COLLEGE WISE

How to Make Your Common App a Lot Less Common

The 2025-26 Collegewise Guide to the Common App

A Collegewise Publication

Here's our Latest Edition!

Welcome to the 14th edition of the Collegewise Guide to the Common App, a tool that's helped tens of thousands of students successfully complete the universal application used by over 1,000 colleges and universities around the world.

We wrote the guide we needed.

The Collegewise Guide to the Common App was originally born from necessity. In 2011, we were wrestling with questions like: How do we make sure every Collegewise student gets access to our very best college application advice? How do we codify what our best counselors know? How can we share their wisdom with new counselors we're training? The guide solved those problems for us. And we knew it could help other students, and our counselor colleagues outside of Collegewise, too.

Always up-to-date.

We're always looking for ways to make our guide even better. It's now an annual tradition at Collegewise to assemble a team of our most experienced 'Wisers' to go line-by-line and review the application, making sure our guide reflects our best, most accurate, most up-to-date advice. This year, the Common App itself includes a more user-friendly interface, new and reworded questions that allow students to provide important context to their stories and lived experiences, and modifications that respond to current shifts in higher-education (ex: students have more flexibility when reporting standardized test scores). As always, we've updated our guide right along with the Common App; you'll find plenty of helpful context and advice inside to help you navigate these changes.

The 2025-2026 Collegewise Guide to the Common App

More than a decade and tens of thousands of downloads later, what began as a tool just for us is now 65 pages of curated, counselor-tested, meticulously updated (and FREE!) guidance to help students craft their very best Common App. We think you'll be amazed by what a difference even small—but smart— tweaks will make to an application.

Collegewise exists to help as many students as possible access the transformative power of higher education—our Guide to the Common App is just one of the ways we can help. If you would like more advice or support with the path to college, we have other **free resources** and **fee-based services** available. We also **partner** with schools, companies, and community-based organizations to bring our advice to the people they serve.

Thanks for letting us join you on this part of your college application journey.

Get in Touch

Kevin McMullin
Collegewise Founder, Chief Education Officer, and original author of The Collegewise Guide to the Common App

P.S. School and independent counselors, while there is a copyright below, please share our Guide with your students and colleagues. All we ask is that the Collegewise name stays on this Guide and that you neither change it nor charge for it.

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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 Common App's instructions, videos, and help menus are great! So, please don't ignore them.

As you work through app sections, watch for the Help & Support 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 worked in lockstep with Common App to ensure that you won't get conflicting advice.

This guide is arranged 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 30,000+ 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 the 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 you're applying to are on Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, etc., go ahead and 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. The information you enter in this section will populate exactly as you type it 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, decide to type everything in lowercase, or use abbreviations that no adult would understand, that mistake might show up repeatedly. Don't rush through this. 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'll 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. What's inappropriate? Anything you wouldn't show your grandma or read aloud in a school assembly. We recommend creating an email specifically for college applications so you have everything in one place, making it easier to organize, check regularly, and keep separate from your school assignments.

☐ **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.

☐ **Which best describes you? I am:**

Make sure you click "Applying as a first-year student and plan to start college in 2025 or 2026." Check one of the other 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 that is not their legal name. If you select "Yes," you may then enter a different first name, which the Common App may use to address you in the app and in email. Learn more at their **student name FAQ page.**

☐ **Date of birth**
International students should note that the Common App uses the American date format: month first, day second for all dates.

☐ **Phone**
Most students will list their own cell phone number here. If you don't have a personal cell phone, list a phone number where you are most likely to be reached. Maybe that is a home landline or a parent/guardian cell phone number. You'll have the opportunity to list an alternate phone number on your actual application. More advice on that later in the guide.

☐ **Permanent Home 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. The Common App will allow you to change or remove an address during setup if you entered it incorrectly.

☐ **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.

☐ **Would you like to receive communications from Common App about opportunities and resources?**
We advise our Collegewise students to always opt into communications when asked. Sometimes, colleges will contact students to invite them to local events or to give some additional information or advice about the application. You can update your communication preferences at any time.

☐ **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 proofread what you've entered. Mainly, make sure there are no typos, misspellings, or and you've capitalized anything that should be capitalized.
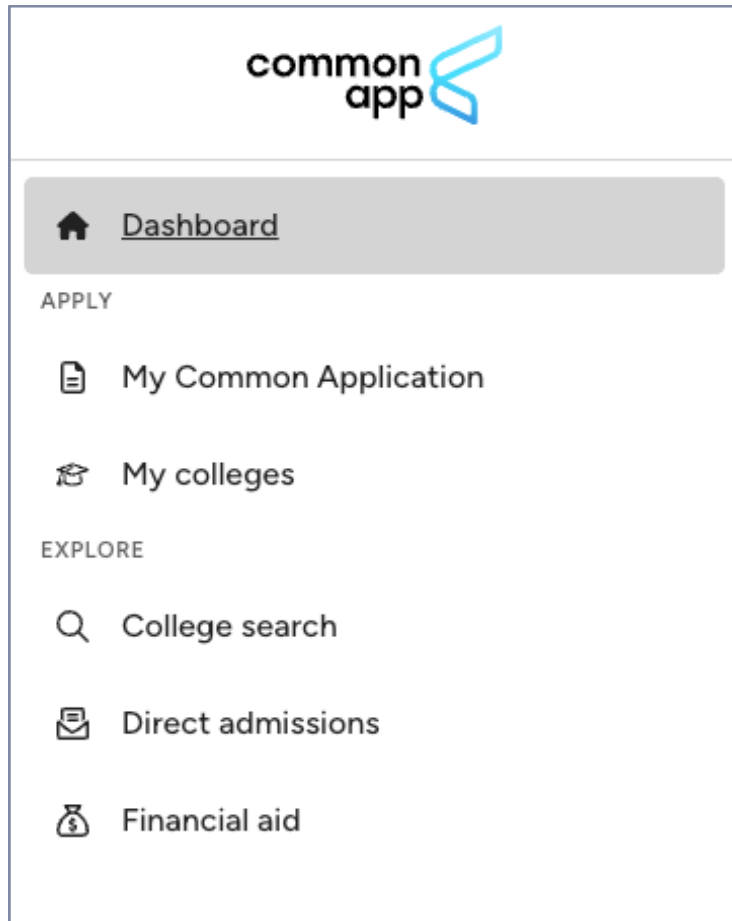
Our counselor Sam once worked with a student who rushed through this step and misspelled their own middle name! This caused confusion later and took a lot of time and hassle to fix once the student had already submitted college applications.

LET'S GO!
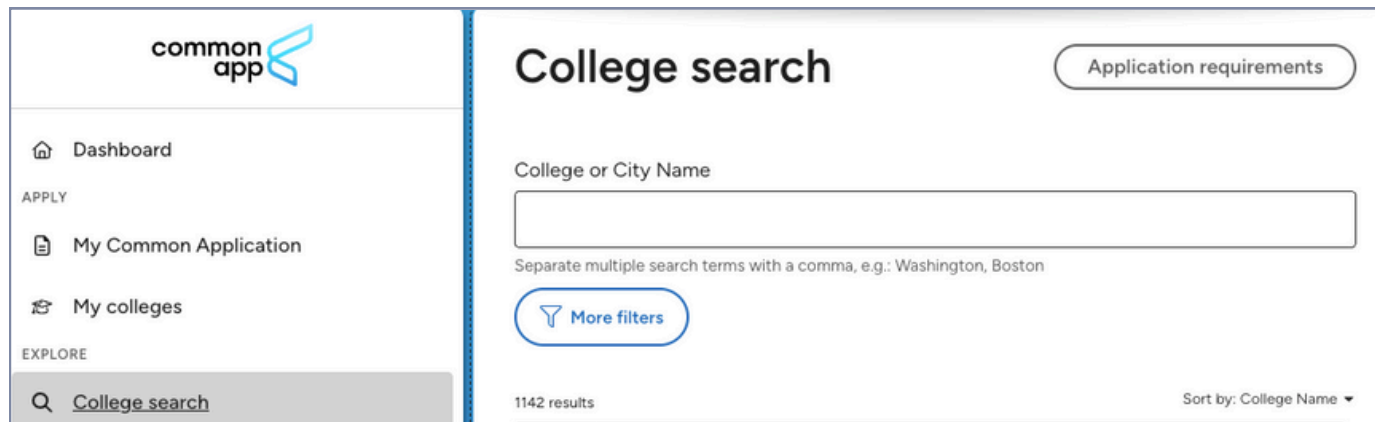
☐ **Then, click Create Account.**

Dashboard

You are now at the Dashboard, where you'll be greeted by a "Welcome!" message. As you'll see elsewhere in the application, the Help & Support section resides on the 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. Note: this means the details in the help section may change from college to college.

The purpose of the Dashboard is to provide one screen that shows the status of each Common App task as well as each application. Immediately below the page title, you'll see a heading called "My Common Application" with an empty progress bar underneath. The progress bar specifies which sections of the Common App need to be completed: Profile, Family, Education, Testing, Activities, Writing, and Courses & Grades. Once you've completed a section, the progress bar will check it off.

Below the progress bar, you'll see the "My colleges" heading. When you first see it, the section will read, "Nothing here yet! Add some colleges to your list to get started," followed by a button that pulls up the College Search function. Once you've added at least one school (more on how to do that in a bit), you can click on the "Show colleges" drop-down, which lets you see which school applications are in progress or complete. It also includes links to the applications for each individual school on your list. When you click on a school marked "In progress," you are taken directly to the application, where the left hand section will indicate which sections need completion. (You can also access much of this information through the My colleges section on the left-hand menu, though it usually takes an extra click or two.)

College Search

Accessible via the Dashboard as a button under My colleges or the left-hand menu as the fourth clickable item, we recommend that most of our students start here. This is where you "add" the various colleges you will be applying to by typing the college or city name into the search bar, identifying the university, and clicking Add+. 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 other sections will remain blank until you do.

Here are a few other things to keep in mind:

1. **You don't have to fill the school's application out yet if you're not ready.**
   Many of our students will complete their entire Common App section, 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.** This page provides a complete list of all the schools on the Common App — more than 1,100 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 Common Application
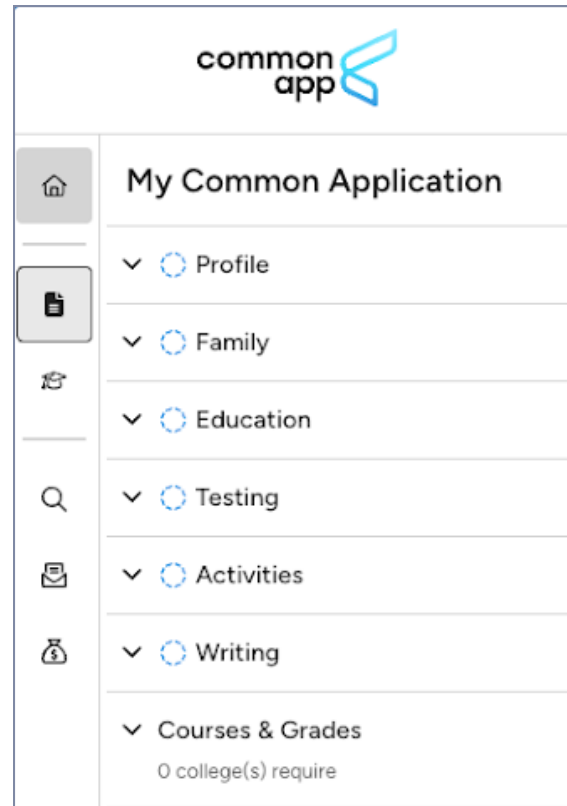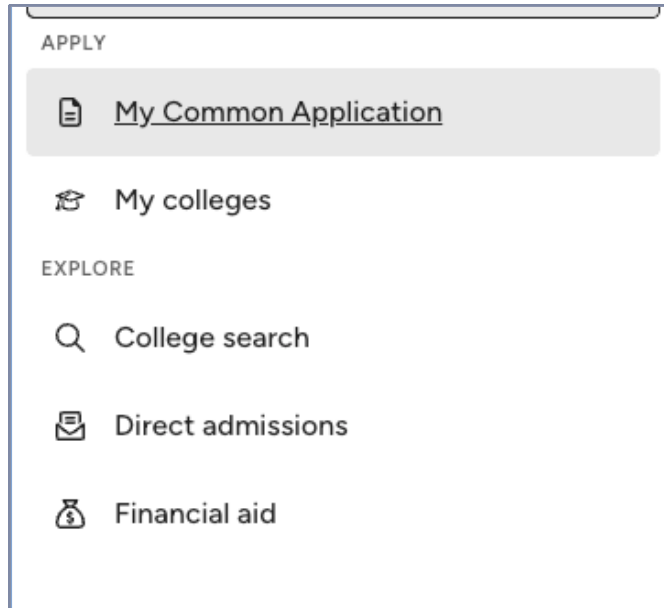
By clicking My Common Application on the left-hand side menu, you can navigate to the My Common Application page, which allows you to view the completion status of each section of the Common App on the left-hand side. You can navigate to those sections by clicking on them, which will reveal a drop-down menu that includes subsections for the section you clicked on, as well as their completion statuses.

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. For example...

Tip:

As you move through the different sections of your Common App, make sure to click the blue 'Continue' button! This will ensure that all of your answers are saved and that you're moving on to the next section. Also, be on the lookout for green check marks which will indicate when you've answered all of the required questions in a particular section. Your goal is to see all green check marks!

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.

☐ **My first name**
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 date format: month first, and then day (e.g. August 01, 2025).

Address

☐ **Permanent home address**
This can be the same address you entered during account creation. 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**
The number you entered when you created your Common App account should auto-populate here. Make sure you click the box ("Home" or "Mobile") that matches the number.

☐ **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.

If you have a cell phone number, you list your cell phone number first as the preferred number. If your family still has a landline, we'd encourage you to list that number, too. 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, the voice you hear on the phone says, "Hi, this is Leslie from College You Applied To 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 a few 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! You could also look into getting a Google Voice number (which is free).

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.

We believe any college that would penalize you in some way based on your answer to one of these questions doesn't deserve you or your application. The good news is that the majority of colleges in this country (and on the Common App) feel the same way. If you're sincerely interested in a school that openly and publicly expresses viewpoints that indicate otherwise, that's a good time to check in with yourself, with your school counselor, and with anyone else supporting you in your college search to make sure you're applying to the right schools for the right reasons.

- Gender
  - We encourage students to answer this question in whatever way feels honest and authentic to you (including leaving it blank or marking multiple options).

- Legal sex
  - This question is mandatory in this section on the Common App for reasons strictly related to federal data collection. Students should answer according to their legal sex (typically their 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 or marking multiple options).

- U.S. Armed Forces Status
  - Select the option that best describes your own U.S. Armed Forces status. This includes if you are a current dependent (meaning you are not serving, but a parent/guardian is). If you are currently serving or have served—thank you for your service!

- Are you Hispanic or Latino/a/x? Regardless of your answer to the prior question, please indicate how you identify yourself. (Select one or more)
  - If you select "Yes" for Hispanic or Latino/a/x, you will have the option to select one or more regions of origin, if you choose.
  - If you check "American Indian or Alaska Native," you will have the option to tell the Common App about your tribal identity/affiliation as well as whether you're enrolled in a federally recognized tribe, if you choose.
  - Checking the other options will also give you the option to select one or more regions of origin, if you choose.

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 will 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 White Paper** gives more context and advice on how to navigate the Supreme Court's ruling.

Language

This section will begin by asking you to select how many languages you are proficient in. Afterwards, it will populate with additional fields that allow you to specify the language as well as your areas of proficiency/proficiency level: First Language, Speak, Write, Read, and Spoken at Home. If you speak English as your first language, be sure to list it. Some people misread this question and think it's asking only about additional 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 a college interview and the interviewer, unbeknownst to you, speaks both English and a language you've listed here. If this interviewer says, "I see you listed French as one of your languages," and then begins a conversation with you in French, 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 them.

☐ **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 (green card holder)," "U.S. resident,"** or **"Citizen of a non-U.S. country,"** you will need to provide information specific to your situation. It's essential to be as accurate as possible.

U.S. refugees/asylees, undocumented and DACA students (along with students with Deferred Enforced Departure or Temporary Protected Status), students **eligible for noncitizen U.S. federal aid**, and students whose status is pending will choose the "U.S. resident" option. You'll be prompted to enter your country(ies) of citizenship and can choose whether or not to include a Social Security Number. If you're an international who does NOT qualify for the listed statuses, you should select "Citizen of a non-U.S. country," even if you're currently living in the U.S.

If you're in the process of obtaining permanent residency or citizenship but haven't finalized your new status, you should answer based on your status as of when you are filling out the application. You can always update colleges later if your status changes mid-year.

Some parents may prefer that their children not list a Social Security Number. However, if you're applying for federal financial aid, it's important to include it here to ensure your application matches your FAFSA.

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. You should click "Yes" here and provide your signature to certify that you meet the eligibility requirements. 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

This is a section we recommend students fill out alongside their family, or have their family review before submitting.

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 accurate. 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." If you are reporting one or multiple step parents, all the fields and advice mentioned below still applies. You can explain more about your family 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)**
This is one of those questions some applicants overthink unnecessarily. The relative professional success of your parents is not a reflection on you; it's one piece of the environment and circumstances in which you've grown up. As with everything in your application, honesty is the best policy here. You'll want to have a parent or guardian around to fill out the next few questions to confirm you're inputting the correct information.

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 accurate.

- 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**
This should reflect the number of institutions, whether trade school, college/university, and/or graduate program/professional school, the parent attended for at least one 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.

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. 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. If you don't find the school you're looking for, peek at the Help section to the right for a solution. If you're a homeschooled student, check out the note posted below the High School Lookup box called 'What about homeschooling?' It explains 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 2022. However, some students at private schools or public charters may have entered in 6th grade or even kindergarten. Some students take a gap year or break between high school and college. In these 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 still be "yes," and this date will be your expected 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.

Here are a few thoughts on how to handle any explanation for a change in progression:

- 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 unless you 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 the 'gap year' box.
  - 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. In most cases, you can wait until after you've been admitted to let the college know about your plans—if they allow a year of deferment, you can get your gap year officially approved at that time.

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 from one high school to another, 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" they are asking 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 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 high school 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 programs**," 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 that 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.

"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. But if they were to 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 rescinded for not reporting pre-college coursework.

Don't take the risk. It's just not worth it.

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 didn't crush 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 may disagree on this point, but our Collegewise counselors believe 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 <u>exactly</u>.

☐ **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.

☐ **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. Take it straight from your most recent transcript, the one that will be submitted along with your application. If you've attended multiple high schools, list the GPA on your most recent transcript.

Colleges won't base decisions on this number alone—they'll review your transcript for full context. So don't stress about this section too much; just report your GPA exactly as it appears on your transcript and move on.

Current or Most Recent Year Courses

Tips before you start:

- You should have a copy of your official transcript or senior year schedule in front of you.
- If you're filling this out during before August 1st of senior year, be aware that this section is intended to reflect your senior year courses, which will be the most recent courses you take before applying to college.
- 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. 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 core/solids first: English, math, science, foreign language, or social science. Then, list any electives.

It's critical you make sure:
- 1) You list the courses accurately
- 2) You update the college if the courses change

For example, if you drop AP Calculus two weeks into your senior year, but leave it listed on your Common App, that's exactly the kind of discrepancy that could result in a college later rescinding an acceptance.

Our counselor Fayelah shared, *"When proofreading one of my student's Courses and Grades section, I found they were missing several courses because they filled it out by memory. If they'd submitted this application, they would have had to follow up with each college individually with their updated courses, or even had their admissions decision impacted."*

☐ **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 <u>exactly as they appear on your transcript.</u> Don't write "Senior English" if your transcript says, "English IV."
- Spell out any abbreviations other than AP, IB, or Adv (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.

☐ **Course level**
Choose "N/A" unless it falls under one of the categories listed.

☐ **Course schedule**
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.

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 (CBOs) 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 BS/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 about your current goals.

☐ **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 2,000 colleges and universities are still utilizing test-optional admission policies. But others, like some of the most highly-selective schools and public universities in states like Georgia and Florida, 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 from the left navigation bar and click one of your universities. On the page that opens, click College Information and scroll to find Standardized Test Policy. 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 or test-free on **this list from FairTest**, though we recommend always double-checking by looking at the school's own admissions website.)

Next, you must decide whether to include your score(s) on your Common App. The Testing section allows you to put your best "testing foot" forward. They're not asking you to enter all your scores (in most cases), only your best scores if you want to. So, the question you should ask yourself: Do I feel confident in the addition of my score(s) in my application as an accurate showcase of my knowledge and academic abilities? If you're not sure, this is a great opportunity to connect with a trusted counselor or teacher, or even **contact Collegewise for a free consultation**.

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.

Students get 4 free score reports when registering for ACT or SAT, and they can designate these colleges during registration or within nine days after the test date. If they don't choose colleges during this period, there's a fee for sending scores later. For students looking to save money during the admissions process, self-reporting is an easy way to do so because each score report from the ACT costs $19, and $15 from the College Board. 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, but about 200 schools that do allow self-reporting can be found at **this link.**

Official scores can take up to 8 weeks to be sent to a college, so plan ahead and request as early as possible.

If self-reporting, be sure that you are self-reporting accurately. **If you are admitted to a school and choose to enroll there, you will be required to provide your official scores before matriculating there.** Any discrepancy can be cause for the university to rescind its offer.

A note on applying test-optional:
If you submit an application to a college and tell them you want to be considered without tests, you might not be able to add test scores to your file later if you change your mind. Be 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.

A note on test-free (or test-blind) schools:
In a trend on top of a trend, about 80 schools, ranging from the California public university systems to liberal arts colleges like Reed and Pitzer, 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.

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 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. And don't miss the inclusion of <u>expected</u> tests. If you intend to take AP exams in the spring of your senior year, for example, you want to click "AP Subject 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. Your score report will also indicate whether your ACT included the Writing section or Science section or not.
- 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.

☐ **Reporting ACT Science and Writing scores**
Did you take the online ACT after April 2025? Or the written version after September 2025? If so, you had the option to choose whether or not to complete the Science and Writing sections of the exam. If you took one or both of those sections you can elect to report your scores in this section.

☐ **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 test dates. If all your highest scores are from one test, choose that you have 1 past SAT score to report. If your highest scores are spread out over two different test dates, choose that you have 2 past SAT scores to report.

- Your score report will also indicate whether your SAT included the essay section. If it did, and you wish to report that score, mark 'Yes' to that question.
- 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:

☐ 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:

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.
- Once you've committed to a school, you'll then pay to send your official scores so the university can verify them and determine any college credit you've earned.
- 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 2026 at the end of senior year.

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 not 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 school-specific questions. 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 activities in order of importance to them. 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.

☐ **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" (more on this one later), "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. 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 2025 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."

☐ **Participation grade levels**
This section is generally straightforward. The most common point of confusion involves summer activities. In those cases, select the grade you were about to enter at the time of the activity. For PG (post-graduate), only check this box if you've already graduated from high school and are currently in a formal post-grad or gap year. If you're a current senior who plans to take a gap year after graduation, you should still select 12th grade—not PG.

☐ **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 Creative Writing Club per week is more accurate than two hours per week. However, if you tell them that your involvement in the Creative Writing Club is 30 hours per week, that doesn't add up (unless the Creative Writing Club has become your full-time job).

But don't underestimate it, 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.

What about hobbies?

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.

For example, one of our counselors worked with a student whose passion for magic led to regular family performances. They set up a stage in the living room and wowed relatives with mind-reading and disappearing acts. It wasn't an official activity they had signed up for—but it gave the admissions officer a vivid, memorable glimpse into who the student really was.

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.

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.

Responsibilities and Circumstances

New for 2025-26, you have the chance to share, if applicable, activities, responsibilities, and circumstances that might not otherwise have a place in your application. This is intended for students who have significant time commitments related to caring for family, working to contribute to their family's income, or experiencing hardships that make it difficult to do their best in school. It is meant to give colleges a clearer context for your application as a whole.

Honesty is important here, and this section may not apply to you. If it doesn't, select None of the Above, then hit Continue.

Writing

Some Collegewise essay advice before you dive in:

We think the best college essay prompts give students enough guidance to focus their story. 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 30,000 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.**

Personal Essay

Some colleges require a **personal essay** with your Common App. Even if it's not required, you can still choose to send it. If a college doesn't require it, you'll be able to decide at submission whether to include it.

☐ **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.

We highly recommend writing your essay in a document outside of Common App and copying it in when you're satisfied with the final draft.

Additional Information

We do not want students to feel pressured to use the Additional Information section. In fact, Common App reduced the word limit this year to 300 words maximum after their data showed that most applicants either didn't use the section or used far less space than was available. If there's an important detail that doesn't show up anywhere else in your application, this can be a great place to include it—but don't feel obligated to fill the space. We'd much rather you skip it than repeat information or add fluff just for the sake of saying more.

In a typical year, two-thirds of the students at Collegewise don't write anything in the Additional Information section. There are two parts to this section that may allow you to provide extra context to your application.

The Challenges and Circumstances Question:

This year, Common App updated the Community Disruption question to be inclusive of any Challenges or Circumstances that may have impacted a student's application or accomplishments, maximum 250 words.

☐ **Sometimes a student's application and achievements may be impacted by challenges or other circumstances. This could involve:**
- **Access to a safe and quiet study space**
- **Access to reliable technology and internet**
- **Community disruption (violence, protests, teacher strikes, etc.)**
- **Discrimination**
- **Family disruptions (divorce, incarceration, job loss, health, loss of a family member, addiction, etc.)**
- **Family or other obligations (care-taking, financial support, etc.)**
- **Housing instability, displacement, or homelessness**

- **Military deployment or activation**
- **Natural disasters**
- **Physical health and mental well-being**
- **War, conflict, or other hardships**

If you're comfortable sharing, this information can help colleges better understand the context of your application. Colleges may use this information to provide you and your fellow students with support and resources.

Would you like to share any details about challenges or other circumstances you've experienced? Yes/No.

So, how do you decide if this is something you need to write a response to?

The question itself offers up many specific touchpoints. If you find yourself nodding vigorously at any of them, then it's time to consider what you have to say. For some students, their application wouldn't be complete without sharing context behind the impacts disruptions and adversities have had on their lives. Admissions officers are always looking to put students' experiences and achievements into a broader context. 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, your school counselor will have the opportunity to write about how your school may have been broadly affected by disruptions, like natural disasters or teacher strikes. This is something they'll weave directly into an updated school profile or information they can add to a school report. 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 at 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 is offered as an opportunity to share more about your life, not to create stress. So, if you're a student who hasn't experienced any profound challenges or life-changing circumstances, it's okay to say "no" to this optional question and move on.

The question about "additional details or qualifications not reflected in the application":

Much like the Challenges and Circumstances question, don't use this section unless it's truly necessary. This is not a place to share an extra personal statement essay if you can't decide between two versions you like or insert another 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.

- 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 (5/2024)
AP Statistics: 4 (5/2025)

3. Keep it short
We've rarely seen a situation where a student needed the entire page to list additional information. There's a 250-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 unless the school specifically requests it. Otherwise, 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 appears under "Writing" in the left-hand menu of My Common Application. If any of the ~75 schools requiring Courses & Grades are on your list, they'll be listed in the left column under the heading "x college(s) require." So if you have 3 out of 10 colleges on your list that require Courses & Grades, it would say "3 college(s) require." You can see the list of colleges that require Courses & Grades **here**.

If you're not applying to any of the schools on that list, you can move on.

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!

- To get started, first answer "yes" to the statement, "I can access a copy of my transcript(s) or official grades," then hit "Continue." You will automatically be taken to the next section, where you will enter your 9th-grade courses and grades. The Common App Help & Support window will open to walk you through the process.
- 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 9th 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.
- Select the academic subject area from the drop-down menu under Subject. Once you select the appropriate subject, enter course names EXACTLY as they are listed on your transcript, even if 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 "Wrld Hist and Geo." Choose the course level that best matches the course you listed, whether it's AP, Honors, IB, or Regular/Standard. 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.
- 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.
- 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 9th-grade year, click Continue and repeat the process for your 10th and 11th-grade years. Only enter courses for which you have an official grade. So, for most students, this means you will not include your 12th-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. My colleges is the section where you will eventually submit your application in several parts:

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

Once you've used College Search to add your universities to the My Colleges section, you can dive in here. The left-hand side of the My colleges section will be populated with your schools and their school-specific questions. Some schools will have nearly nothing extra for you to do. Others may require supplemental essays longer than the Common App personal statement itself.

The first heading under the name of the college is College Information. This is where you'll find important information on application deadlines and requirements- nothing you need to fill out here, but a great page to reference if you need a refresher on deadlines and requirements!

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 start term**
For most colleges, the first question you will answer is when you intend to begin your college career, also known as your 'start term.' The most common start term will be Fall, but there are some colleges that offer Spring or Summer start terms as well. The vast majority of students will start college the following fall after submitting their application. So if you're graduating high school in May/June 2026, you'd likely put Fall 2026 as your start term. If you navigate to the "College Information" section for each college, you will see "Application deadlines." There, you will see if there are different start term options and the corresponding application deadlines.

☐ **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 parents(s) and school counselor will need to sign it saying they support you applying via Early Decision. For the parent version, you will need to navigate to the "Recommenders and FERPA" section for that school and invite your parent/guardian.

☐ **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 if so.)

☐ **Do you intend to pursue merit-based scholarships?**
Merit-based scholarships are scholarships offered by individual colleges that are awarded based on academics, 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.

☐ **Will you be submitting SAT or ACT scores as part of your application?**
Schools with test-optional policies may ask this question to confirm whether they should include your SAT or ACT score in the review of your application. If you indicate that you do want your scores considered, you will likely be prompted with additional information about how to submit your scores, either officially through the testing agency or self-reporting options. Here, schools may also indicate if students applying to certain majors are required to submit a test score, or if a student must submit test scores for scholarship consideration, even if the university's general admission policy is test-optional.

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 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 saying you have 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.

- Some schools will ask you to indicate a second (or even third!) choice major, and will let you know if you will automatically be considered for that alternative choice if you are not selected for the first major you indicated.

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. They may want to know how you learned about their school, including whether you've visited their campus. We recommend that you answer these questions truthfully 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.

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.

Colleges want to know whether you might pose a personal or academic risk to yourself or others. The most important thing to remember in this section is to take ownership of your actions. Demonstrating how you've reflected on the consequences of your infraction, what you've learned from the experience, and how it's shaped you moving forward can help colleges see your accountability, integrity, and growth.

☐ **Explanation**
If you answer "yes" to one of these questions, you'll often see a new text box appear along with a required 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 don't clearly state what you did, you're not controlling the story, and the admissions officer might imagine something worse.

2. Take responsibility

The worst thing you can do in this situation is blame others or make excuses. Colleges want to see that you take responsibility for your role, whatever it was. For example, telling a college that you were unfairly accused of vandalism because you were with a group of friends who actually did it doesn't erase the fact that you were there and complicit.

A stronger approach would be to acknowledge your involvement and your lapse in judgment:

"Although I didn't vandalize the school, I was with friends who did—and that was a poor choice. I wasn't comfortable with what was happening, but if I had just gone home like I knew I should have, I wouldn't have put myself in that position. I take full responsibility." That's the kind of honesty and accountability colleges respect.

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 applied that lesson to 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 your 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.) You will do this only once for your entire application, no matter how many schools you're applying to.

Note: Completing the Release Authorization is also needed in order to 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 review your recommendations, it means once your recommender uploads their documentation, you have no right to view it. You may never know what the writer said about you or whether it helped or hurt your chances of admission (although your teacher may still choose to share it with you). We know that sounds risky. **Still, we recommend to all of our students that waiving this right is the way to go.**

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

 1. You're essentially telling the recommender 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 recommender 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 recommender will say 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 their students.

Invite Recommenders

In the current version of the Common App, high schools can choose to manage their recommendation processes through programs like Naviance, SCOIR, or Parchment, or to simply use the Common App's built-in system. Even those that use Naviance, SCOIR, etc., don't necessarily do so in the same way. So, in this guide, we can't give you exact step-by-step instructions for completing your recommendations, but we can share a few guidelines we think you'll find useful:

1. Ask your school counselor or the college center how your school is handling recommendation forms for college
This is a key step. No matter what system your school uses, many high schools have their own process and set of deadlines to manage letters of recommendation. This is one of many occasions when you should do whatever your school 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 academic counselor you usually work 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 for you. 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. Caltech, for instance, requires a recommendation from a STEM teacher and one from a Humanities or Social Science teacher. You don't want to ask your History teacher and your English teacher for recommendations, and 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 recommenders will be submitting forms to each school, or confirm with your school counselor that this part will be handled through Naviance or another service .

Advisor

This feature allows 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 educational consultant. Regardless of whom it is, two things hold true:

1. Your advisor will **not** be identified to any colleges you apply to, nor to other advisors or recommenders.
2. Your advisor can only view your application and track your progress through the green checkmarks—they **cannot** edit or change anything in your application.

After adding an advisor, you can allow them to preview your application by clicking the **"Enable Preview"** button under their name. This must be checked off in order to give them access to view your application. But, again, they will not be able to make any edits.

Since this feature debuted a few years ago, we at Collegewise have loved it. It's a simple way for students to keep key stakeholders informed while still maintaining full 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 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 colleges requiring varied supplemental essays, 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 before doing anything else. Some colleges may provide a link 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.

Our counselor Ian shared: *"To me, there's no bigger red flag than a vague 'Why Us' essay. My most successful students have spent time reading mission statements, analyzing research or internship opportunities, and identifying EXACTLY how they'd fit in at that specific college — and then writing that story."*

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.

Some supplemental prompts won't list a word limit in the question but will have one in the text box. Check the limit before you start writing—there's nothing more frustrating than crafting a thoughtful 250-word response only to find the box only accepts 50.

☐ **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 you can physically submit the application without it. 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 your application and pay the application fee. 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 several additional 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 in the preview, 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 carefully proofed and previewed your application—and had a parent, counselor, teacher, or other trusted adult do the same—it's time to submit. Remember: you do not have to send all applications at once. You can submit each one individually when it's ready. If you've already submitted to a few schools and want to update your Common App before sending the rest, you can—the new version will go to future schools, while the submitted version will remain unchanged for the schools that already have it. (Keep reading for details on when and how to update your applications after submission.)

☐ **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 application 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 a check, we recommend a card because it's easier to verify if payment has been received. But e-checks may work 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 outlined in the "Submit Your Application" section of this guide.

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. Confirm that your counselor has submitted your School Report and your teachers have submitted their recommendations. If your school uses Naviance, SCOIR, or a similar platform, you can check there—or in the My Colleges section of your Common App. Once they've submitted, thank your recommenders again.

5. Submit any requested supplemental information, such as an art portfolio through SlideRoom (but only if requested and relevant).

6. Some colleges offer applicants interviews or other chances to meet the admission team. Consider exploring your colleges' websites and scheduling an interview, information session, or chat with any college that has availability and is convenient for you. If you'd like some help preparing for your interview, **check out our blog on college interview questions (and examples).**

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 noted above, you can update your Common App between submissions. Any schools you apply to afterward will see the updated version. 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. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. You experience a significant change in your family or personal circumstances that impacts your application—for example, a serious illness, a death in the family, or a major change in your financial situation. Sharing this update can provide important context that may affect your admissions review.

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.

Direct Admissions

The Common App now includes a Direct Admissions section. Direct Admissions is a way for colleges to extend admissions offers to qualified students before they even apply. These offers include perks like waiving application fees and offering guaranteed financial aid. If you see a Direct Admissions offer, take time to review the opportunity. If you don't see any offers, simply skip this section and continue with the rest of your application.

Financial Aid
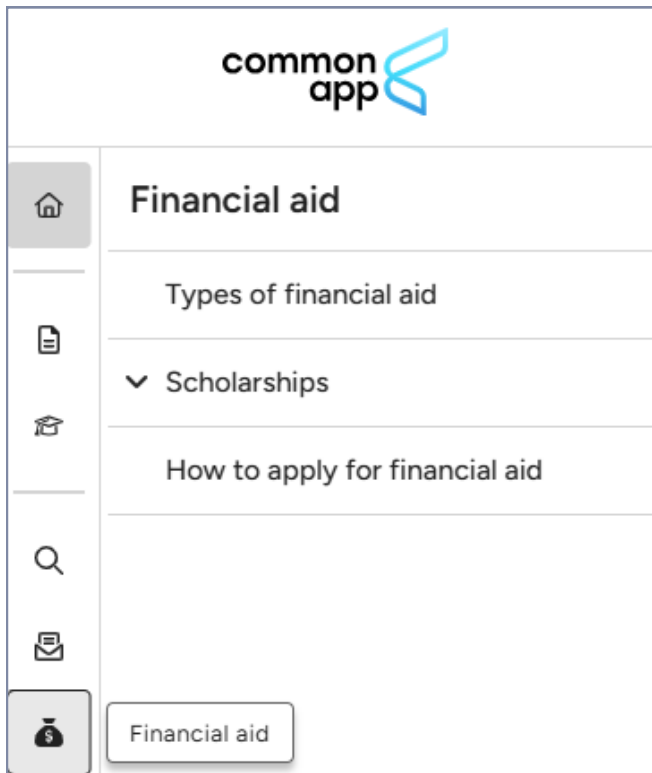
While much of the information in this section can be found elsewhere on the internet, we like that the Common App brings it all together in one place. You can learn the basics of financial aid and explore scholarships. Common App's "How to apply for financial aid" section will walk you through all the 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, how to apply for merit-based scholarships if they're available, and if a separate merit 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)](#). 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.

Some private universities require the CSS Profile to complete their financial aid application. Be sure to check each university's financial aid website to make sure you complete all required forms to be considered for aid.

Common App may match you with scholarships you might be eligible for based on your responses in the My Common Application section. Here's the **[FAQ](#)** with more information.

Conclusion

Given the detail and length of our advice here, it would be easy to come away with the impression that completing a college application is like defusing a bomb. That the process is rife with potential errors and 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 deny their application. Deciding to deny a student is the part of the job most admissions officers don't like, as aptly shared in the popular MIT blog post, **"It's More Than a Job."** The most selective colleges deal with many more applications than they can 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 and universities to pick from, you're pretty much guaranteed to get in many places if you've built a balanced list. The vast majority of college students are quite happy where they end up. Chances are, you will be, too.

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've built a balanced list. The vast majority of college students are quite happy where they end up. Chances are, you will be, too.

You've got this!

Cheers,
The Counselors at Collegewise

Appendix

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. **Collegewise Services**
   https://collegewise.com/services-page

3. **Collegewise Partnerships**
   https://collegewise.com/partnerships

4. **On-demand Collegewise webinars**
   https://www.youtube.com/@Collegewise.

5. **Common App Website**
   https://www.commonapp.org/

6. **Common App Help Page**
   https://www.commonapp.org/help

7. **Common App First Guide for First Year Students**
   https://www.commonapp.org/apply/first-year-students

8. **Common App YouTube Channel**
   https://www.youtube.com/user/CommonAppMedia

9. **Create Your Common App Account**
    https://apply.commonapp.org/createaccount

10. **Common App Transfer Resources**
    https://www.commonapp.org/transfer

11. **Common App Student Name FAQ Page**
    https://appsupport.commonapp.org/applicantsupport/s/article/Should-I-share-my-preferred-name

Appendix Cont.

12. **Explore Common App Colleges**
https://www.commonapp.org/explore/

13. **Common App Legal Sex**
https://appsupport.commonapp.org/applicantsupport/s/article/Why-is-legal-sex-a-required-question

14. **Colleges that accept self-reported SAT/ACT scores**
https://www.compassprep.com/self-reporting-test-scores/

15. **Common App and equitable admissions**
https://www.commonapp.org/race-in-admissions

16. **Race-Based Affirmative Action in College Admissions White paper**
https://go.collegewise.com/affirmative-action-white-paper

17. **Financial Aid Eligibility for Non-U.S. Citizens**
https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/eligibility/requirements/non-us-citizens

18. **Common App fee waiver**
https://appsupport.commonapp.org/applicantsupport/s/article/What-do-I-need-to-know-about-the-Common-App-fee-waiver

19. **Making Test-Optional Admissions Real**
https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2020/08/10/nacac-statement-seeks-make-test-optional-admissions-clear

20. **Database of test-optional schools**
https://www.fairtest.org/university/optional

21. **Contact Collegewise for free consultation**
https://collegewise.com/contact

22. **Colleges that allow self-reporting**
https://www.compassprep.com/self-reporting-test-scores/

23. **Podcast on standardized testing in college admissions**
https://getwise.simplecast.com/episodes/s104-testing-is-never-the-most-important-thing

COLLEGE WISE

Appendix Cont.

24. **Podcast on choosing activities**
    https://getwise.simplecast.com/episodes/0101

25. **Podcast on community service**
    https://getwise.simplecast.com/episodes/s103-community-service-is-not-about-the-hours

26. **Blog posts on college essays**
    http://go.collegewise.com/tag/college-essays

27. **Collegewise YouTube channel (including essay-specific videos)**
    https://www.youtube.com/@Collegewise./videos

28. **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

29. **Common App's video on submitting and paying for your application**
    https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WeJwBCq5QY

30. **Blog post on college interviews**
    http://go.collegewise.com/college-interview-questions-and-answers

31. **FAFSA**
    https://studentaid.gov/h/apply-for-aid/fafsa

32. **Scholarship matching on Common App**
    https://appsupport.commonapp.org/applicantsupport/s/article/How-does-scholarship-matching-work-on-Common-App

33. **It's More than A Job MIT Blog Post**
    https://mitadmissions.org/blogs/entry/its_more_than_a_job/

34. **Not listed directly in the guide, but the AXS Companion is a digital tool that helps students manage and organize their Common App tasks, deadlines, and college application materials in one place.**
    https://open.oregonstate.education/axscompanion/

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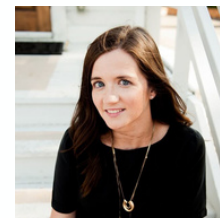Former Senior Assistant Director of Admission at Tulane University

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Want More?

If you'd like to learn more about how Collegewise 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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