same men cannot personally undergo. That's when I decided to join the fight.

Soon I was spending a few hours every day after school volunteering for NARAL Pro-Choice America to promote reproductive freedom candidates. I talked to my friends and classmates about ways teenagers can get involved to rally our state lawmakers to pass legislation. I started to speak up. I recognize now that these rights being threatened are my rights, too. It's up to me and my generation to step up and pick up where mothers like mine left off. And until our rights are secured, I'm not just joining the fight—I'm in it to win it.



Analysis:

The first and second paragraphs convey real passion for this topic. It's clear to the reader that this is not an abstract political exercise for the writer—it's personal, made even more so by the conversations with her mother. She highlights her knowledge of the issue which backs up the purported passion. And the third paragraph is all about the action. She's not just *saying* she cares about the topic; she's *doing* something about it. And it makes a strong, compelling case to the American University admissions committee that she is exactly the kind of student who will lean into the opportunities to learn, engage, and create change AU and its proximity to DC offer to students who are ready for it.

Example 2:

October 30, 2024 was likely the happiest day of my then 16-year-old life—my beloved Los Angeles Dodgers beat the Yankees 7–6 to win the World Series. My dad grew up in Pasadena, California, not far from Dodger Stadium, and he watched as many games as our modest cable TV setup would allow him to view while I was growing up. But baseball didn't take hold for me until I was about 13. I can't even pinpoint what changed, but over the course of one full season, I went from casual fan to a rabid member of Dodger Nation, much to my father's delight. Watching, following, and discussing The Dodgers has become a family tradition for Dad and me.

I'm not one of those people who immediately can't stand anyone who roots for a Dodgers rival. In fact, I respect any loyal fan who stays with their team through the good years and bad. I love baseball and what it means for people who embrace it. I love the optimism true fans channel to start the season. I love the drama as the playoffs take shape. I love the tradition my dad and I have created and how it's deepened our relationship together. When I start college, the World Series will be right around the corner. I expect my Dodgers to be there, but even if they aren't, I'll watch with any of my new freshman friends—Dodger fans or not—who love baseball as much as I do.



Analysis:

The Dodgers certainly don't carry the same topical gravitas of a contentious political issue, and if this applicant had shown the same passion and commitment to something beyond sports, we might have advised they speak to that subject. But this example demonstrates how passion and action can be compelling even when channeled into something that's purely for entertainment purposes. The connection baseball has forged between the writer and their father reflects a deeper meaning than simply rooting for a team. The writer alludes to the actions they take around baseball in connection with being a true fan as opposed to a casual one. They paint a picture of connecting with other baseball fans and sharing their common interest.

Real passion can't be faked. This response is inevitably stronger than it would have been had the writer chosen a different subject they thought would be more impressive to the reader but in practice were simply not as passionate about as they were baseball.

As one of our counselors who previously worked at Stanford once said, "If you don't care about [whatever it is you're writing about], there's no way an admissions officer will care about it."

University of Michigan

Introduction

Michigan's readers want to know why Michigan—**specifically**—is the right place for you. Your job is to connect your interests and experiences to the particular College or School you're applying to (LSA, Engineering, SMTD, Ross, etc.) and to show how you'll use its resources to grow academically, personally, and professionally.

Big idea: if you can swap "Michigan" for another school's name and your essay still works, it's not specific enough.

What Michigan is Actually Looking For

- **Real fit with a specific College/School.** Not just "Michigan is great," but *why this College's* approach, curriculum, and opportunities match you.
- **Evidence you've done your homework.** Programs, learning approaches, labs/centers, studios, institutes, themes—details that show you understand the place. (You do **not** need to drop random course/professor names unless you have a genuine connection.)
- **A through-line from past → present → Michigan → future.** Your activities and curiosities should naturally lead to what you'll pursue at Michigan—and to where that could take you.

How to Research (Fast but Effective)

- Start at your College/School page (e.g., LSA, CoE, SMTD, SEAS). Skim the degree requirements, distinctive programs, and learning philosophy (first-year sequences, project-based courses, research for undergrads, etc.).
- Jot 3–5 specific Michigan things that truly excite you (centers, studios, learning communities, initiatives, study-abroad models, student orgs tied to your field). If you don't feel anything, keep digging—you haven't hit the right matches yet.
- Match each Michigan item to something you already do or care about so your essay becomes "this is who I am → this is how I'll use that."

A Simple Structure that Works

Paragraph 1 — Personal connection to Michigan (2–3 sentences).

Open with a crisp why-Michigan hook *and* name the specific College/School you're applying to. Set the stage for what you're seeking in a learning community.

Paragraph 2 — Specific qualities of the College/School (5–6 sentences).

Explain *which* academic features fit you (programs, labs/centers, teaching approach, research access, learning communities). Include non-academic pieces only if they truly matter to your growth (certain orgs, service models, performance ensembles, etc.). Use genuine specifics over name-dropping.

Paragraph 3 — Connection to your interests (5–7 sentences).

Bridge your past work (courses, projects, competitions, jobs, community work) to what you'll do at Michigan (how the curriculum/resources will deepen your path). Show alignment, not flattery.

Paragraph 4 — Future goals + Michigan's role (4–5 sentences).

Zoom out: how Michigan's approach, people, and resources will help you grow into your next step (impact you hope to make, questions you want to study, communities you want to serve). Tie back to the College/School so it couldn't be written about anywhere else.

Do's and Don'ts



Do:

- Tie each Michigan detail to something about you: interest → Michigan resource → expected use/impact.
- Keep the focus on the College/School fit (curriculum, method, access to research/creation/entrepreneurship).
- Sound like a person, not a brochure. Explain why these features matter to you.



Don't:

- Paste a list of courses/profs you found in 30 seconds—only mention specifics you can authentically justify.
- Write a generic "Why Us" that could fit five other schools. (Michigan readers can spot this instantly.)
- Spend the whole essay on sports, vibe, or prestige. Culture can appear, but academics come first.

Common Pitfalls (and Fixes)

- **Pander-listing.** *Fix:* Replace lists with 1–2 meaningful Michigan matches you can discuss in depth.
- **All future, no past.** *Fix:* Anchor your plans in what you've already done so your goals feel credible.
- **All vibe, no curriculum.** *Fix:* Lead with the College/School's learning model; add community elements later.

A Quick Fill-in Outline (use, then put it in your own words)

- **Hook + College/School:** One sentence that shows your angle and names the unit.
- **Two Michigan fits:** Program/approach/center → why it matters to *you*.
- **Bridge from past:** What you've done that sets you up to use those resources.
- **Future + impact:** The problems you want to work on and how Michigan's model helps.

Final Reminder

Your Michigan essay should only make sense *for Michigan*. If swapping the name still works, it's not ready. Keep revising until your voice, your experiences, and Michigan's specific College/School are unmistakably intertwined.

Stanford University

Introduction

Stanford's application is famous for its supplements. While your grades, courses, and activities show you are competitive, the essays are where you must be **compelling**. They are your chance to show intellectual curiosity, personality, and authenticity. Stanford is not looking for the "best" future computer scientists or doctors—they want students who are *interesting, curious, and different* so that every dorm, classroom, and late-night dining hall conversation feels alive.

Your job is to show that you are not only academically prepared but also someone who will bring energy, creativity, and perspective to the Stanford community.

General Best Practices

- **Curiosity is the core.** Stanford readers want proof that you genuinely enjoy learning—not as a chore, but as a gift. Show them how your brain lights up when you encounter something new.
- **Authenticity over polish.** Don't try to sound like a professor or a politician. Write like yourself. Admissions officers can tell when an essay has been over-edited into something sterile.
- **Supplements > Personal Statement.** At highly selective schools, supplements often matter more than your Common App essay. Stanford wrote these prompts to learn something specific about you—take them seriously.
- **Don't recycle.** Avoid reusing a Common App essay or another school's supplement. Stanford's questions are distinctive; your answers should be too.
- **Balance variety.** Across all your responses, show multiple sides of yourself—intellectual, personal, creative, quirky, reflective.

Key Stanford Prompts

01 "Excited to Learn" Essay

Tell us about an idea or experience that makes you excited to learn."

This is **not** a "Why Major" essay. Stanford doesn't even admit students by major—you don't need to tie it to your future career. Instead, think of it as your chance to show *how your brain works*.

What Readers Want:

- A genuine display of curiosity.
- A "slice of your brain"—let them see you following questions, exploring tangents, making connections.
- Original insight. Even if others have thought of it before, show *your* path to getting there.

Tips:

- Take them into your head. Instead of summarizing ("I learned X, then Y"), narrate the thought process ("I wondered why paper cuts hurt so much, so I looked up...").
- Use concrete details—show us the Wikipedia rabbit hole, the TikTok that sparked a deep dive, the random YouTube video that changed how you see something.
- Show that you ask great questions, even if you don't have all the answers.

Green Flags: Original thinking, curiosity that feels contagious, an authentic voice.

Beige Flags: A book report, summarizing without analysis, sounding like you're performing "intellectual" instead of being yourself.

02

"Note to Roommate" Essay

"Virtually all of Stanford's undergraduates live on campus. Write a note to your future roommate that reveals something about you or that will help your roommate—and us—get to know you better."

This is your chance to be **likable, quirky, and real** (Stanford literally jokes about being the "nerd farm" — long story; it used to be Leland Stanford's actual farm, Google it — so lean into and celebrate your nerdiness!). Don't brag. Don't list accomplishments. Instead, think of it as writing a fun, authentic introduction you'd actually send to a friend you haven't met yet.

Tips:

- Write as if your smartest, coolest potential roommate is reading.
- Use humor, small quirks, or unusual habits. Show your personality, not your résumé.
- Think of it like a friendship-only dating app profile—what's it like to live with you, talk with you, laugh with you?
- Show warmth and humility.

What Not to Do:

- Don't turn it into another activity list.
- Don't try to impress; try to connect.

03

Short Answer Questions

Stanford asks several 50-word questions, including:

- "What is the most significant challenge society faces today?"
- "How did you spend your last two summers?"
- "Which historical moment or event would you have liked to witness?"

Tips:

- **Challenge facing society:** Make it yours. Avoid clichés ("climate change") unless you have a unique angle. Show depth of thought in very few words.

- **Summers:** Be efficient. Instead of long descriptions of two things, give a quick snapshot of several meaningful activities. Don't just copy your activity list.
- **Historical moment:** Have fun. Choose something that genuinely fascinates you, not something that makes you look like a future chemistry major. Enthusiasm matters more than alignment with your intended field.

Personal Statements vs. Supplements

At Stanford, your Common App essay should be your best work, but the supplements are where Stanford gets to ask the questions they care about most—and where you must really deliver.

Big Picture Advice

- **Be competitive to enter, compelling to win.** Strong grades and rigor get you considered. Essays and activities make you stand out.
- **Show impact and curiosity.** Whether in essays or activities, show how you made a difference and how you think deeply.
- **Be human.** Include at least one thing you do "for you," not just for your application. Genuine passion reads as authentic.
- **Supplements are often where Stanford decisions happen.** Use them to show why you'd be an unforgettable addition to the class.

Cornell University

Supplemental Essay Prompts

Introduction

Cornell University is unique among the Ivy League schools because it is made up of separate undergraduate colleges, each with its own mission, focus, and admissions priorities. When you apply to Cornell, you don't just apply to the university—you apply to a *specific college* within Cornell. That means your essays need to do two big things:

- **Show Purpose:** Demonstrate a clear sense of why you're drawn to your chosen field or major, and how your interests connect with Cornell's mission.
- **Show Fit:** Explain why Cornell, and specifically your chosen college, is the right environment for you to explore that purpose.

Your essays aren't just about proving you're a strong student. They're about showing that you've thought deeply about what you want to study, why it matters to you, and why Cornell is the place to pursue it.

The Cornell Supplemental Essays

01 The Community Essay (Required for All Applicants)

"We all contribute to, and are influenced by the communities that are meaningful to us. Share how you've been shaped by one of the communities you belong to. Define community in the way that is most meaningful to you. This community example can be drawn from your family, school, workplace, activities or interests, or any other group you belong to."

What Readers Look For:

- Evidence that you understand Cornell's values: inclusivity, collaboration, and progressive outlook.
- A picture of how you'll contribute to the community—academically, socially, or personally.
- Self-awareness about your own background and how it shapes your perspective.

Tips:

- **Be authentic.** Don't try to "manufacture diversity." If you come from a background that has shaped you in meaningful ways (family, culture, economic struggles, faith, geography), share it honestly. Admissions officers want context.
- **Majority students:** If you don't have a "different" background to write about, focus on inclusivity. How have you welcomed others? How have you learned from people with different perspectives? Show that you'll help foster the kind of diverse, open community Cornell values.
- **Use examples.** Don't just say "I value inclusivity"—show a moment where you practiced it.

Green Flags: Specificity, humility, self-awareness, genuine examples of inclusivity.

Red Flags: Bragging, trying to prove you're "diverse" when it doesn't feel authentic, generic platitudes without examples.

02 The College-Specific Essay

Each Cornell college has its own version of the classic "Why Major? Why Us?" essay. These are probably the most important supplements in your application—they're where admissions officers look first to see if you belong in their program.

What Readers Want:

- A strong connection between your experiences and your chosen college's mission.
- A sense of purpose, not just career ambition. Don't frame Cornell as a pre-professional stepping stone ("I want to be a doctor, so I'll major in biology"). Instead, frame it around your intellectual curiosity and the values that drive your interest.
- Specific knowledge of Cornell's offerings—courses, professors, labs, clubs, or approaches that are distinctive.

Tips:

- **Tell the story of how your interest developed.** Admissions officers want to know the "why" behind your choice. Did it grow out of family experience, a long-term hobby, a unique class, or a formative project?
- **Connect to Cornell's unique resources.** For example, Cornell is one of the only universities with both a College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS) and a College of Engineering. Show that you know which one fits you—and why.
- **Focus on learning, not just outcomes.** Don't just say, "I want to become a lawyer." Instead, say, "I want to study Industrial and Labor Relations because I care about how workplaces shape people's lives, and Cornell's ILR curriculum will help me explore labor policy at its roots."

Green Flags: Deep self-awareness, clear knowledge of Cornell's programs, purpose-driven goals, alignment with the college's mission.

Red Flags: Generic "Why Cornell" answers, pre-professional focus without intellectual grounding, answers that could apply to any school.

Big Picture Advice for Cornell

- **Supplements are critical.** They often carry more weight than your personal statement because each Cornell college asks for what matters to them.
- **Lead with purpose.** Show what drives you, and connect it to Cornell's mission.
- **Show fit, not prestige-chasing.** Don't write as if Cornell is just a brand name to boost your career. Show why Cornell specifically is the place you need.
- **Let your activities back it up.** A well-aligned activities list confirms that your interests aren't new or superficial.
- **Be human.** Cornell values students who are curious, purposeful, and community-minded. Essays that feel authentic and reflective will stand out.

The George Washington University

George Washington University. The name, the location, and yes, even the essay prompts speak to the centerpiece of politics so enduringly central to the GW experience. Their optional essay prompts give applicants a chance to share more about their own engagement with current events, public policy, and efforts to create meaningful change.

The prompts

Here are the prompts and their relevant instructions as they appear on the GW website:

In addition to the required essay, GW offers an optional Writing Supplement on the Common Application. The GW supplemental essay is a chance for an applicant to show their personality and make connections between their experiences and GW's institutional values. While this optional essay may give additional context to the application, those who do not submit it will not be penalized.

Supplemental (Optional) Essay

Every applicant can choose from one of the following two essay prompts to submit.

Essay Prompt 1

At the George Washington University, our students frequently interact with policymakers and world leaders. These experiences and those of our alumni can shape the future of global affairs. If you had the power to change the course of history in your community or the world, what would you do and why? (500 words or fewer).

Essay Prompt 2

The George Washington University encourages students to think critically and to challenge the status quo. Thus, civil discourse is a key characteristic of our community. Describe a time when you engaged others in meaningful dialogue around an issue that was important to you. Did this exchange create change, new perspectives, or deeper relationships? (500 words or fewer).

Is it really optional?

Sometimes two seemingly contradictory truths can coexist. This is one of those times, because both of these things are true.

- Yes, GW means it when they say those who do not submit an essay will not be penalized.
- If you really want to attend GW—and if you have something to say in response to either of the prompts (more on that later)—you should write the optional essay.

GW is one of those selective schools that turns away a lot of highly qualified candidates. But they also lose many of their strong admits to other colleges. A George Washington admissions reader will not assume an applicant who opted out of the optional essay just isn't interested in GW. But these prompts are an opportunity to strengthen both your candidacy *and* your perceived match with GW.

That opportunity is difficult to pass up if you really want to attend GW.

If you read through our advice here and recognize you have something to say in response to one of the prompts, jump on that opportunity to strengthen your application. On the other hand, if you decide you just don't have much to draw from to generate an answer you'd be proud of, opt out of the essay. Better not to dull the luster of your presumably strong application with an essay you had to squeeze too hard to produce.

Unpacking the prompts

Let's look at each prompt in more detail:

Prompt 1:

At the George Washington University, our students frequently interact with policymakers and world leaders. These experiences and those of our alumni can shape the future of global affairs. If you had the power to change the course of history in your community or the world, what would you do and why? (500 words or fewer).

The best responses to this prompt will reflect two criteria around whatever change the writer points to: (1) An understanding of the topic's complexity, and (2) an emotional engagement with the topic.

Weak responses tend to smack of drive-by engagement; the writer picks something no reasonable person could argue with—*I'd cure all forms of pediatric cancer*—and reveals no clear connection between the writer and the purported change. The cursory treatment of the topic reads as if the writer had never considered the need for this change until now. They're finding something to say because they've been asked to write an essay.

Stronger responses, on the other hand, will reflect the writer's knowledge of, and engagement with, the topic. It will read as if the writer didn't need to *search* for an appropriate answer—they just needed the opportunity to share a topic that was already on their mind.

Here's a good litmus test: if you asked your best friend or someone else who knows you very well what you might say in response to this prompt, could they guess? Would they get close?

It's certainly possible you care deeply about a topic but choose not to share it with others for your own reasons. But in most cases, the more you care about something, the more likely you are to share it with people who care about you. If you've done that around a change you'd like to make in your community or the world, you've got something to say that might resonate with an admissions reader.

I'm not suggesting you need to be an expert on the topic or that you couldn't possibly produce a good response unless you have the answer readily available at the top of your mind. But the prompt does come out and say: *At the George Washington University, our students frequently interact with policymakers and world leaders. These experiences and those of our alumni can shape the future of global affairs...*

GW is looking for students who will use their GW education as preparation to arrive at those interactions eager, engaged, and informed. Compelling responses will reveal you're the kind of person who's already started walking down that path.

Prompt 2:

The George Washington University encourages students to think critically and to challenge the status quo. Thus, civil discourse is a key characteristic of our community. Describe a time when you engaged others in meaningful dialogue around an issue that was important to you. Did this exchange create change, new perspectives, or deeper relationships? (500 words or fewer).

The two most important words in that prompt are "civil discourse," a term that's become difficult to define without oversimplifying it. Google "What is civil discourse?" and you'll see how complicated this gets. But here's where most definitions agree: Civil discourse is rooted in *shared intent*. Both parties share a similar desire to learn from each other. They can exchange ideas and opinions, speak honestly, and express themselves respectfully.

What's behind the prompt?

Divisiveness is running rampant in our world, particularly in the United States, today. In the last year alone, the ideal of free expression has changed dramatically on college campuses, with increasing support across political lines for abandoning civil discourse. Some groups have even endorsed violent tactics. And colleges are wrestling with the idea of how to best support their students' right to express themselves while keeping them safe at the same time.

Neither George Washington nor their prompt are asking you to embrace universal civility across all topics. They're asking you to share an example of *one conversation* when you did. If you can demonstrate both the ability and the willingness to engage in civil discourse while you're in high school, you'll likely be able to do it in college, too, especially in a classroom with a skilled professor moderating the discussion.

Do you *have* to be civil?

Members of some groups might reasonably push back on the idea of engaging in civil discussion around a topic that affects them. For example, is it reasonable to expect a person of color and a white supremacist to have a respectful, open conversation with a desire to learn from each other?

We're not here to tell you what to think or how to express yourself; we're here to help you write a compelling response to *this prompt*. And the best responses will show you engaged in civil discourse as it's defined as *an ideal*.

You get to decide when (or if) it's appropriate to set civility aside in your life. But the conversation you share in this prompt should be one in which your civility led the way.

Which prompt to pick?

There's no inherent strategic advantage to picking one prompt over the other. Instead, go where your strongest answer is.

When you read the insights above, did a response come to mind for one or both prompts? Something you might have said had someone just asked you a similar question? Something where the details are already there and you'd just need to figure out which to share and how to share them?

If yes, go where your strongest answer is.

If not, if you just don't have an honest, rich-with-details response that satisfies the criteria outlined above, sleep on it for one night. If you still don't have anything in the light of day, embrace the option to opt out. Again, you want to share a response that *strengthens* your application. What you share should be additive. If you've got that, share it. But this is one of those times when something isn't always better than nothing.

Prompt-specific advice

Prompt 1:

At the George Washington University, our students frequently interact with policymakers and world leaders. These experiences and those of our alumni can shape the future of global affairs. If you had the power to change the course of history in your community or the world, what would you do and why? (500 words or fewer).

So, you're confident you have at least a reasonable understanding of the topic's complexity, and you care enough about your proposed change that someone who knows you well would not be surprised to hear you're addressing this in a college application. Now let's get to some prompt-specific advice.

Strong responses will speak to four pieces:

- Who would benefit from this change?
- What are your reasons for seeking this change?
- What action would you take?
- What change do you want to produce?

You don't necessarily need to speak to them in that order or even give each its own paragraph. But make sure you've clearly addressed each of these by the time you finish your 500 maximum words.

1. *Who* would benefit from this change?

Some applicants will focus entirely on what they want to change without speaking to who exactly will be changed by it. Don't skip the *who*—that's the human element of whatever change you make. To be good for anybody, real change needs to be good for somebody.

Who is the group that would benefit from your proposed change? Who are the people who would be most supportive if this change were to happen?

Don't sleep on the local.

You can absolutely pick a change to make in the world—the prompt invites you to do so as an option. But you don't get extra essay credit for picking a world-impacting change. In fact, identifying a change you'd like to make locally—in your school, neighborhood, town, church, or any other group you identify as "your community"—can be an effective shortcut to highlighting your civic engagement.

Do you see any necessary change to be made in a community you're part of?

Changing the course of history... For *the world*, or for *a community*?

This portion of the prompt distracts some writers: *If you had the power to change the course of history...*

Changing the course of history connotes something big—like eradicating smallpox or inventing healthy donuts. But what might be a small change to the world can be a historical change to a smaller community.

If your real answer is one that would impact the entire world, great. But don't feel pressure to change the bigger world with your answer. Creating meaningful local change is the embodiment of the principle: *Think globally but act locally*. And bigger doesn't inherently mean better when it comes to an effective response for this prompt.

2. What are *your reasons* for seeking this change?

Imagine you were working in public policy and needed to rally support for this change you're driving. What are your personal reasons for wanting this change? Why do you care about this issue? Why do you believe this will be good for those you want it to impact? Help the reader understand why, when magically given the power to change the course of history in one way, you're choosing this one.

3. What action would you take?

The prompt asks, "... What would you do...?" That means you can't just espouse the purported virtues of the change you want to see; you need to identify a specific action you would take if you were given the means to take it.

So get specific. Whatever it is that you would like to be different, what action needs to happen to initiate that change?

Identify the smallest action that would produce viable change.

One way to show your command of an issue is to identify the smallest action that would jumpstart the desired change.

Let's say you live in an area with under-resourced public schools that graduate fewer than 80% of high school students. There are plenty of viable changes you could propose. A new superintendent, reallocating state budgets, a new State Secretary of Education, increasing taxes and funneling the funds to schools, etc. Any one of those could be a strong answer.

But what's the smallest action that could produce a viable result?

Maybe your answer is something like: *Kids in my community just need a place to go after school.*

That kind of answer, if backed by the necessary understanding of the real issue and a vision for how this action would produce intended change, could show your command of the issue.

For example, maybe many of the students in your community come where most parents work, leaving kids unsupervised after school? Maybe you've noticed how boredom drives problematic behaviors for many teens who just want something to do with friends after school? Maybe you envision how much good could be done by opening a local Boys and Girls Club, a place where kids could go to be with their friends, play sports, do activities, and get help with their homework, all under the guidance of accessible mentors who grew up locally and understand what these kids are going through?

That may not change the course of history for the world. But it could change the world as this group experiences it.

4. What will be the result of the intended change?

The prompt also asks why you want to make this change. The best way to describe the why is to describe what would happen if this change were made.

What would be different? For whom? Paint a vivid picture of the before and after, especially as it pertains to the group you're trying to create this change for.

A real-world example

[Dr. Laura Esserman](#) is an oncologist who saw every day how unnecessarily long and complex the process was to diagnose and treat breast cancer. Women first had to schedule an appointment with their doctor, then a radiologist, surgeon, pathologist, etc.—each a separate appointment, often at different locations, all of which could take weeks. Their necessary treatment for a potentially deadly disease was being delayed by what she saw as unnecessary complexity.

Dr. Esserman envisioned a [breast care treatment center](#) where all the necessary practitioners and services were housed under one roof. She described her vision that a woman could come in for a mammogram in the morning for a test, and if the test revealed a growth, she could learn that day if the sample was malignant. If so, she would leave the same day with a treatment plan. What used to take weeks would now take one day. And more women would survive because of it.

See the before and after? She didn't just describe what she wanted to do and why she wanted to do it. She vividly described the ensuing result of that change.

A proposed structure

Here's one way you could organize this essay:

- **What *action* would you take?**

Come out of the gate and state clearly what action you would take.

- **Who would benefit from this change?**

Don't assume the reader will be as knowledgeable about this purported change as you are. Describe the slice—big or small—of the world whose lives would be better if this happened.

- **What are *your reasons* for seeking this change?**

This personalizes your response and helps the reader get to know *you*—what *you* care about, how *you* see the world, and what difference *you* would want to make if given the power to do so.

- **What will be *the result* of the intended change?**

This is an effective way to close your essay—with a vivid picture of this slice of the world *after* your change takes place.

Prompt 2:

The George Washington University encourages students to think critically and to challenge the status quo. Thus, civil discourse is a key characteristic of our community. Describe a time when you engaged others in meaningful dialogue around an issue that was important to you. Did this exchange create change, new perspectives, or deeper relationships? (500 words or fewer).

We've covered the intended meaning of the phrase "civil discourse" and its importance to the prompt. With that in mind, let's look at some specifics.

1. Set the stage.

Imagine you were writing a play in which the dialogue you're describing will be the opening act. In addition to the speaking parts in a script, a playwright also includes stage directions that detail where the action takes place—the lighting and sound, the character actions and movement, and the tone of how a line should be delivered. Give your reader the same direction in this prompt.

You're inviting the reader to witness a past conversation. Don't parachute them into it without any context. Give them some stage directions to set the scene.

Where did the conversation take place? Who was involved besides yourself? How was the topic initiated? What was the vibe at the time?

Here's an example:

En route to a Taylor Swift concert with my friends might not have been the place I expected to be arguing that institutionalized racism is real. But there we were in my best friend's 2017 Honda Civic, Taylor's "Love Story" blaring at top volume, the mood upbeat, when my friend's cousin, Jeff, said, "Did you guys see that Netflix documentary about The Central Park Five?" It seemed innocent enough, but in retrospect, that's where the conversation took a dramatic turn, right there at exit 137 on the 405 Freeway.



As a reader, now I feel like I'm there in the car with you. I can see it. Help your reader see it, too, by setting the stage.

2. Describe the dialogue.

Readers don't necessarily need line-by-line details of everything said and by whom. But you'll want to share some details of the dialogue between you and other parties. In particular, you'll want to clarify:

- What was the issue, and why was it important to you?
- Were those participating in agreement about the issue, or were you on different sides of the fence? If there was disagreement or conflict, help the reader see the disconnect, where it existed between whom, and where each party stood.
- What was the tone or mood of the conversation? The same words can carry very different meanings depending on *how* they're said.
- What parts were you and the other participant(s) playing? For example, maybe the conversation was primarily taking place between two students in a class with your teacher moderating the discussion, while another student was playing the role of instigator and you asked questions to point out areas of agreement. Each of those participants affects the conversation based on the role they're playing.

Set your judgments aside (unless you grew from them).

The spirit of civil discourse means judgments aside during the conversation. As you describe the details of this dialogue, strip out any negative judgments you felt at the time. Telling your reader, "It took all of 30 seconds for me to discover that Jeff was a moron" might in fact have been your real perspective. But to share it here doesn't exactly paint a picture of an applicant who appreciates and models civil discourse.

The one exception? If the outcome of this conversation led to you learning or growing in a healthy way, especially if you're able to see how judgments got in the way of a truly civil discourse. Growth is good.

3. Where and how did civil discourse show up?

Here's your opportunity to really stand out in this prompt. Where did you notice or model civil discourse as defined here?

Remember, civil discourse is rooted in *shared intent*. Who demonstrated a desire to learn from the other party? How did they demonstrate it? Were participants able to exchange ideas and opinions, speak honestly, and express themselves respectfully?

The skill you want to highlight here is empathy. Empathy is the ability to see the world through someone else's eyes without necessarily agreeing with them. It's putting yourself in their shoes and recognizing that if you'd grown up the way they grew up, if you knew what they knew, if you'd experienced what they've experienced, you might feel the same way they do.

It's not always easy. But it's one of the most life-changing skills you can develop. If you or someone else modeled it in this dialogue, describe it. Even if it wasn't you who showed it, the fact you noticed and appreciated that someone else did is worth pointing out.

4. What was different afterwards?

Here's where you address this portion of the prompt:

Did this exchange create change, new perspectives, or deeper relationships?

Change is at the heart of civil discourse. Maybe the parties come away understanding each other better even if their personal views don't change. Maybe they discover areas of agreement, or a newfound respect for each other. Maybe they still feel the same but learned some compelling points from the other party's point of view. Maybe someone entirely changed their mind.

Or maybe someone left regretful they didn't handle the conversation well and resolved to do better in the future. That's the beauty of growth, especially when you're a teenager. You're still maturing—you're not expected to know everything about the world yet. When you make a mistake or otherwise slip up, it's an opportunity to learn and grow. If you grab hold of it, you're almost always demonstrating an admirable maturity and a growth mindset that will serve you well during and after college.

Whatever it was, highlight the change that took place. And be detailed about it. Don't just say, "We discovered a newfound respect for each other." How are you both modeling that respect today? How has your relationship changed, even if all you did was go from ignoring each other to saying Hi in the hallways?

The big picture

Let's go back to the crux of all this right there in the prompt:

The George Washington University encourages students to think critically and to challenge the status quo. Thus, civil discourse is a key characteristic of our community.

GW attracts engaged students who care about what's happening in the world and aren't content to stand idly by when they see opportunities to make things better. But those engaged undergrads don't all see the world the same way. They're bringing different backgrounds, beliefs, identities, and perspectives with them—exactly the kind of diversity GW aims to cultivate. When you put those students together—in a dorm, a class, and a community—they'll learn from each other even when they don't agree.

They can't do that if they start from a place of "I'm right, you're wrong, and I don't want to hear more."

GW isn't for everyone (no college is). The students who will thrive there are those who see those differences as an opportunity to learn, grow, and better understand the various populations that make up the world. Civil discourse is at the heart of that mission.

This prompt isn't about demonstrating you can prove someone else wrong; it's about demonstrating your openness to learning more about why *they* think *they're* right even if you don't agree.

Vanderbilt University

Introduction

Vanderbilt's supplement is short—just one essay—but it matters. Their current prompt asks you to reflect on how your identity, culture, or background has shaped your growth, and how it will contribute to the Vanderbilt community.

This connects directly to Vanderbilt's motto, *Crescere aude* ("dare to grow"). The admissions office wants to know:

- How have you grown already?
- How will you keep growing at Vanderbilt?
- What will you add to their campus community?

Even though it's just one essay, you should treat it as a central part of your application. Vanderbilt cares deeply about leadership, community engagement, and "fit" with their residential model. Your essay is where you can show these qualities clearly.

What Vanderbilt's Admissions Looks For

- **Leadership & Engagement:** Vanderbilt has historically valued leadership titles and active involvement. But leadership can be formal (president of a club) or informal (mentoring peers, creating initiatives, helping behind the scenes). Use your essay to highlight the kind of impact you make.
- **Fit for the Residential Commons Model:** Vanderbilt's housing system is designed as a *living-learning community*. They want students who will fully engage in events, discussions, and collaborative opportunities, not just treat dorms as a place to sleep.
- **Purpose & Growth:** They're less interested in résumé-polishing and more in your story—how your background has shaped your values, and how those values will shape your contributions at Vanderbilt.

Breaking Down the Prompt

"Vanderbilt University's motto, *Crescere aude*, is Latin for 'dare to grow.' In your response, reflect on how one or more aspects of your identity, culture, or background has played a role in your personal growth, and how it will contribute to our campus community as you dare to grow at Vanderbilt."

Step 1: Identify the aspect of your identity, culture, or background

This could be:

- Family (traditions, responsibilities, values).
- Culture (heritage, language, community).
- Personal background (challenges, opportunities, unique experiences).
- Interests or passions that shaped how you see the world.

Step 2: Show how it shaped your growth

Think about:

- A challenge you overcame.
- A lesson you learned.
- A way you discovered your voice or leadership style.
- How you've become more inclusive, resilient, or curious.

Step 3: Connect it to Vanderbilt

- How will this aspect of who you are help you thrive in Vanderbilt's residential, collaborative environment?
- How will it shape what you contribute to classmates, dorm life, and campus activities?
- How will Vanderbilt's opportunities help you continue to grow?

Do's and Don'ts



Do:

- Be authentic and reflective. Show *your* story, not what you think they want to hear.
- Highlight growth. Vanderbilt wants evidence that you're open to learning and evolving.
- Make it specific. "I value community" is vague. "I grew up translating for my grandparents, which taught me how to bridge cultures and will help me build inclusive spaces at Vanderbilt" is strong.
- Show inclusivity. Vanderbilt looks for students who will strengthen their diverse, welcoming campus.

Don't:

- Rehash your activity list or résumé. This isn't the place to list titles—it's about impact and personal meaning.
- Be generic. Avoid essays that could apply to any school. Tie your growth to how you'll engage with Vanderbilt's community.
- Overshare without reflection. Personal details are fine, but they need to connect to growth and contribution.

Example Angles

- Growing up bilingual taught you to be a connector between cultures → at Vanderbilt, you'll help foster inclusivity in your Commons community.
- Being the oldest sibling and helping raise your younger siblings taught you quiet leadership → at Vanderbilt, you'll contribute as a mentor and community-builder.
- Discovering a passion for sustainability in your town's community garden shaped your sense of purpose → at Vanderbilt, you'll join initiatives in residential colleges that focus on climate responsibility.

Big Picture Advice

- **Leadership matters—but broaden the definition.** Show how you've led, formally or informally, and how that leadership will translate into Vanderbilt's living-learning communities.
- **Show you'll engage fully.** Vanderbilt doesn't just want smart students; they want ones who will join discussions, events, and residential programming.
- **Highlight fit for your college within Vanderbilt.** For example, an engineer's application should clearly show engineering interests somewhere in the file, while Arts & Science students have more flexibility.
- **Use the essay to fill gaps.** If your activity list doesn't fully show your growth, use the essay to add that missing context.

Final Advice Across All Schools

Keep this one-pager nearby as you write and review your essays.

- **Authenticity + Impact > Perfection.** Admissions officers read *fast*. Clear impact and authentic voice always land better than polished but generic writing.
- **Know what matters at each school.**
 1. **UCs:** Rigor + activities carry the most weight. PIQs can bump you up but rarely save an application.
 2. **American University:** Academic rigor and activity impact matter most.
 3. **Michigan:** Wants to see you've done your research and know how Michigan specifically fits your goals.
 4. **Stanford:** Supplements are everything. Show curiosity, personality, and uniqueness.
 5. **Cornell:** Purpose and mission fit are key. Supplements > personal statement.
 6. **George Washington:** Activities with impact are what matter. Demonstrate your ability to make things happen once you're involved.
 7. **Vanderbilt:** Activities and leadership matter most. Essays add context but won't outweigh the ECA rating.
- **Red Flags to Avoid Everywhere:**
 1. Oversharing without reflection.
 2. Essays that could apply anywhere.
 3. Blame or excuses.
 4. Writing what you think they want instead of what's true to you.
- **Green Flags Across Essays:**
 1. Clear impact on community.
 2. Evidence of curiosity and growth.
 3. Authentic voice that sounds like a real teenager.
 4. Alignment between activities, essays, and school mission.

Final Word

Essays are not about sounding perfect. They're about giving admissions officers confidence that:

- You'll contribute meaningfully to their community.
- You have the curiosity and resilience to succeed.
- You're more than a GPA — you're a person worth knowing.

If you keep that in mind, the words will come.



About the Authors



Christopher Logan works directly with students as a counselor at Collegewise and has authored multiple Collegewise guides including [Creativity in STEM](#), [Guide to Activities](#), [Guide to HBCUs](#), [Guide to Women's Colleges](#), and [Race-Based Affirmative Action in College Admissions](#), a white paper that has been featured in graduate-level counselor training courses at universities like UCLA. A 2014 graduate of Yale University with a major in mathematics, Christopher also placed 5th at the Nationals of ballroom dancing.



Kevin McMullin is the Founder and Chief Education Officer at Collegewise. He is the original author of the [Collegewise Guide to the Common Application](#) and has been teaching, speaking, and writing about college admissions since 1999. A graduate of UC Irvine with majors in English and history as well as the holder of a college admissions counseling certificate from UCLA, Kevin also makes fantastic homemade pizza.

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