

How to Write a Great Activity Description

Extracurricular involvement is one of the “Big Five” things colleges want to see. It matters a lot, and because it does, it also matters *how* you describe the activities you participated in.

Most application platforms allow applicants to list up to ten activities and include the following information:

1. Activity name
2. Activity type (e.g. sports, arts, community service, faith-based, etc.)
3. Roles held (e.g. president, captain, treasurer, secretary, etc.)
4. Length of commitment (grades you participated, hours per week, weeks per year)
5. Short description of activity and your role in it

The activity description is not just a chance to highlight your extracurricular involvement. Your short descriptions (#5) are further opportunities to flex your writing skills and cleverness. Indeed it takes cleverness to describe your participation in just 150 characters (including spaces), the limit the Common App allows for each activity. Other college and scholarship application platforms have similarly short character limits.

Below are ten tips - five on content, five on style - for crafting an excellent activity description.

Content Tips

Advice on *what* to include...

1. Include the most impressive info - Use your limited characters to describe, very specifically, your responsibilities, contributions, promotions, and achievements. If you had to apply or try out for the activity, point that out.

Example

Activity Type	Participation grade levels	Position/leadership description and organization name, if applicable:
Swimming	9,10,11,12	McKinley Varsity Team - Captain
Please describe this activity, including what you accomplished and any recognition you received, etc.		
Bad (focuses on unimpressive info): <i>Race in swim meets once per week for 12-week season; during practice, swim, lift weights, and build flexibility</i>		
Good (focuses on most impressive info): <i>Captain: lead captain's practices, coordinate meet logistics, work with coach on training plan; awards: Most Dedicated (11, 12); event: 50m freestyle</i>		

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- Avoid redundancy - Don't repeat in the short description anything you've covered in another field. The exception is if you held a special role and are describing what, specifically, it entailed.

Example

Activity Type	Participation grade levels	Position/leadership description and organization name, if applicable:
Music, Instrumental	9,10,11,12	Marching Band, Section Leader - Lower Brass
Please describe this activity, including what you accomplished and any recognition you received, etc.		
<p>Bad (repeats info from other fields): <i>Serve as lower brass section leader of school marching band for all of high school career; as veteran, support other section leaders; fix instruments</i></p> <p>Good/Acceptable Redundancy (adds new, key info, explains leadership role): <i>Section leader: ensure participants represent section proudly through play, dress, posture, energy; as veteran, support other leaders; fix instruments</i></p>		

- If they don't know, tell them - If the activity isn't self-explanatory, provide a very brief explanation so the reader knows what you're talking about.

Activity Type	Participation grade levels	Position/leadership description and organization name, if applicable:
Other (Community Org)	9,10,11,12	Baton Rouge Youth Coalition (BRYC), Ambassador <i>Not enough characters to say anything else.</i>
Please describe this activity, including what you accomplished and any recognition you received, etc.		
<p>Bad (falsely assumes reader knows what BRYC is): <i>Selected as Ambassador to recruit new Fellows and lead tours</i></p> <p>Good (explains what BRYC is): <i>Selected from competitive applicant pool as "Fellow" in after-school college prep program; chosen as Ambassador to recruit new Fellows and lead tours</i></p>		

- Start with top activities - List your activities in descending order of importance, starting with the ones that matter most to you.

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5. When in doubt, list it - Even though you will have 2-3 activities that stand out among the rest, I suggest using all available spots. Every non-academic commitment counts, including family responsibilities and work. If you follow my tips, no activity description will read as insignificant.

Style Tips

Advice on *how* to write your short descriptions

1. Be concise - You can cleverly say a ton in 150 characters. Start with a separate document. List everything you want to include. Then figure out how to fit in. As long as you're consistent (next tip), you can utilize fragments and other creative measures to cut characters. Having an expert editor would help!

Activity Type	Participation grade levels	Position/leadership description and organization name, if applicable:
Work (Paid)	11,12	<i>McDonald's, Fry Cook & Crew Trainer</i>
Please describe this activity, including what you accomplished and any recognition you received, etc.		
Bad (too wordy; does not utilize fragments or punctuation to shorten): I did well as fry cook and was eventually promoted to Crew Trainer; here I was charged with teaching others about not only cooking but customer service		
Good (utilizes fragments, abbreviations, and punctuation to say more): <i>Standout fry cook; after 1 yr. promoted to Crew Trainer: taught employees cooking, customer service; awards: Employee of Month (4x), Golden Arch (2x)</i>		

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2. Be consistent - Use abbreviations and punctuation to cut characters; just be consistent in how you do so across all descriptions. Same goes for capitalization. I have been consistent in all “good” examples so far. Check out how the “bad” example below violates how I have been punctuating and capitalizing all along.

Activity Type	Participation grade levels	Position/leadership description and organization name, if applicable:
Athletics: JV/Varsity	10,11,12	Varsity Basketball - Captain & Point Guard Bad: In this section for other activities, I used a comma to separate the activity name and my role(s). In this case, I wrongly used a dash.
Please describe this activity, including what you accomplished and any recognition you received, etc.		
<p>Bad (punctuation, capitalization inconsistent with other sections): Captain - led captain’s practices; designed weightlifting program; set example for team; awards: most improved (10), MVP (12), sportsmanship award.</p> <p>Good (punctuation, capitalization consistent with other sections): Captain: led captain’s practices, designed weightlifting program, set example for team; awards: Most Improved (10), MVP (12), Sportsmanship Award</p> <p>How was the “bad” example inconsistent? In all other “good” examples, I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Used a colon, not a dash, after a position name to describe its duties ● Used commas, not semicolons, to separate position duties in a list ● Capitalized all award names ● Did not end the description with a period 		

3. Use strong, specific verbs: Just as you would on a résumé, use strong verbs that express exactly what you’ve done. The right verbs can make what you’ve done sound even more impressive than it is, which is fine!

If you volunteered at an after-school program helping kids, say “tutored” or “mentored” rather than “helped.” If you oversee others at work, say “manage” or “supervise” rather than “worked with.”

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4. **Flex your vocabulary:** The activity description is another chance to show off your vocabulary. In the process, you'll sound even more impressive than you are, which is great! Don't overdo it, though. Advanced vocabulary words are like salt; a few pinches will do.

Fine: As captain, told teammates when to be at bus and what to wear for games.

Better: As captain, communicated game logistics to teammates.