

USE YOUR LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

In college applications

ONE EXPERIENCE THREE USES

Your part

What happened

What you learned

Activity entry

Writing response

Interview

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Use your leadership experience in college applications

An Onward guide for grades 9 to 12

You may know what you do for a team or club and still freeze when an application asks you to explain it. Start with the work: the practice you kept showing up for, the decision you helped make, the person you taught, or the change you tested. This guide helps you choose meaningful experiences and explain them clearly in activities entries, essays, recommendations, and interviews.

A stronger application gives a reader a more accurate picture of you. There is no activity, title, number of hours, or writing formula that guarantees admission. Keep your schoolwork, health, rest, and existing responsibilities in the plan. Activities do not replace academic preparation or required coursework. Colleges and programs use different requirements and review processes.

Choose the route that fits today

Getting involved: Start on pages 4 and 6. Choose a manageable contribution, then keep a short record of what you actually do. You do not need an officer role before your experience is worth describing.

Already leading: Start on pages 8 and 10. Check your evidence and draft one activity entry. Then use pages 12 through 24 for examples, writing, interviews, and recommendations.

These routes are flexible. You might lead a club and be brand new to a sport. Move between them whenever your situation changes.

What you will leave with

- One experience you can describe accurately; an activity-entry draft; a possible writing or interview example; and a short list of facts or requirements to check.

About the practice examples

The scenarios and worked examples use invented students, activity organizations, dialogue, and numbers. They are not accounts of real students' achievements or text to submit as your own. Application requirements and official sources are identified separately. Use the examples to examine your own experience, then write your own words.

Application guidance checked October 5, 2026. Sources begin on page 32. The current instructions in each application and on each college's official site take priority. This guide focuses on U.S. first-year applications; other systems may ask for different information.

Choose involvement you can actually sustain

Getting involved

Before asking which activity sounds impressive, ask what you would like to learn or help with. A useful starting point could be a sport, an arts group, a cultural organization, a hobby, paid work, or a community responsibility. MIT's admissions guidance explicitly recognizes that opportunities and obligations differ, including family and work commitments. [MIT-activities]

Compare two real options

- Interest: What would you do there, and which part makes you curious?
- Access: Can you get there and back? What are the fees, equipment costs, eligibility rules, and accessibility arrangements?
- Time: Count preparation and travel as well as the advertised meeting. What would this replace in your week?
- Support: Who explains the first task? Which decisions need an advisor, coach, supervisor, or partner's permission?
- Useful work: Does the group actually need the contribution you could make? Can you try a small task before committing?

Scenario

A student is interested in both debate and the school garden. Debate meets after the last bus. The garden group has a supervised lunch meeting and needs someone to keep its planting record. The student asks the debate advisor whether occasional lunchtime practice exists, then chooses a four-week garden task that fits their current transport. This is a practical choice, not a lesser kind of involvement.

Try this conversation

I can reliably give about an hour at lunch each week. Is there a useful beginner task that fits that time? Who would show me how to do it, and when should we check whether the arrangement is working?

If both options are unrealistic, you can wait or stay with a responsibility you already have. Do not take on more family care or unpaid work just to create an application story. If a school lacks a club, first ask about an existing class, library, community organization, or supervised informal activity. Starting an organization also creates real obligations.

Choose involvement you can actually sustain

Continued

Your next move

Write one question you need answered before joining. Ask the actual organizer rather than guessing from a social-media post. Choose a next step you would still value if it never appeared on an application.

Make an existing contribution more useful

Getting involved or Already leading

If you already participate, you may not need another activity. Look for one part of your current work you can do more thoughtfully. Leadership can show up when you notice a need, listen, coordinate a task, or help other people participate. UC's leadership guidance includes mentoring and responsibility for a specific task, not only holding an office. [UC-PIQ]

Try one small improvement cycle

- 1 Notice and ask. What is difficult for the people doing the work? Ask the affected people before naming the problem for them.
- 2 Agree your part. Describe a task, a realistic time limit, who approves it, and what someone else will handle.
- 3 Try it and observe. Keep a simple record of what happened. A brief note or existing attendance count may be enough; avoid collecting unnecessary personal data.
- 4 Check and adjust. Ask whether the change helped. Keep, revise, or stop it. Share what the next person needs to continue, if continuing is useful.

Scenario

At robotics club, two experienced members usually handle the tools while beginners watch. A member asks what newcomers want to try and checks safety rules with the advisor. They help plan a supervised rotation for one approved task. The advisor remains responsible for training and tool access. After two sessions, the group discusses whether everyone had a workable turn.

A defensible early result is that the group tested the rotation twice. If no one measured skill or confidence, the student cannot claim the rotation made every beginner confident. A useful next step is to ask what still needs explaining.

Give depth a concrete meaning

Depth can mean learning a harder skill, becoming more dependable, responding to feedback, helping another person learn, or taking responsibility for a defined part of the work. It does not have to mean founding a nonprofit, winning an election, or growing an audience.

Make an existing contribution more useful

Continued

A four week option

Week 1: listen and agree the task. Week 2: prepare and try it. Week 3: check what happened and revise. Week 4: finish, hand over if needed, and record the learning. This is an optional planning rhythm, not an admissions requirement or a promise that meaningful change takes four weeks.

Protect the actual work. Do not choose a flashy project that a partner does not want, publish other people's stories to prove impact, or leave a new group with commitments nobody can maintain.

Keep evidence that matches your part

Before you write

Use the experience record in Onward if you already have one. For applications, add a clear distinction between your contribution, the group's result, and what is still unknown. You usually need a truthful account, not a public portfolio or a certificate for every activity.

Keep these six facts together

- 1 Setting and dates: the activity, organization if there is one, grade levels, and actual period of involvement.
- 2 Your part: what you were asked or permitted to do, any real role changes, and decisions that belonged to others.
- 3 Actions: two or three things you personally did. Name collaborators when that prevents an inflated impression.
- 4 Result: what was completed or observed, over what period, and how you know.
- 5 Learning: a choice you reconsidered, a skill you developed, or something you would handle differently.
- 6 Time and context: a reasonable estimate of your commitment, plus relevant limits you choose to explain.

Separate three kinds of statement

Action: I drafted the club's lending instructions.

Output: The club used the revised instructions at three meetings.

Outcome: Members returned more books on time.

The outcome needs its own evidence; the first two statements do not prove it.

Keep evidence that matches your part

Continued

Scenario

A six-person service team sorted 120 donated items. One student checked the partner's acceptance list, inspected 35 items, and labeled the sorting boxes. The student can report those actions and credit the team total. They cannot claim to have collected all 120 items or to have helped 120 families. Items, recipients, and benefits are different measures.

When you have no impressive number

Describe what became possible: a rehearsal had a usable cue sheet; a new member learned an agreed task; a proposal reached the person who could decide. A specific account of careful work is more informative than an invented percentage. If a result is pending, say what you completed so far.

Keep notes privately. Do not copy client records, teammates' health details, family documents, or student contact lists into your application file. Get permission before retaining a group work sample. A memory note can be enough for your own drafting; if an application asks for verification, follow its actual instructions.

Build an activity entry that a stranger understands

Turn the record into a short description

For 2026-27, Common App calls this section Activities and Experiences. Its currently linked official activity guide allows up to 10 entries and lists 50 characters for position or leadership description, 100 for organization name, and 150 for activity details. These are character limits, including spaces, not word limits. The guide also asks for hours per week and weeks per year and allows a best estimate when exact records are unavailable. [CA-update; CA-activities]

Those field limits come from Common App's published guide, last revised in 2025, checked on October 5, 2026. Confirm the fields and counters in the live application before entering your own information.

Use each field for a different job

- Position: Name your actual role. Member, player, volunteer, or caregiver can be accurate. Use an official title only if you held it; add grade years if they clarify a change.
- Organization: Give a recognizable name. Explain an unfamiliar group briefly if space allows. Do not invent an organization for an independent activity.
- Description: Choose the actions and responsibility the reader cannot learn from the other fields. Add a supported result if it helps.

A useful drafting sequence

- 1 Write the facts in ordinary sentences without a character limit.
- 2 Underline what you personally did and one detail that shows its scope.
- 3 Remove repeated titles, filler adjectives, and details already reported elsewhere.
- 4 Count characters, then read it aloud. Keep enough words for a stranger to understand it. Avoid a string of unexplained acronyms.

Choose and order with purpose

Start from the commitments that matter most to you and explain your life best. Consider time, sustained effort, responsibility, and meaning. Do not fill every slot just because it exists. Common App explicitly says ten entries are not necessary. There is no universal order that makes every student's list stronger. [CA-activities]

Build an activity entry that a stranger understands

Continued

Keep related role changes together when they are part of the same activity, unless the form's instructions require otherwise. Do not split one project into several entries simply to make the list longer. A hobby or a job need not be relabeled leadership to deserve space.

Other applications differ. UC uses Activities & Awards categories; MIT asks for up to four important activities and has a separate place for jobs. Reuse your factual record, then adapt it to the actual questions. [UC-form; MIT-activities]

Show leadership in a sport without inflating your role

Scenario and worked activity entry

A student plays soccer for three school seasons. During the latest season, they practice four days a week and take part in games. The coach pairs them with three new players for approved passing drills. The student listens to the players' questions and brings those questions to the coach. They are not a captain, and nobody has measured whether the extra practice improved game results.

Before

A passionate team leader who inspired everyone and helped us win.

This version uses praise instead of evidence. Inspired everyone cannot be checked, and the student has no basis for claiming they caused the team's wins.

After

Position: Player and peer practice partner

Organization: School soccer team

Practiced 4 days/week; paired with 3 new players for coach-approved passing drills; tracked questions to discuss with the coach.

Character counts: position 32/50; organization 18/100; description 128/150.

What changed

The entry makes the student's ordinary participation visible and adds a specific peer responsibility. Coach-approved keeps the authority clear. Three new players describes the work's scope; it does not claim an improvement in performance. Dates, grades, hours, and weeks belong in their own fields.

If the student later becomes captain

Update the role and dates accurately. A captain's entry could explain how they organized player feedback or managed a defined responsibility. The title does not replace the need to describe the work. Do not claim the later role for earlier seasons.

Show leadership in a sport without inflating your role

Continued

What could become an essay or interview example

The activity entry answers what the student did. A longer response could explore a moment when their first explanation did not help a teammate, how they asked the teammate what was confusing, and how they changed the practice. That is only a writing direction. The student must supply a real moment and reflection from their own life.

A sports experience can be meaningful even if the team lost, the student was not a starter, or the student had to stop competing. Explain the true contribution and learning. Do not invent injury, hardship, or a dramatic comeback to create an essay plot.

Use the same care across arts clubs and service

Three worked activity entries

Example 1 Arts and backstage work

Facts: Three stage-crew members create a prop checklist. This student checks the props before six performances and revises labels after a scene-change mistake. The director and stage manager make production decisions.

Before: Directed a successful show and managed the entire backstage team.

Role: Stage crew member | Organization: School theater program

Built a prop checklist with 2 crew members; checked props before 6 performances and revised labels after a missed scene change.

Description: 127/150 characters. The revision shows responsibility and learning without turning a crew role into directing.

Example 2 An existing club

Facts: A book-club member coordinates a six-week lending pilot approved by the advisor. The log records 28 loans, including repeat borrowers. They revise the labels and show the next volunteer how the log works.

Before: Founded a literacy initiative that transformed reading at school.

Role: Member; lending project coordinator | Organization: School book club

Coordinated a 6-week book-loan pilot; logged 28 loans, revised return labels after feedback, and trained the next volunteer.

Description: 124/150 characters. Twenty-eight loans are not 28 people. Coordinating a pilot in an existing club is not founding a new organization.

Example 3 Community work

Facts: A community partner supplies an acceptance list. A student checks 35 donations and labels boxes. Their six-person team prepares 120 accepted items. Distribution has not happened yet.

Use the same care across arts clubs and service

Continued

Before: Led a charity campaign that changed the lives of 120 families.

Role: Volunteer sorting team member | Organization: Community clothing collection

Checked 35 donations against the partner list; labeled sorting boxes for a 6-person team that prepared 120 accepted items.

Description: 122/150 characters. The entry separates personal work from team output and avoids claiming benefits that have not been observed.

Before using any number, ask what it counts, whose work produced it, and whether it is completed. Use the activity's actual name; these example names are placeholders for practice.

Make your circumstances understandable

Work family responsibilities and limited access

A college reader may not know why your afternoons look different from someone else's. Paid work, family care, household responsibilities, independent interests, and informal community participation can be relevant. Common App's first-year guide expressly includes work and responsibilities. UC considers academic work in the context of available opportunities and life circumstances. [CA-guide; UC-review]

Give the reader useful context

Name the responsibility, when it occurred, and how it shaped your available time or choices. You can describe a family responsibility without sharing a relative's diagnosis, legal situation, income, or name. You do not need to present your family as a problem or turn every responsibility into a leadership claim.

Example

During grade 11, I needed to leave school for regular family responsibilities on four afternoons each week. I stayed involved in lunchtime music rehearsals and could not attend the club's evening events.

This explains a participation pattern without making the reader guess. It does not need a dramatic ending. If the same fact is already clear elsewhere, avoid repeating the full explanation.

Choose the right place

- Activity entry: describe sustained work or responsibilities that are meaningful parts of your life.
- Responsibilities and circumstances questions: read and answer the actual options carefully. Do not assume a checkbox tells the whole story or requires a separate essay.
- Additional context field: use it when a reader needs a factual explanation of a gap, restriction, interruption, or unfamiliar arrangement. Follow that field's instructions.
- Essay or personal response: use the experience only if it answers the prompt and you want to reflect on it. You can choose a different topic.

Make your circumstances understandable

Continued

Onward's When your experience does not come with a title and Describe your experience honestly already offer detailed household and paid-work practice. Use those records here rather than starting again.

When access is the obstacle

Keep an accurate note of what was available: no late bus, a seasonal work schedule, a cost you could not take on, or a school without a particular program. A counselor can help choose the right place to explain relevant context. Do not assume you need an expensive summer program or independent research project to make up for unavailable opportunities.

If a question feels intrusive or you are unsure what is required, ask a counselor or the official admissions contact. Share the minimum personal detail needed to answer accurately. Practice sessions with peers should allow a different example or a pass.

Let a longer response show your thinking

Choose a moment rather than repeating the list

Your activities entry already names the role and work. A longer response can show what you noticed, which decision you made, why you made it, and what changed in your thinking. First read the exact prompt. A strong story that answers a different question still needs revision.

Choose between three real moments

List a moment when you changed your mind, a moment when another person's feedback altered the work, and a moment when you made a difficult but responsible choice. For each, ask: What did I actually do? What could I explain that is not already obvious in my activity list? What am I comfortable sharing?

Scenario

Return to the stage-crew example. At a rehearsal, a prop is in the wrong place. The student initially assumes the newest crew member forgot. When the crew checks the shelf, they find two similar labels. They decide together to change the labels and add a pre-show check. The director approves the change.

Before

Theater taught me leadership, perseverance, and teamwork. I learned that communication is key and that every great leader helps others succeed.

After An excerpt showing a different approach

When the lantern was missing, I nearly told the newest crew member to be more careful. Then she showed me two shelves labeled scene three. I had helped make those labels. At the next rehearsal, I asked her to walk through the setup while I watched. We changed the labels together and asked the director to approve a short pre-show check. I still cared about getting every prop in place, but I had to change how I responded when something went wrong. Now I try to understand the instruction before deciding that the person following it made the mistake.

Let a longer response show your thinking

Continued

Why the revision gives a reader more

It replaces general praise with a specific mistake, the student's part in it, a decision, another person's contribution, and a changed habit. It does not claim the checklist eliminated all errors. This excerpt is a practice comparison, not a complete response or a required structure.

Keep your voice in the revision

Read your own draft aloud. Circle sentences you would never naturally say. Ask a trusted reader where they wanted a clearer detail, not which grander word to use. You can write about an ordinary experience. You do not have to invent a hardship or connect every interest to a future career. See the current Common App prompts and each college's instructions. [CA-prompts]

Adapt to the question in front of you

A UC leadership response is its own task

UC first-year applicants answer four of eight personal insight questions, with a maximum of 350 words each. The questions receive equal consideration. Its leadership question invites an example of influencing others, helping resolve a dispute, or contributing to group work over time. A formal title is not required. [UC-PIQ]

UC's admissions staff advise direct, specific responses; they do not need a dramatic hook. Choose the questions that let you explain different useful parts of your experience. Do not assume everyone must answer the leadership question. [UC-advice]

Example A direct start from the book club scenario

I coordinated a six-week lending pilot in our book club. I first thought that keeping a loan log would be enough. After two borrowers asked when their books were due, I realized our return labels were unclear. I asked them which wording was confusing, drafted a simpler label, and checked the change with our advisor. Another member updated the display while I showed the next volunteer how to keep the log. We recorded 28 loans; I do not know whether students read more because of the pilot. I learned to test the instructions with the people using them before assuming the system made sense.

This practice excerpt gives responsibilities, a decision, collaboration, a supported result, and learning. A student's real response may need more detail about the original need, continued effort, or how the experience changed their approach. The 350-word limit is a maximum, not a reason to pad the answer.

Use one experience differently when appropriate

- Activity entry: what you did and the scale of the commitment.
- Leadership response: the responsibility, choices, work with others, and learning the prompt asks about.
- Creativity or interest response: use the experience only if it genuinely answers that different question. Do not merely change the first sentence of the leadership response.

Adapt to the question in front of you

Continued

Before you reuse a draft

Write the new prompt above it. Underline every sentence that actually answers that prompt. Check whether the new version adds insight rather than repeating another response. Verify names, dates, role, and outcomes against the same record. Then check the live limit and read the pasted version.

UC's published guidance says responses should reflect your ideas and be written by you. Feedback can help you see what is unclear. The practice prose in this guide should never become your submitted response. [UC-PIQ]

Prepare for a conversation about your experience

When the college or program offers an interview

Check the institution's interview policy first. An interview may be optional, required for a particular program, unavailable, or offered by invitation. For example, Yale's interviews are invitation-only, and its published guidance says an applicant is not disadvantaged if none is offered. Do not treat another college's policy as yours. [Yale-interviews]

Keep four notes rather than a memorized script

- 1 The situation and your responsibility.
- 2 A specific choice or action you took.
- 3 What happened, including a limit or unfinished part.
- 4 What you learned or would bring into a new setting.

Example A first answer to Tell me about a time you led

In book club, I coordinated a small lending pilot. I thought the loan log would make it straightforward, but two borrowers asked about the return date because our labels were unclear. I asked them to show me the confusing part, then worked with the advisor on a simpler label. A teammate updated the display, and I trained the next volunteer on the log. We recorded 28 loans over six weeks. I cannot say whether it changed reading habits. What changed for me was checking instructions with the people using them before calling the system finished.

Practice the follow up questions

- What did you personally decide? Explain the draft and coordination work, and name the advisor's approval.
- What did another person contribute? Give the teammate's work real credit.
- What would you do differently? Consider testing the return label with a borrower before launching.
- How would you know whether it helped? Explain what you could observe and what would need a different kind of evidence.

Prepare for a conversation about your experience

Continued

Try a 45- to 90-second first answer as a practice exercise, then let the conversation develop. This is not an admissions timing rule. You may pause, ask for a question to be repeated, or choose a smaller example that you can explain honestly.

Ask something you genuinely want to know

After checking available official information, ask how students learn to contribute in a group, how new members find supported roles, or what the interviewer learned from a campus commitment. Your question can help you decide whether the setting fits you. Practice feedback should focus on substance and clarity, not treating eye contact, accent, speed, or extroversion as proof of leadership.

Give a recommender a useful factual brief

A one page reminder after they agree

Check who the institution permits or requires before choosing someone. A coach or supervisor may know your leadership well but may not meet a required academic-teacher category. MIT, for example, asks for two teacher recommendations and emphasizes teachers who know the applicant as a student and person. Requirements vary. [MIT-recs]

Ask whether they can write a supportive recommendation and whether the timing works. Follow your school's process and their requested lead time. Send a brief after they agree; do not write a letter for them to sign or pressure them to describe things they did not observe.

Copy these headings for your own brief

Application and purpose: College or program, entry term, and what kind of recommendation it requests.

Verified deadline and route: Date, time zone if relevant, school deadline, and official submission method. Note any earlier date the recommender asked you to use.

How we worked together: Course, team, job, or project; dates; and your actual role.

Two moments you may remember: Describe observable actions, feedback, revisions, or contributions. Separate what this person saw from background they did not witness.

What I learned: One short reflection in your own words, grounded in those moments.

Context I choose to share: Only relevant information you are comfortable giving them. Say if something is for context rather than something you want repeated.

Materials and contact: Any requested activity record or work sample you may share, plus a reliable way to reach you.

Example A note to a teacher who also advises the club

You may remember that my first lending labels confused two borrowers. I asked them what was unclear and brought a revised version to you. You also saw me show the next volunteer how to use the loan log. In your class, I used a similar checking step when I revised the directions for our group presentation. I am learning to ask whether an instruction works for someone else before assuming it is clear.

Give a recommender a useful factual brief

Continued

The brief gives reminders, not requested praise. The recommender chooses their own evaluation and wording. If they only observed the class presentation, do not ask them to certify the club example as firsthand knowledge.

Keep the process respectful

Confirm they received the official request, agree on an appropriate reminder, thank them, and check the application's receipt status. Follow confidentiality choices and the institution's process. Do not ask to see a confidential letter or substitute a prestigious name for someone who actually knows your work.

Check time impact and authorship before polishing

An accuracy review

Estimate time from the activity you actually did

Use calendars, schedules, rehearsal plans, or shift records if you have them. Include only time that reasonably belongs to that activity under the application's instructions. Do not count a whole weekend as active work because one event occurred. Distinguish participation already completed from future plans.

Scenario: In one year, an activity took 6 hours a week for 12 weeks and 2 hours a week for 8 more weeks. That is 88 hours across 20 active weeks, or 4.4 hours per active week. If the form requires whole numbers, follow its instructions and choose a reasonable rounded estimate. Keep your calculation privately. Do not report 6 hours for all 20 weeks or use your busiest week as the average.

The same two-hour meeting should not become four hours by appearing in two overlapping activities. If commitments overlap, review the calendar and allocate your active time honestly. When years differ substantially, follow the form's instructions or ask support rather than inventing one perfect number. [CA-activities]

Keep claims the right size

- I helped versus I led: Is the verb accurate for your authority and work?
- Participants versus visits: Were 20 attendances 20 different people, or repeat visits?
- Team result versus personal result: What did everyone produce, and what did you do?
- Improvement versus cause: Did you actually measure a change, and can you justify what caused it?
- Completed versus planned: Has the event happened, the money arrived, or the award been decided?

Keep the application your own

Check the application platform and each college's current rules before using outside help or AI. Common App treats misrepresenting substantive AI output as your own original work as application fraud. Yale permits general topic advice and grammar or spelling review, while prohibiting AI-composed substantive responses. That is Yale's policy, not permission for every college. [CA-fraud; Yale-AI]

Check time impact and authorship before polishing

Continued

A cautious workflow is to write your factual notes and first draft yourself, then ask a permitted reviewer which parts are unclear. Make the revisions yourself and check every claim. Never use a generated personal story, invented achievement, fake award, or fabricated endorsement. Do not put other people's private records into an AI tool. Keep your earlier drafts so you can see that the thinking and language remain yours.

If a tool's rewriting replaces your substance or voice, start again from your own notes. Polished language is not worth an inaccurate account.

Use a pace that fits your stage

A practical plan rather than an admissions formula

Grades 9 and 10

Try interests you can access, learn how a group works, and practice keeping commitments. A ten-minute note at the end of a season or project can preserve useful details. You may change interests. There is no need to choose every activity around a college major or start writing a personal statement years early.

Grade 11

Look for a useful next responsibility where you already contribute. Gather dates and time estimates while you can still check them. Learn which application systems and requirements your possible colleges use. Discuss course choices, support, and recommendation timing with your counselor or another appropriate school contact.

Grade 12

Prioritize an accurate application and the commitments you already made. Do not rush to create a new organization for a last-minute title. Use your real record, check current requirements, and leave time for another person to review clarity. A late-starting genuine interest can still be worth describing; report its actual duration.

If an application deadline is close

Session 1, about 30-45 minutes: gather records and choose the experiences that best represent your life. Mark unknown facts instead of guessing.

Session 2, about 30-45 minutes: draft the activity fields for your priority experiences. Check characters, dates, and time estimates.

Session 3, about 45-60 minutes: choose a real writing moment and make a rough draft in your own words. A complete essay may take several further sessions.

Session 4, about 20-30 minutes: prepare any agreed recommender brief or practice a conversation if an interview is part of the process.

Session 5, about 20-30 minutes: run the accuracy check, compare the application against official requirements, and record remaining tasks.

Use a pace that fits your stage

Continued

These are optional work blocks, not claims about how long every student or full application needs. Split them, use accessible formats, or take longer. The plan does not replace school deadlines, recommender lead time, or institution-specific requirements.

Before you stop today

Choose one unfinished step and name who can help. For example: confirm the season dates with the coach, ask a counselor which field fits your context, or revise one activity description. If submission is near and something is missing, ask the school or admissions office through its official route. Do not fabricate a substitute.

Prepare one experience for three uses

A reusable private worksheet

Use this worksheet for one experience. Type, write, dictate, or discuss your answers in a format that works for you. You can use a practice scenario instead of personal information in a group session.

Experience and actual role

Dates or grade levels and a realistic time estimate

What I personally did and what others did

One choice I made and why

What happened and how I know

What remains unknown or unfinished

What I learned or changed

Prepare one experience for three uses

Continued

Now choose the use

Activity entry: Which actions and scope fit the available fields?

Writing response: Which exact prompt would this help answer, and what thinking would I add?

Interview: What follow-up question could I answer with a real detail?

Before sharing

- Every title, date, number, and result matches my record.
- My part is distinguishable from the group's work.
- The response answers the actual question and fits the live limit.
- The wording is mine and the help I used is allowed.
- I have removed private details that are unnecessary or not mine to share.
- I know what still needs checking and who to ask.

One next action: _____ Person or source to check: _____

Official guidance and further reading

Sources checked October 5 2026

These are official application or university sources, checked October 5, 2026. They support the factual guidance; the practice methods, scenarios, worksheets, and timing suggestions are original teaching material. Institutional examples illustrate differences rather than a universal admissions rule.

CA-update Common App opens application to launch 2026–27 season

July 31, 2026. Confirms the Activities and Experiences section name for the 2026-27 cycle.

<https://www.commonapp.org/blog/common-app-opens-application-launch-2026-27-season/>

CA-activities Common App Approaching the Activities section

The official first-year toolkit links this guide, last revised July 24, 2025. Supports up to ten entries, 50/100/150-character fields, time reporting, and reasonable estimates. Check the live form for changes.

https://www.commonapp.org/static/a5d59a915bdc2031e62c468ad35e0de9/Resource_FY_Activities_ENG_2025.06.25_0.pdf

CA-guide Common App first-year application guide

Activities, work, responsibilities, supporters, and college-specific requirements.

<https://www.commonapp.org/apply/first-year-students/>

CA-prompts Common App first-year essay prompts

Current 2026-27 prompt choices. Individual colleges determine whether they require the Common App personal essay and may add their own writing.

<https://www.commonapp.org/apply/essay-prompts/>

CA-fraud Common App Fraud Policy

Truthful roles, original work, recommendations, and the treatment of substantive AI output.

<https://www.commonapp.org/fraud-policy/>

Official guidance and further reading

Continued

UC-PIQ UC first-year personal insight questions

Four of eight questions, 350-word maximum per response, broad leadership examples, and own-words guidance.

<https://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/how-to-apply/applying-as-a-first-year/personal-insight-questions.html>

UC-form UC filling out the first-year application

Activities & Awards categories, quality of involvement, and the role of additional comments.

<https://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/how-to-apply/applying-as-a-first-year/filling-out-the-application.html>

Official guidance and further reading continued

Sources checked October 5 2026

Check the official page for each institution and application cycle before relying on a requirement. A general resource cannot tell you what a particular college will decide.

UC-review UC how first-year applications are reviewed

Academic review, available opportunities, life circumstances, and variation in campus review.

<https://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/how-to-apply/applying-as-a-first-year/how-applications-are-reviewed.html>

UC-advice UC admissions experts on PIQs and activities

October 23, 2025. Explains direct PIQ responses, meaningful involvement, and individual experience. Its old-cycle deadline is not reused in this guide.

<https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/shaping-your-personal-narrative-piq-tips-and-more-uc-admissions-experts>

MIT-activities MIT Admissions extracurricular activities

Meaningful activities, differing opportunities and obligations, up to four activities on the MIT application, and a separate place for jobs.

<https://mitadmissions.org/apply/prepare/activities/>

MIT-recs MIT Admissions letters of recommendation

Teacher recommendations, firsthand knowledge, and MIT-specific submission requirements.

<https://mitadmissions.org/apply/firstyear/letters-of-recommendation/>

Yale-interviews Yale Admissions interviews

Invitation-only interviews, preparation, and no disadvantage when an interview is not offered.

<https://admissions.yale.edu/interviews>

Yale-AI Yale Admissions AI policy

Distinguishes general advice and grammar or spelling review from substantive generated application responses.

<https://admissions.yale.edu/ai-policy>