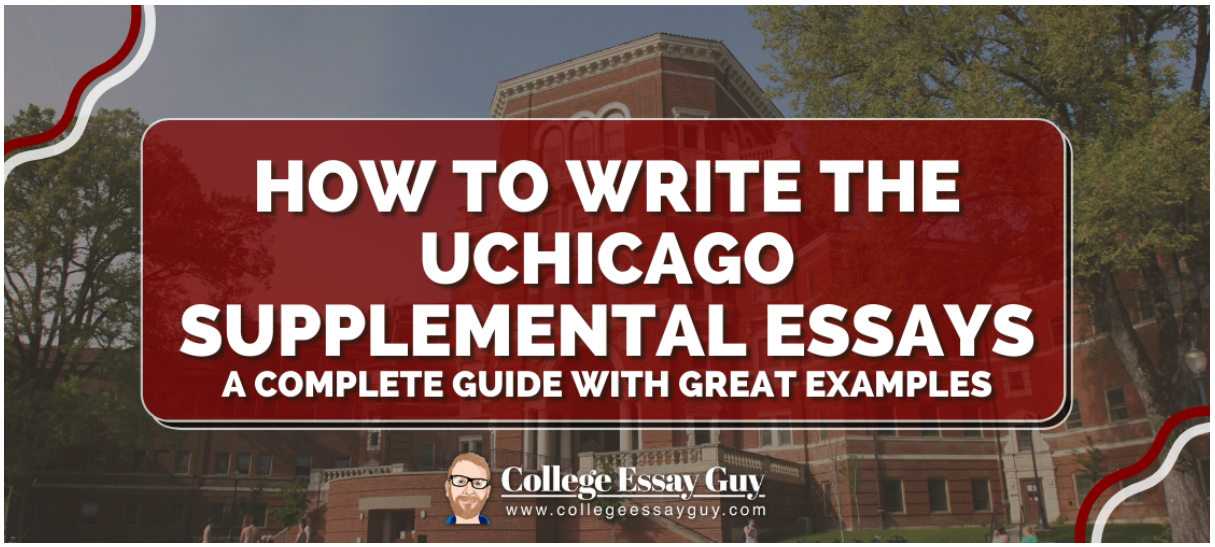
How to Write the University of Chicago Supplemental Essays: Guide + Examples 2022/2023



"If there's a limited amount of matter in the universe, how can Olive Garden (along with other restaurants and their concepts of food infinity) offer truly unlimited soup, salad, and breadsticks? Explain this using any method of analysis you wish—physics, biology, economics, history, theology… the options, as you can tell, are endless."

We love that prompt. And if you had a similar reaction, UChicago might fit you well. Its questions tend to do a nice job both of quickly weeding out students who would likely not fit well at the school (students we've worked with who got in generally react to the prompts with something like, "These are awesome; I can't wait to start writing these") and of giving students a sense of what life at UChicago would be like.

If you want to get a clearer sense of what UChicago is looking for, you can explore 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. And for insights into how the university envisions itself and its role, and how it wants to grow and evolve, read its strategic plan. Reading through this will give you a strong idea of what UChicago values.

WHAT ARE THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY PROMPTS?

No word limit, but with the “Why us?” essay, we’ve found that 400-500 words should give you a good amount of space to get really specific about how you and UChicago fit together. For the supplemental essays, if you write closer to 650 words, that might be fine, so long as your essay is really, really good.

UCHICAGO SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY PROMPT #1

> *(Required) How does the University of Chicago, as you know it now, satisfy your desire for a particular kind of learning, community, and future? Please address with some specificity your own wishes and how they relate to UChicago.*

UCHICAGO SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY PROMPT #2

> *Extended Essay (Required; Choose one)*

- ***Essay Option 1:***
  Was it a cat I saw? Yo-no-na-ka, ho-ka-ho-ka na-no-yo (Japanese for “the world is a warm place”). Może jutro ta dama da tortu jeżom (Polish for “maybe tomorrow that lady will give a cake to the hedgehogs”). Share a palindrome in any language, and give it a backstory.
- ***Essay Option 2:***
  What advice would a wisdom tooth have?
- ***Essay Option 3:***
  You are on an expedition to found a colony on Mars, when from a nearby crater, a group of Martians suddenly emerges. They seem eager to communicate, but they're the impatient kind and demand you represent the human race in one song, image, memory, proof, or other idea. What do you share with them to show that humanity is worth their time?

- ***Essay Option 4:***
  UChicago has been affiliated with over 90 Nobel laureates. But, why should economics, physics, and peace get all the glory? You are tasked with creating a new category for the Nobel Prize. Explain what it would be, why you chose your specific category, and the criteria necessary to achieve this accomplishment.
- ***Essay Option 5:***
  Genghis Khan with an F1 racecar. George Washington with a SuperSoaker. Emperor Nero with a toaster. Leonardo da Vinci with a Furby. If you could give any historical figure any piece of technology, who and what would it be, and why do you think they'd work so well together?
- ***Essay Option 6:***
  And, as always… the classic choose your own adventure option! In the spirit of adventurous inquiry, choose one of our past prompts (or create a question of your own). Be original, creative, thought provoking. Draw on your best qualities as a writer, thinker, visionary, social critic, sage, citizen of the world, or future citizen of the University of Chicago; take a little risk, and have fun!

HOW TO WRITE EACH SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY PROMPT FOR UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

ESSAY PROMPT #1

> How does the University of Chicago, as you know it now, satisfy your desire for a particular kind of learning, community, and future? Please address with some specificity your own wishes and how they relate to UChicago.

This is a pretty standard "Why us?" prompt, but as the following guide explains, you'll want to be sure to think of this as a "Why us?"—as in you + the school, and why you'd be a great fit together—and not simply "why them." One way we sometimes joke about this is to think about the essay as though you're helping the school understand why your online dating profile and its online dating profile are perfect for each other, and how you'd probably make great partners.

For a complete guide to the “Why us?” essay, click here. Here’s a condensed version:

Six Common Mistakes Students Make on “Why Us?” Essays

***Mistake #1*: Writing about the school'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 the school is well known for**

***Mistake #6*: Thinking of this as only a "why them" essay (as mentioned above)**

So, if those are things you shouldn’t write about, what *should* you write about? Here are some steps to figure that out.

Step #1: Do your research.

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

Step #2: Use this chart to map out your research.

Step #3: Decide on your approach.

Approach #1: The Basic, Solid “Why Us?” Essay That Includes a Bunch of Reasons

Here’s an outline for a basic, solid “Why us?” essay:

Clear thesis that names the academic area(s) you want to pursue and maybe charts the path of the essay
Main reason #1 and 3-4 specific details
Main reason #2 and 3-4 specific details
Main reason #3 and 3-4 specific details
An ending that maybe discusses how you’ll give back

Approach #2: The "3-5 Unique Offerings" Strategy

Find 3-5 opportunities *that are particular to the school* (i.e., available at no other school or no other school you're applying to) and connect each one back to you.

Approach #3: The "One Value" Strategy

How it works: Identify one core value that links you to the school and tell a story. Like so:

> Find a way in which you and the school are deeply aligned.
> Take your time crafting the essay.
> Find a way to be vulnerable.

Could I create a hybrid approach by focusing on a central theme, but still listing a few reasons?

Yup.

We're big fans of using examples to illustrate advice, so let's see what it looks like when we put the above together.

Example:

Did I mention I'm a cultural philosopher interested in starting a Neo-Confucian reformation through literature and music? Well, I am. And there's no better place for me than UChicago. Here's why:

When I visited the Leo Strauss Center at UChicago in June 2018, its managing editor Prof. Gayle McKeen led me to the top floor of Regenstein, where Strauss' notes and manuscripts are stored. While teaching at UChicago, Strauss dug into ancient philosophers' esoteric scripts and did a very good job deciphering them -- and the trick lies in those notes. After I realized this, my summer camp roommate never saw me before 10 pm for two weeks. For my own little reformation, a lot of deciphering and arrangement need to be done, for which Strauss' method will provide an ideal guide. UChicago is the only institution that grants access to those notes, and I wonder when my roommate will see me since there is no curfew for undergraduates. (Answer: still 10 pm, since that's when Regenstein closes.)

Strauss was pretty smart, but he would've been more efficient if he had something called "Digital Humanities," an area in which UChicago is now the undisputed leader. I am excited to benefit from and contribute to this promising enterprise, as I personally experienced its convenience when I pulled statistics of

the Encyclopédie of Diderot and d'Alembert from Prof. Robert Morrissey's digitized French literature project, which was an immense help to my research on the Enlightenment. I can see myself compiling and digitizing the "Classic of Documents" with Prof. Edward L. Shaughnessy from East Asian Language and Civilizations department, comparing the respective frequency of Confucius' use of "Ren" and "Yi" in this work, and investigate the subtleties of Neo-Confucian thoughts.

UChicago is the only school I am applying to that opens to undergraduates the course "Adaptation & Translation in Theater-Making." The intercultural and interdisciplinary approach of this course makes it a perfect resource for me to refine my "Wen Tianxiang" and begin creating other works. The music course "Social and Cultural Studies of Music" will deepen my understanding of the connection between music and the philosophy behind it, and the Composition Seminar will vastly improve my skills as I can receive criticisms from world-renowned composers. While technically the seminar is for graduate students, Prof. Augusta Thomas Thomas assured me that distinguished undergraduates can participate as well.

Most excitingly, the "Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities" major allows me to fit all of the above into my four-year-journey. My final BA project, as I envision now, will be a full opera that embodies Neo-Confucian philosophy in a modern story, performed in English and accompanied by a Western-style orchestra.

I also look forward to pursuing a multitude of activities at UChicago's UROCK Climbing Club (I am actually quite a climber -- didn't see that coming, did you?), its Symphony Orchestra, its University Theater, and of course its Philosophy Club -- while I certainly hope to stage my reformation, sometimes it's ok to just be a casual intellectual who sits around and talks, or to just have fun.

Insofar as I am a cultural philosopher interested in starting a Neo-Confucian reformation through literature and music, I look forward to seeing that reformation emerging in the neighborhood of Hyde Park. (538 words)

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Tips + Analysis

> **Use clear, direct structural elements.** This essay offers a nice, quick hook, and clear topic sentences in the body paragraphs (though they aren't always the first sentence of the paragraph). It's possible, perhaps likely, that your reader will be reading quickly to the point of skimming. If so, a clear thesis,

clear topic sentences, and a clear (but concise) conclusion help ensure the reader doesn't miss anything important.

Show you've done your research. The body discusses specific classes, programs, and opportunities, some of them unique to UChicago, and then shows through clear reflections on how they connect to what the student wants to pursue. We get the clear feeling that the student isn't applying simply because the school is on a ranking list somewhere or that he just skimmed some basic information, but rather that he's has taken the time to think about how UChicago specifically offers what he wants in an education.

Connect those details to your values. We often call this the "so what" element of the essay—don't just tell UChicago how great its school is (it knows). Get into why those details connect to some of your core values by reflecting on what they'll allow you to pursue or explore, and why those things matter to you. Bonus points if you can link details that excite you about the school to things you've already done and plan to continue, as the student above does repeatedly.

Here's a bonus second example essay for this prompt.

Example:

As I watch children at the Chicago Heights Early Childhood Center, I scribble notes on how they share the limited snacks I've given them and what stages they go through as they discuss who gets what. After watching a few groups distribute their scarce resources, I give each child a lollipop before I leave the center with a full notebook.

A few hours later, I'm walking up 59th Street to the Becker Friedman Institute. As I drop off my observations for "The Environment Project," I'm excited that I'm contributing to experimental economics under economists like Professor John List through the Chicago Experiments Initiative.

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Well, I guess I might not get this position of student volunteer at the Becker Friedman Institute immediately. But for me, this small fantasy is symbolic of all the things I want to experience at UChicago as a prospective energy economist. Studying at Chicago would be a dream come true for me: bringing economics into everyday life and applying it to environmental problems, while roaming Chicago and having fun.

At Chicago, in terms of economics, I'm looking forward to diving deeper into my major by taking unique courses like Experimental Economics and Creativity, where I'll further my understanding of economics beyond core micro/macroeconomics. Creative and experimental thinking is, I believe, what is needed in my career as an energy economist and these two courses will prepare me well to step up to my challenge. Similarly, I'd also be excited to take Theory of Auctions, a course that will equip me with necessary knowledge for further studies into carbon cap-and-trade markets, a field that I've gained particular interest in after my summer assisting Professor Hojung Park with his research.

As for my interest in the environment, I'm hoping to explore this field through the Environmental Economics and Policy track inside the Environmental and Urban Studies minor, a choice that fits me well. Starting with the required courses focused on policy-making, I also hope to journey through courses like Energy: Science, Technology, and Human Usage and Introductory Glaciology to strengthen my foundations in environmental science, a subject I'll need more expertise on for my career. I also plan to take Climate Change in Literature, Art, and Film (ENST 12520) to study how popular media characterizes environmental problems and what climate change looks like from the perspective of humanities.

I'm so excited about all the opportunities to combine these two fields of interest at Chicago. From mentoring high school students' research at the Center for Robust Decision Making on Climate and Energy Policy to discussing UChicago's sustainability plan with the Green Economics Group and conducting my own studies through the EPIC Undergraduate Summer Research Fellowship, I'll have plenty of places to apply economics to environmental problems. These opportunities will hopefully also give me the chance to give back to the UChicago community and I'll try to share my high school experiences of teaching children as a Climate Reality Leader and leading the school energy club's various experiments and research.

But outside my focus in economics and environmental studies, I hope to take courses like Contemporary French Cinema to deepen my understanding about French culture, as well as Dinosaur Science, a course I've been interested ever since I received a UChicago email two years ago.

Though all of this will occupy most of my time, I'm going to try to squeeze in time to play pétanque with the Lawn Sport Enthusiasts as well as visiting the museums around Chicago. With some luck, I'll find other art history freaks for whom "museum-going" is an exciting weekend plan and together, we'll become

well-acquainted with Mary Cassatt and Robert Delaunay paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago by the end of our four years, not to mention Opo Ogaga.

I'm sure that Chicago will be the best place for me to start my career as an energy economist and researcher. But speaking of research, there's one thing I was troubled about in my Becker Friedman fantasy. Will Chicago kids settle for Chupa Chups? Or is there some Midwest treat I'll have to discover? (680 words)

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And a third!

Example:

I have an irrational love of the Chicago Bears, which I inherited from my dad. Why irrational? Because neither of us have ever lived in Chicago and because the Bears haven't played good football since I was born. I wait for the day that we return to the glory of the '85 Bears. The quarterback of that team, Jim McMahon, was a legendary maverick. He did things few other quarterbacks did—he made rap records, wore headbands, defied some of the best defenders. He wasn't afraid to challenge convention. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn't. What I love about UChicago is that it is a place that fosters the Jim McMahons of the world, a place where its students are nurtured to pursue rigorous freedom of thought and encouraged to succeed or fail in that pursuit.

I see myself on UChicago's Gothic campus seeking answers to why I stuttered with a nine-year-old brain but not with a 13-year-old brain. My stuttering led me to a fascination with the brain, raising even more questions I'd like to answer. UChicago's purpose-built interdisciplinary Core Curriculum will allow me to delve even more deeply into a rich cross-section of subjects that I've become fascinated with in high school, such as physics, computer science, and political philosophy. I look forward to examining how truth and justice are defined by philosophical and cultural underpinnings in Professor Rubini's Vico's New Science and discussing with classmates the role of the individual in society in Philosophical Perspectives. The Core's foundation of learning and questioning will strengthen my critical reasoning and ability to parse through ambiguity.

I'd major in Neuroscience, on my way to my dream of being able to one day communicate with animals, not in their languages or ours, but through a neural code of brain imaging. Hoping to help build the capability to communicate with animals through visual connections, I'd immerse myself in cognitive science, machine learning, and psychology to gain a nuanced understanding of human and

animal behavior. In Modeling and Signal Analysis, I'd develop sophisticated skills for interpreting data and its wide-ranging applications, and in Machine Learning and Large-Scale Data Analysis, I'd learn about the different types of mathematical models that provide the foundation for machine learning. After studying signal transformation through visual pathways in Neuroscience of Seeing, I hope to conduct research with the Maunsell Lab and study the role visual stimuli play in the brains of mammals.

Outside the classroom, in addition to going to Bears' games in the dead of winter, I'd be playing mahjong and giving chess lessons during breaks with my House. I can't see myself anywhere else next year but on the main quad of UChicago, proudly wearing my Bears' orange and blue, and discussing with my friends a new statistical approach to making sure that Jim MacMahon gets into the Hall of Fame.

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ESSAY PROMPT #2

Extended Essay (Required; Choose one)

Option #1

Was it a cat I saw? Yo-no-na-ka, ho-ka-ho-ka na-no-yo (Japanese for "the world is a warm place"). Może jutro ta dama da tortu jeżom (Polish for "maybe tomorrow that lady will give a cake to the hedgehogs"). Share a palindrome in any language, and give it a backstory.

Option #2

What advice would a wisdom tooth have?

Option #3

You are on an expedition to found a colony on Mars, when from a nearby crater, a group of Martians suddenly emerges. They seem eager to communicate, but they're the impatient kind and demand you represent the human race in one song, image, memory, proof, or other idea. What do you share with them to show that humanity is worth their time?

Option #4

UChicago has been affiliated with over 90 Nobel laureates. But, why should economics,

physics, and peace get all the glory? You are tasked with creating a new category for the Nobel Prize. Explain what it would be, why you chose your specific category, and the criteria necessary to achieve this accomplishment.

Option #5

Genghis Khan with an F1 racecar. George Washington with a SuperSoaker. Emperor Nero with a toaster. Leonardo da Vinci with a Furby. If you could give any historical figure any piece of technology, who and what would it be, and why do you think they'd work so well together?

Option #6

And, as always… the classic choose your own adventure option! In the spirit of adventurous inquiry, choose one of our past prompts (or create a question of your own). Be original, creative, thought provoking. Draw on your best qualities as a writer, thinker, visionary, social critic, sage, citizen of the world, or future citizen of the University of Chicago; take a little risk, and have fun!

UChicago's "Why us?" prompt is pretty standard. These prompts are anything but—and that's what we love about them.

You're going to want to spend a good amount of time reflecting on ways to get creative with these. You'll want to do some out-of-the-box thinking, while avoiding cliché phrases like "out-of-the-box."

Try to think through options for addressing multiple prompts (and take advantage of Prompt #7 to see if there's a past prompt that really sparks your curiosity and fits your intellect). Once you've thought through possibilities for a few, one way to choose which one to work on first* is to approach it the way one past student did: He had done a lot of higher-level philosophy work (you'll see his example below), and said that, for the UChicago essay, he really wanted to show them how he could flex his "philosophy muscles."

Note that we aren't going to provide examples for this year's prompts because they change from year to year. Instead, we have a ton of great examples from past years' prompts. Look through the examples below to get a sense of how other students have answered previous prompts (and see what caliber of essay UChicago is looking for).

*The reason we said "work on first" is that, while your first option may be your best option, that won't be the case for all students—so even as you work on the essay,

be sure to keep thinking about other prompts/options, and don't be afraid to try a new direction.

We'll offer a bunch of examples and analysis below, but if you'd like an in-depth guide to picking a prompt and approaches to writing this essay, here you go.

Here's that philosophy muscle-flexing essay we were talking about:

Example:

(2019 Prompt) If there's a limited amount of matter in the universe, how can Olive Garden (along with other restaurants and their concepts of food infinity) offer truly unlimited soup, salad, and breadsticks? Explain this using any method of analysis you wish—physics, biology, economics, history, theology… the options, as you can tell, are endless.

—Inspired by Yoonseo Lee, Class of 2023

The human mind tends to dislike inconsistencies. Possibly for this reason, philosophers created (or discovered?) the "law of non-contradiction": for example, something can't be limited and unlimited at the same time. So if there's a limited amount of matter in the universe (clearly an assumption, but let's grant it and see where it takes us), how can Olive Garden serve an infinite amount of food (not that I'd complain about more breadsticks)?

Both Eastern and Western philosophy have, perhaps without realizing it, struggled with the Olive Garden dilemma for centuries. One possible answer lies in the condition "at the same time." True, matter in the universe might be limited at any single point in time, and so is the amount of food Olive Garden can produce, but Olive Garden is making food ALL THE TIME! Chemistry, biology, and environmental science all teach us that matter and energy recycle, something mirrored in Neo-Confucian cosmology. In the li-qi (principle-matters) system, the li of the universe is fixed, and the qi at any time is limited, but as time goes on, the qi breaks and reorganizes itself according to the li, destroying and creating matter endlessly.

The Hegelian dialectic, while working a little differently, shows the same thing. The Thesis and the Anti-Thesis are limited at a given point in time, but as their conflicts grow and materialize over time, a Synthesis is formed -- creating stuff endlessly! (Well, maybe until the "end of history.") The Daoist dichotomy of Yin and Yang goes a step further: "The Supreme Void divides to The Two; the Two give birth to The Four; The Four create The Eight…." As the two essential elements group

and regroup themselves, myriad creatures are being created, disintegrated, and recreated. The spirit of this self-generative binary paradigm is continued in modern Computer Science, where groupings of 0's and 1's generate infinite possibilities. Although the computer has only limited storage, variations with time create limitless images on the screen. Similarly, although the universe has only a limited amount of matter, over an infinitely long period of time Olive Garden can surely serve limitless amounts of food.

Even if the amount of matter in this universe is finite, we have no way of knowing it -- the universe could be bound, but its terminus is beyond our perception. Similarly, the food at Olive Garden could in fact be limited, and the customers might simply perceive it to be limitless because they can't see its limit. In other words, the food of Olive Garden is made infinite by the customers! As German philosopher Immanuel Kant formulated in his Critique of Pure Reason, the unperceivable world -- the thing-in-itself, aka the secrets in the kitchen -- is unknowable and could be finite or infinite. But what makes it seem infinite is our limited capacity to know, or in this case, to eat. I'm sure many creatures of enormous appetite (myself included) have tried to eat an Olive Garden empty, just as those of outstanding intellect have tried to explore the metaphysical reality of the world, but as far as I know, none have succeeded. This makes the food at Olive Garden effectively infinite.

Political theories offer tantalizing possibilities for explanation, until each is devoured in time. The combination of the self-generating matter of the universe and the limited capacity of mind -- parallel to the continuously refilling Olive Garden salad bar and the limited appetite of each of us -- can lead to a feeling of frustration. I remember a time when I almost finished off the salad bar, but seconds later they refilled it. Nothing could encompass how I felt at that moment besides the word "frustration." Francis Fukuyama, one of my favorite contemporary political philosophers, likely had the same frustration when he concluded in 1989 that "history has ended with the globalization of liberal democracy," only to be proven wrong as cultural and ethnic conflicts arose in the 1990s. Fukuyama's teacher, Samuel Hungtington, then tried to capture this new political zeitgeist in his "Clash of Civilizations," only to be proven incomprehensive when ideological conflicts took place again in the Middle East in the 2000s. Numerous other theories arose to make sense of our geopolitics, and some did a good job -- for a period of time. As the situation itself keeps changing, those theories inevitably become less accurate and less relevant. Political phenomena in the world, like the food at Olive Garden, just keep presenting themselves ceaselessly, and neither our minds nor our appetites seem capable of fully handling them.

Hence, we start to question the question. Things -- food and the world -- seem so limitless and overwhelming that we start to doubt whether there's only a limited amount of matter after all. Maybe the initial proposition itself is wrong!

As I wrote this previous line, I finally realized how infinity is truly possible: it is our very ability to doubt, to think outside the box, to question fixed propositions, that is truly infinite. My favorite philosopher of science, Thomas Kuhn, acknowledges as much: true, no single account of the world is fully accurate, but in attempting to formulate those accounts, we create many different ways of looking at the world -- many mini-worlds to ourselves. Each "paradigm shift" is a complete revolution of thought, a collective "thinking outside the box," a fruit of human creativity, which is limitless and leads us closer and closer to the ultimate reality.

I guess that's why Olive Garden is so popular. (906 words)

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Tips + Analysis

> **Language, structure, and tone.** Similar to the "Why us?" example we looked at above, this essay offers a nice, quick hook, one that does a good job walking a line between both taking the prompt seriously and winking at its absurdity. This tone is something the essay carries off well throughout the body (and one that took several drafts to achieve).
>
> The body paragraphs use clear topic sentences, giving us readers a clear sense of direction and focus. The word choice and sentence structure show a solid degree of craft. The final line gives a nice, clear sense of closure, while again walking a line with tone.
> **Show them brains.** Each body paragraph does a nice job of tacking in a new direction that allows the author to show both the depth and breadth of his understanding, spanning a complex spectrum of philosophical and political thought (Hegel, Confucius, Kant, Daoism, Fukuyama, Huntington, Kuhn), and the fun and interesting ways he can apply that understanding. Again, "flexing his philosophy muscles."
>
> We get the sense reading the essay that he has done *a lot* of reading outside of a normal school curriculum—that's not strictly required, but it tends to help (and if you want to become a smarter human, reading is a pretty good way to do that).

Here's another good example.

Example:

(2018 Prompt) The popular saying goes, "You are what you eat." What food has shaped your life or worldview?

After asking the children to gather around a large table at the center of the room, I announce the challenge.

"I'm now going to open this bag of lollipops. Take whatever you'd like!"

In a split second hands are scrambling all over the desk and the children scream in delight and in frustration. In a few seconds, everyone retreats from the table to protect their bounty and I see the plastic bag has exploded. Looking around the room, I see a mixture of smiles and frowns just as I expected. Tough Soomin has quickly grabbed hold of eight; little Jaeyong has none.

"Don't eat them yet! Yes, Junhyeon, I mean it. Just look around, guys. Is everyone happy?"

Many kids shake their heads passionately. Soomin looks a little sheepish.

"OK. But this is where economics comes in, right? I know you're tired of me saying this by now, but always remember: economics is all about thinking about what to do with all our stuff."

Bringing up the PowerPoint slide, I introduce them to the Tragedy of the Commons and tell them that this way of distribution was Option 1: Leave everyone to do whatever they want, the very process that causes a Tragedy. After collecting their lollipops back (a difficult process that involves my begging), I announce Option 2: Government Regulation.

I pass all the lollipops to Minsoo, assigning him the government role. "Your job is to give out these lollipops to all of your friends, based on what you think is the best way."

I'm sure this will yield a better result, since this is a textbook economic solution. But I'm surprised. What I see is nothing close; I see our own society. Minsoo gives priority to his closest friends, letting them choose flavors and giving them two each. Many others don't get the flavor they wanted. When he has left-overs, he pockets a few for himself.

My presentation loses a lot of meaning with many kids still unhappy. Afterwards, other solutions like communist systems and auctions with Monopoly money don't work much better. I'm hoping that the final solution will work though.

Bringing back all the lollipops to the center table, I announce the ultimate solution, promising kids that after this round they'll be able to keep their lollipops.

"I'm giving you guys ten minutes to talk about who should get what. I want everyone to be happy!"

I watch the debate closely, hoping to see the negotiation process bear fruit as predicted by Nobel laureates Elinor Ostrom and Ronald Coase. This is supposed to be the best solution for small communities, and it appears so. After spending weekends together, the children know each other well enough for discussion. Those who don't want lollipops quickly announce their decisions and help monitor the debate. When they eventually work out something, I ask them if they consider this to be the best solution. Everyone seems to nod and I end the lesson after presenting the ideas of Ostrom and Coase.

I pack my stuff after the lesson when two children come to me. "We didn't get the flavor we wanted. There were some people who secretly took the flavor we wanted and we had to let them because they were older than us." I tell them to wait, and quickly return with the lollipop flavors they wanted from a nearby convenience store. At least they have a smile as they go back home. But I'm slightly troubled.

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I was simulating an economy with some twenty children. But the difficulties of finding a solution even in this microcosm had me thinking: what about the real world?

I've learnt that the world is complex and that it's easy to miss so many important people by relying on classroom theory. It's why I hope to start tackling the world's problems at UChicago, to make sure that, as much as possible, everyone gets the lollipops they want. And that's what lollipops have taught me. (660 words)

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Tips + Analysis

> **Everyone loves a good story (structure):** This essay opens with a classic storytelling move—dive into a moment that paints a vivid picture and sets up

a conflict before you give us the wider context. There's some nice imagery and detail in the description of the kids scrambling that brings us into the moment (showing a good level of understanding of craft) and gets us curious about where we're heading. There's also just the right amount of delay before he adds, "OK. But this is where economics comes in, right?" and then explains that "economics is all about thinking about what to do with all our stuff." This construction reveals where we're going with this (but delay the reveal too long, and you can lose the reader).
Get creative in showing your creativity: Lollipops and the Tragedy of the Commons? Tell us more.

That the student tried to use lollipops to teach about the Tragedy of the Commons and possible solutions (such as Ostrom and Coase's work) shows a creative approach to teaching, and it's structured in a creative way that surprises us with the connection and depth.
Show growth: This can be a scary thing to do, but discussing your failures can show growth and maturity. We have a natural tendency and are subject to social pressures that influence us to want to be perceived as capable, knowing. But no one is interested in hearing a story about how you faced a challenge, knew what to do the whole time because, yay, you're amazing, did it, the end. You're bored by that movie. It does just-okay at the box office. We're interested in seeing growth and development, and those things virtually always come from struggle and failure—from not knowing the right answer ahead of time, and having to learn it. There's a strength in this essay's ending with acknowledging that he doesn't have the answer.

Example:

(2018 Prompt) Topic: Alice falls down the rabbit hole. Milo drives through the tollbooth. Dorothy is swept up in the tornado. Neo takes the red pill. Don't tell us about another world you've imagined, heard about, or created. Rather, tell us about its portal. Sure, some people think of the University of Chicago as a portal to their future, but please choose another portal to write about.

-Inspired by Raphael Hallerman, Class of 2020

I could always tell when summer started by the number of mosquito bites I had on my leg. And as an 8 year old--exasperated by endless Band-Aids and cortisone globs--the mosquitoes' constant nagging bothered me.

Was my blood too sweet? Did I fight too much with my brother? Only through the Internet did the diagnosis become clear: light clothing and constant motion were homing targets for the parasites. More research revealed that the bites swelled so much because of a histamine response the body sent to fight the anticoagulant the mosquito carried.

But these questions only led to more questions – not just about my bites, but about the people around me. Why did Grandma prick her finger every day and count rice grains? Why was Grandpa not able to speak?

Biology answered all of them.

From the fibrin nets that make up my scabs to the millions of scattered wavelengths that create the earthy hue of my mom's spider plants, biology was my portal to understanding life and its endless kaleidoscope of mysteries. It translated the foreignness of toothaches, goosebumps, and common colds into a language that the little me could speak. It served as my own map to the world's hidden trove of secrets and became a sense of wonder and comfort I could rely on.

But as I got older biology gave me an insatiable desire to go beyond hole punching leaf disks to measure photosynthesis. I took it upon myself to explore a different kind of animal than mosquitoes: the human mind.

This past summer, I assisted Dr. Mark Fisher at UC-Irvine with his research about cerebral microbleeds in young athletes. I recruited local high school students, whose MRI scans and medical histories were studied to make earlier and more effective diagnoses of CTE, a degenerative disease brought on by repeated concussions. I also attended medical journal club meetings with prospective medical students each Friday, where I learned about the risks of tPA treatment in ischemic stroke patients, the use of optical histology, and other facets of neurology.

But biology is not only a portal to comprehending the world around me. It has also become a gateway to understanding myself. Learning that the immune system uses the antigen of invaders to fortify its own defences taught me to persevere when my results fall short of my expectations and embrace my vulnerabilities to my advantage. Learning that humans share 99% of the same DNA can teach me to appreciate humanity's similarities instead of being divided by its differences. But most of all, learning that the body can learn to walk again, even after paralysis, taught me to have hope in the face of disease and disaster--to maintain faith in the human spirit and see life as Asagai did in a Raisin in the Sun: not an endless circle we futilely march around and around in but a line of infinite possibility.

Just as Alice found her identity after falling down the rabbit hole, as Milo found a love for life and learning through the phantom tollbooth, and Neo saw truth and reality by taking the red pill, I discovered in biology the paradox of living. Through the erosion of telomerase sequences and apoptosis of cells, biology showed me how incredibly mortal we are as human beings. But despite our corporeal limitations, biology showed me that we can achieve immortality. We can rise above our earthly circumstances and allow our minds to transcend and our hearts to conquer atrophy and illness. We empower our bodies to recover by simply believing in the effect of a placebo. We reduce our coronary heart risk and prolong our lifespans by reducing stress and thinking optimistically.

Through the power of the mind, our bodies can heal.

Through the faculty of thoughts, we hold the mantle to shape our own fates.

And through the portal of biology, I find time and time again vitality, strength, and autonomy. (650 words)

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Tips + Analysis

Go fishing: Similarly to the lollipops essay, this piece begins with a nice hook ("I could always tell when summer started by the number of mosquito bites I had on my leg." Cool. Where you going with this?) that leaves us wondering where we're heading, and leads nicely into a reveal ("Biology answered all of them.") that is delayed just long enough to keep our curiosity piqued. In between, the author raises questions that offer mysteries we want to see solved—Why did Grandma prick her finger every day and count rice grains? Why was Grandpa not able to speak?
Show progression: We once worked with a student who said he wanted to become a doctor. When we asked what he had done in pursuit of that goal, he said, "Well, I took Biology…" When we asked about further pursuit, he said he hadn't really done anything else. And he was actually kind of disturbed by blood.

Given those things, do you really get the impression he was interested in medicine? Or do you think someone else was maybe interested in it for him…?

One thing we really like about this essay is that it shows depth of progression and pursuit and connection, from younger curiosity to UCI

research to ways that biology offers insight into sense of self and how best to live.

Show and tell: You've likely heard the phrase "Show, don't tell." And often, that's a strong approach. But because admission officers read applications quickly (often the span of a few minutes), we like to think of college essay writing as having a surprising parallel with kindergarten—show and tell.

This essay does a nice job of showing us complex insights and values. And then, at the end, the author tells us, just in case we were skimming and missed some of it: "And through the portal of biology, I find time and time again vitality, strength, and autonomy."

Example:

(2019 Prompt) UChicago has international campus centers around the world, but we don't have any interplanetary, interstellar, or interdimensional campuses… yet! Propose a spot in time or space, in this or any universe, for a new UChicago campus. What types of courses would be taught at this site? What cultural experiences await students who study there?

—Inspired by Peter Jasperse, Class of 2022

A new UChicago campus should be placed in a universe where there is a fourth dimension in space and time. Our fourth-dimensional campus will offer many opportunities that our third-dimensional campus in Chicago cannot offer. For example, there will be solids with cubes as faces and double rotations of four-dimensional Euclidean space.

On Earth, the three basic dimensions are length, width, and depth, each of which are perpendicular to one another. The theoretical fourth dimension is perpendicular to the length, width, and depth. The concept of the fourth dimension started with French mathematician Jean le Rond d'Alembert. British mathematician Charles Howard Hinton coined the terms ana (up toward) and kata (down from) to describe the directions along this new axis. We call the positions with the x, y, and z axes the latitude, longitude, and altitude. The fourth dimension is measured along the w axis. Henry Mode described the position within this fourth dimension as the spissitude. There will be a course dedicated to the history of these ideas.

At the new UChicago campus, we can have geometrical fun with the extra dimension that we normally can't have on Earth. When working with two dimensions, we know that if we stack an arbitrarily large number of congruent circles on top of each other, we create a cylinder. Now, we can push out a sphere

to create a four-dimensional spherical cylinder, which is like a cylinder but has spherical caps. In addition, if we have two interlocking rings on Earth, we would normally not be able to untangle them without breaking the rings. However, with the fourth dimension, we would be able to easily separate the rings using knot theory. On Earth, if a plane cuts through a cube, it leaves a two-dimensional surface behind called the cross section. With the fourth dimension, if we take the cross section of four-dimensional shapes, we are left with wacky cross sections that look like a tower of cubes with some extra cubes protruding out. On the fourth-dimension campus, we will offer courses based off of rotations in four-dimensional Euclidean space and hyperspheres, as well as dimensional analogy.

With four dimensions, we can research more about the boundless velocity of light. We can also study more about simultaneity, which helps us look at whether events are concurrent in time with respect to a frame of reference. Cosmology will be much easier to research there because we will have an extra dimension to work with.

Life will be different for the students in this alternate world compared to life on the three-dimensional Chicago campus. In this fourth dimension campus, we will be able to turn objects inside out on the spot. Some rude students may turn their faces inside out if they decide that their professors' lectures are a waste of time. We will need doors that have four dimensions because with three dimensions, they will be useless! We will also report to the campus in the city of Chicago on Earth with a fourth-dimensional satellite.

There will also be novel opportunities for physics research in four dimensions. Within the Astrophysics Department, we will do an abundance of research on black holes and particle physics. Black holes suck in space and time, and in a four-dimensional world, we may better understand the extra dimension that Earth's current universe does not have. Studying the most fundamental building blocks of the universe may help us further understand the particle behavior that the extra dimension imposes.

While it may be difficult for a student from the third dimension to adjust to a fourth dimension, we believe it will be an unforgettable experience for those who feel like they don't quite fit on Earth. These students will be mesmerized by the distinct learning opportunities that exist on this new campus. (631 words)

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Tips + Analysis

Use clear language and structure: As with the previous sample, this essay uses clear structural elements—the intro contains a direct response to the prompt, and the paragraphs each have a clear focus, with language that prevents the reader from feeling lost as to what direction the author is heading and how this relates to the overall focus of the essay.

It's useful to remember that, among the other purposes of your college essays, one purpose is to show admission officers that you're ready to write at the college level. Understanding clarity and how to achieve it through language and structure is a part of that.

Go full starfish: An effective approach to the UChicago prompts that we've seen work numerous times is to show your understanding of a complex topic along several different axes (pun semi-intended). To do so here, the author brainstormed a bunch of different possible aspects to explore (historical, mathematical/geometrical, physical/cosmological, biological/social), each with interesting examples that illustrate breadth and depth of thinking and that allow for variations in tone (ranging from a discussion of 4 dimensional solids to students with inside-out faces). Take some time to think about how elastic your topic is—does it allow you to stretch, exploring connections we may not have contemplated previously?

And because we love bonuses, we'll leave for your enjoyment this last example, which flexes some nice UChicago-style creative flair:

Example:

(2020 Prompt) Joan of Arkansas. Queen Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Babe Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Mash up a historical figure with a new time period, environment, location, or occupation, and tell us their story.

"And the 2012 Grammy for Best Producer goes to … Nikola Tesla Tchaikovsky, for his work on m.A.A.d city!" LL Cool J announces. It's not Tchaikovsky's first Grammy; he won one in 2011 for the production of Adele's Rolling in the Deep. Nor will it be his last. He'll go on to win another in 2015 for Justin Bieber's What do you mean?

Nikola's success can be linked to his invention of, and later innovations to, electronic music. Born in Croatia in 1959, he majored in electrical engineering at the Austrian Polytechnic Institute. His eyes were set on becoming the most-famed electrical engineer since Edison, and he planned on doing so by inventing a motor, powered by alternate currents.

It wasn't until the evening of May 7, 1990, that he decided to go into music. On that fateful night, when he was moving out of his parents' house, he stumbled across his dad's old record of Dvořák's score of Swan Lake. Inspired by the theme and the infectious melody, Tchaikovsky was determined to become a groundbreaking composer. There was one issue, though: He didn't know how to play a single instrument. His life to that point had been dedicated to the complex manipulation of the motion of electrons, and here he was, suddenly switching his career to the manipulation of sound.

In December of that year, looking to work with the talented musicians of the New York Philharmonic, he moved to New York City. Still working alone and with no background in music, he churned out early compositions that were terrible, almost harmful to listen to, like nails screeching against a chalkboard. That didn't stop him from thinking his music was top-tier, though. After composing his first song, Water, in two weeks, he took it straight to the conductor of the renowned New York Philharmonic.

Under normal circumstances, Leonard Bernstein would not have even considered letting his orchestra play a random piece by a random composer, but pleasantly surprised by Tchaikovsky's confidence (witnesses said he deemed his piece "the child of Bach and Beethoven" and "so beautiful and complex that Paganini could only dream of composing it"), Bernstein gathered his musicians and asked them to play the composition. Not even a quarter of the way through, Bernstein asked the musicians to stop, took out his cigarette lighter, burned Water, and told Tchaikovsky never to compose again.

Disheartened, Nikola knew he needed to transform music to accommodate his strength: electrical engineering. He reserved a room from the New Yorker Hotel for three days and left his belongings in his apartment in Harlem. He wanted to spend time alone, only thinking. Powered by milk, honey, and bread, Nikola arose from his room a new man with a plan. He realized that the vibration of sound could be translated into electrical signals. The initial plan was to have musicians play into a specialized microphone attached to his laptop. Unlike an ordinary microphone, where sound waves are converted into electrical signals, then transferred to a speaker (then re-converted into sound waves), his microphone would convert the sound waves into electrical signals then into binary code, speaking the computer's language.

The only issue with his plan was that Nikola had no friends nor the money to hire musicians. That's when he had his second light-bulb moment, recognizing that there was no need for sound waves; he could just mimic their electrical signals.

While his invention of a machine that generated one repeating electrical wave was spectacular, his crowning achievement was the filter that allowed for the manipulation of timbre. The modulation of tone granted the user a newfound power: the ability to sound like any instrument. Nikola Tesla Tchaikovsky had digitized music.

Ironically, the industry he sought to re-invent, classical music, wanted nothing to do with him or his innovations. Those musicians realized there was something special about human error that his machines couldn't learn. However, his invention super-charged the beat-making industry. It now only took a producer a few weeks, instead of months, to make a beat. Nikola continued to make strides with digital music, inventing a way for musicians to correct their pitch (a technique he called autotune), and popularized the I-V-vi-IV chord progression.

In the end, instead of giving up when he encountered obstacles, he took new approaches and found ways to innovate around them, a lesson on courage and creativity that inspires me as I pursue my dream of breaking the neural code.