

Test questions: Finding the imaginative prospects

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 16, 2004](#) issue

Some years ago students at an Ivy League university rated party schools. The University of Chicago came in 300th out of 300. The public relations people were ready to respond, until they noticed that Chicago students had printed T-shirts bragging about the rating—and that Johns Hopkins, which came in 299th, wanted to sue because it had coveted the booby prize.

The University of Chicago invents its own way to have a good time and to be different. Prospective students at most schools dread the personal essay that must accompany applications. The essay demands autobiographical details from people too young to have had many experiences about which to write, and philosophical insights from people too old to get by on the wisdom of childhood. And the admissions people who must read these narcissistic probes are apt to be bored by them.

In the September 27 *Chicago Sun-Times* Tom McNamee give samples of “weird questions” aimed at those who would come to the University of Chicago. Such as: “How do you feel about Wednesday?” Try writing a couple of thousand words about that, knowing that what you write might get you in or keep you out.

For 20 years the admissions office has come up with other stumpers like, “If you could balance on a tightrope, over what landscape would you walk? (No net).” The office’s Gerald Doyle explains that answers to these “weird questions” helps sort the imaginative prospects out of crops of applicants among whom 4.0 grade points are routine.

Wouldn’t it be good if applicants to theological seminaries or graduate programs in religious studies had to write responses to “weird questions”? I think we’d get more people who could write and deliver excellent homilies, be capable counselors and administrators, and be all-around interesting. So I formulated some sample questions:

- Tired of trying to answer the medievalists’ question about “how many angels could dance on the head of a pin”? We’ll make it harder: How many angels could dance on the *point* of a pin? And why would they want to?
- Write the advertisement for an e-Bay sale setting the opening price for the nail with which Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the Wittenberg church door. Offer justification for the price you set. Oh, and what is “justification”?
- You’ve often spoken against the lottery. Just once you gave in to temptation and bought a ticket. It paid off in the megamillion drawing. Explain yourself to the media and tell what you’ll do with the money.
- You are preparing a sermon for a church dedication in a week in which the lectionary text quotes Jesus saying, “Destroy this temple.” Write a homily that does justice both to the text and to the occasion.
- Tell the story of Bathsheba bathing and being watched by a voyeuristic King David, but do it from Bathsheba’s point of view.
- Write an essay following up on the opening line, “A minister, a priest and a rabbi entered a bar,” in which you do not try to make a joke out of the situation, or, alternatively, an essay which does turn out to include a joke on a subject that, for the first time in history, turns out to be original and funny.

- Say why you'd want to attend a school that asks for essays responding to weird questions.
- Write your own set of weird questions and answer one of them.