

The Diversity Prompt

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The first thing to remember when approaching your “diversity essay” is why colleges include these types of questions. The goal is not to host the oppression Olympics and award top honors to the person who has had the most difficult life, nor is it to disqualify applicants who have not had to face institutional discrimination. Colleges include these essays because they want to offer students the chance to share more about who they are. For some students, who they are is partially a byproduct of the difficulties they’ve experienced. Others may find that their character has been more heavily shaped by their contributions to or lessons from a community they belong to. Still others might find that their journey has been shaped by the people they look up to.

The second thing to remember when approaching the diversity essay is that the prompt should be your guide. Take a moment to really look at the prompt. Is it asking how you will contribute to diversity on the campus, or is it just asking you to explain the world you come from? Look a little harder. Is it really asking about the world you come from, or is it asking about how you contribute to that world? Is it perhaps asking how that world has shaped you?

It’s important to remember that this section is not designed for everyone to share experiences of being marginalized or treated poorly. The sooner you get that idea out of your head, the better equipped you will be to think critically about who you are and how your experiences have shaped you.

In some cases, these prompts are optional, and you should think very carefully about whether it makes sense for you to write anything there at all. When responding to prompts about diversity, adversity, and community, colleges expect students to reflect on their own character and how they’ve become who they are. Whether you’ve always had access to the academic and professional opportunities you want, or your life story is filled with obstacles, you should never feel like you’re having to prove anything about yourself in these essays. Colleges want to know about you within the context you’re living in. If the section is not mandatory, don’t fill it with fluff. You should only respond if there is something that will add depth to your application.

Students with the most social privilege often fall into the trap of writing about an experience in which the perceived disadvantage is a reach at best. This approach can easily backfire, as the applicant frequently comes off as the unsympathetic party. No one chooses the bodies and communities we're born into, so trying to draw parallels between minor inconveniences and someone else's severe mistreatment or discrimination signals a lack of critical thinking. That's a bad look.

If you hold marginalized identities, colleges are not asking you to put your most painful experiences on display. It's a difficult thing for anyone to do, and no one is entitled to your story, especially if you're not ready to share. If you have had a significant obstacle that you feel colleges should know about but that you don't believe is a defining part of your lived experience, it may be better to reserve that for the "Additional Information" section. (That's a different part of the college application, and I don't want to take us on that tangent just yet.)

In the end, remember that they're asking you to explain not how you are different, but how you are you - being relatable is a good thing! Don't shy away from a topic just because you think others will write something similar. You may have shared experiences with other applicants, but only you know how to tell your version of it. You want to allow the real people reading your application to connect with you, and the best way to do that is to be open with the stories you feel best capture who you are, whatever those stories happen to be.

Don't feel hemmed in by a perfunctory definition of "diversity." You are unique in your own way, and these prompts are just asking you to find that uniqueness and share it with the admissions committee. You may do your best work if you think of this as a chance to "let your freak flag fly." If the prompt has not specified that you are meant to highlight some form of injustice, then take this as an opportunity to talk about what you've learned from your Dungeons and Dragons campaigns. Think of it as a chance to tell the admissions committee about how your Discord server has helped you connect with people from all over the world and learn about different cultures. Share some information about how the players on your field hockey team take turns hosting movie nights, and how that's helped you define community in your own way.

The moral of the story is that there are a lot of ways for you to take this prompt and run with it, and there is never a reason for you to feel like you have to manufacture a tale of personal grievances where one is not readily available. As with all of the supplements, this is a time for you to show the admissions readers who you really are. You can only do that if you stop for a moment and reflect a bit. Self-awareness is crucial to the diversity essay.