

Is it “Okay” to Talk about Race in Your College Application and Essay —And if So, How Should You Do it?

A Guide for Students of Color (and Their Counselors)

In late June, the Supreme Court banned affirmative action as it relates to college admission (also known as race-conscious admission), leaving many students wondering...

“Can I talk about race in my personal statement and college application?”

In short, yes, you definitely can. But with this caveat from the Supreme Court decision (underlined for emphasis) “nothing prohibits universities from considering an applicant’s discussion of how race affected the applicant’s life, so long as that discussion is concretely tied to a quality of character or unique ability that the particular applicant can contribute to the university.”

“Should I?” That’s more complex. Ask yourself, “Do you (if you’re a student) feel your race and cultural background have influenced who you are today? Are these a part of your story that you want to share?” If not, then there may be no need for you to mention your race. But if you feel like it has influenced your life in important ways, it may be something worth considering. For more considerations, [check out the complete guide](#).

The purpose of this shortened version is to share with you...

An Analysis of a College Application and Essays That Mention Race—While Demonstrating Character + Unique Qualities

So if you do elect to talk about race, there are actually a few different places in your application where you might do so. These include your:

1. **Personal Statement**
2. **Activities List**
3. **Additional Information Section**
4. **COVID Additional Information Section**
5. **Supplemental Essays**

In the essays and application below, you’ll meet a high-achieving, first-generation student from Phoenix named Joselina. She had her heart set on attending Yale. I’m sharing her application essays with her permission because I think she does a great job of connecting her race and cultural background to her character and unique qualities—in each of the sections named above.

I'll mark in bold where Joselina discusses race in a way that illuminates her character or unique qualities, but she didn't bold these in her submitted application, and you don't need to in yours (although you might do this while you're writing just so you can make sure you're providing your application reader with information that they can actually use, then unbold everything before you submit). Take a look:

Example 1 of 5: Joselina's Personal Statement

Analysis from Ethan:

In the opening paragraphs, the author shares information that wouldn't be obvious from anywhere else in her application, which helps the reader to understand specifically how and why she took the actions she took that led to her developing the qualities of character and unique ability that I'll name in the comments below.

Note that some of the specific identifying details have been edited by request of the author.

Character and unique qualities this demonstrates: appreciation of beauty, love, wonder, perspective

When I was nine, I heard a knock that would change my life forever.

We answered the door and found officials from the immigration office standing there, their demeanor routine, having performed this task countless times before. My parents were to be deported, leaving my siblings and me in a whirlwind of uncertainty. It felt as if the foundation of my existence had been uprooted.

With our parents gone, my siblings and I found refuge with our tia and tio, after the court deemed it unsafe for us to return to our birth country due to escalating political unrest. Throughout my childhood, my parents had shied away from introducing us to our Mexican heritage so our family could better assimilate into American society. **I fell in love with the vibrant colors of folklorico dresses and the melodious tones of Spanish coming from family members and 105.3, our favorite Mexican radio station. I was in complete awe of my roots.**

With our parents away, I felt a moral responsibility to become a leader and parental figure to my younger siblings. I started by attending parent teacher conferences, "Parent Cafecitos" and becoming a mini-mom to my siblings. I began to integrate into my community to a greater extent, which brought to light problems my own people faced on a daily basis: menstrual poverty, gun violence, and the crisis along the Mexican-American border. Many community members face injustices, financial crises and discrimination based on their immigration status from Mexico and their socioeconomic standing

With this knowledge, **I became fascinated with questions that pertained to my own community. How is our capitalist state impacting the lives of the underprivileged? How can we reconstruct our legal frameworks to better reflect the humanity and rights of asylum seekers?**

Character and unique qualities this demonstrates: increased awareness, courage, leadership, commitment to helping others

Character and unique qualities this demonstrates: curiosity, critical thinking, commitment to fairness, social justice, more evidence of leadership

Contributing to my community led me to fall in love with the concept of reforming the world for the better. Empowered Latinxs such as Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and Mayor [redacted] inspired me to strive towards success; not individual success, but the flourishing of our whole society. I began working alongside my community to organize Climate Strikes, Menstrual Rallies, and events that promote awareness of gun violence.

Character and unique qualities this demonstrates: more courage, deeper commitment (in the future) to social justice, leadership, a sense of purpose, and hope

My megaphone became my best friend, sending my thoughts into the ears of my community. This ignited a desire within me to become the very change I want to see in the world. I plan to become a catalyst for grand modifications to policy and positively transform the relationship between legislation and societal implications that directly affect my community.

I intend to make this change through the fields of political science and sociology with a concentration in public policy. I want to create legislation relating to humanitarian causes such as immigration reform and the slaughter of our society through the ease of gun attainment.

Who knows? Perhaps one day, I'll be the one knocking on doors, bringing hope instead of heartbreak.

FAQ 1: What exactly is “character” and what kind of “unique qualities” are colleges looking for? [Check out the complete guide for more.](#)

FAQ 2: Do I have to talk about challenges in order for it to be a “good” essay?

You don't. Check out our blog on [Why You Don't Have to Write about Trauma in Your College Essay to Stand Out](#) or [this podcast episode with Tina Yong](#) to learn what you can do instead. Also, the “mariachi” essay analyzed below is an example of a great essay that shows cultural influences and experiences but doesn't focus on challenges.

But that's not the only place where Joselina demonstrated how her race and culture helped shape her character and develop unique abilities. Let's look at...

Example 2 of 5: Joselina's Activities List

Analysis from Ethan:

Note on the character and unique qualities this description demonstrates: commitment to helping others, showing love and support

Character and unique qualities this description demonstrates: leadership, commitment to fairness

Here she shows similar qualities to those listed above, but provides further evidence of these qualities.

As above, she shows: leadership, helping others, social justice

This description gives more support for the qualities I mentioned above.

Activity 1 - Harper COLLEGE CLUB (10th - present)

1. 4 hours a week, 36 weeks out of the school year
2. Senior Mentor, Harper College Club
3. Guide mentees academically, provide unconditional support, facilitate structure to help change the trajectory of their lives: simply root for them.

Activity 2 - CONGRESSMAN [REDACTED] INTERNSHIP AND VOLUNTEERING (10th - present)

1. 2 hours a week, 20 weeks out of the school year
2. Youth Advisor: Office of Congressman [redacted]
3. Awarded Congressional Recognition for serving on a council, being Congressman's direct connection to Generation Z, advocate for those who can't vote

Activity 3 - AMERICORPS PEER COACH (Senior Year)

1. 15 hours per week, 40 weeks beginning the summer of Senior year
2. Peer Coach, AmeriCorps Southwest High School
3. Increase equitable access to career plans for FGLI students, coaching HS peers to plan their future (resume, test prep, applications, scholarships)

Activity 4 - VOTANTES PARA EL CAMBIO SOCIAL (11th - present)

1. 4-5 hours per week, 52 weeks during the calendar year (self-led project)
2. Founder, Esperanza Ahora
3. Lead organization/website, provide service opportunities, translate nonpartisan political information, distribute political literature in Spanish

Activity 5 - MOVIMIENTO ESTUDIANTEL CHICANOS DE AZTLÁN (11th - present)

1. 2 hours a week, 36 weeks out of the year
2. President, MeCha at Southwest High School
3. Oversee weekly meetings to discuss issues in the Chicanx community, arrange "know your rights" events, interact with those affected by such issues

Same as above: leadership, helping others, social justice

Activity 6 - SCIENCE CLUB (9th - present)

1. 2.5 hours a week, 36 weeks out of the school year
2. President, Science Club at Southwest High School
3. Lead weekly meetings, facilitate demonstrations and fundraisers, coordinate annual Science Night, advocate for STEM

Same as above: leadership, helping others, social justice

Activity 7 - SOUTHWEST COLLEGE PREPARATORY ACADEMY COHORT

1. 1.5 hours per week, 36 weeks out of the school year
2. President, College Prep Academy at Southwest High School
3. Lead member meetings, facilitate after-school focus groups on academics & mental health, represent students in program planning and outreach

Similar to above: leadership, helping others, compassion

Activity 8 - FIGHT4HER FELLOW AND FIELD CAPTAIN (11th - present)

1. 7 hours a week, 23 weeks during the summer and senior year
2. Field captain, Fight4Her Non-Profit Organization
3. Advocate for reproductive health, campaign/contact local representatives, lead phonebank trainings and mobilize supporters by grassroots organizing

Similar to above: leadership, helping others, compassion

Activity 9 - Southwest HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELING ADVISORY COUNCIL (10th grade- present)

1. 2 hours a week, 10 weeks during the school year.
2. Advisor: Counseling department at Southwest High School
3. Collaborate with staff members, contribute to structure of the counseling department, advise peers and formulate programs for future students

For more tips, here's [How to Write a Successful Common App Activities List](#).

Beyond the personal statement and activities list, Joselina took the opportunity to share important context about her life in two other sections of her application:

3. The COVID Additional Information Section (250 word limit)
4. The (general) Additional Information Section (650 word limit)

Let's take a look at how she used each of these sections.

Example 3 of 5: Joselina's COVID-19 Additional Info Section

Analysis from Ethan:

Here, as in her personal statement, Joselina is sharing information that isn't obvious from elsewhere in her application. Again, this helps the reader understand why she did what she did and what she learned.

Important: Joselina was careful to share information NOT in her personal statement, keeping in mind that this is the additional information section

This is the "What I did" section, where Joselina shares concrete actions she took (using active verbs like "worked, studied, led, mentored" to show what she did to overcome her challenges.

The qualities of character she demonstrates include: commitment to self-care/love, persistence/grit, immediacy, leadership, helping others, sense of purpose, taking initiative

This is the "What I learned" section. Although it's short, she demonstrates at least two more qualities of character: gratitude, and perspective

My family was thrown into a world of online learning and social distancing without adequate resources, especially coming from a marginalized community. My family only had one laptop to use between my three siblings and me. My zip code was the epicenter of infections in Arizona, creating panic within the community. My older sister worked at McDonald's, so we feared she would lose her job or, worse, infect my elder Abuelita (78 yrs. old) who is our guardian, with COVID-19. I experienced mental deterioration as isolation chewed away at my sociable personality. Pessimism surged as my Leadership Expedition to Alaska was cancelled. To add on, teachers began retiring early, leaving me to fend for myself educationally.

With time, **mental health became a priority** unlike ever before. Once we received loaner laptops, **I worked harder than I had during the average year** since I felt time slipping away from my hands. **I began to live in a world of "now" instead of "eventually."** **I studied, led, mentored and created.** As I prepared for AP exams, **I continued to mentor** through the Harper College Club, **formulating new mediums to provide educational and emotional support such as mental health trainings and relationship building activities.** **I formulated my own organization Votantes para el Cambio Social to relieve Latinx voter suppression in my community by translating political information to Spanish.**

At times, I do wish we could return to a pre-pandemic era. However, **life has altered and my world has been more productive ever since.** (250 words)

For a more in-depth analysis, [check out the complete guide.](#)

Example 4 of 5: Joselina's Additional Information Section

(300 words)

Mariachi Sonidos del Desierto

- Played mariachi since I was 7 years old (violin). I love the community it fosters as I keep Chicanx culture alive. In high school, I joined a group called “Sonidos del Desierto”, and I hope to continue playing in college.

Science Club

- President for 3 consecutive years
- More than a club for me: Latinx representation is needed in STEM, so I lead the free community Science Night to engage Latinx youth.

College Visitation Trip (Selected)

- Part of select groups from Southern Phoenix to visit Ivy League schools and selective institutions. As low income students, we planned and financed the entire trip.

Hugh O'Brian Leadership Seminar

- Represented Southwest HS at the HOBY AZ Leadership Seminar where I committed the next year to 200 hours of community service.

Campaigning for Mayor

- Led community canvassing (phone banking and knocking on doors) to elect Mayor [redacted].

Stanford Summer School

- Took an Ethics and Philosophy course at Stanford on a full scholarship.
- First student from my school to set foot on Stanford's campus as a summer-school student.

Internship at Congressman [redacted]'s Office

- Meet with Arizona youth and provide Congressman with summaries of meetings to convey stances and values from GenerationZ.
- Lead climate strikes on behalf of the Congressman when he was in D.C.
- Since his office is in the heart of my community, I hope to work in that same office as I pursue an AZ congressional seat in Congress.

Founder, Esperanza Ahora

- Translate political information into Spanish to increase voting rates.
- Encourage political enthusiasm and voting in South Phoenix.
- Recruit bilingual students to assist in this initiative, encouraging them to be politically engaged.

LARC Labs

- Work in a research lab studying the disease transmission of mosquitoes.
- Translate research (Spanish into English) for researchers at [redacted] University.

Challenges and Circumstances

(250 words)

Senior Schedule

- AP Psychology
 - Due to budget cuts, my district often has teacher shortages for advanced classes. Since AP Psychology was cut senior year, I advocated to my counselor and am now self-studying the course and will earn a letter grade and AP credit. I'll be the only student at my school taking AP Psychology.

AP Environmental Science

- During middle school, AP classes weren't encouraged
- Advocated to the AP Environmental Science teacher, joined the course one semester late, self-studied to catch up on work, and became one of the first freshmen to pass an AP exam at my school.

FAQ: Do I have to include this much in my Additional Information section?

No, you definitely do not have to include this much content in your additional information section—in fact, it’s totally okay to leave it blank. To learn more, [check out this guide](#).

Example 5 of 5: Joselina’s Yale Supplemental Essays

Important note: The prompts below are outdated (from a previous application year):
For an analysis of the current supplemental essays for Yale, [check out our supplemental essay guides to 70+ colleges and universities](#).

Analysis from Ethan:

[Qualities of character](#) and unique abilities this essay shows: Commitment to helping others, intellectual curiosity, taking initiative, a sense of purpose, global perspective, compassion

In case you missed it, [here’s our guide to writing the current Yale essays](#).

[Qualities of character](#) and unique abilities this essay shows are similar to those above: Commitment to helping others, intellectual curiosity, taking initiative, a sense of purpose, global perspective, compassion

...and yet here she does a smart thing by showing how she’ll build on those qualities with specific opportunities available on the Yale campus, which is what this type of “Why us” essay requires.

[Here’s a comprehensive guide to the “Why us” essay](#) that applies to colleges besides Yale.

Why do these academic areas appeal to you? (up to <125 words) *Majors selected by Joselina: Political Science, Sociology, Ethnicity, Race and Migration*

Service feels like my calling: a chance to engage with my community while understanding systemic complexities that impact my people.

While working with Mayor [redacted] and Congressman [redacted], I realized service and legislation go hand-in-hand. My desire to serve my community ignited as I educated myself on the hardships my people face due to public policy such as the criminalization of People of Color through SB1070 and the broken prison system. I gained an internalized desire to reform policy to relieve these hardships and communal generational trauma. As I pursue a Congressional seat serving the third-district of Arizona, Political Science, Sociology, and Ethnicity, Race and Migration allow me to explore social implications, analyze reform and gain the skills I need to serve my community. (124 words)

What is it about Yale that has led you to apply? (125 words)

As a FGLI student, Chicanx, justice warrior and social pioneer, Yale is the place for me to develop my identities and give as much as I take.

Through the Human-Rights Studies MultiDisciplinary Program, I’ll delve into humanitarian issues beyond my South Phoenix community—such as gender disparities in the entire contemporary world—while gaining practical and analytical skills. In professor Sanjabi’s “Women’s Self-Narratives,” I’ll explore feminist voices in a way I haven’t before, as the female perspective is often ignored in my community. Attending Cena a las Seis while munching on empanadas at La Casa Cultural will provide support I need as a Latinx student. Finally, Dwight Hall at Yale will foster a niche where I can contribute to New Haven through social justice and service. (125 words)

[Personal values](#) this short answer shows: Connection to family, appreciation for nature, an interest in self-care, inspiration and empathy

[Here's a guide on how to write the short answer questions](#) that other colleges require.

[Personal values](#) this short answer shows: intellectual vitality, critical thinking, humor

[Personal values](#) this short answer shows: wit, critical thinking, intellectual vitality

Here she illustrates more of her personality, sense of humor/fun, and willingness to be impacted by others.

[Here again are tips on answering the short answer questions](#), in case you missed it.

What inspires you? (300 characters, 35 words)

My abuelo's naturalization documents. The smell of Petrichor. The feeling of placidity after meditating. Seeing a sparkle in someone's eyes when they speak about something they genuinely love. (28 words)

Yale's residential colleges regularly host conversations with guests representing a wide range of experiences and accomplishments. What person, past or present, would you invite to speak? What question would you ask? (300 characters, 35 words)

Alice Paul. How has the idea of radicalism morphed since the beginning of the 20th century? What has prompted this shift? Is activism the secret to staying young? (She died at the age of 92.) (35 words)

You are teaching a Yale course. What is it called? (300 characters, 35 words)

The Red Stain Across History: A Historical Look at the Taboos, Magical Theories, and Gender Stereotypes Surrounding Menstruation

Most first-year Yale students live in suites of four to six people. What do you hope to add to your suitemates' experience? What do you hope they will add to yours? (300 characters, 35 words)

A Southern Phoenix perspective. Affinity for rodents and enchiladas. Singing along to Bruno Mars at all hours. I hope to gain the same quirks in return, even if my suitemates don't enjoy musical duets. (286 characters)

Think about an idea or topic that has been intellectually exciting for you. Why are you drawn to it? (250 words)

My community doesn't have white picket fences; we have barbed wire and chipped walls. The American dream is a fallacy that impacts my community on a social and systemic level. We live in a divided country; some flourish while others beg for scraps. This became apparent as DACA was attacked under Trump's administration. Thousands of lives were impacted as the fear of looming deportation became reality.

I dove into DACA research and bridging this national division while working with Congressman [redacted] on co-sponsoring proposed legislation on immigration reform in the

This prompt offers an opportunity for students to show their intellectual side—in other words, “Can you handle Yale-level work?”

Here she offers further evidence of some of the values and abilities she has shown elsewhere in her application, including: ability to think critically, taking initiative, commitment to social justice, and a strong sense of purpose.

U.S. As we discussed the Farm Workforce Modernization Act and the Homeland Security Improvement Legislation, it became apparent that this subjective idea of the American dream and who it applied to stems from implicit racism, bigotry, and false criminalization. Negative stereotypes surround Dreamers, but they are misplaced: Dreamers pay 5.7 billion dollars in payroll taxes and, in turn, boost Social Security and Medicare. Additionally, they contribute to the cultural diversification of communities like mine. However, this opportunity is being denied time and again, leaving communities like mine sometimes poverty-stricken, stagnant, and hopeless.

We live in two Americas. I recall sitting on the steps of Cecil H. Green Library discussing the state of my community with a fellow Stanford summer-school student. Tears filled her eyes as she turned to me and said, “I can’t believe we live in the same country.” My purpose was crystallized: we live in a split nation, and I shall work on bridging them together. (250 words)

Reflect on your engagement with a community to which you belong. How has this engagement affected you? (250 words)

The smell of barbecue floods my senses as I rush to the end of the hallway, clearing my throat and mind. I pass through the crowd of diners as they are serenaded by muffled blows of trumpets and the strokes of violins. Sonidos del Desierto rehearses in the back of Sizzle Spot BBQ, a restaurant that devotes its business to mariachi.

I play the violin, an instrument that I’ve had by my side since the first grade. We work on a popurri for the Southern Arizona Mariachi Conference, a mashup of songs that encompass various aspects of our heritage.

The music goes beyond sharp accents, long vibratos, and rhythmic groove.

On a practical level, violin has given me the muscle memory to not only recall the classic version of Las Mañanitas, but also a way to communicate with the deaf community in Phoenix through American Sign Language. While being connected to my heritage and abuelos, I gain a superpower: the ability to manipulate the energy surrounding me as I evoke emotion from the audience and even myself.

With every caballito sprouts a new sensation, the feeling of unity and the colors of Mexican culture. Not only do we keep Mexican tradition alive, we plant smiles and energy into our community. The sun goes down as sweat curves on my shoulder rest and my fingertips become bruised. Tomorrow we perform at mass where I can spread this sensation to a whole audience, keeping mariachi music and my own soul alive. (249 words)



For more college application resources, check out:

- <https://www.collegeessayguy.com/college-application-hub>
- www.collegeessayguy.com/SCOTUS