



Common App 101: What to Know Before You Fill It Out

Everything you need to know to complete each section of the Common App correctly

Overview

The Common Application is a single college application platform used by over 1,000 colleges in the U.S. and abroad. Instead of filling out separate applications, you can complete one core form and send it to every school on your list.

This guide walks you through each section of the Common App, explains what colleges are looking for, and gives you practical tips to complete it accurately and confidently.

Common App Sections

- **Profile:** Basic info like your name, address, contact details, citizenship, and languages.
- **Family:** Information about your household, parents or guardians, and siblings. It's okay if you don't know every answer.
- **Education:** Details about your high school(s), senior-year courses, GPA, and any college classes you've taken.
- **Testing:** SAT, ACT, AP, IB, or other standardized scores. Only fill this out if you choose to report them.
- **Activities:** Up to 10 extracurriculars, jobs, or responsibilities from grades 9 through 12.
- **Writing:** Your main college essay, plus an optional section to explain anything important that doesn't fit elsewhere.
- **Courses and Grades:** Only for schools that ask for self-reported transcripts. You'll be notified if this applies to you.
- **My Colleges tab:** Each college you apply to may have extra questions, essays, or requirements. This is where you'll upload supplements, request recommendations, and submit your apps one by one.

Helpful Links

- Create your account: <https://apply.commonapp.org/createaccount>
- See what schools use the Common App: <https://www.commonapp.org/explore/>
- Additional resources & FAQs: <https://www.commonapp.org/apply/first-year-students>



Pause: Before continuing, create your Common App account. It will be helpful to follow along in the platform as you read about how to complete each section!



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Section 1: Profile

What is it? This section collects your basic personal information: name, address, contact details, citizenship, and language background. It's mostly straightforward but essential to get right.

Why it matters:

- Matches your application to transcripts, scores, and recommendations
- Helps determine eligibility for fee waivers
- Provides context that colleges use for reporting

What you'll be asked (+ tips for filling it out):

- **Name:** Use your legal name as it appears on your school records and standardized tests. Avoid nicknames or shortened versions.
- **Email:** Use a personal email account you check regularly. Do not use your school email in case it gets deactivated after graduation. Write down your password and save it somewhere safe.
- **Address:** Use your current permanent address. If your housing situation changes or is temporary, talk to your school counselor about using the school's address.
- **Demographics:** This section is optional. Colleges often only see aggregate data. Answer if you're comfortable, or skip it.
- **Citizenship:** U.S. citizens, permanent residents, DACA students, and undocumented students can all apply through the Common App. If you're unsure of your status, check with your counselor.
- **Languages:** List every language you speak, including English. Select the level of fluency honestly (basic, conversational, fluent).
- **Fee Waiver:** Select "Yes" if you meet any of these criteria:
 - Free or reduced lunch
 - Public assistance programs
 - Foster care or homelessness
 - TRIO or Upward Bound programs
 - Financial hardship that makes it difficult to pay fees (confirm with your counselor)



Tip: *Triple-check that your name matches* your school records and test scores.

Even small mismatches (like a missing middle name) can delay or misplace your documents.



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Section 2: Family

What is it? This section asks about your household, parents or guardians, and siblings. Colleges use it to understand your background and support system.

Why it matters:

- Gives schools insight into your home environment
- Helps identify first-generation students
- Some colleges use this info to offer extra support or resources
- May inform financial aid and fee waiver eligibility

What you'll be asked (+ tips for filling it out):

- **Household:** You'll be asked who you live with (parents, stepparents, other family, guardians, etc.). It's okay if your living situation is nontraditional or complicated. Be honest and use the "Other" option if needed (there's space to explain).
- **Parent/Guardian 1 and 2:**
 - They'll ask for:
 - Relationship to you
 - Name
 - Occupation (what they do for work)
 - Education level (highest degree they've earned)
 - Contact info and employer (optional)
 - You don't need to answer parent questions you don't know. It's fine to leave fields blank or choose "Unknown" if you can't ask.
 - Education level is especially important. It helps colleges understand if you're a first-generation college student, which some schools track for support and access programs.
 - First gen = neither of your parents has earned a 4-year college degree (in the U.S. or abroad)
- **Siblings:** List all siblings (full, half, or step). If you have more than five, you can add the rest in the "Additional Information" section later. Don't leave this blank! Schools use sibling info to better understand your family size and dynamic.

 **Tip:** If your situation doesn't fit neatly into the boxes (like if you don't live with either parent), that's okay. Choose the closest option, and use the explanation box when it appears.



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Section 3: Education

What is it? This section asks about your academic background: high school(s) attended, senior year courses, GPA, academic honors, and any college classes you've taken.

Why it matters:

- Shows what academic opportunities you've had and how you've used them
- Helps colleges understand your transcript, curriculum, and performance
- Supports context around GPA, school system, and course rigor

What you'll be asked (+ tips for filling it out):

- **Current or Most Recent High School:** Search for your school and select it. Use the school you're attending when you submit your application, even if you've transferred.
- **Other High Schools:** If you've attended more than one, list all. You'll also be asked why you left each. Keep it clear and brief (e.g. "Family moved").
- **Colleges & Universities (for dual enrollment):** If you've taken college classes, even online or during summer, list them here.
 - If you got both high school and college credit: select "Dual Enrollment."
 - If not: select "Credit awarded directly by college" (you'll need to send that transcript separately).
- **Grades (you'll need your transcript for this!):**
 - List GPA exactly as reported by your school. If your school gives both weighted and unweighted GPA, report the weighted version. GPA scale is usually 4.0 (check if unsure).
- **Current Year Courses:**
 - List all your senior-year classes. Use exact course names from your schedule or transcript.
 - Mark as "Full Year" unless the class switches halfway through.
 - If you don't know your full schedule yet, come back and fill this in later.
- **Honors:** List up to five awards or academic honors. Use short, clear titles (no need to explain them here). See the next page for more details on this section!
- **Community-Based Organizations (CBOs):** If you've worked with any outside college access programs (like College Possible, Boys & Girls Club, or QuestBridge), list them here.
- **Future Plans:** Share a possible career goal and degree level (e.g. "Doctor / MD" or "Entrepreneur / Bachelor's"). It can be aspirational – it doesn't lock you in.



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Bonus: Honors Section

What is it? This section lets you list up to five academic honors or awards you received during grades 9–12. These could be school-based, local, state, national, or international.

Why it matters:

- Highlights academic strengths and achievements
- Shows recognition of your effort, skill, or impact

What you'll be asked (+ tips for filling it out):

- **Honor Title:** Enter the full name of the award or honor you received. Be specific, and clarify if the name isn't widely recognized. Examples: "AP Scholar," "1st Place – State Science Fair," or "Student of the Month (English Dept)"
- **Grade Level(s):** Select all the grade levels when you received the honor. You can choose more than one if it was awarded in multiple years.
- **Level of Recognition:** Choose how widely the award was recognized:
 - School, Local, State/Regional, National, International
 - Only select "national" or "international" if the recognition truly applies at that scale
- Use this space to briefly explain what the honor means or why you received it.
 - Example: "Top 5% of class" or "Selected out of 300+ applicants for research program"
 - Avoid full sentences or repeating the title

What counts as an "honor"?

This section is for academic or achievement-based recognition. You can include:

- Academic awards: Honor Roll, Dean's List, AP Scholar, National Merit
- Competition results: Science fairs, math contests, writing/art competitions, debate tournaments
- Department or school honors: English Student of the Year, Senior Leadership Award
- Community recognition: Awards from nonprofits, local government, or service orgs
- Selective programs: Being chosen for a competitive summer program, fellowship, or showcase

Rule of Thumb

- If you had to earn it, apply for it, or were selected out of a group, it probably counts.
- Don't include general club membership or participation certificates.



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Section 4: Testing

What is it? This section allows you to self-report standardized test scores if you choose. These may include the SAT, ACT, AP, IB, TOEFL, or others.

Why it matters:

- Test scores (if submitted) support your academic profile and can strengthen your app
- Some schools require test scores to consider your application

What you'll be asked (+ tips for filling it out):

- **Do you wish to self-report standardized test scores?** Select "Yes" if you want to report any scores in this section. If you select "No," skip the rest of this section entirely.
 -  **Important:** Scores reported in this section will be sent to ALL colleges on your list. If you want to send scores to some schools but not others, you need to read their score reporting instructions in the "My Colleges" tab. Some schools will automatically consider any test scores added to your Testing section, so it could make sense to leave blank.
 -  **Rule of thumb:** If your score is at or above the school's middle 50 percent range, it is usually smart to send it. If it is well below the 25th percentile and the school is test-optional, it may be better to leave it out.
- **Tests Taken:** Check all tests you have taken or plan to take (only if you wish to report them). This controls which test-specific fields will appear next.
- **SAT and ACT:** Enter your test date(s), section scores, and composite (ACT only). Only report scores you want considered. Leave this blank if you're not submitting scores.
 -  **Superscores:** The testing section of the Common App only asks that you self report your highest scores for each section of the SAT/ACT, but some colleges require all scores to be reported (either through their own application portal or via College Board or ACT).
- **AP, IB, and SAT Subject Tests:** You may report scores for these tests, but only include the ones you want colleges to see. SAT Subject Tests are no longer offered but can still be reported if previously taken.
- **English Language Proficiency Tests:** If required, enter test name (such as TOEFL, IELTS, Duolingo, or PTE), score, and date. This is typically for non-native English speakers or international applicants.

 **Tip:** Many colleges accept self-reported scores when you apply, but some still require official score reports as part of your app. Be sure to check each school's policy on their website!



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Section 5: Activities

What is it? This section allows you to list up to 10 activities from grades 9 through 12. These can include school clubs, sports, jobs, volunteer work, family responsibilities, personal projects, & more.

Why it matters:

- Helps colleges see how you use your time outside the classroom
- Highlights leadership, initiative, and responsibility
- Adds context to your academic record and interests

What you'll be asked (+ tips for filling it out):

- **Activity Type:** Choose the category that best fits. It does not have to be perfect, just select the closest match.
- **Position/Leadership Description:** Start with strong action words like led, created, managed, tutored, or organized, be specific about what you actually did, and show impact through numbers whenever possible.

 **Tip:** Check out our *Mastering the Common App Activities Section* guide for tips on writing activities descriptions that stand out and impress admissions officers!

- **Organization Name:** This might be your school, a community group, workplace, family, or something you created yourself. Use the org name to embed the mission and save space in your description, e.g. Edu4ALL | Affordable STEM tutoring nonprofit
- **Participation Details:** grades participated (check all that apply: 9–12) & when you participated (school year, summer, or both)
- **Hours per Week / Weeks per Year:** Estimate realistically (don't overestimate). Make sure yearly totals don't exceed 3,000–3,500 hours.
- **What you accomplished / Recognitions:** Use your 150 characters to show impact. Be concise and specific. Cut filler like "helped with" and focus on outcomes.
- **Future Participation:** Select "Yes" if you plan to continue this activity in college.

 **Tip:** You get 10 slots on the activities section and we **highly** recommend using them all. If you have more than 10, you can combine smaller ECs into one activity (use a pipe | instead of commas to separate them), e.g., Tutoring (1) | Library Volunteer (2).



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Section 6: Writing

Part 1: Personal Essay

What is it: This is where you submit your main college essay (also called your personal statement). It's required by most schools and gets sent to every college on your list.

Why it matters: It's your chance to show admissions officers who you are beyond your grades and activities. Many colleges weigh the essay heavily in their admission decisions.

What you'll be asked:

- Choose one of 7 essay prompts
- Paste or upload your final essay (no more than 650 words)

 Visit the resource library for helpful guides on brainstorming, writing, and editing your essay!

Part 2: Additional Information (Optional)

What is it: This is an optional 650-word text box located at the end of the Writing section. It's for important context that doesn't fit anywhere else in your application.

Why it matters: Admissions officers use this to understand anything unusual, nuanced, or significant in your academic experience. It's not for bonus essays, it's for factual clarification or major life circumstances.

What you'll be asked:

- Select "Yes" to open the text box (650-word max)
- Add information that helps colleges understand your academic or personal circumstances
 - Examples: illness, family responsibilities, school closures, unusual grading policies, etc.

 **Tip:** Skip this section if you don't have anything significant to explain. If you're not sure, use the Additional Info guide in the resource library to determine if you should leave it blank!

Wait...what about supplemental essays?

Some colleges will ask you to write school-specific essays (often called "supplementals") in addition to your main essay. These are *not* part of this Writing section. To find them:

- Go to the My Colleges tab
- Click on a school
- Look for a section called "Questions" then find the "Writing" section within it



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Section 7: Courses & Grades

What is it? This section asks you to manually enter all your high school courses and grades as they appear on your transcript. **Only a few colleges require this**, and it will only appear if one or more of your selected schools ask for it.

Why it matters: For schools that require it, this section helps them evaluate your academic performance more precisely (especially if they don't receive an official transcript right away).

What you'll be asked (+ tips for filling it out):

- **School Information:** Confirm the high school you're reporting grades for. You'll only report courses from schools where you earned credit (not summer programs or online classes taken for fun).
- **Grading Scale:** Choose your school's grading system (e.g. A–F, 100–point, 4.0 scale). If you're not sure, check your transcript or ask your counselor.
- **Course Entry:** For each year of high school, you'll enter:
 - Grade level (9–12)
 - Course title exactly as it appears on your transcript
 - Subject area (Math, English, Science, etc.)
 - Final grade (what you earned, not your average)
 -  Use the format shown on your transcript (e.g. A, 93, 4.0)
 -  Include all courses that appear on your official transcript
 -  Don't enter classes from schools that don't grant credit
- **Course Level (optional):** Some schools let you indicate the rigor of the course (e.g. Honors, AP, IB). Only use this if you're sure of how your school labels courses.

Tips & tricks

- Double-check everything you enter here matches your official transcript exactly (no abbreviations, grade rounding, or name changes).
- This section won't appear unless a school on your list requires it. You'll see a notification in your dashboard if you need to complete it.
- If your school uses pass/fail, narrative grading, or has unusual grading policies, explain it in the Additional Information section.
- You will still need to send your *official transcript* to all schools you apply to via Common App.



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Bonus: My Colleges Tab

What is it: Once you complete the main Common App sections, each college you apply to may ask for additional requirements under the My Colleges tab.

Why it matters: Each school is different. This is where you'll upload school-specific materials, request recommendations, and submit your applications one by one.

Supplemental Essays

- Some colleges ask for extra essays, found under Writing Supplement or Questions > Writing.
- ☒ Topics vary: "Why this college?", "why this major", activity highlights, or identity

School Questions

- Quick questions about your major, housing plans, financial aid, or whether you've visited.
- ☒ Found under the Questions section for each college

Recommendations & Transcripts

Under Recommenders and FERPA, you'll:

- Waive FERPA rights
- Invite recommenders
- Track submissions

☒ Your counselor will upload your official transcript, but make sure to check in with them so it gets submitted on time (especially for schools where you are applying early)

Review & Submission

Each college must be reviewed and submitted separately.

- Check for errors
- Pay the fee (if required)
- Hit submit

⚠ Warning: Completing the Common App doesn't automatically send it to all of your schools. You must submit to each school individually, making sure to answer any additional questions.