

HEO's 2026 Guide: Writing your US Apps

TELL NO STORY
BUT YOURS.



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what this guide covers



- **Key Application Info**
- **Writing the 5 Academic Honours**
- **Writing the 10 Activities**
- **Essays**
- **Important notes on Early Apps, agents, AI and National Service**

key application info



1) The application portals used

Common App: Common App (CA) is where you write and submit your applications. Pay attention to the CA deadlines of your respective universities, and ensure you submit your apps on time. Some schools, like the UCs and MIT, are on their own portals. Please follow these accordingly. For all other schools which have CA as an option, use only CA.

CIALFO: This platform will be synced to your CA account. It is where you request for teacher recommendations. As well, HEO will send through your required transcripts, recs and other school documents via CIALFO .

The CIALFO guide will be published by late Aug, in IVY HEO (Y6) and on RI's website (alumni) when this current cycle is done. Wait for this and create your CIALFO account then. Do **NOT** create accounts prior.

2) The deadlines to adhere to

All students **adhere to RI internal deadlines** for CIALFO submission. These are:

- **All Early apps (Fri 16 Oct 1700h)**
- **All Regular Decision apps (Mon 14 Dec 1700h).**

These deadlines are non-negotiable. HEO needs a firm list to send your documents in for timely consideration. On the above dates/times, you merely need to confirm your school choices in CIALFO. You may complete your CA apps and submit them by the respective deadlines of the universities.

Refer to the **Timelines guide** for all relevant deadlines.

UC applicants: The UCs have just one deadline, commonly in **end Nov**. This is submitted directly on the UC portal. Do check the UC website for the exact date (as yet TBC, May '26).

key application info



3) Approaching tutors for references

Most US apps require **three** tutor referees in all. This would be your Civics Tutor (as Counsellor), and two further subject tutors. Do not double-count your CT, please.

Approach **only Y56 teachers** who have taught you GCE A-Level subjects as your referees. This is to ensure you meet the minimum requirements of applications. (i.e., External coaches/mentors/CCA teachers do not allow you to meet this requirement).

Tip: A good time to approach teachers personally is in Aug-Sep. Do so politely, before you ping them on CIALFO. Kindly ping your tutors early, so your tutors have time to write well for all of you. The **last day** to ping teachers on CIALFO (for RD) is **20th Nov**. This is to give your tutors sufficient time to complete writing as school closes the week thereafter.

4) Three factors that make for a good app

a) Consideration of fit

Is the US a place you will thrive in and bloom well? Avoid applying out of FOMO or notions of prestige. Different states and different schools have their own microcultures. Do your research! This includes taking a clear-eyed look at your own records: your interests, proven abilities and values. Consider if the school you are looking at is right *for you*.

Also keep aware of current geopolitical tensions. It is not just about entry, but about the four years thereafter. Take on a challenge that you can manage healthfully.

key application info



b) Timeliness and thoughtfulness in writing

In order for apps to yield, proper writing is needed. This takes a lot of time, effort and self-reflection. You need to research into the universities, and match that with writing in a manner authentic to yourself. Each school has multiple essays, that require you to demonstrate fit. Do not underestimate the time needed for this self-examination and expression. **It is wise to start writing early, from Jun-Jul, at the very least, on the 5+10.** Avoid last minute apps.

Y6s: HEO's recommendation is 5-8 schools, max. Beyond this, quality of apps often suffer. A common misperception is that "more = better". This is wholly untrue. What is better, is taking on a number that you can cope healthfully with, that you can spend time and sincere effort on.

As well: AI is not a substitute for original thought. Do not for a moment imagine that it's difficult to pick out the voice of a machine from the voice of a *human*.

c) Consistency across what you say and do

It is not just about laundry-listing medals, or bragging. There is **no** model portfolio.

Rather, your activities and honours will showcase what you have done, giving inflections of personality and values. Your essays then fill out the portrait of you, by illuminating the whys, wherefores and learnings you have done. How you have developed as a whole person.

Consistency across the entire app is key to drawing this portrait of yourself. By **sense-making**, and connecting the whys with the whats, you gain consistency across what you say and do, reflecting the individual you are.

writing the 5 honours



Academic Honours refer to prizes & accolades won in a **specific academic discipline**, or for **all-rounded excellence in academia**.

In the Common App, you can list 5 Honours. This is under the Education section.

For each Honour: up to 100 characters to describe the Hon, state the year(s) awarded, and the level of recognition. These can be school-wide, nation-wide, region-wide or internationally.

Honours are from Sec 3 to Year 6 (the SG equivalent of Grades 9 to 12 in a US high school).

Tips:

- Prior to writing this, have a list of all your academic-related prizes, awards and achievements. Avoid spamming, curate what to include.
- If you have fewer than 5 Hons, then curate an appropriate list of schools. Be aware that if your list comprises of primarily top schools--where admission comprises the top 1-2% of the global population--the 5 Hons should not be difficult to fill in. This helps to ensure you are competitive globally.
- It's useful to give an idea of rank or percentile in describing your Hons. Avoid just naming the award: there is no context for your reader.

Examples of valid academic honours: science fair presentations & paper publications, ABRSM/Trinity certificates & diplomas, essay writing competitions, Olympiads and business/computing competitions. Edusave scholarships, any MOE scholarships (e.g., Humanities Scholarship), A*STAR JC scholarships, all-round academic excellence awards, subject prizes.

Examples which are not academic honours: sports/colours awards, character awards, leadership & community awards. (These can be talked about in your Activities or essays, if you want to demonstrate a different facet of yourself).

writing the 10 activities



In the 5 Hons, you give your readers a sense of academic exceptionalism. In the 10 Activities, you give a pen-pic of what is most important to you, as a **unique individual**.

Importantly: Activities are **not** synonymous with achievements merely. Use the 150 characters meaningfully to give inflections of whats, whys and hows. Consider: Why did you pursue the activity? What did you learn and how did the experience change you? What is your place in a community, and what do you bring to others? Reflect succinctly: bring life to yourself on paper. In our experience, many students gloss over the 10 Activities, effectively missing a great opportunity to **showcase personality**.

The details of what you write:

Remember the point about consistency? It is useful to draw out your records from Years 3-6. Your RI Journey, Raffles Digital Badges and CCA records will also be useful. As well, all the things you took part in outside of school. Pick out all that were meaningful to you as a person. Also have the years of participation, the intensity & duration of it. For alumni: it's useful to reflect on activities you have participated in, in the year(s) you have been out of school.

In Common App, for each Activity, you will:

- specify the activity type
- be given 50 characters for position/leadership description,
- 100 characters for the organization name,
- 150 characters to describe what you did.

In checkboxes and short fields, you indicate the years you took part, the no: of hours/week, and no: of weeks/year. You are also asked if you intend to participate in a similar activity in college: answer yes/no according to what you intend for this.

writing the 10 activities



Tips for writing the 10 activities

a) For Name/Title: your identity should come across. Titles like 'member' say little. What exact role did you play? How do you identify yourself? What is the noun, and what is the adjective that you would use?

b) For Description: Specific, concrete detail is useful in demonstrating the level of involvement and scale of impact. E.g., not just 'organised concerts' but 'organised 2 sellout concerts within 1 year'. Then: what was so important about this to you, or what did you learn? Add in a unique insight to yourself, be it about reason, motivation or learning. Avoid just laundry-listing. Instead, capture meaning, intent, learning. Do so succinctly. Make your reader interested in learning more about you, as a person!

c) Avoid repetition. If you have already specified your role, it is not necessary to repeat it in the description--save the character count for incisive insight.

d) Consciously use adjectives, verbs and nouns to convey dynamism, purpose and individuality. It is not just about the doing.

e) If you forget everything else, remember this: **People, not portfolios, are admitted.**

Done insightfully, your 10 Activities should be so unique, no one else could have written it except you.

Tell *your* story, no one else's.

writing the essays



Overarching:

There is a Common App (CA) essay which goes to all your schools. As well, supplementary essays for every school you choose. The Common App prompt is already known, and most schools will have their prompts out by mid-Aug. All of this is on CA.

As the CA essay goes to all your CA schools, it's useful to use this piece to reflect on something core to your identity, values, beliefs. **What is one story that is central to you, without which your identity would be lost?**

Note: The UCs and MIT are on their own portals, so the CA essay does not go to these schools. If you have UC/MIT apps alongside other schools, it can be useful to start first with the CA app, as this helps you clarify your thinking.

Questions to guide your thinking as you write:

- Who are you as an individual? What makes you stand out?
- With what intent do you do what you do?
- Why do you value what you value?
- What were the experiences that made you grow, how have you overcome adversity?
- How, why, and with what impact have you contributed to others and the community?
- Why do your values and principles align with the schools you are applying for?
- Why should they take you?
- What do you bring to a place, that no one else can?

writing the essays



Tips on writing essays:

- a) Do not underestimate the length of time needed to write and refine essays. Start early. In general, beginning in mid-Aug when the supplementary prompts are released is a good idea.
- b) Curate a practical number of schools you are able to write well for, without compromising on the A-Levels or NS/other commitments. **Y6s with NS will want to be mindful that if you accept a US offer, it equals commitment to enrol, hence be judicious in application.** For all Y6s in particular: HEO's recommendation is 5-8 schools. Less is perfectly fine.
- c) Avoid repetition between prompts. If two stories show but one facet of you, that's a missed opportunity! Similarly: consistency between your 5+10, and the essays.
- d) Relevance. You are writing to demonstrate alignment and fit with the university. It is not just about answering questions for the sake of answering!
- e) As hard as this may be, enjoy writing. After all, if you don't enjoy writing about yourself, why would your readers enjoy reading about you?

Word limits are there for a reason. Write with intentionality, clarity and succinctness.

important notes on Early Apps, agents, AI and National Service

On early apps:

Differentiate between Early Decision and Early Action (all types: Single Choice, Restricted, Unrestricted).

Early Decision (ED) is binding. This means you commit to attending the school if offered. You and your parents will sign to the commitment that you will accept, and withdraw from all other apps in all parts of the world. You are expected to adhere to what you sign on to.

As such, ED is for those who definitely want that one school and have the funds to attend. If unsure: apply for Regular Decision (RD) or other EA programmes.

Early Action (EA) is non-binding. This means that if you are offered, you have until Regular Decision deadline to choose whether to accept or not. If your school is an REA/SCEA, adhere to its conditions similarly.

For those considering Early apps: Consider if you are ready to submit your app by Oct/Nov. If you aren't, opt for RD instead! A strong app is defined by its quality, not its time status.

On use of agents and AI

You may be tempted to use ChatGPT or other LLM sources. **Do not.** In writing, the authentic heart matters. Where AI may be useful: in the *process* of ideating. For instance, if you need some words to choose between, or if you are stuck on how to phrase a certain line. Never wholesale.

In line with the US universities, HEO does not approve of the use of AI for essay-writing. We also do not approve of the use of private consultancies and agencies. Be aware that these do not necessarily operate in your best interests.

important notes on Early Apps, agents, AI and National Service

For those with NS

In general, all US universities will hold 2 years for those with NS, with the exception of UC Berkeley. Check specific websites for latest updates.

Do note that if you are offered and accept your offer, **it equates to a commitment to enrol**. Invariably, the T&Cs include a clause that you are not allowed to apply to any other university, in any part of the world, while your place is being held for you.

In all cases, you are expected to honour the commitment you signed on to.

HEO will continue to guide all alumni, until you place in university. Thus, for Y6s with NS: if you are not prepared to apply this year, that's fine! Find us next year, when you are ready.

All the best in applications. Do what is meaningful to you; remember that you are more valuable than any place you gain admission to. Be open to what opens to you.

Best and brightest wishes to all of you,
HEO