



# Ultimate Guide To The Common App

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Section by section tips,  
how to's, and FAQs

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**New** 2019 Edition

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## “ INTRODUCTION TO THE COMMON APPLICATION

The [Common Application](#) (“Common App”) is a free, online college application that is used by 800 colleges and universities in the United States and abroad. For many colleges you apply to, the Common App is the only application you have to submit.

The Common App asks you questions on many topics. In addition to objective data, students also submit essays, activity lists, and other pieces of information that reveal their personal background, academic interests, character, and personality. **Even though it's a standardized form, students can still use the Common App to present a powerful and unique story about themselves.**

We created this *Guide* to teach you how to tell your unique story through the Common App! You'll find a breakdown of the information you need to complete each section, tips for filling out both objective and subjective questions, suggested timelines, and answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs). This *Guide* also gives you insight into the most time-intensive—but exciting—element of the Common Application: the personal essay.

The *Guide* walks you through the Common App and teaches you how to conquer it. Step by step, section by section, you'll learn the secrets and strategies to creating a strong, successful application using your stories, activities, and accomplishments. If you're applying to a college or university that doesn't use the Common App, the lessons in this *Guide* will help you organize other applications.

As you work on your applications, be sure to check out [www.story2.com](http://www.story2.com) for more tips and advice on how to tell your strongest story through your essays and applications.

Story2 has helped more than 150,000 students complete selective college admission essays. Many of these students also won scholarships to help them attend college. The Story2 team is here to support you through every step of your college application process. If you have questions, call us at (800) 206-5530 or email us at [getstarted@story2.com](mailto:getstarted@story2.com).

## PREPARING FOR YOUR COLLEGE APPLICATIONS

### Get started early.

The best piece of advice we can give for the Common App is to start early! This will save you so much time and stress during the school year. While some of the info the Common App asks for you should know off the top of your head (like your birthday), other information may require some investigating (such as your mom's graduate school or your counselor's email address).

A good tip is to go through the Common App once and fill out the information that you can. When you come across something you aren't sure of, make a note of it on a piece of paper or your phone, so you can follow up with the appropriate person (your parent/guardian, counselor, teacher, etc.).

### Request teacher recommendations.

Depending on which colleges you're applying to, you may need one or two teacher recommendations. This is an important part of the application review process as admissions officers really want to hear about what type of student you are.

So who do you ask? We recommend that you pick at least one teacher who taught you in eleventh grade. After teaching and getting to know you for a full term or semester, they likely have the most complete idea of who you are as a student. A twelfth-grade teacher may not know you well enough, unless you've had that teacher before.

Recommendations should ideally be from teachers in core subjects (English, foreign language, math, science, or social science). If you're asked for two recommendations it's best for them to be in two separate academic disciplines. There's also the option of a third recommender, such as a coach or art teacher (this is completely optional). Certain programs (such as theater or music) may ask for specific recommendations from those disciplines, so always pay attention to what the college is asking for.

Some students feel they should get recommendations from teachers whose classes they earned the strongest grades in. That's not always true! The best strategy is to ask the teachers who know you best: teachers who've seen the quality of your work, from classes in which you've done strong, independent work above and beyond the usual. Let's say you have a B- in Calculus, and an A in English. Your Calculus teacher, who you meet weekly after school, may be able to speak to your persistence and academic drive. Your English

teacher however, can only speak to your proficiency in their class.

Here are a few other things to keep in mind as you think about recommendations:

- **Ask early!** Because some teachers limit the number of letters they write and many like to write them over the summer, you should think about asking your teachers if they'd be willing to write for you during spring of junior year—or early fall.
- **Have a strong backup plan.** If a teacher tells you that he or she can't write you a supportive recommendation or doesn't know you well enough, thank the teacher for being honest and ask a different teacher.
- **Additional info for recommenders.** While the focus of teacher recs should be your classroom performance, you should ask if your teacher needs any other information. For instance, you could remind them of the time they gave you three extra books to read which changed how you researched your final paper for their course. If you have an idea of what you plan to study in college, let them know so that they can connect your work in high school with your future as a college student. However, you should never draft the letter for them or ask them to write it a certain way.
- **Generate the electronic request.** After you get a verbal "Yes!" from your teacher, go ahead and invite them through the Common App. If your school uses Naviance, you should ask about how they'll take care of the recommendations.
- **Sign the waiver.** Students have a legal right to view teachers' recommendations. The Common App includes a checkbox to indicate your waiver of that right. Check it. Teachers need to be confident that they can write candidly.
- **Reminders.** Don't be afraid to send a polite email reminder to your recommenders as your deadlines approach!
- **Extra Letters of Recommendation.** If there is someone outside your school who knows your work particularly well—a college professor whose course you took or who advised your advanced research, or someone you worked with closely in a job or internship—you might consider submitting a third letter of recommendation. But this is entirely optional, and it's better not to submit a letter if the person doesn't know you well enough. This type of recommendation is typically not submitted via the Common App but sent via regular mail or email.

- **Famous Alumni and Family Friends.** With very few exceptions, you shouldn't ask family friends or VIPs—such as business leaders, professors, etc. whom your parents know—to write you letters of recommendation. These rarely help and can sometimes backfire against an applicant. On rare occasions a VIP who knows you personally may write a letter. We recommend it be sent separately from the Common App, if at all.
- **Say thank you.** Writing a thank you note is always a kind gesture for people who have taken the time to write recommendations for you. While an email is fine, a handwritten note is even better!

### Request counselor's recommendation and school transcript(s) early.

During your first few weeks back in the fall, it's a good idea to check in with your counselor on your high school's admissions process. This is a good time to update them on where you are in the process and deal with a few basic issues. One of the primary things you should check in on is your transcript. We recommend that students ask to see a copy of their transcript to make sure that it's accurate as far as grades and classes. It's also a good idea to ask your counselor about the procedure for sending transcripts to specific schools. A few weeks before your applications are due, check with your counselor to make sure they've sent out your transcripts.

### Setting up your Common App account.

When you create your Common App account, you'll see five tabs: **Dashboard**, **My Colleges**, **Common App**, **College Search**, and **Financial Aid Resources**. The application also has an extensive (though sometimes confusing and incomplete) Help section.

The screenshot shows the Common Application dashboard. At the top left is the logo 'THE COMMON APPLICATION'. To the right, a user profile box displays 'Welcome, Will!', 'First Year | CAID 14362661', and 'william.geiger@story2.com', along with a 'Sign Out' button. Below this is a navigation bar with tabs for 'Dashboard', 'My Colleges', 'Common App', 'College Search', and 'Financial Aid Resources'. The main content area is divided into two columns. The left column has a 'Hello!' heading, a welcome message, a 'Let's get started:' section with three bullet points, and a note about viewing requirements. The right column has an 'Instructions and Help' heading and two sections: 'How many colleges can I add to my Dashboard?' and 'I already submitted, can I change some of my answers?'. Both sections include a '[ + ]' link and a '[more]' link with a red arrow.

- **College Search** enables you to search for prospective colleges using several criteria including name, state, and entry term.
  - Keep in mind that the Common App only allows you to search colleges that are members of the Common App. If you're applying to non-Common App schools, like the University of California system or Georgetown, you'll be required to complete a separate application.
  - The ability to research colleges through the Common App is a bit limited, so you don't want to rely on the Common App for getting information about colleges.
  - Students can search for colleges based on application fee, writing requirements, test requirements, and recommendation requirements!
- The **My Colleges** section is where you can view the colleges you decided to add after searching. You can add up to 20 schools. In this section, you'll also find school-specific supplements.

- The **Dashboard** is similar to My Colleges, but allows you to see at a glance what you've completed, and still need to complete, for each college.
- The **Common App** section encompasses the application itself.
- The **Financial Aid Resources** section connects students to tools and resources to pay for college. In this section, students can get tips on filling out the Free Application For Student Aid (FAFSA), which is necessary when applying for need-based financial aid. Students can also connect to outside scholarship opportunities through a tool called Scholar Snapp.

The **Common App** section is where you'll spend most of your time. This section breaks into several subsections, which are listed in the navigation bar on the left-hand side of the webpage. These subsections, in turn, have their own subsections.

The Common App also has sections for your school to complete, including:

- School Report
- Counselor Recommendation
- Teacher Recommendations (students should generally ask for two teacher recommendations)
- Mid-Year Report (sent to colleges in January)
- Transcripts
- Final Report (sent to the college you'll be attending at the end of the school year)

**For International Students:** If you attend high school outside of the United States and don't have a counselor well-versed in the US application process, you may have to be more proactive.



## ““ **COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO THE COMMON APP**

The Common App has two major components:

- 1) The general “Common App” section (which is sent to all colleges)
- 2) The college-specific sections (which will be completed on a college-by-college basis)

First we'll break down each section of the general Common App so you'll know how to complete each section. This includes a comprehensive overview of the section and answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).

The screenshot displays the Common App user interface. At the top left is the logo "THE COMMON APPLICATION". On the top right, a user profile box shows "Welcome, Will!", "First Year | CAID 14362661", and "william.geiger@story2.com", along with a gear icon and a "Sign Out" button. Below this is a navigation bar with buttons for "Dashboard", "My Colleges", "Common App" (which is highlighted), "College Search", and "Financial Aid Resources". The main content area is titled "Common Application" and features a sidebar with a checklist: Profile (selected), Family, Education, Testing (checked), Activities (checked), Writing, and Courses & Grades (0 College(s) Require). The main section is "Profile" with a "Preview" button and a "View Profile Tutorial" link. Under the "Personal Information" header, there are three text input fields: "First/given name \*", "Middle name", and "Last/family/surname \*". On the right, an "Instructions and Help" box contains the text: "I already submitted, can I change some of my answers? You can return at any time and change your answer to any question in the Common App tab for future ... [+ ] [more] →".

### Profile

This section asks for basic information about you. You should be able to complete this off the top of your head, but there may be some questions that you're unsure of. Check out the FAQ below if you have questions (you can also reach out to at [getstarted@story2.com](mailto:getstarted@story2.com)).

In this section, you'll need to provide the following personal information:

- Name
- Address
- Contact Details
- Demographics
- Geography
- Language
- Citizenship
- Common App Fee Waiver

### Tips

This section requires a lot of personal and family information. If you're unsure of an answer reach out to your parent(s) or guardian(s) for help. The most important thing is to answer each question honestly and choose the answers that best fit you and your situation.

One REALLY important point: make sure you include your full legal name, as it appears on your passport or driver's license. This version of your name must match your transcript and standardized tests. If not, colleges might lose track of your paperwork.

### FAQs

If you have a nickname or shortened name—something that your teachers might use in your recommendations for instance—this is the time to use that.

#### **Must I list my sex? What if I identify as a different gender?**

Students are asked about their "sex assigned at birth." The Common App also has an open response to indicate additional information about sexual identity.

#### **What if I have two permanent addresses, one with each parent?**

You should put down the address of the home where you spend most of your time. A little bit later, you'll be able to write down your other address in the "Family" section.

#### **What if I don't have a home phone number?**

Select mobile as your preferred telephone number, and then provide that number. Under alternate phone number, select no alternate phone number.

#### **What if I don't have a US Social Security Number?**

A Social Security Number (SSN) isn't required to submit your Common Application! However, you'll need to include an SSN on your application if you want to be considered for federal financial aid via the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

If you're a US resident but don't have a SSN, choose "U.S. Permanent Resident or Refugee." You'll be able to upload a copy of your green card or proof of refugee status with your Common App.

### **Why do colleges ask for demographic information?**

Colleges are interested in the diversity of applicants and enrolled students, so the data they collect in the demographics section is helpful for them. The information you provide, by law, can't be used in a discriminatory manner in the admission process. The questions in this section are optional, except for the last question, which asks you to confirm that "[You] have completed this section to your satisfaction."

### **What does it mean to "live outside the U.S.?"**

Have you lived outside of the U.S. as a full-time resident of another country (e.g. you attended school in that country)? If so, you can calculate that time and list it here. However, if you've spent two months per summer in a foreign country for 16 years, this wouldn't count as "living outside the U.S.," even if the total time amounts to several years.

### **Do I have to provide my religion and ethnic background?**

This is optional information so you don't have to provide it. However, you do need to provide your citizenship status, birthplace, and years lived in the United States in the Citizenship section.

### **What if more than one of the ethnic options provided on the Common App apply to me?**

Include all ethnic identities that apply to you.

### **If I am a citizen of the U.S. and another country, should I list my dual-citizenship, or should I list only my foreign citizenship so that I look more exotic?**

Colleges value diversity and international experiences, so dual citizens may want to discuss their experiences of places and cultures outside the U.S. However, they are still required to identify as American citizens. The best advice is always to fill out these forms as accurately and honestly as possible.

### **What if I am an undocumented immigrant?**

You may choose "U.S. Citizen or U.S. National." "National" means you reside in the U.S. If you choose this option, no further documentation is required. Note that individual colleges have their own policies on admission and financial aid for undocumented students.

### **How do I decide on my level of language proficiency?**

It's up to you to decide if you're proficient enough to check the various boxes for speaking,

reading, and writing that apply to the languages that you indicate. Note that you may check “language spoken at home” even if you aren’t personally proficient in that language.

### **What email address should I use?**

You should use one that you check regularly. If you don’t check email regularly, the admissions process is a good time to get into the habit. If your current email address is something you don’t want colleges seeing (i.e. something you created in middle school), you should probably create a new email account that is a version of your name.

## **Family**

The Family section asks you about three main things:

- Household
- Parent(s) and/or Guardian(s)
- Sibling(s)

### **Tips**

In this section, you provide information about the other members of your household. If you don’t know certain information, such as country of birth, occupation, or education level, about your parent(s) or guardian or siblings, you may want to ask them for their help as you fill out the section!

### **FAQs**

#### **What if I don't live with my parents?**

Under the Household tab, there is a question, “With whom do you make your permanent home?” which gives you a variety of options to choose from.

#### **My parents are separated/divorced and one of my parents is mostly out of the picture. Do I still have to enter his/her information?**

The more information you provide the better. You should enter his/her name and as much information as possible. This is also something that you should discuss with your counselor so he or she can include details about your family situation in his or her school report. On rare occasions, you might write about family circumstances in the Additional Information section of the Common App. Otherwise, colleges may have no way of knowing about your circumstances.

### What if I don't know the date of my parents' divorce?

Try to find this information from one of your parents. Only the month and year are required.

### If I have step- or half-brothers or sisters, do I include their information in the "Siblings" section as well?

Yes, you may indicate they are a step- or half-brother or sister where it says "Relationship."

### Why do colleges ask for information about my parents' and siblings' schooling?

There are two reasons for this:

- 1) In the admissions process, some schools will consider granting "legacy" status to children or siblings of current students or alumni. How much this counts depends on the institution (some schools may not care very much about legacy status, while others absolutely will).
- 2) If you'll be the first in your family to attend a four-year college, you're considered a first-generation college student! Many colleges are eager to admit first-generation college students, so this is good for them to know!

## Education

This section will ask you lots of questions about your academic performance, so having a copy of your high school transcript at your side will be really helpful as you complete it!

Specifically, you'll be asked for the following pieces of info:

- Current or Most Recent School
- Other Secondary Schools
- Colleges & Universities
- Grades
- Current/Most Recent Year Courses
- Honors
- Community Based Organizations
- Future Plans

### Tips

If you drop or change a course during your senior year, your counselor will need to tell colleges that you changed your schedule and explain the reasons why. Before making a change to your schedule, we always recommend talking to your counselor so you understand the pros and cons of doing so!

Make sure that you describe honors honestly and accurately!

## FAQs

### **What is a community-based organization?**

A community-based organization (CBO) is a nonprofit group that assists underprivileged students with the college process (such as Posse, College Possible, or Questbridge). This question doesn't refer to community service or charity work.

### **Should I be worried if I had an education interruption?**

Not necessarily! If the interruption was for a legitimate reason (such as an illness, traveling, or taking time off to pursue a sport) then it's totally fine. If you were suspended or expelled from school, this is a different story. In either case, you'll have to explain the situation in the "Required Explanation" essay in the Writing section. This is another example of something that your school's college counselor can discuss in his or her school report.

### **Should I worry if I've attended several high schools? Do I need to explain why I changed schools?**

As with many things in the admissions process, it depends. If you changed schools because your family moved, that's totally fine. If you switched schools because you were suspended or expelled, you need to spell that out. If you changed in order to pursue a specific academic opportunity, that could work in your favor because it shows initiative! No matter the reason, you'll have a chance to explain in the Additional Information essay in the Writing section which we'll get to a bit later.

### **I'm only a high school student. Why do they ask me for colleges and universities I've attended?**

Some students attend enrichment programs at universities or take college-level courses during high school. Colleges are interested in your experience with college-level coursework as it can be an indicator of your ability to succeed in college. If you haven't completed any enrichment programs or taken college classes, that's okay too!

Sometimes these courses grant students college credit. If a course is for *high school credit*, it's not listed here and is instead listed among the student's high school courses. If it's a course for college credit, the student will have to produce a transcript along with his or her regular high school transcript or make sure that the high school includes the college course on its official transcript.

### **What if I've taken online enrichment courses?**

If you've taken an online course run by a college or another well-known educational

institution (such as a MOOC through Coursera or EdX) that's fantastic! These courses award certificates of completion, not official college or high school credit, so you should list them in the Activities section. This could also be something to discuss in the Additional Information section.

### **My school doesn't have a class rank. What do I do?**

There's no need to worry; admissions officers understand that many schools don't calculate class rank. If that's the case for you, you should still indicate your class size, but choose "none" for class rank. All colleges will receive a copy of your school profile, so they'll know that your school doesn't rank students. If your school does use rank, make sure that your rank is consistent between the Common App and your school.

### **How do I choose my GPA scale?**

You should double-check with your school counselor or look at your school profile. If your school doesn't officially calculate GPA, you shouldn't list a GPA here. Make sure you confirm whether your GPA is listed as weighted or unweighted.

### **How do I list courses if I am taking more than seven in a year (such as multiple one-semester courses)?**

First, list the seven courses you're taking at the start of the school year. Then in the Additional Information section you may list further courses. Remember, all your courses will also be listed on your transcript!

### **I don't have any honors or awards from high school. Do I leave the Honors section blank?**

Yes, but remember that this includes all honors at the school, state/regional, national, and international levels. If you've received something like a School Spirit Award or a Citizenship Award, these are honors you may include. You shouldn't list extracurricular positions (such as "club president") as honors (just list them as activities). On the right side, check off the "level" of your awards; the majority of students will choose "school" for most, if not all, awards. But again, if you don't have any honors or awards (some high schools simply don't give out a great deal of them), that's completely fine and you can leave this section blank.

### **Will my future plans affect my admission to the university or college?**

It certainly can. Colleges and universities are in the business of "crafting" a diverse student body as far as backgrounds, ambitions, and academic interests. Think about it like this—wouldn't college be a bit dull if every single student was the exact same major?

While this can impact decisions, you should remember that it's just one of many factors colleges consider. Keep in mind that many students go into college undecided and many

more change their majors! So be honest about what you think you want to study in college. Additionally some colleges offer independent majors that allow students to build their own program of study. Generally, it won't hurt you to be undecided, but it could help you to have credible, compelling academic goals.

### **What if I don't know what my career interests are?**

You can choose “undecided,” which doesn't make you look “bad” or unprepared. Colleges know that students' interests evolve and change throughout college, so it's okay to be undecided.

### **What if I don't know the highest degree I intend to earn?**

“Undecided” is fine here too! You don't want to say you'll earn a Ph.D. just for the sake of seeming ambitious.

### **What if I decide to change from one program to another—say from Engineering to Liberal Arts—once I'm in college?**

In most cases, that's okay too. However, if you're applying to a specific program or department, be sure to check with the college about how flexible they are with internal transfers. At some schools this can be quite difficult to do.

## **Testing**

This is a tricky section, because all the questions are both optional and adaptive. First, you'll indicate *whether* you want to provide testing information, and then you indicate *which* testing information you want to provide. This section also requires you to have taken standardized tests or have a clear plan for the tests you need to take (or the optional ones you want to take).

You'll be asked about the following tests in this section:

- College Entrance (SAT/ACT)
- English for Non-Native Speakers (TOEFL, IELTS)
- Academic Subject Tests (SAT II, AP, IB, etc.)
- Other tests



International students, watch out! If you choose “yes” to the question about leaving examinations (i.e. national exams given at the end of high school), a tiny new section will pop up below that question. Don't miss it!



## FAQs

### **I submitted my test scores via the College Board. Should I indicate my scores here too?**

Good job! Submitting your test scores through the College Board (or ACT) is crucial if you plan on submitting test scores. Even though your test scores have been submitted “officially” it’s still helpful to indicate your scores on the Common App.

### **Do I need to submit scores from all of my test sittings?**

This depends on whether the college allows you to use Score Choice (which means that you can pick the highest individual test scores per section to submit). Some schools will make students submit their entire testing history, so this is something to double-check on each college’s website. Remember, that this is more important when officially submitting your test scores through the College Board or ACT (as opposed to self-reporting them on the Common App).

### **Should I report a past or future AP exam even if I haven’t taken an AP course?**

For a past exam, definitely. For a future exam, make sure your school counselor knows that you’re taking the exam so that he or she can corroborate on the school report. Most schools will only give you credit for 3s, 4s, and 5s, so we usually recommend that students only list scores of 3 or above.

### **If I’m not a native English speaker, how do I know if I need to submit a TOEFL score?**

Every college will publish its specific TOEFL policy on its website. Typically, students who attend high schools that conduct classes in English are exempt from taking the TOEFL.

### **If I have taken the SAT and ACT, do I need to submit both scores? Which exam should I take in the first place?**

No, you don’t have to submit both scores. Many students do, but submitting both scores is rarely, if ever, preferable to submitting solid scores from a single exam.

You should take the exam you feel most comfortable with. You can find that out by taking sample tests. Once you’ve chosen an exam, commit to it. It’s better to study properly (without spending an excessive amount of time) for one exam than to split your attention and brain power between two exams that serve the exact same purpose and are viewed equivalently by colleges.

Be sure to check each college’s testing requirements, especially as they relate to Subject Tests.

## For international students, how do colleges view the scores of national exams compared with SAT and ACT?

Every college has different approaches to evaluating international students. You can rest assured though that your application will be evaluated by someone who's familiar with your country's secondary education system. All colleges understand that international students have had different experiences and different chances to prove themselves. They may look at scores (or predicted scores) on national exams for insight into students' potential.

## Activities

The activities section is one of the most important parts of the application! This is how you can show colleges how you've spent your time outside of the classroom.

You'll need to provide the following information for each activity:

- Activity type
- Position/Leadership description and organization name (if applicable)
- Details, honors won, and accomplishments
- Participation grade levels
- Timing of participation
- Hours spent per week
- Weeks spent per year
- If you intend to participate in a similar activity in college

### Tips

Except for essays, the activities section offers you the best opportunity to show the admissions officers who you are as a person. You can list up to 10 activities, along with brief descriptions to elaborate on what you accomplished. Admissions officers are looking for quality over quantity, so don't worry if you don't have 10 separate involvements to list!

Once you've chosen the type of activity from the drop-down menu, the field for position/leadership description and name of the activity is crucial. You only have 50 characters to use for your response, so make each one count! You may decide whether to use an organization's official name or a descriptive name. For instance, you might list "President, Wombat Club," but colleges won't know what a Wombat Club does. If the Wombat Club is a school spirit organization, then you could say, "President, school spirit club;" alternatively, you can describe the club's function in the following field.

The “details, honors won, and accomplishments” field is your opportunity to showcase how you made a difference through each activity. You only have 150 characters to use in this response, so don’t repeat anything you’ve already mentioned or indicated in the other fields. It can be difficult, but try to be as specific and detailed as possible. A great way to do this is by focusing on SMART details: **S**pecific, **M**easurable **A**ctions with **R**esults over **T**ime.

If you have athletic accomplishments, include them in your response. For example, “Placed 2<sup>nd</sup> in state finals after running three hours each morning before school for six months.” If you raised a certain amount of money for a charity or you had an accomplishment at a job, then say so. For instance, “Folded 285 pairs of jeans in one day; a new store record.”

## FAQs

### **Does the order of my activities or work experience matter?**

Activities should be listed in order of importance, with activities in which you had a leadership role, significant accomplishment, and longer involvement. prioritized.

### **What if I don't remember how many hours or weeks I spent doing each activity?**

Make the best estimate that you can. This is just so colleges know how committed you were to the activities you were involved in. Colleges want students who are active and engaged community members and this is one way they can determine this.

### **I don't have any activities to list because I'm always home taking care of my siblings or other responsibilities. Should I leave this section blank?**

Absolutely not! Taking care of your siblings, any family responsibilities, or part-time jobs are all serious commitments and something that admissions officers will want to know about!

In this case, write down how many hours per week you spend taking care of your siblings, and make sure you indicate during which grades you did this, as well as when during the year it happened (i.e., school year and/or summer break). You can also describe these responsibilities in the Additional Information section.

### **What if I've participated in more than 10 activities during high school?**

Choose the activities that you feel your participation has made the greatest impact or are the most important to you. If you feel like you must report other activities, you may do so in the Additional Information section. Some colleges also invite students to submit resumes; however, resumes are not recommended for a college that doesn't invite them.

### **What's to stop students from fabricating accomplishments or activities?**

Good question! Aside from general ethical considerations, everything a student submits on

the Common App may be corroborated by your school counselor's School Report. This report isn't quite a letter of recommendation, rather it's the narrative that your counselor submits along with your letter of recommendation.

### **Does it matter if I intend to continue with a similar activity in college?**

It certainly can! If you're a recruited athlete, then you definitely want to indicate that you'll continue your sport. If you're an accomplished musician, colleges might want to know that you'll try out for the orchestra. Other generic activities may have less of an impact and colleges know that students often want to try new things once they get to college!

### **What if I can't describe the depth of my commitment or the magnitude of an accomplishment in 150 characters?**

If you're asking this question, then you may have hit upon a strong topic for one of your essays or for a longer description in the Additional Information section! But 150 characters should be sufficient for most accomplishments. If a college allows you to submit an additional resume, this can also be an opportunity to talk about your involvements in more detail.

## **Writing**

The writing section includes the following subsections:

- Personal Essay (250 - 650 words)
- Disciplinary History (School Disciplinary, Criminal History)
- Additional Information (optional essay up to 650 words)

## **Overview**

The essay is perhaps the most intimidating part of the admissions process for students. When you're applying to college, most of the information (as you now know) is pretty cut and dry. You have your grades, your classes, your test scores, and a list of your activities. All of that is very matter of fact. But the essay is designed to reveal your character, the stuff below the surface that most people may not know about you. A successful admissions essay gives admissions officers a glimpse into your world. By telling the admissions officer a story, you'll be able to authentically connect with them.

### **Tips**

You can assume that the people reading your essay are bright, aware human beings. You shouldn't assume they'll understand you, agree with you, or have any prior reason to like

you.

Remember that your application conveys a lot of information about you (classes, grades, C test scores, your hometown, ethnicity, and activities). These things can be a jumping-off C point for an essay, but your essay should *illustrate*, not repeat important information.

The goal of the essay is to convey that you're smart, capable, personable, and that you're C going to add value to a college's community. This may seem like a tall order, but it should C be liberating too! After all, you get to imagine your best self and tell a story that illustrates C who that version of "you" is.

This may sound counterintuitive, but the essay isn't about answering a specific question. C The questions are starting points; if your essay is strong, readers will engage with it C wholeheartedly.

One of the best things you can do to assist yourself in the writing process is give yourself C ample time to work through different ideas and essays. Don't get too attached to the first C essay you write, it may not be the best that you're capable of.

## The Personal Essay

Students often make the mistake of writing Personal Essays like they write essays for C English or History class. Great essays are built around stories, not arguments. Whichever C prompt you choose, it should reveal your character, not rehash your achievements. **The C best essays focus on a Defining Moment—a moment when you changed, learned, grew C as a person, or took action.** Use [StoryBuilder™](#) by Story2 to FIND a Defining Moment C story, TELL it out loud, and SHAPE it into a powerful and authentic personal essay.

The Common Application has seven essay prompts for the Personal Essay (sometimes called the "main essay" or "personal statement"):

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. 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.
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.

The instructions are as follows:

*The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice. What do you want the readers of your application to know about you apart from courses, grades, and test scores? Choose the option that best helps you answer that question and write an essay of no more than 650 words, using the prompt to inspire and structure your response. Remember: 650 words is your limit, not your goal. Use the full range if you need it, but don't feel obligated to do so. (The application won't accept a response shorter than 250 words.)*

## What you need to know about each essay prompt:

The prompts serve as “jumping-off points,” not questions to answer. If you have a topic you're dying to write about, go for it. If not, the prompts can be great idea generators. Challenge yourself to come up with one topic for each of the prompts. The more you reflect and brainstorm, the more you'll have to work with.

Here is some more information to help you unpack each of the prompts:

**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.**

This is the prompt most students find easiest. If you don't know which prompt to pick, try this one! It allows you to reflect on your identity or values, but you can also write about any

story that has shaped you. Everyday quirks and details can be great topics for this essay. An example: several years ago, our intern Paul wrote about the time his principal asked him to cut his kinky hair. He refused, and asked his parents to help him find another school!

**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?**

This prompt has two great advantages. First, it invites reflection: you're meant to think about that obstacle and draw your own conclusions about it. Second, it's perfect for storytelling because most stories are about overcoming some sort of challenge, setback, or failure!

Explore the failure part. Remember: you don't need to have caused the failure to answer this prompt. Maybe you were a bystander, or you heard about it another way. Classroom failures that turn into triumphs are a cliché; it's best to avoid writing about them. If the failure is obvious on your transcript, the Additional Information section is the best place to discuss it.

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

This prompt may make you think about protest and activism (such as the Women's March or a movement to start the school day later). While these can be great topics, the "challenge" can be intellectual too (such as a book that changed your way of thinking or a lively classroom discussion). Keep in mind that the belief you challenge may be your own!

**4. 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.**

In some ways, this is the most straightforward of all the prompts as it lays out specifically what you should talk about. It's a great topic for students who've done scientific research or served on student government or other leadership positions. It invites students to be aspirational, by referring to a problem "you'd like to solve," but don't get too dreamy. If you're going to write about curing cancer or sending people to Mars, your essay should be grounded in your own current knowledge and experience.

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

This can be a tricky prompt, because it's very easy to oversimplify your "period of personal growth" as an instant change. Anything that sounds like a big "a-ha" moment—e.g., "that

was the day I learned all people are alike”—is probably a cliché and not a good place to land. This essay should reveal smaller, more enduring changes—memorable moments when your perspective shifted, when you took on something new or developed a different outlook. It sometimes helps think about the “period of personal growth” as “maturation,” an ongoing process, and seek moments that reveal the larger trajectory of your growth.

**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?**

Whether you're passionate about physics, the American Revolution, or the implications of artificial intelligence in society, this question allows you to discuss whatever excites you. Remember, this does not have to be something that is academic and in fact, it can be a great opportunity to share another interest or passion that might not come through otherwise. Perhaps you are a prospective math major who is passionate about economic inequality or a prospective business major who loves botany and is an avid gardener. Admissions officers want to get to know the “whole” you so don't be afraid to share. One piece of advice if you choose this prompt--it can be very tempting to focus your essay on the actual idea or concept. While this important (especially if your passion is rather obscure), you will want to make your action and learning experience the focus of the essay.

**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.**

Question number seven is one of the reasons that students should think of the prompts as suggestions as opposed to firm rules. Perhaps your original essay has radically shifted (even though it fit neatly into a prompt at one point) or maybe you just wanted to go in your own direction from the start. Whatever the case, you can always check off prompt #7 if you are uncertain where your essay might fit. This prompt should also give you assurance that it is okay to stray from one of the assigned prompts.

## FAQs

### **How important are essays in colleges' decision?**

After grades and test scores, essays are the most important part of your application.

### **How do you fit everything important in 650 words?**

You don't! It's stronger to tell one important story than to try to pack your whole life into 650 words. Colleges know what the life of a typical high schooler is like. They want to find out how you're different and what you've made of that high school life.



## **I'm having trouble thinking of a topic, and/or writing my essay. Is there anything that could help me get started?**

At Story2, we have a five-step process that simplifies the college essay process:

**Step 1: Find Stories** helps you identify moments that reveal your character.

**Step 2: Focus In** makes your topic stronger by helping you identify a specific moment when you changed, learned, grew or made a difference.

**Step 3: Tell It Out Loud** unleashes the power of your spoken voice as the foundation of solid writing.

**Step 4: Map It** shows you how to structure your essay with a 3-sentence story.

**Step 5: Focus Out** gives you strategies to edit your essay, sentence-by-sentence, to bring your story to life and engage readers in the details of your experience.

Story2 has empowered more than 150,000 to crack the code on admission and scholarship essays. We're here to help you save you, reduce stress, and produce your very best essays, based on the stories only you can tell!

## **What do college admissions officers say I should write about?**

There are no pre-set "good topics." Start with your own experiences, and use specific moments to show who you'll be in college and life. You should be writing the essay that YOU want to write (not the essay that you think will "look good" to admissions officers).

## **Hasn't any topic I might write already been written by thousands of other students?**

Many students participate in community service. Many students travel. And many students play sports. But you're the only person who's had your specific experiences! Often the best essays come from common everyday moments that reveal your character and humanity. Take those general experiences and focus on moments that are really your own.

## **Does my essay have to be about me?**

It's your essay and it's important that you take ownership of your thoughts and ideas. One common mistake students often make is focusing their essay on a person who's had a strong influence on their life. Your essay should be about you, whether you're the protagonist, an observer, an investigator, or a scholar--or maybe what you learned from another person.

### **How personal should the Personal Essay be?**

Here's a way to decide: if you're having dinner with someone whom you've just met, is this a story you would tell them? How would you tell the story if your goal was to continue the conversation? It's important to be honest and genuine in your essays, to reveal what matters to you, and even to illustrate when you've made mistakes. But don't overshare, and don't discuss anything that you want to remain private.

### **Why shouldn't I write about my awards or accomplishments?**

Your academic awards and extracurricular accomplishments will show up in other parts of your application. Use each essay to add more insight into your character and to reveal the thoughts, feelings, relationships, and motivations behind those accomplishments.

### **How important is it that my essay be polished?**

Admission officers look for authenticity, not slickly polished essays. It's much better to write in your own voice. However, you should still proofread for spelling and grammar and take time to make sure the essays represent your best work.

### **The essay directions say I can write between 250 and 650 words. That means I can write just 250 words, right?**

Most students will find that it's easier to exceed the upper limit than to reach the lower limit. However long your essay is, make sure that every word counts. As the saying goes, "it should be as long as necessary, but not longer." (If you want to see the power of brevity in action, take two minutes to read the Gettysburg Address or one of Shakespeare sonnet.)

### **What clichés should I avoid?**

Generally, students are always better off if they avoid the following topics:

- Sports triumphs after long, hard work
- Family drama, including illnesses
- Vacations and exotic travel, including community service trips
- Contrived or overly produced community service projects
- Injuries and medical conditions
- Early childhood anecdotes
- Sex, romance, and anything else risqué
- Political preaching (political analysis can work well)
- Religious preaching (reflection on religious traditions can work well)

With that said, there are always exceptions to these rules. If you intend to be one of these exceptions, just know that you may need to work twice as hard to tell the story only you can tell.

### Can I make different versions of the personal essay? Should I?

The Common App wants your application to be truly “common.” It discourages students from customizing or updating essays. That being said, the Common App allows students to make unlimited changes to their essay after the first submission. However, aside from a minor correction, there should be no reason for making drastic changes to the essay. If a major life event occurs after you’ve submitted your first application or you come up with a dramatically stronger topic, then you may have reason to write a new essay.

## Disciplinary History

Disciplinary action isn’t ideal, but the Common App gives you a chance to explain and reflect on these experiences.

If you marked yes to either of the two questions in the Disciplinary History section (meaning that you were placed on disciplinary probation, suspended or dismissed from a school from ninth grade onward) you **must** complete the explanation. This is definitely a section to review with your counselor. Here’s a few tips to keep in mind when writing your responses.



### Tips

#### 1. Stick to the facts

Use detail and description to briefly illustrate what happened using language that is as straightforward as possible. Avoid any excess emotions or judgements. Try to describe the situation in three to four sentences or less.

#### 2. Focus on what you learned (as opposed to what happened)

Use the majority of this response to show what you learned from the situation, rather than simply explaining what happened. Acknowledge how you got yourself into the situation and reflect on why you made those choices and on what you could have done instead.

#### 3. Highlight any impacts moving forward

Describe how you’ve changed since the incident and its corresponding punishment. Was the situation a “wake-up call” for you? Was there a clear before and after in your life because you went through this situation? Explain what you learned, how you changed, and what difference you made after going through the situation.

## FAQs

### **I have been put on probation/suspension/removal/dismissal/expulsion from my high school before. Do I have to complete the explanation section?**

Yes. Some colleges will consider an application incomplete if the student doesn't explain what the situation was or what he or she learned from the experience. If you say nothing it may suggest that you're not taking responsibility for your disciplinary violations. Make sure you complete this section, as admissions counselors will know that you didn't fill it out. Talk to your college counselor about how to complete this statement.

### **Does this need to be an “essay,” or can it be a brief statement?**

It depends on the offense and on your genuine reaction to it. A minor incident may warrant only a brief acknowledgement. Admissions readers don't need to read 500 words about gum-chewing or tardiness, especially if a student is otherwise a strong applicant. But if there's a real narrative and/or weighty issue at stake—such as academic integrity—then a reflective essay is warranted and will probably help your cause.

## Additional Information

For many students, and even some college counselors, the Additional Information section is the most baffling element of the Common App. “Circumstances or qualifications” can mean almost anything. Is it another essay? A resumé? An extended activity list? A space for accolades? A writing sample? It can be any of the above—or it can be left blank—but students must think carefully about how, and whether, to use it.

In this section you'll be presented the question “Do you wish to provide details of circumstances or qualifications not reflected in the application?” If you answer yes, a text box will appear that allows you to provide up to 650 words of any additional information you wish to share.

## Tips

Some “circumstances or qualifications” will be obvious for certain students. Here are some examples of topics to discuss:

- A significant extracurricular activity (such as service, leadership, or artistry at the state or national level) that isn't fully described elsewhere
- Any extenuating circumstance(s) that may have affected your academic performance
- Major extracurricular academic work, such as scientific research or creative writing

- Employment or entrepreneurship
- Components of your identity, such as ethnicity, nationality, gender orientation, or disability that you feel colleges should know about
- Extended activity list, only if activities are truly compelling

## FAQs

### **Will it look bad if I leave this section blank?**

No. This section is completely optional. However, if you do choose to complete it, admission officers take this section seriously, so make sure you use this section constructively.

### **Can I use this space for an extra essay?**

Only if you have a high quality and compelling essay to share. Students who don't feel that they have obvious topics such as the above will most likely leave this section blank. That is 100 percent okay. Students might, however, include an extra essay even if the topic doesn't seem crucial. In this case, though, the essay has to be very good.

### **How should I write about uncomfortable situations in my personal or family life?**

If there were any extenuating circumstances at home or in school that affected your academic performance, you should complete this section. When you're writing about these situations always stick to the facts. For example, *"My sophomore year was a difficult year for me and my family. In the fall, my father lost his job, and my parents went through a divorce. In the spring, I was diagnosed with mono. As you can see on my transcript, my grades suffered that year. Over time, I have learned how to better manage my schoolwork, activities, and family responsibilities. I now feel very well prepared to balance all the different parts of college life."*

### **Can I include an art portfolio in this section?**

No. The previous version of the Additional Information section enabled students to upload PDFs, which could include photographs or other visual displays. The new version is purely a text box. Each college will have their own procedure and instructions for submitting artistic work, including paintings, photographs, and even musical recordings. Keep in mind, you should only submit these if you're strongly considering pursuing a major or minor/certificate in the arts.

## My Colleges

Once you add colleges and universities via the College Search tab, you'll see additional sections to complete under the My Colleges tab. These sections will vary from school to school, and usually include:

- Entry term
- Degree Status
- Financial Aid Preference
- Academic Program
- Family (whether you have had family members attend the college)
- Previous Contact with Institution (interview, visit)
- Writing Supplement (college specific essays and short answers)

## Tips

Many colleges have additional essay questions, called Supplemental Essays, included in their college page. Some schools may include important additional information about their supplements on their website. **There's a whole course devoted to Supplemental Essays when you sign up for [StoryBuilder](#).**

The Common App is “adaptive,” meaning that some questions are tailored to you based on your prior responses. Adaptive questions are common in supplements. For instance, a school might have different questions for different academic programs, so it won't reveal the questions until after you've indicated which academic program you're applying to.

Don't reuse the topic of your Personal Essay for supplement essays. Supplement essays should be an opportunity to reveal a different aspect of your character and experiences.

Although there are many different prompts, you can answer almost any question by describing a specific moment when you learned, changed or made a difference. Use [StoryBuilder](#) to complete supplement essays that build a bridge between you and the colleges you're applying to using stories from your own experience.

## FAQs

### **Is it OK to recycle supplemental essays for different colleges?**

We don't recommend recycling essays for another college. If you want to repurpose it however, it's okay to discuss some of the same experiences and important moments in your life if they fit the prompt. Colleges use supplements to determine the “fit” of a prospective student in their community. Supplements can also be one of the biggest missed opportunities because students don't tailor them to each particular school. To take advantage of this, it's best to have an individual approach to each college's supplemental essay.

### **How firm are word limits?**

This depends on the college. Some colleges will set exact limits by the word or character. In

these cases, you should stick to the limits. Other colleges will be vague and say “about a page” or “a paragraph.” In these situations, it’s best to follow their suggestions as closely as possible and err on the side of a shorter essay if you can.

### How important is the “interview/visit” question?

Colleges are sensitive to what they call “demonstrated interest” (things like visits and interviews). That’s why it’s important to fill out a sign-up sheet when you visit a college or meet a rep at a fair. If you’re not able to visit the campus, check and see if there are any local opportunities to learn about the school (such as an off-campus interview). Even an email to your local admissions rep can help. But don’t worry: colleges understand if you can’t visit because of cost or distance.

## **ADDITIONAL TIPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In this e-book, you’ve learned:

- What the Common App is, how it’s structured, and what information it requires
- How to compile objective information, from your family background to your current classes
- How to approach teachers and counselors for letters of recommendation
- How to build your activities list
- What the Common App Personal Essay entails and the process to write a successful essay
- How, and whether, to write optional essays, such as the “Additional Information” and “Required Explanation” essays
- How to complete supplement essays that establish a connection between you and each college you decide to apply to
- The time management, and organizational skills that can make your experience with the Common App effective, efficient, and straightforward, as well as the effort required to present your best self to colleges

### The Application and the Essay

At [Story2](#), we teach students how to tell their stories and master the art of personal narrative writing—so you may be wondering why do we care about the Common App? Essay writing is most successful when you approach it with a clear mind and a clear sense of context. We know that when students understand the Common App and can complete it with confidence, they can then turn to their application essays with a clean slate and give those essays their full attention.

Now that you've read this guide, you'll be able to write your college admission essays with an understanding of how the essays fit into the entire application process. Most importantly, you can take elements of your personal history that are already on the Common App and use your essays to bring those elements to life.

## Essay: Next Steps

The Story2 Moments Method® enables you to explore your personal stories, develop your own ideas, and turn your memories, convictions, and passions into college admission and scholarship essays. We show you how to shape those stories into authentic, meaningful essays that leave a lasting impression on the admission officers reviewing your application. Our process empowers students to write better essays, and makes the essay writing process easier. Better and easier: that's what happens when you find the right direction and discover the stories only you can tell.

For more information on the Story2 Moments Method®, visit our website at [www.story2.com](http://www.story2.com) or check out [Write Out Loud](#) written by Carol Barash, Founder and CEO of Story2. *Write Out Loud* provided the framework—the process for discovering your most powerful stories and shaping them into successful admission and scholarship essays—that is at the core of our [StoryBuilder](#).

## Additional Resources:

- Head over to [StoryBuilder](#) to register (if you haven't done so already) and get started on your college admission essays!
- Story2 also offers a variety of [essay coaching packages](#) so you can work with admissions experts throughout the application process!
- Use [StoryBuilder](#) to explore your personal stories of change, growth, and discovery that you can use in your admission essays and inspire others.
- Check out the [Story2 blog](#) for more information on the college admission process, the college essay process, scholarship opportunities, storytelling and writing tips, and more.
- Download [4 College Essays and Why They Worked](#) to get examples of four great application essays from students who used Story2 with expert tips on what makes each essay successful.
- Follow Story2 on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#) for daily updates at every step of your college admissions journey.