

HOW TO WRITE A "WHY US" ESSAY

1. How **NOT** to write your "Why us" essay
2. What you **SHOULD** write in your essay
3. All the resources you need to learn about a particular school

Part 1: How NOT to write your essay

After reading many bad "Why us" statements and a few good ones, I've put together this quick list of Dos and Don'ts:

DONT: 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?" essay 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 they say don't write about those things? Because they're 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 the case is this: "You [the school] and I [the student] are a perfect match." But...

DONT: 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 make a good case. It doesn't 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:

DONT: 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, 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 but 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](#).)



DONT: Think of this as a "Why them" essay.

In other words, don't 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 (new) 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 them?" (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?"

Part 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.

How do I do this? Here's how:

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.

So, for example, if the school has a music and medicine program, put that in the right column. Next to it, in the left column, say why that's the perfect program for you. Or maybe you're interested in studying Chinese? Put that in the left column and then look for something related to learning Chinese 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. (Super generic.)

to...

I look forward to Academic Argumentation (225) 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

See what he's done there?



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... On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being "I want to be involved in all the campus activities!" and 10 being "There was a particular student's dorm window I looked in during the campus walking tour and I saw her reading a Microecon book and drinking a Strawberries Wild from Jamba Juice--my favorite--and I thought--" (Slow down, creeper. And how did you know what flavor it was??) Anyway, keep it at like a 7 or an 8. And make sure all your details are relevant and appropriate. 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 with what I have?

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.

Finally...

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

Do 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.

DO: Offer to start something.

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

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 THEY DONT 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 get into the school first.

You can push for the double major your sophomore year.



Part 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.” 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 seem great.) Go to the Unigo section 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, Jewish, 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 fratboys,” that could be a sign that it’s actually a pretty diverse school).

4. **Books:** Remember books? The paper kind? Though much of the info is online, there are still a few good books with good info (available at your local bookstore or on Amazon.com):

- * “The Insider’s Guide to the Colleges, 2013: Students on Campus Tell You What You Really Want to Know”
- * Colleges That Change Lives (Loren Pope)
- * 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. If you can, do it. If you can’t visit the school in person, go here:

- * 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 minutes) so you can compare schools. And here’s the best/most important step... but before you do it you have to have particular questions in mind.

6. **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:

- a.) **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’re willing to take initiative.



b.) 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.

c.) It lets them 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 explain/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!

To close, let me say something I said above in a slightly different way:

Don't ask the admissions officer 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), 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. Your college reps, like me, want the very best for you.

