

5 Things That Don't Matter on Your College Applications

By Shereen Jeyakumar • High School July 6, 2018 at 2:00pm

Your college application should showcase your best qualities as a well-rounded, open-minded student. With that in mind, it might be tempting to crowd your application with everything under the sun that you've been involved with. Unfortunately, that strategy is usually counterintuitive. For the best chance at acceptance, you have to prioritize and choose the parts of your life that your prospective college will be the most interested in. We've talked to college counselors and collegiettes around the country to bring you a comprehensive list of what not to include on your college applications—as well as some advice on what is appropriate to submit.

1. Don't include: Anything from before high school

Unless you did something truly exceptional in your formative years, like starting a charity in elementary school or performing at Carnegie Hall in middle school, you don't need to include any achievements from before high school. An easy way to clean up your college application is to remove outdated information that does not reflect the person you are now, such as old grades or minor awards.

Sarah Duffy, a senior at Trinity College, notes that your most recent activities are the most appealing to colleges. "I was always told not to include activities/experiences that occurred prior to high school, or even before sophomore year," she says. "Colleges are much more interested in the stuff you're currently doing!"

Do include: Activities from ninth grade and beyond

Colleges are typically interested with your activities starting with ninth grade. If you started an activity in middle school and continued it through high school, it should be okay to include—as long as it's still relevant to your life. If you're not sure about a specific activity, don't be afraid to shoot your college counselor an email. They are there to answer your questions!

2. Don't include: Unnecessarily big words

It might be tempting to use fancy words to make yourself look smart, but if you wouldn't normally use it in writing or conversation, it's not a good idea. College admissions committees have read thousands of applications—hence, they can tell when you're faking your image. It's good to have a large vocabulary that you can use naturally, but if you don't, make sure you don't force it.

Anna Ivey, founder of Ivey Admissions Consulting and former Dean of Admissions at University of Chicago Law School, notes that big words don't benefit you and can even hurt your chances of being admitted. "Big words don't help you, so use them in moderation, if at all," she says. "Admissions officers appreciate clear, direct writing. Precision matters, though. Is the word you're choosing the perfect one for what you're trying to convey? You're applying to college, so you're expected to have a good grasp of vocabulary. There's no need to get fancy just for the sake of being fancy, though. That usually just makes your writing worse, not better."

Do include: Concise, accurate wording

Ivey reminds you to choose the right word, not the big word. Keep that in mind when you're writing your essays.

3. Don't include: Leisure activities

If you enjoy knitting in your spare time, that's great. But unless you've taken initiative and started a knitting club, or donated your knitted socks to a charity, it's just not important enough to include on your college application. You need to choose activities that showcase your best qualities, which should include more than simple participation.

Do include: **The Core Four**

Anna Ivey gives you important criteria on how to pick the activities that matter. “Try to pick activities that demonstrate one or more of the **Core Four: Passion, Talent, Initiative, and Impact**,” she says. “Just signing up for activities, or just showing up, doesn’t count for much. Continuity helps, too. If it’s an activity you suddenly picked up right before you applied, that’s a bit transparent.”

Keep the Core Four that Ivey mentions in mind when you’re picking activities to include. That way, you’re putting your best foot forward. If you’re applying to a special program at a university, you may need to alter your activities list to fit the qualities that the program is looking for. For example, if it’s a vocal technique program, you don’t want to fill your resume with awards from science fairs. Similarly, if it’s an engineering program, you don’t want to include an audio file of your musical theater performance.

4. Don’t include: Too many personal details

Context is important. If you’re working two part-time jobs while attending high school to help support your family, you might not have as many extracurricular activities as other potential applicants. Colleges need to have that context so they don’t write you off without understanding your circumstances beforehand. Despite that, there is a point where personal detail is simply too much. Unfortunately, a bad break-up can’t excuse you from a lack of extracurriculars or poor grades. You need to determine how much context is too much.

Do include: Appropriate personal information

Ivey shares her tips on deciding how much personal information to include. “It’s fine to include personal and sensitive details in applications if it gives the rest of your application context,” she says. “That includes tricky family situations like illness, divorce, or drug problems and recovery. Everything you submit is confidential, and admissions officers have seen it all. You won’t shock them. Don’t treat your application as therapy, though. The key question is always: does this give my academics, accomplishments, or activities important context? Will an admissions officer be missing an important part of my story without this information? This is about context; you don’t get extra points just because you suffered in some way and someone else didn’t.”

Be mindful of how much sensitive information you include in an application. As Ivey says, don’t do it for “extra points,” but to frame your image and activities with necessary context. If you’re not exactly sure what that means for your personal situation, talk with a guidance counselor at your high school. They can give you an answer that’s tailored to you.

Rachna Shah, a freshman at Dartmouth College, notes that your family should not be the star of your application. “While your family may be inspirational and motivating for you, make sure that your college application focuses on you and the image you want yourself to be represented as,” she says. In other words, you can include personal information about your family situation, but be sure that your application always comes back to yourself and what you have done. In this scenario, it’s okay to be selfish!

5. Don’t include: Too many extra materials

Often, college applications will have an area to submit extra materials that you’d like the admissions officers to see. It can be difficult to understand what colleges are looking for in this section. While your first instinct might be to upload every certificate you’ve ever gotten, hold yourself back.

Do include: Extra materials that add depth and value

If you do use the extra materials section, you should have a good reason. Ivey notes that extra materials should showcase talent. “If you’re on the fence about whether to submit extra materials, don’t,” she says. “Extra materials are meant to showcase truly exceptional talents. It can be hard to gauge that when you’re seventeen, so you might need to get an outside opinion (who is not your mom). You’re better off getting honest advice before you submit.”

If you'd like to include your art portfolio in your application, for example, ask your art teacher or another person knowledgeable in the field if your work is qualified enough for the school you're applying to. In short, only use the extra materials section if you have a talent that's central to your personal image and that admissions officers need to see to understand you.

Take all these tips to make your college applications as strong as possible. Good luck, collegiettes!

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