

A Guide to the new Common Application 2013-2014 (“CA4”)



STORY TO  COLLEGE

This free e-book is an excerpt from
Write Out Loud: 12 Tools for Telling Your Story and Getting Into a Great College.
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A Story To College e-book
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INTRODUCTION TO THE COMMON APPLICATION

The Common Application is an online college application shared by more than 500 colleges and universities in the United States and abroad. Developed over 35 years, the Common App is free and can be accessed online at www.commonapp.org. It serves as the foundation of the college application process for many colleges and universities.

The Common Application has recently been revised, and the new version will be released online on August 1, 2013. The new design is intuitive and user-friendly, and there is a lot of built-in support for applicants. Except for the essays—which have been changed fundamentally—the content of the Common App will be the same as before. You can download a copy of the old Common App and begin preparing the information you need at www.commonapp.org/commonapp/downloadforms.aspx

Most US colleges and universities—even ones that do not use the Common App—use a format that is similar to the Common App, so this guide will help you to navigate other online applications as well.

WHAT DO I NEED TO PREPARE?

The Common App includes these sections:

Profile

- Contact Information
- Demographics
- Geography

Family

- Parent and/or Guardian
- Siblings

Education

- Current School
- School History
- Academic Information (GPA, class rank, schedule, honors + awards)

Testing

- College Entrance (SAT/ACT)
- English for Non-Native Speakers
- Academic Subject Tests (SAT II, AP, IB, etc)
- Other (optional)

Activities

- Principal Activities/Work
- Years of Participation
- Hours per week and Weeks per Year
- Position/Leadership Held (50 characters)
- Brief Description (150 characters)

Personal Essay

Explanations

- Brief Description (150 characters)
- Required Responses (School Discipline, Criminal History, Educational Interruption)

Additional Information

School Page

This was formerly called the college “supplement.” The school page will vary from school to school and may include:

- Entry term
- Degree Status
- Housing Preference
- Test-optional (if applicable)
- Scholarship (if applicable)
- Financial Aid Preference
- Academic Program
- Previous Contact with Institution (interview, visit)
- Family Members who attended Institution
- Evaluations (names of recommenders)
- Residence
- Signature
- Writing Supplement (college specific essays and short answers)

The Common App also has sections for your school to complete, including:

- Counselor Recommendation
- Teacher Recommendations
- Mid-Year Report (sent to colleges in January)
- Transcripts

TIPS FOR COMPLETING THE COMMON APPLICATION

Here are tips for completing the new Common App, including the supplemental essays on the Schools Page, if you are applying to colleges that require them.

Get started early

The Common Application is released on August 1 each year, but you can get a jumpstart by printing out the application in advance and gathering all of the family and financial information. Get organized by making a spreadsheet of all the information you need to give to or gather from others to complete the Common Application.

Request teachers' recommendations as soon as possible

Depending on which colleges you are applying to, you will need one or two teachers' recommendations. It's best to request recommendations from teachers who know your work well, ideally teachers whose courses you took in eleventh or twelfth grade.

- *Schedule a conversation.* In the spring of junior year or early fall of senior year talk to your teachers and ask them if they are able to write you positive letters of recommendation. If any teacher says no, respect that, learn from it, and find someone else.
- *Come prepared.* It's fine to give them a short list of talking points—for instance, the time they gave you three extra books to read that changed how you researched your final paper for the course. You should never write the letter for them, or ask them to write it a certain way.
- *Have a backup plan.* If a teacher tells you that he or she cannot write you a positive recommendation or does not know you very well, thank the teacher for being honest and ask a different teacher for a recommendation.
- *Should I send another letter?* If there is someone outside your school who knows your work particularly well—for example, a college professor whose course you took or who advised your advanced research, or someone you worked with closely in a job or internship—you might consider submitting a third letter of recommendation. But this is entirely optional and not required, and it is better *not* to submit a letter if the person does not know you well.

Request counselor's recommendation and school transcript(s) early.

You need to request an official transcript from each high school or college you have attended. It can take a week or more for schools to process your transcript requests, so allow plenty of time. A week before your applications are due, it's a good idea check with each school to make sure they have sent out your transcripts. If there are any anomalies in your record, you should speak frankly to your counselor about how these will be addressed. You should also speak to these issues directly—not in your main essay, but on a separate page called Additional Information.

COMMON APP FAQs BY SECTION

Future Plans

What if I don't know what my future academic interests are?

One of the options is "Undecided"; this is the one you may want to select on this section.

Will my academic interests affect my admission to the university or college?

Yes and no. Colleges and universities want students who will study in their key departments, so they may take special interest in your application based on what you choose. However, what you put here will not determine your admission decision; it is just one of many factors colleges consider. So be honest about what you think you want to study in college, knowing that more than 60 percent of students change their majors at least once in their first two years of college! And don't forget that some colleges offer independent majors that allow students to build their own program of study.

But if I choose "Undecided" for my academic interests, does that make me look bad or unprepared?

Not at all! Most students change their minds about their majors once they take actual college classes in different departments; admissions counselors know this. At the same time, if your high school academic background, extracurricular activities, and writing clearly show an inclination toward a certain subject, feel free to write that down and describe how that course of study has been important to you.

What if I want to change from one program to another—say from Engineering to Liberal Arts—once I'm in college?

Check on each college's website to determine the process and requirements for transferring from one program to another, after you have been admitted.

Applicant Information

What if I don't have a US Social Security Number?

Include a copy of your green card or proof of refugee status with your Common App. If you have a green card, the Common App will prompt you to upload a copy of it with Additional Information (this is the only document you can upload to the Common App). You must have a Social Security Number, and it must be included on your application, if you want to be considered for federal financial aid via the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

What if I have two permanent addresses, one with each parent?

Write down the address of the home at which you spend the most time. Later, under "Family," write down your other address as well.

What if I do not use my home phone number?

Write down your preferred telephone number (i.e., check the circle that says "cell"), and then provide that number.

Demographics

Do I have to write down my religion and ethnic background?

No. This part of the Demographics section is optional. However, you do need to write down your citizenship status, birthplace, and years lived in the United States.

Why do colleges ask for this information?

Colleges are interested in the diversity of applicants and enrolled students. This information will not be used in a discriminatory manner in the admission process.

What if I am more than one of the ethnic options provided on the Common App?

You are allowed to check more than one.

Family

What if I don't know the date of my parents' divorce?

Try to find this information from one of your parents. Only the month and year are required.

My parents are divorced and one of my parents does not provide child support, so he/she is basically out of contact. Do I still have to write down his/her information?

The Parent section is especially important when colleges are considering financial aid. You should try to provide your parent's information, but talk to your guidance counselor—who is your advocate in the admission process—so he or she can include details about your family situation in their counselor's recommendation. Otherwise, colleges have no way of knowing about your specific circumstances.

What if my parent(s) did not attend college?

Either leave the question blank, or choose the option that is closest to "not applicable."

If I have step- or half-brothers and sisters, do I include their information in the "Siblings" section as well?

Yes. This section may be especially important if another sibling is attending college or university at the same time, as this may affect your eligibility for financial aid. You may indicate that he or she is a step- or half-brother or sister where it says "Relationship."

Education

I'm in high school, why do they ask me for colleges and universities I've attended?

Some students have had the opportunity to attend enrichment programs at universities or have decided to take college level courses during high school. This section is for students who have attended either of these types of courses on a college campus.

Why do colleges ask for this information?

Colleges are interested in your experience of college-level coursework as it reflects on your ability to succeed in college. Remember to request a copy of your transcript for these courses, if they are not included on your high school transcript.

Academics

Note that if you drop or change any of the senior year courses you list in this section, your guidance counselor needs to tell colleges that you have changed your course of study and must explain the reasons why.

My school does not have a class rank. What do I do?

Admissions counselors understand that some schools do not calculate class rank. Indicate the class size, but choose N/A for class rank. Colleges receive a school profile of your high school from your guidance counselor, so they will know that your school does not rank students.

I sent my SAT scores via the College Board. Do I have to indicate my scores here too?

Yes

It asks for AP/IB scores. Do I need to submit these separately or just list them here?

You do *not* need to submit separate AP/IB scores. Just list them in the Academics section.

I have taken different levels of classes during high school. Should I indicate this on the Common App?

Yes. If you are taking AP or IB courses, indicate those first under "Current Courses," followed by accelerated/honors courses, other courses, and so on. Admission counselors will receive a copy of your transcript, but they also thoroughly read the Common Application and will want to see the level of academic rigor in your course schedule.

I do not have any honors from high school. Do I leave this section blank?

Yes. But remember this section includes honors at the school, state/regional, national, and international levels. If you have received something like a School Spirit Award or a Citizenship Award from your school, these are honors you may include. On the right side where the circles are located, check off "S" to indicate that it is a "School Level Award."

Disciplinary History

I have been put on probation/suspension/removal/dismissal/expulsion from my high school before. I clicked "yes," and then the Common App prompted me to a blank page to write about the experience. Do I have to do that?

Yes. Some colleges will not consider an application complete if the student does not explain what the situation was or what he or she learned from the experience. If you say nothing it may seem that you are not taking responsibility for your disciplinary violations. Make sure you complete this section, as admissions counselors will know that you didn't fill it out (i.e., they know that the Common App prompts you directly to a page to write about your disciplinary history if you mark "yes"). Talk to your guidance counselor about how to complete this statement.

Activities (includes Extracurricular Activities and Work Experience)

Does the order of my activities or work experience matter?

The directions say to write your activities in the order of importance to you. Admissions counselors will assume that the activity you write first is the one that matters most to you.

What am I supposed to write on the top and bottom lines?

On the top line, in 50 characters, provide the position/name of employer or company/honors (e.g., varsity basketball co-captain; busboy at La Strada Pizzeria; Bronze medalist for Latin Competition; part-time secretary at Horizons Inc.). On the bottom, in 150 characters, describe what you did (e.g., led team to win the State Championships in 2012; set tables, managed cleanliness of back room and maintained restaurant inventory; participated in the National Latin Competition for Intermediate level students; filed papers, managed company calendar, and organized events).

What if I don't remember how many hours or weeks I spent doing each activity?

Try your best to make an accurate estimate. You want to show colleges how committed you were to the activities in which you participated during high school.

I have no work experience because I am always home taking care of my siblings. Do I just leave this section blank?

No! That is an extracurricular activity! Taking care of your siblings could be considered a part-time job, especially if you spend a lot of hours doing it. Admissions counselors understand that students have a variety of responsibilities outside of school that may prevent them from fully engaging in other types of extracurricular activities. Write down how many hours per week you spend taking care of your siblings, and make sure you indicate during which grades you did this, as well as when during the year it happened (i.e., school year and/or summer break).

Signature and Payment

You also need to sign your Common Application electronically and state that all of the work you are submitting is your own and true. After you have completed the Writing section, as well as the School Page for each college, you can pay by credit card to submit the application online to that college. If applying to college presents a financial hardship to you or your family, you can apply through your guidance counselor for a waiver on the cost of using the Common Application. You only have to apply for this waiver once; it will be used for all your applications.

WRITING (AKA THE “PERSONAL ESSAY”)

The 2013-2014 Common Application (CA4) has five essay choices:

- Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
- 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?
- Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there and why is it meaningful to you?
- Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

The instructions say, "The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your own 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.)"

10 STEPS TO AWESOME APPLICATION ESSAYS

1. Refresh: Clear your mind of doubts and distractions.

Studies show that your best writing happens when your mind is free from tension, worry, and other distractions. So before you start writing take a few minutes to create a space that is free from other work and any doubts you may have about the admissions process. There are many ways to refresh: you can exercise or take a short walk outside; write about what's on your mind and throw it away; or just take a few breaths and let yourself relax before you start to work on your essays.

2. Build a Bridge: Find great topics from your own experience.

In college application essays you show colleges what you will do in the future based on what you have already done. So take a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle; on the left side of the page write "My Life Story," and on the right write "Where I Am Going." Start with the "Where I Am Going" side and write at least 10 things that you want to do in college, work, and the rest of your life. Then, on the "My Life Story" side, list at least 10 things that you want colleges to know about you, especially the experiences that have shaped you into who you are today and who you want to be in the future. Explore the connections between what you have already done and where you want to go in the future. Are there any experiences that naturally connect your past to your future?

3. Transform Scripts to Stories: Tell the stories only you can tell.

Take another look at the 20 things you wrote in step 2. Are any of them very general things that lots of people can say—clichés like "I'm ambitious" or "I want to be an engineer?" At Story To College we call that general type of writing "scripts." There's nothing wrong with scripts; that's how most people talk most of the time. But scripts don't help to distinguish you from anyone else. Wherever you have scripts, you want to replace them with specific stories that only you can tell. You accomplish this by expanding individual moments from your experience to find actions, dialogue, and details. Let's say your story involves a lesson you learned when your father became upset with you. Lots of people's fathers get upset, but they do it in different ways. Did he stand in the window looking down at you and, without words, motion for you to come inside (action)? Did he quietly say, "Get home" (dialogue)? Did he walk behind you the whole way home as you stared down at the dusty concrete sidewalks (detail)? For each script you identify from step 2, try to find at least two or three specific stories.

4. Choose a Moment: Avoid the two most common mistakes.

Mistake #1 is trying to pack too much into your application essay. Remember, the goal of a college application essay is to show who you are as a human being, beyond your grades and test scores. Your scores, accomplishments, and awards all have other places on the application; so use the essays to reveal something new about you. Pick one of the stories from step 3, and explore it in more detail. Let's say your story is about the child your family adopted when you were 12. There are many parts to that story: your parents told you they were going to adopt a child; you went to meet the child in Russia; she was just a year older than you and shared your bedroom. Include as many details as you can remember; take as much space as you need. Then pick *one* of those moments where you risked something, learned something, changed, or grew in some way.

Mistake #2 is focusing on thoughts rather than actions. You will be tempted to start off your story with something like "I realized . . ." or "I thought . . ." or "I felt. . . ." You connect with the reader more powerfully by allowing the reader to draw conclusions about you. Neuroscience research shows that when people listen to a story there are three immediate responses: their brains trigger memories of similar stories; they feel empathy; and they have a desire to take action. By telling the reader what to think, it prevents these responses. In the next step you will tell your story out loud. Stick to the actions, dialogue, and details to show your reader what you realized, thought, or felt.

5. Tell It Out Loud: Speak so admissions will listen.

One of the main things admissions officers are looking for is an authentic voice. Tell your story out loud to a small group of friends and record your own storytelling. By recording your story you can capture the unique qualities of your spoken voice as well as the specific details that you remember when talking. After you are finished telling the story, let your friends ask you questions and record those too.

6. Write it Out: Find the gold in your spoken word.

Listen to your recording from step 5 and transcribe your story word for word. The goal is to use your spoken voice to strengthen your writing and also to learn more about how you sound when you speak. So be sure to include all of the "ums" and "likes." Then, print out a hard copy of your story and highlight in green the places where your story is strongest. Highlight in orange places where your spoken voice is strongest (they may overlap). And highlight in yellow places where the story includes language that is vague, general, or could be said by lots of other people.

7. Heighten the Three D's: Use details, description, and dialogue.

Anywhere you highlighted in yellow in step 6, replace general statements with specific sensory details (things experienced through sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch), physical description (orient the reader in time and space), and dialogue (the actual words people say). For instance replace "It was a really nice day" with "It was the first day of spring. Orange tulips had just started blooming in our front yard. My mom said, 'It's perfect weather for your lacrosse game.'"

8. Map It: Structure your essay with a strong story arc.

Does your essay have a clear beginning, middle, and end? We call them *Magnet*, *Pivot*, and *Glow*. What do you want your reader to learn about you from this story? What action will leave your reader with that idea? That is the Glow, and the end of the story. What actions in the middle of the story resulted in that end? That's your Pivot. And where did the action start? That's your Magnet that draws your reader in. Be very specific; create a three-sentence map of the key elements of your story and then go back into each section and choose the details, dialogue, and description that move the story forward.

9. Magnet and Glow: Create memorable beginnings and endings.

The beginning of your essay should draw the reader in like a magnet, and the last sentence should leave them with the glow of wanting to know more about you. You can heighten your Magnet by putting your reader in the action, prompting your reader to ask, "What's next," or setting the scene. And you can strengthen your Glow by keeping your reader in the action, leaving more to be asked, or closing the scene.

10. Write Out Loud: Revise to emphasize your unique voice.

Here's an eight-point checklist to guide your essay revision. Pick 1-2 things to focus each round of revision:

1. Does the essay take the reader to a specific place and moment in time?
2. Does the essay reveal something important about you?
3. Does the first sentence draw the reader in?
4. Does the last sentence leave the reader wanting to know more about you?
5. Does the essay include actions that happen in the world?
6. Are general phrases replaced with specific details, dialogue, and description?
7. Is the voice welcoming to everyone, whether or not they agree with you?
8. Does the essay show something specific about who you will be in a college community?

Want to learn from Carol herself? Head to www.udemy.com/college-essay for videos!

WRITING FAQS

The essay directions say I can write between 250 and 650 words. That means I can write just 250 words, right?

Sure, you can. But the Personal Essay is your chance to speak to admissions counselors in your own voice. The rest of your application says what you did, how long you did it, and what you achieved. After grades and SATs, the essays are the most important part of your application. Use the essays to paint a fuller picture of yourself and show colleges your personality! Take advantage of the essays to reveal your unique character and point of view.

How personal should the Personal Essay be?

Here's a way to decide: if you were meeting this person for the first time, is this a story you would tell them? How would you tell the story if your goal is continue the conversation? In our always-connected world, a lot of very raw writing circulates in cyberspace without much pause for reflection. It's important to be honest and genuine in your essays, to reveal what matters to you, and even to show times when you have made mistakes. Whenever possible shape your essays to show the reader how you have grown and changed as well as what you have learned and done as a result of these experiences.

Shouldn't I write about awards or accomplishments?

Your academic awards and extracurricular accomplishments will show up in other parts of your application. Use each essay to add more information and to reveal who you are as a person.

How do you fit everything important in 650 words?

You can't! In 250 to 650 words you can only write about one thing. It is much more powerful to tell one important story than to try to pack your whole life into 650 words.

How important is it that my essay be polished?

Admissions officers look for authenticity, not slickly polished essays. It's much better to write in a voice that is your own than to smooth over your essay into something that anyone can write. While you don't want to edit out your unique voice, you do want to proofread for spelling and grammar and take time to make sure the essays represent your best work.

Hasn't anything I might write about already been written by thousands of other students?

Many students participate in community service. Many students travel. And many students play sports. But you are the only person who has had your experiences. Often the best essays come from common everyday experiences that reveal your character and humanity. Take those general experiences and focus on moments that are really your own.

What do college admissions officers say I should write about?

There are no pre-set "good topics." Start with your own experiences, and use those experiences to show who you will be in college and in life.

What should I include in the Additional Information Section?

The instructions prompt you to write about any relevant circumstances or qualifications that are not reflected in the rest of the application. The new section will not accept any attachments, other than a copy of your green card or other information about your citizenship.

- You can discuss a significant outside activity (such as service or leadership at the state or national level) that is not fully described elsewhere.
- This is also the place to address—directly and matter-of-factly—any circumstances that may have affected your academic performance.
- You can use the additional information section to speak frankly about any unusual circumstances in your school record or personal life. No drama, no apologies; a straightforward tone is best. For example, *“The spring of my sophomore year was a really rough time for me and my family. My father lost his job, and my little sister was diagnosed with leukemia. As you can see on my transcript, my grades suffered that term. Over time, I’ve learned how to manage schoolwork, activities, and family responsibilities much better, and I feel really well prepared to balance all the different parts of college life.”*
- You do not need to include your resume if all of the information is included elsewhere.

COLLEGE PAGES

These are also called “College Supplements” and/or “Supplemental Questions.”

Many colleges have additional essay questions included in the new College Page of the Common Application. And many include important additional information about their supplements on their websites.

These supplements are really important! This is the place where you can connect with each college by researching their programs and talking specifically about how you will engage as a student and community member. Successful supplements take time and research. Plan ahead so you have time to write specific essays for each college to which you are applying.

Answer the questions honestly and authentically. Don’t over think them.

If a college asks for 5 words that describe you, describe who you really are (not what you think they are “looking for”).

Use each essay to reveal a different aspect of your character and experience. Don't reuse your Personal Essay for your supplement essays (e.g., don't write multiple essays about the same service trip to Brazil).

Make each supplement a conversation with that specific college. Research the colleges to which you are applying and connect with each one honestly. Reveal the depth of your character, your intellectual curiosity, the impact you had on your local community, and the impact the community has had on you. Imagine you are a student at that college, and talk about how you will take advantage of its programs and make a difference in its community.

Though there are many different questions, you can answer almost any question by describing a specific moment when you learned or changed or made a difference. In our courses and in **Write Out Loud** we teach you the tools to answer any college supplement question honestly and authentically with stories from your own experience.

Want to know more? To learn about how Story To College teaches students to write essays that connect powerfully with admissions officers go to www.storytocollege.com/programs. For online + offline course schedules for rising sophomores, juniors + seniors go to www.storytocollege.com/register.

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