



CALIFORNIA COLLEGE  
GUIDANCE INITIATIVE

## The Common Application Overview

Accepted at more than 500 colleges worldwide, the Common Application is one of the most widely used college applications. Most, but not all, private independent colleges in California accept the Common App. Additionally, the Common App is accepted at many private independent colleges outside of California and at some out-of-state public colleges and universities as well. Using the Common App allows you to submit one online application to multiple schools.

**How to Create an Account.** Each year on August 1, the Common Application is ready for new applicants. **On August 1 right before you start your senior year of high school go to [www.commonapplication.org](http://www.commonapplication.org) to create an account.**

**Fee Waivers.** Most, but not all, colleges require you to pay an application fee when you submit your application, which means the application process can become expensive: the more colleges you apply to, the more fees you will have to pay. However, you may be eligible for a fee waiver if you demonstrate financial need. Talk to your school counselor for more information.

**Sections of the Common Application.** There are four sections of the Common Application that you must complete when you log in to your account: *Dashboard*, *My Colleges*, *Common App*, and *College Search*. If you get confused while you are completing the application, use the *Help Center* links located on the right side of every screen on the Common Application Website.

The *Dashboard* provides an overview of all the colleges you are applying to, including application deadlines, your current progress, and supplemental material requirements (e.g., some colleges require a supplemental essay, while others do not).

*My Colleges* provides a list of the individual colleges you are applying to. In this section, you also complete the individual college supplements and assign teachers to write recommendations for you.

*Common App* is the main part of the application where you add all your basic information like your name, school, activities, classes, and your personal statement. **Everything you enter in the *Common App* section will be sent to all the colleges you apply to using the Common Application.**

To add a college to your application, click on *College Search*. The easiest way to search is to type the name of the college in the first box. Click *Search* and a list of colleges will appear. Check the box next to the college you want and then click *Add*. A box will pop up to confirm the college has been successfully added. Click on *Dashboard* in that pop up box to return to your college list.



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**Step 1: Gather your documents.** After you've created your account and before you sit down to complete the application form, make sure you have the following information in front of you:

1. Your full legal name.
2. Your Social Security number. (If you are applying for federal financial aid, you must include your Social Security number. Otherwise, it's optional.)
3. Your parents' full legal names, contact information, colleges (if applicable), college graduation year (if applicable), current job title (if applicable), and current employer (if applicable).
4. Your school counselor's contact information.
5. The name, title, and emails of the teachers who are writing your recommendations.
6. Your transcript, including senior year courses and your most updated exact SAT or ACT scores.
7. List of your high school activities.

**TIPS:**

- ✓ Make sure to thoroughly review the information above once it's entered into your application. One small mistake (like a wrong number in your Social Security number or address) can have big consequences.
- ✓ If you are still waiting on SAT or ACT scores, or planning to take either again in December, you do not have to enter them on your application. However, you must still have them sent to the colleges you are applying to. You can send score reports by signing into your SAT (College Board) and ACT accounts online.

**Step 2: Ask for recommendations.** Most colleges that use the Common Application require you to submit recommendations. Those recommendations are usually from the following individuals: 1) Your school counselor and; 2) At least one, but sometimes two, teachers from academic courses (i.e. math, science, English, history).

**Who is my counselor?** At most high schools, you have a counselor assigned to you. If you are at a small school, you may know your counselor well. If you are at a big school, it is possible you have never met your counselor. If you do not know your counselor, go to your high school college counseling office (or career counseling office, depending on your school) and someone there can connect you with your counselor.

**TIPS:**

- ✓ Teacher recommendations are positive letters that highlight your academic accomplishments and overall positive contributions to your school community. Make sure your recommenders can speak positively about both your academics and contributions. If you're not sure, ask them.
- ✓ Ask your teachers for recommendations as early as possible, but at least one month before your application deadline.
- ✓ Take the time to meet with your recommenders to talk with them about your college goals and the schools you want to apply to. They may have valuable insight that can help you in your application process.

**Step 3: Entering your activities.** Your activities may include school clubs, sports teams, and student government. In this section, you will also include activities you do outside of school like volunteer or paid jobs, internships, additional visual or performing arts and sports lessons, and participation in college access organizations. The following are tips for completing this section of the application:

**TIPS:**

- ✓ Enter your activities in order of most important to least important.
- ✓ You have a limited number of activities you can enter (it's usually around 12). If you have more activities than space available, consider combining similar activities into one entry. For example, if you play violin in the orchestra and in a quartet, combine these activities into one entry, "Musician, Violinist." In the activity description, include your participation in both the orchestra and quartet.
- ✓ Highlight activities you have participated in consistently over the course of high school.
- ✓ Highlight leadership positions in your activity descriptions.
- ✓ Your activity descriptions should say more than "I play violin in the orchestra and quartet." Provide specific details on your accomplishments and why you participate in your activities.

**Take the time to carefully complete this section and proofread your work. It may seem less significant than the personal statement, but it's not. Colleges want to know what you're passionate about, and they learn a lot about you from this section.**

**Step 4: The Personal Statement.** The personal statement, also known as the college essay, is a critical and exciting part of your Common Application. Writing the personal statement takes time: you will need to brainstorm, organize, write, and get feedback on your essays before producing your final version, which will be between 250-650 words. The Common Application always offers you several essay topics to select from. Examples of prompts are listed below:

- Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?
- Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?

**How to start your personal statement.** This is your chance to tell college admissions readers anything about who you are. What makes you different? What do you care about? What is your story? **The personal statement is a story, specifically a narrative piece about you. It is not an expository essay or an analysis most high school students are accustomed to writing.** To get started, grab a pen and paper or open a Word document and follow these simple steps:

1. Take two minutes to write down any topic ideas you've already considered writing about.
2. Now, take a few minutes to brainstorm a list of words and phrases that describe who you are. Take some time with this. What kind of daughter, son, sister, brother, etc. are you? How do you describe yourself as a student, or as a friend? What are your values?
3. Next, what are your passions? How do they define you?

4. Then, what have been the most difficult experiences you've had in the last couple years? How did you overcome the challenges?
5. Take a look at everything you wrote and circle the ideas that you believe are most compelling. Finally, take a look at the personal statement prompts and decide which prompt is best matched to your ideas.

### OTHER TIPS:

- ✓ Don't wait until the last minute to write your essay! Start early and give yourself at least a month, preferably more, to write several drafts of your essay.
- ✓ Outline your essay to ensure it is organized and flows well.
- ✓ Once you have a complete draft of your essay, consult others for their feedback. Input from family members (such as parents and older siblings) can be helpful. Teachers, school counselors, and mentors should also review your essay and provide a different perspective.
- ✓ Proofread, proofread, and proofread again! Every time you review and edit your essay, address any spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors you find.

**Step 5: College Supplements.** Many, but not all, colleges that use the Common Application require students to complete a Supplement application in addition to the main Common Application. School Supplements can include additional questions about you, your family, your classes, etc. And, sometimes, Supplements require you to write additional essays, so the admissions committee can learn more about you. Supplement essay topics are different for each college, but usually, they fall into one of these three categories:

- ✓ **Why Essay:** you write about why you want to attend a specific college. Use specific and meaningful reasons for why you like a college.
- ✓ **Critical Analysis:** you are given a prompt (usually a quote, question, or scenario) and you have to respond by analyzing the situation and sharing your perspective. Sometimes you have to develop a thoughtful solution.
- ✓ **Creative Writing:** you are given a prompt (usually a quote, question, or scenario) and are given the chance to respond using creative writing, narrative, and analytical writing techniques.

**How long are these supplement essays?** The length varies from essay to essay. Some are really short, like 50 words. Others can be as much as 1000 words. (That's longer than your Personal Statement!)

**Are supplement applications required? Are supplement applications due the same time as the main common application?** Yes, most schools that use the Common Application require supplements that are due at the same time as the main Common Application components.

**How do I know if a college I am applying to requires a supplement?** When you add colleges via the *College Search* section of your Common Application, the college will appear in the section called *My Colleges*. When you click on college names in *My Colleges*, a menu of options for that specific college appears on the right side of your screen. There, you will see a Supplement section if the college requires a Supplement.