

ADMISSIONS STRATEGY

The Common App Activity List Strategy: Transforming 150 Characters into Proof of Impact



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A student spends three years on a debate team, mentors younger students, and helps organize a regional tournament. Another student lists the same activities but describes them as “Participated in debate,” “Helped students,” and “Assisted with tournament planning.”

Both students may have done substantial work. Yet the second set of descriptions gives an admissions reader little information about what either student actually contributed.

That is the challenge of the Common Application activities section: students must communicate the substance of their commitments in very limited space. The goal is not to make ordinary experiences sound extraordinary. It is to make meaningful experiences understandable.

For families applying to selective colleges, improving these descriptions can be a practical way to communicate the value of work a student has already completed—without inventing accomplishments, exaggerating leadership, or turning the application into a collection of marketing slogans.

WHAT 150 CHARACTERS CAN—AND CANNOT—DO

Common App's published guide to the activities section specifies a 150-character limit for the activity description, alongside separate fields for the position or leadership role and organization name.¹ Applicants should verify the limits displayed in the application for their current admissions cycle.

The activities section also collects information such as time commitment and participation dates. Students therefore do not need to squeeze every logistical detail into the description.

The limited space should answer a more useful question: What did the student actually do that helps a reader understand their contribution?

Consider this hypothetical description:

- Before: “Participated in the school debate club and attended weekly meetings and competitions.”
- The description communicates attendance, but little else.

Suppose the student researched cases, developed arguments, and coached novice debaters. A more informative version might be:

- After: “Researched cases, developed rebuttals, and coached novice debaters for regional competitions.”

The revision replaces general participation with specific responsibilities. It does not claim a championship, invent a leadership title, or imply that the student founded the team.

That is the central principle: use the available space to communicate evidence, not inflate importance.

THE FOUR-PART FORMULA FOR STRONGER DESCRIPTIONS

Most activity descriptions can be improved by examining four elements: action, responsibility, scope, and outcome.

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1. ACTION: WHAT DID THE STUDENT ACTUALLY DO?

Replace vague verbs such as participated, helped, and was involved in when more precise language is available.

Depending on the activity, useful verbs might include analyzed, designed, organized, researched, programmed, edited, coached, translated, or coordinated.

The verb must match the student's actual role. A student who contributed to a research project should not claim to have directed it. Someone who assisted with an event should not describe themselves as its organizer unless that accurately reflects their responsibilities.

2. RESPONSIBILITY: WHAT PART BELONGED TO THE STUDENT?

A club can have 40 members, but membership alone does not tell the reader whether a student attended meetings, led a project, managed finances, or trained new members.

Compare these hypothetical descriptions:

"Member of school newspaper."

"Edited articles, checked sources, and revised drafts before publication."

- The second explains the work. It does not require an impressive title.

3. SCOPE: HOW MUCH WORK WAS INVOLVED?

Numbers can make an activity easier to understand when they provide meaningful context.

Examples include the number of students tutored, events organized, articles edited, users who tested a tool, or dollars raised for a clearly identified purpose.

But a number is useful only if it is accurate and relevant. "Reached 500 students" means something different from "posted content viewed 500 times." Similarly, a student should distinguish between money personally raised and money raised by an entire organization.

4. OUTCOME: WHAT CHANGED OR WAS ACCOMPLISHED?

An outcome might be a completed project, a new process, an event delivered, a resource created, or a demonstrable improvement.

Not every activity produces a measurable result. A student who studies piano for several years may have developed discipline and musical ability without increasing an organization's membership or generating revenue. In such cases, a clear description of the commitment and work is preferable to an artificial metric.

The four elements are a diagnostic tool, not a requirement to squeeze every element into every description.

BEFORE-AND-AFTER EXAMPLES

The following examples are hypothetical. They illustrate how to improve specificity without inventing achievements.

EXAMPLE 1: TUTORING

Before: "Helped younger students with homework after school."

After: "Tutored younger students in algebra; explained problem-solving methods and reviewed errors before retests."

The revision identifies the subject and instructional approach. If the student has verified information about the number of students tutored or the duration of the commitment, that information may add useful context.

EXAMPLE 2: RESEARCH

Before: "Participated in a summer research program in biology."

After: "Analyzed biological data, reviewed research literature, and presented findings on [specific topic]."

The revised version is appropriate only if the student performed those tasks. If the student primarily observed demonstrations or completed assigned exercises, the description should say so accurately.

EXAMPLE 3: STUDENT ORGANIZATION

Before: "Helped organize school fundraising events."

After: "Coordinated event logistics, contacted vendors, and tracked fundraising expenses."

The second description communicates operational responsibilities. If the student independently raised a verified amount, that figure could be included if space permits. It should not be attributed to the student when it represents the organization's total.

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EXAMPLE 4: SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT

Before: “Worked on a coding project with friends.”

After: “Built the data dashboard; wrote Python scripts to clean survey responses and visualize results.”

This version makes the student's technical contribution more visible. It also gives the reader concrete information about the work, rather than relying on the general label “coding project.”

The same approach applies to arts, athletics, employment, caregiving, and community service. The description should help readers understand the actual commitment, not force every activity into an entrepreneurial or research-oriented framework.

WHEN NUMBERS STRENGTHEN A DESCRIPTION—AND WHEN THEY DO NOT

Students are often encouraged to quantify their accomplishments. That advice can be useful, but it becomes counterproductive when every activity is rewritten to include a statistic.

Consider a student who coaches a recreational basketball team. “Coached 12 middle-school players during weekly practices” communicates scope. If the student also designed practice plans and helped players learn specific skills, those responsibilities may be more revealing than an unsupported claim that the team became “30% better.”

A student who manages a community garden might report the number of volunteers coordinated, the number of planting sessions organized, or the amount of produce harvested—provided those figures are documented and the student's contribution is clear.

The rule is simple: use a metric when it makes the work easier to understand, not merely because it makes the sentence look impressive.

Avoid inflated percentages, ambiguous claims about reach, and numbers that attribute a group's entire accomplishment to one student. Admissions applications are stronger when the wording can be defended in a straightforward conversation.

Yale's official admissions guidance emphasizes that quantitative measures are interpreted alongside qualitative information and that the application should help readers

understand the actual person behind the accomplishments.² The lesson is not to eliminate numbers; it is to make sure they clarify the student's experience.

HOW TO PRIORITIZE THE ACTIVITIES LIST

Students can list up to ten activities in the Common App's traditional activities section, but having ten entries is not a goal in itself. Families should verify the current application instructions before finalizing the list.

The order should reflect the student's genuine priorities, not an attempt to guess which activities an admissions reader will consider most prestigious.

A sustained commitment to a school newspaper, a part-time job, or caring for a family member may reveal more about a student than a short, expensive summer program. An activity does not need a formal leadership title or a national award to deserve space.

Yale's admissions officers have advised applicants to focus on activities that are meaningful to them and to describe the impact of their involvement rather than treating the list as a contest to accumulate impressive-sounding entries.³

Parents can help by asking which activities required the most sustained effort, which responsibilities grew over time, and which experiences best reveal the student's interests or contributions.

The answers may lead to a list that is shorter in spirit—even if the student fills every available slot—and more informative in substance.

HOW SCHOLAR COACH HELPS STUDENTS REFINE THEIR ACTIVITIES LISTS

Scholar Coach helps families turn an existing record of activities into clear, accurate descriptions that fit the application.

Step 1: Reconstruct the actual work. We review each activity with the student, identifying responsibilities, duration, progression, concrete tasks, and outcomes. This often reveals contributions that a generic title such as “club member” fails to communicate.

Step 2: Separate individual contributions from group achievements. We establish what the student personally did, what the team accomplished collectively, and which figures can be verified. This prevents a polished

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description from becoming an exaggerated one.

Step 3: Identify the strongest evidence. For each activity, we consider whether a specific responsibility, technical skill, meaningful result, or sustained commitment best communicates the experience. We use numbers where they add genuine information, not as mandatory decorations.

Step 4: Draft and refine within the character limit. We remove redundant phrases, replace vague wording with precise verbs, and check the final character count. We also ensure that descriptions remain consistent with the student's essays, recommendations, and other application materials.

Step 5: Review the list as a whole. We examine whether the activities collectively reflect the student's actual interests, responsibilities, and development. The goal is not to manufacture a perfect admissions narrative, but to make the student's experiences understandable without forcing them into a predetermined profile.

Step 6: Verify the final submission. We check names, roles, dates, time commitments, metrics, and character limits against the student's records and the current application interface.

The student remains the source of the underlying experience and facts. Scholar Coach's role is to help communicate those facts with greater precision and clarity.

THE BEST DESCRIPTION IS THE ONE THAT MAKES THE WORK VISIBLE

A strong activity description does not need to sound like a corporate performance review. It should not contain a string of impressive verbs, technical terminology the

student cannot explain, or metrics that exist only to make the activity appear more significant.

It should allow a reader to understand, quickly and accurately, what the student contributed.

Before submitting an activity, ask three questions:

- Does the description explain what the student actually did?
- Does it distinguish the student's contribution from the group's overall achievement?
- Does every number or claim add meaningful, verifiable information?
- If the answer to all three is yes, the description is doing its job.

The 150-character limit is restrictive, but it can also encourage better writing. Students must decide what matters most, remove what the application already records elsewhere, and choose words that communicate real responsibilities rather than general participation.

The objective is not to make every activity sound exceptional. It is to make each meaningful activity specific enough that an admissions reader can understand what the student brought to it.

SOURCES

¹ Common App, Approaching the Activities Section: <https://www.commonapp.org/files/FY-Apply-College-Activities-Section-Common-App.pdf>

² Yale Undergraduate Admissions, What Yale Looks For: <https://admissions.yale.edu/what-yale-looks-for>

³ Yale Undergraduate Admissions, The Activities Section: <https://admissions.yale.edu/posts/2021-07-08-episode-19-the-activities-section>

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