

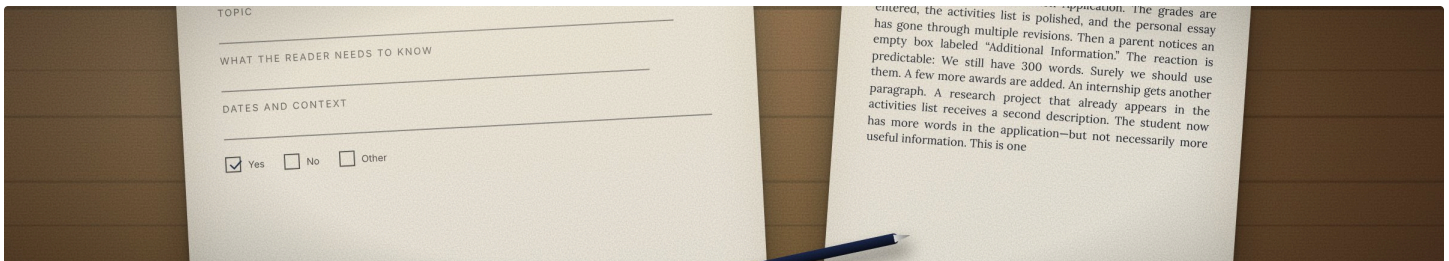
ADMISSIONS STRATEGY

The Common App Textbox Many Parents Misuse (And How to Fix It)



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A student finishes the Common Application. The grades are entered, the activities list is polished, and the personal essay has gone through multiple revisions. Then a parent notices an empty box labeled “Additional Information.”

The reaction is predictable: We still have 300 words. Surely we should use them.

A few more awards are added. An internship gets another paragraph. A research project that already appears in the activities list receives a second description. The student now has more words in the application—but not necessarily more useful information.

This is one of the most common strategic mistakes families can make when completing college applications: treating every available text box as an opportunity to add more accomplishments.

The Additional Information section serves a different purpose. It can help explain relevant context that the rest of the application does not adequately convey. It is not automatically a second activities list, an extra personal essay, or a place to repeat achievements that already appear elsewhere.

The right question is not, “What else can we tell colleges?” It is, “What important information would a reader misunderstand or miss without this explanation?”

1. UNDERSTAND WHAT THE ADDITIONAL INFORMATION SECTION IS FOR

The Common Application includes space for students to provide additional information, and its application guidance recognizes that responsibilities and circumstances can help colleges understand an applicant's experience.¹ The precise prompts, word limits, and available fields can change, so students should review the application for their current cycle rather than rely on an older screenshot or online template.

The section can be useful when an applicant needs to explain something significant that is difficult to communicate through grades, activities, or essays alone.

Examples include:

- A substantial interruption in schooling that affected academic performance.
- A course sequence that differs from the usual progression because of school scheduling or course availability.
- A significant family responsibility that affected the student's time or opportunities.
- A change in academic performance that requires brief, factual context.
- An unusual educational circumstance that would otherwise leave a material gap in the application.

These are examples, not an exhaustive list of approved topics. Whether an explanation belongs in this section

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depends on the actual prompt, the nature of the information, and the other places where the application already addresses it.

The important distinction is between information that adds necessary context and information that simply adds volume.

If a student's activity description already explains that they founded a coding club, recruited 20 members, and organized weekly meetings, repeating those details in Additional Information is unlikely to clarify anything. If the student had to suspend the club for several months because their school temporarily closed its facilities, that circumstance might merit explanation if it materially affects how the activity should be understood.

One entry describes an accomplishment. The other explains context.

2. DO NOT CONFUSE ADDITIONAL INFORMATION WITH CHALLENGES AND CIRCUMSTANCES

The Common App has also provided a separate optional question about challenges and circumstances. These fields should not be treated as interchangeable.

For the 2025–2026 application cycle, Common App announced a 300-word maximum for the first-year Additional Information question and a separate 250-word maximum for the Challenges and Circumstances question.² Applicants applying in 2026–2027 should verify the limits and wording displayed in their current application before drafting.

The distinction matters because students may have a significant circumstance to explain without needing to use every available space.

For example, a student whose school did not offer a particular advanced course may need to clarify the available curriculum if that information is not otherwise evident. A student whose family responsibilities substantially reduced their extracurricular time may have a different reason to provide context.

Neither situation automatically requires an extensive personal narrative. The explanation should fit the purpose of the field and the information the reader needs.

Before writing, students should ask:

- What exact information needs clarification?

- Is that information already stated elsewhere?
- Which application field is intended for this type of explanation?
- Can the point be communicated accurately in a few sentences?

This small review can prevent students from writing multiple overlapping explanations about the same circumstance.

3. RECOGNIZE WHEN A TRANSCRIPT ANOMALY NEEDS CONTEXT

Academic records are one area where additional explanation can be particularly useful. A transcript may contain a sudden grade decline, a gap in enrollment, an unusual course sequence, or a pattern that requires context to interpret fairly.

But students should not assume that every imperfection needs an explanation.

A single lower grade does not necessarily require a paragraph. Neither does every schedule change, every dropped club, or every difficult semester. The decision depends on the significance of the issue, whether the application already explains it, and whether the additional information would help a reader interpret the record accurately.

Consider a hypothetical student whose grades declined sharply during a semester when a serious family disruption affected attendance and study time. A brief, factual explanation may help clarify why that semester differed from the student's broader academic record.

A useful explanation identifies the relevant circumstance, describes its effect when appropriate, and avoids claims that cannot be substantiated.

For example:

“During the fall semester, a significant change in my family's caregiving responsibilities reduced the time I could devote to schoolwork. My schedule stabilized the following semester, and my grades improved.”

That example should be used only if it accurately reflects the student's experience. It also should not be included automatically if the same information is already clearly explained elsewhere.

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The objective is context, not a request for special treatment. Students should explain what happened without exaggerating the circumstances or promising that an admissions reader will interpret the record in a particular way.

4. EXPLAIN COURSE LIMITATIONS WITHOUT SOUNDING DEFENSIVE

Students sometimes worry that their transcript will look weaker because their high school did not offer a course they wanted to take.

In some cases, a concise explanation can be helpful. A student might have wanted to study a more advanced mathematics course but been unable to enroll because it was not offered, conflicted with a required class, or was unavailable within the school's scheduling structure.

The explanation should establish the relevant facts rather than criticize the school.

A weak version might say:

"My school did not provide enough challenging courses, so I could not reach my full academic potential."

That statement is broad and difficult to evaluate. It may also sound defensive if the transcript already shows a demanding course load.

A more useful explanation, when needed, would be:

"My school does not offer multivariable calculus. I completed the highest mathematics course available to me, and I pursued additional study independently."

Again, this belongs in the application only if the information is accurate, relevant, and not already apparent from the school profile or transcript.

Students should also avoid turning every unavailable course into a claim of exceptional initiative. Independent study may be valuable, but it should be described only when it actually occurred.

The same principle applies to scheduling conflicts. Explain the limitation clearly, identify what the student did within the available options if relevant, and stop before the explanation becomes an argument about why the student deserves credit.

5. WHY ADDING ANOTHER ACTIVITY CAN WEAKEN THE APPLICATION

Families often use the Additional Information section to fit in something that did not make the main activities list.

Sometimes there is a legitimate reason to clarify a significant experience. But if the only reason for adding a paragraph is that the student has another accomplishment, the better question is whether the accomplishment deserves space in the first place.

The activities section already gives students an opportunity to describe employment, hobbies, clubs, community engagement, and other responsibilities.¹ The application also includes fields for academic honors and other information. Repeating content across sections can make the overall presentation feel less organized.

Suppose a student has completed a research project, presented it at a school symposium, and included it in the activities list. The Additional Information section then describes the same project in another 200 words, listing its background, methods, results, and future implications.

Unless the extra space supplies essential context that cannot be communicated elsewhere, the second description may contribute little.

If a college specifically accepts research supplements or portfolios, the student can review that institution's submission policy. A dedicated supplement may be more appropriate for substantial work than trying to squeeze a technical abstract into an unrelated application field.

The goal is not to hide achievements. It is to place information where it can be understood most effectively.

6. USE A SIMPLE EDITING TEST BEFORE SUBMITTING

Before finalizing the Additional Information section, read it alongside the rest of the application. Do not review the text in isolation.

Ask these five questions:

Does it clarify something important? The information should help explain a meaningful circumstance, discrepancy, limitation, or other relevant detail.

Is it already covered? Check the transcript, activities list, essays, school information, and other application fields.

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Is it factual and proportionate? Remove speculation, exaggerated language, unsupported conclusions, and unnecessary personal details.

Is it in the right place? If the information belongs in a specific college's supplemental response or another designated field, follow those instructions.

Can it be shorter? Remove background the reader does not need, repeated accomplishments, and explanations that do not change how the information should be understood.

A useful final test is to delete the entire paragraph temporarily and ask what the reader would lose. If the answer is “nothing important,” the paragraph may not need to be there.

An empty optional field is not a failure to use the application. It can simply mean the student has already communicated the relevant information elsewhere.

HOW SCHOLAR COACH HELPS FAMILIES USE APPLICATION SPACE STRATEGICALLY

At Scholar Coach, we review the application as a connected document rather than treating each field as an isolated writing opportunity.

Step 1: Audit the application for missing context. We review the transcript, activities, essays, and relevant application fields to identify information that may require clarification.

Step 2: Separate explanation from self-promotion. We distinguish genuine context from accomplishments that are already adequately represented.

Step 3: Select the appropriate field. We check the purpose of the current Common App question and the specific requirements of each college before deciding where information belongs.

Step 4: Draft a concise, neutral explanation. We prioritize the relevant facts, remove defensive language, and avoid overstating the impact of a circumstance.

Step 5: Review the whole application again. We check for duplication, inconsistent details, unnecessary disclosures, and text that does not add meaningful information.

Our objective is not to fill every available box. It is to make the student's application accurate, coherent, and easy to understand.

The Additional Information section can be valuable when the rest of the application leaves an important question unanswered. But more text does not automatically mean a stronger application, and an extra accomplishment does not become more persuasive simply because it appears twice.

The best use of the space is often a short explanation that allows the rest of the application to speak for itself.

SOURCES

¹ Common App — Application Guide for First-Year Students

² Common App — Announcing the 2025–2026 Common App Essay Prompts and Application Changes

³ Common App — First-Year Essay Prompts for 2026–2027

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