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College Essay Guy's Crash Course on the "Why us" Essay

"Why us" Essentials

The purpose of the "Why us" or "Why this college" essay is to demonstrate--through specific details and examples--why you're a great match for a particular school. In some cases, the "Why us" essay is an important way to demonstrate interest (see p. XX).

In this chapter I'll cover:

- Six Common Mistakes Students Make on the "Why us" Essay
- How to Write Your "Why us" Essay: A Step-by-Step Guide
- How to Find All the Resources You Need to Learn about a Particular School
- The Top Secret Three-Word Trick to Finding Specific Info for Your "Why us" Essay
- Approach #1: The Basic, Solid 'Why Us' Essay That Includes a Bunch of Reasons
- Approach #2: The "3-5 Unique Reasons" Strategy
- Approach #3: The "One Value" Strategy
- How to Write a "Why us" Essay If You Don't Know What You Want to Study
- Three Ways to Make Sure Your "Why Us" Essay Is Doing Its Job

Five Common Mistakes Students Make on the "Why us" Essay

Mistake #1: Writing about the school's size, location, reputation, weather, or ranking.

Why shouldn't you do this? Because that's what many other students are writing about and you don't want to blend in. 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?

Or check out Georgia Tech's prompt:

Beyond rankings, location, and athletics, why are you interested in attending Georgia Tech?

Clearly their admissions readers are tired of reading about those things.

Mistake #2: Simply using emotional language to demonstrate fit.

Telling the school that you walked onto campus and "it just felt right" is a) something else a lot of students say and b) doesn't the reader understand how are a good match for the school. And,

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for that matter, neither does the statement, “I can see myself rooting for the Wildcats at MetLife Stadium on Sundays.”

Mistake #3: Screwing up the mascot, stadium, team colors or names of any important people or places on campus

Why avoid this? 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.¹ Also, the “I can see myself in [insert school colors here]” is a cliché of the “Why us” essay. Avoid it too.

Mistake #4: Parroting the brochures or website language.

It could be that the person reading your essay and evaluating your application actually wrote the words you're copying and pasting. “On the one hand, it shows that a student has actually researched us and I appreciate that,” says Brian Liechti of Warren Wilson College. “On the other, as one of those people who wrote the words you're copying, I'd rather see evidence of how what I wrote resonated with you--do we share values?² What stood out or spoke to you in that brochure or on that web page? That's what I really want to see.”

Mistake #5: Describing traditions the school is well-known for.

In fact, find out the school's common traditions (like throwing toast on the field at Penn, for example, or painting the rock at Northwestern) and then don't write about those things. Why? Everyone and their brother already has. How do you learn these? Google the name of the school and the word “traditions.”

Mistake #6: Thinking of this as only a "Why them" essay.

The school knows it's awesome. “You probably don't need to tell us about the beautiful Nott Memorial,” says Nicole Buenzli of Union College. “I pass the Nott every day, it's on every brochure we create, and we all know it has 16 sides!”

Instead, think of this as a “Why we are perfect for each other” essay.

In fact, imagine you're on a date and the person sitting across from you leans in to ask, “So, why do you like me?” Don't just say, “Because you're hot,” or “My auntie says a relationship with you will improve my job prospects.” When it comes to the “us” in “Why us,” think of it this way:

<p>“Us” ≠ the school by itself or its admissions officers “Us” = the school + you</p>

In order to prove you and the school are destined to be together, make connections between the two of you.

¹ And, based on their home record these days, neither do the Giants. But I digress.

² Yes he actually said “values” and no I did not pay him to say that.

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How to Write Your “Why us” Essay: A Step-by-Step Guide

Step #1: Do your research.

How? Like this:

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

“Click deep” on the school’s website.³ Spend serious time on the school’s online catalog/course schedule and look for not only majors and minors, but also specific programs, courses, activities, and opportunities that set this school apart from all the others you’re applying to.

Read reviews from experts. Here are some good ones:

- The Fiske Guide to Colleges (Edward B. Fiske)⁴
- Colleges That Change Lives (Loren Pope)
- The Best 376 Colleges (Princeton Review)

Read student reviews. Students sometimes say things that experts don’t or won’t say. Both Niche.com and Unigo.com have real student reviews. Read a bunch so you can get a sense of the campus vibe and aren’t skewed by just 1-2 opinions. I particularly like the Unigo question, “What’s the stereotype of the students at your school?” and “Is the stereotype true?” Note that 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 it’s actually a pretty diverse school).

Take real and virtual tours. It’s hard to really know a campus without seeing it. And if you can, do it. But if you can’t visit in person, check out:

- www.campusreel.org
- www.campustours.com
- www.youniversitytv.com
- www.youtube.com⁵
- Tours on individual school websites

TIP: Take at least five online tours so you can compare schools.

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

³ Shout-out to my counselor friend Michelle Myers for this term.

⁴ This is my top choice, as it has long been one of the best resources for researching schools. You’ll likely find one in your counselor’s office or at your local library, or you can purchase a searchable version online.

⁵ Maybe obvious, but just type in the name of the school and “online tour.”

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Most colleges have particular representatives for particular regions of the country (and the world). You can talk to them. And they're really nice! A few reasons why this is a good idea:

- **It's a fantastic way to find out about a school.** In fact, there are people who get paid to answer your questions. (My best friend was one of them.) Don't be afraid. They won't be mad at you; they'll be happy you asked.
- **Your conversation may help you write your essay.** If you learn something meaningful on the call, you may be able to write in your essay, "When I spoke to so-and-so in the Admissions Office, she told me..."
- **At some schools, the person you speak to on the phone may be the one who reads your application.** And how cool will it be when they're reading your app and they think, "Oh, I remember this student! They were so nice."

Pro Tip #1: *Definitely* have a few specific questions in mind before you call and try not to ask about anything you could Google in five minutes. Don't ask, for example, if the school has a Biology major (spoiler: it does!). Ask instead how easy it is for non-majors to take advanced musical theater classes or what sets their Engineering program apart from other schools' (assuming you've already Googled these things and can't find the answers). Don't be afraid to make a connection and simply 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.⁶

Get in touch with a current student.

Try putting the word out the word on social media: "Anyone know a current or former student at Purdue?" Ask that person for 15 minutes of their 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 them to answer like: "What was the most mind-blowing class you took and why? What surprised you about [this particular] college? What do most people *not* know about [insert school]?" The more interesting your questions are, the more interesting the answers will be.⁷

The Top Secret Three-Word Trick to Finding Specific Info for Your "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 may take at that school.

Why does this help? Imagine you're trying to articulate why you'd take a certain class. What

⁶ For more tips on developing an authentic relationship with an admissions counselor, turn to page XX in the demonstrated interest chapter.

⁷ Also a life lesson.

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better way than to peruse the 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, 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.

You can show off your research skills by mentioning in your essay you found a syllabus:

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

Step #2: Organize your research using one of these:

College Essay Guy’s Extremely Advanced⁸ “Why Us” Essay Research Chart

Northwestern University (Example)	
WHAT I WANT FROM COLLEGE	WHAT THIS COLLEGE OFFERS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I want to study sports Journalism • A community where I can write and produce my own plays and films in my spare time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Northwestern has tons of Division I sports and J.A. Adande (one of my favorite sports reporters) is the Director of Sports Journalism at Medill (Northwestern’s School of Journalism, Media, and Integrated Marketing Communications) • Northwestern has lots of student theater groups and some of them produce original work. There’s a playwriting sequence I can apply for and even classes like Ten-Minute Plays, Unlikely

⁸ I’m being facetious when I say “Extremely Advanced.” It’s just two columns.

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	Adaptation, and Tiny Histories. Plus, I can apply for mini (CIRA) grants to fund my short film projects AND there's even an arts-focused residential college (Jones).
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What you're looking for as you research: Specific reasons that connect the school (i.e. "them") AND your own interests and needs (i.e. "you"). Here's a simple formula:

A (school-related detail) + B (how this connects back to you) = a great "Why us" sentence

Pro Tip: Remember the "Why us" is another opportunity to share a few more of your skills/talents/interests/passions. So look back at your "Everything I Want Colleges to Know About Me" List (p. XX) and ask yourself: are all these values/qualities somewhere else in my application? If not, where could I weave them into my "Why us" essay?

Step #3: Decide on your approach.⁹

Here are a few options:

Approach #1: The Basic, Solid 'Why Us' Essay That Includes a Bunch of Reasons

How it works: Research *a bunch* of opportunities at the school and connect each one back to you in an organized way.

How many is "a bunch?" Try to find 10-15 reasons. While you may not ultimately name all the reasons in your final version, research this many will give you plenty to choose from when you start your draft.¹⁰

What do I mean by "organized" way?

Here's an outline for a basic, solid "Why us" essay:

1. Clear thesis that names the academic area(s) you want to pursue and maybe charts the path of the essay¹¹
2. Main reason #1 and 3-4 specific details
3. Main reason #2 and 3-4 specific details
4. Main reason #3 and 3-4 specific details
5. An ending that maybe discusses what you'll give back

⁹ Important: There is no "best" approach and students are accepted to wonderful schools each year with each of these strategies.

¹⁰ An exception here is the 100-word "Why us" essays. For those, I'd recommend Approach #2.

¹¹ Don't know what you want to study? I'll cover that approach on page XX.

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Here's an example of a basic, solid "Why us" Essay that includes a bunch of reasons:

The "Why Michigan?" Essay

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)

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

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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)

Four Things I Love About the “Why Michigan” Essay

1. The short hook. Many students spend way too long on their “Why us” opening when a short one will do. This essay’s hook is just 40 words long and works well. Does your “Why us” even need a hook? Nope. If you use this first approach, get to the main argument as fast as you can.

2. The clear thesis that provides a path for the essay. This will probably take you back to AP English class essays where you’re asked to make your argument explicit at the start and then provide evidence to support it. That’s what you’re doing in a “Why us” essay and your argument is that you and the school are a perfect match.

3. Three main reasons and 3-4 bits of supporting evidence per paragraph. I recommend identifying three main reasons because a) it keeps your essay organized, b) it’s easy to adapt for different length “Why us” essays, and c) it provides “buckets” for your research. (“Buckets” = the themed paragraphs you need to “fill” with research.)

4. The way he sprinkles “salt” into his essay. Remember above where the author notes that he “look[s] forward to exploring [law at Michigan, as it] wasn’t offered in [his] high school education”? I call this sprinkling “salt” into your “Why us” essay. Why? Consider this analogy: salt makes one thirsty and, by mentioning opportunities you haven’t had access to, you let the reader know that you’re thirsty for something the school has to offer. And the reader may know of opportunities for quenching that thirst that you don’t--including the “salt” may inspire them to think of those ways.

A Slightly More Advanced Example of This Approach

Here’s another example that follows the basic structure of the “Why Michigan” essay, but it’s a bit more advanced because the details are a bit more specific. As a result, we learn a bit more about both the school and the author. Read it first, then take a look at the outline below to see how it’s constructed.

The “Why Penn” Essay

Prompt: How will you explore your intellectual and academic interests at the University of Pennsylvania? Please answer this question given the specific undergraduate school to which you are applying. (Word limit: 650)

I want to be a catalyst when I grow up, someone who sparks growth while also trying to sustain the environment through improved efficiency. At UPenn, I look forward to pursuing a major in

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Mechanical Engineering and exploring interdisciplinary programs, as I believe that sustainability can be a viable solution to preserve earth's resources.

At the **GRASP laboratory**¹², I hope to work at the **Haptics Lab** under **Professor Katherine Kuchenbecker** to devise an integrated haptic-responsive camera trap. I believe that the use of teleoperation (in camera traps) in wildlife censuses and studies can be a potential gamechanger in a geologically diverse country like India. I also feel that haptics interfaces can catalyze the process of discovering and studying unexplored biodiversity hotspots like the Western Ghats and the high-rising Himalayas. Besides this, I would also really get a chance to perfect my butterfly stroke through stroke rehabilitation at the Haptics Lab!

In addition, hands-on project courses like **Machine Design** and **Manufacturing and Product Design** will help me in developing, testing and prototyping product permutations, and through **ISAC Program 2018**, I would love to advocate for a course called Environmentally Sustainable Product Design, as I feel that a product's longevity in a market is directly related to its environmental sustainability.

I believe that little sparks of innovation can turn into developed businesses if given the right acceleration and, having already negotiated a deal with the software company Everlution Software Ltd. for my eco-friendly innovation 'Water Wave', I look forward to using the opportunities at **IGEL** to turn my innovations into sustainable technological ventures. After accompanying my father to joint-venture meetings across Europe, I have picked upon certain technical aspects of negotiations such as the influence of 'EBITDA', the use of inter-cultural body language to change mindsets and the long-drawn-out process of Due Diligence. Courses like **Engineering Negotiations** will advance my skills in the subtle art of negotiation and develop my thinking in high-pressure situations.

I look forward to contributing in unconventional ways: through **Penn's policy of Climate Action 2.0**, I'd love to help increase the efficiency of alternative energy machinery through responsive auto-sensors and I would also contribute to the establishing of wildlife corridors at UPenn by conducting case studies at the Morris Arboretum with the help of the **Penn Green Fund**. I also look forward to engaging in bird photography and ornithology by being an active member of the **Penn Birding Club** and potentially conducting fall bird censuses to illuminate for students the birdlife that nestles in the university. I hope to photograph and document each and every one of the 104 species (**Morris Arboretum Checklist**) of birds at UPenn. Furthermore, courses like **Documentary Strategies** and **Photographic Thinking** will help me better integrate critical thought into my photos and construct out-of-the-box documentaries to put into perspective environmental sustainability at UPenn. Also, contributing photo essays

¹² I'm bolding the school-specific reasons in his essay so you can spot them more easily, but you shouldn't do this in your final draft.

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to the **Penn Sustainability Review** will allow me to depict the need for a change, beyond words.

UPenn will also help me pursue a multitude of activities at its various clubs such as **Penn Cricket Club, PennNaatak**, where I hope to spark my flair for **Marathi Drama**, and **men's club basketball** (I was all state for three years!).

As I move with a redefined pace towards the goal of global sustainability, I am reminded of the UPenn ideology of addressing the most challenging questions and problems of our time by integrating and combining different disciplines and perspectives. Through my stay at UPenn, I hope to do just that.

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Here's the outline for the "Why UPenn" essay (which you can adapt for your own essay):

1. Intro/Thesis (say what you want to study and why)
2. Really specific academic offering at the school that is in your intended major/concentration (this should connect to you in a really specific way)
3. A second really specific academic offering that is also in your intended major/concentration (and that also connects back to you)
4. Something academic that's *not* in your intended major/concentration (this keeps the focus on academics, but also brings in some variety)
5. Best/most important extracurricular offering (that connects to you in a really specific way)
6. Miscellaneous extracurriculars paragraph (2-3 things to demonstrate social/non-academic fit)
7. Closing (this can be short and, in shorter "Why us" essays, is unnecessary)

Note that the content in the two essays above are roughly 50% about the school and 50% about the student, which is a nice balance. Below is an example essay that uses a similar structure (thesis followed by main reasons), but is more like 75% about the school and 25% about the student. This isn't not "wrong," it's just a slightly different approach.

The "Why Tufts?" Essay (With Notes on Why I Like It)

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

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 (EXP-0029-S) 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)

Ethan's Notes:

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I call this the “firehose” approach because it packs 14 reasons into 196 words. The author offers the reader a sense that he has clearly done his research and knows how he might make use of the school’s offerings, which is the goal of the solid, basic “Why us” essay.¹³

But how do you make the school feel really special? Like this:

Approach #2: The “3-5 Unique Offerings” Strategy

How it works: find 3-5 opportunities *that are particular to the school* (i.e. available at no other school or no other school you’re applying to) and connect each one back to you.

This is my favorite approach, as focusing on fewer reasons allows you the chance to share more about yourself and your interests (i.e., “why you”). But it can be more difficult to write because, frankly, it can be hard to find specifics that *truly* set a school apart from other schools.¹⁴ It is possible to find these unique offerings, however, and I believe it’s worth trying, especially for your top-choice school(s).

As an example, notice how the author below names four unique offerings that connect him to Cornell (I’ve labeled them below). Plus, we learn a little more about the author’s interests than we do from the essays above.

The “Why Cornell” Essay

Prompt: Students in Arts and Sciences embrace the opportunity to delve into their academic interests, discover new realms of intellectual inquiry, and chart their own path through the College. Tell us why the depth, breadth, and flexibility of our curriculum are ideally suited to exploring the areas of study that excite you. (Word limit: 650)

Whenever I have time on my hands, I hook myself up to my EEG and analyze my brain waves. Or if I am feeling slightly less adventurous, I am reading about the latest neuroscience trends in ScienceDirect or NCBI PubMed. I want to spend my life studying, understanding, and helping to fix the human brain.

I bought my EEG online two years ago for about \$150 and have used it to compare the beneficial effects of both circadian and non-circadian sleep on the brain by analyzing the number of clear peaks in a 3-minute interval of a theta wave. But just counting the peaks is not the best way to measure the benefits. I look forward to gaining a deeper understanding of the fundamentals of neurophysiology (as well as working with better equipment) in courses like Principles of

¹³ Did you notice how easy it would be to adapt the “Why Tufts” essay for another school? Switch out “18” in “18 related departments and programs,” change the names of the Chinese professor and University, name two different interesting courses and cut the “mother’s alma mater” line and voila--suddenly this is an essay for another school. More on adapting your “Why us” for other schools on page XX.

¹⁴ Pro Tip: Ask admission reps what sets their school (or the department you’re applying to) apart from other schools.

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Neurophysiology. As someone who has long been passionate about neurotechnology, the fact that Cornell is unique in offering classes devoted specifically to the field is very important to me.

I would also like to be able to contribute my experiences with neurotechnology to support the cutting edge research in Cornell's brand new NeuroNex Hub. I would love to work with Dr. Chris Xu in expanding the current three-photon microscope to be applied on various animal models. I also look forward to helping Dr. Chris Schaffer, whose research on deep neural activity is not being done anywhere else in the world. I freak out at the possibility of helping him develop a tool to look at multiple brain areas at the same time.

Though I have long aspired to study at Cornell, when I visited and sat in on Neurobiology and Behavior II, it made me all the more determined. I found Professor Christiane Linster's presentation on synaptic plasticity absolutely riveting. Her animations of neurotransmitters crossing a synapse and new synapses forming in neuron clusters kept her students engaged in a way I have not seen in any other classrooms. I want to go to Cornell because of teachers like her.

During my visit I also enjoyed talking with Kacey about her experiences in the college scholars program. I loved that she had studied the effects of circus and gymnastic performances, like Cirque Du Soleil, on therapy for children with neurological disabilities. I am very excited by the idea of combining neuroscience with something like the effects of learning a classical language on developing brains. Many studies have shown the plethora of positive effects of being bilingual, but not much research has been done on classical languages. I have been studying Latin for over seven years, and I have experienced firsthand the positive effects. I spend hours every day breaking down complex sentences such as those in Vergil's Aeneid, and so have extended this approach to problem-solving to other aspects of my life, like my neuroscience research. This is the program I would create for my college scholars project.

Cornell is also the only university I am interested in that offers a speaking course in Latin: Conversational Latin. For the past six years, I have rarely had to translate more than a few sentences at a time from English to Latin, never truly experiencing the unique grammatical features of Latin, such as intricate word play by Catullus in his Odes, that drew me so much to this language. I would love to supplement my knowledge by being able to formulate my thoughts in Latin and actively immerse myself in the language. I am really excited about learning the language as it was meant to be learned, as well as the new perspective it will provide me on Latin rhetorical artifacts.

As a kid who loves inventing, enjoys interactive learning, and wants to speak a dead language, I know Cornell is where I want to be. I wonder if my roommate will mind if I bring my EEG?

How this essay is similar to the first approach:

1. He begins with a short intro and solid thesis; both work well.
2. He weaves back and forth between what he wants and what the school offers.

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What sets this essay apart: The four examples that name how the school is unique give us a *really* clear sense of how Cornell is a great fit for this student. Also, we know this essay was written specifically for the school because it would be much more difficult (than the “Why Tufts” essay, for example) to switch out the variables and use this for another school. Finally, while the “Why Michigan” and “Why UPenn” examples go for breadth, discussing many different reasons; the “Why Cornell” example discusses fewer reasons but with more depth.

Approach #3: The “One Value” Strategy

How it works: identify one core value that links you to the school and tell a story.

This approach might be good for:

- Schools that a) have shorter “Why us” essays¹⁵ and b) seem to be asking for this type of response
- Students who feel approaches #1 and #2 might blend in too much, and are willing to take a risk

Why is this a risky approach?

1. You’re foregoing listing 5-15 reasons that connect you to the school (and, frankly, that some admission officers like to see)
2. This approach hinges on a particular story, value, or insight. And if:
 - a. your reader is skimming (as many are), or
 - b. your story isn’t well-told, or
 - c. the central theme or value isn’t clear, or
 - d. the insight doesn’t make the reader *feel* something... the essay may not work.

That’s a lot of ifs! Having said that, here’s an example essay that, I think, does work¹⁶:

The “Why Bowdoin” Essay

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. (Word limit: 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*

¹⁵ I wouldn’t recommend this approach for longer (500-650-word) “Why us” essays, as I think it’s too hard to do. For longer essays I’d recommend Approach #2 (if possible) or #1.

¹⁶ Heads-up: If you skim this essay, you may not get it. :)

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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.

Ethan writing again: Why does this essay work?

This author checks a few "Why us" boxes by focusing on specifics, showing us he's done his research, and clearly answering the prompt. But what to know the main thing that sets this essay apart?

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

I know this flies in the face of the "provide a whole bunch of specific reasons" for your essay that I mentioned in Approach #1. Instead, the author found one really good reason: Both he and Bowdoin are deeply committed to investigating *place*. This focus was particularly apropos for this student, as he planned to major in Environmental Science. And, as you read this essay you sense that it couldn't have been written for another prompt.¹⁷

¹⁷ Aaactually... this student *did* re-use some of the language in this essay for a short extracurricular essay, which just goes to show you how reusable even very specific essays can be. (For more, see page XX on the Super Topic.)

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Because he used a value as the central theme, 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. This works because he stays connected to the central themes, which are nature and storytelling. In fact, if in your essay we don't get a sense of the central themes in the first 200 words, we might wonder, "Where is this going?" Instead, though, we feel as we read this essay that the author is taking us somewhere. He's a guide we trust. So we relax.

How can you write an essay like this?

1. Find a way in which you and the school are deeply aligned.¹⁸

It'll 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.

2. Take your time crafting the essay.

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

- A. Core values (which this essay does)
- B. Insight (aka important and interesting connections, aka "so what" moments)
- C. Craft (it should be obvious, in other words, that the author has revised the essay over several drafts and knows the purpose of each paragraph, sentence, and word)

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 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 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.

¹⁸ Hint: It's probably a value.

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3. Find a way to be vulnerable.

This part is perhaps the most difficult, but 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.

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.) He does this by writing about what he loves without apology.

Why is this vulnerable? Because, in doing so, he risks public ridicule. (I mean, *water testing? Come on...*) 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 push 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.

Another thing that makes this essay vulnerable: he lists very few (almost no) Bowdoin specifics. And that’s a risk! Did it work? You decide.

Could I create a hybrid approach by focusing on a central theme, but still listing a few reasons?

Yup. Here’s...

The Hybrid Approach: Use a Central Theme + Include Several Specific Reasons That Connect Back to You

The “Why Swarthmore” Essay

The human body’s greatest asset is its ears. They come pimped, freckled, mushed, bent, rounded, and pointed. But, despite their differences, they share a single purpose: to listen.

Swarthmore is all about ears. It not only understands the importance of empathetic and open dialogue, but also the ways in which listening can be the first step towards bridging deeply entrenched ideological divides. Whether I’m learning from guest lecturers at the Center for Innovation and Leadership, engaging in dialogue at the Global Health Forum, or exploring my sexuality through the Intercultural Center, I know I’d be at a place that values collaboration, honest discourse, ethical leadership, and creativity invested in the public good. Everything at Swarthmore is about putting those cartilage appendages on the sides of your head to good use.

As a person drawn to audio and visual storytelling, my life has been defined by listening. At Swarthmore, I would continue to foster the quality relationships I’ve created and the love I’ve

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spread by inviting people to share their stories on my podcasts. Majoring in Film & Media Studies or English Literature, broadcasting at WSRN, and writing for The Review is the next chapter in my life of listening. I would creatively explore how narratives have been told in the past and can be redefined digitally for a new generation of ears. Swarthmore knows that global change starts with an honest conversation. I want to be pioneering new networks of connection. I want to be starting those conversations. (247 words)

Ethan's note: If you go with this approach, ideally you would find offerings unique to the school (as in the "Why Cornell" essay). But if you can't, just find reasons that are as specific as possible and connect them back to you (as in the "Why Michigan" and "Why UPenn" essays).

How to Write a "Why us" Essay If You Don't Know What You Want to Study

Good news: you can still write a great "Why us" even if you have no idea what you want to be when you grow up. Some tips:

1. Consider including a thesis that either names your 2-3 areas of interest or states that you're unsure what you want to study. In that thesis, consider saying what you do want, and including the name of the school (Example: "I'm interested in X, Y, and Z, and I believe there's no other place for me to explore these areas than the University of Wisconsin-Madison.")
2. You can also begin with a nice hook to not only show your creativity but also perhaps distract from the fact that you have no idea what you want to be when you grow up (and oh by the way it's totally fine to not know).

Here's a great example to illustrate these points:

The "Why Johns Hopkins" Essay¹⁹

Prompt: Johns Hopkins University was founded in 1876 on a spirit of exploration and discovery. As a result, students can pursue a multi-dimensional undergraduate experience both in and outside of the classroom. Given the opportunities at Hopkins, please discuss your current interests (academic, extracurricular, personal passions, summer experiences, etc.) and how you will build upon them here. (500 words)

Dear 2016 Ariana,

It's 2026. I have just returned from the G20 summit after delivering the annual-report on demographic transition and population stability.

Throughout your seventeen years of life, you have been barraged with choices: Which airline seat to choose? Is the answer B or C? Is "the dress" blue/black or white/gold? But, you

¹⁹ Heads-up that JHU no longer has a "Why us," or may not when you apply. (I'm still including it because it illustrates a few important concepts.) But this is a good reminder to check for updated prompts.

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will soon make a choice that will allow you to harness your knowledge and apply it to reality. The choice to go to Johns Hopkins.

By now, you have lived in India, the UK, and the USA: multicultural exposure that shaped your worldview. You are confused as to what you want exactly, but deep down you strive for a synergy of ideas and fields. That can and will be found at Hopkins.

Particularly, the **JHU Humanities Center** will provide you with a flexible approach toward interdisciplinary study: important, as you value the need to explore before settling on a choice. You will find this at **Homewood**, but also globally; through study at the **Sciences Po campus, Paris**, which outlines the interconnectedness between areas such as law, finance, and urban policy.

In Model United Nations, you built skills in collaboration, working with students across the country to embody pluralism and reach consensus. At Hopkins, you will enhance these skills and your knowledge of international relations in **Professors Moss and Hanchards's class, Diaspora, Nation, Race, & Politics**. The discussions, which range from political sociology and human rights to the fall of late nineteenth century empires, will give you greater insight into how history determines our understanding of today's geopolitical challenges.

And although you stuck your toe in the ocean of government and politics through your internship in Senator Glazer's office, JHU provides an immersive dive into this field through their **International Studies Program**, with opportunities at the **Nanjing Center, China and the Nitze School in Washington D.C.**

On a local level, you will be able to extend your political service when you run for **JHU Student Government Association**, where you will continue to represent diverse viewpoints and provide a forum for recognition and discussion.

You will also have the opportunity to continue your work with **the Red Cross**, giving back to the Baltimore community by joining the **JHU and the Chesapeake Regional chapters**. And by joining the **Public Health Student Forum**, you will gain access to speakers who have worked in these fields all their life, like **Former Director of the Peace Corps, Dr. Jody Olsen, and Dr. Richard Benjamin, Chief Medical Officer of the Red Cross**.

All your life experiences, from building community to understanding behavior in order to enact decisions, have stemmed from One. Single. Choice. Without Johns Hopkins, you would not have become an expert on global policy change, speaking at events like the G20 emporium.

Yes, the world has changed dramatically in the past 10 years. But Hopkins recognizes this fluidity, and paired with you, Ariana, will propel the importance of integrative study.

Love,

Future Ariana

PS: The dress is white/gold.

Final note from me: Do you notice how in the end this approach isn't all that different from the Approaches 1 and 2? The main difference is her thesis, which, instead of naming a major, simply

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states that she's unsure what she wants to study. We're cool with it, though, especially because she still includes lots of reasons and connects each back to herself.

Three Ways to Make Sure Your “Why Us” Essay Is Doing Its Job

1. Scan your essay for capital letters. Why? Because, chances are, capital letters means you've included something specific that the school offers. In fact...

2. Highlight in bold your reasons for wanting to attend. I've done this in the “Why Johns Hopkins” essay above. Notice after doing this if you have just 1-3 items highlighted in bold. If so, you can probably trim in some places to make room for more reasons. This isn't a hard and fast rule, but if you're going for the first or second approach I've described, then 1-3 reasons per paragraph is a good rule of thumb, whereas if you're going for the third approach you can kind of do whatever you might choose to in-depth on one really great reason. But either way...

3. Make sure that each time you mention something about the school you connect it back to yourself. How do you know? Simply check each mention of the school and see if you've explained why this is important--not just in general, but to you.

Finally, just so you can see how a personal statement and “Why us” essay can work together, here is:

The “Why us” Essay for the “Laptop Sticker” Essay (p. XX)

If I could pursue only one goal for the rest of my life, it would be taking measurable action towards gender equality. Since the age of six, I have observed the difference in how I am treated because of my gender--when playing sports, during mealtimes, or at social gatherings. I have tried to counter the effects of gender bias through social entrepreneurship, and now I would like to gain insight into the societal constructs that underlie these issues.

At UPenn, I hope to study Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies with a concentration in Feminist Studies and Global Gender and Sexuality Studies in the College of Arts and Sciences. Through Professor Kathleen Brown's “Gender & Society” class, I will learn how complex social identities such as race and gender impact economic exchange and demarcate opportunities available to minorities. I hope to further explore the consequences of electoral quotas and their effect on women's mobilization transnationally with Dawn Teele in her class, “Sex and Power.” Such classes will help me ensure that I am not working for one cause at the expense of another, and will arm me with the skills necessary to analyze social, economic and political dynamics in the real world.

Last summer, I spent a month at UPenn, living in Harnwell College House and incubating my social impact startup, Straw'd, through the LaunchX program held at the Pennovation Center. At the program, MEAM Professor Jenna Shanis spoke about her work

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designing soda machines with Coca Cola. Presenting us with a simple task (“design a way for humans to enjoy flowers”), she showed us that the first solution is usually never the best solution, and that innovation is most effective when it is iteratively brainstormed and cross-fertilized. Material Science and Engineering Professor Vanessa Chan, inventor of the tangle-free headphones ‘Loopit,’ inspired me to take on the challenge of creating a consumer good instead of a company in the service industry. These two professors, along with others who spoke, have given me a new perspective on integrating theory into practice, critical thinking into activism.

Given my interest in building new social enterprises, I would like to join the Penn Social Entrepreneurship Movement to learn more about empowering women economically in different countries. Through events like ‘Social Impact Talk Series’ held by PennSEM, I will learn about the multi-faceted industry of social entrepreneurship and gain exposure to issues such as food innovation and food policymaking. Additionally, planning TEDxYouth@Austin events has been an integral part of my four years of high school, and I will continue this passion through TEDxPenn by finding women speakers from underrepresented industries and helping to elevate their voices.

I’ve been an artist longer than I have been an activist. Through classes such as “Photographic Thinking- a Benjamin Franklin Seminar” and “Art, Design, and Digital Culture”, I will learn to use design as a vehicle to fight for gender equality in the future, as digital art is currently heavily influencing the way social movements develop momentum through media.

While at UPenn, I noticed that many youth from surrounding neighborhoods grow up with difficult socioeconomic circumstances, and I hope to empower women of color from these neighborhoods as I study how race and gender impact economic opportunity. I will join the Community School Student Partnerships to lead social impact and entrepreneurship workshops at the after-school programs in high schools. I’ve experienced firsthand how entrepreneurship training can empower individuals, and by training girls from underrepresented communities, I hope to help them solve the problems they experience. Joining CSSP would give me the opportunity to give back to the Philadelphia and Penn communities while continuing my passion for empowering young females.

The GSWS program at UPenn is a perfect fit for me. Its interdisciplinary training and intersectional approach would provide me with the knowledge, mentorship, and resources I need to continue growing as a social justice advocate and champion of equality.

In the Treasure Trove you’ll find:

- A Basic Downloadable “Why us” Essay Chart
- Article: Your Annual Reminder to Ignore the U.S. News & World Report College Rankings