

## InGenius Webinar. July 11, 2024 on Common App Tips

With Raheel Masood: former Asst. Director of Admissions at Columbia and now with InGenius

This wasn't much different than last year's (notes on the Homework Hub), and that one might be a big more detailed.

Applicants are way up over the past 5-6 years at more competitive schools, but the same number as always are being admitted, so percentages have gone down sharply, (even more at schools like Georgetown, BU and Northeastern than at the usual suspects). At some of the most competitive schools, the admissions rates have risen slightly the last year or two, but it's still brutal.

(However, most schools are still easy to get into: only about 200 out of 4000 are pretty to very competitive, and many of these are great for many students.)

Review of what happens when your application arrives: it is sorted by region/schools within region and goes to one admission officer for that area, who is the gatekeeper. That person reads your file more carefully than anyone else will (and if this person isn't impressed, no one else will look at it). If you impress this person, this person will bring it to the admissions committee and hopefully push your case.

Consider getting this person's positive attention in everything you do on the Common App.

Note that Texas and California state universities and colleges have their own admissions systems.

Sections of Common App:

**Profile:** This is your basic demographic information: be sure to be accurate. When it asks about languages you grew up with, you don't have to be fluent: if they were fairly common in your household, mention this. As I have already told you, be sure your email address for this purpose is professional.

**Family:** they want this to assess your childhood in context: how your family may have affected your growth.

**Education:** be sure to include any college or summer classes you took here. When it asks for current classes, those are the ones you'll take senior year, so you can't put these in until you register. Note that having an impressive schedule will help here, but if you drop those classes and they see your first trimester evaluations, that will hurt you.

**Honors:** you want to put your five most important awards (or any you have earned if fewer). The majority of students have none. Put them in order of importance with nothing before 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Indicate whether they were school, state, regional or national awards.

**Future Plans:** InGenius strongly recommends that you don't say undecided here for major, even if you are. Think about who you are saying you are in the application and pick a major that fits that: no one will hold you to it, but it makes you appear more mature and considered. This makes sense as they can't hold you to it, and it makes you sound more interesting and definitive than undecided.

Future plans is one place you want to consider having an **Application Persona**, which is InGenius's term for the common thread that runs through your application: the brand you're pitching for yourself. This isn't something the application asks for, but considering how you want to present yourself: nerdy, oboe-playing environmentalist or athletic lover of ancient literature or social activist who loves STEM classes. Having this match your Future Plans and current interests/activities helps your reader to "get" you.

Testing: Be aware that some schools require you to send all SAT scores, although we haven't run into this the last few years. Check your colleges' test policies well ahead of time. I always recommend not putting SAT scores on your Common App. Unless you're sure you want all of your schools to see them. **Even if you put them here, you must have the College Board send them to the colleges you want to see them.**

**Activities:** Time commitment is important here as is how you handle the short description you're allowed: this is not something to dash off and hit send. Stress improvements you (helped make) made and your actions, which are much better than just membership or showing up for meetings. How you made an impact is the key.

Activity List strategies: you can have up to 10, and there are ways to include more by broadening categories if you have more than 10. Don't worry if you don't have ten: quality counts more than quantity.

Begin with the most impressive: don't do it chronologically

Emphasize leadership and tangible achievements if they are true.

Emphasize sustained involvement if this is true

Tying at least some to the application persona makes you more coherent to the reader

Proof read the writing

Writing: This includes your essay (senior essay), any discipline explanations (these are very rare and don't count red cards in soccer class) and additional information.

In the essay, who you are: obviously, you don't have room for everything, so pick a key aspect of yourself that makes you look good. Show something that makes you unique (or at least not usual). Be sure your personality comes out in this essay. Hopefully, it also connects to your application persona. Vitally, SHOW (tell stories, give examples) rather than just telling things. They emphasize that you should read the full essay prompt and not leave out parts of it: this is new advice from them.

When figuring out your topic (or whether to keep your topic), they say to consider:

Does it support your application persona

How will your audience (likely an early 20s recent college graduate) react?

Consider how it makes you look in comparison to your peers: I.e., don't complain if you're clearly privileged.

Writing suggestions:

The first line should be intriguing

The theme should be personal and backed up with specifics.

Evidence is key, and it should be a good story or two.

Don't try to do too much in a short essay: do a small theme well rather than stretch to include a lot

Don't exaggerate adversity you have faced if they may feel others have faced worse

Don't focus on other people.

Avoid cliches

Letters of recommendation: be sure that at least one is from a teacher in your area of greatest interest.

Additional Information: only use this if it will be meaningful and advance your application persona: personality

It can be used to explain an academic hiccup or irregularity: you had to drop French after one year because we don't offer it.

Only do a positive one here if it's truly impressive because you're asking them to take more time.

Covid Question: It sucked for everyone, so only use this if your situation will really stand out from most others. In other words, most of you shouldn't do this question.

Other:

Courses and grades:

You can skip the grades section: we will send your evaluations. You skip GPA and class rank. To quote the presenter when asked about schools with no GPA or rank, "This is an increasing trend among high schools." Advisors will provide context if you take harder classes and do well in them in their evaluation letters, as will the two teachers you choose

The courses it's asking for are your senior year courses, which means they will know if you're just trying to take easy things or challenging yourself. Which will they admire?

School Specific Writing (supplements): be consistent with what you answered early in the Common App.

Some have questions about activities and planned majors even though you hit that earlier. This a chance to say why in a bit of depth.

Short answers, for those who have them, tend to be things like favorite books or a few words you'd pick to describe yourself.

Supplemental essays often want to know why you want to go to this school or what you would bring to this school (that they'd like). However, some are more off beat. These should never be recycled from one school to the next: they need to show understanding of the specific school and hopefully subtly flatter it a bit.

