



ADMISSIONS INTELLIGENCE SERIES • 2027

The Complete College Admissions Guide

Expert insight on testing, building your college list, and writing the essays that get you in.

Testing Strategy

College List Building

Common App Essays

UC PIQs

Standing Out

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Test Optional Is Almost Over

Test scores matter more now than they have since before COVID. More schools — especially selective ones — are returning to requiring them.

Ivies Going Test-Required

Yale has returned to requiring SAT/ACT. Princeton follows next year. Columbia is the last Ivy still test-optional — an announcement is expected soon.

Selective = Submit

The more selective the school, the more 'test optional' means you should still submit. Large state schools may genuinely not penalize you for withholding.

Hard Factors Screened First

Grades and test scores are the most important factors. Some schools now use AI to screen hard factors first — you may not reach a human reader without meeting those thresholds.

Use Your Score to Build Your List

Middle 50% = target school. Bottom 25% = likely a reach. Top 25% = strong position. Your score helps calibrate your entire college list.

Middle 50%

Submit if you're here

Don't leave this on the table

1500+

SAT target for top schools

Verify with the Common Data Set

1550+

SAT target for Ivies

Each 10 points can shift your rubric

SAT Strategy

- Start with a diagnostic baseline sophomore year
- Math score matters more for engineering programs
- Sub-1000 total? The ACT may offer a better path
- In the middle 50%? Submit — it helps your rubric
- 1500 with strong soft factors = apply to Ivies

ACT Strategy

- Equally accepted at every school, no exceptions
- Great option if your SAT score has plateaued
- Take the science section at least once
- Skip science on your first sit if test anxiety is high
- Each additional point can make a real difference

Where to Find Your Data

Common Data Set Shows middle 50% SAT/ACT ranges, year-over-year trends, and admission statistics for each school.	Accepted Student Profile Search "accepted student profile class of 2030" to reveal first-gen %, legacy status, geographic diversity.	High School Scattergrams Your counselor may have acceptance data by GPA and test score for past applicants. Ask — it's very useful.
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02 — BUILDING YOUR LIST

How to Build a Smart College List

A well-built college list is not about adding names — it's about calibrating ambition against reality, and making sure every school is one you'd genuinely attend.

~20

Schools to start with

Narrow to 10–15 by end of junior year

2+

Safety schools required

You must genuinely want to attend them

9th

Grade to begin visiting

QR self-guided tours — no pressure

Don't Lock In Your ED School Junior Year Junior year grades shape your list significantly. Wait until the end of that year to finalize your reach, target, and safety designations.	Know Why Each School Is on Your List Generic 'Why Us?' answers hurt you. Name specific departments, professors, and programs. Admissions officers can spot a copy-paste essay.
Financial Aid Changes the Math Need aid? Apply to 15 schools. Not applying for aid? 10–12 is often enough. Know your situation and plan accordingly.	Plan for More Reaches (If Highly Selective) Top-school applicants often have 3–4 targets and many reaches (under 15% acceptance rate). That's not unusual — it's strategic.

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Writing Your Common App Personal Statement

The Personal Statement is a single essay — up to 650 words — sent to every college on your list. With fewer supplemental essays at many schools, it carries more weight than ever.

650 words max Aim for 600–650	7 prompts to choose from Pick the one that fits your story	1 essay, seen by every school This is your main stage
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The Seven Prompts

Pro tip: Write your story first, then pick the prompt that matches. Don't let the prompt box you in.

- 1 Background, identity, interest, or talent that makes you who you are
- 2 A challenge, setback, or failure — and what you learned from it
- 3 A time you questioned or challenged a belief or idea
- 4 Gratitude — a person who influenced you in an important way
- 5 An accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked personal growth
- 6 A topic, idea, or concept that captivates you — what makes you lose track of time
- 7 Open prompt — any topic of your choice

Four Principles Behind Every Strong Essay

1 Lead with a specific moment

Open with one scene, one image, one line of dialogue. The reader should see something concrete in the first three sentences — not a thesis statement.

2 Write in your real voice

It should sound like you talking to someone you trust. Read it aloud — if it sounds stiff or like you wrote it for a class grade, rewrite it.

3 Show, don't tell

Don't say you're resilient — show the moment you almost quit and didn't. Details, actions, and scenes do the convincing. Every sentence should be uniquely yours.

4 Land the reflection — the 'so what'

What did it change about how you think, act, or see the world? And how will you show up on campus? This is where the essay earns its meaning.

“A good essay reports an experience. A great essay tells the reader what changed in you and why it matters.”

THE 'SO WHAT?' TEST · APPLICATION MENTOR

Do's & Don'ts

✓ DO THIS

- ✓ Start with a real, specific moment in motion
- ✓ Use sensory details, dialogue, and inner thoughts
- ✓ Let the essay sound like a thoughtful version of you
- ✓ Have someone list 5+ new things they learned about you
- ✓ Write as if no one else will ever read it first

✗ AVOID THIS

- ✗ Start with 'Ever since I was young...'
- ✗ Choose a topic just because it sounds impressive
- ✗ Let too many adults edit out your personality
- ✗ Use big words to sound smarter
- ✗ Use AI to write or heavily polish your essay

Writing Strong UC Personal Insight Questions

The PIQs are four short essays — up to 350 words each — and the only part of the UC application that shows your personality. The UCs don't interview, don't read a personal statement, and don't accept letters of recommendation. These four essays carry everything.

4 of 8

prompts you choose

Show different sides of you

350

words max per essay

Aim for 330+ words

13

comprehensive review criteria

Readers map your essays to these

Use the S.T.A.R.R. Framework

Think of the STAR method used in job interviews — but written. The second R (Reflection) is where most students stop short, and where the best PIQs live.

Situation

Set the scene in one or two lines. No long wind-up.

Task / Goal

What were you responsible for? What needed to change?

Action

What did YOU specifically do? This is the heart of it.

Result

The tangible outcome — with numbers and moments.

R

Reflection

The 'so what.' What it taught you. Where the gold is.

The Eight Prompts — What They're Really Asking

Q1 — Leadership

A title isn't required. Mentoring, running one task, or holding your family together counts. Show sustained influence over time and what it changed in your view of leading others.

Q2 — Creativity

How do you think differently — and what have you produced with it? Creativity with specificity: something tangible exists in the world because of you.

Q3 — Greatest Talent

Not just what you've won — where the skill came from and what it cost. Did it come naturally or through grind? What doors does it open in and out of class?

Q4 — Educational Barrier

The bar is significant. The guiding questions live in the process and the reflection — how you took it on, and who it made you.

Q5 — Significant Challenge Why did it matter? What did you do, alone or with support — and how did it touch your academics? Avoid the tidy bow.	Q6 — Academic Inspiration UC loves this prompt. Show how a subject took hold inside and outside class — then hint at what you'd do with it on their campus.
Q7 — Community Contribution Define community your way. Don't frame yourself as saving others — show what the interactions taught you. This is one of the UC's favorite prompts.	Q8 — Strong Candidate The catch-all. Surface one under-explored dimension the rest of the app missed — not a summary. Don't be afraid to brag a little, with specifics.

05 — THE DIFFERENCE

What Actually Sets Students Apart

When grades and scores look the same across thousands of applicants, these are the things that tip the scales. They can't be manufactured — they develop over years.

Authenticity Students who are genuinely themselves stand out. Admissions officers read thousands of applications. They always know when someone is performing for college.	A Coherent Story Your activities, essays, and interests should form a clear thread. Threading the needle between consistent passions beats a scattered list of achievements.	Genuine Curiosity Knowing WHY you want a specific school — a professor, program, or research center — separates real applicants from students who want the name on a sweatshirt.
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Start Earlier Than You Think

Admissions doesn't start junior year. Students who stand out have been building their story since 9th grade.

9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
→ Map your course selections → Explore authentic interests → No-pressure campus visits → Counselor check-in (3–4 hrs)	→ Deepen focus activities → Take SAT/ACT diagnostic → Explore summer programs → Build on core interests → Consider dual enrollment/outside learning	→ Junior grades matter most → Targeted campus visits → Finalize list by year-end → Retake SAT/ACT as needed → Draft activities list → Draft essays over summer	→ Continue rigorous curriculum → Apply EA/ED in the fall → Final 10–15 school list → Essays = 100% your voice → Submit safety schools too



Application Mentor
YOUR STORY STARTS HERE

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