



UNIVERSITY OF
MICHIGAN

**THE
ESSAY
GUIDE**

**HELPFUL
ADVICE FOR
WRITING
YOUR
PERSONAL
STATEMENT**

2015-2016

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR THE 2015-2016 COMMON APPLICATION:

SHORT ANSWER

Required for all applicants.

Approximately 100 words (maximum 150).

If you could only do one of the activities you have listed in the Activities section of your Common Application, which one would you keep doing? Why?

ESSAY #1

Required for all applicants.

Approximately 250 words (maximum 300).

Everyone belongs to many different communities and/or groups defined by (among other things) shared geography, religion, ethnicity, income, cuisine, interest, race, ideology, or intellectual heritage. Choose one of the communities to which you belong, and describe that community and your place within it.

ESSAY #2

Required for all FRESHMEN applicants.

500 words maximum (Common App will allow up to 650).

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?

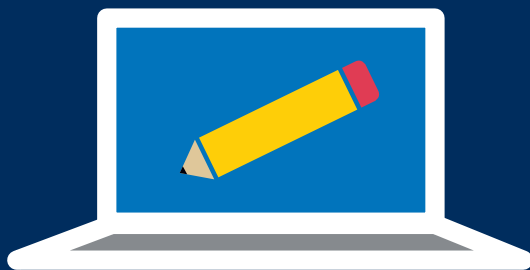
ESSAY #2

Required for all TRANSFER applicants.

500 words maximum (Common App will allow up to 650).

Describe the unique qualities that attract you to the specific undergraduate College or School to which you are applying at the University of Michigan. How would that curriculum support your interests?

TIP - How to Get a Word Count: In MS Word, highlight the text that you wish to count. Go to the Tools menu and select "Word Count." If you do not highlight any text, MS Word will count every single word on the page.



WRITING PERSONAL STATEMENTS

CONTEXT CONSIDERATIONS

What is a Personal Statement? A personal statement, or essay, offers an opportunity to show aspects of yourself that will not be obvious in other areas of your application. It is important that personal statements are not simply material contained elsewhere in the application.

Think of the statement as the single opportunity in your package to let the admissions committee hear your voice. Often, committees sort through large numbers of applications and essays.

You want your essay to engage the reader, and to clearly demonstrate what makes you a unique candidate - different from the rest of the students who are also applying.

OVERVIEW OF THE ESSAY

Some applications ask more specific questions than others. There is no set formula to follow in shaping your essay, only choices for you to make, such as whether you should write an essay that is more autobiographically focused or one that is more professionally focused.

Personal statements are most important when you are applying to an extremely competitive program, where all the applicants have high test scores and GPAs, and when you are a marginal candidate and need the essay to compensate for low test scores or a low GPA.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

The personal statement is an important part of your application package. Depending on the topic you choose, the essay you write provides additional evidence of your intellectual and creative achievement.

The essay is also the only opportunity for the readers of your application to get a feel for you as a person as well as for you as a student. The essay is also the place where you can put your academic record into the context of your opportunities and obstacles.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD PERSONAL STATEMENT

Before you write a single word, make sure you know what is expected of a successful college essay. A good essay...

Conforms to guidelines:

If the essay instructions tell you that the essay should be two pages long, on white 8.5x11 inch paper, then the essay should be two pages long, on white 8.5x11 inch paper.

Exudes confidence that you will be successful no matter what:

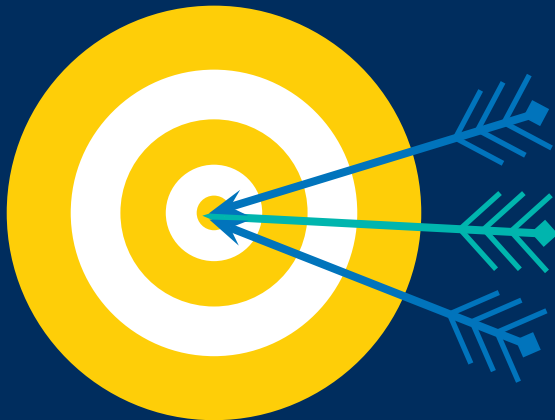
A good essay doesn't beg or brag. Colleges and universities want to admit the best students, those that demonstrate their ability to pursue their goals. Think of this as quiet confidence -the kind that reveals itself through your description of lifelong interests, sustained commitment, and/or perseverance in the face of adversity.

Is thoughtful and honest:

A strong personal statement is reflective; that is, it demonstrates that you have thought about and gained a clear perspective on your experiences and what you want in your future. It does not simply tell a reader what you think he/she wants to know. Instead, it gives the reader a vivid and compelling picture of you, in essence, telling the reader what he or she should know about you. Remember that the focus of the essay is YOU, your achievements, your obstacles, your goals, your values.

Strives for depth, not breadth:

Think deep, not wide. Don't jump from topic to topic. It's better to go deeper into a more meaningful experience in your life and write about that.



PROCESS FOR WRITING THE ESSAY

- 1) Analyze the question(s) asked on a specific application. Research the school and/or program to which you are applying.
- 2) Take a personal inventory. Write out a 2-3 sentence response to each question.
- 3) Write your first draft.
- 4) Revise your essay for form and content. Ask yourself the following questions as you edit for content:
Are my goals well articulated?
Do I include interesting details that prove my claims?
Is my tone confident?
- 5) Make sure your essay is error-free with no spelling, grammar, or mechanical errors.
- 6) Ask someone to read your essay and make suggestions for further revision.
- 7) Revise again.

PERSONAL INVENTORY QUESTIONS

What's special and/or impressive about your life story?

What details of your life (personal or family situations, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?

What are your career goals?

Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain?

Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?

What skills (for example, leadership, communication, organization) do you possess?

What personal characteristics (for example, integrity, compassion, persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?

What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

What or who are your intellectual influences? What writers, books, teachers, concepts have shaped you?

What's the most important thing the admissions committee should know about you?

DRAFTING AND REVISING

A draft is a work in progress. A good essay undergoes several revisions -don't assume that your first draft is your best draft! Composing often involves going back and forth among planning the essay, generating ideas, organizing the contents, and editing the results. Drafting allows you to get the most out of these composing stages. Through the brainstorming and gathering information stages, you have generated the raw material to compose effectively. Now you will begin the process of creating your essay.

Your First Draft

In a first draft, you are attempting to capture your essay's meaning and get it down on paper. In this way, you are attempting to draw out the essay's concept. Use your first draft to formulate a working introduction and organize your ideas.

A first draft is often the skeleton of the paper; it contains the overall structure, but may lack a clear theme, vivid language, fully developed paragraphs, and strong transition words and phrases.

Example First Draft

I really learned so much from my sophomore year World History class. My teacher, Mr. McCarthy, was so amazing and I learned so much from his class. Although I was a great student in history class, the way he explained things in such a different way made it easy for me to remember the concepts that we needed for the tests. I think it's incredible when teachers can teach their students well without having to lecture from the textbook all the time.

Revising Your Draft

The key to revising your essay is to determine how it appears not just to you, but to your reader. So - think like an admissions counselor! Remember that readers need a sense of your essay's structure and a clear idea of why they should read your essay in the first place.

To revise your essay:

Step One: Concentrate on the whole by examining your essay's frame: the introduction, the conclusion, and a sentence in each that states your main theme. Ask the following questions: Will my reader know where my introduction ends and where the body of my essay begins? Will my reader know where the body of my essay ends and where my conclusion begins? Will my reader know which sentence is the main sentence in my introduction, and which is the main sentence in my conclusion?

Step Two: Examine your essay for continuity. Make sure that your points work together conceptually - that is, that key points are unified by your essay's theme.

Step Three: Revise for focus, clarity and depth. Make sure that the skeleton of your personal statement is fleshed out with sufficient examples, fully developed paragraphs, and meaningful prose.

Going Beyond the Basics: Moving from Modifiers to Description

What Are Modifiers?

- Adjectives (describing words): *interesting, amazing, fascinating, cool*
- Adverbs (the "-ly" words that describe verbs): *I ran **quickly**, **Unfortunately** I can't do that, I **obviously** understood that.*

A strong revision uses strong adjectives and description to elaborate on what these modifiers truly mean.

Weak adjectives

interesting

different

Strong adjectives

absorbing, arresting, engaging, engrossing, enthralling, fascinating, gripping, immersing, intriguing, involving, riveting

unique, varied, individual, particular

Example Revision with Increased Attention to Description

When Mr. McCarthy wadded up a ball of construction paper and threw it full force across the room in World History class my sophomore year, something changed in the way I thought about learning. Mr. McCarthy was trying to explain how difficult it was for the Papacy in France to control the Byzantine officials in Constantinople. As he wadded up the ball of paper in his thick, knotty hands, he said, "Imagine that this piece of paper is an edict from the Pope in France, and think of Chris' desk as Constantinople." He threw the paper ball across the room and it floated gently to a landing on the carpet next to Chris. "That," Mr. McCarthy said, "Is about how difficult it was to communicate between France and Constantinople. By the time the message got to Turkey, nobody took it seriously because it had taken so long to arrive."

Even today, two years later, I remember that empires that decentralized their power during the Middle Ages were more likely to collapse. Thanks to Mr. McCarthy's creative non-traditional teaching tactic, I doubt that I will ever forget this fact. I believe that the University of Michigan will offer me equally creative and unique opportunities to learn and grow.



GETTING FEEDBACK ON YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

Getting feedback from others is a critical part of writing your essay. If your teachers, peers, or parents have suggestions, listen carefully. You don't have to take every suggestion, but try them out and find out which ones work. You'll want to be very specific in asking for feedback; if there are sections of your essay that you are particularly concerned about, ask your readers to pay special attention to those parts. It is very important that your essay be your own creation and be conveyed in your own words, but it is okay (and even encouraged) to get feedback from others.

When soliciting feedback, steel yourself to criticism. Not everyone will see your essay the way you do. After receiving feedback, and before revising, write down the comments you receive and look for patterns. Use these patterns to decide how to proceed. If every one of your reviewers thinks that your essay is too wordy, then you can be pretty sure that your essay is too wordy, and revising for a simpler, more natural style should be a top priority.

Help your readers by providing a structure for them to respond. Ask your readers to comment first on larger issues, and lastly on grammar or syntax. Use the following questions as a guide for your readers.

Overall Impression

After reading my essay, what three words would you use to describe me?

After reading the essay, what do you think its overall theme is?

In what way (or where) is the essay most persuasive?

In what way (or where) is it least persuasive?

Structure and Organization

Is the essay organized in a logical fashion?

Are the transitions between paragraphs fluid and logical?

Do the paragraphs build upon one another, and move from smaller issues to more significant ones?

Grammar and Syntax

Are there grammar errors? If so, what are they?

Are the words used appropriately?

What other comments/suggestions do you have that will strengthen my essay?

ESSAY OVERVIEW CHECKLIST

DO...

- Answer all the questions asked.
- Be honest and confident in your statements.
- Do not try to hide, make excuses for, or lie about your challenges.
- In some cases, a student needs to explain a weak component of his or her application, but in other cases it may be best not to mention it at all. Rather, write an essay that focuses on your strengths.
- Write a coherent and interesting essay.
- Make your first paragraph the best paragraph in your essay. The lead or opening paragraph is generally the most important. It is here that you grab your reader's attention or lose it. The paragraph becomes the framework for the rest of the statement.
- Develop a thesis about yourself early in the essay and expand on it throughout.
- Think of the essay as not only an answer to a specific question but as an opportunity to introduce yourself.
- Think in terms of showing or demonstrating through concrete experience. If your statement is fresh, lively, and different, you'll be putting yourself ahead of the pack. If you distinguish yourself enough through the story, you will make yourself memorable.
- Be specific.
- Tell what you know.
- Be meticulous. Type and proofread your essay very carefully. Express yourself clearly and concisely. Adhere to stated word limits.
- Avoid clichés.

DON'T...

- Summarize your entire life. Don't include needless details that take space away from a discussion of your maturity and ability to be successful in college.
- Write what you think the admissions committee wants to hear. You are probably wrong, and such a response is likely to make you blend into the crowd rather than stand out from it.
- Repeat information directly from the application form itself unless you use it to illustrate a point or want to develop it further.
- Allow any superficial errors in spelling, mechanics, grammar, punctuation, format, or printing to creep under your guard.

ENGLISH 101

Use your most mature, professional writing skills.

Avoid contractions and slang. If you have questions, talk to your English teacher.

Explain any abbreviations.

Sure, we know the obvious ones (NHS), but talking about the B.O.B. award that you won for participating in the F.D.R. may not make sense to someone who doesn't go to your high school.

Beware the dreaded homonyms!

Homonyms are words in the English language that sound the same but can be spelled differently and mean different things - like "to" and "too" or "their," "there," and "they're." Check that you are using them correctly. Pay attention. They can be tricky - and they can change the meaning of your sentence or confuse the reader.

Remember the basics.

Make sure your sentences use proper grammar - don't mix third person (they) with second person (you) in the same sentence. If you're using semi-colons, use them correctly - if you're not sure when and how they should be used, check with your English teacher, or review a grammar book.

Mix it up a little.

You can play it too safe. Choosing only simple words and sentences can make your essay appear redundant and unpolished. An essay with 20 simple sentences and an elementary vocabulary can sound awfully boring and won't do your topic justice. Practice using compound and complex sentences, and then include some of each in your writing.

Don't stretch it too far.

Conversely, don't get in too far over your head. If you don't know what a word means, don't use it in a sentence. Only use words you know the meaning of - or look up definitions you're not sure about.

Back up arguments with facts.

Have an opinion about global warming? Affirmative action? Think that capital punishment is evil? Why? Your argument should be supported by facts, not the opinions of others.

Be aware that plagiarism is serious academic fraud and will cause your application to be thrown out of consideration.

You know those great websites that will write your essays for you? We know about them too. Aah, the power of Google...

Pick one topic and stay with it.

You don't have a lot of room to discuss a variety of different topics, so strive for depth versus breadth on one subject.

Proofread your essay - then use spellcheck.

Have at least two people read your essay to check for major errors. Bonus if you use people who don't have a vested interest in your college education.

Make sure your essay can stand alone.

Avoid saying something along the lines of, "As I stated earlier in my application..." Please re-write the topic at the top of the essay so we can quickly identify what you're writing about.

Be careful with humor.

It can be tough to pull off in writing. And remember - you don't necessarily know your audience. Your essay will be read by a number of different people from a wide array of ages and backgrounds.

Tell us what is unique about you.

Why would you stand out among our 51,000+ applicants? Is there something different about your experiences? Your response should provide us with an opportunity to get to know you on a more personal level, beyond your GPA, test scores and curriculum.

U-M ESSAY TIPS

Read and answer the question asked.

You'd be amazed how many essays we receive that don't relate at all to the question we were asking!

Be authentic.

We want to hear about you in your response – the experiences, opinions and values that have shaped you. Feel free to write on something you are passionate about so we can get to know you better.

Be proactive!

Each year, we talk to students who have everything ready but their essays – if they could just get them finished, their application would be complete. Get started on your essays soon, and don't spend months agonizing over whether they're perfect. We don't read through them with a red pen in hand!

Avoid re-writing your accomplishments.

You should have already given us all of that information in your application.

Re-use essays (or portions of essays) when possible.

However, make sure to re-read before hitting the submit button! The worst possible way to finish your essay to U-M is to say, "And I just can't wait to be a Spartan!" This happens. *Seriously.*

Don't forget - a research paper is different than an essay.

If you are re-using something you've previously written, make sure it directly answers our question and not one that a teacher posed to you for an assignment.

Don't overload on advice.

When mom, dad and your advisor all start editing your essay too much, your unique voice will disappear. And we want to hear from you - not them.

Remember there is no "right" answer.

Don't think you know what we want to hear. Whatever you have to say about the topic is of interest to us.

Use recent examples.

It's always best to focus on issues that occurred while you were in high school, since we're only reviewing your high school performance when determining if you'll be admitted. If something happened when you were younger that has significantly affected you, talk about it, but then put the focus on how this event has influenced you in recent years.

Don't make excuses.

If you've had a poor or inconsistent grade performance due to unusual or stressful circumstances, feel free to share that information with us; it can be useful. But don't strain credibility by making up false excuses. Be honest – we'll respect that.

Watch your tone.

There's a big difference in focusing your essay on "U-M needs me as a student because..." versus "please please please admit me!"

Be truthful, but make sure you're comfortable with your potential audience.

Students often feel compelled to share extremely personal and even traumatic experiences in their responses – health issues, death of a family member, abuse, etc. We will absolutely keep your information confidential; however, if you decide to reveal something deeply personal, be aware that a number of people will be reading your essay.

Tell us why Michigan is the school for you.

Talk about campus programs you've attended. Tell us why you're a great fit for Michigan. Remember that athletics can be a reason, but should not be the only reason you want to come to Ann Arbor! Your essay is your opportunity to tell us why you would be a valuable contributor to the U-M community.



**UNDERGRADUATE
ADMISSIONS**
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

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1220 Student Activities Building
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admissions.umich.edu 734-764-7433

Sources Include:

Jen Michaels, Sweetland Center for Writing, University of Michigan
www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/tips/personalstatement
owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/pw/p_perstate.html
students.berkeley.edu/apa/personalstatement