

COLLEGE ESSAY GUY'S
**complete guide to
the "why us" essay**



College Essay Guy

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Let's do this...

1

How NOT to write your essay

Here's a quick list of Dos and Don'ts that I compiled based on years spent reading (many) bad "Why us" statements and (a few) good ones:

DON'T: Write about the school's size, location, reputation or the weather

Why? Because that's what half of America is writing about. Take a hint from Emory University, whose "Why Us?" prompt used to read:

Many students decide to apply to Emory University based on our size, location, reputation, and yes, the weather. Besides these valid reasons as a possible college choice, why is Emory University a particularly good match for you?

Why do you think the school says not to write about those things? Because their admissions readers are tired of reading about those things.

In fact, here's what to do after you've written your first draft: go back through your essay and underline anything that sounds like it could have appeared in another student's essay. **Then delete it.**

In your "Why us" essay you're making a case and it's this: "You [the school] and I [the student] are a perfect match." But...

DON'T: Simply use emotional language to make your case.

"I really really want to go to Northwestern because I just have this feeling that it's the place for me" does not a good case make. It doesn't clearly show how you are a.) qualified or b.) a good match for the school. And, for that matter, neither does the statement, "I can see myself rooting for the Wildcats" at MetLife Stadium on Sundays.

Which reminds me:

DON'T: Screw up the mascot, stadium, team colors or names of any important people or places on campus

Why? It's the quickest way to show you're a crappy researcher. In the example above, the Wildcats play neither at MetLife Stadium nor on Sundays. (And, based on their home record these days, neither do the Giants. But I digress.)

Also, you should know that the "I can see myself in purple and white/maroon and gold/[any color] and [any other color]" is a cliché of the "Why us" essay. Having said that, some students can't resist. Fine. But if you're going to use it, at least get the team names and colors right. I've heard more than one admissions officer say that a screw-up like this can immediately disqualify an application. I'm not saying it definitely will, or that this is true for all admissions officers--some probably don't care--but don't give them a reason to put you in the "no" pile. Do your research. (And the USC colors are not red and yellow, incidentally, but [USC Cardinal and USC Gold](#).)

DON'T: Think of this as only a "Why them" essay.

Don't, for example, simply tout the school's bus system. "I know we have a good bus system, I take it every day!" says Erica Sanders, Director of Recruitment at University of Michigan. And don't parrot the brochures or website language--it could be that your reader actually wrote the words you're copying and pasting. Again, look at Emory's "Why Us" prompt, which reads, "Undergraduates at Emory and Oxford Colleges are offered countless opportunities to engage with the student body, the faculty, and your academic program of choice--from hands-on research opportunities to student organizations to volunteering. What are some of the programs and/or activities you would plan to get involved with on either campus, and **what unique qualities will you bring to the school?**" (Emphasis mine.)
Tip: Even if the school doesn't ask for that last part, include it.

"So what should I put in my essay?" you ask, "And how do I know where to research?"



2

What You Should Write in Your “Why Us” Essay

DO: Think of this as a “Why we are perfect for each other” essay.

Imagine you're on a date and the person sitting across from you leans in to ask, "So, why do you like me?" You can't just say, "Because you're hot." You're gonna need to be a little more specific.

Actually, when it comes to the “us” in “Why us,” think of it this way:

“Us” ≠ the school by itself
“Us” = the school + you

In order to prove you and the school are destined to be together, you'll want to make connections between the two of you. How? Like this:

DO: Fold a piece of paper in half to create two columns, then at the top label one “What I want” and the other “What they have.”

As you're researching the school, bullet-point 10-15 specific, concrete reasons why you and the school are a great match for one another. (That many, you ask? Yes, that many. See example essays below: it's possible!)

If, for example, the school has a music and medicine program, put that in the right column. Next to it, in the left column, say why that program is perfect for you. Or maybe you're interested in studying Chinese Language and Literature? Put that in the left column and then look for something relevant that the school offers—either academically or extracurricularly (an actual word but don't use it in your essay)—and put that in the right column.

How does this help? It takes your essay from:

Michigan's well-known legacy, its fantastic football team and spectacular location in Ann Arbor are just a few reasons why I believe UM is the place for me.

(Suuuuper generic.)

to...

I look forward to Academic Argumentation and Professional Writing (229), as I believe these courses will provide me with a firm basis in journalistic writing technique and improve my abilities to write analytically and develop well-supported arguments. Furthermore, the Professional Writing course will teach me how to write in a concise, straightforward style, a skill vital to a journalist.

#likeaboss

Note that you'll find the rest of this essay, plus analysis, in Chapter 4.

DO: Mention specific classes, professors, clubs and activities that you will actually be excited about being a part of.

And don't BS it. Imagine yourself on campus as a freshman. What are you doing? What conversations are you having? How are you involved? I want to say "You can't get too specific," although I'm sure you could if you try...

Here's a good gauge to know what's relevant and appropriate. Ask:

1. Am I showing that I've done my research?
2. Am I demonstrating my intelligence?
3. Am I connecting what they have to what I have/want?

If you're doing all three, keep it in. If you're not doing any of these, consider cutting. And I know I said that third thing already, but it's worth repeating: often students only say why the school is awesome. But remember that this essay is not about why the school is awesome. The school knows it's awesome; the admissions readers spend a lot of their time telling students like you why it's awesome. Make important and interesting connections.



Finally...

DO: Remember this is another chance to show a few more of your skills/talents/interests/passions.

Try this: make a list of 10 things you definitely want the school to know about you. Ask yourself: are all these values/qualities in my main essay or another supplement? If not, the "Why us" may be a place to include a few more details about who you are. But remember: connect it to some awesome opportunity/program/offering at or near the school.

Okay, I said I was finished but here's one more:

If the school doesn't have a particular program/opportunity you're looking for, don't freak out. Look at this not as a dead end, but as an opportunity. How?

DO: Consider offering to start something.

And by "something" I mean a club, group, or activity. Two qualifiers here, though:

DONT: Feel like you must start something. Some schools have over 300 clubs. They don't need 300 freshman coming in starting 300 new clubs. Also...

DONT: Offer to start something that you probably can't start. Your freshman year, for example, you probably won't start a brand new International Studies and Dance double major. You might, however, offer to start the school's first West Indian Dance Company. Which reminds me:

MAKE SURE THE SCHOOL DOESN'T ALREADY HAVE A WEST INDIAN DANCE COMPANY. Or whatever it is you're offering to start.

And I'm not saying you shouldn't push for that International Studies and Dance double major once you're there... just, y'know, get into the school first.

You can push for the double major your sophomore year.

3

How to Find All the Resources You Need to Learn about a Particular School

1. [Google](#). Obvious, but true. Search interesting phrases like “What students really think about LMU” or “Grinnell students forum.” All the info is out there, you just need to get smart about your Googling. Find students’ perspective. What do alumni say? You’re collecting quotations, ideas and phrases. Don’t be afraid to quote, borrow and re-phrase.

2. [Fiske Guide Online](#): It’s long been one of the best resources for info about schools. It’s online, it’s searchable, and it’s worth the \$20. Check it out [here](#).

3. [Unigo.com](#): Read real student reviews. They’re great because they’re by actual students who aren’t worried what the school thinks of what they say. (Official publications don’t want to say anything *too* bad about a school, so most schools sound great.) But go to the Unigo student reviews and read answers to the question that asks “What’s the stereotype of the students at your school?” and “Is the stereotype true?” If ten students in a row say the school is “intellectual, Presbyterian, white,” chances are there’s some truth to it.

TIP: If the “stereotype” comments contradict one another (one student says “hippie school,” another says “nerdy,” and another says “jocks and frat boys,” that could be a sign that it’s actually a pretty diverse school).

4. [Books](#): Remember books? The paper kind? Though you’ll find much online, there are still a few good books with good info (available at your local bookstore or via Amazon):

- * *Colleges That Change Lives* (Loren Pope)
- * *“The Insider’s Guide to the Colleges, 2013: Students on Campus Tell You What You Really Want to Know”*
- * *The Best 376 Colleges* (Princeton Review)

5. [Real and virtual tours](#) The single best way to get to know a school is to go there. And if you can, do it. But if you can’t visit in person, check out:

- * www.youniversity.com - Tons of online tours.
- * www.campustours.com - More online tours.
- * www.youtube.com - Even more. Type in the name of the school and “online tour.”

TIP: Take at least five online tours (it’ll take you about 30 min.) so you can compare schools.

6. Dive deep into the school’s own website

A counselor friend Melinda Kopp encourages her students to find the online catalog/course schedule and find not only majors and minors, but specific courses and describe unique courses particular to X college. For example, a student who loves philosophy, art, entertainment, and business might apply to Chapman University and refer to:

IES 207 The Pursuit of Happiness and Knowledge: Walt Disney and Charles Darwin
Course Description: We all declare for happiness and knowledge. Walt Disney primarily entails the world of fantasy and Charles Darwin the reality of nature. We will explore their creations and their beliefs, and delve into some profound ideas underpinning our origins and our happiness.

Cool, huh? It might take a few minutes to find the course descriptions, but be persistent; you’ll find ‘em. And here are the most useful ways to get info on a school, but before you do them you need to have a few particular questions in mind.

7. Contact the admissions office and, if possible, talk to your local rep

Most colleges have particular reps for particular regions of the country (and the world). And you can talk to them. And they’re really nice! Three reasons why this is a good idea:

- * **It shows them you’re really interested in the school AND willing to do your**



homework. You'll be able to write "when I spoke to so-and-so in the Admissions Office, she told me..." Schools love that—it shows you take initiative.

* **It's the single best way to find out about the school.** There are people who get paid to answer your questions. (My best friend was one of them.) Don't be afraid. They're not going to be mad at you; they'll be happy you asked. They want to meet you.

* **It lets them (the school) help you write the essay.** What do I mean? Say you have a specific question. You play the santur, for example, and you're trying to figure out if a school has a santur club. Ask! The college rep may say, "We don't—you should start one!" (or) "What's the santur?" (in which case you get to talk about this very interesting part of yourself... see where this is going?) Warning: don't abuse this! Admissions officers are pretty smart; they can tell when a student is trying to ingratiate him/herself. But having a frank conversation about particulars of the school is great! It's what these reps do. If that conversation happens to lead to you talking about why you may be an awesome candidate for the school... great!

8. Get in touch with a current student

How do you do this? Easy. Put out the word on social media: "Anyone know a current or former student at Davidson University [or whichever school]?" Chances are, a friend of a friend will. Ask that person for 15 minutes of his/her time. Then ask a short set of questions that you've prepared beforehand. Ideally these are questions that will help you write your "Why us" essay and will be interesting, specific, and open-ended. Don't just ask, "So, what's it like there?" (too general) or "Did you like it?" (close-ended question). Ask open-ended questions that will be fun for him/her to answer. Questions like: "What was the most mind-blowing class you took and why? What surprised you about attending [insert school], if anything? What do most people not know about [insert school]? Why would you or wouldn't you attend if you had to do it all over again?" The more interesting your questions are, the more interesting the answers will be. This is also a life lesson.

To close, let me say something I said above in a slightly different way: Don't ask the admissions officer (or the current/former student) anything that you or anyone else could Google in five minutes. Don't ask about the faculty-to-student ratio or if the school has a Biology major (spoiler: it does). Ask instead how easy it is for non-majors to take the advanced musical theater classes (assuming you've already Googled this and couldn't find the answer), if the admissions officer attended that school and, if so, what's one thing s/he wished he'd done differently in undergrad—or one opportunity s/he would have liked to have taken advantage of. Don't be afraid to make it personal, make a connection, and just be a curious human. It's a great way to engage with the world. Even if you're doing something as specific as researching a "Why us" essay.



4

Six Great "Why us" Examples (And Why Each One Is Great)

Okay, let's take a look at some rad sample essays (and note that the prompts have changed slightly since these essays were written, so double check with the school before starting yours, but the lessons from these essays will still apply to yours):

Example A: "Why Michigan?"

Prompt: 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? (500 word limit)

This sets up his whole essay. Plus, he's gives three examples in just his first 17 words!

This is the "literature" paragraph. And note how he's set up what this paragraph will be about with a clean and clear topic sentence.

A third example, followed by one more specific reason that is different from the reasons named in the previous sentence.

Same formula as earlier: he names a specific offering at the school...

...followed by specific reasons why these are perfect for him (aka: how they'll serve him in his career as a journalist).

Again: another specific reason that connects him to the school. Remember: it's not just "Why the school," it's "Why you + the school."

Again: specific reasons followed up by a specific connection to the author's own life.

Mark Twain was a steamboat pilot. Agatha Christie was a nurse. Robert Frost was a light bulb filament changer. The best writers do not only write beautifully, but also integrate their personal experiences and knowledge outside the world of literature. By combining the study of literature, media and perhaps law, I believe the University of Michigan will provide the education necessary for me to evolve as a journalist.

A journalist cannot reach the peak of his craft if his knowledge of literature and critical thinking skills are weak, which is why I'm excited to explore what the Department of English has to offer. I look forward to courses such as Academic Argumentation and Professional Writing, as I believe these will provide me with a firm basis in journalistic writing technique and improve my abilities to write analytically and develop well-supported arguments. Furthermore, the Professional Writing course will teach me how to write in a concise, straightforward style, a skill vital to a journalist.

At The College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, I will be able to apply the skills learned in class with media studies in and beyond the classroom. The Honors Program provides an opportunity for independent research into the field of mass media, which will allow for intensive group studies and in-depth research opportunities, and the superb networking opportunity provides the chance to meet and engage with prominent figures in media-related studies, which will provide a deeper insight and knowledge into the field. Outside the classroom, I can see myself writing scripts for the student-run television station WOLV-TV, or composing headlines for *The Michigan Daily*.

And although journalism is the path I'm currently on, I want to remain open to other opportunities I may encounter at UM. The Pre-Law Advising Program is interesting because I want to explore the intricacies of law and policies that govern this world. I believe that the judicial role of a lawyer is closely related to the expository skills of a writer, and I look forward to exploring this new field of study that wasn't offered in my high school education.

But all these are what UM has to offer me. I realize that, as a member of the UM community, I'll want to give back as well. The various volunteer programs offered by Volunteers Involved Every Week appeals to me, as does the possibility of volunteering at the Boys and Girls Club of Southern Michigan, as I have previous experience with elementary school teaching. And as an international student, I know the pains of learning English as a second language. I believe I can contribute to the ESL teaching program either at UM or abroad, and see this as an opportunity to have an impact not only at UM, but in Washtenaw County and beyond. (466 words)

Here are the three things he'll discuss in each of the next three paragraphs (note how each of these corresponds to the paragraphs that follow). In essence, he's creating a map for the essay.

Next he names really specific examples of classes he'll take...

...then goes on to say why these classes will help him specifically.

This is the "media" paragraph. Again, he sets up it up with a clean and clear topic sentence, which tells us what's to come.

Then he moves from inside the class to outside the class, and gives two more school-related reasons that

This is the "law" paragraph, which he sets up again, this time taking two sentences to establish the topic of this paragraph (which is totally fine).

How's that for a cool segue? (Don't steal this; find your own original last paragraph.) Again, he sets up his paragraph with a neat topic sentence.

He even researched the name of the county the school is in! (Don't steal this either--find your own way to show the school some love.)



Example B: "Why Tufts?" (Short essay)

Prompt: Which aspects of Tufts' curriculum or undergraduate experience prompt your application? In short: "Why Tufts?" (200 word limit)

My favorite thing about this essay is how many **specific** reasons this student packs in to 200 words. Count along with me...

Reason #1 → In addition to providing a strong foundation in economics, Tufts provides me the opportunity to further explore global health care policy through an International Relations Program that leverages the strengths of 18 related departments and programs. I'm also keen to continue my study of the Chinese language through Tufts' Chinese Department, studying with Professor Mingquan Wang and perhaps study abroad at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, China, to receive the full immersion experience. Tufts' Experimental College intrigues me as I can take unconventional courses such as Game Strategy and Rising Tide: Climate Change, Vulnerability, and Adaptation (EXP-0021-F). Further, Tufts' urban backdrop provides me the opportunity to play league cricket year round to train for my bid to become the first Jumbo on the US National Cricket Team, while studying abroad at Oxford would provide me with not only global economic perspectives, but also the opportunity to continue my pursuit of cricket in its birthplace. Visiting Tufts my mother's alma mater, I felt I was at home in Singapore. Its strengths in Chinese, Econ and International Relations, combined with its beautiful suburban campus, academic rigor, and global reach have confirmed that Tufts is the place for me. (196 words)

Reason #2 →

Reason #3 →

Reason #4 (Note that he's connecting himself to the school here.) →

Reason #5 →

Reason #6 (He even works in a "why"--and it takes just six words.) →

Reason #7 →

Reasons #8 and #9 →

Reason #10 (Again, note it's not just "urban backdrops are cool," but there's a specific reason related to the author.) →

Reason #11 →

Reason #12 →

Reasons #13 and #14 (Bonus points for having visited: that's called "demonstrated interest.") →

The re-cap. →

My re-cap: Daaaang! 14 reasons in just 196 words. That's why it's important you bulletpoint your reasons first. (Trust me: it helps.) Also, come up with more reasons than you think you can fit. This essay started out at 400+ words, but over several revisions he was able to fit everything in.

Example C: "Why U of Chicago?" #1

A creative opening: some like it, some don't. It's up to you, but note that you won't have time (and don't need it) for a "Why us" essay that's 250 words or fewer. In general, prioritize info over poetry in your "Why us" essay.

→ A cold gust blows over the flat and barren expanse, a frozen tundra devoid of vitality. I shiver as the thought crosses my mind. The fear that I may come to limit the many and unique ways of perceiving my surroundings is chilling. Suddenly, a Phoenix sweeps down across the sky, pulling behind itself a bright warm sun that melts the permafrost. At the University of Chicago, I plan to pursue an interdisciplinary education in biochemistry and English--to foster a methodical and scientific approach to examining information while maintaining creative and abstract thought in exploring ideas. The University of Chicago's Core program values such a path. I feel that this common principle will allow me to maximize the benefits of an interdisciplinary education while fostering engrossing discussions among students who have distinct interests and are supported by a shared, comprehensive academic foundation. In developing my critical thinking at UChicago, I hope to equip myself with the necessary education as well as experience to become an oncologist. My passion for medical care was sparked while volunteering at the UCLA Medical Center, where I saw how emotional support can heal just as much as medicine that treats physical suffering. I believe the University of Chicago Medical Center will provide the possibility to continue interacting with patients, walking with them in their struggle, and helping them overcome at least the psychological, if not physical, toll of disease. I am also eager to partake in UChicago's Urban Health Initiative to illustrate the power of strong patient-physician relationships in recovery by directly contributing to my new community. In the same way that researchers at Argonne National Laboratory and Fermilab have drastically changed cancer treatment through nanomaterials and particle physics, I hope to play a part in revolutionizing cancer treatment by looking at its causes. UChicago's abundant research and internship opportunities for undergraduate students--easily accessed through FROGS--offers an exciting way for me to work with esteemed professors and even initiate my own project.

Including a sentence that let's the reader know in clear terms what you plan to study is great...

...following up with the "why" is even better.

This part could probably be a bit more succinct, but it's a solid reason.

This mirrors the format above. We get what she wants to do. Then...

Now she's discussing off-campus opportunities. You'll notice this format in several of these sample essays: first academics (on campus), then extracurriculars on campus, finally extracurricular opportunities off campus. This creates a clear progression: in the class, on campus, off-campus.

...she explains why...

...and here's how U of Chicago will support that goal.

And here's why.

Could perhaps cut this, but it shows she's done her research.

Another reason, plus the why.

She sets up her new topic. If the above paragraph was on "science," this one's on "culture."

At the University of Chicago, I also look forward to further developing and uncovering new cultural spheres previously unknown or inaccessible to me. The Festival of the Arts seems to be an unbelievable marketplace for discovering new music, paintings, film, dance, and more from around the world. In addition, a place on the *Chicago Maroon* or the *Chicago Weekly* would be the ideal avenue for me to express my voice through writing. UChicago Arts--a central part of life on campus, and hopefully mine--can allow me to sustain and advance my skills as a piano



player in the Piano Program while the Committee on Creative Writing provides yet another opportunity to cultivate my ability to translate my imagination into words.

Note how all the examples in this paragraph—even the volunteer opportunities she discusses—all fall under the umbrella of "culture." Neat.

While many intellectual and global mysteries await at the University of Chicago, I know I am ultimately becoming a citizen of the city of Chicago in which I must play my part. As a tutor and teacher, I have enjoyed the satisfaction of teaching children and helping them expand their minds. The Neighborhood Schools Program will allow me to utilize the experience I have gained to contribute to the growth of children in my new community. As the sun descends into the horizon, a maroon light glows from the earth, a fertile bed of growth and possibility.

And she's out.

Example D: "Why U of Chicago?" #2

We take our places along the starting line, mentally preparing ourselves for what is to come. I grasp the plastic handles of my embellished shopping cart, though I am unable to grasp exactly what lies ahead. LET THE HUNT BEGIN! With these words, students are catalyzed into action. As I turn towards Hull Gate, racing towards the Reg, two carts collide, spiraling out of control. Hovering overhead, helicopters airdrop federal agents into the main quad to confiscate Scav item #240, a homemade breeder reactor. One student from Snell-Hitchcock climbs to the top of Rockefeller Chapel where he establishes human contact with sophisticated life forms galaxies away. Over the next four days, the chaotic forces of entropy preside over the University...

This one begins with action: the student imagines himself as a student on campus (not just taking part, but) fully immersed in a quintessential U of Chicago activity.

If you take this approach, be sure to clearly name the activity.

Ok, perhaps this was a bit of a stretch... or maybe it wasn't.

Either way, the University of Chicago's annual Scavenger Hunt represents something much more than just an eccentric game; it is a microcosm for what actually occurs throughout the University day-to-day. For me, "the Scav" is a larger metaphor for the University's unique ability to wield its immense intellectual diversity for the betterment of society. In order to be successful at the Scav, teams must possess a diverse set of skills and perspectives to solve problems. Such diversity is fostered through the University's Core Curriculum. The Core's effectiveness in this respect extends far beyond its use of small, discussion-based classes. Its emphasis on a well rounded course load gives students from vastly different backgrounds the capacity to engage in meaningful conversation on a wide range of issues even after class is dismissed. In this sense, students are situated to critically evaluate arguments 24/7, an excellent model of how to live the "Life of the Mind." As a debater, I flourish in this form of discussion-based inquiry in which I am able to articulate my view amidst opposition. Eager to learn from UChicago's intellectually motivated student body, I possess the openness to consider the views of others and the courage to voice my own opinions.

Here the author demonstrates that he really gets what the school is about.

Ah: and it's a metaphor! Awesome.

Beautiful. Challenge: keep revising until each line in your essay is this succinct.

See what he's doing here? The scavenger hunt is a focusing lens for the different qualities that make U of Chicago perfect for him (and vice versa).

The Scav also challenges teams to materialize their abstract ideas and designs into concrete actions. Though much of the Core is theoretical, UChicago students are more than prepared to respond to such a challenge through the University's plethora of research, entrepreneurship, and community service opportunities. Through mustering diversity, the University of Chicago has been a catalyst for hundreds of revolutionary breakthroughs, ranging from the first self-sustained nuclear reaction to the first use chemotherapy. Now, with the establishment of the Molecular Engineering Institute, the University is poised to achieve similar gains in nanoscience, a field I wish to pursue in my professional career. The University's exceptionally low student to faculty ratio ensures that undergraduates have the unique opportunity to participate in such advanced research. The University also fosters world class entrepreneurs, a profession that specializes in turning ideas into reality. With the ability to take up to six graduate level classes at the renowned Chicago Booth School, aspiring entrepreneurs like myself can receive a strong background in business leadership that will be instrumental in helping me jumpstart an engineering firm in the future. I can see myself in 34103: "Building New Venture", simulating every step involved in creating a startup such as raising seed funds, engaging with customers, and building teams. With the ability to intern for the Booth School's Polsky Center, I will also obtain powerful insights into the inner workings of the most successful small businesses throughout the Midwest. The University's position as an agent for positive change in its community also opens up several opportunities to serve those around me. As President of my debate team, I taught incoming freshmen and

Try not to use this word in your essay. It's kind of a cliché of college essays. Other cliché words to avoid: myriad, world-class, cornucopia.

Again, note how his clear topic sentence sets him up for the paragraph to come.

Remember: don't just say what's awesome about the school...

He's still (mostly) keeping to this theme in the paragraph. (Note: he set this up in his topic sentence.) Kudos.

...make sure you connect it back to you.

Cut.

You can list the course number if you like, but don't have to. (Just make sure it's clear that it's a class, especially if the course title doesn't make that clear.)

Again: note that academics (in class) are often mentioned before off-campus opportunities.

Here's something he wasn't able to work into his main statement. That's another potential value of the "Why us!"—to work in those last things you'd like the school to know about you.



middle school students fundamentals in communication theory, introducing them to the eye opening world of policy debate. Through the University Community Service Center and UChicago's close relationship with Woodlawn High School, a member of the Chicago Urban Debate League, I will be able to continue introducing inter-city students to debate, empowering them to speak out in their communities. As students scuttle across Hyde Park in their Scav carts, they are constantly reminded that their highly abstract ideas have real use across society. The real debate is: will my team's cart be *Game of Thrones* or *Ghost Rider* themed? (709 Words)

Overall I think this one's pretty long; we could've gotten the point in fewer words. Aim for brevity.

Nice: bringing it back...

...back to the theme of the whole essay.

Example E: "Why UPenn?" #1

Here's a different approach: a "Why us" essay written as a letter to an historical figure.

Dear Mr. Benjamin Franklin,

Note that the author's intro is super short. No need to belabor the set-up: once it's clear, get to the reasons.

My heart is steadfast every time I see you on that hundred dollar bill.

But even more so, for the fine institution you have founded.

No other institution imparts practical knowledge and theory to enable students to make a positive difference quite like Penn. Through programs like the Benjamin Franklin Scholars Program, your institution nurtures thoughtful leaders who exemplify your founding principle that true learning should be the aim of all education and the vision that education should produce "socially conscious citizens as well as conscientious bankers and traders." I want to be a part of this prestigious academic tradition by becoming a Quaker.

Tip: cut most of the adjectives, especially if it sounds like you're kissing up to the school.

Another Kiss-up adjective. Cut it.

I have fallen in love with Penn's interdisciplinary studies. The freedom and flexibility your institution offers to take classes in my favorite subjects of management, business law and science are unlike those of any other universities, especially the one in Princeton, New Jersey.

This is an Ivy League joke. Get it? It's funny.

Okay, this is actually funny. I especially like how this essay (and the last one) both use humor. In each case, humor endears me to the author. Smart humor (or irony) is also a great way to show your intelligence.

And I admit to having Wharton fantasies.

In the morning, I am in the nation's leading Health Care Management and Policy class, contributing to the discussion on health care with my knowledge of electromagnetism or fluid mechanics. I trust my strong background in science will provide some insight to the class discussion, contributing to the experience of "true learning". Or, perhaps by inductively approaching a business problem and formulating a creative solution using the scientific method, our team may win the 1st place trophy in the 2012 Wharton Business Plan Competition. After my Management 104: Industrial Relations and Human Resource Management class, I retreat to the Huntsman study room with my Learning Team members to further analyze the case study we are working on, pointing out connections between my Academic Decathlon's study of the Great Depression and the current issue at hand.

More details that help us picture him on campus. Note that lots of essays do this. How do you stand out? Choose places and events that other students might not choose. (Example: don't mention "Dillo Day" or "painting the rock" if applying to Northwestern. You'll blend in.)

In the afternoon, I am in Legal Studies 210: Corporate Responsibility and Ethics, expanding my elementary knowledge of Business Law. In a world of questionable business ethics, Professor Alan Strudler's teachings will guide me in the right direction. I see myself in the summer internship program with Securities and Exchange Commission, learning how to combat insider trading, starting with my home community.

Here's an interesting approach: he mentions specifically how he'd contribute. (Be careful, though, not to sound cocky-- you are after all primarily there to learn, not teach.)

Now that you've read a couple of these, do you kinda' see how these go? Specific school-related examples that connect to your specific interests and passions.

In the winter, I am mountain climbing Hvannadalshnjukur with the Wharton Leadership Ventures program or representing my Cohort as we compete in the Winter Whartonland's annual gingerbread house-building contest.

In my junior year, I am back in the Del Mar district in Haiti, through Wharton's Volunteer International Program. As a team, we are planning and devising finance strategies and marketing plans before meeting with NGOs to bring medical aid or efficient sanitation systems to local villages.

He's wrapping it up now, giving us the thesis at the end rather than the beginning, which is kind of nice for a change.

I firmly believe Wharton will provide me the incomparable leadership skills, exceptional insights into management and the conscientious perspective I will need to lead the next decade's global pharmaceutical companies such as Pfizer and Merck, companies that your alumni, Edmund T. Pratt, Jr. and Roy Vagelos led. I believe that every child in the third world can have access to such medical treatment when they need it and that, more effective and less expensive treatments for schizophrenia and obsessive compulsive disorders will be made available to patients worldwide. In fact, I've already made this promise to my brother. And thanks to your submatriculation MBA program, I can fulfill this promise sooner.

Fun fact: this is the author of the "I Shot My Brother Essay," which you'll find here: <http://www.collegeessayguy.com/blog/example-the-i-shot-my-brother-essay>

Without the resources and connections Wharton provides, my aspirations may be labeled as far-fetched. But with your help, the sky is the limit.



Please accept my early commitment to your institution.
Sincerely,
Hee Su Kim

ps. One last thing: If you have any extra portraits of yourself on that green bill lying around, please don't hesitate to send me one. (I will be applying for financial aid).

This is called a "button." It's a little zinger at the end that helps create a satisfying final line. In this case, it's also a joke that makes the reader do a little work, which is nice. (In other words: it's not a super obvious joke.)

Example F: "Why Duke?" (Short essay)

Prompt: If you are applying to the Trinity College of Arts and Sciences as a first year applicant, please discuss why you consider Duke a good match for you. Is there something particular about Duke that attracts you? (150 words.)

I adore the International Comparative Studies major. Even though Economics will be my primary major, I'm highly interested in the intersection of Economics and culture and ICS will allow me to examine the effects of capitalist expansion across national boundaries. I want to find a way to stimulate globalization without deteriorating the cultural heritage of the international community and classes such as "Comparative Approaches to Global Issues" are perfect for the purpose as I hope they will elucidate specific instances of neoliberal culture bleaching and allow me to theoretically develop methods for breaking down perpetual inequality. Furthermore, with my regional focus on the East Asia in the ICS major, I plan to combine my interests in Economics and culture through research on the socio-economic impact of immigrant entrepreneurs in South Korea since undergraduate research is widely available. Duke's unique ICS curriculum is perfect for my multicultural background and Economics interests.

Note that the format is much the same, though: I want X because of Y.

Notice how there's very little set-up. With just 150 words, you've got to get right to it.

This essay is super factual and straightforward, but what's important is that the info is there. He's clearly done his research.

Okay, but what if you're not super excited about the school you're applying to..?



5

How to Write a "Why Us" for a Safety School

First of all, I don't like the term "safety" school or "back-up" (because who wants to go to their back-up, amiright?) but I used it in the title because it's a phrase lots of people use, plus it probably piqued your interest. I prefer the term "likely admittance."

Okay, let me set this up:

If Claremont-McKenna (CMC) is your top choice, it's easy to write your "Why us"--you simply gush about all the (specific) reasons that you love it, trim it to 200 words, and you're done, right?

But here's the thing: what if you're writing a "Why us" statement for a school that isn't your top choice? How do you get excited about that school? How do you fake it?

TIP #1: Don't fake it.

What do I mean? If a school is on your list and you're not excited about it, then why is it on your list? I say:

Take that school off your list. There are so many great schools out there.

But let's say you have some good reason to apply (your parents have agreed to pay full tuition because it's close to home, for example). In this case:

Do your research and get excited about the school. Chances are, you may not be excited about a school because you don't know much about it yet. See, here's something you may not have been told:

Finding a school that "fits" you is an active process, not a passive one. That's one reason I appreciate and am an advocate for the "Why us" essay--you get to (read: have to) research and find out if the school you're pledging your allegiance to is actually one that you want to pledge your allegiance to. So get researching! (For research resources go [here](#).)

If, once you've researched for a while, you're still not super excited about the school you're writing the essay for, ask yourself: do I even want to apply here? Maybe you don't. Maybe you need some new schools to get excited about. (For resources on finding schools go [here](#). And yes, it's the same link--because the link is that good.)

But what if you've done your research and you're still not feeling that school?

Then take it off your list!

Sorry, I said that already. Okay, let's say you still have some good reason to apply. Try this:

TIP #2: Write your "Why Us" statement for a school you are actually excited about... then switch out the variables.

Okay, for any "Why us" statement to work, you need specifics--and not just about the school--about what you're interested in doing while attending the school. For example :

I'm eager to become involved in UChicago's Urban Health Initiative as I'm committed to both increasing health care access and nurturing strong patient-physician relationships. And in the same way that researchers at Argonne National Laboratory and Fermilab have drastically changed cancer treatment through nanomaterials and particle physics, I hope to play a part in revolutionizing cancer treatment by looking at its causes. (See Example C for the rest of this essay.)

Crazy specific? Yeah.



But watch this:

I am also eager to become involved in University of Rochester's Golisano Children's Hospital as I'm committed to increasing access to children's health care and nurturing strong patient-physician relationships. And in the same way that researchers at Argonne National Laboratory and Fermilab have drastically changed cancer treatment through nanomaterials and particle physics, I hope to play a part in revolutionizing cancer treatment by looking at its causes.

See what she did there? "Wait, that's sneaky, right?" Maybe a little. But it's it also true? Isn't she likely to do those the things no matter where she ends up? (And if you're writing about things you're not actually going to do THEN WHY ARE YOU LYING? I'm kidding. Kind of.)

TIP #3: Talk to someone who has attended the school and had a great experience.

Ask that person what s/he loved about the school. Get them to give you specifics, to sell you on the school. Take good notes. Open yourself up to the possibility of that school.

If after you've done all these things you still aren't feeling that school, then, well:

TAKE THE SCHOOL OFF YOUR LIST.



6

How to Re-Use Your "Why us" Essay (And How Not to)

The lessons from this mini-chapter can largely be taught by showing you two essays written by the same student for two different schools. Take a look:

Example G: Why Northwestern?

Prompt: What are the unique qualities of Northwestern - and of the specific undergraduate school to which you are applying - that make you want to attend the University? In what ways do you hope to take advantage of the qualities you have identified? (300 words)

Northwestern stands out as the perfect place for my undergraduate studies.

I adore the International Studies major. Even though Economics will be my primary major, I've always been highly interested in the intersection of Economics and culture and IS will allow me to examine the effects of capitalist expansion across national boundaries. I want to find a way to stimulate globalization without deteriorating the cultural heritage of the international community and classes such as "Economics of Developing Countries" and "Global Capitalism" are perfect for the purpose as I hope they will elucidate specific instances of neoliberal culture bleaching and allow me to theoretically develop methods for breaking down perpetual inequality. Furthermore, with my regional focus on Asia in the IS major, I plan to combine my interests in Economics and culture through research on the socio-economic impact of immigrant entrepreneurs in South Korea since undergraduate research is widely available. Furthermore, I want to supplement my regional IS education with a study abroad program that ties Economics classes into language study, and the Yonsei University program fits that criteria perfectly. I want to explore Korean economics while studying advanced Korean composition and literature because the best way to deeply understand the political and social issues of Korea's government is to fully immerse myself in its culture and business life.

...real specific.

As with the examples above, note how specific...

Note that this isn't just "I want to study abroad," but I want to get [this specific thing] out of my study abroad experience. **Make the school feel special!**

My academic and multicultural background will allow me to be a meaningful and contributing member of the Northwestern community and especially the International Studies community. Northwestern is the perfect fit for my educational goals in Economics and culture.

Example H: "Why Columbia?"

Prompt: Please tell us what you find most appealing about Columbia and why. (300)

Columbia College stands out as the perfect place for my undergraduate studies.

I adore the Core Curriculum. While pursuing my passion in Financial Economics, I want to have a classical education on traditional topics that aren't important only now, but have been throughout the centuries. I long to dig into knowledge from texts such as Machiavelli in Contemporary Civilization class or ancient Greek literature in Literature Humanities, as classics let me expand my critical analysis abilities. Also, I plan on excessively exploiting the New York pass for Columbia students to explore the Japan Society, the Queens Museum, and especially the Goethe-Institut.

Note that this is exactly the same. Is it a riveting opening? No. But it works fine. What's important is that he gets write to the specific reasons.

While the above essay focused on Econ + Culture, this essay focuses on Econ + Classics. Why? The author wanted to combine Econ with something else and was able to find more on culture-specific classes at NU and more on classics at Columbia. (Lesson: let your research guide you--even if you have some pretty words written for your first "why us" essay, be open to change.)

These are all really specific, unusual, and connected to this student's interests. Really nice. There's no equivalent in the essay above, but that's fine.

This is similar to a sentence above, but note that the reasons here are particular to these classes.

Through the undergraduate Economics Department, I specifically want to take Richard Clarida's "International Money and Finance" class as I hope it will elucidate international finance and capital mobility while teaching me to analyze



these trends in a specific theoretical context. I also appreciate the Columbia Economics Society's large networking events established to introduce members to my future career field. Furthermore, I plan on accessing the Columbia Program for Economic Research, as I see the potential to combine my interests in Economics and culture through a research project on the socio-economic impact of immigrant entrepreneurs in South Korea.

The interest in exploring South Korea is in the essay above, but note that it's related (at Columbia) to a different opportunity, and so is phrased in a slightly different way.

This is exactly the same...

He ties it to specifics in the place he'll visit, then uses the same reason at the end of the paragraph. (See how this works?)

I'm also particularly interested in study abroad programs that tie internships into language study, and the Summer Business Chinese and Internship in Shanghai Program fits that criteria perfectly. I want to explore Chinese economics and law at a Shanghai law firm while studying Chinese at Jiao Tong University because the best way to adapt for business ventures in China is to fully immerse myself in its culture and business life.

...and lo and behold there is a program that allows for that.

My academic preparation, multicultural background and potential will allow me to be a meaningful and contributing member of the Columbia community. Columbia is the perfect fit for my educational goals in Economics and Business.

Same ending except for the name of the school is different and the last word in this version is "Business" instead of "culture."



7

The Top Secret Three-Word Trick to Writing a Next-Level “Why us” essay

Find a syllabus.

That’s it.

Research high and low, search the deepest darkest depths of Google (or better yet: ask someone who attends the school) and find a syllabus for a class you will take at that school.

Why does this help? Imagine you’re trying to articulate why you’d like to take a certain class. What better way than to re-phrase language the professor is using in the part of the syllabus that says “What I hope you will learn from this class”?

Take this course description, for example, which is excerpted from a syllabus by (and quoted with permission from) Dr. Frank Anderson at the University of Michigan:

This course provides a comprehensive introduction to the field of reproductive health, both in the United States and from a global perspective. The course will introduce students to cross-cutting themes including 1) historical discourses on reproductive health; 2) the social ecology of reproductive risks (e.g., gender, race, sexuality); 3) the relevance of physical anatomy to reproductive risks; 4) life course perspectives; 5) human rights frameworks; and 6) application to health behavior and health education assessments and interventions. Additional (more specific) topics in reproductive health will be addressed including maternal morbidity, contraceptive use, pregnancy, STI care, HIV, abortion care, and violence against women. Through a comparative look at reproductive health needs in a range of diverse social settings, we will critically examine the logic and impact of current domestic and international standards for reproductive health policy and practice.

Don’t you think this might come in handy when articulating why you’d like to take Dr. Anderson’s class? (This is a rhetorical question and the answer is yes.)

“Wait,” you’re wondering, “Isn’t this approach kind of sneaky?”

Here’s what I say: It depends on how directly you quote the syllabus and whether or not you mention that you found a syllabus. First of all, don’t plagiarize (obviously)—don’t just straight up quote the syllabus.

In terms of mentioning that you found a syllabus, why not include that little gem?

“When I read Professor [X]’s syllabus for her Class in [Y], I was intrigued by the possibility of exploring [Z], in particular...”

See where this is going? Again: be a smart researcher. You don’t have to invent this stuff out of thin air. The information is out there--go find it.

Okay.

Now for an amazing essay that didn’t even need to quote a syllabus...



8

My Favorite “Why us” Essay: Advanced Techniques & Breaking the Rules

Read the essay below without commentary from me, then I’ll tell you why I think works and what you can do to (try and) emulate it.

Tip: Read it slow. And maybe aloud. Or [click here](#) to listen to me reading it aloud.

Example I: “Why Bowdoin?”

Prompt: Bowdoin students and alumni often cite world-class faculty and opportunities for intellectual engagement, the College’s commitment to the Common Good, and the special quality of life on the coast of Maine as important aspects of the Bowdoin experience. (250)

Reflecting on your own interests and experiences, please comment on one of the following:

- 1. Intellectual engagement*
- 2. The Common Good*
- 3. Connection to place*

On the first dawn of the summer, I found myself in a familiar place: sitting awkwardly in the back of a crowded bus full of rowdy twelve year olds. But this time around, I wasn’t the shy, new kid at school, a position I knew all too well. I was the teacher, implementing a middle school aquatic ecology curriculum I’d developed the year before.

As New Jersey’s Passaic River appeared on the horizon, I tightened the red laces on my Merrell hiking boots and checked my bag: clipboards, lesson plans, and a new water testing kit.

For the entire day, I watched as twenty-five young minds tested the Passaic River’s water. Using the river as a natural learning laboratory, I taught them about pollution and industrialization, urban design and remediation strategies.

That summer, through my work in environmental education, I discovered the power of place. I realized that in a changing world, places really are the best storytellers. By tracking the Passaic’s pollution levels, we toured the tales of its waters, beginning with its use by the Lenape Native Americans, to its unjust usurpation by European hegemony, to the Vietnam War, during which tons of Agent Orange were dumped recklessly.

At Bowdoin, I’ll encounter this again. I find myself doing the very thing I was teaching: investigating the rich stories behind a place. As part of my major in Earth and Oceanographic Science, I blissfully get lost on Orr’s Island, researching everything from the historical ecology to the changing geography of the Maine coastline. And I can’t wait.

Why does this essay work?

First, it covers the basic “Why us” requirements, as it:

1. Clearly answers the prompt
2. Lets us know the student has done his research, and has even visited
3. Focuses on specifics.

But this author goes further...



How? And why do I consider this author's essay "next level"? Because he does three really great things:

1. The author found a deep connection between one of the school's core values and one of his own.

This flies in the face of all the "provide 50+ specific reasons" for your essay that I've been preaching so far. Instead, he found one really good reason: Both he and Bowdoin are deeply committed to investigating place. This focus was particularly apropos for this student, who planned on becoming an Environmental Science major.

Why is this particularly awesome? Because as you read this essay you sense that it couldn't have been written for another prompt. And in a world of copy-and-pasted "Why us" essays, this is a breath of fresh air.

(Fun fact: he did actually re-use some of the language in this essay from his short extracurricular essay.) The result: this truly differentiates the school and the student.

2. This essay is primarily about the author.

Check out that word count: the essay is 258 words long, but he doesn't even **mention** the school until word 202. That's so great. But why does this work? Because even though he's writing about himself for the first 200 words, he's also illustrating a particular value: **connection to place**. That's really important. Why? Because if we didn't sense the value in the first 200 words, we might've wondered, "Where is this going?" Instead, though, we get a sense as we read that he is taking us somewhere. (And the key to making it sound like that is **actually having somewhere you're taking the reader**.) He's like a guide we trust. So we relax.

3. He found an interesting/beautiful/poetic way to illustrate that connection.

And it's hard to teach this. (More on this in just a moment.)

Okay, how do you do this?

1. Become an amazing writer.

I'm kidding. Kind of. Just know that part of why this essay is great is that the writer has writing talent. Can you still write something like this even if you don't consider yourself a writer? You can. Here are some ways:

2. Find a way in which you and the school are deeply aligned.

This will take some research. And it may be easier to do this with a smaller liberal arts school (like Bowdoin) that has a particular character. Reed College, for example, is proud to call its students "Reedies"--even going so far as to call them a [particular species](#)--so, for Reed, you might figure out what being a "Reedie" means to you, then demonstrate why you are without a doubt one of them. (Here's [a list of other schools](#) with a culture so particular that they've named themselves.)

And note that this may be harder to do with a large school like Michigan, which offers tremendous resources for exploring practically anything. (It's still possible; it's just tougher.)

2. Craft the heck out of it.

What do I mean? I believe a great "why us" essay is similar to a great personal statement in that it should demonstrate:

1. important and interesting connections
2. craft

(Note: there is a third quality, which I discuss in point #3 on the next page.)

And because the Bowdoin essay above essentially focuses on just one important and interesting connection (connection to place), I believe that craft becomes a LOT more important. In other words: **this essay would be much less awesome if it were much less beautiful.**

What do I mean by beautiful? Read it aloud. Note phrases like, "Using the river as a natural learning laboratory" and "places really are the best storytellers." The writer even makes water testing kits sound like exciting tools of a real-life adventurer, as essential to the author as an explorer's compass (and when I read this essay I'm convinced that they are!)

How do you get to this point? I think you have to really love the thing you're writing about. I also think (if I'm being honest) that you have to love to write, or at least to convince yourself you do. This approach takes time. But it's worth it. Why? I believe this is the type of an



essay that, particularly at a small liberal arts college, can truly make a difference. I have only anecdotal evidence--stories from a few admissions officers--to prove it, but in some cases I believe essays like this have tipped the scales in favor of a particular student. (For reference: this student was accepted to Bowdoin, but after much debate decided to attend Yale instead. #FirstWorldProblem)

3. Find a way to be vulnerable.

This is probably the hardest part, but the most crucial. Let me explain:

I mentioned above that a great “why us” essay should demonstrate a) important and interesting questions and b) craft. But there’s a third quality that I think a great personal statement should have, and that a “why us” essay can, in rare instances, demonstrate. That quality is vulnerability.

First, how does the Bowdoin essay above show vulnerability? He lets his geekiness show. (My definition of “geek,” by the way, is someone with a lot of knowledge in a particular area, particularly an area that is not conventionally popular.)

How does he let his geekiness show? He writes about what he loves without apology.

Why is this vulnerable? Because, in doing so, he risks public ridicule. (I mean **Water testing**? C’mon...) But he pulls it off because he doesn’t go too far or include too much jargon. Why is this important? He draws us in rather than pushes us away. And we’ve all met both kinds of geeks: the kind that draw us in and the kind that alienate us. Be the draw-us-in kind.

A Final Note to Those Who’ve Read This Far

If you’re still reading this, you’re either:

1. A counselor who is interested in helping students, so just reading this for funsies (actually: for worksies)
2. Stalling/procrastinating on starting your own “Why us” essay
3. Someone who likes to be really thorough in your research (aka: a procrastinator with an excuse)
4. Some combination of B & C

If you’re not A (a counselor), it’s time to start researching and writing your essay.

When?

Right now.

Okay, to get you going, here are [40 inspirational talks in two minutes](#).

Now NO MORE PROCRASTINATING.

Begin!

Want more guides like this?

Check out my complete video course [How to Write Amazing Supplemental Essays](#).

