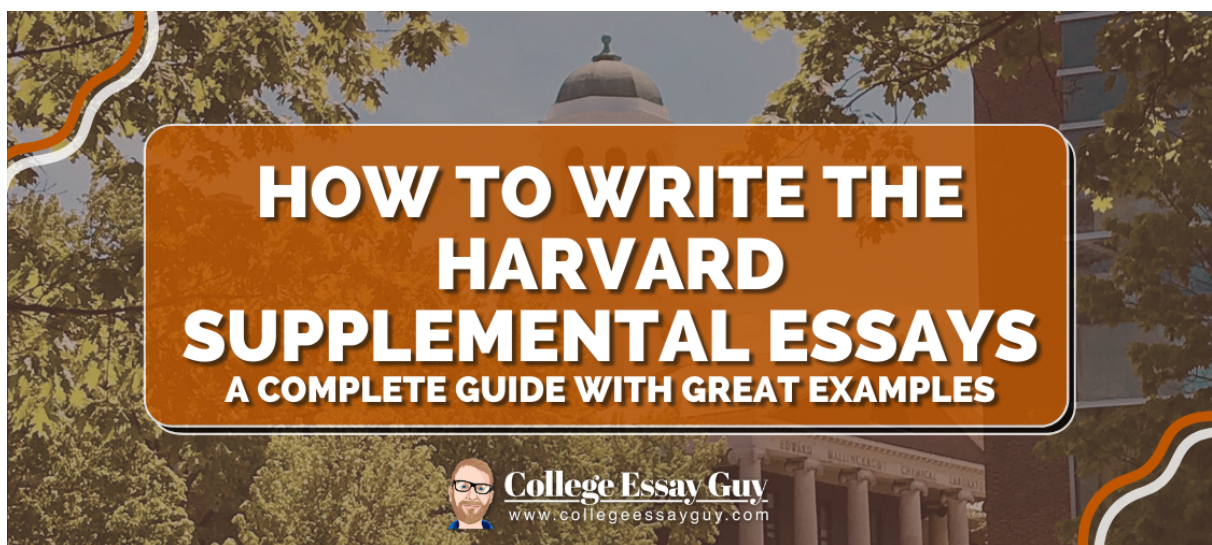


# How to Write the Harvard Supplemental Essays: Examples + Guide 2022/2023



## HOW TO WRITE THE HARVARD SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAYS

Tackling the Harvard University supplemental essays is no joke. Why? Well, you've got 3 essays to write with a combined count of a whopping 900 words, not including the 650-word Common App essay you'll also be submitting.

But on top of all that writing, you're also competing against over 42,000 other seniors, applying to admission to one of the most competitive colleges in the US, and one of the most prestigious universities in the history of the world.

Not daunted by that?

Great. Keep reading and I'll walk you through how to write great responses to Harvard's supplemental essay questions.

# HARVARD'S SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY PROMPTS

So here's what you're looking at:

## PROMPT #1

*Your intellectual life may extend beyond the academic requirements of your particular school. Please use the space below to list additional intellectual activities that you have not mentioned or detailed elsewhere in your application. These could include, but are not limited to, supervised or self-directed projects not done as school work, training experiences, online courses not run by your school, or summer academic or research programs not described elsewhere. (Optional – 150 words)*

## PROMPT #2

*Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences. (50 - 150 words)*

## PROMPT #3

*(Note: this one's optional, but still do it.)*

*You may wish to include an additional essay if you feel that the college application forms do not provide sufficient opportunity to convey important information about yourself or your accomplishments. You may write on a topic of your choice, or you may choose from one of the following topics:*

- Unusual circumstances in your life
- Travel, living, or working experiences in your own or other communities
- What you would want your future college roommate to know about you
- An intellectual experience (course, project, book, discussion, paper, poetry, or research topic in engineering, mathematics, science or other modes of inquiry) that has meant the most to you
- How you hope to use your college education
- A list of books you have read during the past twelve months
- The Harvard College Honor code declares that we “hold honesty as the foundation of our community.” As you consider entering this community that is committed to honesty, please reflect on a time when you or someone you

observed had to make a choice about whether to act with integrity and honesty.

- The mission of Harvard College is to educate our students to be citizens and citizen-leaders for society. What would you do to contribute to the lives of your classmates in advancing this mission?
- Each year a substantial number of students admitted to Harvard defer their admission for one year or take time off during college. If you decided in the future to choose either option, what would you like to do?
- Harvard has long recognized the importance of student body diversity of all kinds. We welcome you to write about distinctive aspects of your background, personal development or the intellectual interests you might bring to your Harvard classmates.

If none of these options appeal to you, you have the option to write on a topic of your choice.

Now let's get into the fun part: how to write great essays for Harvard.

## HOW TO WRITE EACH SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY PROMPT FOR HARVARD

### HOW TO WRITE HARVARD SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY #1

Your intellectual life may extend beyond the academic requirements of your particular school. Please use the space below to list additional intellectual activities that you have not mentioned or detailed elsewhere in your application. These could include, but are not limited to, supervised or self-directed projects not done as school work, training experiences, online courses not run by your school, or summer academic or research programs not described elsewhere. (Optional – 150 words)

This is pretty straightforward and functions kind of like the Additional Info section of your Common App, but whereas there are tons of things that can go in the Add'l Info section (For a complete guide on the Additional Info section, [click here](#)), for this Harvard prompt, you'll probably want to stick to their phrasing and focus on things of an intellectual nature.

The prompt does mention “list,” but we’ve also seen students submit brief essays here (and be accepted), so either approach can work. And just in case: we recommend you do not add an entire short essay in your Additional Info section. Admission readers have said that could ... make them not happy with you.

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## HOW TO WRITE HARVARD SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY #2

Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences. (50 - 150 words)

This is your classic 150-word extracurricular essay. You’ll find an in-depth step-by-step guide [at this link](#), with specific advice for the 150-word format (plus some really great examples) towards the end. I recommend using that post to guide you as you’re writing.

But if you want to see the short version, here’s what to do:

Go to your Common App activities list and pick 2-3 of your most impressive or important (to you) activities.

Then, go through the Best Extracurricular Activity Brainstorm I’ve Ever Seen (AKA **BEABIES** exercise), either mentally or by filling out the chart. This will help you decide which topic might yield the most content for your essay. If you’re unsure, maybe do a simple outline for two different topics.

Write a draft! To guide you, each of those columns could provide a sentence or two of your first draft that you can later tweak and add some style to.

**Pro-tip:** Be careful about writing about an activity that you’ve already shared a lot about elsewhere on your application. If you’ve already written about your most important extracurricular activity in your main Common App personal statement or any of the other Harvard supplements, write about your 2nd or 3rd most important activity. This essay is your chance to say “Hey, here’s this other cool thing I’ve spent some time doing that I haven’t told you about yet!”

Here’s a nice example essay:

### Example:

*“The word is YES, say it a million times ... it always leads to something good.”*

*Jim Carrey, Yes Man*

*But there are dangers to being a Yes Man. Accepting opportunities and information without questioning can lead to sticky situations and embarrassing moments.*

*Fortunately, my participation in policy debate has taught me to be anything but a yes man. Sifting through databases of information to research both sides of a resolution has instilled in me a healthy skepticism of overly simple solutions to complex societal problems. Just as my speeches are typically filled with indictments of my opponents' cases, I find myself instinctively detecting the fallacies in billboards and commercials.*

*So, for most questions, it's a maybe from me—until I consider several other possibilities and perspectives. As Jim Carrey comes to realize,*

*"Maybe's fine. I like maybe!"*

*(135 words)*

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Want to read a few more? [Here are a few other 150-word extracurricular essay examples I love.](#)

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## HOW TO WRITE HARVARD SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY #3

(Optional—but still include info here, if you can!)

(You may wish to include an additional essay if you feel that the college application forms do not provide sufficient opportunity to convey important information about yourself or your accomplishments. You may write on a topic of your choice, or you may choose from one of the following topics:

Unusual circumstances in your life

Travel, living, or working experiences in your own or other communities

What you would want your future college roommate to know about you

An intellectual experience (course, project, book, discussion, paper, poetry, or research topic in engineering, mathematics, science or other modes of inquiry) that has meant the most to you

How you hope to use your college education

A list of books you have read during the past twelve months

The Harvard College Honor code declares that we “hold honesty as the foundation of our community.” As you consider entering this community that is committed to honesty, please reflect on a time when you or someone you observed had to make a choice about whether to act with integrity and honesty.

The mission of Harvard College is to educate our students to be citizens and citizen-leaders for society. What would you do to contribute to the lives of your classmates in advancing this mission?

Each year a substantial number of students admitted to Harvard defer their admission for one year or take time off during college. If you decided in the future to choose either option, what would you like to do?

Harvard has long recognized the importance of student body diversity of all kinds. We welcome you to write about distinctive aspects of your background, personal development or the intellectual interests you might bring to your Harvard classmates.

Scroll up to see Harvard’s list of suggested topics for this one, but as with the Common App essay, the prompt you choose for this essay for Harvard doesn’t really matter as much as it may for other supplemental essays. Why? They offer you “topic of your choice” at the bottom. In short, Harvard just really wants to know more about the skills/interests/qualities/values you’ll be bringing to campus. So what’s the best way to do that?

**General tip #1** for the long Harvard supplemental essay: When possible, try doubling this essay with other prompts. In other words, write an essay you can reuse for other schools. Why? This essay is likely another really important story (since it’s 650 words) that you want colleges to know, and likely it’s going to be a story that you’ll want other colleges to know about.

How do you reuse it? [Click here](#) for more on writing a “Super Essay.”

**General tip #2:** Think of this as a second personal statement. It should, in other words, reveal core values, insight, vulnerability, and craft. For more on those

qualities, check out [The Great College Essay Test](#). In some cases, I've seen students do such a great job with this essay that it ended up being better than their personal statement and they ended up using this (their Harvard supplemental essay) for other schools they were applying to on the Common App. And by the way, you can submit different personal statements for different schools on the Common App. Lots of students are surprised by this, but [here's proof](#).

**General tip #3:** This essay should complement your personal statement, and by that I mean that it shouldn't be too similar to your personal statement—it should differ in either content, structure, tone, or perhaps all three. As an example, say your personal statement uses [montage structure](#) and describes many different sides of yourself. Maybe, then, for your Harvard supplemental essay you use [narrative structure](#) to describe a recent challenge you've overcome. (We've seen this work well with past students, just to clarify.) Or maybe your personal statement is about what you want to study. Then your Harvard supplemental essay could then be on your cultural background. One might be light, the other deep; one fun, the other more serious. There are lots of ways for these essays to contrast one another—I'll share an example below.

Quick recap: Given the wide range of possibilities, I'd recommend (as I do in [this video](#)) not being overly concerned with the prompt for this essay. Why? Harvard wants to know what skills, qualities, interests and values you'll bring with you to campus ... but how you do that is up to you. As long as your essay is revealing core values, insight, (maybe) some vulnerability, and shows you put some time and effort in, you'll be on the right track.

### **More specific tips for how to write Harvard Essay #3:**

Go through this [Super Essay](#) guide and choose a topic that might complement your personal statement. What story can you tell that you haven't already told? Which sides of you will you not have shown elsewhere in your application? If you're really stumped, here's a prompt I love:

*Describe the world you come from and how it has shaped your dreams and aspirations.*

(Do this only if you haven't already answered this question in your personal statement). If you need help, [here's a whole guide](#) based on that prompt. And I know that link says "personal statement" at the top, but that's frequently what this prompt is.. If that doesn't work for you, consider writing about one of your most important extracurricular activities. And hey, if all else fails, just grab one of the prompts above—say the roommate prompt—and let 'er rip. I've seen that work too.



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## ONE MORE GREAT HARVARD SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY EXAMPLE FOR PROMPT #3

Below is an example of a great Harvard long supplemental essay. I'm including the personal statement this student wrote first so you can see how these essays show two different sides of this student. Note that they also differ in content, structure, and tone.

### Common App Personal Statement Example (that complements Harvard Supplemental Essay Example Prompt #3 below)

*My mom has the coolest eyes you will ever see. Resembling somewhere between the ocean surrounding a Caribbean island and the "share" button on a Google Doc., her eyes, and thus her genes, spell out very clearly that the OCA2 promoter should not produce melanin in her iris. My dad, albeit with significantly less cool eyes that look more similar to a cloudy day, has fallen victim to the same mutation. Recessively inherited, our eyes are unique, a marking of an increased susceptibility to certain forms of ocular disease but still cool enough to warrant the stares of people on busy New York City streets. To us, on a less scientific note, they represent a shared upbringing: a shared hatred of honey mustard, a shared memory of my sister lighting her hair on fire on her birthday (she was fine), and a shared need to question the unknown.*

*Growing up at 10 West Deerhaven, where bears would lazily trek across my lawn and the rocks probably had diamonds in them if you hit them just the right way, it was not long before a lab coat and microscope were placed on my Amazon wishlist. My sister would accompany me on my missions, hiking and hiding with me to get a closer look (because every scientist needs a lab partner). More often than not, she was left holding the snacks or carrying my samples back up the hill. But when my microscope finally came, I'd let her look at what we found (sometimes).*

*Not long after would come the train rides to Kean University, my dad happily (and sleepily) waking up with me for 5 AM breakfasts before my two hour commute. He makes me waffles and asks me about my research, nodding and pretending to understand. I tell him about using RT-PCR to move from the 5' to the 3' end of mRNA coding for CAHS1 and about electron microscopes too expensive to be asked for on an Amazon wishlist. He hands me my lunch (6 chicken nuggets) and reminds me to say goodbye to my brother before I leave.*



*Then would come the bus rides, taking the (totally strenuous) trip into New York City to intern at Columbia University Medical Center. I work with researchers to help determine the genetic basis of epilepsy by studying population models and using CRISPR-Cas9 technology to create petri-dish brains with the mutation of interest. I might get lost in the city or forget which subway to take. My dad may have to come rescue me, joking about how I can microinject in the perfect spot but get lost in a city with numbered streets.*

*Then would come the car rides, mom in the passenger seat as I drive us to the New York Psychoanalytic Institute to attend lectures on the gut microbiome and the link to autism-spectrum disorders. She shoves the microphone into my hands when I whisper a question to her, encouraging me to speak up in a room full of psychoanalysts who got their degrees long before I was born. I speak, voice quivering, and get a response as if I were no different.*

*Then would come the walks into our kitchen, sitting with my mother analyzing psychological statistics to aid in making treatment more efficient in her clinic. I laugh at her when she misspells words and she laughs at me for not knowing the difference between affective disorders and mood disorders (trick question: they're the same).*

*Living in a household of explorers comes with its challenges: sometimes we neglect to dust and sometimes we forget to order groceries until there is only a stale box of pasta in our cupboard. But my absent-minded family of best friends, with eyes like  $\text{Cu}(\text{C}_7\text{H}_5\text{O}_2)_2$  and  $\text{CoCl}_2$ , cracking open rocks and insisting that CRISPR cuts are just like deleting sections of code on a computer, are always up for an adventure.*

### **Harvard Supplemental Essay Prompt #3 Example**

*אִיזְהוּ חָכָם? הַלּוֹמֵד מִכָּל אָדָם*

*Eizehu chachâm? Ha'lomed mi'kol adâm*

*Who is wise? He who learns from all people.*

*-Jewish Proverb*

*It was the first nice day we'd had all winter, the wind just calm enough that we could convince our parents to allow our newly-licensed friends to drive us to the*

diner so long as we promised to be home before curfew. I was bundled up in a coat that was probably too light and sitting in the passenger seat of a bright red Jeep as we left my driveway, the three of us excited about our newfound freedom and discussing all the places we would go as soon as the temperature went above freezing. For now, though, we were going to Stateline Diner, home of the Best French Fries Known to Man.

“How do you feel about the Yids?”

I was caught off guard as the girl driving began with what had become a popular conversation topic after the lawsuit had ended. Whenever I heard someone mention it I felt my stomach drop, the provocation toward a debate I often did not feel like having.

“Well,” I started, pictures flashing through my mind of pennies thrown at me on public transportation and my brother coming home from school in tears because he had been bullied for being Jewish. Treading lightly, I flipped the question, asking instead, “How do you feel?”

“Hate them,” she replied, disgust evident by the eye roll I could barely see in the reflection of the streetlights. “I mean, you’re a good one. But the ones with the big coats and hats? They don’t belong here.”

For many of us, those whose voices would be listened to at courthouse meetings, there was little distinction between ourselves and our Orthodox brothers and sisters. For others, those who were with the opposition, we were worlds apart because our Judaism was quieter, less noticeable. To them, we were the tolerable version of a group that was ruining their community.

The lawsuit had begun sometime the summer before, over zoning conflicts and the rights of people in nearby towns to enter our parks. Of course, no such arguments had arisen previously, when the visitors in Mahwah, New Jersey had been indistinguishable from local residents. The conflict soon escalated, people claiming that Jewish influence would lower property values and dissolve community structure. Even though the anti-semites lost and we helped the good guys win, the remnants of it all can be found in the attitudes of the people I grew up with who drive me to diners and remind me that even though I may be welcome, the rest of my people are not.

Finally pulling up to Stateline Diner, I hopped out of the passenger seat, careful to note the #MahwahStrong bumper sticker I had previously missed. The battle call for anti-semites in the area, whether or not they’d agree to that label, was quick

*and catchy to hide the dark meaning. Printed in red, white, and blue, it was easy to draw connections between the nationalism that was being propagated by the Oval Office and the hatred burrowing deep below the neighborhoods where we were raised.*

*Over french fries and milkshakes, I was reminded that children and adults are both constantly forming and reforming their views on the world, and that it is a scary thing to question what you have been taught. I forgive the driver of the red Jeep for her words, for her sticker, for her intolerance. No longer do I let words and actions and lawsuits become carved into my being. I know that they are merely stones formed of claims without basis. They are just ghosts, and they cannot hurt me if I do not let them.*

*Maybe Mahwah is strong. But we, my family, the Jewish community, are stronger*