

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO THE COMMON APPLICATION



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You're an excited high school senior ready to embark on the scary but thrilling journey of college applications, when you encounter something known as the Common App. As daunting as all of the sections of the Common App might seem, if done right, it can help ease the process. The Common App is divided into different sections:

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

We will take a closer look at the sections and provide tips for filling out each one. A very important factor to remember is that these upcoming sections apply for all of the schools on the Common App! All of the colleges you apply to within this platform will see the same information that you've filled out in the Family section or Activities section of the Common App. Therefore, do not write anything specific to any one of the schools. You can tailor your responses in the college-specific sections that come up once you have chosen a school, but the following will be sent to all of the schools on your list.

In order to understand what the Common App is and how application systems work, let's first take a look at the different ones and the schools they cover.



The Different Application Systems

Students apply to different colleges through application systems such as the Common Application, the University of California Application, ApplyTexas, or school-specific applications, such as the one for MIT. Below is a list of all the schools that do not accept the Common App.

University of California Schools

- UC Berkeley
- UC Davis
- UC Irvine
- UCLA
- UC Merced
- UC Riverside
- UC San Diego
- UC San Francisco
- UC Santa Barbara
- UC Santa Cruz

ApplyTexas Schools

- Abilene Christian University
- Angelo State University
- Austin College
- Baylor University
- Concordia University
- Dallas Baptist University
- Hardin-Simmons University
- Houston Baptist University
- Huston-Tillotson University
- Lamar University
- LeTourneau University
- McMurry University
- Midwestern State University
- Our Lady of the Lake University
- Prairie View A&M University
- Sam Houston State University
- Schreiner University
- Southern Methodist University
- Southwestern University
- St. Edward's University
- St. Mary's University
- Stephen F. Austin State University
- Sul Ross State University
- Tarleton State University
- Texas A&M University
(at College Station, Laredo, San Antonio, Galveston, Central Texas, Corpus Christi, Kingsville, Texarkana)
- Texas Christian University
- Texas Lutheran University
- Texas Southern University
- Texas State University
- Texas Tech University
- Texas Wesleyan University
- Texas Women's University
- Trinity University
- University of the Incarnate Word
- University of Dallas
- University of Houston
- University of North Texas
- University of St. Thomas
- University of Texas
(at Austin, Dallas, El Paso, San Antonio, Tyler, Rio Grande Valley, Permian Basin)
- West Texas A&M University

School-Specific Applications

- Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania
- Brigham Young University
- Brooklyn College
- Cal Poly Pomona
- Cal Poly San Luis Obispo
- California State University
- City College of New York
- Clemson University
- College of Charleston
- Deep Springs College
- Duquesne University
- Elon University
- Embry-Riddle
- Fashion Institute of Technology
- Florida Atlantic University
- Florida A&M University
- Florida International University
- Georgetown University*
- Golden Gate University
- Grove City College
- James Madison University
- MIT
- Rutgers University (All campuses)*
- University of Arkansas
- University of Georgia
- University of Florida

*will accept the Common App for Fall 2026 Admissions

The biggest application system is the Common Application. If you are applying to college this upcoming cycle, building your school list is a crucial part of this process. The chances that you will encounter the Common App at least once is certain, as it has over 700+ member colleges.

The Common App can seem overwhelming at first glance, as there are many sections. To help you keep better track of your deadlines the Common App has a First Year Requirements Grid with the deadlines and necessary documents for each school. If you are a transfer student, the Common App has recently introduced a Transfers Requirement Grid that can similarly help you navigate the deadlines and requirements for each school.

Your entire college application process rides on how you fill the Common App out! To help guide you through them, here is a step-by-step look at each of the sections and the best ways to tackle them.

Preparing to Fill Out the Common App

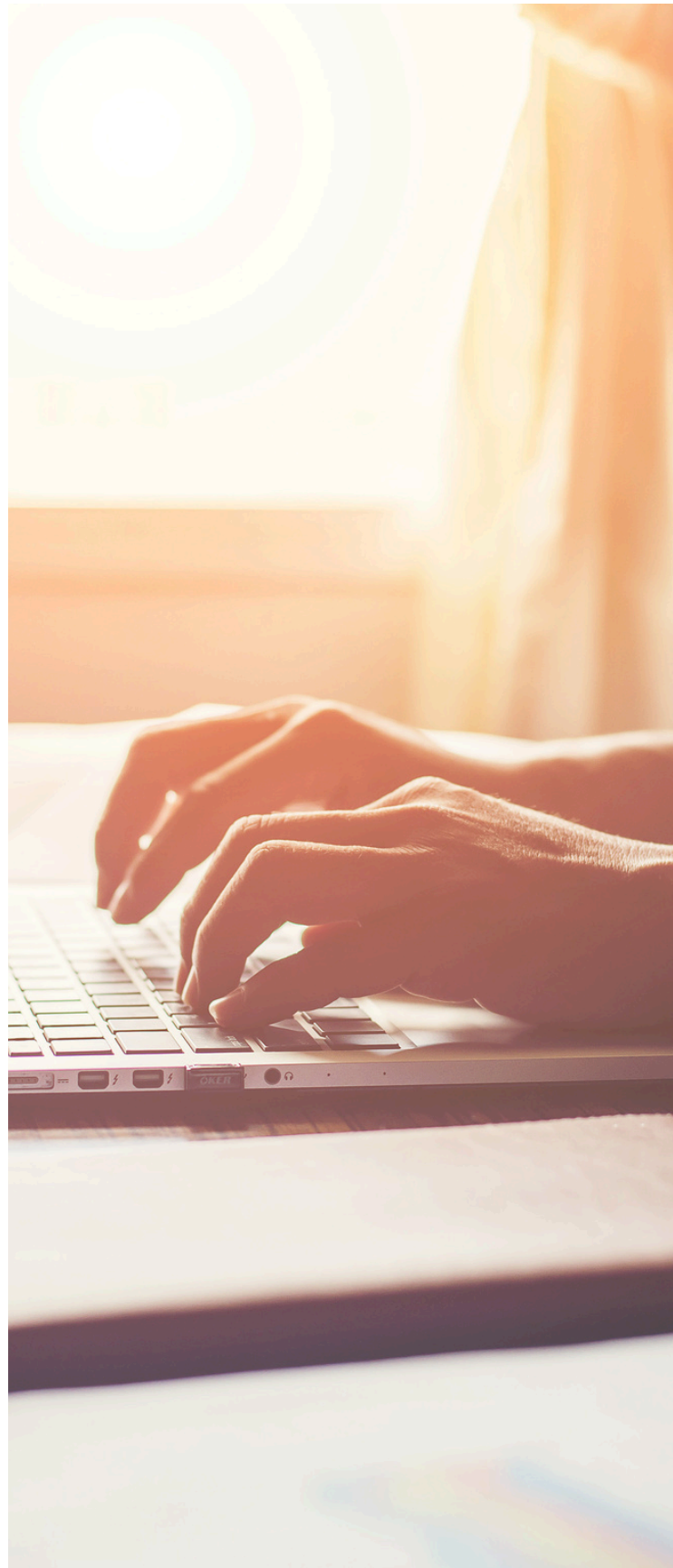
To complete the Common App, make sure you have everything you need on hand. You'll want:

- Your high school transcript
- A list of extracurricular activities
- Your test scores (if applicable)
- Your parents' or guardians' education and employment info
- Contact info for your recommenders and counselor
- Your school's CEEB code

Start early—especially when asking for letters of recommendation. Give your teachers and counselor plenty of notice so they can write thoughtful, personalized letters.

Each section of the application works together to give admissions officers a complete picture of who you are. Take your time, check for accuracy, and don't rush the details.

The Common App interface includes a personalized dashboard called My Common Application, where you can track your progress across sections. You'll also navigate through updated tabs like Explore, Apply, My Colleges, and Financial Aid—making the platform easier to use and more accessible than ever.

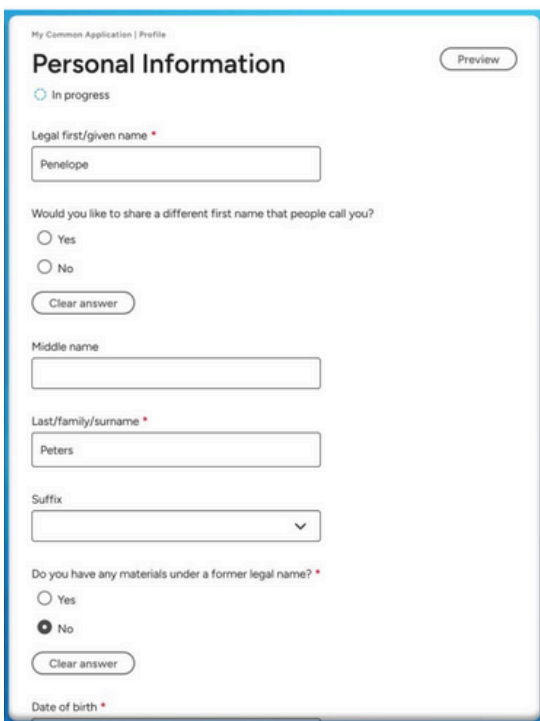


Profile

The first piece that you have to fill out on the Common Application is the Profile section. The Profile section helps the admission officers get an overview knowledge of your background. While this portion might seem very straight forward, these fundamentals matter. As an applicant, there are some important choices you have to make here. Through the following questions admissions officers get a substantial idea of who you are and where you are from. The Profile section asks for:

- **Personal information** - Make sure to fill out this section very carefully, as it's easy to mix up information such as your first name and last name. This section allows you to put in a nickname if applicable, your name in another language if you have one, and if you've used any other names previously. It also lets you elaborate more on your gender identity if you don't identify as male or female.

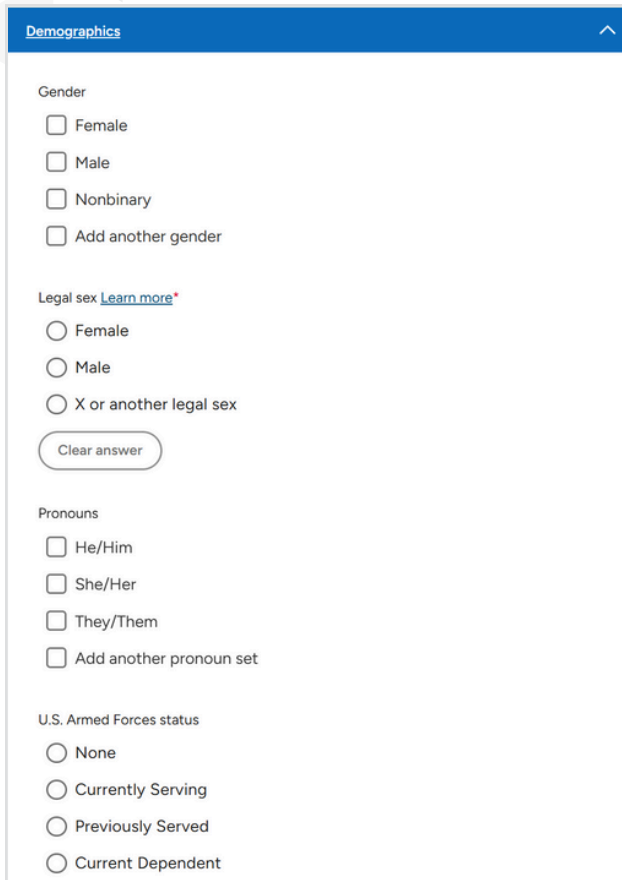
- **Address** - The Common Application has options for your permanent home address, as well as an alternate address if you have multiple addresses. For example if you go to boarding school, you can check the "send mail to temporary or alternate address" box. This section matters because admissions officers at most colleges read applications geographically. Each admissions officer is assigned a particular geographical region, either according to each US State, or according to country. If you're from Minnesota for example, your application is going to be read with the rest of applicants from Minnesota. You could be going up against people from your school and from your area.
- **Contact details** - The contact details section lets you add your preferred phone number, as well as any alternate numbers where you can be reached.



The screenshot shows the 'Personal Information' section of the Common Application. It includes a 'Preview' button in the top right corner. The form is marked as 'In progress'. The fields and options are as follows:

- Legal first/given name ***: Text input field containing 'Penelope'.
- Would you like to share a different first name that people call you?**: Radio button options for 'Yes' and 'No', both unselected. A 'Clear answer' button is below.
- Middle name**: Text input field.
- Last/family/surname ***: Text input field containing 'Peters'.
- Suffix**: Dropdown menu with a downward arrow.
- Do you have any materials under a former legal name? ***: Radio button options for 'Yes' and 'No', with 'No' selected. A 'Clear answer' button is below.
- Date of birth ***: Partially visible text input field at the bottom.

- **Demographics** - Filling out the Demographics section is optional. However, if you choose to do so, it helps colleges get a better idea of the race distribution in a class year, what ethnic or religious group might be underrepresented, and can be used for affirmative action purposes.



Demographics

Gender

☐ Female

☐ Male

☐ Nonbinary

☐ Add another gender

Legal sex [Learn more*](#)

☐ Female

☐ Male

☐ X or another legal sex

Pronouns

☐ He/Him

☐ She/Her

☐ They/Them

☐ Add another pronoun set

U.S. Armed Forces status

☐ None

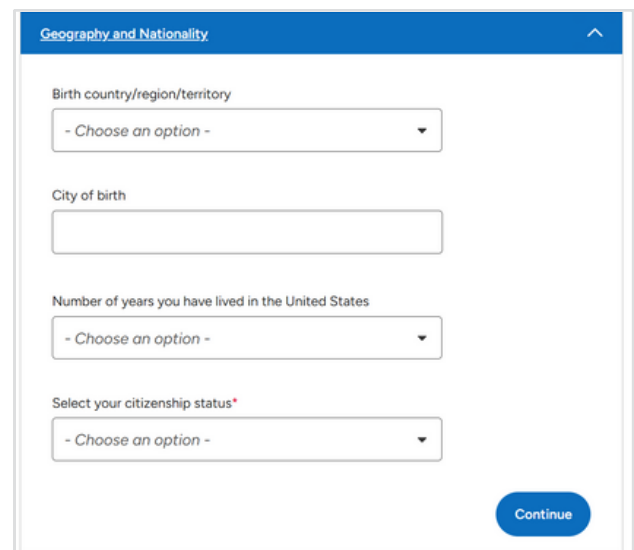
☐ Currently Serving

☐ Previously Served

☐ Current Dependent

The US Armed forces status allows you to list whether you are currently in the armed forces, have been previously enrolled, or are the dependent of someone serving in the armed forces.

- **Geography** - This section asks for your country of birth, city of birth, and how many years you've lived in and outside the United States. As you can tell, it is pretty straightforward and gives you a bigger picture of where you're from and where you grew up.



Geography and Nationality

Birth country/region/territory

- Choose an option -

City of birth

Number of years you have lived in the United States

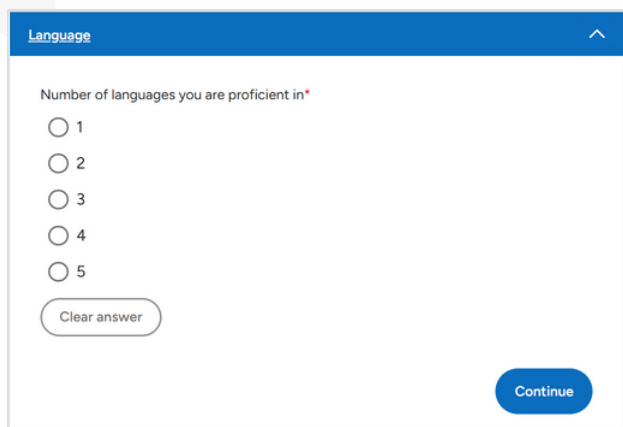
- Choose an option -

Select your citizenship status*

- Choose an option -

You might not have been expecting to talk about your religious preferences or feel comfortable doing so. The religious preferences drop down menu includes many different practices along with "none." Listing your religion will not hurt your chances of getting into college.

- **Language** - You do not have to be fluent in a language to add it to your Common Application. The application asks for your proficiency so you can denote whether you can only read and write or speak the language. This is a simple opportunity to show more about your interests and/or cultural background.



The screenshot shows the 'Language' section of the Common App. It has a blue header with the word 'Language' and an upward arrow. Below the header, it asks 'Number of languages you are proficient in*'. There are five radio button options: 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. At the bottom left is a 'Clear answer' button, and at the bottom right is a blue 'Continue' button.

- **Citizenship**

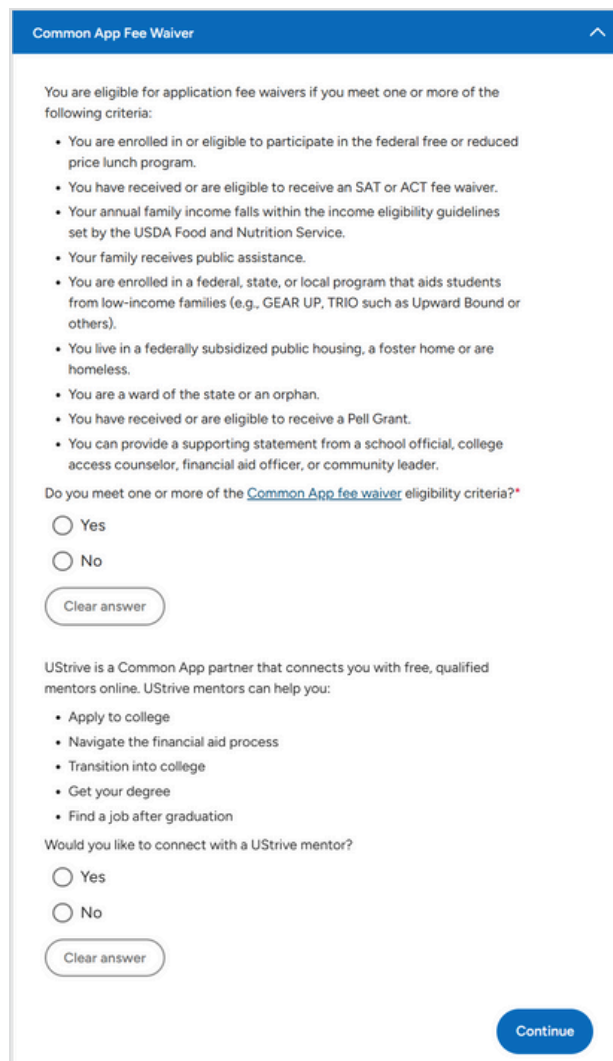
You have to select your citizenship status from a drop-down menu—whether you are a U.S. Citizen, a U.S. Dual Citizen, a U.S. Permanent Resident, a U.S. Resident, or a non-U.S. Citizen. If you hold dual or non-U.S. citizenship, you'll be asked to list all applicable countries.

The U.S. Permanent Resident option includes green card holders. The U.S. Resident category covers a wide range of immigration statuses, such as refugees, asylees, DACA recipients, individuals with Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) or Temporary Protected Status (TPS), undocumented students, students with pending status, or those eligible for noncitizen U.S. federal aid.

Some colleges review applications by citizenship, so this selection helps establish the context for how your application will be evaluated.

Some colleges, for example MIT, read applications by citizenship. The question thus sets a context for your entire application process.

- **Common App fee waiver** - You can receive a Common App fee waiver if one of the following applies to you:



The screenshot shows the 'Common App Fee Waiver' section. It has a blue header with the title and an upward arrow. The main text states: 'You are eligible for application fee waivers if you meet one or more of the following criteria:'. This is followed by a bulleted list of eligibility criteria, including enrollment in federal free/reduced lunch programs, receiving SAT/ACT fee waivers, family income within USDA guidelines, public assistance, federal/state/local aid programs, federal housing, foster homes, orphans, Pell Grants, and supporting statements from school officials. Below the list, it asks 'Do you meet one or more of the Common App fee waiver eligibility criteria?*' with 'Yes' and 'No' radio buttons and a 'Clear answer' button. A section titled 'UStrive is a Common App partner that connects you with free, qualified mentors online. UStrive mentors can help you:' lists five ways mentors can help: applying to college, navigating financial aid, transitioning to college, getting a degree, and finding a job. It then asks 'Would you like to connect with a UStrive mentor?' with 'Yes' and 'No' radio buttons and a 'Clear answer' button. A blue 'Continue' button is at the bottom right.

If you qualify for the fee waiver, don't hesitate to check the box. Talk to your guidance counselor if you have any questions about whether or not you qualify.

Family

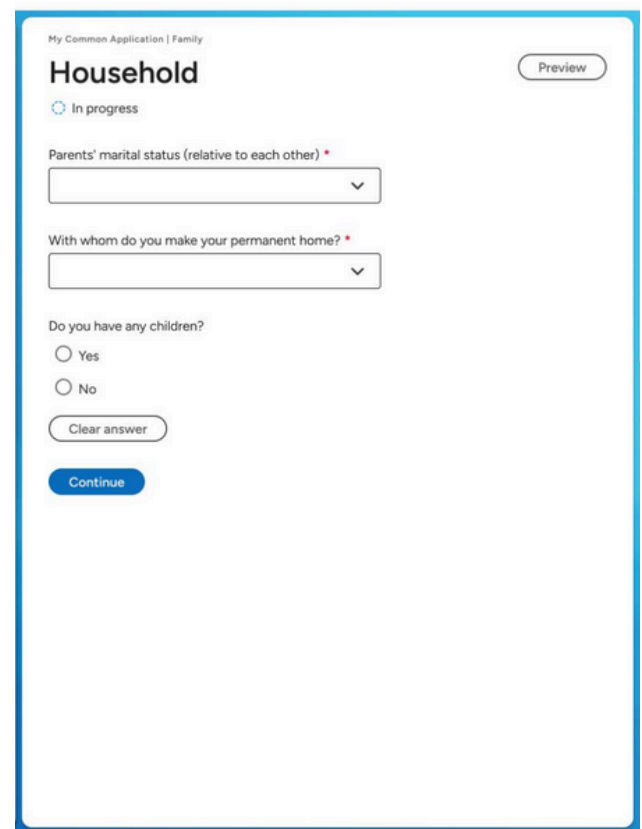
The family section is divided into:

- Household
- Parent 1
- Parent 2
- Sibling

For filling out information about your parents, you need to know your parents' marital status, their profession, their educational background information (including their school and graduation year), and their employment status (whether they are employed, retired, homemaker, or deceased). If relevant, your parents' alma mater counts when colleges consider legacy students if you are applying to the same school. Legacy does not guarantee admission to a college, but it can give students an extra edge.

Your family background is a big part of providing admissions officers a greater context of who you and where you come from. They want to know if you were raised by a single parent, whether you grew up in a divorced home, whether one of your parents have passed away. This information helps provide admissions counselors with context regarding your familial circumstances. There is no specific answer that colleges are looking for -- it will just help them understand your background better.

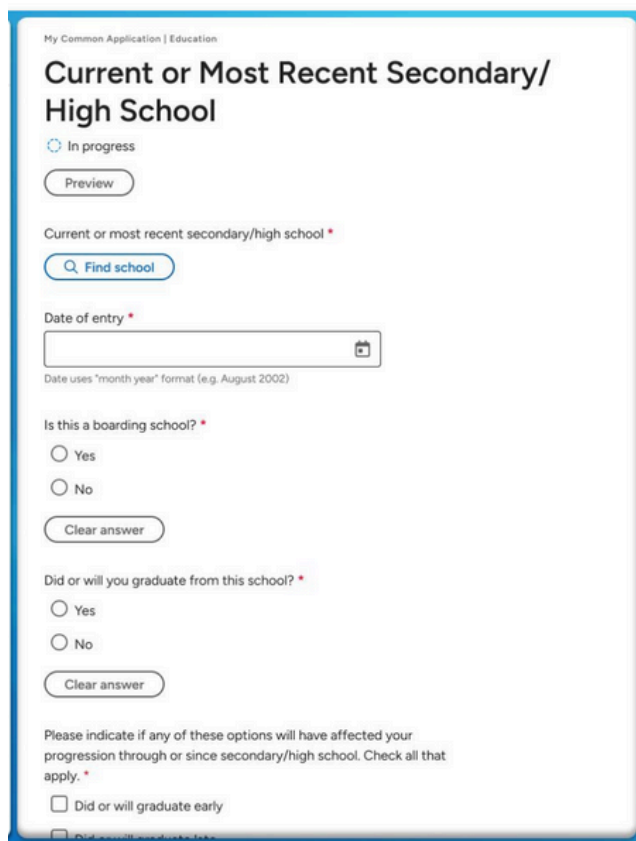
This section is also for admissions officers to find out if your parents went to college, what your parents do, and their current position. Many colleges value the perspective of first generation students and look to see if you are coming from that background. They also want to know whether you have a sibling and whether you're the oldest or the youngest sibling. Your siblings attending the same college also counts as legacy.




Education

The Education section asks for the following information:

- **Current or most recent secondary school -**
For your current school, you have to indicate whether your school is a boarding school, when you started the school, and whether you plan to graduate from your current school.



My Common Application | Education

Current or Most Recent Secondary/High School

☐ In progress

[Preview](#)

Current or most recent secondary/high school *

[Find school](#)

Date of entry *

Date uses "month year" format (e.g. August 2002)

Is this a boarding school? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

[Clear answer](#)

Did or will you graduate from this school? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

[Clear answer](#)

Please indicate if any of these options will have affected your progression through or since secondary/high school. Check all that apply. *

☐ Did or will graduate early

☐ Did or will graduate late

This section also asks for your counselor's information. Don't forget that your counselor writes a letter of recommendation alongside your teachers. They can also act as a crucial liaison between you and colleges throughout the college application process. They make sure schools have received your application, and can advocate on your behalf to schools you have applied to. Make sure you've put in the correct contact information!



Counselor's prefix

Counselor's first name *

Counselor's middle initial

Counselor's last name *

Counselor's job title *

Counselor's email

Counselor's phone

- **Other secondary schools** - If you've transferred schools, there is a section which allows you to discuss this transition. Make sure to be clear in writing why you left your previous school in the 250 word limit given. Explain what the circumstance was so that admissions officers know whether it was for preference for something different that your previous school lacked, such as in the example below, or if it was something you had no control over, such as family obligations. If you had to relocate, admissions officers want to know this to see how the move might have affected your performance.

Other Secondary/High Schools

If you have attended any secondary/high schools not listed in the previous section, please indicate the number of schools.*

☐ 0
☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3

Clear answer

Continue

- **Colleges and universities** - In the Colleges and Universities section, admissions officers want to know whether you have taken classes at any college. One reason could be because you wanted to take advanced courses not offered at your high school. These courses are also a good way to balance out your grades if you are not happy with them. You could also be really interested in a subject and use the opportunity to learn more about the subject. All of these efforts show admissions officers that you took an extra step to explore a topic of your interest further than obligated at your school.

Colleges & Universities

If you have ever taken coursework at a college or university, please indicate the number of colleges.*

☐ 0
☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3

Clear answer

- **Grades** - The Grades section asks for your class size and class rank (if you have one) for more context on your student body. Colleges use class size and class rank to compare your academic standing with your peers. Your rank helps the admissions officers understand the value of your GPA, and how you would fare in the academic climate of their institution. This section also asks for your GPA Scale and whether it is weighted, along with your cumulative GPA so that admissions officers can truly understand how to read your transcript. A weighted GPA is one where the highest GPA varies depending on the course or the program. Your GPA could be on a scale of 0 to 4 for regular classes, but 0 to 5 for AP courses, and 0 to 7 for IB courses. But this will all change from school to school. Some schools only use letter grades, some use a 100 point scale, you get the idea. Understanding these systems helps admissions officers compare you with other students' grades because not every school has the same grading system.

Grades

Graduating class size (approx.)*

Class rank reporting

☐ Exact

☐ Decile

☐ Quintile

☐ Quartile

☐ None

Clear answer

GPA Scale reporting

Cumulative GPA

GPA weighting

☐ Weighted

☐ Unweighted

- **Current or most recent courses** - This section is straight forward. Colleges want to know what courses you've selected and how they might have affected your grades as well. The drop down menu under schedule allows you to select the system your school uses - between "semester," "quarterly," and "trimester." Be careful of any spelling errors or any courses you might have missed.

Current or Most Recent Year Courses

Please list all courses you are taking this academic year. If you are not currently enrolled, please list courses from your most recent academic year.

How many courses would you like to report?*

Please select the course scheduling system your institution is using.*

☐ Semester

☐ Trimester

☐ Quarter

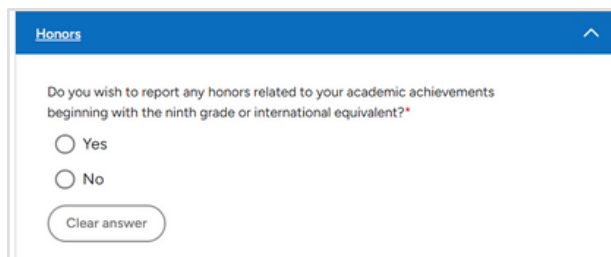
☐ Yearly

Clear answer

Continue

- **Honors** - The Honors section is for you to put in any academic awards or achievements that you have earned starting from the ninth grade. This could include anything from a science award to an article in an economic journal. Since there are exactly five slots, if you have more than five awards, prioritize your achievements, and list the most unique and impressive ones.

If you have less than 5 awards you can stretch the definition of “academic” to include more honors, for example if you’ve won first prize in a regional or national art competition. If you have more than 5 awards, try to think of ways to combine them. Make sure these do not overlap with the answers in your Activities section! Keep your description short and to the point, as you can only use 100 characters per award for this section. Always put the achievement with the biggest impact on top. Make sure you do your best to take full advantage of this section.



The screenshot shows a section titled "Honors" with a blue header. Below the header, it asks: "Do you wish to report any honors related to your academic achievements beginning with the ninth grade or international equivalent?*" There are two radio button options: "Yes" and "No". At the bottom of the section is a "Clear answer" button.

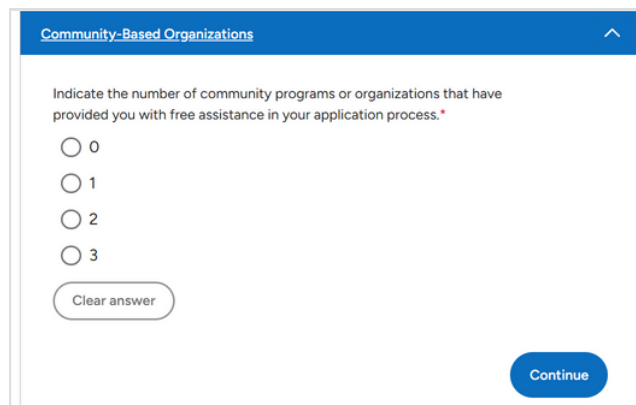
A list of honors that could be included are

- National Merit Scholar
- Member of an Honor Society
- Award winner for writing, art, photography, music etc.
- Publication in research papers, journals, newspapers
- Athletic character recognition awards
- Any state, national or international award that you have won in high school

A good example of listing an honor within the given space is: “1st Place, Intel ISEF, for inventing “Robocop”, robotic biomechanical law enforcement wearable unit”.

Within just 99 characters, the student highlighted not only what the prize was but what the prize was for. Abbreviating “first” and the title of the Engineering Fair helped reduce characters. The purpose of the robot reflects the applicant’s application persona as a student who is interested in engineering and passionate about social justice.

- **Community-based organizations** - This is the place to indicate whether any community based organizations such as Questbridge or Upward Bound have helped you with your application. Community-based organizations do not include guidance counselors or private counselors (such as InGenius Prep) who might have helped look over your materials.



The screenshot shows a section titled "Community-Based Organizations" with a blue header. Below the header, it asks: "Indicate the number of community programs or organizations that have provided you with free assistance in your application process.*" There are four radio button options: "0", "1", "2", and "3". At the bottom of the section is a "Clear answer" button. A "Continue" button is located at the bottom right of the form.

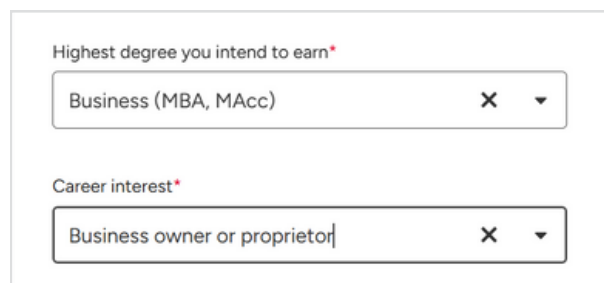
- **Future plans** - The Future Plans section can be daunting. Don't worry about committing to your future life path in this section. Many high school students don't know exactly what they want to do. Plans made in high school often change, and that is okay. The important step is to make sure you do not select "Undecided." Think about what you are passionate about, what courses you are excited to study, what activities you enjoy. Leaving the answer as "Undecided" will show admissions officers that you have not put much thought into your interests or future career choices.

Your choice of major and your intended career should have a connection. Make sure your answers in the Future Plans section support the bigger picture of your application persona - the theme of your application. For example you could be an aspiring photographer interested in capturing dance performances. Or, you might be a budding marine biologist who is passionate about climate change activism. If all of these things do not support each other, admissions officers might think that your plans are haphazard and disorganized.

Individuals whose passions, interests, and career goals are more specific are more likely to be accepted, so think about how you can be focused with this section. For example, if you want to be a lawyer, specify a type of law. Just saying "lawyer" can sound very generic and common.

For example, a student who is interested in Art and Engineering can combine both interests and choose Architecture as a career interest in the Future Plans section.

A student who is interested in business and starting her own company one day can select "Business owner" as part of the Future Plans section.

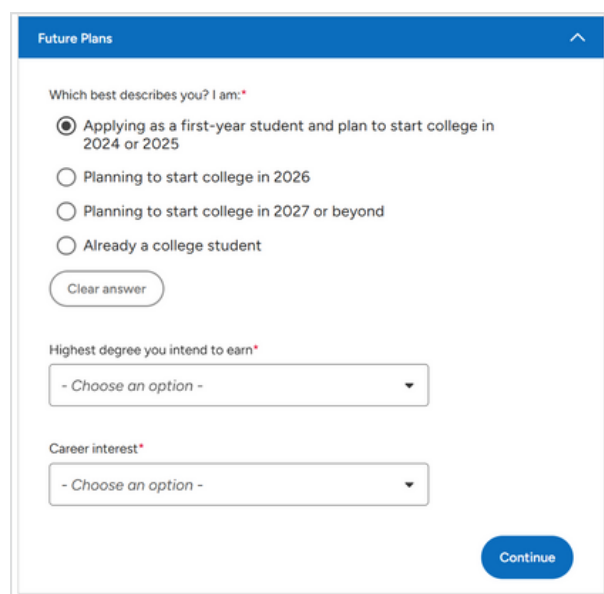


Highest degree you intend to earn*

Business (MBA, MAcc) X ▾

Career interest*

Business owner or proprietor X ▾



Future Plans

Which best describes you? I am:*

☒ Applying as a first-year student and plan to start college in 2024 or 2025

☐ Planning to start college in 2026

☐ Planning to start college in 2027 or beyond

☐ Already a college student

Clear answer

Highest degree you intend to earn*

- Choose an option - ▾

Career interest*

- Choose an option - ▾

Continue

Testing

The Testing section asks you to self-report any tests you have taken—whether standardized tests such as the SAT or ACT, subject-based exams like AP or IB, or English proficiency exams such as the IELTS, TOEFL, or Duolingo English Test.

Make sure to check the testing policy for each of the colleges on your list. Some schools are test-optional, while others may require specific exams. When self-reporting your scores, you must be honest. You'll also need to order official score reports to be sent from the College Board or ACT website to each individual college.

The Common App will ask how many times you took each standardized test. Keep in mind: taking the SAT or ACT multiple times doesn't necessarily boost your application. Quality matters more than quantity.

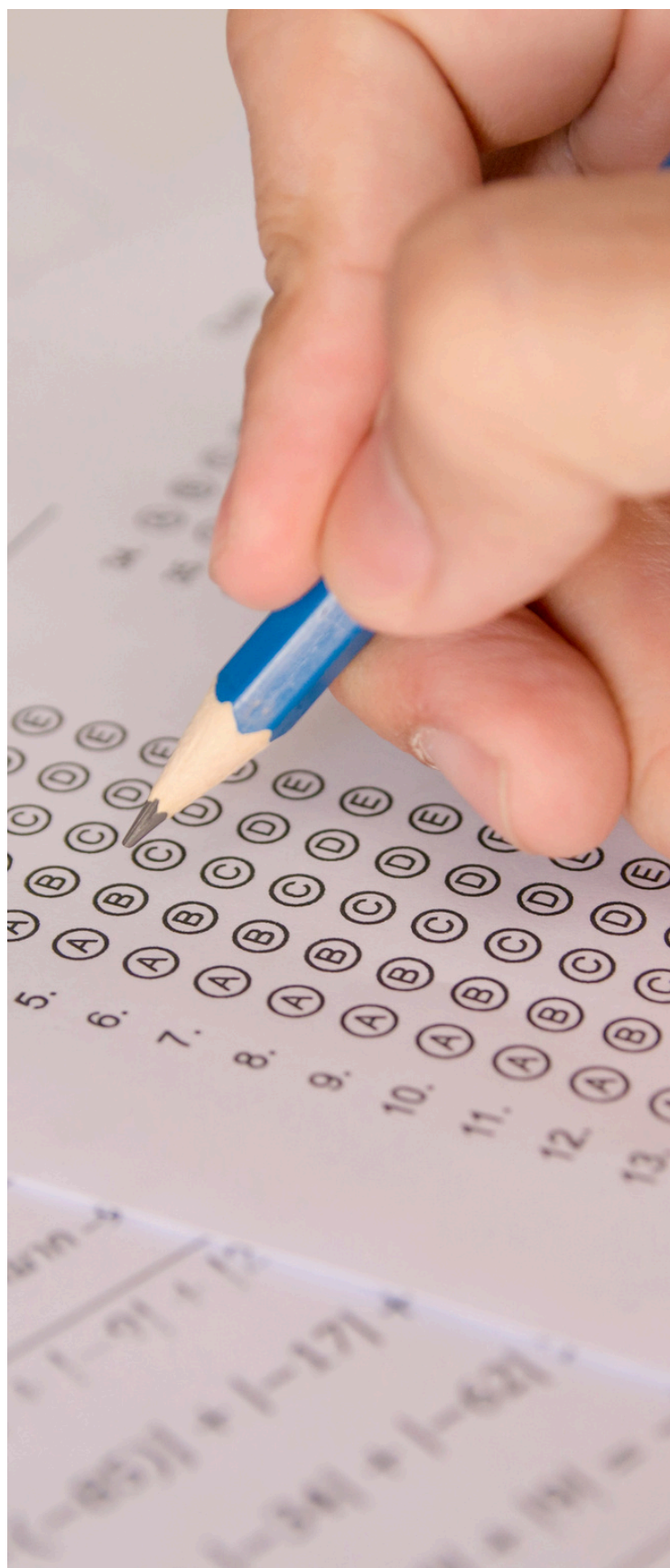
ACT Reporting Formats

Students now have the option to report their ACT scores in different combinations to reflect how they took the test. You can report:

- ACT with science and writing
- ACT with science only
- ACT with writing only
- ACT without science or writing

The order of the ACT subsections in the Common App now matches the order on your official score report, making it easier to enter your scores accurately.

Remember, you don't need to report every score. If a college allows score choice or superscoring, submit only what strengthens your application. Always make your testing strategy work in your favor.



Different Score Options

Many schools allow score choice, where you are able to choose which SAT and ACT scores to report. This enables you to have a certain degree of agency as to which scores colleges see. A lot of schools which accept score choice recommend that you send all scores. Some colleges have a superscore policy, which allows you to pick each of your top sub scores and combine into one superscore if you have taken a standardized test multiple times. Instead of superscoring across test dates, some schools will just look at your highest score from a single sitting. Then, there are colleges which do not require standardized test scores.

The table below shows some schools which schools require all scores and which schools are test optional. The asterisk indicates schools which allow score choice, but prefer that you submit all of your scores.

Schools that require ALL scores	Test optional schools	
Brown	American University	Mt. Holyoke College
CalTech	Bard College	Occidental College
Cornell	Bates College	Oregon State University
Dartmouth	Bowdoin College	Pomona College
Georgia Tech	Brandeis University	Rhodes College
Georgetown	Chapman University	Rochester Institute of Technology
JHU	Colby College	Scripps College
Harvard	College of Charleston	SUNY (all schools)
Florida State University	Colorado College	Trinity College
MIT	Columbia University	University of Chicago
OSU	Davidson College	University of Oregon
Purdue	Franklin and Marshall College	University of Rochester
Penn	GWU	University of Washington – Seattle
Rice	Holy Cross	Wake Forest University
Stanford	Haverford College	Wesleyan University
University of Florida	Indiana University – Bloomington	William and Mary
University of Georgia	Lehigh University	
University of Texas-Austin	Macalester College	
Yale (test flexible)		

Make sure you only report scores that are required and help make your application look stronger.

Activities

The Activities section lets you list up to ten extracurriculars you've participated in during high school. For each, you'll include:

- Type of activity
- Your role and organization name
- A short description (150 characters max)
- Grade levels and time commitment
- Whether you plan to continue in college

This section helps colleges understand how you spend your time outside class. Highlight leadership, impact, and sustained involvement. Use strong verbs and include measurable outcomes—for example, “Led 10 volunteers at weekly food drive” or “Organized fundraiser with \$3,000 raised.”

Be realistic with your time estimates—admissions officers will notice if your hours exceed what's possible.

Responsibilities and Circumstances

At the end of the Activities section, you'll find a required section about personal responsibilities or challenges that affected your involvement. While you're not required to write anything here, you must review and complete it.

This section includes:

- Household responsibilities – like caregiving, working a job, or translating for family
- Circumstances – such as health issues, limited access to transportation, or other barriers

If relevant, this is your chance to provide helpful context that supports the rest of your application. Share only what adds clarity.



For Activity type, the Common App provides you with a list to choose from. The options available are:

- Athletics: Club
- Athletics: JV/Varsity
- Career Oriented
- Community Service (Volunteer)
- Computer/Technology
- Cultural
- Dance
- Debate/Speech
- Environmental
- Family Responsibilities
- Foreign Exchange
- Journalism/Publication
- Junior R.O.T.C.
- LGBT
- Music: Instrumental
- Music: Vocal
- Religious
- Research
- Robotics
- School Spirit
- Science/Math
- Student Government/Politics
- Theater/Drama
- Work (Paid)
- Other Club/Activity

The activities list gives admissions officers a concrete idea of how you spend your time. With the hours, make sure you are being reasonable, even if it might be difficult to put down the exact hours if there is not a consistent number. Admissions officers can count and will notice if your participation hours exceed the number of hours in a week!

In the description itself, use strong verbs and be as specific as possible. Your achievements should be tangible or quantifiable. The following are the most important points when considering what to put in your activities list:

- **Leadership** - When listing your activities, make sure you prioritize leadership positions - whether you have started an organization, led a team, or been president of a club. The order in which you list your activities matters. Founding an organization usually takes precedence of being president of a club. If you have been a member of a common activity such as Model UN team or debate club, this should not go on top of your list of activities.
- **Tangible Achievements** - It is always very helpful to quantify your achievements as much as possible - for example if you have raised a certain amount of money for an organization, or you've helped recruit 30 members, or led a team of 20 athletes. Using numbers throughout your descriptions helps admissions officers immediately grasp the impact that you've had.
- **Sustained Involvement** - The participation grade levels and timing/hours spent on the activity shows admissions officers exactly how much you have committed to your involvement in the activity. Longer involvement shows that you have truly dedicated the time to honing your leadership skills or nurturing community in your organization, which are skills and qualities that will help you in college.

- **Your Application Persona** - Activities should for the most part support your application persona. If the overall theme of your application, for example, surrounds an interest in art and writing, an award you might have received in chemistry would not look best on top of your activities list.

A successful Activities section should look like this:

Activities

Community Service (Volunteer)

9, 10, 11, 12	Co-Founder of Little Orange Lantern Project
Break	Teaching Beijing migrant & Yunnan mountain school students; Donated 20,000+ books and raised >¥80,000 via social media campaigns & events
70 hr/wk, 6 wk/yr	
Continue	

Research

9, 10, 11, 12	Internships in Public Health Policy at Yale & JHU
Year	Analyzed social obstacles to Chinese & Indian health reform (Dr. Worthington); grant-seeking for Chilean health tech (Dr. Rusoja) [see add'l info]
2 hr/wk, 30 wk/yr	
Continue	

Community Service (Volunteer)

9, 10, 11, 12	Co-Head of Amnesty International Club
School	Spearhead ongoing dialogue between campus orgs. (Gender/LGBT equality orgs); Raise awareness & funds for Amnesty initiatives (Write for Rights)
1.5 hr/wk, 36 wk/yr	
Continue	

The student has listed the project that they founded at the very top. They maintained this activity from the beginning of high school. There is a brief but clear description of the Little Orange Lantern Project, along with quantified examples of how many books they donated and how it was done.

The student also included their Internship under professors that they conducted throughout high school. Third, the applicant talked about their responsibilities as co-head of the Amnesty International Club. While a lot of schools have Amnesty International Clubs, this student's contribution to their school's club was unique and tangible.

Writing

The writing section requires the following:

- Personal essay
- Disciplinary information: disciplinary violation at any educational institution, misdemeanor, felony
- Additional information

The personal essay plays a crucial part in showing colleges who you are, and it has a strict word limit of 650 words. Within a little over a page you have to show admissions officers what makes you a unique applicant, a good fit for their school, and tie it all to your application persona while displaying strong writing skills. This is not easy! Having a well-written personal statement can be tough, especially when you are a high school student used to writing five-paragraph-essays.

The prompts for the personal statement are as follows:

1. 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.
2. 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?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?



4. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?

5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

6. 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?

7. 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

Brainstorming Your Essay

When brainstorming your personal statement, remember your application persona. How does your personality tie in to your application persona. Ask yourself questions. How can you take advantage of the prompt to provide your reader with a sense of your personal growth? When choosing your topic, it is very important to remember that the admissions officer will be reading thousands of applications. Think about topics to avoid. Do not write about middle school achievements, about others' achievements, or try to accomplish too much.

You want to stand out, you want to tell your story, and share some of your biggest passions and important parts of your life. If you talk about a debate competition that you almost didn't win, admissions officers might not be very engaged or impressed. Lots of applicants win debate competitions. Think strategically about how you can differentiate yourself.

Narrative Structure

As for the actual writing, pay attention to your narrative structure. Narrate your story by showing the reader your personality and emotions instead of telling. Provide the reader with a theme or a takeaway message. Show them how you've grown stronger or how your topic has changed your perspective.

Proofreading

Proofread and make sure you've used correct grammar. Avoid cliches and overusing figures of speech. Make sure your essay captures the reader's attention from the very first sentence. Tie in your essay with a common theme. You don't have to specifically mention your application persona at every step, but strategically choose your topic to market who you are to admission officers.

There is always room for edits. You can read your application out loud and see if everything makes sense. Ask a parent, friend, or mentor to read your application for errors that you might not have caught. Printing out and proofreading can also help you spot errors you might have missed while reading from a screen.

You want to spend as much time as possible thinking about your topic and working on your essay, through as many drafts as you can. Start early, and you will find that the process is much less overwhelming.

Additional Information

The Additional Information section includes two optional questions that allow students to provide important context about their academic or personal experiences.

1. Additional Information

This open-ended space gives you the opportunity to share anything important that isn't reflected elsewhere in your application. The Common App asks:

Do you wish to provide details of circumstances or qualifications not reflected in the application? You may use the space below to provide any additional information you wish to share.

You might use this space to explain a dip in grades, a gap in your education, a family situation, or an independent project that doesn't fit in the Activities section. Avoid repeating your personal essay or using this space to continue listing activities. Responses are limited to 300 words for first-year applicants and 1,500 characters for transfer applicants.

2. Challenges and Circumstances

This prompt allows you to describe personal or academic challenges that may have affected your educational experience. It replaces the previous Community Disruption question and now covers a broader range of experiences. The Common App asks:

Have you faced any challenges or circumstances that have affected your academic journey?

Students may write about limited access to a quiet study space or internet, mental or physical health struggles, discrimination, caregiving responsibilities, housing instability, financial hardship, or larger-scale disruptions such as war, natural disasters, or community violence. The response is limited to 250 words for first-year applicants and 1,250 characters for transfer applicants.

Both questions are optional. Use them only if your response will help admissions officers better understand your background. Be clear, focused, and truthful—context can provide meaningful support for the rest of your application.



Final Components of the Common App

Courses & Grades - This section is self-explanatory. Admissions officers want to see your academic track record and the classes you've taken at different levels. Not all Common App schools require this section, so it only appears if you select a college that does. Even if a school doesn't require Courses & Grades, you'll still need to send your transcript. Be careful when entering your information—you don't want to list a C instead of an A. Some schools use an external system called STARS (formerly SRAR) for self-reported transcripts. Check each college's requirements to see whether they ask for Courses & Grades, STARS, or neither.

Letters of Recommendation - Your teachers, guidance counselors, and other recommenders can submit their letters of recommendation directly on the Common App - you will invite them to contribute through the application platform. Build these relationships as early as possible. Pick people who know you best, understand your background and interests, and can provide perspective on you as a student and a person.

Besides knowing you as a student and person, your recommender should also be familiar with the components of your application and your application persona. They should be aware not only of the theme you hope to achieve, but how they can help elevate it in their letter. Talk to them openly about your interests in the major of your choice, about the activities you want to pursue in college, and the extracurriculars from high school that you have tried to highlight in your application. The better your recommender understands what you are aiming for in your application, the stronger their letter will be.



Moreover, make sure your recommender is someone who takes the time to sit down with you, has time to dedicate to a careful letter, and is enthusiastic and excited about your application.

School Specific Essays - A lot of schools have specific questions that they want to ask about your interest in their campus and course offerings specifically. They want to know that you have researched the school and that you are genuinely interested. These questions can include what major you want from their list of majors, and what activities you would partake in at the college. They can also include supplemental essays, usually asking why you want to attend their school. Always be as specific as possible in these essays.

There are countless ways in which you can answer how and why a college appeals to you. For example, if the school you're applying to is a liberal arts college, you can highlight how the community or small faculty to student ratio appeals to you. If you're applying to an engineering school, talk about the equipment and facilities available. Mention specific faculty members you might want to do research with. If you're an athlete, talk about the importance of the team's spirit if it appeals to you. Talk about alums who have inspired you, about extracurricular opportunities that resonate with you, and how the location might be of importance. If you visited campus, write about what you enjoyed.

Whatever you decide, make sure your voice can be heard. Almost every student conducts the same research, and two answers might be similar. How you make your unique story pop in the context of the school is what can make the difference between you and another applicant.

Next Steps

Now that you have an idea of what each Common App section is like, you are all set to begin your application process. To start, you have to go to the Common Application website, and first create an account. You can then start adding your school list, and going through the sections to understand the requirements for each. You can always come back to this guide for tips and tricks, as well as visit any of the blogs linked on this e-book to get more detailed information on how to approach each section.

Time to start tackling your college applications. Good luck!