

Common App Activities Section Overview

What qualifies as an activity?

According to Common App, “activities may include arts, athletics, clubs, employment, personal commitments, and other pursuits.” In other words, pretty much anything pursued outside the classroom qualifies as an activity.

What are the word or character limits for each activity?

Common App sets the following limits for each activity:

- Position/Leadership description: 50 characters
- Organization name: 100 characters
- Activity description, including what you accomplished and any recognition received: 150 characters
- This is your chance to BRAG!

What other information does Common App collect for each activity?

Common App requests the following information for each activity:

- Activity type (e.g., art, athletics, community service, debate/speech, foreign language, research, social justice, work)
- Participation grade levels (9, 10, 11, 12, post-graduate)
- Timing of participation (during school year, during school break, all year)
- Hours spent per week
- Weeks spent per year
- Whether or not you intend to participate in a similar activity in college (yes/no)

Writing Strategies

- **Include role or position *and* organization name in their respective boxes.** That way, you can use the full 150-character limit for the activity description box. For example, you should write “President” followed by “Student Council.”
 - o The first four fields for each activity on Common App look like this:

Activity 1

Activity type*

- Choose an option -



Position/Leadership description

(Max characters: 50)*

Organization Name

(Max characters: 100)

Please describe this activity, including what you accomplished and any recognition you received, etc.

(Max characters: 150)*

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- Do not repeat words from the position description box in the activity description box.

Continuing with the student council president example: Instead of writing, “As president of the student body, I was responsible for...”, you should write, “Implemented school initiatives such as food drive for families in need during Thanksgiving, liaised with administration, and curated meeting agendas.”

- **Focus on quantifiable and significant impact.**

Many applicants undersell their achievements because they don’t get specific enough about their contributions. For example, rather than writing something like, “Organized food can drive for local families,” you should write, “Collected over 10,000 cans and provided Thanksgiving meals for 500 families in greater Minneapolis.” With details like that, your impact will be unquestionable to admissions committees.

Numbers also have a way of jumping out to a reader and demanding attention, and they can help break up long strings of text that a reader might have otherwise been inclined to skim over.

- **List tasks and avoid complete sentences to make room for more detail.**

Colleges understand that you do not have enough space to provide in-depth descriptions of each activity. Therefore, rather than write, for example, “At the hospital, I transported patients with physical disabilities on wheelchairs...”, you should write, “Transported patients on wheelchairs, provided meals and blankets, assembled gift baskets, and attended grand rounds.”

Think of these descriptions more as bullet points on a resumé. It’s a good idea to begin each description with a strong descriptive verb — words like *implemented*, *led*, *founded*, *tutored*, *established*, *managed*, *launched*, etc. catch the reader’s attention and help them envision your actively engaging in the activity.

Stick to direct pieces of information and cut out any “fluff” or filler information. While using proper grammar is still important, it’s also acceptable to eliminate things that would typically pad your writing, such as prepositions, articles, and pronouns. You may be surprised at just how many characters you can save by eliminating them!

5. Describe current activities using present tense.

For instance, rather than, “I tutored seventh graders in science,” you should write, “Tutor 7th graders to help them master challenging science concepts.”

- **Advanced strategies**

What is the best order to list activities on the Common App?

With so many possible ways you can list activities on the Common App, you may wonder if the order even matters. In a word: yes!

Keep in mind that the Common App specifically instructs applicants to list your activities in order of their importance [i]to the applicant.[/i] It would also be wise for you to consider placing a few of your most objectively impressive activities and the activities most closely related to your intended college major close to the top of the list. Moreover, capturing admissions committees' positive attention early on will compel them to review the rest of your activities list more favorably.

You should list activities that best illustrate who you are as a person and how you prefer to spend your time. Activities that don't tell anything about your interests or possible future career endeavors don't need to be included. Remember, the experiences listed in this section should be noteworthy and indicative of who you are, so choose wisely and order them accordingly.

- **Make activities sound as impressive as possible.**
- **Group related activities together to develop a theme.**

College admissions committees look not only for activities in which you have participated for a number of years, but also for groups of related activities. For example, let's compare the following students' activities:

Student 1

- High school basketball team captain
- Model United Nations award winner
- Piano club president
- Elementary school English tutor

Student 2

- High school basketball team member
- Youth basketball team coach
- Organized local basketball tournament for kids with special needs
- Interned with local professional basketball team's analytics department

Student 2 demonstrates significant impact and achievement through a single area—basketball. On the other hand, Student 1 lists unrelated activities that make them seem well rounded, but nothing particularly stands out. Collectively, Student 2's activities will be more memorable and seem more impressive than Student 1's.

It's good for a student to demonstrate a willingness to broaden their horizons and explore various different types of activities. But when their activities list looks too nebulous, it can be hard for admissions committees to connect the dots. College admissions committees are increasingly more interested in students who demonstrate *depth* of interest in one or two niche areas than students who demonstrate only *breadth* of various different unrelated experiences.