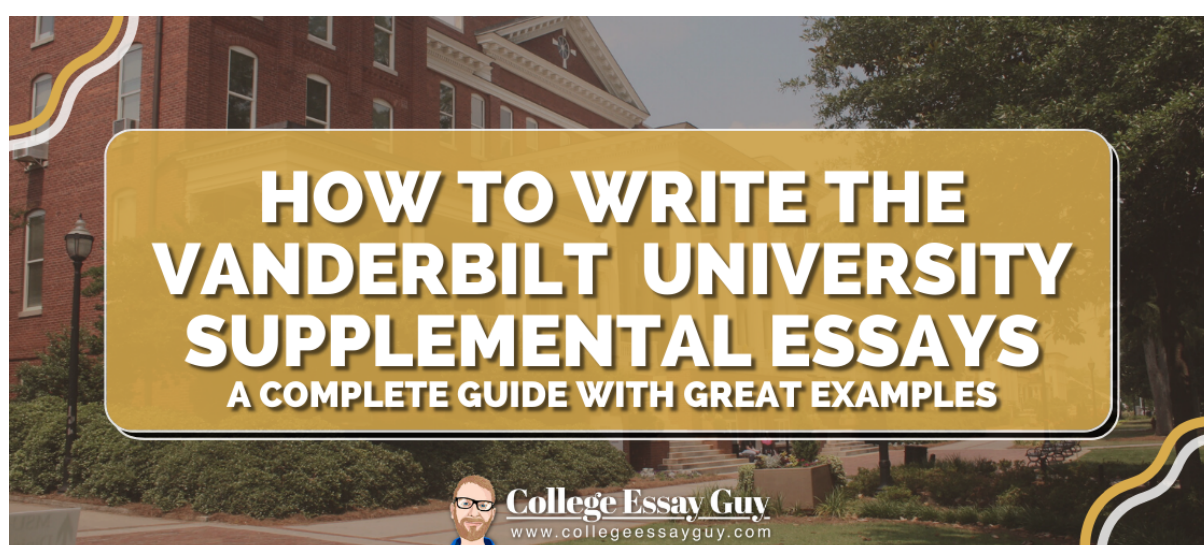


How to Write the Vanderbilt Supplemental Essay: Examples + Guide 2022/2023



Vanderbilt University cares about its students, and they must be doing something right—they are ranked #2 on *The Princeton Review*'s home to the happiest college students! Perhaps it's their emphasis on creating community through residential colleges or their opportunities for diverse learning via cross-disciplinary research. Or, maybe, it's because students in their first year get to storm the football field during the first home game! Regardless, Vanderbilt's happy students form a diverse community, and through these supplemental essays, Vanderbilt is looking to learn about your own uniqueness, and how you'll add to that diverse community. So be bold and show Vanderbilt your curiosities, your communities, and your ways of working with a pool of diverse thinkers!

Want to get a better sense of what Vanderbilt is looking for?

You'll find an extensive, by-the-numbers look at Vanderbilt's 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 research university envisions its role and how it wants to grow and evolve, read its [academic strategic plan for the next five years](#) (it even has its own website!). Reading through this will give you a strong idea of what Vanderbilt values.

BUT, please don't just copy and paste chunks of the plan into your essay because a) that's plagiarism and it's basically an academic crime, and b) anyone could do that.

Think about this: What aspects of Vanderbilt's plan speak to you? Does anything you read make you want to get in a time machine and skip the rest of high school so that you can "travel to Guatemala to repair medical equipment" or "write and produce a musical" as part of Vanderbilt's commitment to Immersion Experiences? What resonates with you? Keep reading to find out how you can connect the dots.

WHAT IS THE VANDERBILT SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY PROMPT?

PROMPT #1

Pick 1 of 2:

- 1. Vanderbilt offers a community where students find balance between their academic and social experiences. Please briefly elaborate on how one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences has influenced you. Please provide your response in approximately 250 words.*
- 2. Vanderbilt University values learning through contrasting points of view. We understand that our differences, and our respect for alternative views and voices, are our greatest source of strength. Please reflect on conversations you've had with people who have expressed viewpoints different from your own. How did these conversations/experiences influence you? Please provide your response in approximately 250 words.*

HOW TO WRITE THE SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY PROMPT FOR VANDERBILT

Option 1: Vanderbilt offers a community where students find balance between their academic and social experiences. Please briefly elaborate on how one of your

extracurricular activities or work experiences has influenced you. Please provide your response in approximately 250 words.

This is a classic extracurricular activity essay with an additional opportunity to suggest how your experience might contribute to Vanderbilt's community. So if you've been crushing it as an intern at a local tech startup, volunteering at an urban gardening nonprofit, and babysitting your neighbor's insane twins for extra cash, which one do you write about?

It depends!

Your most impressive activity may not always make for the best essay. You could write an *incredible* essay about working at McDonald's as a vegetarian and a totally boring essay about being ASB President or working on Wall Street.

Notice, too, that the prompt asks you to reflect on *how* your work or extracurricular activity has influenced you. This means you will want to pick an activity that has helped shape one of your core values or interests.

Take a look at your Common App essay and make sure to avoid too much overlap. Also remember that your activities will be in the activities list with descriptions.

Before you start, it's a good idea to do some brainstorming (bonus: You can use your brainstorming results for *all* of your college essays, not just this one!).

Grab a glass of water (or caffeine if you need it), put on a soothing Spotify playlist (no lyrics), open a blank document (or pen and paper if you're old school), and set a timer for 20 minutes.

Congrats! You've just started working on your college essays.

You'll find a pretty in-depth, step-by-step guide to the extracurricular activity essay [at this link](#), with specific advice for the 150-word format and some great examples near the end. We 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 possible topics.

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.

One factor that might help you choose between multiple topic options: You may also consider how either topic might allow you to contribute to

Vanderbilt's community. This connection might be a nice way of wrapping up your essay.

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

General tip: Be careful about writing about an activity you've already shared a lot about elsewhere in your application. If you've already written about your most important extracurricular activity in your main Common App personal statement, for example, you might consider writing about your second or third most important activity. This essay is your chance to say, "Hey, there's this other cool thing I've spent some time doing that I haven't told you guys about yet!"

Here's a great Vanderbilt supplemental essay example, written for a different version of this prompt (and thus over word count):

Example:

I used to imagine my future as a pediatrician in an office decorated with bright posters and knick-knacks. Although I am still excited for that, lately, I also picture myself conducting research. I recently had the opportunity to intern at the Behavioral Psychopharmacology Research Lab at McLean Hospital, where I helped with studies focused on treating alcoholism.

On my first day, my mentor gave me a list of spreadsheets filled with data. Each study required multiple types of data, some of which was collected by sensors on wristwatches and some of which was handwritten in journals. My job was to process the raw data into something more readable. As the days went on, I became more familiar with my task until eventually, I was processing data for three of the four RAs in the lab.

A few days later, I was tasked with a new job: organizing potential subjects. I ranked them in order of most eligible to least, based on factors such as their alcohol and drug habits, body measurements, and proximity to our lab. One day I was invited to observe a study that was testing a drug that increased the effects of alcohol, with the idea that it might curb the subject's desire for more. As I watched a research subject drink significantly less alcohol than before, I realized the impact that my spreadsheets might have. The experiment happening right in front of me could help people gain more control over their lives by relearning how to live without alcohol.

As a Neuroscience major at Vanderbilt, I can learn about the functions of the brain and the science behind the studies in classes such as "Psychopharmacology" and

“Neurobiology of Addiction” while simultaneously fulfilling the pre-medicine curriculum. Additionally as a Medicine, Health and Society minor, “Ethics and Medicine” and “American Health Policy ” will help me pursue my interests in public health and expanding access to healthcare. Vanderbilt’s Institute of Medicine and Public Health Research has sections named “Child and Adolescent Health” and “Healthcare Research”, where I could pursue my interests in a research environment. At the Lamb Center for Pediatric Research, which focuses primarily on infectious diseases, I could gain more experience working with children and how diseases affect them differently.

At Vanderbilt, where academic opportunities are as plentiful as the trees, I will gain the exposure I need to help develop a better world for future generations.

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Tips + Analysis:

Be specific about the how and why. The admission committee doesn’t just want to know what you did—they’re looking for *why* you pursued this opportunity, *how* you contributed to your team/boss/community, and *what* skills or insight you gained that you can bring to Vanderbilt. “Helped with studies focused on treating alcoholism” tells us a lot more than just “intern at the Behavioral Psychopharmacology Research Lab at McLean Hospital,” even though, whoa (that sounds super legit!).

Demonstrate your unique expertise and values. Starting off with a description of where she started (processing raw data) and upping the ante by showing how she quickly became an expert, exceeding the capabilities of others on the team (without being a jerk), reveals some impressive values: adaptability, critical thinking, diligence, and a willingness to learn. She takes it even further by leveling up (tasked with a new job a few days later) and realizing that her work has meaningful, real-world applications to “help people gain more control over their lives by relearning how to live without alcohol.” This shows even more insight and gives the essay a great “why this all matters” moment.

Sneak in a “Why Vanderbilt” conclusion. Because Vanderbilt doesn’t have a “Why us?” essay, y’all can be a bit sneaky. When you’re brainstorming this essay, look at your list of activities and pick which ones you could a) continue doing at Vanderbilt in a similar way, or b) take the experience/knowledge/skills and apply them to one specific part of the Vanderbilt community. This student shows she’s done her research by alluding to her future at “the Lamb Center for Pediatric Research” as an

extension of the work she's already done at her internship at the "McLean Hospital" in high school.

Question: Do you really need to include all these classes?

Why not! Show 'em you've done your research. One of your goals here is to get the admissions reader to imagine you at Vanderbilt. Knowing that Vanderbilt has classes such as "Psychopharmacology" and "Neurobiology of Addiction" shows this student dove deep into the academic offerings available. And when she references a "Medicine, Health and Society minor" as well as an "Institute of Medicine and Public Health Research" and the "Lamb Center for Pediatric Research," she's connecting her internship, skills, and future career to her education. Adding details like these will make your essay that much more specific (and, hey, our #1 comment to students is to be more specific!).

Here's another example that tackles this topic really well too (again for a version of the prompt that had a larger word count, but the detail and focus are what you want to take away here):

Example:

Despite my interest in pursuing a career in medicine, I secretly love marketing.

On my tour as a "shadow" of a Key Society volunteer, I loved the lush 370-acre grounds and unique teaching styles of St. Stephens, but failed to grasp authentic campus life in the short time I had to talk to my student host. Since I knew I'd be boarding my first two years, this almost turned me away, but my gut told me St. Stephens would have the close-knit community I craved. I scoured the school's website and social media for depictions of genuine experiences only to find inactive accounts and stock photos of students.

I immediately joined Key Society to improve the tour for prospective students, but soon realized it was impossible to have real conversations in brief passing periods between classes. What if shadows had more meaningful time with students and could actually imagine themselves on campus from the photos online?

After interviewing with the admissions office to share these goals, I was appointed Key Society's Director of External Marketing. I created student Q&A panels following tours so upperclassman could speak directly to shadows about their experience. Determined to share the reality of campus life, I took over the Instagram account, posting current students' ambitions and hobbies and unique events, such as class hikes during theology.

While it's difficult to measure the results of these initiatives, the positive feedback from shadows and staff makes me hopeful that they will have a lasting impact on recruitment. My connections with prospective students have certainly made a lasting impact on me, which is why I want to continue this type of work at Vanderbilt through joining the AmbassaDors program, where I can learn more about the university, meet members of the Vanderbilt community, and hone communication skills imperative not to my success as an AmbassaDor but also to my future career in public health.

Vanderbilt will give me the opportunity to become involved in organizations like Volunteers for Health, where I can use the leadership skills I have acquired through my work in Key Society to start working directly with people in the healthcare field and begin pursuing a career in Public Health. Moreover, Heal VU and Partners in Health Engage will allow me to marry my interests in health advocacy and marketing.

If medicine fails, I've got a backup plan.

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Tips + Analysis:

Use an unexpected transition to engage the reader. Many essays discuss common activities (baseball) in common ways (learning the value of hard work). To stand out, consider using the element of surprise. That's what this student has done in her introduction: "Despite my interest in pursuing a career in medicine, I secretly love marketing." You think it's going to be another essay about pursuing a career in medicine (we definitely need doctors, but there are a *lot* of those essays, and they tend to sound similar), and then the surprise: marketing! Now, you've captured the reader's attention (the goal of every college essay).

Explain how you solved a problem: Just like in the first essay example, this student tells us about joining Key Society and how she contributed. She "soon realized it was impossible to have real conversations in brief passing periods between classes," so she came up with a solution, took it to the higher ups, and earned herself a fancy title "Director of External Marketing." Nice. By demonstrating how she solved this problem, she shows a) core values of problem solving, critical thinking, and creativity, and b) implies (and then later explicitly states) that she'll bring these skills to Vanderbilt.

Demonstrate that you've made an impact (small or big): You're going to graduate high school and leave this position behind for bigger and more

complicated projects and adventures. But what is your legacy? Even if you're writing about a babysitting job, you'll have left an impression on the lives you've touched. What is it? This student tells us what legacy she hopes to leave behind *and* the impact she's already had on the Key Society: "the positive feedback from shadows and staff makes me hopeful that they will have a lasting impact on recruitment." Demonstrating that the work you've done will create a positive ripple effect once you've left is pure essay gold (and life gold, 'cause you want to be a good human!).

Here are some more tips for your extracurricular activity essay, either for Vanderbilt or for other schools:

Try to tie the extracurricular activity or work experience of choice back to a specific value in your life. Rather than just state what you did point-blank, make it resonate for the reader by connecting it to some aspect of what makes you, well, you.

Use active verbs so that readers get a clear sense of what you've done. This just makes things more engaging and dynamic overall.

Consider starting your essay with the "problem." In fact, probably name the problem in the first couple sentences. Then, tell us what you did about it. Then what you learned. Hey—that's a simple structure you can use *right now*.

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

Don't forget to include specific impacts, even if they're brief. You want to connect your time and energy 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 work paid off and (maybe even) inspired some kind of change.

Option 2: Vanderbilt University values learning through contrasting points of view. We understand that our differences, and our respect for alternative views and voices, are our greatest source of strength. Please reflect on conversations you've had with people who have expressed viewpoints different from your own. How did these conversations/experiences influence you? Please provide your response in approximately 250 words.

This prompt is asking you to think about how you communicate with others who have different viewpoints than you. It wants you to select one or a series of related conversations/experiences that showcase how you acted when met with, and perhaps challenged by, someone's contrasting beliefs and, ultimately, what you've learned from alternative views.

In order to answer this prompt, you will first want to brainstorm specific scenarios where you were in a conversation or interaction with someone who had a differing view. It might be helpful to set a time for this (try 20 minutes at first!)

Make a list of times when you disagreed with a friend, family member, or classmate's point of view. Also consider experiences where you were a part of a group that might have been divided due to opposing views.

For each instance, write down the differing opinions, what instigated the discussion, how you handled it, and especially what you learned.

Per the prompt, also consider how acknowledging these differences has made you and those around you stronger.

Brainstorming Tip: As you begin to brainstorm potential topics, consider both serious and playful options. While this essay could be about political or religious viewpoints, it could also be about the strong differing opinions you and your friends have on your go-to fast-food order (though if you go with something more playful, the lessons you draw will probably need to be profound).

Things to Keep in Mind:

Maintain focus. This kind of essay should focus on how differences have shaped and strengthened you, not on the specific opinions themselves. Your viewpoint should not be the main point of the essay; instead it should be a springboard for writing about what differing viewpoints have taught you and how they've influenced you.

Remember the two R's: Respect and Reflect. As you write about people with differing opinions, especially those with ones that might make you heated, make sure you write about them maintaining a level of respect. You will always come across best in the essay if you write with a level of kindness! If you feel like you can't write about a topic or a circumstance without anger radiating off the page, it might mean the topic is too fresh and may not be ready for reflection. Instead, pick a topic that you feel like you've had enough time to process. Anger can of course still exist in the essay, but it should also be met with some component of understanding or self-reflection.

Here's an example essay that seeks to stay focused and respectful when thinking about the differences in the writer's friend group.

Example:

The past few years have demonstrated a rift between perspectives present throughout the nation, and my Spanish class perfectly demonstrated this. Once during a group discussion, someone shared a cartoon in which a certain elected official with a certain style of hair who lives in a certain house was drawn as an infant. This led to a heated argument.

Some of us found it relatively humorous, while others were offended, claiming the political caricature was a form of bullying. As the quarreling continued, the focus on the image waned. Insults were being thrown in broken Spanish and it soon became clear people weren't listening so much as forcing their beliefs and expecting agreement.

For a while, I just attributed this to differences of opinion. But once members of the group began avoiding each other, I noticed the resentment over who had or had not chuckled at the simply-drawn lines of the cartoon had led to another drawing: that of deep divisions between friends. There seemed to be a lack of ear-lending and little fact-based explanations shared as to why others were perceived as wrong.

When we revisited this incident in our next discussion, I realized education is different from indoctrination. Explaining something to demonstrate why a certain belief is not a fact is different from forcing someone to change their beliefs by belittling them. Though I considered myself a neutral party in this particular argument, I had taken a side internally. In the future, if I were to find myself in a similar situation, the first thing I would do is limit my bias by attempting to hear the rationale behind both sides before concluding that one is worse than the other.

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Tips + Analysis:

There is power in neutrality. Don't feel like you can only write about a time where you were on one of two opposing sides. In the above essay, the writer keeps their own opinions on the matter to themselves, acting instead as more of an observer in the situation. This is effective because it keeps the focus of the essay on the rift between friends rather than the topic that divides them. If you are writing about a controversial topic like this one on a specific political figure, consider how the essay might read if you write with a more neutral eye. This can be useful if you are struggling to keep the essay focused on the conflict and its resolution, rather than you and your beliefs, or if you are unsure where you stand.

Shape the conclusion with a realization. The writer does a wonderful job closing this essay by clearly stating what they learned from this experience: “I realized education is different from indoctrination.” Then they use the rest of the conclusion to expand on this discovery and consider how it has shaped them. Because this prompt is interested in how your experiences have directly impacted you, make sure to dedicate a decent chunk of the essay to reflecting on your realization rather than just stating it. Consider these questions: What did I believe before? What do I believe now? How has my understanding of the world/myself changed? How has it been complicated?

Look to the future. Notice, too, that the writer doesn’t just make a realization, but they also demonstrate how this realization will influence their future actions. By considering how they might handle the same situation in the future, they are deliberately showing how their perspective and insight have grown. They are putting their realization into (hypothetical) practice. You can try this too! Imagine how you would handle the same experience differently and write a potential ending with this in mind. Bonus points if you don’t have to imagine because you have had an additional experience which you handled differently. Write it into your essay!

Here’s another example essay offering a different tone and approach:

Example:

“Why on earth do you have to volunteer at places like that?” My dad spoke abruptly during our drive home.

I had just finished working at an LGBT-friendly bar, raising funds for an LGBT workplace diversity campaign. As I walked out smelling like tobacco and beer, his face stiffened. But I knew what angered him more was that I’d turned down a volunteering opportunity at the UN and chosen the Beijing LGBT Center, an NGO he deemed illegitimate.

“Because...” I began.

“I don’t want you to work there anymore.”

Dreadful silence prolonged in the car. I was devastated that he didn’t approve of the work I’d prided myself in.

But I didn’t tell him these things. I hadn’t (and haven’t) come out to him yet.

I love my father. He's the superman who let me ride on his shoulders, who spent his savings on providing me the best education possible, and who cried when I told him I was lonely in boarding school.

But he didn't want me volunteering at the bar. And I didn't want to let him down.

So I compromised.

I never worked again at the bar. I could continue volunteering at the LGBT center, but not more than twice a week. And I should never discuss my work publicly.

As I gave in to my family's wishes, my mind flashed back to my other queer activists who had not. A transgender woman, Qing, has a father who hasn't spoken to her in ten years because she refuses to cut her long hair. Nana's mother nearly disowned her because she married her girlfriend.

I've come to realize that activism isn't just about marching in rainbow parades and running ambitious campaigns. It may involve conflicts with our loved ones who hold opposite beliefs. Upholding personal beliefs could lead to a broken family, and vice versa. There is not a right answer but only a matter of choice.

And that's a painful lesson.

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Tips + Analysis

Pick your passion. In this essay, the student chooses to write about a cause which they clearly feel strongly about: LGTBQ+ rights. The writer explains why they care about this cause, including their own personal relationship with it. Because they are writing from a place of genuine feeling, the essay is deeply empathetic and vulnerable, two aspects readers admire in college essays. If you have a viewpoint that is especially important to you, consider exploring an essay that highlights it and, in turn, sheds light on your values.

Lean into the scene. The above essay is an excellent example of how a scene can open and propel your essay forward. The first third of this essay takes place in the car between the narrator and their father during the exact moment of tension. By opening the essay with a scene, the writer is able to introduce the people involved, the setting, the conflict, and some of the background context all in an efficient and engaging way. Experiment with opening your essay with dialogue from your scene for a natural hook, then

continue writing the scene to give the reader the sensation that they are there experiencing the conflict with you. Keep in mind that the scene shouldn't take up the whole essay, but instead just ease us into it. The writer still uses most of the essay to consider how this conversation impacted their decisions and greater outlook on life.

Paint others fairly. One of the greatest strengths of this essay is how it portrays the father. Because he appears unsupportive of his child, it could be easy to paint him as a villain. The writer refuses to do this, though. Instead, the writer also shows their respect for their father and highlights some of his greatest strengths: "He's the superman who let me ride on his shoulders..." This level of empathy lends to a sophisticated essay that portrays the writer as thoughtful and slow to judge. As you set out to tackle your own draft, consider how you can write each person fairly, so that you are not just showing one facet of them.

Don't worry about being "right." Notice how this writer had to make a difficult choice, but they didn't qualify it as the right or wrong choice. Instead, they wrote about their decision, then mentioned other people who made different choices for themselves. The writer acknowledges the different path they have taken as opposed to other queer activists, and in doing so, admits that there is no clear answer. If you are also dealing with a challenging topic or reckoning with a difficult decision, don't feel like you have to have all the right answers. Instead, use part of the essay to show the college how you are working through these complicated choices.