



Common Application FAQs 2020

The Common Application is now accepted by over 1000 colleges and was designed to streamline the college admissions process. However, not all colleges accept the Common Application (particularly some public universities) and many of those that do accept it also have application supplements that may contain additional essay requirements (a typical prompt being “Why are you interested in attending our college?”).

We find the Common Application more straightforward than the Coalition for College application, another application platform accepted by 150+ colleges, so we recommend using it whenever possible.

We have compiled information addressing some of the most common questions our students have asked when filling out their Common Applications; should this hand-out not address your questions, start with the Instructions and Help box to the right on your application or go to the Student Solution Center [here](#). The help tips will change with each page and contain valuable information for the questions on that page. From October through January, there will also be an Applicant Chat feature.

If the solutions you find do not answer your question, you can submit it online [here](#). Common App will generally respond within 24 hours; don't forget to check your spam filter if you are awaiting a response from them and you should add this address to your contacts to prevent their response becoming trapped in a spam filter. There is no telephone support desk for the Common Application.

Here are some basics:

- Go to CommonApp.org and create an account for yourself as a first-year applicant (unless you are a transfer student). Your username will be your email address. Follow the instructions to create a password and start filling out the application.
- Icons on the Dashboard page – which becomes your landing page once you have added some colleges to your account - provide the status of your progress by college. Green checkmarks signify that an application has been submitted, while a purple pencil indicates an application that is still in progress or ready for submission.

Frequently Asked Questions

How long can my Personal Statement be?

The guidelines specify 250 to 650 words. You will not be able to submit your application if your essay exceeds 650 words or is shorter than 250 words. The word count will appear on the screen and indicate how many words need to be added or deleted to meet the requirements.

Should I list my AP or IB courses under Education – Colleges and Universities?

No. If taken freshman through junior years, they will appear on your transcript; if taken senior year, they will be listed with the rest of your courses under Education – Current or Most Recent Year Courses.

What is FERPA?

FERPA is the Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act, a law that gives students the right to read confidential letters of recommendation under certain circumstances. You will be asked if you want to waive this right on the Common Application in the Recommenders and FERPA section. We recommend that students waive their FERPA right so the colleges who read them are reassured that these letters were written candidly by their teachers.

If you have reservations about signing this waiver, please discuss with us or your school counselor before selecting that choice in your Common Application account; the decision cannot be undone and can complicate your process.

Can I assign different recommenders to different colleges?

Yes. This is especially helpful if one college you are applying to allows up to three letters of recommendation but another allows only one; you can decide which letter goes to each college. (Keep in mind that some high schools request and assign letters of recommendation through another platform, such as Naviance; make sure you understand your school's procedures.)

Should I create tailored Personal Essays for each college by making multiple versions of my Common Application?

You may find it helpful to use different Personal Essays for different colleges depending on what information you share with them in their supplemental essays. You should not tailor your Personal Essay for each college to which you apply.

How do I find the supplements for the colleges I am applying to?

When you add a college to your list, their specific Questions and Writing Supplement will appear in the My Colleges section of the application. Depending on the college, the required essays may appear in either the Questions section or the Writing Supplement section.

Colleges will not generally release this year's supplementary questions before the Common Application rolls over on Aug. 1. However, you may find some supplementary questions on their individual websites before then.

How do I find the Early Decision Agreement?

When you add a college to My Colleges and then move into its supplemental questions, you will be asked to indicate under which admissions program you are applying, which will vary from college to college. If you indicate that you are applying Early Decision, the Early Decision Agreement will be made available to you on that same page. (This is also true for Early Decision 2 applications.)

Once you sign your FERPA waiver, you will be able to send an ED agreement to your parent(s) from the Recommenders page.

Where do I find the arts supplements?

When you add a college to My Colleges and then move into their Questions section, you are asked if you are going to submit an arts supplement or portfolio, if that college accepts them. If you indicate yes, then a link to either the college's own supplement or to Slideroom.com will appear. Many colleges use Slideroom.com to accept arts documentation, including the performing arts. If you indicate no, then that option will no longer be available to you.

Do I have to self-report my courses and grades?

Some colleges do require students to self-report their courses and grades in the Common Application for grades 9 through 12. You do not have to fill out the section if you are not applying to a college or university with this requirement.

Some other colleges require students to self-report the courses and grades through another platform such as SRAR. You should double-check each college's application checklist on their website to make sure you are providing all the material they require in the format they designate.

What happens if I make a mistake on the self-reported Courses and Grades section or on the Testing Page?

Once a college has accepted you and you have made a deposit, your high school will forward your final transcript. If there is a discrepancy between your self-reporting and the official grades or test scores, your college will assess whether the discrepancy is small enough to appear innocent (e.g., you reported a B+ instead of a B) or large enough to suggest deliberate deception (e.g., you reported an A+ instead of C). In the event that they conclude the discrepancy was deliberate, they may revoke your admission. Proofread carefully, and if you discover an error, you can always contact specific colleges by email or phone to apologize and to ask how they would like to handle a correction.

The application only lets me enter my best scores from the subsections of the ACT and SAT. Does that mean that colleges are going to "superscore" my ACT results?

Most colleges already combine your highest scores from different test dates on the sections of the SAT to create your "superscore." However, fewer colleges superscore the ACT. The Common Application asks you to enter your highest scores by each section and to indicate the specific date on which you earned that score. However, this does NOT mean that every college will superscore your testing or calculate a new composite score based on your highest scores on the subsections.

Most colleges require official score reports from the testing agency for verification, although many accept self-reporting until you matriculate. Check the requirements for each college on your list

Do I have to report my ACT and SAT test scores to colleges?

Test score reporting requirements can vary from college to college and many have remained “test optional” since Covid-19. On the flip side, some require you to submit all test scores, some require all from either the ACT or SAT, and some allow you to decide what you want to send. It is your responsibility to know the requirements for each college you apply to.

You do not need to self-report your scores on the Common Application or send an official score report to colleges that don’t require scores. However, test optional colleges may have other requirements if you don’t submit scores, such as an evaluative interview or the submission of a graded paper. Be sure to check with each college website to understand their requirements and how they want you to report scores (sending them from the testing agency or reporting them in your application or an applicant portal).

You may also report scores from Advanced Placement (AP) exams. We typically recommend reporting scores of 4 or 5.

Can I change my application (for example, if I want to submit scores to some colleges but not to others, or if I change my essay)?

You cannot change an application to a college once it has been submitted to that college, but you can change it before you submit it to another college. This is particularly helpful if you intend to submit test scores to some colleges but not others. Once you fill in your test scores, your application “remembers” them so even if you suppress them by selecting “No” when asked if you wish to self-report any test scores for a college where you are applying without test scores, they will reappear if you change your response to “Yes” for the next college.

Can I use ChatGPT, or another virtual writing assistant, to write my application essays?

Technically, the answer to that question will vary from college to college. Some colleges will actually ask students to sign an affirmation that they generated all the work in the applications themselves and specifically did not use AI; others may indicate they have no preference.

We recommend against using AI for the simple reason that the essays produced lack the specific details and voice that make personal essays compelling.

Deadlines?

Each college has a designated deadline date. Once that deadline has passed, you will no longer be able to submit your forms. (You can find deadlines in the My Colleges section and your specific deadline will appear on your Dashboard once you select an admissions plan in the supplement, or you can visit the college’s website for specific information.)

All time stamps and deadlines are based on Eastern Standard Time, and colleges will accept applications submitted up until 11:59 pm on the deadline in the student’s time zone. We do not recommend cutting your time close enough to put the time stamp deadline to the test!