

Presenting Your Best Self #5: Addressing Supplementary Prompts

Supplements are smaller, more specific writing prompts required by many schools in addition to the Common Application or Coalition for College essay. Though they are predictably varied in topic and length, here are some general guidelines:

1. **Typical length:** 100 to 300 words
2. **Paragraph structure:** Assume 1 paragraph for each 100-125 words; for a supplement over 150 words, always use multiple paragraphs.
3. **Diction and focus:** Supplements are typically read more quickly by admissions staff members. For that reason, unless the supplement is off-beat in nature, use clear, unadorned diction and focus like a laser on the prompt topic. Do not diverge one bit.

And now, specific tips for more frequently required prompts:

- **Intended program, area of study, or major:** Larger universities, especially public ones, regularly ask students to identify, or predict, what they intend to study, along with academic or personal experiences that may have led to such decisions. If you're applying to an accounting, nursing, or engineering program, you likely know why you're doing so. But if you have little to no idea what you want to study, don't panic: Consider naming two, three, even four possible majors or, instead, a general area like "social sciences" or "humanities." It's perfectly fine not to know your major!
- **Favorite activity:** This prompt invites you to share an anecdote about your favorite activity, or something else that explains why it has so much meaning for you. Remember not to list your awards or achievements in the activity, since you have already done that in your activities list. Bragging will not help you, but revealing the "So what?" will.
- **"Why [this school]?":** Contrary to what it seems, such a prompt is not asking you to flatter the admissions reader with meaningless compliments about location, campus beauty, and sports teams. This prompt is asking you for specific reasons that you are seeking admission. It offers you a great opportunity to demonstrate that you have done your homework, whether online or on a campus visit. Be specific at all times, and if social components of college life appeal to you—service clubs, perhaps, or fraternities or sororities—by all means include those.

- **“Community”:** It is not unusual for larger schools, particularly public ones, to ask you to identify and explain one or more communities to which you belong. This sort of prompt enables admissions readers to gauge how you may fit into the student body and, in your own way, bring increased diversity to campus. But if you do not fit the profile of a racially or ethnically diverse applicant, never fear. Instead, consider experiences, hobbies, practices, or activities of yours that can form communities—marching band, juggling, international travel, yoga, vegetarianism, meditation, biking, and others.
- **Off-beat prompts:** Some highly selective schools—for instance, the Ivy League and University of Chicago—purposely offer whimsical, sometimes quirky supplementary prompts in order to jostle you into creativity or even humor. For success with such prompts, you need to “roll with it”—loosen up, allow yourself some space and time to test out options, but first figure out what you want to reveal about yourself to the admissions reader.
- **Additional information:** Many schools offer students an opportunity to provide additional information not otherwise included in the application. Though this prompt offers some students the opportunity to provide crucial contextual bits, no student should think, “Everyone is doing this section so I should, too.” In particular, when addressing any health issues, keep it short and simple, for example: “I dropped volleyball after freshman year because of chronic back problems.” Nothing else is needed. The “TMI” rule applies here!

Finally, a strategy that will absolutely save you time:

Instead of knocking off one supplementary prompt at a time, before you write the first one survey your playing field. First gather all your supplements together into one document, including suggested or required word lengths. Then review them analytically. What overlaps and similarities do you see? Are some supplements simply shorter or longer derivatives of others? What topics might address multiple supplements, thereby cutting down on the total number of essays you must write?

It is not just ethical but eminently sensible to cannibalize your supplementary prompts, to reuse certain portions or otherwise adapt them for different schools. *A caveat:* Your personal statement is inviolate. Never cannibalize or repeat any content from it in supplementary essays.