



# How to Make Your Common App a Lot Less Common

The 2023-24 Collegewise Guide to  
the Common App

A Collegewise Publication



# A Message to Students and School Counselors

Since 1999, Collegewise has been America's premier college counseling company—focused on helping students navigate the college admissions process with less stress and more success. It's now an annual tradition for us to create this guide to help students complete the Common App, a universal application used by over 1,000 colleges and universities around the world. Each year we look for ways to make the guide even more helpful to students and counselors. On the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the wake of the recent ruling on affirmative action by the Supreme Court of the United States, this has been particularly important.

If you're looking for high-level updates on what's new to the Common App this year and how they are remaining committed to equity initiatives, check out the "What's New?" section later on in the guide. We continue to remind students to focus on the parts of the college journey that they can control and to approach those parts with thoughtfulness and intentionality. Yes, that can be difficult at times, but it is one of the keys to a successful (and dare we say joyful) journey to college.

## Students:

This guide offers 65 pages of guidance to help you craft your very best Common App. We think you'll be amazed by what a difference even small—but smart—tweaks will make to your application.

## School Counselors:

While there is a copyright below, please share our guide with your colleagues and students. All we ask is that the Collegewise name stays on this guide and that you neither change it nor charge for it.

## We are committed to sharing what we know about applying to college with students and counselors.

If you would like more advice about and support with the path to college, we have free resources and fee-based services available. We have links to many resources referenced throughout this guide, and you can find even more on the [Resources page](#) or during our live weekly webinars.

# What's New?

This may be your first time completing the Common App; it's my first time as Editor in Chief of Collegewise's Common App Guide! But Common App has been around since 1975, and each year they make important updates to improve students' experiences on the platform. So, what's new to the Common App this year? Let's get into it.

## USER FRIENDLY

- This year, students can select an avatar image, assign it a specific color, and use it with their Common App profile. Fun! But also helpful for students using a shared computer, like at school for example.
- Be on the lookout for more prominent disclaimers about application policies, like those that will notify you when a school has chosen to hide certain information from their application (e.g. test scores) or that a school doesn't accept optional recommendations.

## EQUITY INITIATIVES

- Legal sex is a required question on the Common App due to federal and state reporting requirements. Students will now find "X or another legal sex" as an option, giving all applicants the opportunity to answer the question as reflected on their government identification documents.
- Students who go by a name that is different from their legal first name can now identify which name they'd like to be addressed by when using the app or in communications from Common App. Learn more at their [student name FAQ page](#).
- In June 2023, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled to heavily restrict the use of race in college admissions. Common App continues to include questions about the applicant's race and ethnicity [for statistical and research purposes](#). But reporting race and ethnicity is, and will remain, optional and colleges can (and likely will) hide or "suppress" your responses to these questions. Check out [Common App's landing page](#) or [Collegewise's Affirmative Action guide](#) for more insight on how to navigate the recent ruling.

Collegewise is excited about playing a small part in helping more students have wonderful and fruitful college experiences. And students, thanks for letting us be a part of your journey.



**Caitlin Harper**

*Common App Guide Editor in Chief  
Collegewise Counselor*

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Twelfth Edition

# How to Use This Guide

**We wrote this guide to pick up where the Common App'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 actually useful to admissions officers. The Common App gives you prompts for the personal statement, but we tell you what strong and effective responses look like.

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

So, please don't ignore the Common App's directions. As you work through app sections, watch for the 'Need help?' box to the right—that content 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, so start at the beginning. Or you can skip right to the parts you need help with the most.

Everything we're sharing here is the same advice Collegewise has given over 28,000+ students when helping them fill out their applications. It's worked very well for those students, and we think it will work well for you, too. If you have questions or feel like you should do something differently, always check with your school counselor or college center.

One other note: this guide is focused on the online version of the Common App, not the Android/iOS app version. But the principles are the same even if what you see on the screen is laid out a bit differently.

# 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 [the Common App website](#) (You'll be using it a lot as you complete your Common App and the required supplements.)
2. Bookmark [the Common App's "Help" page](#). The Student Solutions Center has a wealth of basic information about completing the app.
3. Same with their [First Year Student application guide](#).
4. You should review the videos available on the [Common App YouTube channel](#).
5. Have documents - like your transcript(s), testing, and resume - readily available.
6. 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 search Google.)
7. Add yourself to Common App social media feeds. They offer timely and useful advice throughout the process and can be found on the bottom right of the [homepage](#).
8. And finally, if the admission offices of the schools to which you are applying are connected to Facebook, Instagram, and X (Twitter), follow 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 App and create your account. But before you do, slow down. Don't rush through this and type everything in lowercase and use abbreviations that no adult would understand. The information you enter in this section will populate throughout your Common App, throughout your supplements, and on the forms sent to your teachers and counselor. If you have a typo in your name or 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 essential pieces here.

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

## I am a(n):

Choose "First Year Student." (If you're not going to be a first-year college student, you want to review [Common App's transfer student resources](#). This guide is written specifically for the First Year Common App.)

## Email Address

Make sure it's an email address that A) **you check daily** (yes, every day) and B) is appropriate. One of our Collegewise counselors who worked in admissions had a contest every year with fellow admissions officers to determine who 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 or read aloud in a school assembly.

## Password

You must follow the requirements in the text below the Password box. To make it easier to remember, make your password the same as the one you're using for other college-related platforms. We usually don't suggest writing down passwords, but it might be worth jotting this one down or adding it to your password manager and keeping it somewhere secure (and away from your prankster younger sibling).

## Which best describes you? I am:

Make sure you click "Applying as a first-year student and plan to start college in 2023 or 2024." Check one of the other two options if you are a younger student starting your Common App early or if you plan to take one or several years off between applying to and starting college.



❑ **Legal first/given name and Last/family/surname**

Enter your given name as it appears on formal or “official” documents like your Social Security card, birth certificate, driver’s license, high school transcript, etc. If these are different from each other, choose one and stick with it. Colleges will have to match your application with your transcripts and other pieces of information, so your name must be consistent.

❑ **Would you like to share a different first name that people call you?**

This question serves the needs of some students who elect to go by a middle name, nickname, or chosen name. If you share a different first name, you will be able to indicate which name Common App should use to address you in the app and in email. Learn more at their [student name FAQ page](#).

❑ **Date of birth**

International students should be aware that the Common App uses the American convention of month first and day second in all dates.

❑ **Phone**

Now that most households have dropped their landlines for cell phones, this question is straightforward. If you have a cell phone number, you list your cell phone number. But if your family still has a landline, we’d encourage you to use it here instead. Here’s why:

- First, some students don’t check their cell phone voicemails regularly—if they even have them set up. Parents are usually a little better about checking messages on the home phone. Just make sure everyone is committed to checking that voicemail.
- 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 mercilessly taunt you for making a poor ringtone choice. Then, the voice you hear on the phone says, “Hi, this is Jamie 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.

For most of you who will be listing your cell phone number on the application, remember that if an admissions officer is missing a teacher recommendation or a test score and they don’t feel like emailing you or if they want an immediate response, they’re going to call this number. If you are waitlisted, and an admissions officer calls to deliver some good news, this is the number they’re going to dial. So 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.
- If you do get a voicemail from a college representative, collect your thoughts, find a quiet place, and call back within 10–15 minutes. Have something to take notes with handy! This won’t be an interview, but you still want to be ready to make a good impression.



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. Don't use songs or be creative; keep it a bit generic for the next few months.

This advice is a little different if you don't have a permanent phone number. If you don't have access to a phone, find someone you trust who does have a phone (this might be a family friend, a teacher, or a counselor). Ask them if you can use their number for the Common App and, if they agree, to forward any messages to you. Make sure to thank them! Or you could look into getting a Google Voice number (which is free).

**Address**

Click "Add address" and use the pop-up to 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. For students who don't live at home or don't have a permanent address, you'll need an address that can receive mail for you. If you're having trouble finding a good address, ask your school counselor for help. You might be able to use your school's address—just make sure you get permission first.

**Are you currently based in a European Union country, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland, or the United Kingdom?**

No, for anyone not from any of those countries listed. Yes, if you are.

**Which name should Common App use when addressing you in the app or via email?**

If you shared a different first name in the Personal Information section, you get to choose if you want Common App to address you using your legal first/given name or a different first name. As Common App mentions, this preference will not be shared with colleges, recommenders, or other third parties. Also, you can update this preference at any time.

**Common App may share my contact information with colleges that I am considering applying to so they may communicate with me prior to the submission of my application (you can change your response later within 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.

**Common App may communicate with me by email, phone or text message about my account, information relevant to the college admissions process, and my college experience (you can change the response later within your account settings).**

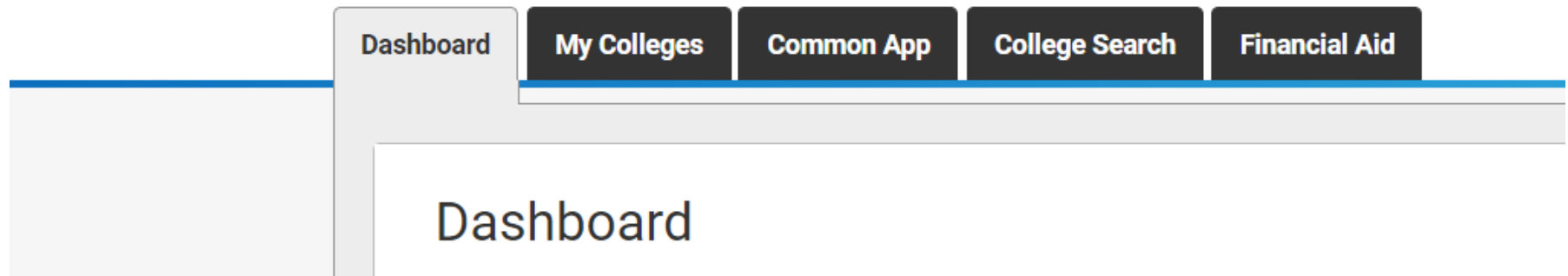
Like the checkbox above, we encourage checking this off to receive useful updates from the good folks at the Common App.

- ❑ **By checking this box...**  
If you're under 18, confirm with a parent or legal guardian.

**PAUSE!** Once you enter your information according to the suggested guidelines and are ready to click **Create Account**, PAUSE, 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 Account**.**

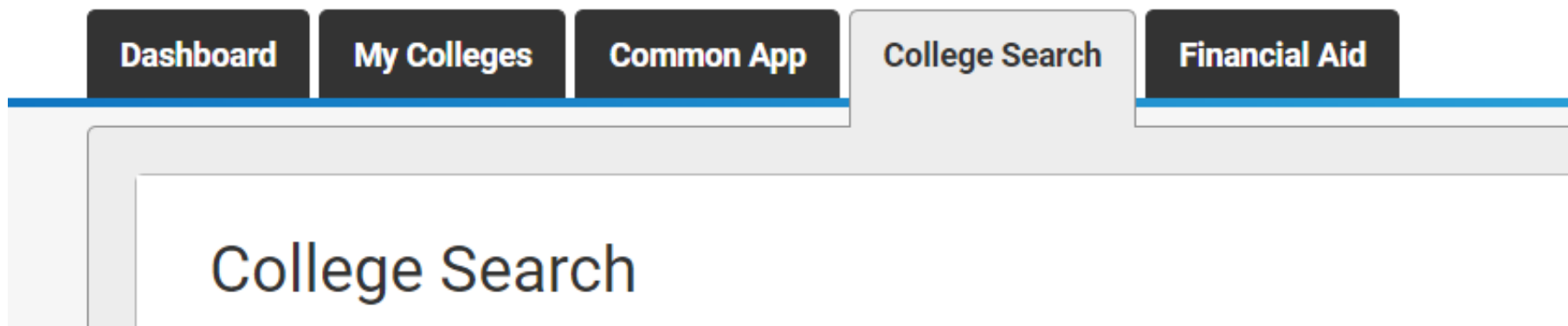
## Dashboard



You are now at the Dashboard. First, read the “Welcome!” message. As you’ll see elsewhere in the application, the 'Need help?' section resides in the upper right side of the screen. Make a habit of reading through it on each page you visit. It will reveal helpful and relevant information for the page you’re currently on. Please note: this means the details in the 'Need help?' section may 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 the “Show more details” drop-down for any individual school, you can see which sections remain for you to complete. When you click on a section marked “In progress,” you are taken directly to the part 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



Although this section is the second-to-last tab, we recommend that most of our students start here. This is where you “add” the various colleges you will be applying to. By doing so, you’ll be populating the information that will appear under the Dashboard and My Colleges sections. If you do not choose schools in this section, those sections will effectively remain blank until you do.

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.**

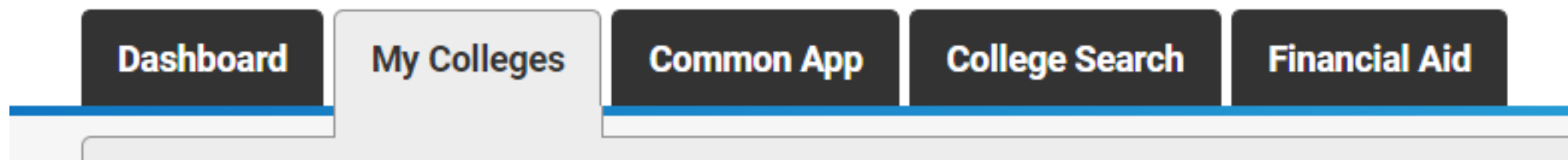
Many of our students will complete their entire Common App tab, then go back and add their colleges at the end, especially if they haven't finalized their college list. You can always add or drop schools from this list at any time. Nothing is permanent here.

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

To double-check, open a new tab in your browser and paste in this link: [commonapp.org/explore](https://commonapp.org/explore). This page provides a complete list of all the schools on the Common App — more than 1,000 of them.

Note that 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. Common App has made it easier to differentiate schools by including their logos. Be sure you're applying to the correct one, or you may be in for a surprise come decision time.

## My Colleges

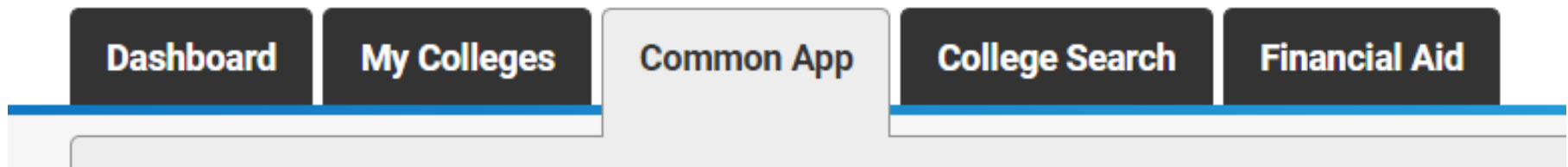


My Colleges is the section where you *submit* your application in several parts:

- a. Main Common App (including school-specific questions)
- b. Recommenders and FERPA
- c. Writing Supplement (if a school requires a separate writing submission)
- d. Review and Submit

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 process down more toward the end of this guide. We encourage students to first complete the main Common App tab by entering in their basic information that will stay the same across all schools.

## Common App



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



# Profile

## Personal Information

**Legal first/given name, Middle name, Last/family/surname, and Suffix**

Enter your given name as it appears on formal documents, like your Social Security card, birth certificate, driver's license, 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. Only items with the \* beside them are required.

**Would you like to share a different first name that people call you?**

If you entered a different first name during account creation, this should appear here. This question serves the needs of some students who elect to go by a middle name, nickname, or chosen name. If you share a different first name, you will be able to indicate which name Common App should use to address you in the app and in email by clicking "communication preferences".

**Do you have any materials under a former legal name?**

Choosing "Yes" pops up "Former first name," "Former middle name," and "Former last name" boxes where you can share your previous *legal* name that may appear on materials like transcripts, test scores, or financial aid forms. You might have changed your name because your parents divorced or remarried, you chose a new name for yourself, or something else entirely. That's fine, and if you have, you should list your previous legal name here.

**Date of birth**

This should already be completed. It's also another reminder that international students should be aware that the Common App uses the American convention of month first and day second in all dates.

## Address

### **Permanent home address**

This can be the same address you entered during registration. If you have a permanent home, list that address. If you don't have a permanent home, list an address that can receive mail for you. This could include the home of a friend, relative, or any other trusted adult, and make sure they agree.

### **Alternate mailing address**

Will a college be able to send you mail for the next nine months at your permanent address? For most students, the answer is yes. If that's you, click "No alternate address." However, if you are living somewhere temporarily (including at a boarding school) you can click "Send mail to temporary or alternate address" and then list the dates you're living there. Use the same option if your family prefers to receive mail at a P.O. Box address.

## Contact Details

### **Preferred phone**

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). If you received permission from an adult to use their phone number instead, or you have a Google Voice number, list that number here.

### **Alternate phone**

If you think an admissions officer might have trouble reaching you at your preferred phone number (for instance, if you don't have a phone and are using someone else's number), you can use this space to list another way for colleges to call you. Most students will click "No other telephone," and we encourage that to keep things simple for the reasons we explained earlier.

# Demographics

Most of the questions in this section are optional, but at Collegewise, we recommend that our students answer them honestly and confidently. None of the details you share here are going to get you into or keep you out of college single-handedly. But this is an excellent opportunity to shed more light on the person behind the application, the grades, and the test scores, and it's always a good idea to seize those opportunities when they're presented.

- Gender
  - We encourage students to answer this question in whatever way feels honest and authentic to you (including leaving it blank). We firmly believe that the right colleges will be excited about you, exactly as you are.
- Legal sex
  - If Collegewise were writing our own college application, we would make this question optional. But it's mandatory in this section on the Common App for reasons strictly related to federal data collection. Students should answer this question according to their legal sex (typically your sex assigned at birth or a legally changed gender marker). Click the "[Learn more](#)" hyperlink if you have questions.
- Pronouns
  - Again, we encourage students to answer this question in whatever way feels honest and authentic to you (including leaving it blank).
- U.S. Armed Forces Status
  - Most students will choose "None," but if you can select one of the three other options, thank you for your service!
- Are you Hispanic or Latino/a/x? *and* Regardless of your answer to the prior question, please indicate how you identify yourself. (Select one or more)
  - In June 2023, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that race cannot be used as a standalone factor in college admission decisions. Why then is Common App still asking these questions? [For statistical and research purposes](#). Reporting your race and ethnicity on your Common App has been, and will remain, optional. If you do choose to answer these questions, the information is likely to be suppressed from the PDF version of your application that colleges will use to evaluate you for admission. In other words, the college won't see your answers. [This Collegewise blog](#) gives more context and advice on how to navigate the Supreme Court's ruling.



## 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. If you're fluent, or you've completed four years (or even the AP level) of foreign language study, you might be skilled. If you're not sure, imagine you have an interview with one of your colleges, and the interviewer, unbeknownst to you, speaks both English and a language you've listed here. 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? But if you can read and write it even though you genuinely can't have a chat in it, then it's appropriate to check off just those boxes.

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.

## Geography and Nationality

The first few questions on birthplace and number of years you have lived in the U.S. 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. And, other than the questions on citizenship, these are optional questions, so you can always leave them blank if you don't feel comfortable answering these.

### **Select your citizenship status**

This question is required. If you are a "U.S. citizen or U.S. national" you only need to add your Social Security Number if applying for financial aid using the FAFSA. If you are a "U.S. dual citizen," "U.S. permanent resident," "U.S. refugee or asylee," or "Citizen of non-U.S. country," you will need to provide information specific to your situation. It's essential to be as accurate as possible in this case.

Undocumented and DACA students will choose "DACA, undocumented, Deferred Enforced Departure, or Temporary Protected Status." No additional information is required on the Common App.

If you are in the process of obtaining permanent residency or citizenship but have not yet finalized your new status, you need to answer with your status as of today. You can always update colleges later if your status changes mid-year.

Some parents don't want their children to list a Social Security Number here. However, it's important to answer this question if you're applying for federal financial aid because it will correspond to your FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) information.

## Common App Fee Waiver

The Common App lists a number of economic indicators for you to see if you would qualify for a waiver of the application fees, and there is also a link to a great FAQ that provides more information. If you meet one or more of the criteria listed, then you qualify for a fee waiver, and you should click "Yes" here. We would also encourage you to click "Yes" to receive information from UStrive. They're a nonprofit that provides extra admissions and financial aid support at no cost.

## Family

### Household

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

If you select "Divorced" a window will ask you for the year of the divorce. Be as accurate as you can. This could provide some important context to your academic record if the divorce happened while you were in high school. Additionally, if you are applying for financial aid using FAFSA, this answer should match that paperwork.

If you select "Divorced", "Never Married", or "Widowed" an additional question will appear asking "Do you wish to list any step-parents?" and "How many?" Again, we recommend that you complete every question that applies to you with accuracy and confidence, including sharing the full scope of your family structure.

**With whom do you make your permanent home?**

Many students will list one or both of their parents here, but if you don't live with either parent (for example, if you live with a relative or someone else), you can click the appropriate option here. If you select "Other," you'll be able to specify your living situation in a new field (there is a 100-character limit, but you can disclose more in the Additional Information section later on if necessary).

- ❑ **Do you have any children?**  
Click “yes” or “no” as appropriate.

## 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 when possible to ensure the information is as accurate as possible. If you don't live with your parents or are not in contact with them, you can select “I have limited information about this parent.” You can explain more about your situation in the Additional Information section if you would like.

- ❑ **Preferred email**  
Make sure your parents are OK with you giving out their email address. This information is generally used by colleges once you're admitted so they can invite parents to special events and share information about financial aid.
- ❑ **Preferred phone**  
Same advice as for “Preferred email” — check with your parents.
- ❑ **Occupation (former occupation, if retired or deceased)**  
Some college 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. Other students feel they must do the opposite and play up what their parents do to be “college material.” As with everything in your application, honesty is the best policy here.

Here's what Collegewise counselors tell their students to do:

- First, ask your parents what they want you to list here. It's crucial that they feel what you have shared is accurate. If their occupation is not listed — whether specifically or broadly — “Other” is an option that opens up a text box to type in a response.
- 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 can be grateful for your circumstances. If neither of your parents went to college and you have dreams of doing things they didn't have the opportunity to do in their lives, you should be proud of yourself and of the fact that you're about to do something groundbreaking in your family. Don't apologize for or try to hide the circumstances in 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 considers graduate (like MSW or Ph.D.) and professional schools (like MD, JD, or MBA) as the same thing.

Additionally, "Some trade or community college" and any selection below it in the pull-down menu will trigger the following prompt:

☐ **Total number of institutions attended**

Use the following: 1 = attended trade school or college for at least a semester; 2-5 = entered another trade school/college and/or graduate program/professional school for at least a semester.

☐ **College lookup**

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

This section is where you can also indicate what degree was earned at the specific college, and that drop-down offers: Associate's; Bachelor's; Master's; Business; Law; Medicine; Doctorate; Other. It will also ask you what year the degree was earned.

## Sibling

List the number of siblings you have, along with their name(s) and age(s).

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 in the Writing section."

# Education

## Current or Most Recent Secondary School

**Current or most recent secondary school lookup**

Using the “Find School” link, enter your current school. And if you don’t find the school you’re looking for, peek at the Help section to the right for a solution. And if you’re a homeschooled student, check out the note posted in the High School Lookup box explaining how you should approach this question.

**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 2020. But some students at private schools or public charters may have entered in 7th grade or even kindergarten. In those cases, go ahead and list when you first entered the school. If you transferred high schools, enter the date you started at your current school.

**Is this a boarding school/do you live on campus?**

If you are a student who lives at a boarding school, this should also be reflected in the Address section above.

**Did you or will you graduate from this school/Graduation date**

If you’re still in high school, the answer will be “yes” and this date will be your future date of graduation. Get this information from your school counselor or your school’s online calendar.

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

If you check any one of these boxes except the final one, a text box will appear below and request you to, “Please use the space below to provide details about the change in progression through secondary/high school that you indicated above.” Note, there’s a 250-word limit for this text box.

**COVID-19 Note:**

If you’re among the many students whose classes were online for your freshman year, you might be wondering if you need to note that here somehow. The answer is: nope. However, if you took time off from school when the pandemic hit - maybe you started working more hours to help support your family, or you cared for a relative - that might count here. See the full explanation below for what qualifies as a change in progression and how to articulate that clearly to your colleges.



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

- Most students completing high school on a standard four-year timeline will check the “No change in progression” box. You will only check another of these boxes if you need(ed) more/less than four years to graduate or are opting to take time off or for a gap year upon graduation.
- Admission officers will be interested in why you finished high school late, so you need to be thoughtful with your response. First, clearly explain the details of your situation and then follow up with why this is the case. If you needed more time to graduate because freshman year fell apart due to an illness in the family, share that. If you needed more time because you struggled with some of your coursework, that’s okay. Just be honest and take responsibility when it’s appropriate. Colleges know that not everyone is perfect during their high school years, but they won’t know your reasons for that being the case. It’s on you to tell them in your own words.
- Some students take a year off between graduating high school and starting college. During this gap year, they may work to save up money for college, pursue a personal goal like learning a new language, or, in the case of some international students, fulfill mandatory national service.

If you are 100% sure that you will be taking a break AND you have a plan, it’s wise to check this box off. If you’re thinking about it but unsure how you’ll spend that year, then don’t. You likely won’t be able to articulate precisely how you’ll spend the time, and that won’t do you any favors.

## Other Secondary/High Schools

- If you have attended any secondary/high schools not listed in the previous section, 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. If you transferred schools between 10th and 11th grades, the right answer is probably one. But if you’ve taken summer school at a different high school or participated in any academic coursework or program on a high school campus other than your own, the situation is a bit more complicated. Colleges want to see the courses you’ve taken and the grades you’ve earned at each high school you have attended. That makes sense. But part of the “question behind the question” here is how many high school transcripts you’ll be sending them.

Every high school has its own policies around how they record classes you have taken at a different high school or academic center, and the approaches vary widely by district and region. So, we can’t give a single answer in this guide about how to note the number of high schools you’ve attended. Here are a few guidelines we think you’ll find helpful in determining the best answer for your situation:

### **1. Ask your school counselor or the college center director how your school notes classes taken at a different campus or center**

This is a key step and one of many occasions when you should do whatever your counselor tells you to do. If your school counselor tells you that your summer school or academic center courses are considered to be part of your current/primary high school and will be on the same transcript, then you will likely simply enter “zero” for this question and move on. But if your school counselor tells you that those classes are on a separate transcript, you should enter the proper number of schools and answer the follow-up questions that appear.

### **2. Verify who is expected to send the extra transcripts to the colleges**

Will it be your counselor? Or will you need to request those transcripts and ensure they are sent directly to the colleges? Make sure you are clear on this point, then make any transcript requests you are responsible for and allow ample time for those transcripts to arrive at the colleges. You don't want your application to be noted as “incomplete” because your summer school transcript hasn't yet arrived.

#### **Please provide details about why you left each of the above secondary/high schools.**

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

- For most students, just a short explanation should be enough. Sometimes it can be a single sentence, such as, “My father got a new job, and our family had to relocate.” Or, “I took a single summer class here.” Don't go on longer than necessary.
- If you switched high 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 terrible or that none of the other students were committed to academics. If the fit wasn't right, you can be honest about it without being overly negative. Without 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?

## Colleges & Universities

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

This section should be used if you have taken one or more college courses — online or on-campus. (This does not include AP or IB courses taken on a high school campus. These would usually be listed on your transcript.) You do not have to have received credit or have a transcript available to check the box.

Click “Find college” to add it, then for Course Details, mark all the appropriate boxes because you can choose more than one.

**Dual enrollment with high school** means that you took a college course that gives you credit (and a transcript) at a college AS WELL AS at your high school. If you took a class that fits that definition, then check this box. Most students will leave this blank unless they are in a program such as Running Start or an early college-entrance program, but check with your school counselor if you're not sure. For **Summer program**, more students will check this one off but see the caveats in the paragraph below. For **Credit awarded directly by college**, check this box only if you are sure you were given credit for satisfactory performance in the course.

With this in mind, students at Collegewise check the last of these boxes only if they have taken a course that is equivalent to 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 okay to leave the "**Credit awarded...**" box unchecked and only check off "**Summer program.**"

Additionally, if you did great in the course and enjoyed the course material, the Additional Information section (which you'll learn more about in the Writing section of this guide) is a perfect place to share the course name, your grade, and a brief description of the class.

### **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 ever taken coursework at a college or university, please indicate the number of colleges," not, "If you have ever taken coursework at a college or university AND received an A, please indicate the number of colleges." We like the message you send to a college when you have the guts to admit that you took a college class even if you got crushed in it.



And if you want to, it's a piece of information you can address in the Additional Information section. You can acknowledge that you didn't get the perfect grade you were hoping for then talk about what you got out of it despite that.

Some counselors disagree on this point, but we believe that honesty always comes back to reward you. This is one of those sections in our guide where you should double-check with your school counselor or college center if you're uncertain about whether our recommendations are right 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. The information you enter here must match your official records.

### COVID-19 Note:

Some high schools used a Pass/Fail grading system (also called Credit/No Credit) during the 2020-2021 school year. If your school used this grading system, you do not need to address that here. Your school counselor will address this in the forms they will submit on your behalf. You should fill this section in the same way you usually would. So, for instance, if your school usually grades on a 4-point scale, you should choose 4 under "GPA Scale Reporting." The same thing is true for your GPA. Use the highest GPA on your most recent transcript, even if some of your grades were recorded as Pass/Fail. If you're worried about how colleges might view this grading shift, [check out this blog post](#).

#### **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. But it also says you can approximate, so if your school reports 525 and you say 520, that'll probably be close enough. If you report 200 or 1000, though, that'll raise some question marks from admissions officers.

#### **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.

#### **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.

**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. If you've attended multiple high schools, list the GPA on your most recent transcript.

## Current or Most Recent Year Courses

Again, you should have a copy of your official transcript or senior year schedule in front of you. Keep in mind, if you're filling this out during the summer before your senior year, this section is intended to reflect your senior year course load, which will be the most recent courses you take before applying to college.

**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 Advisory Group or Physical Education, don't count it. If you have classes that switch at the semester break (e.g., AP Microeconomics becomes AP Macroeconomics), then each should be counted separately.

**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.

**Course subject**

Use the drop-down box to select the course subject. Use your best judgment.

**Course name**

- 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, choose "N/A" unless it 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 select only the individual First/Second Semester options 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. If you're taking AP courses, list them at the top (lead with "AP Calculus" or "AP English" if you're taking one or both, as they both have oomph). Then, move to honors courses, followed by regular classes (solid academics, 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.
- 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. Yes, we know we just told you to use the class names exactly as they appear on your transcript, but this is the exception. When in doubt, spell it out.

## Honors

- **Do you wish to report any honors related to your academic achievements beginning with the ninth grade or international equivalent?** 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 distinctions aren't a priority. If that's the case for you, highlight your strengths in another section.

If you do, start with your most impressive awards first. If you're not sure which one is the most impressive, consider listing any national or state awards first. Otherwise, list the more recent awards toward the top. There is space to list 5 honors.

Many awards that appear as acronyms need to be spelled out, especially if they are unique to your school or your state. (You have 100 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 schoolwide or countywide award that's an abbreviation.

It's also essential 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 would have no idea what that means. Help the college understand it, like this:

"Cosmos Award: two juniors selected by faculty for outstanding achievement in science."

## Community-Based Organizations

Community-based organizations (CBO) are non-profit organizations that work with a local community by providing educational or related services. These organizations often work with underserved or under-resourced communities. Notice that the question is asking only about free programs. Don't list any program that you paid to attend.

If you are working with an organization that provides a free educational service or assistance to you as you apply to college, select its name from the dropdown menu. If your CBO is not listed, you can choose "Other" and write in the title.

## Future Plans

**Which best describes you? I am:**

This carries over from your account creation. You shouldn't need to change it.

**Highest degree you intend to earn**

This question has no set timeline. If you're sure you don't want to pursue degrees beyond the next four years, select "Bachelor's" (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 "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 Law is not going to make a difference in your application. Just tell the truth.

**Career interest**

This is different from the major you plan to pursue, and you'll tell colleges about your intended major in the "My Colleges" section (more on that later). It's fine to be "Undecided" in your career plans. No college is going to track you down 10 years after graduation to confirm that you became a veterinarian like you listed on your application. However, if you're applying to schools known for their pre-professional curricula, it might be a good idea to show that your future career goals align with what you'll experience academically at said schools.

Choosing "Other" towards the bottom of the pull-down menu opens up a text box that says, "Other career interest." If your interest is not offered in the pull-down or you want to get more specific or even note a couple of options that interest you, you can type that information into this box.

# Testing

After the pandemic forced the cancellation of thousands of ACT and SAT tests in 2020, nearly all colleges and universities in the United States went test-optional. Meaning, a student can choose whether they want their test scores included in their application and considered in their admission decision. ([And yes, test-optional means test scores are truly optional.](#)) More than 1,900 colleges and universities are still utilizing test-optional admission policies. But others, like Purdue and the public universities in Georgia, are requiring SAT or ACT scores from applicants. What does this mean for you as an individual applicant here and now? Here are the three questions you need to answer for each Common App school on your list:

1. Does this school require test scores as part of its admissions process?
2. Should you include your scores on the Testing section of the Common App?
3. Do you need to submit your scores “officially” to any schools separately from what you report on the Common App?

The answer to the first question is found quickly for each Common App school. Go to My Colleges, choose your school on the left, and then click on College Information. On the page that opens, scroll down to Standardized Test Policy under Application Information. There you will find the school's policy briefly stated and a link to the school's webpage that outlines their policy more thoroughly. (For non-Common App schools, you can do a quick check of whether a school is test-optional by checking [the list from FairTest](#), though we recommend always double-checking by looking at the school's own admissions website.)

Once you have carefully determined whether the school you are applying to requires scores, you must decide whether to include those scores in your Common App. The Testing section allows you to put your best “testing foot” forward. They're not asking you to enter in *all* your scores, only your best scores. So, should you enter any in and, if yes, which ones? Collegewise has a handy flowchart as well as a blog post to help you think through exactly that. We strongly encourage you to read them for excellent guidance. This magical resource, To Send or Not, can be found [here](#).

One note of caution: if you submit an application to a college and tell them you want to be considered without tests, you may not be able to add test scores to your file later if you change your mind. Make sure to check with the colleges on your list BEFORE you apply to see if they'll let you switch to or from a test-optional application after you've submitted it. Some colleges will allow it, but some won't, and it's better to know before you submit your application.

Finally, you need to determine whether to submit your test scores "officially" or whether "self-reporting" them on the Common App suffices. If you list a score on your Common App for colleges that allow you to self-report it, the admission office does not require the official scores from ACT or College Board when you submit your application. For students looking to save money during the admissions process, this is an easy way to do so because each score report from the ACT costs \$16 and from the College Board \$12. To learn whether a school allows you to self-report, check out the link you find under Standardized Test Policy as outlined two paragraphs above. Also, it's not an exhaustive list as many schools are now switching to self-reporting, but about 190 schools that do allow self-reporting can be found at [this link](#). Be aware, if you are admitted to a school and choose to enroll there, you will be required to provide your official scores. Official scores can take anywhere from 1 to 8 weeks to be sent to a college, so plan ahead and request as early as possible.

**A note on test-free (or test-blind) schools:**

In a trend on top of a trend, about 80 schools, ranging from STEM powerhouses like Caltech to public universities like Washington State to liberal arts colleges like Dickinson, have score-free policies, which means they will not consider test scores *at all* in their application review. You can send 'em in, but they won't look at 'em. This will be clearly stated in their Standardized Test Policy, but you can also find a separate running list maintained by FairTest at a link on [this page](#).

**Bonus Collegewise Tip:** [We've got a podcast episode](#) on the role of standardized testing in college admissions. Check it out if you'd like to learn more.

## Tests Taken

- 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, Cambridge, TOEFL, PTE Academic, IELTS and Duolingo English Test?**

As covered above, for some students, the answer is "No," and you can simply move onto the next section of the application once you've determined whether you need to submit any score reports officially.

**A note to international applicants:**

Follow the directions in the Instructions and Help section to the right if you check "Yes" to the question about "standard leaving exams." You will have the opportunity to enter either actual or predicted scores.

- ❑ **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 carefully. 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, 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 past 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) and see how many tests you wish to enter here.
  - Then, find your best composite (total score) in your score reports. List that under "Highest composite score" and enter that date in "Composite date." Then, enter the best scores you have for each section, even if they come from different test dates.
- ❑ **Number of future ACT sittings you expect**  
This alerts the school that you may have additional information to share with them even after submitting your application. If you're unsure, set it at 0 as you don't want the admission officer waiting for scores that may never arrive.

### If you took the SAT:

- ❑ **Number of past SAT scores you wish to report**
  - Get your official score reports via the College Board's website and note your highest scores on each section, 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 tests, mark that instead.
  - Then, list the dates on which you took those exams and the appropriate scores from that date.

□ **Number of future SAT sittings you expect**

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

## Here's what you should do for other tests:

□ **AP/IB/SAT Subject Tests**

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

### Subject Tests

- It's worth noting that since the College Board ended the Subject Test program in January 2021, very few applicants will even have scores to consider reporting in this section.
- We advise students not to list any Subject Test scores lower than 500 for most colleges. If you're applying to highly selective schools such as Amherst, Stanford, or any in the Ivy League, you probably shouldn't list any score lower than 700, but check with your school counselor or college center if you have questions.

### AP or IB or Cambridge scores

- We typically 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 themselves, worked like crazy, and still just eked out a 2 on the AP test. If they feel proud that they went in and sat for that exam — and they should — they 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 or Cambridge tests, list your highest scores first. This is subtle, but you want to start strong when an admissions officer looks at your 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.
- Also, the prompt here says, “Number of AP Tests you wish to report, including tests you expect to take.” Meaning, you should also include the tests you plan to take in May 2024.



### **TOEFL/PTE Academic/IELTS/Duolingo English Test**

These are tests taken primarily by international applicants. Whether they are required depends on each school you are applying to. Always check the international applicant section of the websites for each school you're applying to and make sure you meet their requirements.

## **Activities**

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

- Don't plan to cut and paste a resume into the Additional Information or send one to any college unless that college specifically asks you to do it in their supplement. Admissions officers spend a lot of time constructing their applications so that they can collect all the information they need to learn about students. If you send a resume without being asked, it's like telling them that you didn't like the way they put their application together. That might annoy them, which is never a good idea.
- We encourage students to list your activities in order of their 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" arrows within each activity.
- Space can be limited in this section, so it's fine to abbreviate if 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 many other abbreviations 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 and abbreviations in the right place, i.e., "Senior Class Vice President" can 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.

- You don't need to fill up all ten available spaces. The applicant with the longest list of activities is not necessarily the one who's going to get in. Many of the Collegewise counselors who previously worked in admissions at highly selective universities note that many of the students they admitted only had six or seven of the lines completed. Admissions officers want to learn about the *significant* ways you spend your time outside class. If you were in the Spanish Club in the 9th grade and never went back after that, does it 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 enjoyed doing in high school.

#### COVID-19 Note:

We've seen some significant changes to students' activities since COVID-19 hit and upended everything. When schools initially closed and shelter-in-place began, many activities were canceled altogether (eight people pushing their heads together in a rugby scrum didn't seem like a great idea in that moment), and some students started doing brand-new activities that didn't exist before as a result (hello, making face masks). But the overall impact on your activities probably depends a bit on where you live since pandemic life looked quite different in Florida from how it looked in California, as well as in other countries. Schools and activities in certain regions of the world largely returned to "business as usual" during the 2020-2021 school year, while in other places students were largely still schooling from home that year and had more-limited options for school clubs and organized activities. No matter where you live, though, colleges get that many things were out of your control. What they want to know instead is what you did with the aspects that *were* in your control. So, your list of activities might look a little different than it would in other times but is still an excellent opportunity to highlight what makes you an interesting human.

□ **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 see, like "Family Responsibilities," "Cultural," "Academic," etc.

□ **Position/Leadership description/Organization Name**

These spaces are limited to only 50 characters and 100 characters respectively. You can use this space to list what this activity 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 the "Red Cross Club" or "Rock Climbing Club."

Think of these sections 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 the description text box.

□ **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 was, according to the information I provided above?" 2) "Did I or the organization 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?" That is the type 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 was specifically for children with physical and intellectual disabilities? That's something interesting the admissions officer 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 living with physical and intellectual disabilities."

What if your school paper won a statewide award during your junior year? That's a cool accomplishment that can't be summarized in the previous two sections. Here's where you could say, "February 2022 issue won the statewide journalism award, 'Excellence in Student Press.'"

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

## What about hobbies?

Collegewise has some non-traditional 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. Perhaps 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 Taylor Swift 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:

- 1) Real interest makes you interesting. Admissions officers really are trying to get to know the applicants. So, if you have a hobby you enjoy, that's an integral part of your life that they should know about.
- 2) When you share something a little personal like a hobby, it breaks up the monotony 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 App. And don't get too cute and start listing things like "Petting my dog" or "Sleep." It's probably 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, or post-graduate, this should only be selected if you've already graduated from high school. We can assure you that you will indeed know if you are doing a PG year.

□ **Timing of participation**

Again, this is pretty straightforward. We recommend that you check just one box that best represents the time frame of the activity even though you have the ability to check multiple boxes.

□ **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 the 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. And you can include travel time. If you're on a dance team that competes hours away from home each week, that's time that couldn't be spent on other activities. 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 amount 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 to 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 on an activity. Sometimes it may be three hours a week, and sometimes it may be 15. If you do an honest job guesstimating, you'll be just fine. If you feel the need to explain further, don't forget you always have space in Additional Information.

□ **I intend to participate in a similar activity in college.**

Your response here is used for two main purposes. One, if you check "Yes" and are admitted to the school, it allows them to share more information with you about similar activities at their school. Two, as they are building a class, it gives them a sense of what you'll engage with on campus.

Don't feel compelled to check off every single box with a "Yes," but checking off "No" to every box probably won't leave the impression you want either.

**Bonus Collegewise Tip:** We've got podcast episodes on the roles of [activities](#) and of [community service hours](#) in college admissions. Check them out if you'd like to hear more.

## Writing

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

We think the best college essay prompts give students enough guidance to focus their story (even though it's effectively the last of seven prompts, most students appreciate more direction than, "Write a 650-word essay on a topic of your choice."). But it's also helpful when prompts leave enough flexibility 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.

Collegewise has helped over 28,000 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 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 one, or perhaps several of the Common App prompts.

Whether it's teaching yourself to cook, struggling through your first year on the soccer 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 in picking one topic over another; we simply help students find their best story and apply it to whichever prompt fits best. If you'd like more advice, Collegewise has lots of [blog posts](#) on college essays. We've also got a few short essay-related videos on the [Collegewise YouTube channel](#).

#### COVID-19 Note:

COVID-19 affected everyone in the world, and, at the same time, no one experienced it precisely the same way. If you lost a loved one to COVID, or if you experienced the virus yourself, you can write about it in your personal statement. Just be sure to follow the rules of a good college essay: make sure that the essay shares information about you and that it is detailed.

You might also choose to talk about how COVID-19 impacted you or your life in the Additional Information section (which we cover a few pages from now) instead of in your essay.

If your essay has to do with how bored you were during shelter-in-place, or how much you realized you missed school because it was closed, we recommend choosing another topic because most high school students feel similarly. Again, COVID-19 and the changes it made to our lives affected everyone—it was a shared, universal experience. It's hard to own that story when it also happened to everyone else in the world. We encourage you to keep thinking about a story you can tell that is truly your own.

## Personal Essay

- **The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your 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 obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
  3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
  4. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
  5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
  6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
  7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.



**Bonus Tip:** The Common App allows students to upload an essay via Google Drive. If you're a student who's already comfortable working on your essays in Google Docs, then this will be a simple and obvious process. If you use Word or another text editor, it's still quite easy to do a cut and paste. Just make sure you read through it again to ensure all the formatting - spacing, bolding, italicizing, underlining, etc. - end up exactly as you intended.

## Additional Information

In a typical year, two-thirds of the students at Collegewise don't write anything in the Additional Information section. Currently, though, there are two parts to this section.

### The COVID-19 and natural disasters question:

- **Community disruptions such as COVID-19 and natural disasters can have deep and long-lasting impacts. If you need it, this space is yours to describe those impacts. Colleges care about the effects on your health and well-being, safety, family circumstances, future plans, and education, including access to reliable technology and quiet study spaces. For more information, check out our [COVID-19 FAQ](#).**
  - **Do you wish to share anything on this topic? Y/N**
  - **Please use this space to describe how these events have impacted you.**

In response to the pandemic, this question was added to the Common App in the fall of 2020. Technically, it neither requires a response nor is an additional essay in the strictest sense. Of course, this puts this section in the sometimes-dreaded "optional" category. So how do you decide if this is something you need to write a response to?

To start, Scott Anderson of the Common App [wrote an excellent piece](#) sharing some background on why they decided to add this question:

*"Over time, we've found that the solution lies in giving you—the student—the space to tell your story and, moreover, the explicit invitation to tell it with honesty, with pride, and with the confidence that the people reading it care about what you have to say. The questions on the application may be common, but your own distinct personal experience is not. And that's never been more true than today."*

The question itself offers many specific touchpoints. If you find yourself nodding vigorously at any of them, then it's time to consider what you have to say. If you find yourself shrugging your shoulders a bit as you search your mind for how COVID-19 affected you or your only response is, "Well, online learning wasn't much fun," then you might consider skipping it. (The counselors who joined Collegewise over the past two years and read responses to this question during application review have confirmed this—mentioning that the school prom was canceled wasn't really helpful here.)

For some students, the virus had a truly powerful impact. Some students had their lives upended by losing loved ones. Others found the shift to learning from home to be life-changing as it allowed them to pursue beloved academic and personal curiosities in a deeper way than ever before.

As you know by now, admissions officers are always looking to put students' experiences and achievements into a broader context. If the virus affected you in a significant way, by all means, dive into a reply. Remember, it's not an essay, so there's no need to elaborate at length about lessons learned and the sort. There's a 250-word limit, but even a sentence or two is fine if it captures what you want to share.

Finally, remember that your school counselor will have the opportunity to write about how your school was broadly affected by the virus. This is something they'll weave directly into an updated school profile or information they can add to a new question directed only to them. They've got it covered, so you don't need to duplicate the same information.

Still, the question of whether or not this prompt is genuinely optional will nag some of you. We understand that instinct because we love students who use every part of the Common App as an opportunity to reveal parts of themselves and share their stories. Just remember, the question was offered as an opportunity to share more about your life in the time of COVID-19 (or wildfires or hurricanes or tornadoes), not to create stress. So, if you're a student who found the pandemic and/or natural disasters to be mere blips in your life, it's okay to say "no" to this optional question and move on.

## The section on "circumstances or qualifications not reflected in the application:"

Much like the COVID-specific question, don't use this section unless it's truly necessary. This isn't a place to share an extra personal statement if you can't decide between two versions you really like or another 650-word essay on a totally different topic. 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.

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 share specific information but that limit the amount of space available, like with 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 run out of space.
- Some students have ongoing challenges during their high school years, like homelessness, abuse, or health issues. If you've experienced a similar challenge that has affected your high school career, you may want to describe it here.
- 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 officer.
- If you have important activities or awards that you couldn't accurately summarize or that 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 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 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 (5/2021)

AP Statistics: 3 (5/2022)

### 3. Keep it short

We've rarely seen a situation where a student needed the entire page to list additional information. There's a 650-word limit, but don't feel pressured to use all of that space. Brevity and clarity are your friends here.

### 4. Keep it "additional"

Additional information needs to be brand new and compelling. 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 — even to the most highly selective colleges — understand how to prioritize what they've done. They use the spaces on the application to highlight their most important information, not give a complete biography.

### 5. No resumes, please

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

If they want a resume, they'll ask you for it in their school-specific section. And even then, most schools requesting one consider it optional, so you'll need to carefully consider whether you'd be sharing new information or duplicating info they've already seen elsewhere in the application.

## Courses & Grades

This section will appear under "Writing" on the left-hand menu of the Common App tab. If you are applying to one or more of ~50 schools that requires this information it will tell you how many: "X college(s) require". You can see the list of colleges that require Courses & Grades [here](#).

If you're not applying to one of the schools on that list, you can simply move on in the guide.

#### COVID-19 Note:

Even though some part of your high school years were interrupted by COVID-19, the colleges on your list that require this section will still want you to complete it. And given how differently schools handled grading during the pandemic, this is one of those times that we can't give you specific instructions on how to tackle this section. Our best advice here is to talk with your school counselor and make sure you're responding accurately based on what your school, district, or state policy has been around grades during the pandemic. This is also a great place to rely on the Common App Student solutions center (the "Need help?" section on the right of the page) and even to contact their support team directly if you run into problems with the mechanics of filling this section out.

It's important to note that the self-reported grades usually do not serve as a substitute for your counselor uploading an official copy of your transcript either through your school's college counseling platform (like Naviance, SCOIR, or Parchment) or through the "Recommenders" section of the Common App.

Remember, you must have access to your high school transcript, and have it in front of you as you fill out the section, to ensure accuracy.

Time to dive in! Click "Add 9th grade" to get started, and the Common App Course Assistant, teal chat bubbles with helpful directions, will open up to walk you through the process. We recommend clicking the "View walkthrough" button on the right of this screen before beginning.

Start by choosing the school from the dropdown menu. These will automatically populate based on the information you provided in the "Education" section of the Common App. If the appropriate school doesn't appear, you'll need to go back to the "Education" section and add it to the "Other Secondary/High Schools" section.

Next, you'll check the year that you attended ninth grade at that school. Your transcript (that you have in front of you at this point, right?) will likely contain this information as well. Select the appropriate grading scale and schedule for that year. Then, enter the course name EXACTLY as it is listed on your transcript, even if it's abbreviated. For example, if your high school abbreviates "World History and Geography" as "Wrld Hist and Geo" on the transcript, make sure to write it as the latter. Then select the subject that best matches the course you just entered. Choose the course level that best matches the course you listed, whether it's AP, Honors, IB, or Standard Level.

Again, base your answer on what's listed on your transcript. If your high school doesn't explicitly designate a course as Accelerated, Gifted, or Honors level, don't list it here.

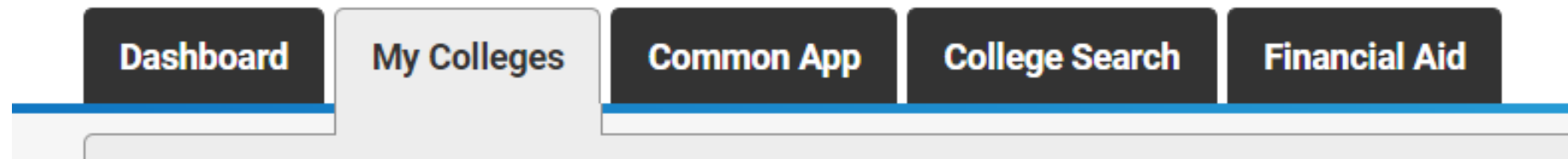
Next, report your grades precisely as they appear on your high school transcript. If your transcript only displays the result for one term or only displays the final grade, only enter that one grade for the course. Finally, report the number of credits you received for the course. Again, make sure to fill out the information exactly how it appears on your transcript. (You may be sensing a theme here.)

To add additional rows to list more courses, click the "Add another course" button and continue entering courses until you've completed entering the remaining information as it appears on your transcript. To delete a class, click the grey X to the right of the course. And if you have more courses for the same grade to add from a different school, click the "Add courses from another transcript" button and repeat the process.

When you've completed all the courses for your ninth-grade year, click Continue and repeat the process for your tenth and eleventh-grade years. Only enter courses for which you have an official grade. So, for most students, this means you will not include your twelfth-grade year. If you have courses to report that were taken in middle school or over the summer, you can do so under "Other Courses". What if you took a college course during high school? Again, follow your official high school transcript and only report the college course if it appears there.

If you want to get a print preview of the self-reported transcript at any point, you can always click the "Preview" button on the top right side of the page.

## My Colleges (School-Specific Components)



Now that you've completed the main Common App, it's time to work on 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 used College Search to add your schools to the My Colleges section, you can dive in here.

## Questions

### General

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 you may have questions about.

#### **Preferred admission plan**

Some colleges allow you to select a specific decision plan. Previous versions of the Common App included descriptions of those plans, but those have now been removed. We're guessing that was done to encourage students to visit the websites of each school and read the *schools' descriptions* of how their different 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 means. Some colleges have very specific rules and restrictions for their plans, so get familiar with that college's rules, then talk with your 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 guardian(s) and school counselor will need to sign it saying they support you applying via Early Decision. The parent version is found under Recommenders and FERPA for that school.

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

Checking "Yes" here is not the same thing as actually *applying* for financial aid. You will need to follow through with submitting any required financial aid application forms. Only check "No" if you are certain you won't be applying for need-based financial aid. (Make sure you double-check this with a parent/guardian first.)

#### **Do you intend to pursue merit-based scholarships?**

Merit-based scholarships are scholarships offered by individual colleges that are awarded based on talents, skills, or other attributes. If you are interested in receiving merit-based scholarships, check "Yes." Make sure you read the directions carefully. Sometimes this is all you need to be considered for merit-based scholarships, but sometimes you'll need to fill out an additional scholarship application form and write an extra essay or two.

**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 housing information 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. And sometimes colleges admit students directly to a particular major. If a college on the Common App wants to understand the motivation for what you intend to major in, they're going to ask about it via a supplemental 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 do enjoy biology, English, and international relations and the prompt allows for it, list them.
- At some colleges, the essay questions you'll answer will directly depend on the major or program you're applying to. Read the prompt carefully to make sure you're answering the question the college is asking. And if you're not sure how this question will be used by a college, you can reach out and ask them about it.
- We advise our students not to select "Undecided" if it's asking about *academic interests*. Many students 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" about your interests is the online equivalent of shrugging your shoulders and having no clue. Be honest and tell colleges what your interests are, even if you aren't sure you want to major in them.
- Be mindful of the school you're applying to, and make sure you show them that you understand their academic offerings.



## Contacts/Family

These sections are mainly used to help a school get a fuller picture of your background. They'll ask if you've applied to the school before. There may be additional questions about your family members to uncover any staff/faculty or alumni connections. And they may want to know how you learned about their school, including whether you've visited their campus. Aligned with advice you've received throughout this guide, we recommend that you answer these questions fully and confidently.

## Disciplinary History

Colleges have the option to ask questions about school discipline or criminal convictions. So, if you apply somewhere that asks about these two things, read the questions carefully and answer honestly. If you've never been in serious trouble at school or with the law, you can probably skip ahead to the next section from here. If you have, though, we have some suggestions here.

If you answer "No" to these questions and a college later finds out you should have responded, "Yes," you will almost certainly not be admitted. (If you've already been accepted, they'll revoke the offer.)

There's a phrase publicists use: "We can control the story." It means that if you admit something unpleasant rather than waiting 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 Collegewise counselors approach this question with students: Honesty is the best policy. This is one of those sections in our guide where you should double-check with your school counselor or college center if you're uncertain about whether our recommendations are right for you.

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 fourteen.

□ **Explanation**

If you answer “yes” to one of these questions, you’ll see a new text box appear along with a prompt asking you to explain and to reflect on what you’ve learned from the experience—the exact prompt phrasing and response length will depend on the college that’s asking the question.

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

**1. Be honest**

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

**2. Take responsibility**

The very worst thing a student can do is blame other people or make excuses. You must 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 doesn’t change the fact that you were there and complicit. Instead, consider saying 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 being honest and taking responsibility.

**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 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 complaining about how you were treated unfairly, the admissions officer 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.

## Recommenders and FERPA

### FERPA Release Authorization

FERPA is the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. While it covers pretty much all your educational records, what the Common App is focused on is allowing your high school to send information about you to colleges.

Before you start adding your recommenders' information to the application, you must complete the FERPA Release Authorization (and have your high school listed in the Education section on your main Common App tab.) You will do this only once for your entire application, not for each school.

**Note:** Taking care of this also helps link your school's college counseling platform (like Naviance, SCOIR, or Parchment) to your Common App account, if your school uses one of those platforms.

Read the instructions carefully on the Release Authorization before you check the box 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 them to do a good job. Also, 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 is worried that you'll see the letter one day is one who is less likely to be truly honest and more likely to say things that are technically positive but bland. That's bad for you.

It's the difference between:

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

and

"Although William has occasionally struggled in my class, he's cheerful, he keeps trying his best, and he's never given up on getting better at chemistry. I like that in a student, and it bodes well for his future."

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 is saying 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 worried, 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.

## Invite Recommenders

In the current version of the Common App, high schools have the *option* of managing their recommendation processes through programs like Naviance, SCOIR, or Parchment, but every high school will make its own decision about how to manage the recommendation process, and those that use Naviance, etc., 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 school counselor or the college center director how your school is handling recommendation forms for college**

This is a key step. Whether or not your school uses Naviance, etc., many high schools have their own system and set of deadlines to manage letters of recommendation. This is one of many occasions when you should do whatever your counselor tells you to do, and it can make things more complicated for your teachers and counselor if you don't follow their directions on your school's specific process. Remember, anyone who writes a letter of recommendation for you is doing you a favor. If your school has a system, you need to follow 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 usually 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 vaguely mentioned sometime in the past that they 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. Also, make sure you know how many letters your colleges require, and check to see if those colleges have requirements or suggestions about which teachers should write your recommendations. You don't want to ask your History teacher and your English teacher for recommendations then learn that you need a letter from a Math teacher for the college or program you're applying to.

### **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 App. Hint: Google helps.



## 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 entered the information for your counselor and all your teachers, you can then go back to the My Colleges section, select each school individually, and indicate which people will be submitting forms to each school, or confirm with your school counselor that this part will be handled through Naviance, etc.

## Advisor

This feature was added a few years ago to allow students to share a "review" version of their application with up to three people who may be supporting them. For some applicants, this may be a parent or guardian. For others, it may be a school teacher/counselor, community-based organization advisor or an independent education consultant. Regardless of whom it is, two things hold true:

1. The advisor is NOT identified to anyone on the college side of things or to other advisors.
2. The advisor can only "see" your application and your progress on it (via the familiar series of green checkmarks). They cannot make changes to it.

After adding an advisor, you will have the opportunity to allow them to preview your application by clicking the "Enable Preview" button under their name. This gives them access to view your application but, again, they will not be able to make any edits.

Based on everything we've seen since this feature debuted a few years ago, we at Collegewise love it. It's a simple mechanism that allows students to keep important stakeholders in the loop while still maintaining control of their application and the process.

## Writing Supplements

Not all schools have extra pieces of writing beyond the main personal statement in the Common App. Others will tuck their additional writing prompts right inside the Questions section, and they may not be revealed until you've completed a particular question. Too many students put off filling out the basics in the Questions section only to be surprised at the last minute by an essay that pops up in response to an otherwise benign question. To avoid that, 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 on all of them. But [we've got a number of blog posts](#) that tackle some of the most-common questions, and we'll share a few general tips here to help you make sure your supplements are just as robust as the rest of your Common App.

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

We know it's not groundbreaking advice, but you must read any directions provided to the right of each supplement. The information 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 to a single 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 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 App itself. These supplements are another chance for you to show your personality to your favorite colleges.

### **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, but admission officers can usually tell when you've written one "Why I want to go to this college" essay and merely substituted a new college name.

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 being expressive and 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 response 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: Some schools will ask you to write a one-paragraph answer 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 not offer a word limit in the question but will have a limit set on the accompanying text box. 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 for a box that only allows 75 words.

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

Some colleges 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 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 App: if there is something you’d like a college to know that you haven’t had a chance to reveal in the Common App or the supplement, this is the place to share it. If you don’t have anything else to share, you shouldn’t worry about that question.

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 wanted to make the soccer team at your school, and the soccer coach said they were 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.

## Submit Your Application

The Common App [provides an excellent video](#) on how to submit and pay for your application. It’s also worth noting that you can’t “accidentally” submit your application. You will have a chance to proofread your application, and there will be around three to five other screens you have to click through to submit it officially.





### □ **Final PDF Preview**

These instructions will tell you 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 see when they read your application. If there are sections that aren't showing up, check for a note at the top of your screen about what the school has chosen to suppress from the application.

Go through that preview 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. If you pasted in an activity description that was more than 150 characters, you won't get an alert about it like you would if your essay is over the maximum word count, so make sure you look at those descriptions to make sure none of them were cut off. If it is, you will need to shorten what you wrote until it all shows up in the next Preview PDF you generate.

After you've done a good proofing and preview of your application (and your counselor or teacher or a trusted adult has, 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 each application off when you're ready. And if you submit your application to a school or two then want to update your Common App before you submit the rest of your applications, you can. (Keep reading for information on how to update your applications after you've submitted them.)

### □ **Application Fee Payment**

If you didn't request a fee waiver in the Profile section and the college charges a fee, you will have to pay an app fee. Colleges have their own fee structures and methods of payment, so carefully follow the directions for each school. When students are given the option between a credit/debit card and check, we recommend a card because it's easier to verify if payment has been received. But e-checks work well, too, so consider what's best for your needs. Either way, 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 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 you designated.

# After You Submit

Here's the checklist we recommend going through for each school:

1. Submit the Common App to the school following the steps above.
2. If the school has a separate Writing Supplement, submit that too. That means starting with the "Final PDF Preview" step for the Writing Supplement of that college, then following each step again through "smile and hit Submit." (You won't have to pay a new application fee, though.) If a school has a Writing Supplement, you have to complete BOTH of these steps for the application to be considered complete. There are alerts on the Common App, but a lot of students still miss this step. Don't let that be you!
3. Submit official standardized test scores as directed by the university's test policies, if applicable.
4. Verify that your counselor submitted your School Report and that your teachers submitted their recommendations. If your school uses Naviance, etc., this can be verified there or in the My Colleges section of your Common App.
5. Submit any requested supplemental information, such as an art portfolio through SlideRoom (but only if requested and relevant).
6. Schedule the interview (if available). This isn't something the Common App will tell you to do. You need to visit each school's 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 to schedule 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 on college interviews](#).
7. Many colleges will send you login credentials for their online portal for applicants. Don't wait to set up that account! This is a crucial communication hub that will tell you not only if your admission application is complete but, in most cases, your ultimate admission decision.

Double-check those seven things, and you're sure to provide each college a complete application.

# How to Update Your Common App After You Submit

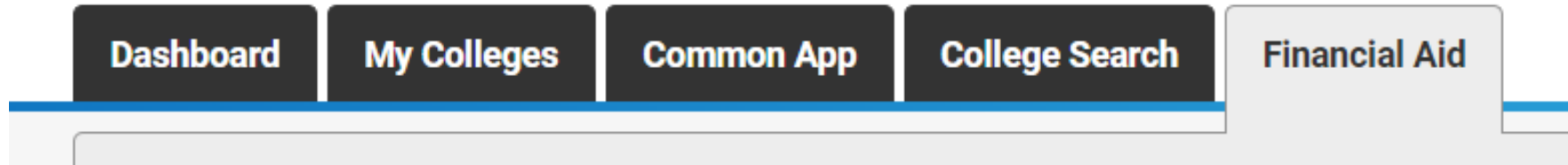
As we mentioned above, you can update your Common App between application submissions, and the rest of your schools will see any updates when you send in your applications. Once you submit your Common App to a school, though, the only way to change or update the application that college will read is 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 an email or update through their applicant portal, describing any changes or updates you want to make. Be sure to call or email each school to verify how they prefer this update 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 significant 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.
4. You are involved in a situation where official disciplinary action is taken against you. Refer back to the Disciplinary History section for advice on how to communicate what happened to the schools where you have applied.

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 App is as strong as it can be and so you can have the confidence not to second-guess every little detail.

# Financial Aid



While much of the information in this section can be found elsewhere on the Internet, we like that the Common App brings it all together in one place. You can learn the basics of financial aid and explore scholarships. The "How to apply for financial aid" tab will walk you through all the steps and provide you with quick links to the financial aid websites of each of the schools in your My Colleges section. It gives you a natural starting point to research each school's policies on need-based aid, what the deadlines for various required forms are, and how to apply for merit-based scholarships if they're available and if an application is required.

**It is important to remember that to apply for need-based aid, you must fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) at [fafsa.gov](https://fafsa.gov). FAFSA is not part of the Common App, and the Common App is not a substitute for a financial aid application.**

The Financial Aid section is meant to make it easier for you to locate each college's specific instructions to apply for aid. Still, you'll need to follow those instructions (which will include filing a FAFSA at a minimum) once you get to those pages.

When you have submitted your very first application via the Common App, you'll unlock the features in the Explore scholarship opportunities section.



# Conclusion

Technological advances like the Common App are supposed to make your college application life easier. But now that you've read almost 65 pages of our advice about the Common App, 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 find a way to do it every year. Although we hope our guide helps you avoid common mistakes and 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 great 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 friendly, understanding, and genuinely happier to admit a student than to reject them. Rejecting people is the part of the job most admissions officers don't like. The more selective colleges deal with many 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 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 nearly 4,000 colleges to pick from, you're pretty much guaranteed to get in many places if you build a balanced list. The vast majority of college students are quite happy where they are. Chances are, you will be, too.

You've got this!

Cheers,  
The Counselors at Collegewise

# Appendix

Other than a handful of URLs early in the guide (to launch your Common App, check which colleges are on it this year, and the Before You Start section) we have embedded all URLs in the text of this year's guide. But we know that it's not always convenient to hunt down an embedded website in a lengthy document, so we've got a list of them here in the order they appear in the guide.

1. **Free Collegewise Resources**  
<https://collegewise.com/resources/>
2. **On-demand Collegewise webinars**  
<https://collegewise.ewebinar.com/>
3. **Live Collegewise webinars**  
<https://collegewise.com/seminars/>
4. **Start your Common App**  
<https://apply.commonapp.org/createaccount>
5. **Who is on the Common App**  
<https://appsupport.commonapp.org/applicantsupport/s/live-common-app-schools>
6. **Blog post on Credit/No Credit**  
<https://go.collegewise.com/credit-no-credit>
7. **Colleges that accept self-reported SAT/ACT scores**  
<https://www.compassprep.com/self-reporting-test-scores/>
8. **"Test scores are truly optional" statement**  
<https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2020/08/10/nacac-statement-seeks-make-test-optional-admissions-clear>
9. **Database of test-optional schools**  
<https://www.fairtest.org/university/optional>

# Appendix

## Cont.

10. [Podcast on standardized testing in college admissions](https://getwise.simplecast.com/episodes/s104-testing-is-never-the-most-important-thing)  
<https://getwise.simplecast.com/episodes/s104-testing-is-never-the-most-important-thing>
11. [Podcast on choosing activities](https://getwise.simplecast.com/episodes/0101)  
<https://getwise.simplecast.com/episodes/0101>
12. [Podcast on community service](https://getwise.simplecast.com/episodes/s103-community-service-is-not-about-the-hours)  
<https://getwise.simplecast.com/episodes/s103-community-service-is-not-about-the-hours>
13. [Blog posts on college essays](http://go.collegewise.com/tag/college-essays)  
<http://go.collegewise.com/tag/college-essays>
14. [Collegewise YouTube channel \(including essay-specific videos\)](https://www.youtube.com/@Collegewise/videos)  
<https://www.youtube.com/@Collegewise/videos>
15. [Background piece on why Common App added a COVID-specific question](https://www.forbes.com/sites/civcnation/2020/06/25/this-pandemic-does-not-define-you)  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/civcnation/2020/06/25/this-pandemic-does-not-define-you>
16. [Common App colleges that require the Courses & Grades section](https://appsupport.commonapp.org/applicantsupport/s/article/Do-all-members-of-The-Common-Application-use-Courses-Grades-in-their-admissions-process)  
<https://appsupport.commonapp.org/applicantsupport/s/article/Do-all-members-of-The-Common-Application-use-Courses-Grades-in-their-admissions-process>
17. [Blog post on answering supplemental essay questions](https://go.collegewise.com/tag/college-essays)  
<https://go.collegewise.com/tag/college-essays>
18. [Common App's video on submitting and paying for your application](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WeJwBCq5QY)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WeJwBCq5QY>
19. [Blog post on college interviews](http://go.collegewise.com/college-interview-questions-and-answers)  
<http://go.collegewise.com/college-interview-questions-and-answers>

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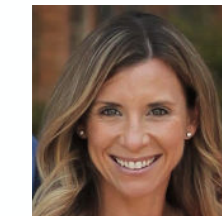
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# Want More?

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

Collegewise is a private college counseling company that embraces 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.

## Additional Resources

[Collegewise's Resource Bank](#) offers a complete collection of helpful resources!

[Upcoming webinars](#) that cover all things related to the college admissions process.



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