



**EVERYTHING YOU
NEED TO KNOW ABOUT
THE COMMON APP
ACTIVITIES LIST**

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As you start your college application process, chances are you will encounter the [Common Application](#) for at least one or two of your schools. After all, this centralized application system allows you to apply efficiently to any of its 700+ member colleges. The Common App is divided into sections which ask for your contact information, demographics, school name and address, test scores, personal statement, and of course, the activities list.

The activities list is more than a resumé. It is a significant element which provides admissions officers insight into your personality and how you choose to spend your time outside of school. A strategically-written activities list can help distinguish you from your peers. Admissions officers use your extracurricular titles, descriptions, and the duration of your participation to understand what you're passionate about, whether you're a hardworking and committed individual, and how your extracurriculars connect to the rest of your application.

In this e-book, we have outlined all of the nitty-gritty details that you need to know about creating an impressive activities list. Using tips from InGenius Prep's Former Admissions Officers (FAOs) from top schools such as Brown, UPenn, Stanford, MIT, Northwestern, and UC Berkeley, we have covered the basics of this Common App component, exactly what to include, and how to prioritize all that you've done, as well as some dos and don'ts to keep in mind when you finalize your activities list.

The Activities List: The Basics

Let's start with the basic logistics of the activities list. This section lets you to add up to 10 activities, but allows only 150 characters (not words!) to describe each of your entries. Our FAOs emphasize that although each entry is brief, when added up, the activities list is as long - and as descriptive - as many of your supplemental essays. This is substantial!

While it's crucial to make the most of the allotted space when writing each description, note the other questions asked by the section alongside "Activity description" before you start writing, so that you don't repeat any information. These are:

- Activity type
- Position/leadership description and organization name if applicable
- Activity description
- Participation grade levels: 9, 10, 11, 12
- Timing of participation: all year, summer, school break, etc.
- Hours spent per week
- Weeks spent per year
- Intent to continue in college: yes, no

Activity Type

The first menu you come across is a drop-down list featuring categories to describe your activities. Our Former Admissions Officers explain that a student's ability to "show clear blocks of categories to demonstrate interest areas" stands out to universities.

Read through all of the options that are available. We recommend strategic thinking here. List all possible categories for each activity and then carefully consider which description best tells your story. "Church choir," for instance could be classified in many ways: "music: vocal," "religious," "community service," and even "work (paid)." Although a few different categories may be accurate, choose the one that best fits your experience and helps tell your story.

- 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

Position / Leadership Description and Organization Name

You're allowed a maximum of 50 characters for the "Position/leader description and organization name" slot. Our FAOs advise that, "having a description of what the student did as the title is the most important. Simply having the title of the activity or calling themselves a "member" is not enough." Our FAOs often explain that the fact that an activity is listed already implies membership. You should be more descriptive - are you a point guard on your basketball team, or alto in your choir group?

The Description

To guide you through determining which activities to add first and how your level of commitment plays a role in the order, let's take a more in depth look at how to strategize the placements and write descriptions in a way that can help distinguish you from your peers.

When you write your activities list descriptions, remember that it is all about optimizing the character limit of 150 to summarize your impact and role in a way that stands out to admissions officers. The descriptions need to be as specific as possible. This means strategically outlining the part you played - articulating any type of leadership position, and noting quantifiable and tangible achievements. Always use as many characters as you can. Don't leave too much space.

Since the "Participation grade level" drop-down menu only starts from 9th grade, utilize the description strategically to mention if you've been playing an instrument or a sport "since age 4" for example. So let's take a closer look at what to include in your Common App activities list descriptions:

- **Leadership** - Whether you've started an organization, captained a sports team or acapella group, or served as the historian of your favorite club, leadership roles should always take precedence when thinking about both the order and the description of your activities. Your leadership roles help you stand out from the rest of the pack. Schools want students who aren't afraid to take initiative, and would undoubtedly be more impressed by a leadership position in your own organization over your general membership in a common club. Holding a leadership role doesn't necessarily mean that it should go on top. It's okay to leave off activities that don't matter as much to you, or aren't that impressive, even if you were the president of the club. If your leadership position doesn't have a title, create one which captures your exact role as precisely as possible.
- **Tangible Achievements** - You should definitely quantify your achievements, as numbers are a highly efficient way to demonstrate impact. If you know the number of people who attended an event you initiated, membership growth since you started leading a group, or amount of money you helped raise at an event, these are useful statistics that impress admissions officers!

- **Sustained Involvement** - According to our Former Admissions Officers, when thinking about how to order your activities, students should carefully consider the “consistent amount of time or sustained involvement they have devoted to the activity.” Activities you no longer participate in, or just started this year, aren’t as strategically valuable to the list as activities you have built over all four years of high school. Greater and longer involvement depicts dedication towards honing your leadership skills and creating community in your club or organization, which are traits admissions officers seek in students.
- **Application Persona** - It’s important to think of your application persona when organizing your activities list. Your application persona is the theme of your application. You could be an artist who has taught painting classes at a local school and started an Instagram page featuring your work, for example. If the majority of your activities - especially the ones listed at the top - don’t have a connection to each other and to art, admissions officers might think you’re disorganized. Colleges appreciate students who are specialized leaders in one or two areas, rather than moderately committed to 20 different activities.

Now that you have an idea of the content, let’s talk about the structure of your writing. Each description doesn’t have to be full sentences, but, you should be consistent with your formatting choices. Don’t start your descriptions with “I” as it’s considered too informal. Don’t start one entry with “President & Captain,” but another with “Founder & President.” Keep “President” in the same position both times.

Debate/Speech
9, 10, 11, 12
School
8 hr/wk, 35 wk/yr
Continue

President & Captain, School Debate Club
[ranked among top 20 debaters in the nation], won 6 Champions & 7 Top Speaker Awards at tournaments nationwide. [Leads the team, helps the novice]

Student Govt./Politics
10, 11, 12
School, Year
1 hr/wk, 32 wk/yr

Founder & President, Political Science Club
Organized district-wide political events, [invited local politicians as guest speakers, promoted student volunteer programs.

Zak Harris, who has worked at the admissions offices of Johns Hopkins, George Washington University, Bowdoin, and Regis, further notes, “Help the admissions officer by making your descriptions clear and understandable. Using unusual acronyms or industry-specific terms isn’t a good idea. The admissions officer should be able to read the description and understand very well what the activity entails.”

Your word choice makes a difference to your activities list. Since you only get 150 characters to make a lasting impression on the reader, it’s key that you use strong verbs which convey your role with greater impact. Check out some action words in the table below which might come in handy when describing your participation in your most significant activities:

Research	Creation	Cooperation	Leadership	Improvement
Analyze	Design	Collaborate	Arrange	Accelerate
Assess	Engineer	Coordinate	Execute	Amplify
Compile	Establish	Consolidate	Enforce	Enhance
Estimate	Explore	Contribute	Govern	Enrich
Evaluate	Formulate	Facilitate	Manage	Extend
Examine	Implement	Negotiate	Motivate	Formalize
Identify	Inaugurate	Support	Preside	Improve
Investigate	Initiate		Simulate	Optimize
Pinpoint	Launch		Strategize	Overhaul
	Pioneer		Supervise	Refine
	Propose			Restructure
				Revamp
				Revitalize
				Streamline
				Systemize

Even from just reading these words you can tell that they would convey your role in the activity very clearly to admissions officers. Mentioning that you've "engineered" or "accelerated" a project gets the message across more effectively than words like "did" or simply "led." Comprehensive wording allows admissions officers to visualize and understand your level of commitment and the depth of your involvement better.

Strategizing the Order

You might be confused about how to order your activities list most effectively. Since it is a part of the Common App itself and doesn't pertain to any particular school, keep in mind that all of the colleges you apply to will see the same activities list.

The instructions are clear: you are asked to list your most important activities first. Think about which activity has had the most impact on you and vice versa. The first set of activities should also be very connected to what you want to study in college. Take a look at your last three activities and choose one with a bit of pop to go last, for instance. Don't just value impressiveness, but uniqueness as well. According to our FAQs, "The expectation is that the order of activities is in order of importance to the student. The duration, number of hours, and leadership position of an activity make the biggest difference when selecting which activities to list.

A successful activities list 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	

You can see that the student has prioritized original initiatives, i.e., the program they founded. Note the quantified data - it's apparent from the description that the student worked hard at this project due to the inclusion of the "80,000." Each of the activities are described using strong verbs such as "spearhead," "analyze" and "teach," letting admissions officers clearly understand what the student did in the roles.

The student has participated in all of these activities over all four years of high school, and throughout the week. They have also positioned in second place an internship, conducted with professors at prestigious universities. It's impressive for a high school student to participate in such unique work opportunities. Note how the internship takes precedence over a leadership position in a pre-existing common club such as Amnesty International.

Dos

- **Be honest about your hour count** - While it may be hard to pinpoint the exact amount of time you've dedicated to an activity down to the minute, be reasonable when adding the time spent during a week or year. Don't exceed a plausible number of hours in an attempt to impress colleges. Admissions officers can count, and will find it hard to believe if you mention that you've spent 100 hours a week on an extracurricular on top of being in school for 8 hours a day.
- **Try to fill all 10 slots** - While you don't have to add 10 activities if you're stretching too thin, our FAOs highly recommend that you try your best to fill all 10 of the slots if you're applying to top-ranked colleges. Your options of what counts aren't limited to just activities you've participated in at school. You can include hobbies, jobs, volunteer opportunities, and self-directed extracurriculars as well. FAOs add that, "Activity #9 on the Common Application is sometimes a throw-away activity while activity #10 can be something that is eccentric, interesting, or surprising, although not necessarily impressive."
- **Include part-time jobs and volunteer experiences** - You might not realize that part-time jobs and volunteer experiences also count as valuable activities. You can definitely add them to the activities list and you should - especially if you've been involved in them throughout high school, have led projects as part of these endeavors, or if they fit your application persona. Admissions officers appreciate knowing that candidates are responsible individuals who bring experience in a variety of ways.
- **Keep supplemental essays in mind** - Even though all schools will see your Common App activities list, some universities also ask for a supplemental essay elaborating on one of your most significant activities. Here are some examples from top institutions:

Caltech: *Describe three experiences and/or activities that have helped develop your passion for a possible career in a STEM field. (10-120 words.)*

Harvard: *Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences. (150 words)*

Princeton: *Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences that was particularly meaningful to you. (Response required in about 150 words.)*

While you can definitely write your essay about an activity that's mentioned in your activities list - after all you're supposed to include your most impactful extracurriculars in both cases - make sure you're not repeating sentences from your Common App for your supplemental essay and vice versa. Admissions officers want each sentence in either case to convey new information about you. So make sure to note how you've framed your description in the activities list so that you won't repeat the same line later!

- **Write out the list in a separate file first** - Your activities list gives admissions officers an idea of how you choose to interact with your community and how you'd contribute to their campus. Don't take this section lightly and come up with your list on a whim! Type out your list in a different file before going straight to the Common App. A spreadsheet is good for dividing up the categories and keeping track of the character count to stay organized.

Don'ts

- **Don't prioritize common activities** - You may have been captain of your debate or Model UN team, and while that's okay, if you have more impressive or unique choices to pick from, don't put these on top. An exception would be when you have done something unusual with your leadership position in a common club - started a blog, run a fundraising event, coordinated community impact, etc. You're trying to stand out here. Below is a list of the types of extracurriculars that may be very worthwhile, but won't make you unique in the eyes of admissions officers.

1. Debate
2. Robotics
3. Chorus/marching band
4. Cheerleading/pep squad
5. Recreational summer camps
6. Tutoring
7. Service trips abroad
8. Sports

Our Former Admissions Officers note that these kinds of extracurriculars "aren't so interesting and may not be as strategic as other unique activities or ones that are specific to a student's interest." So while you may have taken on leadership roles in these areas, you shouldn't prioritize them over more specific and special initiatives.

- **Don't automatically include honors** - If you've received awards for your extracurriculars, the activities list might not be the best place to put them. After all, there's an entirely separate section on the Common App for achievements. Even though the honors section is dedicated to "academic" achievements, the word academic can be interpreted loosely, for recognition in the arts, publications, and sportsmanship in athletics as well. Before writing about an accolade in the activities list, ask yourself if it would make more sense in the honors section first.
- **Don't submit the first draft of your activities list** - Just like with any other part of your college applications, you should not submit the Common App activities list without going through many drafts and thoroughly reading your entries. Watch out for spelling and grammar errors, incorrect numbers, and whether you've made the most of the space given. Once you've edited, edit again!
- **Don't add hobbies without careful consideration** - You might be wondering whether or not to include hobbies in your activities list. It depends on how much the activity aligns with the theme of your application. If your application persona is being a screenwriter, it makes sense to include that you've made short films as a passion project. On the other hand, if you enjoy playing basketball in your free time but you're not applying as a student athlete and have no other athletic experience, you shouldn't include it in your activities list. According to our FAOs, "If a hobby isn't relevant or doesn't add anything meaningful, it can be read as stretching for additional activities."
- **Don't be offensive** - Remember that admissions officers are human and will flag your application for any inappropriate content. Our FAOs mention that, "It's important to recognize that admissions officers can have personal biases. Applicants should be careful and thoughtful in how they write about each activity. Anything that is potentially offensive should not be included." You naturally want to appear as a considerate and likable individual, so adding anything that could offend never looks good on your college applications.

While grades and test scores make up a big part of the application process, your Common App activities list gives admissions officers a glimpse into what you care about. Don't miss out on the opportunity to show your schools the depth of your involvement. By highlighting your most significant and impressive extracurricular activities, you can demonstrate to colleges that you bring commendable leadership abilities and dedication to your community.