

InGenius supplemental essay webinar 8/1/24 notes. Shannon Beddingfield

This was the best of the 4 Common App Bootcamp sessions, and in one significant way, it disagreed with the previous one, and I think I trust this one more. She said that the personal essay (not supplemental essay) prompts are just guidance: you don't have to follow them, but the opposite is true **for the supplemental essays: for these, it's crucial to address the full prompt and not go elsewhere.** Her feeling is that in the personal essay you are primarily distinguishing who are you in your own voice, and you have leeway. **You should be discussing in the personal essay what's special/interesting about you with an emphasis on your own voice being clear. She feels this is much more important than highlighting achievement, which is important in supplements that are asking about achievement** (some of them). The personal essay prompts are inspiration, but the supplemental essay prompts are demands.

Generally, she said the essay and supplements (many of which are short essays) should complement but not repeat the rest of the application. **The supps should provide new insight into you as a person and as a prospective student at this specific college and/or a new helpful perspective about details of your life mentioned elsewhere in your application but without this detail.** Don't use these to repeat what's elsewhere in the application. **Provide context to enable a concrete vision of who you are.**

Differences between the personal essay and supplements:

First, usually length: most supplements are shorter (as few as 50 words), but a minority are in the 650 word range like the personal essay. A few don't have a limit: in these, she says to aim in the 600 word range.

While the personal essay should tell a story, supps are open to more variety: some request you to be more academic or analytical. Some ask for a story, but that's less common. Your personal essay should have detail within the story, but **in the supps it's crucial to provide concrete detail to answer their question, whether it's about your academic interests or why you want to go to this specific school.** You're insulting the school if you're giving generic reasons for wanting to go there.

While your personal essay is more about who you are, a key focus in the supps is your fit with the specific school: why it's right for you and why you'd be valuable to the school while there. This requires clarity and precision: it may well require research about the school's program and resources in your area of interest. If it's asking about fit, provide detailed information about what the college offers you including the correct name of their programs, majors and possibly professors that attract you.

Going through some examples to provide best approach:

2 U. of Illinois supplements:

1. Up to 150 words about an experience in the last 3-4 years (high school time) related to the major you're choosing: it can be an extracurricular activity or a class.

Tips:

They're asking for one, so focus on one and don't just mention 3.

Be clear and precise about the activity. Don't use abbreviations they don't know. If they don't understand it, this isn't a good supp.

Be sure to tie it to your major. Remember that InGenius strongly recommends picking a major you might be interested in even if you're not sure. If you're not sure, don't pick a super competitive one like pre-med or engineering. **Be specific when tying it to the major.**

Include why it excited/engaged you: show your passion and its roots.

2. Up to 150 words to describe your personal/career goals after college and how your major will help you achieve these.

To prepare for the supplements, think about a specific reason you want this major (even if you're not sure you'll stick with it) that fits with the rest of your application.

Begin by explaining your academic interest rather than the major. Your major should be influenced by the interest and not vice versa.

Connect past experience and academic activities to this academic interest. How did the interest develop out of/was influenced by your activities?

Then identify which major or program would best help you explore this interest and be sure to be specific about why.

If you get somewhat vague supp questions, these are both good topics to address in those cases. Some supps ask both parts: an activity that led to or increased an interest and how the interest will fit your major and perhaps your life afterwards (the job it leads to, perhaps).

Why school/why major supplements are very common. Most are limited to about 300 words, but Tufts is only 50-100.

If you get a why this school/why this major supplement, here are the steps she recommends:

Research things like requirements, courses available to undergrads, possibly specific faculty members and resources (internship programs, study abroad programs as just 2 examples). Show that you know the specifics about things you like about the school.

Demonstrate interest: discuss what you learned in your interactions with the school like visits, summer programs, interviews, contact with students, faculty or alumni. Be specific about what you learned and why you liked it. Obviously, you won't have tons of this for every school, but if you have had contacts, stress the positive effect they had and why.

How well do you understand the mission/educational philosophy of the school/program? **Why does it suit you?** If you get somewhat vague supps, this is a good topic to address in those cases. **Examples would be the school's distribution requirements or lack of same: why would their stance work for you? You want to be specific about why this is the best school for you.** The odd thing about this is that if you're applying to ten schools, you have to do this for all ten if you want to be accepted at all ten, so everyone knows there's some dishonesty going on here, but they're basically asking for it, and if your supp. Is based on solid researched information, it will be helpful.

Be as specific as possible! Use the school's terminology. This shows them you care and know why you want to go there.

Show enthusiasm for the school! If you don't, your chances go way down!

Shortcut: You can't use the same supps on the why this school essays (if you want to get in), but you can adapt ones about why this major with different specifics about the school.

Other types of supplements you may have to do:

Community impact: Be specific about how you have done something positive for a community as you define it (school, team, neighborhood, ethnic or religious group, family, club, workspace). If you can, provide details about the quantitative difference you have made to this group by your actions.

Collaboration and/or leadership: Collaboration has become at least an equally important skill to leadership, but you want to find the sweet spot in between: you don't want to sound like a boss, but you want to show how you were essential (or at least helpful) to a positive collaboration.

Identity: sometimes this is how does your family/community help define you: this could be a cultural group, family, religion, neighborhood, school, team, club or workplace. They want to understand how your membership provides context for who you are, but in terms of diversity, they also want to know how you will add to the school by being other than the average student there. (**For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, this is especially important as Justice Roberts left this door open while ending formal Affirmative Action for minority groups but retaining it for legacies, males and rich people, but don't repeat here if you have already focused on this in the personal essay.**)

Dealer's choice: something like "What do you want us to know that isn't elsewhere in your application?" If you get this one, consider how you can augment your application persona: the brand you're selling in your application. Definitely don't sound whiny or privileged.

Some supplements are very short answer questions. Examples:

What's your dream job?

What's your life's theme song (choosing a real song)?

Who would you choose as your celebrity roommate? (Hint: don't make it about looks!)

Tips for these:

Be really specific about the dream job: she cites a student who wrote "Bojack Horseman animator" as an excellent answer for a student interested in animation.

Don't give obvious answers or what you think they want to hear: you want to differentiate yourself rather than sounding like everyone else.

Again, consider fit with your application persona/brand.

Think about how your answer contributes to the reader's understanding of you/your interests.

Avoid what's going to be obscure to the reader: if the reference isn't clear, it doesn't help.

Weird Supps.: you must play ball on these. Take them seriously even though they're weird. You need to impress the reader, and this is here to separate the best from the good.

Q and A:

Many supps went up on August 1, but it's up to the schools, so some might not appear until about August 21. If they're not there by then, check the school's website.

Some schools have a disagreement supp. It asks how you deal with disagreements. It's important to indicate that you're a good listener and open to and empathetic to others' opinions and want to understand where they're coming from but also that you're not a pushover. Think about how they want you to be in class and on campus (even if many students on all sides are pretty intolerant these days).

Writing: use action verbs, avoid passive constructions, focus on your actions (not others' actions)

New opportunity: InGenius is having a webinar in August that allows seniors to send in drafts of their essays ahead of time and have them (at least a few of them) dissected by during the webinar in front of everyone by an expert college essay reader. They haven't announced the date yet, but you can send in your essay if you're brave. For more information, tune into the actual webinar before they take it down. The information comes up about the 51st minute of Common App. Bootcamp session 3 (personal essay) if you want to skip ahead to learn more about this.