

ADMISSIONS STRATEGY

Stop Declaring “Broad Majors”: The Secret to Framing a Distinctive Academic Niche



By **Alex Gomelskiy**
Founder and Director of Admissions Strategy, Scholar Coach, Inc.

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A student says they want to study biology. Another wants to study linguistics. A third plans to major in computer science.

All three have legitimate academic interests. Yet each has a question worth exploring before writing a college essay: What, specifically, about this field makes you want to keep learning?

Biology encompasses everything from molecular mechanisms to ecosystems. Linguistics examines the structure, history, and social use of language. Computer science spans theoretical computation, artificial intelligence, systems, and human-computer interaction. Naming a major identifies a field; it does not yet reveal how a student thinks about it.

That distinction matters in selective college admissions. But the solution is not to replace a broad major with an obscure subfield or to sprinkle advanced terminology throughout an application. It is to move from a general interest toward a specific, genuine intellectual question—and show what the student has done to investigate it.

WHY “I WANT TO STUDY BIOLOGY” IS ONLY A STARTING POINT

Consider two hypothetical applicants interested in biology.

The first writes:

“I have always been fascinated by biology and hope to study it at a university with excellent research opportunities.”

The second writes:

“I became interested in why two patients with similar diagnoses can respond differently to the same treatment. Reading about gene expression led me to explore how researchers investigate differences between cells, and I want to understand how molecular mechanisms can help explain variation in disease.”

The second response gives the reader more to consider. It identifies a question, points toward a possible method of investigation, and shows how the student's interest has developed.

It does not automatically make the applicant stronger. The first student might have a richer record of scientific work elsewhere in the application, while the second might be repeating language borrowed from an article without understanding it. The difference depends on whether the stated interest is supported by the student's actual experiences and thinking.

The useful distinction is between naming a subject and demonstrating curiosity about a problem within it.

Yale's admissions guidance encourages students to write about topics that genuinely excite them and explains that the perspective a student brings to a topic matters more than choosing an unusually obscure subject. Its current application also asks students to identify academic areas that fit their interests and explain why a related topic excites them.¹

The objective is not to sound like a graduate student. It is

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to give the reader a concrete reason to understand why the subject matters to you.

FROM BROAD MAJOR TO SPECIFIC QUESTION: THREE EXAMPLES

A student does not need to commit to a narrow specialization before college. However, exploring a question within a broad field can help turn an abstract interest into something more tangible.

EXAMPLE 1: LINGUISTICS → COMPUTATIONAL LINGUISTICS

Broad interest: “I want to study linguistics because I am interested in language.”

More specific question: “Why do language-processing systems sometimes misinterpret the same sentence when its meaning depends on context?”

This question creates several possible avenues of exploration: syntax, semantics, pragmatics, discourse, and computational modeling. A student might compare how different systems interpret ambiguous sentences, investigate how context changes meaning, or examine the limitations of automated translation.

Stanford's linguistics department describes computational linguistics as a field that connects formal approaches to language with computational methods, including research on syntax, morphology, semantics, dialogue, and machine translation. Its undergraduate curriculum includes computational linguistics alongside other areas of the discipline.²³

A high school student need not master computational syntax to express this interest. They might begin by analyzing ambiguous sentences, comparing translation outputs, or reading introductory material about how computers represent language.

The key is to explain what they actually investigated and what they still want to understand.

EXAMPLE 2: BIOLOGY → GENETICS AND GENE REGULATION

Broad interest: “I want to study biology because I want to understand disease.”

More specific question: “How can changes in gene regulation influence the behavior of cells?”

That question points toward genetics, molecular biology, and gene expression without requiring the student to declare a permanent specialty.

A student might investigate an introductory genetics topic, compare scientific explanations of gene regulation, or explore how researchers distinguish correlation from causal mechanisms. The resulting work could be a careful literature review, a class project, or a research experience if an appropriate opportunity is available.

The application should not claim that the student has discovered a new biological mechanism when they have merely read about one. It can instead show how the student learned to ask better questions, evaluate evidence, and recognize the limits of their understanding.

EXAMPLE 3: COMPUTER SCIENCE → HUMAN-COMPUTER INTERACTION

Broad interest: “I want to study computer science because I enjoy coding.”

More specific question: “Why do people struggle with software that technically works, and how can interface design reduce those difficulties?”

This question leads toward human-computer interaction, accessibility, usability, and software design.

A student might examine an application that frustrates users, observe where people encounter difficulties, redesign a small feature, and test whether the change improves the experience. The project combines technical work with observation and evaluation.

It also gives the student a reason to explain the difference between making software function and making it useful.

None of these examples requires an unusually specialized major title. Each begins with a broad discipline and develops a question that can be explored through accessible, meaningful work.

THE MISTAKE: CHOOSING A SUBFIELD BECAUSE IT SOUNDS IMPRESSIVE

There is a difference between intellectual specificity and strategic name-dropping.

A student who writes “I am fascinated by computational syntax” may sound specialized, but the phrase communicates little if the student cannot explain what computational syntax investigates or why it interests them.

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Likewise, mentioning a professor's research does not demonstrate fit if the student has not understood the research question or cannot explain its connection to their own interests.

Three warning signs suggest that a student is forcing specialization:

The vocabulary exceeds the understanding. The student uses advanced terminology but cannot explain the underlying idea in plain language.

The interest appeared only during application season. There is no genuine curiosity, reading, project, course experience, or other evidence behind the claim.

Every activity has been retrofitted to the same theme. A student's unrelated experiences are described as though they all served a carefully planned academic agenda.

These problems are not solved by selecting a broader major, either. An applicant can write a thoughtful, specific essay about a broad interest, just as an applicant can write a vague essay about a highly specialized one.

MIT explicitly encourages applicants to be honest and authentic in their responses rather than spending excessive time strategizing about what will look most impressive. It also makes clear that applicants indicate a field of interest without committing to a major at the time of admission.⁴⁵

The standard should be genuine engagement, not the sophistication of the label.

HOW TO DEVELOP AN ACADEMIC NICHE WITHOUT MANUFACTURING ONE

Students can use a four-step process to move from a broad subject to a credible intellectual direction.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY THE QUESTION BEHIND THE INTEREST

Instead of asking only, "What do I want to major in?" ask:

- What problem do I keep returning to?
- What explanation do I find incomplete?
- What contradiction or unanswered question interests me?
- What do I notice that makes me want to investigate further?

A student interested in economics might wonder why housing costs rise faster than wages in certain places. A student interested in history might ask how competing primary sources shape our understanding of a political decision. A student interested in mathematics might investigate why one model explains a pattern better than another.

The question does not need to be groundbreaking. It needs to be meaningful to the student.

STEP 2: INVESTIGATE IT AT AN APPROPRIATE LEVEL

Read introductory material, compare credible sources, analyze a small dataset, conduct a modest project, or discuss the question with a teacher.

The point is not to accumulate impressive credentials. It is to encounter the actual difficulty of the subject.

A student who begins by exploring machine translation might discover that a system handles literal meaning well but struggles with idioms or context. That observation can lead to a more precise question about how meaning is represented and interpreted.

The investigation should be appropriate to the student's skills, time, and access to resources. Formal research is one possible path, not a requirement for every academically serious applicant.

STEP 3: LET THE QUESTION EVOLVE

The original question may change as the student learns more.

A student exploring environmental science might begin by studying plastic pollution, then become interested in how local infrastructure affects waste management. Another might start with neuroscience and develop an interest in the statistical methods researchers use to interpret experimental results.

That change is not evidence of a weak academic profile. It can show intellectual development.

Yale's admissions guidance emphasizes curiosity, intellectual initiative, and openness to exploring new horizons. Its admissions officers also recognize that students may change their academic direction.⁶

Students should not manufacture a perfectly linear trajectory merely because they believe admissions officers

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expect one.

STEP 4: CONNECT THE QUESTION TO A COLLEGE'S ACTUAL OFFERINGS

Once the student has identified a genuine interest, university research becomes more useful.

Look for courses, laboratories, research groups, academic programs, and interdisciplinary opportunities that relate directly to the question. Verify current information through official university websites, and distinguish undergraduate opportunities from graduate-only programs or research that undergraduates cannot automatically join.

For example, a student interested in computational linguistics could examine Stanford's published linguistics curriculum and research areas to understand how the department connects language theory with computational methods. The point is not simply to insert a course title into a supplemental essay. It is to explain which intellectual question the student hopes to investigate and why the university's resources are relevant.

A useful "Why This College?" paragraph therefore follows a simple sequence:

- Identify the question that interests you.
- Explain how you have begun exploring it.
- Name a verified university resource that would help you investigate it further.
- Explain what you hope to learn, test, or understand.

The connection should be specific enough to demonstrate research, but open-ended enough to reflect the fact that college is a place to learn.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR COLLEGE ESSAYS

A broad major is not a liability. A narrow subfield is not an admissions advantage by itself. What matters is the quality of the thinking that connects a student's interests to their experiences and future questions.

A student who writes "I want to study biology" can develop a compelling essay by showing the moment a scientific explanation raised a question, the process of investigating it, and the insight that followed. A student who writes "I want to study computational syntax" can still produce a weak essay if the phrase is disconnected from any real experience or intellectual engagement.

The major label identifies a destination. The student's reasoning reveals the journey.

The strongest application does not pretend that a teenager has already mapped an entire academic career. It shows that the student has begun to investigate something meaningful and is ready to continue learning.

HOW SCHOLAR COACH HELPS STUDENTS DEVELOP AN AUTHENTIC ACADEMIC NICHE

Scholar Coach helps students move from broad interests to specific, evidence-based academic questions without manufacturing a specialty for admissions.

Identify recurring questions. We examine coursework, activities, independent reading, projects, and conversations to find subjects the student genuinely returns to.

Clarify the intellectual direction. We distinguish a general interest from the specific questions, methods, or problems that make it meaningful to the student.

Develop appropriate exploration. Students identify realistic ways to investigate the question through reading, analysis, coursework, projects, or available research opportunities.

Research university fit. We verify relevant programs, courses, faculty research, and undergraduate opportunities through official sources, then assess how they connect to the student's interests.

Translate the evidence into essays. We help students explain what they investigated, what they learned, and what they want to explore next—using their own voice and without overstating their expertise.

The objective is not to make every student sound like a future professor. It is to help students articulate what genuinely interests them, demonstrate how they have pursued that interest, and identify the academic opportunities that could help them take the next step.

Do not choose a niche because it sounds impressive. Find a question worth pursuing, and let the specificity emerge from the work.

NOTES

¹ Yale's essay guidance

² Stanford Linguistics: Computational Linguistics

³ Stanford Linguistics: Undergraduate Major

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⁴ MIT Admissions: Essays, Activities, and Academics

⁶ Yale: What Yale Looks For

⁵ MIT Admissions: Majors FAQ

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