



# 20 MISTAKES TO AVOID ON THE COMMON APP



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If you've embarked on the scary but exciting journey of applying to college, you've probably heard of the Common Application. If you don't know, the Common App is an application system that eases your workload by sending your information to most (if not all!) of the schools on your list. The Common App helps you organize your information, activities, and scores so that you don't have to type them multiple times to send to each institution. Over 800 colleges use the Common App, so chances are, at least a few of your schools are members of this portal. It is divided into different sections:

- Profile
- Family
- Education
- Testing
- Activities
- Writing
- Additional Information

At first glance, the Common App can seem overwhelming. It's very easy to forget a tiny detail that can make a big difference in how your applications are evaluated. Look over our list of frequent mistakes to stay extra careful. If you avoid the following errors, the process of filling out the Common App will go much more smoothly and help you submit clean applications.

### 1. MISTYPING PERSONAL INFORMATION

When filling out the Profile, Contact Information and Family sections of the Common App, be very careful. It's surprisingly easy to mix up your school address with your house address, put your sibling's first name where your first name should go, or accidentally reverse two digits of your phone number. These sound obvious, but you'd be amazed how often it happens. Read through each section very carefully, and double checking that all names, addresses and phone numbers are correct.

### 2. HAVING SOMEONE ELSE FILL OUT THE APPLICATION ON YOUR BEHALF

This is your application. Of course, it's okay to have a parent or teacher proofread the different sections. But ultimately you should be the one physically typing everything in the Common Application. When you fill out the Common App, you have to affirm that everything you've submitted is your own work, factually correct, and presented honestly. Don't start your college journey by compromising your integrity!

If someone else is typing from your account, they won't know everything about you because nobody knows your interests, grades, and extracurricular activities better than you do. Only you can paint a full and clear picture of what you've achieved so far. Moreover, you're going to have to fill out a lot of applications when you're in college - for courses, fellowships, clubs, and more, so start making a habit of it now.

### **3. ONLY LISTING NATIVE LANGUAGES**

You do not have to be fluent in a language to add it to your Common App profile. Though this error won't make a huge difference, it's still pretty impressive if you can read and write in two or three languages even if you're not a native speaker. For example, if you're hoping to major in Middle Eastern Studies, the ability to read or write in Arabic is undoubtedly an asset. Admissions officers will understand more about your interests and/or cultural background through the languages where you have relatively proficiency.

### **4. CONFUSING COMMUNITY BASED ORGANIZATIONS WITH OTHER OUTSIDE RESOURCES**

The Education section of the Common App asks whether you've received support with your college applications from any community-based organizations. It's important to know which organizations count. Examples of community-based organizations are Quest Bridge, Upward Bound, Boys and Girls Club, and The Posse Foundation. Community-based organizations do not include guidance counselors or private counselors, so don't include them as your answer to this section.

### **5. LISTING THAT YOU ARE "UNDECIDED" IN THE FUTURE PLANS SECTION**

Since you're in high school, you probably don't have your entire career plan mapped out right now. Having said that, you shouldn't select "Undecided" under "Career Interest" in the [Future Plans](#) subsection under Education. Doing so tosses away an opportunity to tell admissions officers something about yourself. Colleges might think you haven't put any serious thought into your career, or that you lack ambition. So brainstorm what your academic interests are, what you're passionate about, and what you can see yourself doing. Your answer here doesn't have to be set in stone, so don't worry, you're not making a lifelong commitment!

### **6. OVEREMPHASIZING EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**

The Common App allows you to add up to 10 extracurriculars in the Activities section. For some students, this number may be a lot. It can be tempting to exaggerate your achievements to appear more impressive - saying you've led projects for your organization when you've been just a general member, or stating your documentary has reached over 100,000 views when it only has 1000.

Instead of exaggerating your accomplishments, focus on framing what you've actually done so far in a way which exemplifies your leadership and communication skills, highlights tangible achievements, and conveys your passion and interests. Don't overstate the hours spent on an extracurricular either. Admissions officers are smart enough to do the math and know that your after school clubs adding up to 40+ hours isn't exactly accurate.

## 7. FAILING TO TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE OF THE SPACE AVAILABLE

You can add up to 150 characters to sum up each of your 10 activities. No, that's not a lot of characters, but being able to summarize your extracurriculars is also an opportunity you don't want to miss. So don't just name what you've done - optimize the space to describe it further. Use strong verbs to be as specific as possible, and remember to prioritize your tangible and quantifiable achievements.

## 8. USING UNCOMMON ACRONYMS

While you don't want to run out of characters when describing your activities, you also don't want to leave admissions officers confused and lost when they are reading your Common App. So even though the names of organizations may take up a lot of characters, using acronyms for uncommon institutions will not work in your favor. It's okay to use well known acronyms such as UNICEF or BBC. But if you use acronyms for obscure online magazines or grassroots organizations, such as ASOFFM, admissions officers will not immediately know that you're talking about the Asian Student Organization for Future Musicians.

## 9. ADDING NON-ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS IN THE [HONORS LIST](#)

The Activities section in the Common App includes a subsection to list your honors and achievements. The Common App does specify that your achievements indicated in this section must be "academic." While the definition of academic includes an art prize or published journal article, this is not the place where you mention that you've won a nationwide award for video gaming, or set a new world record for hopscotch. Use your best judgment to determine what counts under academic achievements. As a guideline, if the award is in an area that is a common academic department at college, then it is fine to list here.

## 10. MIXING UP GRADES

This error is easy to make, and easy to avoid at the same time. When listing your grades, be careful about transcribing information onto the Common App. Admissions officers expect consistency!

## 11. REPORTING STANDARDIZED SCORES INCORRECTLY

On a similar note, you do not want to type in the wrong scores for standardized tests, whether intentionally or by accident. Your official SAT scores are sent by College Board to each of your schools, so if you've made an error on the Common App, and it doesn't match the official score, admissions officers will grow skeptical about your entire application, even if you did type the wrong score by accident. Proofread everything!



## 12. SELECTING THE WRONG ESSAY TOPIC

Before you write or paste your personal statement in the Common App, you have to indicate which essay prompt you've answered. An easy error you can make here is mistakenly selecting the fourth prompt when you've actually answered the third. Your essay will leave admissions officers confused or believing that you didn't answer the prompt.

- Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
- The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
- Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
- Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma—anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.
- Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
- Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
- Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

## 13. ANSWERING ONLY PARTS OF A PROMPT

Speaking of incorrectly answering a prompt, often personal statements and supplemental essay prompts contain multiple questions. When you're reading fast it's easy to overlook a second sentence or miss a section part of the question, and only answer half of the prompt. Make sure you read very carefully and note exactly what the question is asking for before you sit down to outline your essay.

## 14. WRITING YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT ABOUT SOMEONE ELSE

Your personal statement is exactly what it sounds like - it's an essay about you. The essay is your chance to tell a story about your life or highlight a part of you that cannot be guessed from reading the rest of your application. What it also means is that you can't make someone else the protagonist of your own personal statement. Yes, your grandfather's experiences at war could have inspired you. But his story is unlikely to belong in your essay. It's not his college application. Your goal is to avoid focusing on anyone else and instead write a powerful essay which narrates a unique story about you.

## 15. DOING A POOR EDITING JOB

You're going to have to do a lot of writing in college. You shouldn't submit a sloppy first draft as your final Common App personal statement. Proofread multiple times, and have a parent or teacher proofread as well. Make sure you've used correct spelling and grammar. Avoid flowery language and overused figures of speech. Go through multiple drafts to make sure you're turning in the best essay you possibly can. Your writing has to capture admissions officers' attention from the very beginning. Any glaring errors will work against you.

## 16. WRITING GENERIC SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAYS

When you add your colleges on the Common App, you'll be able to see supplemental questions for most colleges. While some prompts may overlap, such as "why do you want to go to our school," avoid submitting the same supplement for multiple schools because they will end up sounding generic. Don't copy and paste an essay for one school onto another because you might forget to change the name of the school. The last thing you want is to accidentally mention Harvard in your Princeton essay, but admissions officers see this every year. Instead, look through the website of each school and find examples of what you're excited about - whether it's certain courses, the ice cream selection at the cafeteria, or the research facilities. You want admissions officers to see that you've done the research and that you're genuinely interested in the school.

## 17. USING THE ADDITIONAL INFORMATION SECTION AS AN EXTENSION OF OTHER SECTIONS

The [Additional Information](#) section at the end of the Common App should not be used as a continuation of your personal statement or your activities list. Those sections have assigned character limits for a reason. This section can be used to explain extenuating circumstances, link to a research abstract or to include your writing or art portfolio.

## 18. CLOSING THE TAB WITHOUT SAVING

After you've filled out a section, when you click the "continue" or "back" buttons, your information is automatically saved. However, if you close the window without clicking either, or you refresh the tab, everything you've put in will be lost. So make sure all changes are saved before you exit. You don't want to lose progress and have to re-write all 10 of your activities.

The image shows a screenshot of the Common App 'Grades' section. The header is a dark red bar with a white downward arrow and the word 'Grades'. Below the header, there are three input fields: 'Graduating class size (approx.) \*' with a red asterisk, 'Class rank reporting' with a dropdown menu showing 'Select', and 'Cumulative GPA' with a text input field. To the right of these fields, there are two more dropdown menus: 'GPA scale' and 'GPA weighting', both showing 'Select'. At the bottom right of the form, there are two buttons: a blue 'Back' button and a red 'Continue' button. A red rectangular box highlights the 'Back' and 'Continue' buttons.

## **19. FORGETTING THAT ALL SCHOOLS AREN'T ON THE COMMON APP**

Don't start planning your next vacation once you've finished filling out the Common App. Remember, not all schools are member colleges. Some, such as the University of California schools, MIT, and schools in Texas have their own application systems. So your job may not be done. Make sure that you've completed your profile on all applicable portals. You don't want to scramble the day before the deadline.

## **20. WAITING UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE**

The Common App cannot and should not be entirely filled out in one day. As you know by now, it's easy to overlook instructions or mix up numbers. You need to give yourself enough time to gather all your materials, and actually sit down and carefully list your information. Don't wait until the day before your first college app is due to start writing down your name and contact information. This can be started as early as August 1st when the Common App opens. Take advantage of the time now when you're less stressed to keep ahead of the deadlines.

Once you work on your application, review this list of errors according to the section you're tackling. Completing the Common App requires a significant amount of time, but once you've hit that submit button, college applications will be out of your way. Remember - start early. As August rolls around, log on to [commonapp.org](https://commonapp.org) and start filling out your information. Good luck!