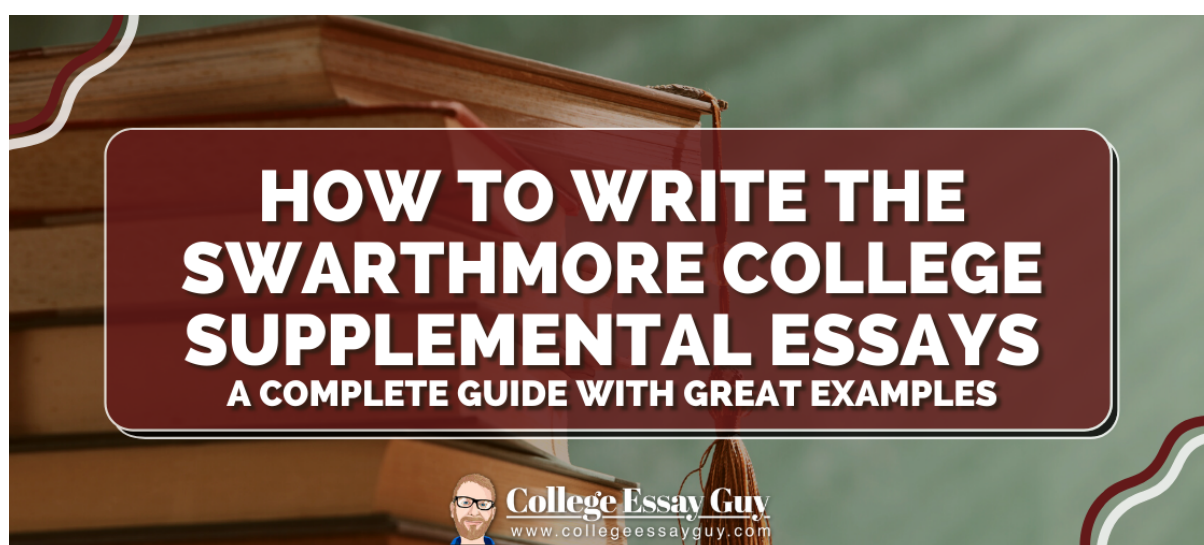


How to Write the Swarthmore College Supplemental Essay: Examples + Guide 2022/2023



If you're into talking about big abstract ideas like the nature of the universe or niche topics like Vermeer's choice of texture in that one painting from 1652, Swarthmore College might be the place for you. Located just outside Philadelphia, Swarthmore is known for being very liberal and, in part because of its Quaker history, for its intense focus on community-building. It's also a place where nerding out is accepted, even celebrated. If this sounds like you, we have some tips and examples below to help you ace your Swarthmore supplemental essay.

Want to get an even better sense of what Swarthmore is looking for? You'll find an extensive, by-the-numbers look at its offerings, from enrollment and tuition statistics to student life and financial aid information, on its [Common Data Set](#). For deep insights into how this private college envisions student success (and how it wants to grow and evolve), read its [Strategic Directions plan](#).

WHAT ARE THE SWARTHMORE COLLEGE SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY PROMPTS?

SWARTHMORE COLLEGE SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY PROMPT #1

Respond to one of the following three questions in no more than 250 words:

- 1. Swarthmore students' worldviews are often forged by their prior experiences and exposure to ideas and values. Our students are often mentored, supported, and developed by their immediate context—in their neighborhoods, communities of faith, families, and classrooms. Reflect on what elements of your home, school, or community have shaped you or positively impacted you. How have you grown or changed because of the influence of your community?*
- 2. We are inspired by students who are flexible in their approach to learning, who are comfortable with experimentation, and who are willing to take intellectual risks that move them out of their comfort zone. Reflect on a time that you were intellectually challenged, inspired, or took an intellectual risk—inside or outside of the classroom. How has that experience shaped you, and what questions still linger?*
- 3. Why are you interested in applying to and attending Swarthmore?*

HOW TO WRITE EACH SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY PROMPT FOR SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

HOW TO WRITE SWARTHMORE SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY PROMPT #1

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of the influence of your community?

2. We are inspired by students who are flexible in their approach to learning, who are comfortable with experimentation, and who are willing to take intellectual risks that move them out of their comfort zone. Reflect on a time that you were intellectually challenged, inspired, or took an intellectual risk—inside or outside of the classroom. How has that experience shaped you, and what questions still linger?

3. Why are you interested in applying to and attending Swarthmore?

One nice thing about the Swarthmore supplemental essay is that college officials give you a choice between three different prompts, so you can go with the one that speaks to you. That said, each prompt is pretty different from the others, so we'll offer a general breakdown of what you should be thinking about for each one, then show you an example of each.

No matter which prompt you end up writing for, *spend some time brainstorming*. We can't emphasize this enough. You only have 250 words to make yourself stand out to admission officers at Swarthmore, so going in with a plan will help you formulate your thoughts and streamline your response.

Now, let's look at each prompt in more detail.

PROMPT #1: SWARTHMORE STUDENTS' WORLDVIEWS ARE OFTEN FORGED BY THEIR PRIOR EXPERIENCES AND EXPOSURE TO IDEAS AND VALUES. OUR STUDENTS ARE OFTEN MENTORED, SUPPORTED, AND DEVELOPED BY THEIR IMMEDIATE CONTEXT—IN THEIR NEIGHBORHOODS, COMMUNITIES OF FAITH, FAMILIES, AND CLASSROOMS. REFLECT ON WHAT ELEMENTS OF YOUR HOME, SCHOOL, OR COMMUNITY HAVE SHAPED YOU OR POSITIVELY IMPACTED YOU. HOW HAVE YOU GROWN OR CHANGED BECAUSE OF THE INFLUENCE OF YOUR COMMUNITY?

This is what we call a “community essay.” It asks you to reflect on how a specific community in your life has shaped you in an important way. [Here's a step-by-step guide](#) to “community” prompts, including multiple samples and analysis, but here's the short version:

The “What Communities Am I a Part Of?” Exercise

Time: 10-15 minutes

Instructions:

Step 1: Create a “communities” chart by listing all the communities you’re a part of. Keep in mind that communities can be defined by ...

1. Place: Groups of people who live/work/play near one another
2. Action: Groups of people who create change in the world by building, doing, or solving something together (examples: Black Lives Matter, Girls Who Code, March for Our Lives)
3. Interest: Groups of people coming together based on shared interest, experience, or expertise
4. Circumstance: Groups of people brought together either by chance or external events/situations

Use four columns in your chart, like this:

PLACE	ACTION	INTEREST	CIRCUMSTANCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Los Angeleno (where I live now)- Third-culture kid (I grew up in both Latin America and the United States)- North Carolinian (related community: Family members with Southern accents!)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Day Laborer Theater Without Borders (for a year I helped organize a theater group that promoted worker rights in immigrant communities)- ACCEPT (Admissions Community Cultivating Equity & Peace Today)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Book-lover (loved reading ever since I was young)- Basketball (played in high school)- Theater (high school theater geek, studied in college)- Jazz-listener (speaks for itself)- Travel (visiting every continent is on my bucket list)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Male-identified- European ancestry- Missionary kid (MK)- Rider of public bus 56 (this is the one I took home during high school; met some pretty cool people)

Your turn.

Step 1: Create a “communities” chart by listing as many of your communities as you can think of. Keep in mind that, as shown above, communities can be defined in a variety of ways, including place, culture, interests, political beliefs, hobbies, even your favorite sports team. Get creative.

Step 2: Use the BEABIES exercise to generate your essay content for 2-3 of these communities that seem like your strongest options (as in, they show sides of you that you haven't gotten to illustrate elsewhere). Simply ask yourself and jot down notes to these questions:

What kinds of problems did I solve or work to solve (personally, locally, or globally) in that community?

What specific impact did I have?

What did I learn (skills, qualities, values)?

How did I apply the lessons I learned inside and outside that community?

Step 3: Pick a structure for writing this essay and focus on the community that you feel is most compelling and reveals the most about you, then connect those experiences to how you'll impact the Swarthmore community (for more on how to do this, check our ["Why this College" guide](#)).

Here's a strong example of a community essay.

Example 1:

I belong to a community of storytellers. Throughout my childhood, my mother and I spent countless hours immersed in the magical land of bedtime stories. We took daring adventures and explored far away lands. Imagination ran wild, characters came to life, and I became acquainted with heroes and lessons that continue to inspire me today. It was a ritual that I will never forget.

In school I met many other storytellers—teachers, coaches, and fellow students whose stories taught me valuable lessons and enabled me to share stories of my own. My stories took shape through my involvement with theatre. I have learned that telling stories can be just as powerful as hearing them.

When I tell a story, I can shape the world I live in and share my deepest emotions with the audience. This is exactly why I love theatre so much. The audience can relate to the story in many of the same powerful ways that I do.

I love to perform with my theatre class to entertain and educate young audiences throughout my community. To tell our stories, we travel to elementary and middle schools performing plays that help educate younger students of the dangers of drugs, alcohol, and bullying. As storytellers, we aim to touch lives and better the world around us through our stories. (219 words)

Tips + Analysis

Start with a powerful hook, if you can. From the beginning, this student draws you in. Starting off by saying she's part of "a community of storytellers" is vague, but declarative and intriguing. We want to hear more. The shortness of the sentence adds to its power because it leaves so many questions unanswered. Think of your first sentence (or two) as your first impression on the reader. Starting out strong is a good way to invite them in and engage their interest.

Use structure to create clarity. Notice how the writer breaks her essay into small bite-sized chunks of 2-3 sentences. Instead of one big dense block of text, she's made the reading experience much more manageable by using mini-paragraphs. Even better is that each block of text touches on slightly different but connected themes and/or moments. The first explores her history of reading stories with her mom, so we get a bit of context as to how storytelling became a force of influence in her life. Then she uses each of the next three paragraphs to map out how storytelling created a broader community outside her home—at school, in theatre, and in the elementary and middle schools where her troupe performs. You can think of this approach as a **montage**, which we liken to a beaded bracelet, with each short paragraph a bead that connects to an element of the community, and the thread of "storytelling" binding it all together.

Explain the impact you've made. Remember, your answer to this question shouldn't stop at the end of your learning experience. The prompt asks how you've "grown or changed" because of the community's influence on you. Notice how this student talks about learning experiences with her mom and in her theatre program but ends on a final paragraph about teaching younger students in her community. This is an important addition because it conveys a sense of how the student is paying her lessons forward. We all learn lots of things on a daily basis; it's what we do with that knowledge that sets us apart—and that's exactly what Swarthmore is seeking to learn about you.

PROMPT #2: WE ARE INSPIRED BY STUDENTS WHO ARE FLEXIBLE IN THEIR APPROACH TO LEARNING, WHO ARE COMFORTABLE WITH EXPERIMENTATION, AND WHO ARE WILLING TO TAKE INTELLECTUAL RISKS THAT MOVE THEM OUT OF THEIR COMFORT ZONE. REFLECT ON A TIME THAT YOU WERE INTELLECTUALLY CHALLENGED, INSPIRED, OR TOOK AN INTELLECTUAL RISK—INSIDE OR OUTSIDE OF THE

CLASSROOM. HOW HAS THAT EXPERIENCE SHAPED YOU, AND WHAT QUESTIONS STILL LINGER?

This prompt really gets at the core of Swarthmore's intellectual spirit. You can tell that school officials place a lot of value on learning, both inside and outside the classroom, and on learning in unconventional ways. That means (yay!) you don't have to talk about the 20 AP or honors classes you took in high school (besides, all that's clear from your transcripts). Instead, try to think creatively about what learning looks like and the contexts in which it can take place. Here are some steps you can take that might help you approach this essay:

Step 1: Do the **Values Exercise**. Why? Your values are the things that inspire, motivate, and drive you through life, and those are exactly the insights Swarthmore wants to know about you. Use the exercise to come up with your top 10 values, then think of a learning experience that required you to stretch or take a risk—one that also allows you to show as many of the 10 values as you can.

Step 2: As you brainstorm and write, keep referring back to the original question. Notice how Swarthmore asks you to contemplate “what questions still linger.” This might get overlooked if you focus all your energy on describing what you learned. Asking thought-provoking questions is an essential part of learning, so don't feel like you have to have all the answers (in fact, asking complex questions can be more interesting and impressive).

Step 3: Write it long first, then cut it. In our experience, this tends to be easier than writing a very short version, then trying to figure out what to add.

Step 4: Don't forget to include specific impacts and reflection. That will allow you to connect your learning experience to a meaningful outcome. You should be able to say, “I did X, and that resulted in Y.” The Y is just as important as the X, because it shows your learning experience paid off and (maybe even) inspired some kind of change. Or, put another way, the “so what” is at least as important as, and generally more important than, the “what” in a prompt like this.

Here's a great example for this prompt.

Example 2:

When I was doing customer research for my chemistry practice website, I came across another, much larger issue with education: the lack of personalized learning. It stuck with me. I knew if I could create a solution, I would be helping many students, like my friends, reach their goals. Also, the idea of an engine that

can recommend lessons based on your learning style just seemed super cool. As I dug deeper into the issue, I realized I didn't have the skills to even scratch the surface. So I started developing what I needed to build a system that recommends lessons based on learning style.

On my own time, I learned about machine learning algorithms, from linear regressions to k-nearest neighbor classifiers, and whenever I could I applied these skills on mini research projects—finding trends, then using data to create an algorithm that predicts other data. At school, I took a rigorous machine learning course where one of my final projects was using data from Portuguese schools to analyze what factors lead to good grades.

Looking ahead, I'm hoping to study computational neuroscience to properly know how the brain solidifies connections and recalls information. With the two together, I could create a model of how a person learns based on different stimuli, and recommend different lessons based on the stimuli. I still have quite a bit to learn, but if I manage it, it could have a powerful impact on the educations of students around the world.

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Tips + Analysis:

Geek out (a bit), but stay on track. Remember that Swarthmore is known for its nerdy and intellectual student body. This prompt is all about embracing that side of yourself. This student does a great job of balancing specific jargon like “linear regressions” and “k-nearest neighbor classifiers” with informal reflections like “the idea of an engine that can recommend lessons based on your learning style just seemed super cool.” This allows him to demonstrate his deep knowledge of the subject without confusing the reader or bogging us down in a bunch of details. You can do this too (just don't do too much of it, as that can be off-putting). Offer some specific language that shows you know your stuff, but write in a way that's still accessible to someone who doesn't know a lot about your topic.

Connect your intellectual projects to your academic interests. This student does a great job of using his specific machine learning project as a segue into other relevant insights about himself. He talks about classes he's taken and his general interest in computational neuroscience. He's also able to sneak in some neat details about working for a chemistry practice website and helping friends out academically. Through this one topic, we get a more complete picture of who he is and the values that guide him. Remember,

when you answer this prompt, treat the experience or moment you write about as a launching point into other connected parts of your life.

Consider looking to the future. Note how this writer ends his essay. He doesn't just talk about his one machine-learning project or class and then end it there. Instead, he talks about what he hopes the future holds for him and how he might like to expand on what he's already done. This is great because it shows he's curious and has an appetite for learning. Swarthmore is looking for applicants who are willing to push past what they know and envision future questions, projects, discussions, etc. When you end your essay, consider leaving your reader with a sense that there's more to come (if you have some idea of what that might look like). Learning and experimentation are lifelong pursuits that sometimes lead to more questions than answers. Embrace that.

PROMPT #3: *WHY ARE YOU INTERESTED IN APPLYING TO AND ATTENDING SWARTHMORE?*

This prompt is your classic "Why us?" essay. We recommend checking out this [complete guide on how to write the "Why us?" essay](#) and paying close attention to the "Why Cornell" and "Why Penn" examples, which are our favorites.

Here's the short version of how to write the "Why us?" essay for Swarthmore:

Spend 1 hr+ researching 10+ reasons why Swarthmore might be a great fit for you (ideally 3-5 of the reasons will be unique to Swarthmore *and* connect back to you).

Make a copy of [this chart](#) to map out your college research.

Create an outline for your essays based on either Approach 1, 2 (recommended), or 3 in the full guide above.

Write a first draft!

As you write, try to avoid these common mistakes:

Six Common Mistakes Students Make on "Why Us?" Essays

Mistake #1: Writing about Swarthmore's size, location, reputation, weather, or ranking

Mistake #2: Simply using emotional language to demonstrate fit

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

Mistake #4: Parroting the brochures or website language

Mistake #5: Describing traditions Swarthmore is well-known for

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

Here's a great "Why Swarthmore" essay.

Example 3:

The human body's greatest asset is its ears. They come pimpled, 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 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)

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Tips + Analysis

Vary sentence length and structure. This essay is another good example of the power of a great hook. The first three sentences are short and don't take up much space, but they're well-written and leave the reader wanting more. One big reason they work is because they're so short (one is actually just a sentence fragment). At just 250 words, your whole essay won't likely be this poetic (and doesn't need to be), but if you're feeling it, have some fun

playing around with not only what you write, but how you write it. Don't let the word count keep you from getting creative.

Connect your interests to Swarthmore's resources. This essay isn't just about you. It also isn't just about Swarthmore. "Why us?" = why you + why Swarthmore. So try to craft a response that both demonstrates your unique interests and connects those to what the college has to offer. This student highlights her interests in dialogue and listening, particularly in relation to audio/visual storytelling. She then connects those interests to specific opportunities at Swarthmore, like WSRN, The Review, and the Global Health Forum. We get a distinct sense of her excitement to engage with what the school has to offer. She also finds a way to weave in the majors she's interested in exploring (Film & Media Studies and English Literature). Getting as specific as possible about the clubs, labs, classes, majors, or professors you want to engage with will show that you've done your research—and you've found lots at Swarthmore to be excited about.

Consider using a common thread to string your interests together. With a question like this, it's easy to fall into the trap of writing an essay that reads like a bullet list. As you write, you might find yourself just rattling off the things that interest you about Swarthmore, without connecting those opportunities to one another or back to you. Notice how in this example, the student immediately establishes the recurring theme of "ears," and connects that theme to a core value she feels she and Swarthmore share. This gives her a symbolic throughline to bring together all the interests and resources she talks about in a coherent way. It makes the essay feel less like a list and more like a journey we're taking with her. When you're writing, consider coming up with a way to link all the aspects of your response together in a way that feels both personal and accessible.