

# How to Make Your 2015–16 Common Application a Lot Less Common

**The Collegewise Guide to the Common Application**

*by Arun Ponnusamy, Kevin McMullin, and Meredith Graham*

# A Message to Students, Parents, and Counselors

## **Students and parents:**

This guide is our treatise to help students craft their very best Common Applications. We've arranged it so that you can read the entire thing, or go directly to those sections where you have questions or need a little help. We think you'll be amazed by what a difference even just some small—but smart—tweaks can make to your application.

If, at the end, you feel like you need even more advice, our Collegewise counselors can help you:

- Tackle your personal statement or supplements
- Review everything before you officially hit “Submit” and send your application off through cyberspace
- Answer some last minute questions

To find out more about these services, just shoot me a quick note at [paulk@collegewise.com](mailto:paulk@collegewise.com) and I'll point you in a sensible direction.

## **Counselors and teachers:**

While there is a copyright below, we intended for you to share our guide with your colleagues and students. Some counselors print a copy for their office, others forward the download link directly to their students, and some add the link to their school's newsletters or websites. All that we ask is that our Collegewise name stay on it, and that you neither change nor charge for it.

In return, we ask you to consider the following:

- Sign up for our [free email newsletter](#) for counselors, students, and parents. We don't send out sales pitches—just great college planning advice. And if you change your mind about subscribing, one click is all it takes to opt-out.
- Check out our founder's blog, [wiselikeus.com](http://wiselikeus.com). Hundreds of counselors around the world read (and share) it, and it's a streak Cal Ripken would admire in that Kevin's blogged his wisdom daily for six straight years.
- Invite us to help you. We're really good presenters both live and online and there are very few college-related topics we cannot handle. And yes, we also do amazing professional development.

If you'd like to set something up where Collegewise can hopefully help, please email me at [paulk@collegewise.com](mailto:paulk@collegewise.com).

Paul Kanarek  
CEO  
Collegewise

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Fourth Edition

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# How to Use This Guide

We wrote this guide to pick up where the Common Application's instructions leave off.

The Common App outlines how to add your activities to the appropriate section, but we explain how to present them in a clear and compelling way. The Common App tells you where to upload additional information you'd like to share, but we tell you what kind of information is appropriate and useful for admissions officers. The Common App tells you to choose your preferred telephone number, but we tell you which phone number you should prefer.

We didn't write this guide to tell you how to add colleges to the My Colleges section, how to use the CEEB lookup function, or anything else that the Common App's directions already clearly explain to you. We think the Common Application's instructions and help menus are pretty good, and we didn't want you to spend time on anything that's already available.

So, please don't ignore the Common Application's directions. As Arun says, "Read the directions. In life, always read the directions." Follow that advice on the Common App. As you work through the sections on the app, watch for the **Instructions & Help Center** box to the right—it answers a lot of obvious and not-so-obvious questions quite clearly.

Then, as we suggested earlier, use our guide to pick up where the directions leave off.

We've arranged this guide in a sequence that we think makes the most sense for completing the sections. Or, you can skip right to the sections you need help with the most. (If you're feeling nervous, skipping forward and reading our Conclusion before you do anything else might help you relax a bit.)

Everything we're sharing here is the same advice we've given to over 8,000 of our Collegewise students when we helped them fill out their applications. It's worked very well for them, and we think it will for you, too. If you have questions or feel like you should do something differently, always check with your high school counselor or college center.

## **Why no screenshots?**

Earlier versions of this guide include detailed screenshots that we felt made it easier for readers to follow along as they completed or reviewed their Common Apps. But after a complete overhaul of the application in 2013, the folks at Common App stopped granting permission to for-profit companies to use any images from the app. Sure, we're disappointed. But we're going to follow the rules and forge ahead sans screenshots.

# Before You Start Your Common App

Here are a few steps you can follow before starting your Common App that will help things go more smoothly:

1. Bookmark <https://www.commonapp.org>. (You'll be using it a lot as you complete your Common Application and the required supplements.)
2. Bookmark <https://appsupport.commonapp.org/ics/support/splash.asp>. The Applicant Solution Center has a wealth of basic information.
3. In particular, you should review the videos available on the Common App YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/CommonAppMedia>.
4. Double-check that your computer and software meet all system requirements. <https://recsupport.commonapp.org/link/portal/33011/33014/Article/937/System-Requirements>
5. Make sure spell-check is enabled in your browser. (If you're not sure how to do this, you can search your browser's "help" section, or ask about it in Google or Bing.)



6. Add yourself to the Common App Facebook page and Twitter feed. They offer timely and useful advice throughout the process: <https://www.facebook.com/commonapp> & <https://twitter.com/commonapp>.
7. And finally, if the admission offices of the schools to which you are applying are connected to Facebook and Twitter, add yourself to them. Increasingly, many schools are providing advice through social media on how to approach their applications.

# Creating an Account

Now you're going to register with the Common Application and create your account. But before you do, slow down. Don't treat this like an ordinary online form you can rush through and where you enter everything in lowercase letters. The information you enter in this section will populate throughout your Common Application, throughout your supplements, and on the forms sent to your teachers and counselor. If you have a typo in your name, or if you decide to type everything in lowercase, that mistake might show up repeatedly. So, get it right the first time. We'll walk you through a couple of important pieces here.

Go to <https://apply.commonapp.org/createaccount> to start your application.

## **Email address**

Make sure it's an email address that A) you check daily and B) is appropriate. One of our Collegewise counselors who worked in admissions said she and her colleagues had a contest every year for which admissions officer would read the file with the most inappropriate email address. That's not a contest you want to win. What's inappropriate? Anything you wouldn't show your grandma is probably inappropriate.

## **Password**

You must follow the requirements in the gray box to the right. If possible, make your password the same as your Naviance or College Board password. Normally we don't suggest writing down passwords, but it might be worth thinking about jotting this one down and keeping it somewhere secure.

Click [Continue](#)

## **First/given name and Last/family/surname**

Enter your given name as it appears on formal documents, like your Social Security card, birth certificate, transcript, etc.

Click [Enter address](#) to bring up the "Address information" pop-up.

List the address where a college will be able to successfully send you mail for the next nine months. For most students, this is just their home address. However, if you attend a boarding school, or if your parents don't live together and you stay at different houses, this is an important distinction. Click [Continue](#)

## **Phone**

This is an example of a seemingly simple question that actually could have some important consequences. Consider this: If an admissions officer is missing a teacher recommendation or a test score, and she doesn't feel like emailing you or she wants an immediate response, she's going to call this

number. If you are waitlisted and the admissions officer calls you to take you off the list, this is the number she's going to dial. Because it's important that these calls get through without any delay, most of our Collegewise students list their Home number for this option. Here's why:

First, some students don't check their cell phone voicemails regularly. Parents are usually a little better about checking messages on the home phone.

Cell phone calls can also catch students unprepared. Imagine this: Your cell phone rings while you're in a car with your friends, and the music is blaring at top volume. When your phone rings, your friends viciously taunt you for making a poor ringtone choice. Then, the voice you hear on the phone says, "Hi, this is James from Harvard University calling to schedule our interview. Is this a good time to talk?"

We don't know about you, but that's not a scenario in which we'd be able to put our best "phone foot" forward.

If your family has made the switch and no longer has a home phone, or if you just feel more comfortable listing your cell phone number on the application, here are a few suggestions:

- For the next few months, consider answering unidentified calls only when you are in a quiet and comfortable place to talk. Otherwise, let the call go to voicemail.
- For the next few months, consider answering unidentified calls only when you are in a quiet and comfortable place to talk. Otherwise, let the call go to voicemail.

- If you get a voicemail from a college representative, collect your thoughts, find a quiet place, and call back within 10–15 minutes.
- While you're at it, you might want to make sure your outgoing voicemail is something you'd be comfortable with a college representative hearing. Do not use songs or be creative; play it straight and generic for a few months.

**I am applying as a:**

Make sure you click “First-Year Student.” That will ensure you get and submit the correct application version.

**I am a(n):**

Make sure you click “Applicant planning to enroll within the next 12 months.” That will ensure you get and submit the correct application version.

**The colleges that I am considering for application may communicate with me by email prior to submission of my application (you can subsequently change your response to this question in your account settings).**

We advise our Collegewise students to always check this additional box. Sometimes, colleges will contact students to invite them to local events or to give some additional information or advice about the application.

## □ **Submitting**

Once you enter your information according to the suggested guidelines and are ready to click “Create,” stop and proof what you’ve entered. Mainly, make sure there are no typos, misspellings, or anything that resembles a text message. Anything that should be capitalized needs to be.

Then, click **Create**.

# Dashboard



You are now at the Dashboard. First, read the “Welcome!” message. As you’ll see elsewhere in the application, the Instructions & Help Center resides on the right side of the screen. Make it a habit of reading through it on each page you visit. It will reveal information you’ll find helpful and relevant to the page you’re currently on. Please note that the information will likely change from college to college.

The purpose of the Dashboard is to provide one screen that shows the status of each of your applications. By clicking on any individual school, you can see which sections remain for you to complete. When you click on “incomplete,” you are taken directly to the section that needs to be completed. (You can also access much of this information through My Colleges, though it usually takes an extra click or two.)

# College Search

Dashboard

My Colleges

Common App

College Search

Although this section is the last tab, we recommend that most of our students start here. This is where you “add” the various colleges you will be applying to or are at least considering. By doing so, you’ll be populating information that will appear under the Dashboard and My Colleges sections. If you do not choose schools in this section, those sections will remain blank. Thus, at the very least, we encourage you to plug in two or three schools to start so you can become familiar with how various parts of the application work with each other.

Here are a few other things to keep in mind:

**1. You don’t have to fill it out yet if you’re not ready.**

Many of our students will complete their entire Common Application, then go back and add their colleges at the end, especially if they haven’t finalized their college list. You can always add or drop schools from this list at any time. Nothing is permanent here.



**2. If a school doesn't show up in the search box, verify that it actually is not on the Common App.**

To double-check, open a new tab in your browser and paste in this link if the school's name starts with an A-M:

<https://appsupport.commonapp.org/link/portal/33011/33013/Article/999/Live-Common-App-Member-Schools-A-M>

If the school's name starts with an N-Z:

<https://appsupport.commonapp.org/ics/support/kbanswer.asp?deptID=33013&questionID=1902&task=knowledge>

Between the two links, it's a complete list of all the schools on the Common App—over 600 of them. Note in some cases a school might start with “The” and then you'd find it at the second link above. And some schools are found under “St.” and others other “Saint.” So, be sure to double-check possible variations!

Also worth noting, some schools share parts of their name. There's a Cornell in New York and there's one in Iowa. There's a Trinity in Texas and another in Connecticut. Be sure you're applying to the right one or you may be in for a surprise come decision-time.

# My Colleges



My Colleges is the section from which you will actually *submit* your application in several main parts:

- a. Main Common Application
- b. Recommendations
- c. Writing Supplement (i.e., school-specific questions)

When you have completed the College Search section, the left-hand side of My Colleges will be populated with the schools you plan on applying to and their school-specific questions. We'll break this section down further toward the end of this guide. We encourage students to first complete the main Common App by entering in their basic information.

# Common App

Dashboard

My Colleges

Common App

College Search

For those of you who read our advice back in the Creating an Account section, some of this will be a repeat performance (some of that information will populate here). But don't skip this section because we have some new tips, too.

## Profile

### Personal Information

**First/given name and last/family/surname**

Enter your given name as it appears on formal documents, like your Social Security card, birth certificate, transcript, etc. You should have already entered your first and last name when you created your account. However, you might not have entered your middle name, so you should do so here if you have one (or even two). If you don't have one, simply leave this space blank.

**Preferred name (nickname)**

Do people, including your teachers and counselors, call you a different name from what you entered for your "First/given name?" If so, fill it in here. If your name is "Patrick," but the letters of

recommendation from your teachers and counselor refer to you as “Pat,” the administrative staff in the admissions office will have an easier time assembling your file correctly if you provide this information. Remember, they are processing thousands of pieces of info during admissions season. Make their jobs easier and help them ensure your file contains the right information by entering your “Preferred name.”

**Have you ever used any other names?**

Applicants commonly use the “Former last name” box if they are married or divorced. You’ll most likely answer “No” to this question.

[Continue](#)

## **Address**

**Permanent home address**

You should have completed already this information upon registration.

**Alternate mailing address**

Is your permanent address where a college will be able to successfully send you mail for the next nine months? For most students, this is just their home address. If that’s you, click “No alternate address.” However, if you attend a boarding school or have some alternate temporary address, you may need to click “Send mail to temporary or alternate address” then fill out the date range when you can be reached at the alternate address.

Click [Continue](#)

## Contact Details

### **Email**

Again, you should have entered this during the registration phase. Remember, make sure it's an email address that A) you check regularly and B) is appropriate.

### **Preferred telephone**

Make sure that you click the box ("Home" or "Mobile") that matches the number you entered during the registration phase. Again, consider listing your home phone (if you have one) rather than your cell phone (we explained why in the "Creating an Account" section).

[Continue](#)

### **Demographics**

Even though the questions in this section are optional, we advise our Collegewise students to fill this out for a couple of reasons. First, this section alone is not going to get you in or keep you out of college. It's not important enough to worry to the point that you leave it blank out of fear or concern. We think that filling out every section, and doing so candidly, makes for a more complete picture of you for the reader.

**Religious preference**

Colleges sometimes use religious preference during the yield process (the time after students have been accepted and when colleges try to convince them to attend campus functions). For example, it wouldn't be unusual for an accepted student who checked "Jewish" here to receive information about the Hillel or Jewish life on campus. Regardless of what you list, this won't be held against you.

**Regardless of your answer to the prior question, please indicate how you identify yourself (Select one or more)**

Notice that they're asking how you identify yourself. That's not the same thing as asking what your DNA might be composed of. If you're Caucasian and your parents recently told you that you're one-sixteenth Native American, you should still check "Caucasian." If you check an ethnicity you don't identify with in the hopes of getting an admissions advantage, you run the risk of being exposed later. Did you check the same box when you took the SAT? What about when you took the PSAT way back in your sophomore year? People who identify with an ethnic group check the corresponding box whenever they're asked. Don't try to game the system here.

Getting into a college is a lot like dating: You have to be confident. You shouldn't change who you really are just to make people like you. So, why would you want to change or hide your ethnicity or religious beliefs? Be proud and confident, whatever your answers to these questions may be.

- The questions in this section, while helpful to colleges, are entirely optional, and you're welcome to move on without answering them. Before you do, please confirm for us that you've completed this section to your satisfaction.**

There's only one box to check here, but before you do, make sure you've read the advice for the question above.

Continue

## **Geography**

This should all be fairly straightforward. For the years, rough estimates are fine. Don't worry about exactly how many months because rounding to the nearest year will suffice.

Continue

- Language**

If you speak English as your first language, remember to list it. (Some people misread this question and think it's asking only about second or third languages.)

Some students want to stretch this and include languages in which they aren't really proficient. When you click the "Help" menu in this section, they offer this guidance:

Proficiency in a language is about how comfortable you are using another language as a form of communication. In order to be proficient, you must be able to communicate effectively and converse comfortably.

If you're fluent, or if you've completed four years (or even the AP level) of foreign language study, you might be proficient. If you're not sure, imagine you eventually have an interview with one of your colleges, and the interviewer, unbeknownst to you, speaks both English and a language you've listed here as one in which you're proficient. If this interviewer says, "I see you listed Spanish as one of your languages" and then begins a conversation with you in Spanish, would you feel confident, or would you feel like you'd just been caught in a lie?

Our feeling at Collegewise is that it's never worth it to lie or stretch the truth on a college application. If you're caught, it calls your entire application into question. That's just not worth the risk.

[Continue](#)

## **Citizenship**

### **Select your citizenship status**

If you are a "U.S. Citizen or U.S. National" you only need to add your Social Security Number. If you are a "U.S. Dual Citizen," "U.S. Permanent Resident or Refugee," or "Other (Non-US)," you will need to provide information specific to your situation. It's important to be as accurate as possible in this case.



Some parents don't want their children to list a Social Security Number here. However, it's important to answer this question because schools sometimes match official test score reports (like from the SAT and ACT) to applicants' files by using Social Security Numbers. Also, if you're applying for financial aid, you'll need to list this number because it will correspond to your FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) information.

Continue

## **Common App Fee Waiver**

If you click "Yes" and see that one of the economic indicators applies to you, then go ahead and sign your name. If you are unsure, speak with your high school counselor or someone in the college center. A formal list of indicators of economic need that would qualify you for a fee waiver can be found here: <https://appsupport.commonapp.org/link/portal/33011/33013/Article/758/Common-App-fee-waiver>

These waivers are for students truly in need. Don't check "Yes" if you just assume you qualify; the schools will ask for verification.

Continue

# Family

## Household

### **Parents marital status (relative to each other)**

If you select “Divorced” or “Widowed” while also listing Parent 1 as living, a window will ask you for the date. Be as accurate as you can. This can provide some important context to your academic record if the divorce or passing happened while you were in high school.

### **Parent 1 and Parent 2**

It doesn’t matter which parent you list as 1 or 2. However, when filling out this information, do consult directly with both parents to ensure the information is as accurate as possible.

### **Preferred email**

Make sure your parents are OK with you giving out their email address. This information is generally used during the yield process once you’re admitted so colleges can invite parents to special parent events.

### **Preferred phone**

Same advice as for “Preferred email” — check with your parents.

## □ Occupation

Some counselors advise that you should use strategy in this part and play down whatever your parents do. The argument is that colleges will instinctively expect more from a student who grew up with parents who are both successful heart surgeons than from a student who grew up without the same advantages.

That point isn't entirely without merit. However, a college is never going to accept or reject you solely on the basis of what your parents do or don't do for a living. And because you can't change your parents' occupations, it's fruitless to worry too much about this. We'd rather our students focus on the other parts of the application that they *can* influence, like the essays.

Here's what we tell our Collegewise kids to do:

- First, ask your parents what they want you to list here. It's important that your parents feel what you have shared is accurate.
- Never *inflate* your parents' accomplishments. You're not going to get extra admissions credit because your parents have fancy-sounding titles. Just be direct.
- Remember the confidence factor. If your parents are very successful, you should be grateful about your circumstances. If neither of your parents went to college and you have dreams of doing things they never could have in their lives, you should be proud of yourself and the fact that

you're about to do something groundbreaking in your family. Don't apologize for or try to hide the circumstances under which you've been raised. Just be genuine and let your qualifications speak for themselves.

### **Education level**

In the pull-down menu, "College" and "Graduate school" are listed; however, "Professional school" is not. For this section, the Common App actually considers graduate and professional schools as the same thing.

### **Total number of institutions attended**

Use the following: 0 = never attended college; 1 = attended for at least a semester; 2 = entered into a graduate program or professional school; 3, 4, or 5 = attended multiple graduate or professional schools.

### **College lookup**

This is where you enter the specific names of the schools your parents have attended. If you can't find your schools (which is often the case for international schools), then carefully follow the directions on manually entering the schools' details.

This section is where you can also indicate what degree was earned at a particular college, and that drop-down offers: Associates; Bachelors; Masters; MBA; JD; MD/DO/DVM/DDS; PhD; Other.

## □ Sibling

Colleges ask about siblings for two reasons. First, they'd like to know if any of your siblings attended or are currently attending the same college you're now applying to. Second, it can provide more context to your family story. For example, if neither of your parents went to college, but your two brothers went and now it's your turn, it's clear that there are some special things happening in your house.

What should you put for step-siblings or younger siblings if they don't have a degree? What should you do if you have more than five siblings? Here's the Common App's reply:

"You may add siblings, half siblings, or step-siblings only. If you need to enter more than five siblings, please use the Additional Information section, located on the Writing page."

Continue

# Education

## Current or Most Recent School

### **Current or Most Recent School lookup**

Using the “Find School” link, enter in your *current* school.

### **Date of entry**

For most students, this will be when they’ve started high school or secondary school (as it may be called in some parts of the world). For most of you, that’ll be in the fall of 2012. But for some students at private schools or public charters, they may have entered in 7th grade or even kindergarten. In those cases, go ahead and list when you entered the school as a whole.

### **Graduation date**

If you’re still in high school (as most of our Collegewise students are), this date will be your future date of graduation. Get this information from your school counselor or your school’s online calendar.

### **Counselor information**

After you provide your high school information, you’re asked to give your counselor’s name, title, phone number, and email. It’s very important that you take the time to get this information right.

If colleges have any questions about your application, they're going to contact your counselor. But a college isn't under any obligation to track down your counselor if you put in the wrong phone number or email address. And if the name and title don't match the person they call, you're making the situation messy for everyone.

Also, the information you enter here will populate into other parts of the application, so this would be a bad time to spell your counselor's name wrong.

It's also important that you make your application as complete as possible. If your counselor doesn't have an email address, that's fine. But you shouldn't leave this space blank just because you didn't want to take the time to find the information.

Go to your school's website or visit your counselor personally to verify all this information.

## **Other School**

### **If you have attended any other schools, please indicate the number of schools**

This refers to high schools. If you've attended the same high school since 9th grade, the right answer is zero. They are not looking for your elementary or middle schools here.

If you switched high schools, then enter the appropriate number and the requisite information that follows.

This does not include summer school at a different high school or participating in any academic coursework or program on a high school campus other than your own. Such information either is listed on your transcript or can be placed in the Additional Information section on the Writing page.

### **Community-Based Organizations**

Notice that it's asking only about free programs. Don't list any program that you paid to attend. If you do list any, follow the prior advice regarding your school counselor and being thorough and accurate.

### **Education Interruption**

#### **If your progression through secondary school was or will be delayed or interrupted in any way, please check all that apply**

When you check one of these boxes, a new section called Required Explanation will appear in the Writing section and request you to, "Please use the space below to provide details of the applicable situation(s)."

Here are a few thoughts on how to handle that explanation:



- If you switched schools voluntarily, the worst thing you can do here is be overly critical of your former school. Don't claim that all the teachers were bad or that none of the other students were committed to academics. If the fit wasn't good, you can be honest about it without being overly negative. Draw a contrast between your former school and your new school. Without whining or complaining, explain where that first school fell short of what you needed or expected from your education. What does the new school offer you that the old one didn't?
- For most students, just a short paragraph of explanation should be enough. Sometimes it can be just one sentence, such as "My father got a new job and our family had to relocate." Don't go on longer than necessary.

## **Colleges & Universities**

- If you have taken a college/university course beginning with 9th grade, please indicate the number of colleges**

This pull-down should be used if you have taken a college course—online or on campus—from a college or high school. You do not have to have received credit or have a transcript available to check the box.

For the first three check boxes in this section, it should be obvious to you if the course was taught online, on a college campus, or on a secondary/high school campus. Mark the appropriate boxes. As the

Common App notes, this does not include AP or IB courses taken on a high school campus. (Those would be listed either on your transcript if taken at your own school or in the section above about attending other secondary schools.)

For **College credit awarded**, check this box only if you are certain you were given credit for a satisfactory performance in the course. For **Degree candidate**, high school students will leave this blank unless they are the rare students in a program such as Running Start or an early college-entrance program. For **Transcript available**, once you check this box, you need to be ready to ask the college to send your official transcripts to each institution you're applying to. It's very important that you do this because your file at each college you're applying to may be considered incomplete if they don't receive the transcripts.

With this in mind, our students at Collegewise check this box only if they have taken a full-semester or full-year course that would be part of a regular college curriculum. We've seen many special summer programs for high school students that are hosted on college campuses and where the students receive a half credit in Life Skills or something similarly vague. In this case, the colleges you are applying to care less about the credit than the fact you were engaged with your own learning beyond required courses. In those cases, it's OK to leave the "Transcript available" box unchecked. Too many students end up feeling stressed and having incomplete files while chasing down transcripts that the colleges won't even factor in when evaluating a student.

## □ Degree earned

Again, high school students will leave this blank unless they are the rare students in a program such as Running Start or an early college-entrance program.

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### **Collegewise aside: “What if I took a college class and I don’t want to report it?”**

That’s a common question we get from students. We’ve certainly seen that happen. For example, a student tries a summer course in chemistry, earns a C or lower, and doesn’t want to mention it on the application.

We’re going to be straight with you about two things here. First, if you didn’t do well in a course and you decide not to mention it here, the likelihood of a college finding out is virtually zero, especially if you did no other academic work at that college. Second, however, if they do somehow find out, the odds of your being accepted (or keeping your admission once it’s been offered) are also virtually zero. In recent years, several students have been expelled for not reporting pre-college college coursework. So, is it worth the risk? We don’t think so.

The prompt clearly states, “If you have taken a college/university course beginning with 9th grade,” not “If you have taken a college/university course beginning with 9th grade AND received an A.” We like the message you send to a college when you have the guts to admit that you took a college class and got

crushed in it. Yes, it reveals a failure, but it also says something about your character (and your willingness to challenge yourself).

It's also a piece of information you may choose to address in the Additional Information section of the Common App. "Although I didn't pull off the perfect grade I wanted, I loved the demands of a college-level course and getting a taste of the expectations ahead of me."

Some counselors disagree on this point, but we believe that honesty somehow always comes back to reward kids. This is probably one of those sections in our guide where you should double-check with your high school counselor or college center if you're uncertain about whether our recommendations are really best for you.

## **Grades**

Don't attempt to fill out this section without a current copy of your official high school transcript or without speaking with a school official. It's very important that the information you enter here matches your official records.

### **□ Class rank reporting**

Don't worry if your high school doesn't assign a rank—many high schools don't, and it won't hurt your chances of admission. But if your school does rank or breaks down by decile, quintile, or quartile, list what appears on your transcript.

### **Graduating class size (approx.)**

Since this question is required, you need your answer to match what the school will report, so double-check with your school counselor. If your school reports 525 and you say 520, that'll probably be close enough. But if you report 200 or 1000, that'll raise some question marks from admissions readers.

### **Cumulative GPA**

Again, don't guess. Verify it with your most updated transcript, which should include your grades through the end of your junior year as well as any summer school classes you took at your high school.

### **GPA scale and GPA weighting**

If you don't know, check with your school counselor. Even if your school weighs grades and you can get 5 points for an A, chances are that it's still on a 4-point scale. After all, a 3.9 on a 4-point scale is much stronger than a 3.9 on a 5-point scale.

## **Current or Most Recent Year Courses**

Again, you should have a copy of your official transcript in front of you.

## **How many courses would you like to report?**

First of all, they want only credit-bearing courses. If your school doesn't give credit for ASB or Physical Education, don't count it. If you have courses that switch at the semester break (e.g., AP Microeconomics becomes AP Macroeconomics), then each should be counted separately.

- First, make sure you use class names exactly as they appear on your transcript. Don't write "Senior English" if your transcript says "English IV."
- For the Course level, this remains blank unless it clearly falls under one of the categories listed.
- If you are receiving Fall and Spring grades for the same course, it needs to be listed under Full Year. You will check only the individual First/Second Semester boxes if that's the full length of the course.
- List the courses in descending order of difficulty. This lets you impress the admissions officer immediately. List AP courses at the top (lead with "AP Calculus" or "AP English" if you're taking one or both, as they both have particular course oomph). Then, move to honors courses, followed by regular classes (solids, followed by electives). If you don't have any honors or AP classes, list any of the five academic solids first: English, math, science, foreign language, or social science. Then, list any electives.

- Also, spell out any abbreviations other than AP, IB, or CP (which colleges know). For example, some students in student government take a class called ASB (Associated Student Body). Don't assume that colleges will know what ASB is. When in doubt, spell it out.

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

Typically, students in a semester system receive two grades per year in each class. Students in a trimester system receive three.

## **Honors**

- If you have received any honors related to your academic achievements beginning with the ninth grade or international equivalent, please indicate the number of honors**

Don't feel bad if you don't have a lot of (or any) academic awards. Plenty of qualified students are light in this area or attend schools where such awards aren't a priority. If that's the case with you, highlight your particular strengths in another section.

If you do, start with your most impressive awards first as you are limited to five. If you're not sure which one is the most impressive, list the more recent awards toward the top.

Many awards that appear as acronyms need to be spelled out, especially if they are unique to your school or your state. (You have 150 characters to do this.) Admissions officers in California may know that CSF means “California Scholarship Federation,” but some colleges in other states won’t. The same can be said for any school- or countywide award that’s an abbreviation. Be sure to check Help Center to the right for more specifics as well.

It’s also important to describe the context of any award that a college may not understand. They know what a “National Merit Finalist” is. But if you won the “Cosmos Award” at your school, a college will have absolutely no idea what that means. Help the college understand it, like this:

“Cosmos Award: Two juniors selected by faculty for outstanding achievement in science.”

## **Future Plans**

### **Career interest**

It’s fine to be “undecided” in your career plans, unless you’re applying to schools like Drexel, Northeastern, or Penn, which are known for their pre-professional curricula that prepare students for specific careers. If you’re applying to such a school, you should have a good idea about what you want to do with your life. Don’t make a college think that you have no idea what you’d be getting into academically.

### **Highest degree you intend to earn**



This question has no set timeline. If you're certain you don't want to pursue degrees beyond the next four years, select "Bachelors" (which, by the way, just means "four-year college degree"). If you're applying to a combined BA/MD program where you become a doctor in seven years, you'll select "MD/DO/DVM/DDS (Medicine)." If you plan on going to medical school, make the same selection. But please don't worry too much about this. If you're considering going to law school one day, checking or not checking JD (Law) is not going to make a difference in your application. Just tell the truth.

# Testing

The test-score section of the Common Application gives you a nice opportunity to put your best “testing foot” forward. They’re not asking you to enter in *all* your scores, only your *best* scores, which you should do. But it’s important to remember that you’ll still need to ask the testing agencies to send official score reports to colleges, and some colleges will ask you to send all your scores, not just the best ones.

So, think of reporting test scores as a two-part process:

1. You put your best “testing foot” forward on the Common App and share only your best scores.  
Or, if you prefer, share none.
2. Then, use the SAT or ACT website (or both) to officially send each college whatever they specifically ask for.

**In addition to sending official score reports as required by colleges, do you wish to self-report scores or future test dates for any of the following standardized tests: ACT, SAT/SAT Subject, AP, IB, TOEFL, PTE Academic, and IELTS?**

If you are unclear on what test scores each school asks you to report, go to the My Colleges section and choose the college you want more information about. There, in the “Required” section, you’ll find a link that will take you directly to that school’s webpage on their standardized test requirements. You will be able to see what each school requires from their applicants.

Here's an extra tip: Don't make yourself crazy over which scores they'll see and at which point in the process they'll see them. That's one of those things that you have limited control over. If a college asks for all your scores, you're going to have to send them, and any time spent worrying about it is just going to make you focus on the wrong things.

### **A note to international applicants**

Follow the directions in Instructions & Help Center section to the right if you do check "Yes" to the box regarding "standard leaving exams." You will have the opportunity to enter either actual or predicted scores.

### **A note about test-optional schools**

Test-optional schools do not require any standardized test scores in the admissions process. If you are a student who is applying to such a school, you have an option to explore here.

It is completely acceptable to leave this entire section blank on the Common App and just send your official scores to the schools that require them. Yes, we know it sounds risky to leave an entire section blank, but we did our homework, and that's what the people at the Common App recommend in this scenario. This way, the schools that are test optional will never see your scores in any manner, and the ones that require them will receive them directly from the official reports you send.

**Indicate all tests you wish to report. Be sure to include tests you expect to take in addition to tests you have already taken.**

Read the instructions closely. They don't say that you need to report *all* of them; they say to list "all of the tests *you wish* to report." You can choose exactly what you want whether that is clicking on only one, or multiple tests.

Here's what you should do for the ACT and SAT sections:

If you took the ACT:

### **Number of ACT scores you wish to report**

- Go back to your official score reports (you can log in to your online ACT account to find them if you need them) and see how many tests you wish to enter here. For most students, this will be one or two.
- Then find your best composite (total) score. List that under "Composite" and enter that date in "Composite Date." Then, enter the best scores you have for each section (English, Math, Reading, Science, and Writing), even if they come from different test dates. (Sometime this combination comes out of three tests at which point the answer above should be three instead.

**If you're taking the test again, list the future date on which you plan to take it.**

This alerts the school that you may have additional information to share with them even after you've submitted your application. If you're unsure, leave it at 0 as you don't want the admissions officer waiting for scores that may never arrive.

If you took the SAT:

**Number of SAT scores you wish to report**

- Get out your official score reports via the College Board's website and note your highest Critical Reading, Math, and Writing scores, even if they came from different dates. If all your highest scores are from one test, indicate that here. If it's spread out over two or three these, mark that instead.
- Then, simply list the dates on which you took those exams and the appropriate scores from that date.

**If you're taking the test again, list the future date on which you plan to take it.**

This alerts the school that you may have additional information to share with them even after you've submitted your application. If you're unsure, leave it at 0 as you don't want the admissions officer waiting for scores that may never arrive.

## **AP/IB/SAT Subject Tests**

Remember, this section doesn't say that you must list *all* your scores—only the “wish” to. Here's how we think you should do it:

### **Subject Tests**

- First, check your individual colleges and see if they even require them. That's important, because some schools may require specific exams. (Again, if you go to the My Colleges tab, you can get the link to that information under “Testing Policy” for each school.) If you're applying to an engineering program that requires you take Math Level 2, remember, there are two possible steps here: first you can list it here, then you have to ask the College Board to send an official score report to each college that needs the score.
- We advise our students to try not to list any Subject Test score lower than 500 for most colleges (unless the score is required by a particular school). If you're applying to schools such as Amherst, Stanford, or any in the Ivy League, you probably shouldn't list any score lower than 680.

### **AP or IB scores**

- We recommend that our students list only the tests they've passed. The exception might be a student who took one AP class in high school to challenge herself, worked like crazy, and still just eked out a 2 on the AP test. If she feels proud that she went in and sat for that exam—and she should—she should list it. Share what makes you proud here.
- Here's a tip about the art of presentation: If you've taken multiple AP or IB tests, list your highest scores first. This is subtle, but you want to start strong for when a reader looks at a list of scores. Also, AP scores are usually just self-reported. That means you do NOT have to ask the College Board to send AP scores to colleges unless you find a school that specifically asks you to do so when you apply.

### **TOEFL/PTE Academic/IELTS**

These are tests taken primarily by international applicants. Whether they are required depends on each school you are applying to. Be sure you have checked the international applicant section of the websites for each school you're applying to in order to ensure you meet their requirements.

# Activities

The Activities section causes the most confusion with students. There is no one accepted way to list your activities here, which is actually intentional on the part of the Common App. They want to give kids a little bit of flexibility. But here's how we tell our students to approach this section, and it's worked very well for us and for them.

First, it's always good to read the directions to the right. You'll find all sorts of good tidbits of information, but here are a couple of general guidelines to this section:

- Don't plan to attach a résumé as part of the Additional Information or send one to any college, unless that college specifically asks you to do it. Admissions officers spend a lot of time constructing the applications so that they can collect all the information they need to know about students. If you send a résumé without being asked, it's like telling them that you didn't like the way they put the application together. That might annoy them, which is never a good idea.
- Notice that they ask you to list your activities in order of importance to you. Start with the one activity that you could never imagine your high school career without and work your way down from there. After you enter the first one, you can always move the order around using the "Up/Down" buttons.



- Space can be limited in this section, so it's fine to abbreviate as long as the abbreviation is universally understood. It would be hard to find an admissions officer who doesn't know what an MVP or NHS is, but there are many other abbreviations that mean something only to the people involved in the group that uses it. As we said in the Honors section above, some acronyms need to be spelled out, especially if they are unique to your school or your state.

In addition, you'll find you can save space by using numbers in the right place, i.e., "Senior Class Vice President" can be also be "Class VP: 12," or "First Place in Conference Championship as a Sophomore and Junior" can be "1st in Conf. Championship: 10, 11."

But be cautious. If you find yourself so desperate to squeeze in information here, and if your abbreviations start making this section look like a series of awkward text messages, then you may want to consider carefully using the Additional Information section to give yourself some breathing room.

- Don't feel that you need to fill up all 10 lines. The applicant with the longest list of activities is not necessarily the one who's going to get in. Admissions officers want to learn about the significant ways you spent your time outside class. If you were in the Spanish Club in the 9th grade and never went back after that, how does that really help your application to list it? Leave the space blank or use that spot to share something else more important to you. Remember, this isn't a contest to see how much you can list; it's your chance to describe what you really enjoyed doing in high school.

### **Activity type**

Start by selecting the activity from the drop-down menu. It's important to let this menu do the work for you. Look carefully and try to find a category that works before you select "Other Club/Activity." There are a lot of categories you might not expect to find, like "Family Responsibilities," "Cultural," "Academic," etc.

### **Position/Leadership description and organization name, if applicable**

This space is limited to only 50 characters. You can use this space to list what this activity actually is if you weren't able to do so with the drop-down menu. For example, there's no combination of drop-down selections that will explain "Red Cross Club" or "Rock Climbing Club."

Think of this section as your spot to list your titles, roles, or recognitions or the name of the place you work. For example, if you work as a camp counselor, that's your role. Put "Camp Counselor" here. If you were the Editorial Page Editor for the school newspaper, that's a title—put that here. If you were the captain, MVP, and first-team all-state in volleyball, those are recognitions. Put those here.

Roles, titles, and recognitions are short and punchy, like "Varsity," "Eagle Scout," "Coach's Award," "Counselor," "Volunteer," "Founder," "Sports Editor," "Violinist," "Treasurer," "Photographer," "Graphic Artist," "Tutor," or "Captain." Anything that takes more space to explain should be put in Details and Accomplishments.

**Please describe this activity, including what you accomplished and any recognition you received, etc.**

Here are three questions to consider asking yourself for this section: 1) “Is it possible that whoever is reading this application might not understand what this activity really was, according to the information I provided above?” 2) “Did the organization or I accomplish anything that can’t be summed up with a simple recognition that I listed above?” 3) “Can I provide greater depth to my experience by elaborating on my responsibilities or the value of my involvement?” Those are the types of information that can be listed in this section.

For example, let’s say you listed your camp counselor work under “Work (Paid).” But what if the camp were specifically for children with physical and mental disabilities? That’s something interesting the reader wouldn’t know just from the previous two sections. So, here’s where you could put the camp’s name—if it’s not already included—and description, like “Special Camp for Special Kids: Camp for children with physical and mental disabilities.”

What if your school paper won a statewide award during your junior year? That’s a cool accomplishment that can’t be summed up in the previous two sections. Here’s where you could say, “February, 2013 issue won the statewide journalism award, ‘Excellence in Student Press.’ ”

If you’ve won a lot of awards for one particular activity, it’s fine to summarize them here, such as, “six first-place awards, three honorable-mention ribbons.”

## What about hobbies?

We have some non-traditional, Collegewise advice about listing a hobby on the Common App.

Do you have a hobby that you care about, something that's not an official activity, but one that you put time into? Maybe you've taught yourself to play guitar in a garage band with your friends. Maybe you enjoy drawing, writing, or composing music, even though you aren't publishing or performing any of it. Or, maybe you and your friends are Beatles fanatics who gather on Wednesdays and listen to your favorite songs together. If you have something you care about, we suggest that you list it in the Activities section for two reasons.

First, real interest makes you interesting. Admissions officers really are trying to get to know the applicants. Thus, if you have a hobby you really enjoy, that's an important part of your life that they should know about.

Second, when you share something a little personal like a hobby, it breaks up the tedium for an admissions officer who is reading app after app after app, day after day after day.

List a hobby only if it's important to you. A good way to gauge this is to imagine a college interviewer asking you about it. Would you have something to say? Could you tell a good story about the time you put into this or what you've learned how to do? If you made an origami swan one time, you're not

going to have much to say about origami. However, if you've read books about origami and have taught yourself how to make 20 different advanced origami creations, you've got something to talk about.

Don't include a hobby you started last week just to list it on your Common Application. And don't get too cute and start listing things like, "Petting my dog" or "Sleep." It's better to not include those interests in these cases.

### **Participation grade levels**

This is pretty straightforward. The exception might be where to place summer activities. The correct answer is that you check the box that would represent the grade you entered in the fall following it. As for PG, unless you're in post-graduate year, that is left blank. And we can assure you that you indeed know if you are doing a PG year.

### **Timing of participation**

Again, this is pretty straightforward as you'll check one box that best represents the time frame of the activity.

### **Hours spent per week/Weeks spent per year**

Be as accurate as you can here. Colleges aren't so nitpicky that they'll question if one hour of Spanish Club per week is more accurate than two hours per week. However, if you tell them that your involvement in the Spanish Club is 30 hours per week, that doesn't add up (unless Spanish Club has become your full-time job).

But don't underestimate, either. If you say that you play football six hours a week, that's probably selling yourself short, considering that one game alone is at least three hours. Again, just be as accurate as you can.

Also, some students who are very involved in an activity automatically enter "52 weeks per year." But you should do that only if you are honestly swimming in the pool, working at the hamburger stand, or running the Key Club every single week of the year (including winter holiday, spring break, and summer months). There's no need to exaggerate here and no reason to give an admissions officer pause.

One way you can double-check your numbers is to take the number you put in "Hours spent per week" and multiply them by "Weeks spent per year." If you look at that resulting number and say, "Great! Sounds about right," then you can go with it. If you look at that resulting number and say, "Whoa. Something's off there," then you will want take another look at your original numbers in those two sections.

Finally, admission officers know that there's an ebb and flow to how much time you might spend with a particular activity. Sometimes it may be three hours a week, and sometimes it may be 15. As long as you do an honest job guesstimating, you'll be just fine. If you do feel the need to explain further, don't forget you always have space in Additional Information.

# Writing

## Personal essay

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.)

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 failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?

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 or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

### **Some Collegewise essay advice before you dive in**

We think the best college essay prompts give students enough guidance to focus their story. (Most students appreciate more direction than, “Write a 500-word essay on a topic of your choice.”) But it’s also helpful when prompts leave enough leeway to allow every student to share something that helps the admissions committee get to know this applicant better than the application alone would allow. These Common App prompts do just that.

We’ve helped over 8,000 Collegewise students find their best stories for college essays. In all those brainstormed stories, we can’t think of one that would not have worked with at least one of these prompts.

At first, you might think you don’t have a story that fits any of the prompts. But if you can back away from the pressure of college applications and actually just consider the questions, chances are you have something to say. Is there something so central about you that you feel your application would be



missing something if you didn't share it? Have you ever failed at something? If so, did you learn anything from it? Have you ever stood up for something you believed in or gone against the grain in some way, even if it wasn't popular or accepted? Have you found yourself challenged by a problem only to be thrilled to solve it? Have you done something that made you proud and at the same time made you feel like you were growing up?

If you answer "Yes" to one or more of those questions, you've got a potential story in response to a Common App prompt.

Whether it's teaching yourself to cook, deciding not to go into your family's business, struggling through your first year on the water polo team, or immigrating to this country when you were 16, you have a story to tell. The Common App prompts will let you tell it.

There is no strategy to picking one topic over another; we simply have our Collegewise students find their best story and apply it to whichever prompt fits best. Nevertheless, here are a few topic-specific tips. And if you'd like even more advice, visit the college essay section of our blog at <http://wiselikeus.com/collegewise/category/college-essays>

- 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.**

The two most important phrases in that prompt are “...central to their identity...” and “...their application would be incomplete without it.” Our discussion of those phrases is a good time to mention two of our most important pieces of essay advice for any prompt you’re answering.

(1) Don’t inject meaning that isn’t there.

Many students are going to read this prompt and choose a story that they think sounds good but isn’t actually central to their identity. Don’t make that mistake. Your story doesn’t have to be important to anyone else, but it does have to be important to you. And it should probably be something that was important to you long before you read this prompt. Religion, culture, playing baseball, family, babysitting your little brother, art, karate, growing up with a single mother, your part-time job at the mall—if it’s important to you and you’d like colleges to know about it, share away. But if you’re just claiming something meant a lot to you because it seems like a good answer, pick a different prompt.

(2) Don’t repeat information from the rest of your application.

Remember, the prompt is telling you to share something that your application would be incomplete *without*. That means this story either should be about something that you haven’t mentioned anywhere else in your application, or it should provide brand new information about something that you have mentioned.

**2. The lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?**

A lot of students we've met are inclined to make one of two mistakes with this prompt:

(1) They try to position the failure as evidence of a strength, e.g., "I was spending so much time volunteering that it actually affected my academics."

(2) They make excuses for something rather than own the outcome, e.g., "I received a low grade in U.S. History because of a personality conflict with the teacher."

If you're experiencing the same inclinations, reverse direction or pick a different prompt.

No successful person has been great at everything she's attempted, so don't be afraid to answer this question honestly. Admit you struggled in physics, that you tried out for the wrestling team and got tossed around like a rag doll for two hours, or that you founded a club that wasn't able to attract any members. These things don't make you sound inferior; they make you sound human.

So, think of the honest answer to the question. Don't make excuses, just take responsibility. Show that you're a mature, confident student who can discuss those things and apply the available lessons.

**3. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?**

Keep two things in mind:

1. Tackle this prompt only if you really did speak or act out against a popular belief or idea, thereby causing you to take a stand and go against the grain. “Everyone else cheated, but I decided to play it straight” is just following the rules, not challenging a belief or idea.
2. Stories have more heft to them when the challenge lasted more than one moment. Saying “Hi” once to the awkward outcast at school is a nice thing to do. Eating lunch with him every day is challenging a belief or idea. Arguing with your friends about a woman’s right to choose is likely easier than arguing the same point in an AP Government class filled with conservative students. Telling your counselor that your school should offer AP German doesn’t have as much oomph as convincing a teacher to do an independent study after school for 12 interested students.
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.**

Don’t forget the part of the prompt that asks why this problem has *significance* to you. Good responses here will reveal something about yourself that helps the reader get to know you and your life better.

And note the use of the word “scale” meaning it doesn’t have to be world hunger you’re trying to solve. It may actually be something quite personal.

The key here is to make sure you pick something that you can clearly identify as a problem and break down into identifiable steps by which you have solved or would solve it. In that sense, picking a global topic like human trafficking because you think it will sound impressive might prove to be more difficult and cumbersome to write about than something you’ve dealt with in your own life.

**5. Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.**

“...[M]arked your transition from childhood to adulthood...” makes this prompt seem like you need to have a life-changing experience to qualify. You don’t. You just have to share something formative and memorable (to you, not necessarily to anybody else). Think of this as a before-and-after story. Explain who you were before, describe the accomplishment or event, and the reveal who you became after.

We worked with a student who gave up his starting spot on the football team so he could become a youth group leader at his church. For him at that time, it was a big deal to acknowledge that faith was a lot more important to him than football. That’s a before-and-after story.

Another student wrote that after her parents’ divorce, she started doing all the cooking for her and her father. (As she described it, “My dad can only make grilled cheese.”) She titled that essay, “Table for Two.”

We'll always remember our student who wrote about teaching little kids at his church how to do traditional Greek dancing. In his case, the student had quite literally become the teacher.

# Disciplinary History

There are two questions asked here. Read them carefully.

If you answer “No” to either of these questions, and if a college later finds out you should have responded “Yes,” you will almost certainly not be admitted. (If you’ve already been admitted, they’ll revoke the offer.)

Although that’s still a big “if,” there’s a phrase publicists use: “We can control the story.” It means that if you admit something unpleasant rather than wait for other people to find out, you get the benefit of revealing it yourself rather than letting someone else do it for you. Plus, you can provide an explanation rather than a defensive response. That’s almost always how we approach this question with our Collegewise students: Honesty is the best policy.

Here are a few pieces of question-specific advice.

- Have you ever been found responsible for a disciplinary violation at any educational institution you have attended from the 9th grade (or the international equivalent) forward, whether related to academic misconduct or behavioral misconduct, that resulted in a disciplinary action? These actions could include, but are not limited to: probation, suspension, removal, dismissal, or expulsion from the institution.**

Ask your high school counselor what the school's policy is on reporting this information to colleges. Some schools mention disciplinary action on a transcript or in the secondary school report that's part of the Common App. If your counselor intends to mention it, you don't have any choice—check “Yes” and start controlling the story. Don't fight with your counselor, and don't let your parents fight with your counselor. That will only make things worse and discourage your counselor from doing more to help you.

However, some high schools believe such infractions are internal matters, and they decline to reveal it to colleges. If that's the case, you could feasibly not mention it here, and the college will probably never find out. But you need to hear your counselor say the words, “We will not reveal this to colleges.”

We should mention that not all infractions are created equal. If you were suspended for one day as a freshman for throwing a water balloon in the hallway and you've never had another disciplinary incident, don't worry so much about it. Tell the story and admit that you did something stupid when you were 14.

## □ **Explanation**

Here is the prompt for the required explanation: **Please give the approximate date(s) of each incident, explain the circumstances and reflect on what you learned from the experience. You may use up to 400 words.**



Here's your chance to control the story, and there are a couple of important things to remember here:

**1. Be honest.**

This is not the time to fudge the truth. Describe exactly what happened. Don't use vague language. Also, be straightforward about your role, whatever it was. If you're not stating clearly what you did, you're not controlling the story, and the reader might imagine something worse.

**2. Take responsibility.**

The very worst thing a student can do is blame other people or make excuses. You have to express that you take responsibility for your role in the incident, whatever it was. If you tell a college that you were unfairly accused of vandalism because you were in a group where other kids were doing the vandalizing, that really doesn't change that you were there and complicit. You should say something to the effect of,

“Although I didn't vandalize the school, I was still with a group of friends who did. And that was a stupid thing to do. I wasn't comfortable with the situation, but if I had just gone home like I knew I should have, none of this would have happened to me, and the fact that it has is all my fault.”

That's a student who's taking responsibility—and showing maturity.

### **3. Be detailed about your punishment.**

One of the keys to having colleges potentially forgive you is to convey clearly that you were punished for your actions. If you were suspended, explain how many days you missed. The subtle message here is that you've already paid your debt and suffered the consequences of your actions.

### **4. Don't whine or complain.**

This is closely tied to accepting responsibility rather than blaming other people. However, we mention it here so you can check the tone of your response. If anything sounds like you're whining or complaining about how unfairly you were treated, the reader will likely become less sympathetic to your circumstances.

### **5. And finally...**

A college will be looking for evidence that you've learned something from your mistakes. All four of the previous tips should come together in the "What I Learned" part of the response. A student who writes, "I learned that my school is far too strict, and I'm looking forward to having more freedom in college" is complaining without taking responsibility. Be truthful. If you can, give an example of how you've put that lesson to use in your life.

- Have you ever been adjudicated guilty or convicted of a misdemeanor, felony, or other crime? Note that you are not required to answer "yes" to this question, or provide an explanation, if the criminal adjudication or conviction has been expunged, sealed,**

**annulled, pardoned, destroyed, erased, impounded, or otherwise required by law or ordered by a court to be kept confidential.**

If you have a conviction on your record, you're going to have to report it. We've met families who've argued that they've kept that information from the high school and therefore don't need to share it here because a college will never know. We still think that's a terrible idea. If there's an official record, we suggest you own up to what you did and be responsible.

## □ **Explanation**

Here is the prompt for the required explanation: Please provide the details of your criminal conviction or adjudication. You may use up to 400 words.

In general, it will be hugely important and beneficial to be honest and upfront here. Furthermore, take ownership of any incident. Basically, see our advice above. It all holds true here, too.

# Additional Information

## □ **Additional information**

Two-thirds of our students at Collegewise don't write anything in the Additional Information section. Don't use this section unless you have to. Make the rest of the application as clear, organized, and complete as possible. Don't rely on this section to list things that you could have summarized elsewhere if you had just spent a little more time paring down your words. (There is a 650-word limit here, too.)

However, if you find yourself wanting or needing to list something in this section, here are a few bits of advice.

### **1. Choose carefully.**

There are times when inputting additional information is necessary and useful. Here are a few examples:

- There are parts of the application that invite you to list additional information that didn't fit in the original space, like AP test scores. If you took enough AP tests that you ran out of room, that's something important that an admissions officer would want to know. List the additional scores and future test dates here if you ran out of room.

- Include significant health circumstances, especially if they caused you to miss multiple weeks of school. Make sure to be specific about the dates you missed.
- If you attend a school with a specialized curriculum, like a performing arts school or a school with specialized religious instruction that takes up a significant portion of your class day, that's appropriate to list here. Your counselor will likely cover this in the school profile, too, but it's never a bad idea to make things as clear as possible for an admissions reader.
- If you have *important* activities or awards that you couldn't accurately summarize or just didn't fit on the application, list them here. We're not talking about "9th Grade Homecoming Float Committee." But if you've played on two different U.S. club soccer teams and on a statewide select team (in addition to your high school team), and if you've won multiple accolades with each, it's quite possible that you just couldn't fit all of that in the previous sections. It would be helpful to bring it up here.
- Maybe you did a research project with a college professor and you'd like to do a short summary of the project and your involvement in it. Keep it short and clear, but it deserves inclusion here.

## **2. Make it pretty.**

Make it organized and easy to read. Don't just list only classes and activities. Group related items together and give them a heading, like this:

### **Additional Activities**

- U.S. Club Soccer (9–12), 15 hours per week, 35 weeks per year; Captain (11)
- Cashier and Cook, In-N-Out Burger (10, 11), 20 hours per week during the summer

### **AP Tests Scores**

- AP Psychology: 4 (5/2009)
- AP Statistics: 3 (5/2010)

### **3. Keep it short.**

We've rarely seen a situation where a student needed the entire page to list additional information. Brevity and clarity are your friends here.

### **4. Keep it "additional."**

Additional information needs to be brand new and interesting. If you write three paragraphs about your involvement with the National Charity League, you're filling space with details admissions officers already know from the Activities section.

We really can't emphasize enough how ineffective sheer volume can be in a college application. We know students think they can make a strong case if they list everything they've ever done, won, and accomplished. But successful applicants understand how to prioritize what they've done, and they use

the spaces on the application to highlight their most important information, not give a complete biography.

**5. No résumés, please.**

Don't cut and paste a résumé here. A résumé will just repeat information you've mentioned elsewhere, and that will irritate admissions officers. Don't waste their time by making them read things twice. They're tired, and they've already read hundreds of other applications.

If they want a résumé, they'll ask you for it in their school-specific section.

# My Colleges



Now that you've completed the main Common App, it's time to dive into school-specific components. Some schools will have nearly nothing extra for you to do. Others may require supplemental essays longer than the Common App itself. Once you've added your schools through College Search to the My Colleges section, you can dive in here.

## Questions

This section will vary widely from school to school. Some may have as few as two questions here, whereas others may have multiple sections that end up including dozens of questions. Below we tackle some of the ones that might pose a challenge.

### General

#### Preferred admission plan

Some colleges allow you to select a specific decision plan. Previous versions of the Common Application include descriptions of those plans, but those have now been removed. We're guessing that was done to



encourage students to actually visit the websites of each individual school and read *the schools'* descriptions of how their individual plans operate. That's always a good idea, so we're not going to include our own descriptions here. If a college gives you an option to apply "Early Action," "Early Decision," or any other type of application option, visit the school's website and learn what that option actually means. Then, talk with your high school counselor about whether that's a good option for you.

Also, if you select "Early Decision", there is an Early Decision Agreement that will pop up, and your parents and high school counselor will need to "sign" saying they support you applying via Early Decision. The parent version is found under Recommenders and FERPA.

**Do you intend to pursue need-based financial aid?**

Checking "Yes" here is not the same thing as actually *applying* for financial aid. We mention that because some students worry that applying for financial aid will hurt their chances of admission. Although it's rare for your financial need to be held against you, this is not the place you have to worry about it. Check "No" only if you are absolutely certain you won't be applying for financial aid. (Make sure you double-check this with a parent first.)

**Do you intend to apply for merit-based scholarships?**

Merit-based scholarships are scholarships offered by individual colleges that are awarded based on talents, skills, or other attributes. If you plan to research and apply for scholarships offered by individual colleges, check "Yes."

**Do you intend to be a full-time student?**

A full-time student implies you're taking the required number of courses to make progress toward graduating in four years. Most students will check "Yes" here unless they're going to work full-time and take just one or two classes at a time.

**Do you intend to enroll in a degree program your first year?**

Are you planning to earn a college degree at this school (even if you don't know what you want to major in yet)? If so, check "Yes," as most students do. Students who check "No" are intending to take a couple of classes for personal enrichment.

**Do you intend to live in college housing?**

Checking "Yes" means that the college will eventually send you a housing application if you are admitted.

## **Academics**

This section will vary from school to school, and it is not always asking you to pick a major that is yours forever; sometimes colleges just want to know what your interests are. If a college on the Common Application really wants to understand the motivation for what you intend to major in, they're going to ask about it via a short answer or essay. With that in mind, here are a few tips for this section:

- We see nothing unreasonable with listing two or three of your interests, even if they are unrelated. If you really do enjoy biology, English, and international relations and the prompt allow for it, list them.
- We advise our students not to select “Undecided” if it’s asking about interests. Many students really are undecided about what they want to *major* in during college, which is fine; that’s different from what your academic *interests* are. Even students who are applying as “undecided” majors usually have some idea what their interests are. We think checking “Undecided” is the online equivalent of shrugging your shoulders and having absolutely no clue. Be honest and tell colleges what your interests are, even if you don’t want to major in them.
- The Future Plans section is one that can—and often should—be customized to individual schools. Let’s say you’ve listed your academic interests as
  1. Business,
  2. Accounting, and
  3. Marketing.

Now, let’s say you add the University of Chicago and you repeat those selections. That’s a problem, because the University of Chicago doesn’t offer any of these as majors. Even though you’re not committing to a major here, you’ve already made it pretty clear that you’re not interested in studying

anything that doesn't tie closely to business. Be mindful of the school you're applying to, and make sure you show them that you understand their academic offerings.

# Recommenders and FERPA

Before you start adding your recommenders' information to the application, you must complete the FERPA Release Authorization. You will do this only once on the application, not for each school.

Note: Taking care of this also helps link your Naviance account (if your school uses that system) to your Common App account.

Read the directions carefully on Page 1 of the Release Authorization before you check the boxes to move on.

If you waive your right to access, it means once the writer sends the letter to the school, you have no right to view it. You will never know what the writer said about you or whether it helped or hurt your chances of admission. We know that sounds risky. Still, you should *always* waive your right to access.

Here's what happens if you *don't* waive your right:

1. You're essentially telling the writer that you don't trust him or her to do a good job. In addition, you're making that implication while asking this person to do you a favor. A teacher or counselor can't help but be a little offended by that. Offending the person you want to recommend you is never a good strategy.

2. A writer who's worried that you'll see the letter one day is often less likely to be honest and more likely to say things that are technically positive. Admissions officers recognize that such generic statements mean nothing. That's bad for you.

It's the difference between

"William has shown consistent effort and is both diligent and determined"

and

"William is never going to be a chemist. That much is clear. But although he's struggled at times in my class, he's cheerful, he keeps trying his best, and he's never given up on chemistry. I like that in a student."

The first example means absolutely nothing to an admissions officer. You are far better served by an open and revealing recommendation—even if it acknowledges a weakness—than you are by generic, faint praise.

3. The college will wonder why you didn't feel comfortable enough to waive your right, and they'll also think you were worried about what the writer says about you.

4. If you're feeling uneasy about waiving your right, consider asking someone who's more unwaveringly positive about you to write the letter. If you're still uneasy, try to relax. Teachers and counselors are out to help, not hurt, students. Just about all of them will do their best to say something positive about a nice student.

### **Naviance or no Naviance?**

In the current version of the Common Application, high schools have the option of managing their recommendation processes through Naviance, an online program that allows official forms to be submitted to colleges electronically. Every high school will make its own decision, and those that use Naviance don't necessarily do so in the same way. So, we can't describe in this guide the precise steps you should take to complete your recommendations. But here are a few guidelines we think you'll find helpful.

#### **1. Ask your counselor or the college center director how your school is handling recommendation forms for college.**

Whether or not your school uses Naviance, many high schools have their own system to manage letters of recommendation. This is one of many occasions when you should do whatever your counselor tells you to do. Remember, anyone who writes a letter of recommendation is doing you a favor. If your school has a system, you should follow the rules and use it.

## **2. Verify who will be completing the counselor forms.**

Will it be your counselor? Are you sure? Some schools have different counselors who handle college application-related matters, and the appropriate person may not be the same counselor you normally deal with.

## **3. Ask your teachers if they'd be willing to write you a letter of recommendation, and make sure you get a firm "Yes."**

The fact that a teacher told you in the past that he or she would be happy to write you a letter of recommendation doesn't count. You need recent confirmation that your teachers are willing to do this.

## **4. Make sure you know your counselor's and teachers' first names.**

"Mrs." does not count as a first name when you list them as a recommender on the Common Application.

## **5. Verify your teachers' and counselor's email addresses.**

If you get it wrong, your recommenders may never receive the necessary paperwork.



Once you've uploaded the information for your counselor and all your teachers, you can then go back to the School Forms section, select each school individually, and indicate which people will be submitting forms to each particular school.

# Writing Supplement

Not all schools have extra pieces of writing beyond the main personal statement in the Common App. Others will tuck their extra writing prompts right inside the Questions section and they may not be revealed until you've completed a particular section. Too many students put off filling out the basics in the Questions section only to be surprised at the last minute by a question that pops up in response to an otherwise benign question. To avoid that happening to you, complete ALL the information in the Questions section as soon as reasonably possible.

With so many schools requiring varied supplements, we can't give school-specific advice here. But here are a few general tips to help you make sure your supplements are just as strong as the rest of your Common Application.

## **1. Read (and follow) the directions.**

We know it's not groundbreaking advice, but it's essential you read any directions provided to the right of each supplement. The advice can vary from school to school. For some schools, this may be a link at the top that takes you to the school's admissions website, where they'll give you detailed guidance on completing their supplement. If the school doesn't offer specific instructions, it's critical that you read through the supplement in its entirety and determine which sections apply to you. For example, some colleges might have a dozen different essay questions, but the directions will reveal that each one is specific for one type of intended major.

## **2. Don't treat supplements like afterthoughts.**

Just because it's supplemental information doesn't mean it's not important. In fact, at the most selective of schools, the supplements are every bit as important as the main application, if not more so. You want to give your supplements the same time and attention that you gave to the Common Application itself.

## **3. Make your supplements personal to each college.**

Generic doesn't play well in your responses in supplements. Colleges need to sense that you're doing this just for them, not playing a game of college application Mad Libs where you're using the same answer but replacing the name of the school. There may be overlap between your answers. However, if you write one "Why I want to go to this college" essay and then substitute college names, each one is going to know that you didn't write that essay solely for them.

As we've suggested throughout this guide, honesty is always the best policy. In supplements, particularly with essay questions, this means you should worry less about trying to impress colleges and more about telling the truth. Colleges are asking these questions so they can get to know you better. When you try to write what you think is going to sound good, you write the same responses that thousands of other applicants write. That's not a good way to stand out.

Also, here's a tip about the length of your responses: Many schools will ask you to write a one-paragraph response to the question, but their text box allows 450–500 words. Go with one paragraph,

even if there's plenty of room to write much more. Four or five well-developed sentences are usually all you need. Resist the urge to use up every character.

In addition to this, some supplemental prompts will offer no word limit in the question itself, but one exists simply because the box in which the response will be entered has a word limit. In these cases, it makes sense to test the word count before you start writing because few things are as fun as writing a beautiful 250-word piece and the box in which it is to be placed allows for only 75 words.

A quick way to check the word count is simply cutting and pasting any random text into the box—even from your personal statement—and then the app gives you a little warning note stating the word limit.

### **Should you answer “Optional” sections?**

Some supplements will have sections that are labeled as optional. We've found there are two kinds of optional prompts: those that ask you if there's anything else you'd like to share, and those that actually ask you a brand new essay question.

Regarding the question “Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?” (or a similarly worded question), we tell our students the same thing we tell them for the Additional Information section of the Common Application. If there really is something you'd like colleges to know that you haven't had a chance to reveal in the Common Application or the supplement, this is the place to share it. If you don't have anything else to share, you shouldn't worry at all about leaving that question blank.

However, when a college gives you an essay prompt and tells you it's optional, we think it's best to answer it. Yes, optional does mean *optional*. But there's a human-nature factor at work here, too. Think of it this way: If you really wanted to make the soccer team at your school, and the soccer coach said she was going to hold optional workouts on Saturdays before the season, wouldn't you go? Wouldn't your decision whether or not to show up say something about your level of commitment to the soccer team? It's hard for an admissions officer to believe that this school is high on your list if you leave an optional essay question blank.

**Where to go for more advice:**

We've written a lot of guides for various schools' supplements on our blog. You can find those entries here: <http://wiselikeus.com/collegewise/category/advice-for-specific-colleges>.

# Submit Your Application

The Common App provides some excellent directions on how to submit your application:

<https://appsupport.commonapp.org/link/portal/33011/33013/Article/1000/How-to-submit-and-preview>

## **Final PDF Preview**

Within those instructions, you're told how to do a "Final PDF Preview" of your application. This is a crucial step, as it generates a PDF that shows you almost exactly what the admissions officers will be seeing when they read your application. (You also have the opportunity to review each section individually in PDF form but your final review should always be using the Final PDF Preview feature.)

Go through it line by line and ensure that you've correctly filled it out. In addition to correcting spelling and grammar errors (which your browser's spell-check is excellent for), you should make sure that no lines are cut off. This tends to happen most often in the Honors and Activities sections, though it can happen in other places, too. Even if the Common App allows you to enter the text, formatting issues may keep all the letters and words from appearing. If that's the case, you will need to shorten what you wrote until it does all show up in the next Preview PDF you generate. This happens because not all characters are created equal. Compare: "....." versus "WWWWWWWWW." Both are 10 characters, but one obviously takes up more space on the page.

After you've done a good proofing and preview of your application (and your parents have, too), it's time to submit. One critical point to keep in mind is that you do NOT have to submit your application to ALL schools at one time. You can send them off as you see fit.

### **App Fee Payment**

Colleges have their own fee structures and methods of payment, so follow the directions closely for each school. When students are given the option between credit card and check, we always recommend credit cards because they provide a much easier way to verify if a payment has been received. You're one step closer to having a final and completed application.

### **Signature**

The signature page is the last step before you submit. Read what you're signing (or, in this case, checking) carefully. Then—finally—“sign” your name by typing it in and adding the date.

Now smile (seriously—it's a confidence builder) and hit “SUBMIT.” Your application is off to whichever school(s) you designated.

# After You Submit

At Collegewise, here's the checklist we go through for each school after one of our students completes a Common Application:

1. Submit the Common Application to the school.
2. Submit official standardized test scores online and as directed by the school's official test policies.
3. Verify that your counselor submitted your Secondary School Report and that your teachers submitted their recommendations. If your school uses Naviance, this can be verified there or in the School Forms section of your Common App.
4. Submit any requested supplemental information, such as information for Arts or Athletics (but only if requested and relevant).
5. Schedule the interview (if available). This isn't something the Common App will tell you to do. You need to visit each school's individual website. Also, it is important to note that many schools will allow you to schedule interviews *before* you submit your application. If that's the case, do not wait on scheduling your interview because slots may be limited and you'll miss your chance. If you'd like some help preparing for your interview, check out our blog section on college interviews at <http://wiselikeus.com/collegewise/category/college-interviews>.

Double-check those five things, and you're sure to have given a complete application to each college.



# How to Update Your Common Application After You Submit It

Once you submit your Common App to a school, the only way to change or update the application that the college will read is to contact the school directly and tell them you would like to alter it. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. For example, if you change your senior year schedule after you've submitted your Common App, a school would want you to make an update. Most colleges will ask you to send a letter describing any changes or updates you want to make. Be sure to call each school to verify how they prefer this update (by email or mail) and to whom it should be directed.

Here are a few other scenarios where you should consider contacting a college and asking for permission to send an updated application:

1. Despite your best efforts, a major error goes through. A misplaced comma or a misspelled word won't keep you out of a college. But if you realize you misspelled "president" as "precedent" throughout your application, it's probably worth fixing.
2. You win an award late in the application season. For instance, you're a volleyball player and win team MVP as well as 1st-team All-League honors at the late fall banquet. In addition, your team finished as runner-up in the state championships. That's a lot to be proud of, and you should share this good news with schools.

3. If you are taking a class and it appears on your Current-Year Courses, but you drop it late in the fall of your senior year, you want to correct this so your application is accurate.

Now, here's how you should *not* use this feature.

Beyond the scenarios we described above, don't update your submitted Common App with any frequency. Get it right the first time. We made this guide so you can make sure your Common Application is as strong as it can possibly be and so you can have the confidence not to second-guess every little detail.

# Conclusion

We did our college applications on typewriters—crude instruments made popular some time after cavemen but before the advent of the text message. Technological advances like the Common Application are supposed to make your lives easier than ours were when we applied to college.

But now that you've read 50 pages of our advice about the Common Application, it would be easy to get the impression that you need a complex strategy to successfully apply to college, that the process is rife with potential errors, and that you're always just one small mistake away from torpedoing your chances of admission.

Don't worry.

It's not easy to sum up a complex teenage life on any college application, yet hundreds of thousands of students every year find a way to do it. Although we hope our guide helps you avoid common mistakes and that you present yourself in the most compelling way, what we want most is for you to be proud of what you're putting out there to the colleges. Applying to college should be an exciting time for you, not one where you second-guess yourself and merely hope you're doing things right. We want our guide to help you do a good job and maybe even enjoy the months after you submit your Common App.

You should also know that pretty much every admissions officer we've ever met or worked with was nice, understanding, and genuinely happier to admit a student than to reject her. Rejecting people is the

part of the job most admissions officers don't like. The more selective colleges have to deal with a lot more applications than they can possibly accept, but the people reading them would still much rather admit you if they can find a reason. That's a good thing to remember as you begin the long wait to hear back from colleges.

So, relax. You don't have control over whether or not a college ultimately says yes, and worrying about it won't make you feel any better. All you can do is submit an application that proudly reflects who you are, and then remember that with over 2,000 colleges to pick from, you're pretty much guaranteed to get in somewhere. The vast majority of college applicants are blissfully happy where they are. Chances are, you will be, too.

Good luck, and have a great time in college.

Cheers,

Arun, Kevin, and Meredith  
Collegewise

## **Want More?**

Collegewise is a private college-counseling company that holds two beliefs: (1) The college admissions process should be an exciting, adventurous time for every family, and (2) accurate, helpful college information should be made available to everyone. So, even though we are private counselors who work with families who can afford to hire us, we also enjoy working with anyone who is interested and willing to listen, whether we're writing, speaking, or teaching as much as we can.

If you'd like to learn more about how we can help your family or your students enjoy a more successful, less stressful college admissions process, just reach out and ask.

### **Our website**

[www.collegewise.com](http://www.collegewise.com)

### **Our college counseling programs**

[www.collegewise.com/services](http://www.collegewise.com/services)

Collegewise counselors work with students in person and online.

### **Our online store**

<http://www.collegewise.com/store>

The online store has guides, videos, and other college planning resources.

## **Our blog**

[wiselikeus.com](http://wiselikeus.com)

We share free advice every single day (including Christmas Day, Arbor Day, and Super Bowl Sunday).

## **Our free email newsletter**

<https://app.e2ma.net/app2/audience/signup/19920/11809/?v=a>

Get our free advice delivered to your inbox.

## **Contact us**

[www.collegewise.com/contact](http://www.collegewise.com/contact)

# About the Authors

**Arun Ponnusamy** is the head counselor and vice president at Collegewise. He was an assistant director of admissions at both the University of Chicago and Caltech and an admissions reader at UCLA.

**Kevin McMullin** is the founder and president at Collegewise. He also writes the Collegewise blog at [wiselikeus.com](http://wiselikeus.com).

**Meredith Graham** is the director of our Columbus, Ohio office. She has worked as an academic advisor at Purdue University in addition to serving as the associate director of admissions at Cornell University.