

Write a Great “Why Us?” Essay

If a college asks you to complete a supplemental essay in addition to the main essay, there’s a good chance you will have to answer a question that reads something like, “Why do you want to come to our school?” This is a question that most college applicants pull their hair out trying to answer.

Let’s talk about how to tackle it.

Let’s imagine for a second I asked you to write an essay that answered the question, “Why do you want to eat at that restaurant?” Real quick, in **one word each**, list the top four reasons why you would want to eat at a restaurant:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Here’s what I would put:

1. Food
2. Health
3. Service
4. Environment

Now, for each of your one-word reasons, create a short sentence that is personalized. Make them about you. Here’s an example of mine:

1. It has my favorite foods.
2. The food is healthy, and I care about eating healthy food.
3. Its wait staff is always very friendly to me.
4. It has a relaxed environment that I really enjoy.

Write your sentences here:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

If you choose to go to a restaurant, it’s because it meets your needs and wants. So, if you were to write an essay answering the question, “Why do you want to eat at that restaurant?” you would really be writing an essay about you – about how the restaurant meets what you’re looking for in a dining experience.

It’s pretty much the same idea with the “why us?” college essay: you’re really writing about you. More specifically, you’re explaining **the ways that the college matches you – your personality, your values, your needs and your wants.**

Here’s the only catch. There’s a little bit of ego involved on the college’s end. The college in question wants to know that you understand what makes it different from other colleges. When you show that you know what makes a college special, it makes the admissions officer reading your essay feel warm and fuzzy inside. More importantly, it shows that you’re pretty pumped about attending that school.

So, when all is said and done, the “why us?” question boils down to two tasks:

1. **The Primary Task:** Discuss, very specifically, the different ways that the college matches with your personality, your values, and your needs and wants for a college experience.
2. **The Secondary Task:** Prove that you know what makes this college different from other colleges.

Now that you know what you're dealing with, it's time to outline your essay...

Outlining Your "Why Us?" Essay

Use the "Why Us Essay Outline" as you follow these steps.

1. Step One: Determine Your "Match Points"

A "match point" is an aspect of the college that is very important to you and makes the school a match for you. Think of it like a relationship with your/a significant other. You may have certain non-negotiable match points: sense of humor, interest in books, etc.

Choose the top 3-4 match points that attract you to this college. Below is a list of possible "match points" to focus your thinking, but I recommend you go back and refresh your memory on the main reasons you chose this college in the first place.

Note: it's possible that out of your 3-4 match points there is a most important one. It's okay if that one takes up more space in your essay than the others.

Examples of Match Points

Focus on match points that matter. It's great if you like the weather, campus, dorms and food, but if these are your key match points, you're choosing a college for the wrong reason.

- The college's philosophy on academics
- Type of curriculum that the school uses
- Focus on diversity (students coming from all different backgrounds)
- A particular field of study or academic program
- Challenging academic environment
- A focus on collaborative learning
- Supportive faculty and school staff
- A special non-academic (outside the classroom) program that is offered
- School culture
- Focus on community service in the surrounding area

2. Step Two: State Why Your Match Points Are Important to You

Since this essay is about you, you need to personalize each match point. For each of your 3-4 match points, write a statement that explains why that match point is particularly important to you. These "why" statements will serve as the topic sentences / opening lines of your body paragraphs. As you can see below, a "why" statement doesn't have to be just one sentence.

Notice that in each case, my "Why" is personal. Each one starts with what's important to me and then follows up with how the college matches this thing that is important to me.

Match Point 1: the education program (a particular academic program)

Why / Topic Sentence: Education has always been my portal to a better life, which is why I have always dreamed of being a teacher – a role that will allow me to support students the way so many teachers have supported me. I have identified Sweet College's secondary education program as an ideal place to pursue this long-held life goal.

Match Point 2: Focus on diversity

Why / Topic Sentence 2: My experience has been that the most valuable learning happens when you are challenged to see a situation from a point of view that is far different from your own. What excites me most about Sweet College is its focus on diversity as a tool for educating its students.

3. Step Three: Support Your Why Statements (Don't Be All Talk!)

At this point, you have a skeleton. It's time to put meat on its bones and give it a beating heart.



For each “why” statement, you need to write 3-5 supporting details that show **the SPECIFIC ways** that each match point comes to life at the college. You have to flesh out each “why” statement.

Your supporting details should be extremely **specific** and **concrete**. Specificity shows that you have done your homework about the school and you understand how it is different from other schools. Your supporting details also have to be personalized. If you simply list out supporting details without personalizing them, you are telling the school what they already know.

Vague supporting details show that you didn't take time to do the research and that you don't know what makes this school special. Impersonal supporting details show that you haven't thought about the particular things that attract you to the school. Put them together and you have BS (bad stuff). Admissions officers can smell BS from a mile away.

Continuing with the example above, let's look at some BS supporting details (i.e. what NOT to do)

BS Supporting Details 1

Education has always been my portal to a better life, which is why I have always dreamed of being a teacher – a role that will allow me to support students the way so many teachers have supported me. Sweet College's secondary education program is an ideal place for me to pursue this long-held life goal. The college has incredible, esteemed professors and rich course work that aligns with my future goals. Additionally, the education department is filled with sophisticated students who share my dreams of making a great education something that all students can attain no matter their backgrounds. Finally, I am drawn to Sweet College's collaborative learning environment in which students are able to grow together and push one another.

Analysis: This is **Bad Stuff!** All I see are fancy buzzwords and empty fluff. These are general comments that could apply to almost any school. Furthermore, they are impersonal: not one shows why this college, in particular, is a good fit for this writer, in particular.

Now let's examine something more legit – something more specific and personal.

Note: If you learned your supporting details by talking to a student on campus, going on a college visit or speaking to rep at a college fair, it doesn't hurt to mention that in your essay. It's a reminder of your interest.

Legit Supporting Details (in paragraph form)

Education has always been my portal to a better life, which is why I have always dreamed of being a teacher – a role that will allow me to support students the way so many teachers have supported me. Sweet College's secondary education program is an ideal place for me to pursue this long-held life goal. I can't lie: for me, it started with the facilities. During my visit last October, I was able to connect with Associate Professor of Secondary Education Dr. Boris Tittles, who took time to show me Craft Hall and Starling Educator Center. The astounding physical beauty of these buildings wasn't quite as impressive as what they represented: the college's commitment to training highly qualified teachers. It's the first college I have encountered in which the Secondary Education program doesn't feel, well, secondary. In talking with Dr. Tittles and a handful of his graduate assistants, I was also able to learn more about the TEACH-OUT program. This student-teaching program is a perfect place for me to do my field training since I intend for my teaching career to be focused on public schools in low-income areas. But nothing excites me more than the professors I would have the chance to study under. In my current senior research project about smart phones as educational tools, I have read extensively and cited papers by Dr. Tittles, Dr. Damon Porter and Dr. Maggio McCaphrey, to name a few. These men and women have stoked my passion for education, and if accepted to Sweet College, I would relish the chance to not only learn from but work with them.

Analysis: I mean, right? This paragraph is filled with very specific, concrete details about Sweet College. Additionally, every detail mentioned is personalized – the writer explains why it matters to him/her. The writer obviously has done her research and wants to attend. This is a rather long paragraph. Remember, if you have a most important match point, you can spend longer on it.

4. Step Four: Define Your Gut Feeling

College choices often come down to gut feelings – a hard-to-explain sense that this college is right for you. Though it may be hard to explain, I'm asking you to put it into words. It will be helpful both for your introductory and conclusion paragraphs.

Structuring Your Essay

This final part is meant only to guide you. It is just a suggestion for a structure and you do not have to follow it exactly. In general, I discourage you from thinking there is a formula for this or any other college essay – or any piece of writing, for that matter. Choose a structure that works for you.

Remember: it helps to show that you know what makes the school different from others (e.g. academic philosophy, special traditions, school history, etc.) The more specific you are, the better.

- **First Paragraph (possibly first two paragraphs)**
 - Begin with a strong sentence that will “hook” the reader.
 - Jump right into your first and most important match point.
 - Give your “why” statement(s) for the match point.
 - Flesh out upon your why statement(s). Provide 3-5 specific, concrete, personal details.
 - It's okay to spend more time discussing your top match point.
- **Structure for Remaining Body Paragraphs**
 - Open with a transition sentence that smoothly introduces your next match point.
 - Give your “why” statement(s) for the match point.
 - Flesh out upon your why statement(s). Provide 3-5 specific, concrete, personal details.
- **Conclusion**
 - You can but do not have to restate in different words what you've already written.
 - Discuss your gut feeling – that “thing” in your belly that's driving you to this school.
 - This is a great opportunity to reiterate those character and personality traits that make this college different from other ones.

Final Advice

- **Make it personal!** – The essay is about what you. You want to go to this college because it offers the things you need to be happy and successful.
- **Make it specific!** – As I said in “Tips for All College Essays,” do not simply repeat your argument over and over again, passionately and in different words. Find hard evidence that proves this college will offer you want you want and need. The more specific the details, the better the essay and the warmer and fuzzier the reader will feel.
- **Don't focus on less important stuff** – Here are some examples of things you can mention but that you should absolutely not focus on. They are not good reasons to want to go to a college:
 - Your parents went there
 - You grew thinking you'd go there
 - Campus
 - Weather
 - Sports (unless you're an athlete)
 - Food
 - Dorms
 - Party scene
- **Don't use the same essay for multiple schools** – Using the same essay for multiple schools and simply switching the school's name is a recipe for disaster. First, it's exactly the opposite of being specific about why *that school, in particular* is good for you. Second, there's a good chance you will forget to change the school's name or some other important detail. That's a deal-breaker. If you have to write multiple “why us?” essays, it's totally cool to use the same structure over and over again. But the content must be school-specific.

Note: Emory University changed its “Why Us?” question to tell students NOT to write about these things. They were tired of reading about them.