



SIGNET
EDUCATION

YOUR GUIDE TO THE COMMON APP ACTIVITY LIST

How to show colleges what you love (in 150 characters or less)

application form▶ **activity list**▶ essay▶ recommendations▶ supplements

LET'S START AT THE BEGINNING: WHAT IS THE ACTIVITY LIST?

The activity list is the part of the application where colleges find out how you spend your time.

- Don't panic! There are no right or wrong answers to this: it's your chance to signal what you value and prioritize. So toss out what you think colleges want to see and focus on what's important to you!
- Show that you know how to follow directions, self-reflect, and synthesize information. Your goal should be to communicate what is important to you concisely and clearly within the confines of this form!
- The Common App has a great video at the top of the "Activities" page explaining the technical logistics of filling out the online form: <http://bit.ly/2qKH9ub>.

This is the broad category that your activity fits into. Choosing the right category helps the admissions officer understand what this activity is (especially if the name of your club is unclear).

The options you can choose from are:

- Academic
- Art
- Athletics: Club
- Athletics: JV/Varsity
- Career Oriented
- Community Service (Volunteer)
- Computer/Technology
- Cultural
- Dance
- Debate/Speech
- Environmental
- Family Responsibilities
- Foreign Exchange
- Foreign Language
- Journalism/Publication
- Junior R.O.T.C.
- LGBT
- Music: Instrumental
- Music: Vocal
- Religious
- Research
- Robotics
- School Spirit
- Science/Math
- Student Gov't/Politics
- Theater/Drama
- Work (Paid)
- Other Club/Activity

▼ Activity 1

Activity type *

Select

Position/Leadership description and organization name, if applicable *

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

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 *

I intend to participate in a similar activity in college. *

Yes

No

[Clear](#)

[Back](#) [Continue](#)

BUT WHAT IS EACH SECTION ACTUALLY LOOKING FOR?

▼ Activity 1

Activity type *

Position/Leadership description and organization name, if applicable *

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

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 *

I intend to participate in a similar activity in college. *
 Yes
 No

[Clear](#)

[Back](#) [Co](#)

You only have 150 characters, so use sentence fragments with action-packed verbs to get your point across.

This will help the admissions officer know whether your participation was a one-time activity, or whether you do this all the time.

Your answer will give a sense of how committed you are to this activity.

This is where you state the name of the club/organization, as well as your position in it. You have 50 characters to use here, so try to be specific so you can save yourself space in the description!

Don't sweat this too much; try to estimate accurately, but there's no need to get out a calculator. Don't exaggerate either—admissions officers can tell!

This is not a trick question! It is your way to signal what you're really serious about, or what is a necessary fact of your life, like working or caring for family members.

TIPS FOR FILLING IT OUT

DO:

- List your activities in order of importance. Examples can range from well-developed hobbies (such as writing poetry) to consistent employment at a job (such as working at your parents' convenience store).
- Include activities that aren't official clubs.
- Make note of significant household responsibilities, like caring for younger siblings or elderly relatives.
- Use action verbs! Check out this great list of words that can pump up your descriptions: <http://bit.ly/2j9WEsB>.
- Use the Additional Information section.

DON'T:

- Send in a resume, unless the school specifically asks for one.
- Write directly into the Common App form.
- Fill in all 10 spaces if you don't have 10 meaningful activities.
- Include activities from before 9th grade, even if you were a 6th grade chess champion.
- Write in full sentences; instead, write in action-packed sentence fragments to save precious character space!

FAQS & RESOURCES

Why shouldn't I write directly in the Common App?

Because the Common App fields have a character limit, save yourself the headache and draft your answers in a separate document. Use Signet's Activity List Word Counter spreadsheet below to easily track character counts.

Should I include hanging out with friends or taking out the trash?

Only include activities that you can connect to something bigger. Everything here should show responsibility, commitment, and/or a deep underlying interest.

But won't I be at a disadvantage if I only include 5 activities?

No! The average student only includes 5 activities—and admissions officers can tell if you're scraping the bottom of the barrel to pad your list.

What if I have more than 10 activities?

If you have more than 10 meaningful activities, you can use the Additional Information section of the Common Application to list them.

Signet Resources

- Signet Interview with a former UPenn Admissions Officer on the Activities List: <http://bit.ly/2qGoXXD>.
- Signet Activity List Word-Counter Spreadsheet: <http://bit.ly/2qG8Glc>.
- Signet College Finder Course: <http://signededucation.com/college-list-kit>.
- Signet Essay Course: <http://signededucation.com/jump-start-your-essay-kit>.

SO HOW DO I ACTUALLY DO THIS?

Since seeing is believing, we've put together two different versions of an activity list. Each one lists the same activities for the same student to show what a big difference presentation can make. Notice how inconsistent these descriptions are. Some are sentences, some are fragments; some have periods, some don't. Try to create some consistency for the admissions officer's sake: it helps them out!

Let's start with the "not so good" example.

Not so good version

Activities

Community Service (Volunteer)
 11, 12 Tutor.
 School tutoring math/science for students at HKS
 1 hr/wk, 20 wk/yr
 Continue

Work (Paid)
 11 Lab tech
 Break Histopathology intern studying interleukins
 10 hr/wk, 4 wk/yr
 Continue

Student Govt./Politics
 9, 10, 11, 12 Class representative.
 School I am an elected class representative and participate in weekly meetings.
 5 hr/wk, 30 wk/yr

Community Service (Volunteer)
 10, 12 Food server
 Break @ homeless shelter for Thanksgiving.
 2 hr/wk, 1 wk/yr
 Continue

Athletics: JV/Varsity
 9, 10, 11, 12 Swim, Member of Varsity Swim Team.
 Year JV 9th & 10th. Varsity 11th & 12th. Swim 50 free, 100 butterfly, and IM.
 15 hr/wk, 52 wk/yr
 Continue

Other Club/Activity
 10, 11, 12 Water Polo Player.
 Year I play water polo with my friends at the YMCA on the weekends and after school. Three times per year we have a bracket to play against other water pol
 8 hr/wk, 40 wk/yr
 Continue

Family Responsibilities
 9, 10, 11, 12 Babysitter
 Break Watch Tess and Steph after school.
 10 hr/wk, 52 wk/yr

Other Club/Activity
 11, 12 Blogger.
 School Write Sweat Stain
 5 hr/wk, 52 wk/yr
 Continue

Athletics: JV/Varsity
 9 Track and field, Member of JV track team.
 Break 800m relay
 8 hr/wk, 10 wk/yr

Athletics: Club
 9, 10, 11, 12 Other Sport, Recreational Jet Ski
 Break Jet ski at Uncle Luke's lake house
 25 hr/wk, 1 wk/yr

An admissions officer would wonder why a student put this first with such a small time commitment.

Make sure that you explain what any acronyms mean: admissions officers might not be familiar with all the terms you use!

Beware of jargon! This won't make sense to a non-scientist.

Seems strange that this summer activity is 2nd priority.

This sentence takes up too much space and does not communicate anything about this student's role in the organization.

You don't have to list everything you ever did, especially if it's no longer a significant commitment to you!

This activity is listed as #5, but it is the largest time commitment. What does this say about this student's priorities?

This student ran out of characters and still didn't manage to tell the whole story.

This is a lot of time, and suggests that home life is really important to this student, but the description doesn't really tell a story or show how it impacts their life!

This is extremely unclear: with no context, what is an admissions officer supposed to think this means?

This really sounds like something that this student did for fun. No need to pad the list to get it up to 10 activities!

This student only did this activity in 9th grade, but the description is very short. More context would help the admissions officer understand why.

25 hours a week is a lot—even for something that's being done for fun on vacation. Make sure you're putting realistic numbers here!

Here's this student's second attempt, using the tips outlined on the previous page. Your activity list should paint a picture of who you are: what you do should line up with interests as demonstrated elsewhere in your application. With this re-organization, we see that three of the four top activities have to do with athletics and engaging other people, which reveals a lot about this student's interests, passions, and talents.

Good version:

<p>Much better category than "Other"!</p>	<p>Activities Athletics: JV/Varsity</p>	<p>This is now listed as priority 1, which is reflected in the time commitment. The student added details about the contributions they made to the team, even if they weren't shown through official leadership positions.</p>
	<p>9, 10, 11, 12 Year 15 hr/wk, 52 wk/yr Continue</p>	<p>Swim, Member of Varsity Swim Team. Varsity since 10th; established and oversaw weightlifting program that improved team times by an average of 10 seconds.</p>
	<p>Athletics: Club</p>	
<p>The detail here shows that the student took initiative to create and run this group.</p>	<p>9, 10, 11 Year 8 hr/wk, 40 wk/yr Continue</p>	<p>Water polo, Founder & captain: water polo. Founded club water polo team. Lead practice on weekends and organize monthly scrimmages.</p>
	<p>Family Responsibilities</p>	
	<p>9, 10, 11, 12 Year 10 hr/wk, 52 wk/yr</p>	<p>Babysitter. Care for younger siblings in the evenings when parents are working, including cooking dinner and helping them with their homework.</p>
	<p>Journalism/Publication</p>	
<p>Even though this is an independent activity, putting it in a category shows that the student is taking it seriously.</p>	<p>11, 12 Year 5 hr/wk, 52 wk/yr Continue</p>	<p>Founder of fitness blog "Sweat Stain." Created blog reviewing athletic wear/fitness and workout routines. Post weekly and have generated 1,000 subscribers.</p>
	<p>School Spirit</p>	
	<p>9, 10, 11, 12 School 2 hr/wk, 30 wk/yr</p>	<p>Class representative. Chair of Jr Prom Committee. Participate in weekly meetings to plan social events and fundraisers. Led planning for Junior Prom and Relay for Life.</p>
<p>While "Government" sounds fancier, "School Spirit" might capture this better.</p>	<p>Community Service (Volunteer)</p>	
	<p>11, 12 School 1 hr/wk, 20 wk/yr Continue</p>	<p>Tutor & role model. Run 1-hour after school homework group for five 3rd graders, focusing on math, science, and social skills.</p>
	<p>Work (Paid)</p>	
	<p>11 Break 10 hr/wk, 4 wk/yr Continue</p>	<p>Lab tech at Polytech U. Intern in cancer research lab. Assisted grad students with experiments and learned how a lab functions.</p>
<p>Listing this down lower is appropriate given the time commitment; be sure not to overblow things to make yourself look "better"!</p>	<p>Athletics: JV/Varsity</p>	
	<p>9 School 8 hr/wk, 10 wk/yr</p>	<p>Track and field, Member of track team. Ran 100m dash and 800m relay. Was unable to continue in 10th grade due to Water Polo commitments.</p>
<p>Notice that jet skiing and Thanksgiving volunteering didn't make the cut: this keeps the admission officer's attention focused on what is most important to the student—even if it means leaving a few lines blank!</p>		<p>This adds much more context to this activity: it is an important part of this student's athletic journey, but it explains how the student's priorities changed.</p>
		<p>This shows that the student places a great deal of importance on contributing to their home life.</p>
		<p>A clear description helps us understand the work on the blog.</p>
		<p>This is much more evocative than the previous description!</p>

CONCLUSION

Don't sweat the activity list—but don't blow it off either! Follow the steps here, and you'll be well on your way to having a great activity list.