

# How to Make Your Common App a Lot Less Common

The 2020-21 Collegewise Guide  
to the Common Application



# A Message to Students and School Counselors

Since 1999, Collegewise has been America's premier college counseling company—focused on helping students go through the college application process smartly and joyfully. For nearly a decade, we have created an annual guide to help students navigate the Common App, and each year, our team considers ways to make it even more helpful for students and counselors. When we released last year's guide, we already had a list of ideas to pursue for this year's guide. And then a global pandemic rewrote the script on every one of us.

Our mission for this year's guide became clear: how do we help students apply to college in a year where critical elements are changing by the moment, usually due to factors totally outside a student's control? We spent a lot of time considering which details would be particularly impacted this year and highlighted them in the guide. More importantly though, we hope that students will remember that one of the hardest yet most important keys of this entire college journey is to focus on the parts that you as a student can control and to approach those parts with thoughtfulness and confidence.

We know that this "unprecedented" year in college admissions will create new precedents, new norms in the future. But while so many elements are still in flux, we believe that our guide can help students reclaim some control over their journeys this year.

## Students:

This guide offers 66 pages of guidance to help you craft your very best Common App. We've arranged it so that you can read the entire thing straight through or go directly to those sections where you have questions or need a little help. We think you'll be amazed by what a difference even small—but smart—tweaks will make to your application.

## School Counselors:

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

# A Message to Students and School Counselors

(continued)

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

If you would like more advice about and support with the path to college, we have free resources and fee-based services available. For starters, you can subscribe to our blog for fresh, weekly content to be delivered straight to your inbox. If you're looking for more nuanced guidance, you can sign up for Runway—our free, online course that walks students through the college application process.

Collegewise is excited about playing a small part in helping more students have wonderful and fruitful college experiences. And students, thanks for letting us be a part of your journey, particularly in the time of COVID-19.

**Cheers,**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "M. Graham". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "M" being large and prominent, and the last name "Graham" written in a more compact, cursive style.

**Meredith Graham**

*Editor in Chief*

*Director, Collegewise Columbus, OH*

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Ninth Edition



# How to Use This Guide

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

The Common App outlines how to add your activities to the appropriate section, but we explain how to present them in a clear and compelling way. The Common App tells you where to upload additional information you'd like to share, but we tell you what kind of information is appropriate and useful for admissions officers. The Common App 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, how to use the CEEB lookup function, or anything else that the Common App's directions already clearly explain to you. We think the Common App's instructions, videos, and help menus are great, and we didn't want you to spend time using this guide on advice that's already available.

So, please don't ignore the Common App's directions. As you work through the sections of the app, watch for the Instructions and Help box to the right—that content answers a lot of obvious and not-so-obvious questions quite clearly. Then, as we suggested earlier, use our guide to pick up where the directions leave off.

We've arranged this guide in a sequence that we think makes the most sense for completing the sections, so start at the beginning. Or you can skip right to the parts you need help with the most. (If you're feeling nervous about this whole "applying to college during a pandemic" thing, skip forward and read our Conclusion before you do anything else. We believe it will help you relax a bit.)

Everything we're sharing here is the same advice Collegewise has given over 26,000 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.

# Before you Start Your Common App

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

1. Bookmark <https://www.commonapp.org>. (You'll be using it a lot as you complete your Common App and the required supplements.)
2. Bookmark <https://www.commonapp.org/help>  
The Applicant Solutions Center has a wealth of basic information about completing the app.
3. Same with the Virtual Counselor section:  
<http://www.commonapp.org/planforcollege>.
4. You should review the videos available on the Common App YouTube channel:  
<https://www.youtube.com/user/CommonAppMedia>.
5. Make sure spell-check is enabled in your browser. (If you're not sure how to do this, you can search your browser's "help" section, or search Google.)
6. Add yourself to Common App social media feeds. They offer timely and useful advice throughout the process and can be found on the bottom right of the homepage:  
<https://www.commonapp.org/>.
7. And finally, if the admission offices of the schools to which you are applying are connected to Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, follow them. Increasingly, many schools are providing advice through social media on how to approach their applications.

# Creating an Account

Now, you're going to register with the Common App and create your account. But before you do, slow down. Don't rush through this and type everything in lowercase and use abbreviations that no adult would understand. (Save that for Snapchat.) The information you enter in this section will populate throughout your Common App, throughout your supplements, and on the forms sent to your teachers and counselor. If you have a typo in your name or decide to type everything in lowercase, that mistake might show up repeatedly. So, get it right the first time. We'll walk you through a couple of essential pieces here.

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



## **I am a(n):**

Choose "First Year Student" and click Continue.



## **Email Address**

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



## **Password**

You must follow the requirements in the gray text below the Password box. To make it easier to remember, make your password the same as your Naviance or College Board password. We usually don't suggest writing down passwords, but it might be worth jotting this one down and keeping it somewhere secure (and away from your prankster younger sibling).

Click Continue.

☐ **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.

☐ **Address**

Click “Enter Address” and use the pop-up to list the address where a college will be able to send you mail for the next nine months successfully. 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.

☐ **Phone**

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

- First, some students don’t check their cell phone voicemails regularly—if they even have them set up. Parents are usually a little better about checking messages on the home phone. Just make sure everyone is committed to checking that voicemail regularly.
- Cell phone calls can also catch students unprepared. Imagine this: Your cell phone rings while you’re in a car with your friends, and the music is blaring at top volume. When your phone rings, your friends mercilessly taunt you for making a poor ringtone choice. Then, the voice you hear on the phone says, “Hi, this is Jaime from Harvard University calling to schedule our interview. Is this a good time to talk?”
- We don’t know about you, but that’s not a scenario in which we’d be able to put our best “phone foot” forward.

For most of you who will be listing your cell phone number on the application, here are a few suggestions:

- For the next few months, consider answering unidentified calls only when you are in a quiet and comfortable place to talk. Otherwise, let the call go to voicemail.
- If you do get a voicemail from a college representative, collect your thoughts, find a quiet place, and call back within 10–15 minutes. Have something to take notes with handy! This won’t be an interview, but you still want to be ready to make a good impression.

While you're at it, you might want to make sure your outgoing voicemail is something you'd be comfortable with a college representative hearing. Don't use songs or be creative; keep it a bit generic for the next few months.

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

☐ **Date of birth**

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

☐ **I am applying as a**

Make sure you click "First-Year Student." This will bring up the question, "Please tell us a bit more about your plans. When do you plan to start college?" If you are going straight to college after you graduate this year, click "2020 or 2021." Check one of the other two options if you plan to take a year or several years off between applying to and starting college.

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

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

☐ **The Common Application may communicate with me by mail, email, phone or text message about my account and other information relevant to the admission application process (you can change this response later within your account settings).**

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

☐ **By checking this box...**

Yes, you're over 13.

- ☐ **Are you currently based in a European Union country, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, or Switzerland?**

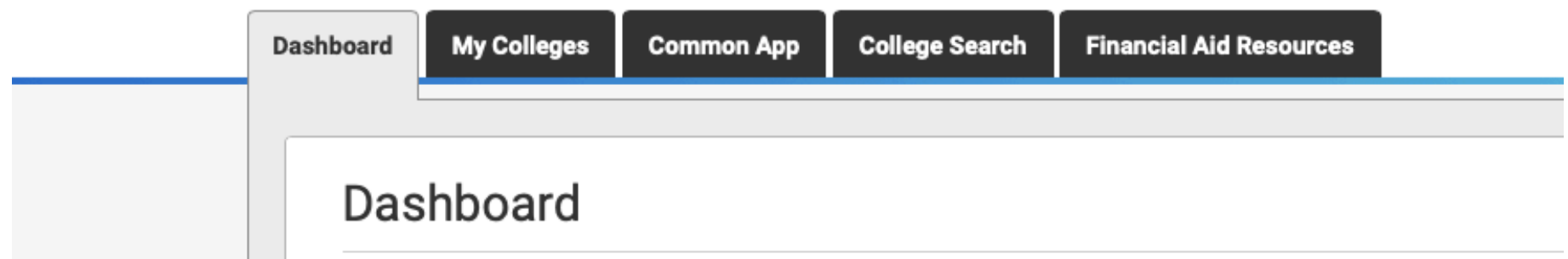
No, for anyone not from any of those countries listed. Yes, if you are.

- ☐ **Submitting**

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

- ☐ **Then, click **Create**.**

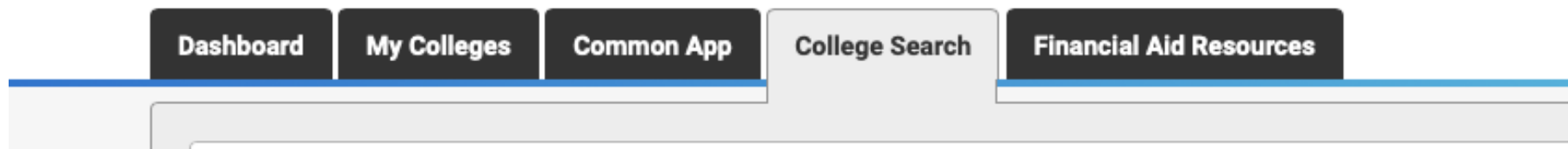
## Dashboard



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

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

## College Search



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

Here are a few other things to keep in mind:

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

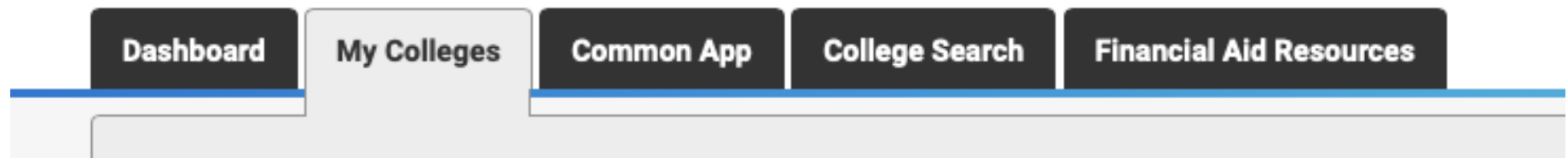
Many of our students will complete their entire Common App, then go back and add their colleges at the end, especially if they haven’t finalized their college list. You can always add or drop schools from this list at any time. Nothing is permanent here.

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

To double-check, open a new tab in your browser and paste in this link: <https://appsupport.commonapp.org/applicantsupport/s/live-common-app-schools>. This page provides a complete list of all the schools on the Common App — nearly 900 of them. Note that, in some cases, a school might start with “The,” and then you’d find it under the Schools Q-T link. And some schools are found under “St.” and others other “Saint.” So, be sure to check for possible variations!

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

## My Colleges



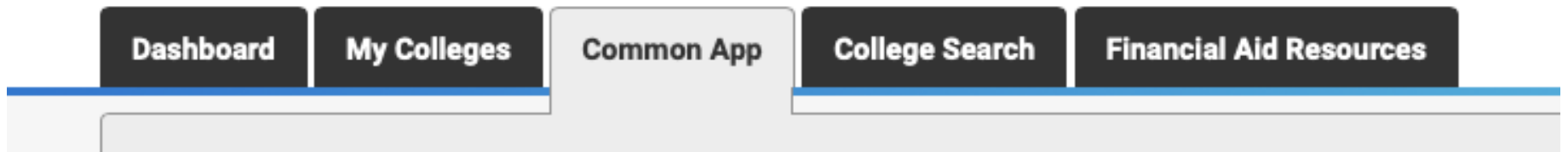
My Colleges is the section where you *submit* your application in several parts:

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

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



# Common App



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

## Profile

### COVID-19 Note:

We're going to kick this off with some good news: there are no COVID-19-related changes in this section! All you have to do is follow the line-by-line instructions in this section to complete your Profile thoroughly.

## Personal Information

### ☐ First/given name, Middle name, and Last/family/surname

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.

☐ **Preferred name (nickname)**

Do people, including your teachers and counselors, call you a different name from what you entered for your “First/given name?” This section serves the needs of some international and transgender students as well as some students who choose to go by a middle name or nickname. If your legal first/given name is “John,” but all the letters of recommendation from your teachers and counselor refer to you as “Jack,” the administrative staff in the admissions office will have an easier time assembling your file correctly if you provide this information. Remember, they are processing thousands of pieces of info during admissions season. Make their jobs easier and help ensure that your file contains the right information by entering your *preferred* name.

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

Choosing “Yes” pops up “Former first name,” “Former middle name,” and “Former last name” boxes where you can share your previous legal name if you have one. You might have changed your name because your parents divorced or remarried, you simply 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.

☐ **Sex**

If Collegewise were writing our own college application, we would make this question optional. But it’s mandatory on the Common App, and for reasons strictly related to federal data collection, the only options here are “Male” or “Female.” Students should answer this question according to their legal sex (typically your sex assigned at birth or a legally changed gender marker).

☐ **If you would like the opportunity, we invite you to share more about your gender identity below**

For students who find the male-female gender binary too limiting, this is an open text box where you can share more about your specific gender identity. We encourage students to answer this question, in whatever way feels honest and authentic to you (including leaving it blank). And while we’d like to be able to assure you that this will have no bearing whatsoever on your admissions chances, realistically we know that’s not true. However, we firmly believe that the right colleges will be excited about you, exactly as you are.

☐ **Date of birth**

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

## Address

☐ **Permanent home address**

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

☐ **Alternate mailing address**

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

## Contact Details

☐ **Preferred phone**

Make sure that you click the box ("Home" or "Mobile") that matches the number you entered during the registration phase. Again, consider listing your home phone (if you have one) rather than your cell phone (we explained why in the Creating an Account section). If you received permission from an adult to use their phone instead, or you have a Google Voice number, list that number here.

☐ **Alternate phone**

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

## Demographics

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 some

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.

- Religious Preference
  - A lot of students worry that their answers here can work against them in the application review process. But whether or not religious life and spirituality are important to you, we promise that you really can be honest here. Even colleges that have a religious affiliation still value diversity of opinion on campus. If the college wants to dive deeper into your religious faith (or lack thereof), they will do so in the supplemental questions.
- U.S. Armed Forces Status
  - Most students will choose "None," but if you can select one of the three other options, thank you for your service!
- Regardless of your answer to the prior question, please indicate how you identify yourself. (Select one or more)
  - In the 23andMe world we live in now, it's easy to think that this question is asking for a full breakdown of your genetic pie chart. But really, this question is asking about the race or races you identify with. And that identity comes through in many more places on the application than just this box, from the stories you share in your essays to your last name to where your parents are from. Be proud and confident, whatever your answers to these questions may be.
- The questions in this section, while helpful to colleges, are entirely optional, and you're welcome to move on without answering them. Before you do, please confirm for us that you've completed this section to your satisfaction.
  - There's only one box to check here, but before you do, make sure you've read our advice for the questions above. The items in this section are just trying to get a better sense of who you are. And if you don't feel comfortable with the question, you can always decline to answer, and that won't be held against you either.

## Geography

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

## Language

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

Some students want to stretch this and include languages in which they aren't really proficient. If you're fluent, or you've completed four years (or even the AP level) of foreign language study, you might be skilled. If you're not sure, imagine you have an interview with one of your colleges, and the interviewer, unbeknownst to you, speaks both English and a language you've listed here. If this interviewer says, "I see you listed Spanish as one of your languages," and then begins a conversation with you in Spanish, would you feel confident, or would you feel like you'd just been caught in a lie? But if you can read and write it even though you genuinely can't have a chat in it, then it's appropriate to check off just those boxes.

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

## Citizenship

### ☐ **Select your citizenship status**

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

Undocumented and DACA students will choose "Other (Non-US)" and then select the country in which they do have citizenship, before clicking "No" for "Do you currently hold a valid U.S. Visa?" Unless you have a specific response to "If you intend to apply for a new or different U.S. Visa..." you may leave that optional question unanswered.

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

## Common App Fee Waiver

If you click "Yes" then be sure to check off one or more of the economic indicators that applies to you before signing your name. If you are unsure, speak with your school counselor or someone in the college center.

These waivers are for students in financial need. Don't check "Yes" if you just assume you qualify; your counselor will need to verify that you're eligible. If you do qualify for a fee waiver, though, check the box (or boxes) that fit your situation, and also click "Yes" to receive information from Strive for College. They're a nonprofit that provides extra admissions and financial aid support at no cost.

## Family

### COVID-19 Note:

Again, there are no adjustments you need to make to the Family section due to COVID-19. Consider this a moderately bright spot in the struggle that is applying to college during a pandemic.

## Household

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

If you select "Divorced" or "Widowed" while also listing Parent 1 as living, a window will ask you for the year of divorce. Be as accurate as you can. This could provide some important context to your academic record if the divorce or passing happened while you were in high school. Additionally, if you are applying for financial aid using FAFSA, this answer should match that paperwork.

### ☐ **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 explain your living situation in a new field (it's got a 100-character limit, but you can disclose more in Additional Information if necessary).

## Parent 1 and Parent 2

It doesn't matter which parent you list as 1 or 2. However, when filling out this information, do consult directly with both parents when possible to ensure the information is as accurate as possible. If you don't live with your parents or are not in contact with them, you can select "I have limited information about this parent." You can explain more about your situation in the "Additional Information" section if you would like.

☐ **Preferred email**

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

☐ **Preferred phone**

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

☐ **Occupation (former occupation if retired or deceased)**

Some college counselors advise that you should use strategy in this part and play down whatever your parents do. The argument is that colleges will instinctively expect more from a student who grew up with parents who are both successful heart surgeons than from a student who grew up without the same advantages. Other students feel they must do the opposite and play up what their parents do to be "college material." As with everything in your application, honesty is the best policy here.

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

- First, ask your parents what they want you to list here. It's crucial that they feel what you have shared is accurate. If their occupation is not listed — whether specifically or broadly — "Other" is an option that opens up a text box to type in a response.
- Never inflate your parents' accomplishments. You're not going to get extra admissions credit because your parents have fancy-sounding titles. Just be direct.

- Remember the confidence factor. If your parents are very successful, you should be grateful for your circumstances. If neither of your parents went to college and you have dreams of doing things they didn't have the opportunity to do in their lives, you should be proud of yourself and of the fact that you're about to do something groundbreaking in your family. Don't apologize for or try to hide the circumstances in which you've been raised. Just be genuine and let your qualifications speak for themselves.

#### ☐ **Education level**

In the pull-down menu, "College" and "Graduate school" are listed; however, "Professional school" is not. For this section, the Common App considers graduate (like MSW or Ph.D.) and professional schools (like MD, JD, or MBA) as the same thing.

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

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

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

#### ☐ **College lookup**

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

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

## Sibling

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



What should you do if you have more than five siblings? Here's the Common App's reply: "You may add siblings, half-siblings, or step-siblings only. If you need to enter more than five siblings, please use the Additional Information section, located in the Writing section."

## Education

### Current or Most Recent Secondary School

☐ **Current or most recent secondary school lookup**

Using the "Find School" link, enter in your *current* school. And if you don't find the school you're looking for, peek at the Help section to the right for a solution.

☐ **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 2017. But some students at private schools or public charters may have entered in 7th grade or even kindergarten. In those cases, go ahead and list when you first entered the school. If you transferred high schools, enter the date you started at your current school.

☐ **Graduation date**

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

☐ **Please indicate if any of these options will have affected your progression through or since secondary 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 school that you indicated above." Note, there's a 250-word limit for this text box.

### COVID-19 Note:

If you're among the many students whose high school classes moved online at the end of your junior year, you might be wondering if you need to note that here somehow. The answer is: nope. However, if you took time off from school last spring or this fall - maybe you started working more hours to help support your family, or you cared for a relative - that might count here. See the full explanation below for what qualifies as a change in progression and how to articulate that clearly to your colleges.

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

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

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

## Counselor Information

After you provide your high school information, you're asked to give your counselor's name, title, phone number, and email. You must take the time to get this information right.

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

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

It's also important that you make your application as complete as possible. If your counselor doesn't have a phone number, that's fine. But you shouldn't leave this space blank just because you didn't want to take the time to find the information. Go to your school's website or visit your counselor personally to verify all this information.

## Other Secondary Schools

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

If you did switch high schools, then enter the appropriate number and then review our advice in the section below on the text box that results.

☐ **Please provide details about why you left each of the above secondary schools. Note, there's a 250-word limit for this text box.**

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 only one sentence, such as, "My father got a new job, and our family had to relocate." 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 pull-down should be used if you have taken a college course — online or on-campus — from a college or high school. You do not have to have received credit or have a transcript available to check the box.

For Course Details, mark all the appropriate boxes because you can choose more than one. This does not include AP or IB courses taken on a high school campus. (These would likely be listed on your transcript.)

For **Dual enrollment with high school**, most students will leave this blank unless they are the rare students in a program such as Running Start or an early college-entrance program. For **Summer program**, more students will check this one off but see the caveats in the paragraph below. For **Credit awarded directly by college**, check this box only if you are sure you were given credit for satisfactory performance in the course.

With this in mind, students at Collegewise check the last of these boxes only if they have taken a full-semester or full-year course that would be part of a regular college curriculum. We've seen many special summer programs for high school students that are hosted on college campuses and where the students receive a half-credit in Life Skills or something similarly vague. In this case, the colleges you are applying to care less about the credit than the fact you were engaged with your own learning beyond required courses. In those cases, it's okay to leave the **"Credit awarded..."** box unchecked and only check off **"Summer program."**

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

### **Collegewise aside: "What if I took a college class, and I don't want to report it?"**

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

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

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

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

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

## Grades

Don't attempt to fill out this section without a current copy of your official high school transcript or without speaking with a school official. The information you enter here must match your official records.

### COVID-19 Note:

One significant change for many high schools last spring was a shift to Pass/Fail grading (also called Credit/No Credit). If your school made this change, you do not need to address that here. Your school counselor will address this in their portion. You should fill this section in the same way you usually would. So, for instance, if your school usually grades on a 4-point scale, you should choose 4 under "GPA Scale Reporting." The same thing is true for your GPA. Use the highest GPA on your most recent transcript, even if your second-semester grades are recorded as Pass/Fail. If you're worried about how colleges might view this grading shift, check out [this blog post](#).

☐ **Graduating class size (approx.)**

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

☐ **Class rank reporting**

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

☐ **Cumulative GPA**

Again, don't guess. Verify it with your most updated transcript, which should include your grades through the end of your junior year as well as any summer school classes you took at your high school. *If you've attended multiple high schools, list the GPA on your most recent transcript.*

☐ **GPA scale and GPA weighting**

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

## Current or Most Recent Year Courses

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

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

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

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

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

☐ **Course title**

- Make sure you use class names exactly as they appear on your transcript. Don't write "Senior English" if your transcript says, "English IV."
- For the Course level, this remains blank unless it falls under one of the categories listed.
- If you are receiving Fall and Spring grades for the same course, it needs to be listed under Full Year. You will check only the individual First/Second Semester boxes if that's the full length of the course.
- List the courses in descending order of difficulty. This lets you impress the admissions officer immediately. If you're taking AP courses, list them at the top (lead with "AP Calculus" or "AP English" if you're taking one or both, as they both have oomph). Then, move to honors courses, followed by regular classes (solid academics, followed by electives). If you don't have any honors or AP classes, list any of the five academic solids first: English, math, science, foreign language, or social science. Then, list any electives.
- Spell out any abbreviations other than AP, IB, or CP (which colleges know). For example, some students in student government take a class called ASB (Associated Student Body). Don't assume that colleges will know what ASB is. When in doubt, spell it out.

## Honors

☐ **Do you wish to report any honors related to your academic achievements beginning with the ninth grade or international equivalent?**

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

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

Many awards that appear as acronyms need to be spelled out, especially if they are unique to your school or your state. (You have 150 characters to do this.) Admissions officers in California may know that CSF means "California Scholarship Federation," but some colleges in other states won't. The same can be said for any 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 are 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

### ☐ Career interest

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



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.

☐ **Highest degree you intend to earn**

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

## Testing

The test-score section of the Common App gives you an excellent opportunity to put your best “testing foot” forward. If you choose to send your test scores to your colleges, keep in mind that they’re not asking you to enter in *all* your scores, only your *best* scores. You’ll still need to ask the testing agencies to send official score reports to colleges, and some colleges will ask you to report all your scores, not just the best ones.

**COVID-19 Note:**

If you haven’t been able to take an SAT or ACT for any reason, that’s fine. Just read our note about test-optional schools in the next few pages.

Think of reporting test scores as a two-part process:

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

## 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, TOEFL, PTE Academic, and IELTS?**

For some students, the answer is “Yes.” You can list the scores you’re proud of and then send them off officially. However, if you don’t feel your scores accurately represent you (or you don’t have any scores), then it’s OK to check “No” and move on. But remember, you will have to send scores to any college that requires them officially.

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

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

Bonus extra tip: Some colleges allow students to “self-report” their standardized test scores. For these colleges, if you list a score on your Common App, the admission office does not require the official scores from ACT or College Board when you submit your application. For students looking to save a few dollars during the admissions process, this is an easy way to do so. It’s only about 150 schools, but to see which schools are on the ever-growing list, [check out this link](#). Be aware, if you are admitted to the school and choose to enroll, you will be required to provide official results.

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

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

## A note about test-optional schools

### COVID-19 Note:

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the cancellation of SAT and ACT tests for hundreds of thousands of students. To make sure that students who could not take those tests weren't at a disadvantage, many colleges, including some of the largest and most prestigious universities in the country, have announced that they will be test-optional for the 2020-2021 application cycle. (And yes, at these colleges, [test-optional means test scores are truly optional](#).) If you were not able to test for any reason, or if you feel that your scores don't represent you as a student, it's totally fine to apply to these schools without sending any test scores. You can check the searchable database of schools [on Fairtest's website](#) for a current list of (over 1,400) test-optional colleges. There is also [a list of colleges](#) that are test-optional for international students. Some colleges, including Caltech and Loyola New Orleans, have also announced test-blind policies, which means they will not consider test scores at all in their application review. Regardless of the particular policy, make sure you check your colleges' policies to see whether it makes sense for you to send any test scores.

One note of caution: 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 (or finally manage to safely take an SAT or ACT and earn scores you're proud of). Make sure to check with the colleges on your list BEFORE you apply to see if they'll let you switch to or from a test-optional application after you've submitted it. Some colleges will allow it, but some won't, and it's better to know before you submit your application.

Test-optional schools do not require any standardized test scores in the admissions process, so it is entirely acceptable to leave this entire section blank on the Common App if you're applying to any. For those schools that ask for test scores, just send your official scores specifically to those schools using the College Board or ACT website. Yes, we know it sounds risky to leave an entire section blank, but we did our homework, and that's what the people at Common App recommend in this scenario. This way, the schools that are test-optional will never see your scores in any way, and the ones that require them will receive them directly from the official reports you send.

**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 hear more.

- ☐ **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, whether that is clicking on only one, or multiple tests.

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

### If you took the ACT:

☐ **Number of 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. For most students, this will be one or two.
- Then find your best composite (total score) in your score reports. List that under "Highest composite score" and enter that date in "Composite date." Then, enter the best scores you have for each section, even if they come from different test dates.

☐ **Number of future ACT sittings you expect**

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

### If you took the SAT:

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

- Get your official score reports via the College Board's website and note your highest scores on each section, even if they came from different dates. If all your highest scores are from one test, indicate that here. If it's spread out over two or three tests, mark that instead.
- Then, simply 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 you've submitted your application. If you're unsure, set it at 0 as you don't want the admissions officer waiting for scores that may never arrive.



## AP/IB/SAT Subject Tests

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

### Subject Tests

- First, check your individual colleges and see if they even require them. That's important, because some schools and programs may require specific exams. (Again, if you go to the My Colleges tab, you can get the link to that information under “Testing Policy” for each school.) For example, if you're applying to an engineering program that requires you to take Math Level 2, you can list it here, and then you must ask the College Board to send an official score report to each college that needs the score.
- We advise students to try not to list any Subject Test score lower than 500 for most colleges (unless a specific school requires the score). If you're applying to highly selective schools such as Amherst, Stanford, or any in the Ivy League, you probably shouldn't list any score lower than 700, but check with your school counselor or college center if you have questions.

### AP or IB 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 herself, 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 tests, list your highest scores first. This is subtle, but you want to start strong when an admissions officer looks at your list of scores. Also, AP scores are usually just self-reported. That means you do NOT have to ask the College Board to send AP scores to colleges unless you find a school that specifically asks you to do so when you apply.
- Also, the prompt here says, “Number of AP Tests you wish to report, including tests you expect to take.” Meaning, you should also include the tests you plan to take in May 2021.

### TOEFL/PTE Academic/IELTS

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

- Don't plan to cut and paste a resume into the Additional Information or send one to any college, unless that college specifically asks you to do it in their supplement. Admissions officers spend a lot of time constructing their applications so that they can collect all the information they need to learn about students. If you send a resume without being asked, it's like telling them that you didn't like the way they put their application together. That might annoy them, which is never a good idea.
- We encourage students to list your activities in order of their importance to you. Start with the one activity that you could never imagine your high school career without and work your way down from there. After you enter the first one, you can always move the order around using the "Up/Down" arrows within each activity.
- Space can be limited in this section, so it's fine to abbreviate if the abbreviation is universally understood. It would be hard to find an admissions officer who doesn't know what an MVP or NHS is, but many other abbreviations mean something only to the people involved in the group that uses it. As we said in the Honors section above, some acronyms need to be spelled out, especially if they are unique to your school or your state.

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

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

- You don't need to fill up all ten lines. 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 spent your time outside class. If you were in the Spanish Club in the 9th grade and never went back after that, does it help your application to list it? Leave the space blank or use that spot to share something else more important to you. Remember, this isn't a contest to see how much you can list; it's your chance to describe what you enjoyed doing in high school.

#### COVID-19 Note:

We've seen two significant changes to students' activities since their schools closed, and shelter-in-place began. Either your activity was canceled altogether (eight people pushing their heads together in a rugby scrum is probably not a great idea right now...), or you've started doing brand-new activities that didn't exist before. So, your list of activities might look a little different than it would any other year. And colleges get that - they know that many things were out of your control. What they want to know instead is what you did with the aspects that *were* in your control.

If your tennis season got canceled, how did you keep your skills up from home? Did you start a socially-distanced running club with your teammates or watch every Roger Federer match you could find on YouTube? If you got inspired by an Instagram post about face masks, did you scrounge up fabric around your house to sew masks for your family and friends? Now that you're eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner at home, do you plan to try a few new dishes from Selena Gomez's new cooking show and branch out from cereal?

Feel free to think outside the box with your activities this year. You should still include the sports teams you've invested so many years in and the musical instruments you've been playing since elementary school. But admissions officers will also be excited to hear about all the books you read for pleasure this summer or the science experiments you did with your little brother or the scrappy lawn-mowing business you started on your block. As always, the activity section is an excellent opportunity to highlight what makes you an interesting human, and this year is no exception.

#### ☐ Activity type

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

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

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

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

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

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

Here are three questions to consider asking yourself for this section: 1) "Is it possible that whoever is reading this application might not understand what this activity 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?" Those are the types of information that can be listed in this section.

For example, let's say you listed your camp counselor work under "Work (Paid)." But what if the camp were specifically for children with physical and mental disabilities? That's something interesting the 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 2019 issue won the statewide journalism award, 'Excellence in Student Press.'"

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



## What about hobbies?

Collegewise has some non-traditional advice about listing a hobby on the Common App.

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

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

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

List a hobby only if it's important to you. A good way to gauge this is to imagine a college interviewer asking you about it. Would you have something to say? Could you tell a good story about the time you put into this or what you've learned how to do? If you made an origami swan one time, you're not going to have much to say about origami. However, if you've read books about origami and have taught yourself how to make 20 different advanced origami creations, you've got something to talk about.

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

### ☐ **Participation grade levels**

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

☐ **Timing of participation**

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

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

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

But don't underestimate, either. If you say that you play football six hours a week, that's probably selling yourself short, considering that one game alone is at least three hours. 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 with 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 do 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 you are admitted to the school, it allows them to share more information with you about similar activities at their school. Two, as they are building a class, it gives them a sense of what you'll engage with on campus.

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

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

# Writing

## Personal Essay

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

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma—anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.

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

## Some Collegewise essay advice before you dive in:

We think the best college essay prompts give students enough guidance to focus their story (even though it's effectively the last of seven prompts, most students appreciate more direction than, "Write a 650-word essay on a topic of your choice."). But it's also helpful when prompts leave enough flexibility to allow every student to share something that helps the admissions committee get to know this applicant better than the application alone would allow. These Common App prompts do just that.

Collegewise has helped over 26,000 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. Nevertheless, here are a few topic-specific tips. And if you'd like even 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](#) or you can buy [our college essay video](#).

#### COVID-19 Note:

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

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

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

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

# Disciplinary History

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

Read the question carefully.

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

There’s a phrase publicists use: “We can control the story.” It means that if you admit something unpleasant rather than waiting for other people to find out, you get the benefit of revealing it yourself rather than letting someone else do it for you. Plus, you can provide an explanation rather than a defensive response. That’s almost always how Collegewise counselors approach this question with students: Honesty is the best policy. This is one of those sections in our guide where you should double-check with your school counselor or college center if you’re uncertain about whether our recommendations are right for you.

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

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

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

### 1. **Be honest**

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

### 2. **Take responsibility**

The very worst thing a student can do is blame other people or make excuses. You must express that you take responsibility for your role in the incident, whatever it was. If you tell a college that you were unfairly accused of vandalism because you were in a group where other kids were doing the vandalizing, that doesn't change the fact that you were there and complicit. You should say something to the effect of, "Although I didn't vandalize the school, I was still with a group of friends who did. And that was a stupid thing to do. I wasn't comfortable with the situation, but if I had just gone home like I knew I should have, none of this would have happened to me, and the fact that it has is all my fault."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Additional Information

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

## The COVID-specific question:

"Community disruptions such as COVID-19 and natural disasters can have deep and long-lasting impacts. If you need it, this space is yours to describe those impacts. Colleges care about the effects on your health and well-being, safety, family circumstances, future plans, and education, including access to reliable technology and quiet study spaces.

- Do you wish to share anything on this topic? Y/N
- Please use this space to describe how these events have impacted you."

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

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

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

The question itself offers 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. If you find yourself shrugging your shoulders a bit as you search your mind for how COVID-19 affected you or your only response is, "Well, online learning wasn't much fun," then you might consider skipping it.

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



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

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

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

## The section on "circumstances and qualifications not reflected elsewhere:"

Much like the COVID-specific question, don't use this section unless it's truly necessary. 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.

### ☐ **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 ran out of space.
- Some students have ongoing challenges during their high school years, like homelessness, abuse, or health issues. If you've experienced a similar challenge that has affected your high school career, you may want to describe it here.

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

### 1. 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 (5/2019)

AP Statistics: 3 (5/2020)

### 2. Keep it short

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

### 3. 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.

#### 4. No resumes, please

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

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

## Courses & Grades

This section will appear under "Writing" on the left-hand menu of the Common App tab *only if* your My Colleges section includes one of ~50 schools that requires this information. You can see the list of colleges [here](#).

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

#### COVID-19 Note:

Even though your school year was interrupted by COVID-19, the colleges on your list that require this section will still want you to complete it. You should enter everything in as described in the guide below for 9th and 10th grades. For your junior year, though, you may run into an issue, depending on how your school handled school closures and online learning.

If, during the school closure, your schooling continued in an online format and you were graded, you can enter your grades and credits as you would normally.

If your school changed its grading scale as a result of COVID-19, report the grade you earned in the first term on its original scale. In the other terms and final grade boxes, you can select a “Pass” or “Fail” option, or “Satisfactory” or “Unsatisfactory” option, depending on your school’s new grading scale. You can then enter the credits you earned accordingly.

If your school did not continue and you effectively do not have grades for the second part of the year or a final grade, and you, therefore, do not have the corresponding credits, you can leave those sections blank.

Remember that you can address these grading scale changes in other parts of your application.

It’s important to note that the self-reported grades will not serve as a substitute for your counselor uploading an official copy of your transcript either through Naviance or through the “Recommenders” section of the Common App. In addition, there are a couple of other caveats to bear in mind for students to be eligible to submit the Courses & Grades section:

1. You must have access to your high school transcript (and have it in front of you as you fill out the section).
2. Your transcript must include grades as opposed to qualitative or narrative assessments.
3. Your high school must use semesters, trimesters, quarters, or block scheduling.

If *all* these parameters hold true for you *and* you’re applying to one of the schools that requires it, it’s time to dive in. Click “Add 9<sup>th</sup> grade courses and grades” to get started, and the Common App Course Assistant will open up to help 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 Schools” section.

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

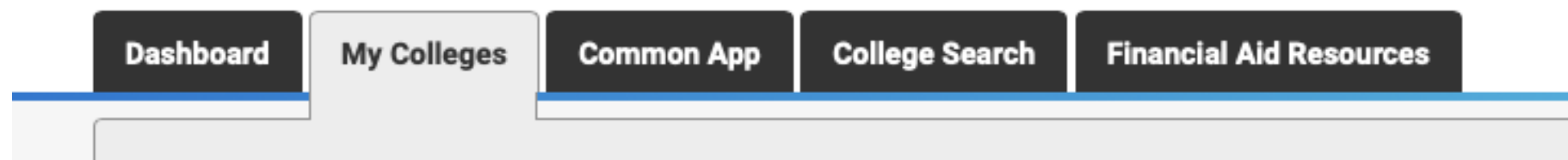
Again, base your answer on what’s listed on your transcript. If your high school doesn’t explicitly designate a course as Accelerated, Gifted, or Honors level, don’t list it here.

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

To add additional rows to list more courses, click the “Add a row” 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 trashcan button. And if you have more courses for the same grade to add from a different school, click “Add courses from another transcript button” and repeat the process.

When you’ve completed all the courses for your ninth-grade year, click Continue and repeat the process for your tenth and eleventh-grade years. 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 College (School-Specific Components)



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

# Questions

## General

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

### ☐ **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 and school counselor will need to sign it saying they support you applying via Early Decision. The parent version is found under Recommenders and FERPA for that school.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Academics

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

- We see nothing unreasonable with listing two or three of your interests, even if they are unrelated. If you do enjoy biology, English, and international relations and the prompt allows for it, list them. At some colleges, the essay questions you'll answer will directly depend on the major or program you're applying to. Read the prompt carefully to make sure you're answering the question the college is asking. And if you're not sure how this question will be used by a college, you can reach out and ask them about it.
- We advise our students not to select "Undecided" if it's asking about interests. Many students are undecided about what they want to *major* in during college, which is fine; that's different from what your academic *interests* are. Even students who are applying as "undecided" majors usually have some idea what their interests are. We think checking "Undecided" about your interests is the online equivalent of shrugging your shoulders and having no clue. Be honest and tell colleges what your interests are, even if you aren't sure you want to major in them.

- The Future Plans section is one that can — and often should — be customized to individual schools. Let's say you've listed your academic interests as
  1. Business,
  2. Accounting, and
  3. Marketing.

Now, let's say you add the University of Chicago, and you repeat those selections. That's a problem because the University of Chicago doesn't offer any of these as majors. Even though you're not committing to a major here, you've already made it clear that you're not interested in studying anything that doesn't tie closely to business. Be mindful of the school you're applying to, and make sure you show them that you understand their academic offerings.

## Recommenders and FERPA

### FERPA Release Authorization

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

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

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

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



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

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

1. You're essentially telling the writer that you don't trust him or her to do a good job. Also, you're making that implication while asking this person to do you a favor. A teacher or counselor can't help but be a little offended by that. Offending the person you want to recommend you is never a good strategy.
2. A writer who is worried that you'll see the letter one day is one who is less likely to be truly honest and more likely to say things that are technically positive but bland. That's bad for you.

It's the difference between:

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

and

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

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

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

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

## Invite Recommenders

In the current version of the Common App, high schools have the option of managing their recommendation processes through programs like Naviance, SCOIR, or Parchment. These online programs allow official forms to be submitted to colleges electronically. Every high school will make its own decision about how to manage the recommendation process, and those that use Naviance, etc., don't necessarily do so in the same way. So, we can't describe in this guide the precise steps you should take to complete your recommendations, but here are a few guidelines we think you'll find helpful:

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

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

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

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

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

The fact that a teacher vaguely mentioned sometime in the past that they would be happy to write you a letter of recommendation doesn't count. You need recent confirmation that your teachers are willing to do this. Also, make sure you know how many letters your colleges require, and check to see if those colleges have requirements or suggestions about which teachers should write your recommendations. You don't want to ask your History teacher and your English teacher for recommendations then learn that you need a letter from a Math teacher for the college or program you're applying to.

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

"Mrs." does not count as a first name when you list them as a recommender on the Common App. Hint: Google helps.

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

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

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

## Advisor

This is a new feature added recently. It 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 Mom or Dad. For others, it may be a community-based organization advisor or an independent education consultant. Regardless of whom it is, two things hold true:

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

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

# Writing Supplements

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

With so many schools requiring varied supplements, we can't give school-specific advice on all of them. But [we've got a blog post](#) that tackles some of the most-common questions and we've got a few general tips here to help you make sure your supplements are just as robust as the rest of your Common App.

## 1. Read (and follow) the directions

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

## 2. Don't treat supplements like afterthoughts

Just because its supplemental information doesn't mean it's not important. In fact, at the most selective schools, the supplements are every bit as important as the main application, if not more so. You want to give your supplements the same time and attention that you gave to the Common App itself. These supplements are another chance for you to show your personality to your favorite colleges.

## 3. Make your supplements personal to each college

Generic doesn't play well in your responses in supplements. Colleges need to sense that you're doing this just for them, not playing a game of college application Mad Libs where you're using the same answer but replacing the name of the school. There may be overlap between your answers, but admission officers can usually tell when you've written one "Why I want to go to this college" essay and merely substituted a new college name.

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

Also, here's a tip about the length of your responses: Some schools will ask you to write a one-paragraph answer to the question, but their text box allows 450–500 words. Go with one paragraph, even if there's plenty of room to write much more. Four or five well-developed sentences are usually all you need. Resist the urge to use up every character.

In addition to this, some supplemental prompts will not offer a word limit in the question but will have a limit set on the accompanying text box. In these cases, it makes sense to test the word count before you start writing because few things are as fun as writing a beautiful 250-word piece for a box that only allows 75 words.

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

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

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

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

☐ **Where to go for more advice**

Collegewise has written a lot of guides for various schools' supplements on our blog. You can find those entries [here](#).

## Submit Your Application

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

☐ **Final PDF Preview**

These instructions will tell you how to do a "Final PDF Preview" of your application. This is a crucial step, as it generates a PDF that shows you almost exactly what the admissions officers will see when they read your application.

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. Even if the Common App allows you to enter the text, formatting issues may keep all the letters and words from appearing. If that's the case, you will need to shorten what you wrote until it does all show up in the next Preview PDF you generate. This happens because not all characters are created equal. Compare "....." versus "WWWWWWWWW." Both are ten characters, but one obviously takes up more space on the page.

After you've done a good proofing and preview of your application (and your parents have, too), it's time to submit. One critical point to keep in mind is that you do NOT have to submit your application to ALL schools at one time. You can send each application off when you're ready. And if you submit your application to a school or two then want to update your Common App before you submit the rest of your applications, you can. (Keep reading for information on how to update your applications after you've submitted them.)

☐ **Application Fee Payment**

If you didn't request a fee waiver in the Profile section, you will have to pay an app fee. Colleges have their own fee structures and methods of payment, so carefully follow the directions for each school. When students are given the option between a credit/debit card and check, we

recommend a card because it's easier to verify if payment has been received. But e-checks work well, too, so consider what's best for your needs. Either way, you're one step closer to having a final and completed application.

#### ☐ **Signature**

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

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

## After You Submit

Here's the checklist we recommend going through for each school after you complete and submit a Common App:

1. Submit the Common App to the school.
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 to submit your application. 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 online and as directed by the university's official test policies.
4. Verify that your counselor submitted your Secondary School Report and that your teachers submitted their recommendations. If your school uses Naviance, etc., this can be verified there or in the My Colleges section of your Common App.
5. Submit any requested supplemental information, such as an art portfolio through SlideRoom (but only if requested and relevant).

6. Schedule the interview (if available). This isn't something the Common App will tell you to do. You need to visit each school's website. Also, it is important to note that many schools will allow you to schedule interviews *before* you submit your application. If that's the case, do not wait to schedule your interview because slots may be limited, and you'll miss your chance. If you'd like some help preparing for your interview, [check out our blog section](#) on college interviews.

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

## How to Update Your Common App After You Submit

As we mentioned above, you can update your Common App between application submissions, and the rest of your schools will see any updates when you send in your applications. Once you submit your Common App to a school, though, the only way to change or update the application that college will read is to contact the school directly and tell them you would like to alter it. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. For example, if you change your senior year schedule after you've submitted your Common App, a school would want you to make an update. Most colleges will ask you to send a letter or update through their applicant portal, describing any changes or updates you want to make. Be sure to call or email each school to verify how they prefer this update and to whom it should be directed.

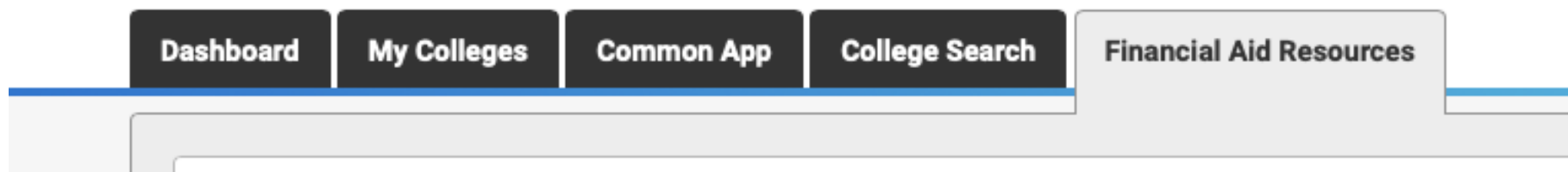
Here are a few other scenarios where you should consider contacting a college and asking for permission to send an updated application:

1. Despite your best efforts, a significant error goes through. A misplaced comma or a misspelled word won't keep you out of a college, but if you realize you misspelled "president" as "precedent" throughout your application, it's probably worth fixing.
2. You win an award late in the application season. For instance, you're a volleyball player and win team MVP as well as 1st-team All-League honors at the late fall banquet. In addition, your team finished as runner-up in the state championships. That's a lot to be proud of, and you should share this good news with schools.
3. If you are taking a class and it appears on your Current Year Courses, but you drop it late in the fall of your senior year, you want to correct this so your application is accurate.



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

## Financial Aid Resources



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 by clicking the “Apply for Aid” tab, you can link to the financial aid websites of each of the schools in your My Colleges section. It gives you a natural starting point to research each school’s policies on need-based aid, what the deadlines for various required forms are, and how to apply for merit-based scholarships if they’re available.

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

The Financial Aid Resources 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](https://fafsa.gov) at a minimum) once you get to those pages.

When you have submitted your very first application via the Common App, you’ll unlock the features in the Explore Scholarship Opportunities page. Scholar Snapp will connect you to scholarships that are selected just for you based on criteria determined by your submitted application. You can read more information on this feature [here](#).

# Conclusion

Technological advances like the Common App are supposed to make your college application life easier. But now that you've read 66 pages of our advice about the Common App, it would be easy to get the impression that you need a complex strategy to successfully apply to college, that the process is rife with potential errors, and that you're always just one small mistake away from torpedoing your chances of admission during this exceptionally strange pandemic-influenced year.

## **Don't worry.**

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

You should also know that pretty much every admissions officer we've ever met or worked with was friendly, understanding, and genuinely happier to admit a student than to reject them. Rejecting people is the part of the job most admissions officers don't like. The more selective colleges deal with many more applications than they can possibly accept, but the people reading them would still much rather admit you if they can find a reason. That's a good thing to remember as you begin the long wait to hear back from colleges.

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

In fact, the Collegewise team can't wait to see where you go.

**Cheers,**

**The Counselors and Educators at Collegewise**

# Appendix

Other than the first two URLs (to launch your Common App and check which colleges are on it this year) 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 long document, so we've got a list of them here in the order they appear in the guide.

**Start your Common App:** <https://apply.commonapp.org/createaccount>

**Who is on the Common App:** <https://appsupport.commonapp.org/applicantsupport/s/live-common-app-schools>

**Blog post on Credit/No Credit:** <https://go.collegewise.com/credit-no-credit>

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

**"Test scores are truly optional" list:** <https://www.nacacnet.org/news--publications/newsroom/test-optional-means-test-optional/>

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

**List of test-optional schools for international students:**

<https://tinyurl.com/InternationalSAT-ACToptional>

**Podcast on standardized testing in college admissions:**

<https://getwise.simplecast.com/episodes/s104-testing-is-never-the-most-important-thing>

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

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

**Blog posts on college essays:** <http://wiselikeus.com/collegewise/category/college-essays> and <http://go.collegewise.com/tag/college-essays>

**Collegewise YouTube channel (including essay-specific videos):**

<https://www.youtube.com/user/collegewise/videos>

**Collegewise essay video (for purchase):** <https://collegewise.com/product/how-to-write-great-college-essays-video/>

**Background piece on why Common App added a COVID-specific question:**

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/civcnation/2020/06/25/this-pandemic-does-not-define-you>

**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>

**Blog post on answering supplemental essay questions:**

<https://go.collegewise.com/supplemental-essays>

# Appendix

**Blog posts for some school-specific supplements:**

<http://wiselikeus.com/collegewise/category/advice-for-specific-colleges>

**Common App's video on submitting and paying for your application:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jeja8Xo2ZA4&list=PL8KEAorkN10CzbZnllkklg4N-JZ9IVVGC&index=12&t=0s>

**Blog posts on college interviews:** <http://wiselikeus.com/collegewise/category/college-interviews>

**Information on Scholar Snapp:**

<https://appsupport.commonapp.org/applicantsupport/s/article/Where-can-I-find-helpful-information-about-Scholar-Snapp>

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# Want More?

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

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

## Collegewise's counseling programs

<https://collegewise.com/services>

Collegewise counselors work with students in-person and online. Contact us to learn more.

## Our free stuff

<https://collegewise.com/resources>

Check out Collegewise's complete collection of free advice!

## Runway

This is a series of college planning programs and resources (all for free!)

<https://collegewiserunway.thinkific.com/>

## Our website

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

## Our social media

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Twitter: @Collegewise

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