



Mastering the Common App Activities Section

A simple system to write activity entries that stand out and impress admissions officers

Overview

The Activities section on the Common App gives colleges a look at how you spend your time beyond the classroom. It's where you can highlight effort, interests, and impact that your GPA, transcript, and test scores can't show. In the pages ahead, you'll learn how to:

- ✓ Identify what counts as an activity
- ✓ Write clear, concise descriptions that show real impact
- ✓ Use strong action verbs and structure for maximum clarity
- ✓ Avoid common mistakes that waste your character count

What Counts as an Activity?

Any consistent commitment outside of class, formal or informal, can qualify. Don't limit yourself to clubs, sports or awards. Any of the following (and more) can make great additions to your app:

Category	Examples
Organized Activities	Theater, debate, varsity sports, model UN, DECA, yearbook
Work & Internships	Babysitting, retail job, tutoring, family business, office internship
Independent Projects	YouTube channel, blog, app development, Etsy store, non-profit
Academic Enrichment	Online courses, dual enrollment, summer programs, research
Significant Family Duties	Childcare, elder care, cooking meals, household management
Volunteering	Food bank, homeless shelter, nursing home, animal shelter
Hobbies	Creative writing, fashion design, gaming, chess, coding for fun



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How the Activities Section Is Set Up

The Common App gives you space to list up to 10 activities and we **strongly** recommend using all 10. As you learned on the previous page, these don't need to be official or award-winning. Hobbies, personal projects, family duties, and consistent part-time work all count.

Each activity has 3 key fields:

Field	Character Limit	What It's For
Position/Title	50	States your role or job title in the activity
Organization/Activity Name	100	Identifies the group, employer, or project
Activity Description	150	Summarizes what you did & your impact



Tip: Use specific, active titles that reflect what you actually did. "Team Captain" or "Clothing Drive Coordinator" is clearer and more informative than just "Player" or "Volunteer."

How to Write a Strong Activity Description

The 150-character description is where you show not just what you did, but why it mattered. Instead of just listing tasks, focus on action, impact, and results.

Use this simple formula to make your descriptions stand out:

[Strong Verb] + [What You Did] + [Who/What It Helped] + [Impact or Scale]

Examples:

- Tutored 10 students weekly in algebra; improved scores by 15% over semester
- Organized 3-day fundraiser; raised \$4.2K for local animal shelter
- Built app for club signups; 1,000+ students used it in first month

Let's break this formula down even more...



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Part 1: Start with a Strong Verb

Avoid vague verbs like “helped,” “worked,” or “participated.” Use specific, action-driven language that shows ownership and initiative.

Category	Examples
Leadership	led, managed, coordinated, directed
Initiative/Creation	built, launched, created, designed
Teaching/Support	tutored, coached, mentored, taught
Improvement	optimized, streamlined, developed, expanded
Research	analyzed, compiled, tested, surveyed
Communication/Outreach	advocated, promoted, presented, facilitated

 **Tip:** Don’t reuse the same verb in every entry. Mix it up to reflect your varied roles/skills!

Part 2: Say What You Actually Did

After you open with a strong verb, the next step is to clearly explain what you did. You may be thinking, *uh duhhh*, but a lot of students get this wrong by making these common mistakes:

Mistake	Example	What to Say Instead
Only listing your title	<i>“Treasurer for Spanish Club”</i>	<i>“Managed club budget; organized 2 fundraisers”</i>
Describing the org, not your role	<i>“Habitat for Humanity builds homes for families in need”</i>	<i>“Assisted with roofing and painting; led crew on build day”</i>
Being too broad or generic	<i>“Was on the crew for theater productions”</i>	<i>“Designed lighting for shows; operated tech during live performance”</i>



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Part 3: Include Who or What it Helped (The Impact)

Once you've explained what you did, give it meaning by showing who benefited from your effort. This adds context and reminds the reader that you weren't just busy, you were useful. The key is to be **SPECIFIC**:

Instead of...	Say...
"Tutored students in math"	"Tutored middle school students struggling with algebra"
"Volunteered at camp"	"Created STEM games for kids ages 6-9 "
"Wrote blog posts"	"Published weekly articles to help teens manage stress"

Part 4: Show Impact or Scale

To take your entry from good to great, add numbers or measurable results when possible. This makes your contribution feel real, concrete, and credible. You can add:

Hours per week or length of commitment, number of people served, funds raised, growth or improvement (e.g. # of hours saved)

Improve Upon This...	By Adding Numbers...
"Tutored middle school students struggling with algebra"	Tutored 5 middle schoolers weekly in algebra; all improved GPA 15+%
"Created STEM games for kids ages 6-9"	Created 5 STEM games for campers (ages 6-9); led 15 sessions total for 250 campers
"Published weekly articles to help teens manage stress"	Published 25 articles on teen mental health; blog reached 10K views in 6 months



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Activities Section Makeovers

Let's put everything we've learned into action by transforming weak activities into 🔥 ones:

Field	🚫 Weak	🔥 Strong
Position/Title	Member	Donation Drive Coordinator
Organization/Activity Name	Key Club	Key Club (Local Chapter)
Activity Description	<i>"Helped with food drive events"</i>	<i>"Led 3 donation drives; collected 1,200+ items for community shelter"</i>

Field	🚫 Weak	🔥 Strong
Position/Title	Blogger	Founder & Head Writer
Organization/Activity Name	Personal Blog	"Teen Mind" Mental Health Blog
Activity Description	<i>"Wrote blog posts in my free time"</i>	<i>"Published 25 articles on teen mental health; reached 10K views in 6 months"</i>

Field	🚫 Weak	🔥 Strong
Position/Title	Babysitter	After-School Childcare Provider
Organization/Activity Name	Babysitting	Local Families (3 households)
Activity Description	<i>"Babysat after school"</i>	<i>"Cared for 3 kids (ages 4-8) 5 days a week; managed meals and activities"</i>

Now let's wrap it all up...



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✓ Final Recap: Make Every Word Count

The Activities Section is your chance to show how you spend your time, what you care about, and the impact you make. Done right, it tells colleges more about you than any test score can. As you complete your activity entries, keep the following in mind:

- **Start with a strong, specific verb.** Words like “led,” “organized,” “tutored,” or “designed” show initiative and ownership. Avoid vague verbs like “helped” or “worked.”
- **Focus on what you actually did.** Go beyond titles and generalities. Say exactly what you contributed.
- **Include numbers when you can.** Details like how many people you reached, how often you participated, or how much you raised give your entry credibility and weight.
- **Make your values clear.** Whether it’s leadership, curiosity, or service, your activity list should reflect what matters most to you.
- **Be ruthless with space.** Skip full sentences. Cut filler words. Every character counts.
- **Use the organization name field wisely.** If the activity doesn’t have a formal title, use that space to quickly explain what it was.
- **Use all 10 activity slots if you can.** Each one is a chance to show another side of you and even informal activities like hobbies or family responsibilities count if you spent a lot of time doing it!

Final Activities Section Checklist

Before hitting submit, review each activity one by one and ask yourself...

- ✓ Does it start with a strong, specific verb?
- ✓ Do you avoid repeating the same verbs in other entries?
- ✓ Does it explain what you actually did?
- ✓ Does it show who or what benefited?
- ✓ Is there a result, outcome, or number if relevant?
- ✓ Is every word absolutely necessary, no filler?
- ✓ Does it align with the story you're telling overall?
- ✓ Is it unique to you (i.e. is it unlikely someone wrote the exact same thing)?

If you said yes to a majority of these questions, your activity is solid!

Want more help? Head to our resource library for more college application guides!