**How to Write the Supplemental Essay:**

**“Why Do You Want to Attend this University?”**

Although the prompt can be phrased in various ways, many schools require some version of this supplemental essay. Schools want to admit students who will thrive on campus, take advantage of what they have to offer, and contribute to academic and social life. They want to know that you’re a good fit.

Don’t think of this as a “Why Us” essay. You’re not telling the school why they are great. This is a “Why We Are Right for Each Other” essay. Like all essays, it is essentially about YOU. They already know why they are a great school; they want to know why you are excited about being there and how you see yourself fitting in. Aim for an essay that’s 50% about you and 50% about the school.

**Research**

First, you have to find out what makes this school different from other schools and what makes it right for you. You should understand something about their programs, philosophy, student life, etc.

* Click deep on the school’s website. Look at individual courses, student organizations, research and academic opportunities, internship programs, and anything else that sets this school apart.
* Look at the school’s mission statement. This may not always be helpful, but if a school places great value on service, leadership, environmentalism, etc., emphasize those qualities in yourself.
* Google the school’s alumni magazine and student newspaper to get a sense of what the school values, the current important issues on campus, and what successful alums are doing.
* Visit Niche.com or Unigo.com to read real student reviews of the school, but don’t just look at one or two; look for broad patterns. Don’t be dissuaded by one student who had a particularly bad experience and just wants to vent.
* If you can’t take a real tour, take a virtual tour.
* Talk to someone, if possible. Whether it’s a tour guide, admissions counselor, college rep, coach, professor, or alum, making personal connections shows initiative and enthusiasm. Mention what you learned, and specifically how it pertains to you. For instance, “My tour guide was excited about his classes” is too general. But, “My tour guide told me how accessible all my bio profs will be” is specific.
* Get in touch with a student who currently attends the school to ask what the college is like. Have some specific questions about favorite courses, dorm life, social scene, political climate, etc. If that student is studying something you’re interested in, ask them to share a course syllabus, which may provide some very specific information to refer to in your essay.
* Don’t hesitate to contact the admissions office with any specific questions (preferably something that can’t be answered with a quick Google search). Don’t ask if they have a good Psychology department. Of course they will say they do. Ask what sets their Psychology department apart from those of other schools.

**Dos and Don’ts**

**Don’t write about the school’s size, location, reputation, weather, ranking, even athletics.** Georgia Tech, for example, specifically asks you to write about something other than rankings, location, and athletics. Why? Because everyone says the same things! Similarly, writing about well-known campus traditions isn’t a great idea, because everyone else will, too. Needless to say, don’t write about really superficial things like parties, easiness of classes, the expensive cars in the student parking lots, etc.

**Don’t give vague or emotion-based answers** such as: “Your school really inspires me” or “It just feels right,” or “I can really see myself here.” While this may be true, it does not show why you and the school are a good fit for each other.

**Don’t use the same essay for different schools.** You must be specific in this essay. If you find you actually can use the same essay by switching out names of professors, courses, etc., then you probably have not been specific enough.

**Don’t make comparisons** with other schools. Just focus on the positive things you like about this school, not negative things about other schools.

**Do** **talk about** clubs, sports (that you’ll play), curricula, departments, professors, student diversity, campus community, internships, study abroad, research or performance opportunities, publications, etc.

**Do give specific examples** such as: “Your travel abroad program allowing hands on experience at an archeological dig in Turkey is an opportunity I’ve always dreamed of,” or “I was so excited to tour the beautiful new Walter White Chemical Engineering Building, and when my guide mentioned Professor Pinkman’s fascinating Thermodynamics course, I couldn’t wait to sign up.”

**Do talk about yourself**. This is an essay about why YOU will thrive at that college. Write about how you will contribute to campus life, how you can enrich the community, how you will take advantage of the college’s offerings, and how the college will help you to achieve your goals. If you visited the school, write about your personal reflections on the campus, students, and classes. Anecdotes and details are always the best approach.

**Do talk about your values, interests, passions, skills, and aspirations** and how you will develop them at this school.

**Do proofread and double-check all details.** If you refer to details like specific buildings, school colors, the location of their international campus, etc., make sure that everything is accurate and correct. Double check the spelling of any professors you name or programs you refer to. Messing this up will send a clear message that you’re sloppy and that you don’t care that much about this school. **The worst possible thing you can do is to insert the name of the wrong school.** Even a perfect SAT score might not be enough to recover from that fumble.

The following examples are not complete essays, just sample portions.

**Example #1**: “I like Bowdoin College because it’s a highly acclaimed school with excellent academics. I especially like that it’s close to Canada.” This doesn’t work because you’re telling the school what it already knows (“highly acclaimed,” “excellent academics,” “close to Canada”). Instead, tell the school why this is important, and how you’ll take advantage of it.

**New Version**: “Bowdoin’s proximity to Canada is important to me because my family is French Canadian. I’m excited to be able to immerse myself in a premier liberal arts education, while being close enough to Quebec to learn more about my heritage and practice my language skills.” This works because the answer is specific.

**Sample #2**: “Your school really inspires me. The students were friendly, and the campus is amazing. I can really see myself going there.” This doesn’t work because it’s generic; almost any campus can be inspiring, and lots of students are friendly. It’s impersonal—there’s no sense that the student connects with this school.

**New Version**: “I introduced myself to some of the students who were on their way to Dr. Gruber’s psych class. As we walked across the quad, they told me how exciting his lectures were and how much they liked him as a teacher. My high school psych course really made me want to learn more about psychology, and if I’m admitted, the first class I’m signing up for is Dr. Gruber’s.” This works because the student has made her answer personal. By referencing an instructor and a course that interests her, she’s able to give the school a clear picture of how she sees herself fitting in.

**Sample #3**: “During the campus tour, my guide gave me a great inside view of the University. He told me about the school culture, and I knew this was the place for me.” This doesn’t work because it’s vague. It doesn’t mean anything to say you have an “inside view” or that “this is the place for me.” You need specifics to back it up.

**New Version**: “After I got home, I remembered my tour guide played cello in the orchestra, so I shot him an email asking what it was like. He replied right away and told me he’d definitely recommend it, especially because of the great friendships he’d made. That’s the kind of experience and camaraderie I’m looking for.” This works because the writer has made a personal connection.

Adapted from getintocollegeblog.com and applyingtocollege.org.