



**USING THE COMMON
APP HONORS SECTION
TO YOUR ADVANTAGE**

USING THE COMMON APP HONORS SECTION TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

A Podcast Interview with [Caitlin Hogan](#), Graduate Coach from the University of Chicago

Caitlin Hogan received her BA from the University of Chicago and is currently an MRES candidate at the Queen Mary University of London. As a Graduate Coach at InGenius Prep, she helped numerous students work on their applications – including the Common App honors section. In this interview, as part of our podcast [Inside the Admissions Office](#), Caitlin dives deeper into what the honors section is, what counts as “academic awards,” common mistakes students make, and more.

Q. Application season is upon us and right around the corner, everyone is starting to look at their essays. We always get a lot of questions about the honors section. There’s a lot of confusion. I wanted to have someone who knows the application process talk about it and answer some questions.

It can definitely be a confusing section. I spend a lot of time with my students working on it so I’m happy to provide a little insight.

Q. Just to start, I wanted to go over what the honors section is for anyone who is new to the process, is younger, or hasn’t heard of it. Could you give a brief introduction to it?

Sure. The honors section is a part of the Common App where you can list awards you’ve received. The Common App calls them “academic awards,” but it can be taken quite loosely. They can include things like athletic awards, publications, volunteering awards - anything you’ve received from anybody, including from your school. They’re a chance to show admissions committees that not only are you as accomplished as you say in your essays and extracurricular lists and as your recommenders will say in your letters, but to show that you’ve received additional confirmation along those lines as well.

Q. It’s an official source to say “we think this person is great, look we gave them this award.”

Yeah, exactly. And that’s so nice to see for admissions counselors, to have that external validation from another source.

Q. It doesn't just have to be academic awards. It can be awards from any area in your life and your activities.

It can be anything you feel is a meaningful representation of something you were involved in. It doesn't have to come from NASA. It can come from a local school-based level. There are categories you can put your awards in. There's a local-level, there's a regional or state level, and there's a national or international level. Any award from any of those categories is valid. Obviously we would encourage that you do have an international award to put on your list. But, just having school-based awards is totally acceptable and can enhance your application. It's rare to get an international award.

Q. Speaking of admissions officers looking at this section, how do admissions officers evaluate it? How important is it to them? What do those awards mean for them and your admissions chances?

Admissions officers really use this as a chance to understand who you are as a student outside the classroom. You have all this information in your application like your transcript and your teacher recommendations that show the academically-minded student that you are and what you do in a learning context. The awards section goes hand-in-hand with the extracurricular activities in terms of painting a more full picture of you as someone other than just someone who sits in a classroom and learns things. What do you do with your time when you're not in school? And the honors list really is a way to brag, to add to your impressiveness, to show all the amazing things you've done. The activities list can do that as well but the honors section is specifically showing how you've been recognized for your achievements not only in academics but in all the things you do outside the classroom.

People often think that the awards section is only to be done if you've won international awards like if you've won a Nobel Peace Prize or you've been published in a really big journal. But that's really not the case. Admissions officers really want to see students filling this out even if you don't necessarily have the five spots filled. Even if you have three awards, they want to see who you are as a person, how you might fit in, and why they might want to admit you beyond just your grades and test scores.

Q. Since it's on the Common App, admissions officers are asking to see it.

Right. The Common App is not one of those things that you can leave bits out if you're not impressed with yourself. It's not on you to judge - it's on the admissions officers to judge, and they are looking at all these different students. You might have a view of your awards that they're not a big deal, but the admissions officer might find it a really big deal, even if it's just from your school. Admissions officers really care about things like school context. If your school has a really competitive award and you think, "Oh this is just in my school," the admissions officers will still know about your school context, they're going to see your school profile and environment and they'll be impressed. So, don't sell yourself short. I encourage my students to do this in the Common App - to get big-headed just for a minute, to brag about yourself and be your own hype person because really, it's not a time to be shy. It's a time to celebrate all the amazing things you've done in school.

Q. If there's any time to brag, it's right now. They're asking for it. I like what you've said about school context. Admissions officers read regionally. If you, or 10 other kids from your school are applying to Yale or any school, you're being pitted against those students from your school. And if you're able to say "I'm the one student in this group who got this award in my school," that's going to look really good for you.

Yup, it's huge, and it's also - to go off your point - a really good way to stand out in terms of the kinds of awards you receive. Lots of people from your school, for example, are applying to Yale, and they're all interested in political science. If you are applying with a chemistry major and have lots of chemistry awards to back up your interest, it will set you apart a little bit.

Definitely awards that go along with your interest are important. Anything you have that can go along with what we call the application person can help.

Right. And the awards section is somewhere I find the application persona comes across particularly strongly. For example, if the student is super interested in physics, and they have a Physics Olympiad award or a school award in physics, it shows admissions officers that not only are they interested inside the classroom but they're going out of the way outside the class time to really explore the subject. And they recognize how good they are at it. Sometimes it can be a little bit difficult in the extracurricular list to really elucidate that persona because you have a bunch of activities that aren't related - because you don't want to be doing physics all day. But the honors section is narrow enough that you can home in on your progress in this one area that you've really pursued.

Having said that there are awards that are a lot vaguer that are still compelling, like being a National Merit Scholar or an AP Scholar that show your academic prowess across various subjects. While they do link to your persona, they're a little bit more general. It is flexible and it's a section you can make your own in terms of adding to your application.

Q. A lot of students are worried about filling out all 5 slots. They see that other schools have all these awards. Starting with students who aren't filling up all 5 spaces, what would you say to calm them? Is it a major drawback?

The first thing I would say to a student who thinks, "I don't have 5," is, "are you sure?" Schools really like to give out awards. I went to high school in the UK and I can certainly say it was the case there and speaking to many colleagues and students and friends, I know that US high schools are very similar. So you may have more than you think you do. Even if you think you have, for example, three big flashing departmental or state or regional awards, think about things that are regional awards such as being an AP scholar or National Merit Scholar that you might have forgotten about in thinking that the awards section has to be super flashy things. That would be my first piece of advice.

Secondly, admissions officers are not there to try and catch you out. They're not trying to find ways to fail. Everything you do in the application is adding. Not having 5 awards is not going to reflect poorly on you. You're not going to be penalized for not filling all 5 slots. But it's just that the more you have, the more it'll help. Don't necessarily think that's everything's over for you. I've seen great students get into amazing schools not having five awards. Don't get into the zone

of making one up – don't do that. Trust that the application is viewed holistically. The awards section, while it's important and the reason I'm here talking about it today, it's just one part of the application. You have plenty of other spaces to let who you are shine through and to prove to admissions officers how impressive you are, whether that's in your essays, or through your teacher recommendations, or in your extracurricular list. Use the awards section to the best of your personal ability but don't worry if you don't have everything super maxed out.

Q, On the other end for students who have maybe 10 awards, how do those students strategically choose which ones to put or even order them and prioritize first?

When you're putting together the Common App in general, thinking about how you're going to order things is very important. My suggestion would be to go for high impact first. And obviously it's a super vague phrase. What I mean is, anything that is national or international, if you won a national history award and were top in the whole region or whole country, that kind of thing you would want to put first. Alternatively, if you don't have awards of those kinds, it's totally fine. But put things that are the most closely related to what you're the most passionate about, that you've put first in your extracurricular list.

So if you are you're a really passionate historian, and you have a bunch of history extracurriculars and you've touched on your passion in history in your supplemental essays and personal statement, and you have a couple of history awards, I would always make sure they are in your awards section and go with the most competitive first. A good metric is - if there was any prize involved - which one was the coolest or most prestigious prize. If you won prizes that had actual money, that's impressive, or you won out of thousands of students, put those ones first. You're going from number one which could be national or statewide to number 5 which could be school-based. It's still impressive but compared to others, it has less of a wow factor. You still want to include it but it would be the one with the smallest scale.

Q. Once students choose the award and decide on an order, you mentioned they have a space where they can describe what the order is. The space is notoriously very short. How do you help your students write those descriptions and take advantage of the small space?

When I'm working with my students, the description takes the most time and involves the most back and forth arguing. You have a 100 characters in which to describe the award and that's not a lot. Students think it is but it's not. It's not even words or even letters, it's characters, including spaces. Things can be very tight. My advice would be to first of all, use numbers as much as possible. Put numbers out as numbers. Don't write 3 as "t-h-r-e-e" because that's five characters when you could just represent it as one. Quantifying things helps students get across how impressive it is to the admissions officers in a very succinct way.

Going along with that, you can use some standard abbreviations. Things like "week" can become "wk," or "hour" can become "hr." These are standard things that can help you to cut away. As a caveat to that, don't use acronyms that people outside your immediate school community wouldn't know. Students get tripped up on this a lot. Things super familiar to

you like catchy phrases all over your school - an admissions officer is not going to know. They read hundreds of applications. If they read for your region, they're not going to know the ins and outs of this one particular French language award that you get in 10th grade. While it's tempting to use acronyms to shorten up specific names, don't use them if you were to run into someone on the street in your town and they wouldn't know what it was. Everyone's going to know "wk" or "hr" but don't try to condense words that would be confusing.

And there's the description layout. You want to talk firstly about how many students were awarded the award, how many students were eligible. So you can say something like, "selected out of 300 students" or "best grades in history." That gives you a sense of what the student was awarded for and how many students you competed against. Write the word out systematically first and then think, "can I reduce this?" You don't even need to use full sentences. You can start them initially with full sentences so you know what's going on and then shorten it. You can really reduce things by using all the little things added together.

Q. It might be like writing a tweet – which a lot of high schoolers are familiar with. You want to write it in an impactful way but you don't need all of the extra fluff.

Exactly. It's like condensing the purest information to get what you want. Like a tweet.

Q. Going off things not to do, what are some of the biggest mistakes that you've seen students make, or ask about, or almost make that you'd caution students against?

The first one is thinking that they don't have anything to add. Students who are excellent often say "I've published this paper and I've won an award in my province or a mentorship position" but they think they think they don't have any awards. No, think again. Make sure you don't deprive yourself of this opportunity to enhance your impressiveness by thinking you don't have anything to add.

Another one would definitely be using acronyms or wording that is unclear to the admissions officer. Like we've said, that no one knows, or describing something in a way that no one understands, because it's very important to be cognizant of the fact that admissions officers read applications quickly because they read so many. You have to make sure whatever you write in the description is easy to understand and doesn't require them to go, "Oh hang on, I don't get it, I need to read it again." Don't let your amazing achievements go unnoticed or misunderstood because you haven't worded it properly. I've seen it happen many times. I think students get caught up with the character limit and don't want to add too much information but then it's incomprehensible. It's about getting that balance.

Thirdly, we touched on this earlier - don't skip over this section. There's always something you can include. I've never seen a student who has genuinely had no awards. Schools and external organizations give out awards. Students who've done any extracurricular activities have won an award. If they've done pickup basketball, and they've won a championship, even if it's within the local neighborhood, it's an award. Even if you don't think it counts, it counts. Be able to recognize that you are award-worthy and give yourself the credit.

Q. To round up the episode, I don't want to focus exclusively on older students, what can younger students begin to get awards?

It's totally a valid thing to think about. I always encourage my younger students to think about when they're going to be applying. It can feel so far away but things come around very fast. It's important to do what you can now to control how smoothly the application process goes for you. There's lots of things that younger students can do to make themselves likely or eligible for these kinds of awards. The first thing I would say is ask your guidance counselor or teachers. If you really like a subject and you'd like to consider entering a competition, a really good source can be your teachers or your counselor. There might be some awards you have to get some kind of permission for to be eligible. For example, for your school or state there's some bureaucracy you have to comply with. Starting from who you like and who knows about your passion for a certain subject can be a really good way to get connected with extra opportunities in that area.

If you're a history buff, consider what about national history day? Or if you're a physics fan, Physics Olympiad! There's plenty of opportunities out there for students to get involved and get these awards. It's just knowing where they are and how to answer them and what you would need from your school to support you. Similarly, if you like writing, consider trying to get published. If you're published that can be included in the awards section. If you wanted to write an opinion piece on how you think the coronavirus situation is going for example, you could submit that to a local or even national newspaper. Plenty of newspapers like to publish work by younger people, they'll often have op-ed sections. That can be a really nice additional award especially if you're interested in writing or politics. Also, if you're really interested in a research paper, there are journals at many universities that want to publish work by high school students. If you have a paper you want to write or have written, reach out and say, "hey here's my paper!" Get your teachers to help you or your parents to help you. Those journals are a really good way to get publishing experience which can be another great award.

Any awards for things like community service or community involvement are really appreciated in the honors section. It's not just about amazing, high flying, publishing papers left and right. If you're super involved in your community and you're volunteering on weekends with students or older people or people with disabilities, and you've been recognized, that is another great way to show your community involvement which colleges love to see and who you are outside the classroom. It's not just about showing who you are in the classroom but who you are as a person. And these community-based, writing-based awards really help to do that well.
