

# Applying to College 101

Course Workbook



**Penn**  
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

**↑ HEIGHTS**  
PHILADELPHIA



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## How to Make the Most of this Workbook

### How to Use this Workbook

Welcome to the *Applying to College 101* course workbook. This workbook compliments the online *Applying to College 101* course on Coursera. Your workbook is a private space to write your reflections, engage with activities, and build skills to be successful throughout your college application process. The activities in your workbook connect to lessons and offer another opportunity to deepen your learning. As you're taking the course, there will be moments that point you to activities in your workbook. When this happens, complete the activity in your workbook, and then return to the course for next steps.

Engaging with your workbook will look different depending on where you are in your college search journey. This workbook is designed for students who are planning to apply to college soon (11<sup>th</sup> graders and 12<sup>th</sup> graders), but the activities and videos can still be useful for students who are earlier in their college search journey as they plan for the future.

### If you're using this workbook online..

- We recommend saving a copy of this pdf in a safe place to refer to throughout the course—this might mean saving it on your computer or an online cloud.
- You will need to manually save this document so that you can refer to it as needed. We don't want your hard work to be lost!
- Text boxes will expand to scroll if you need more space to write.
- You shouldn't need any software to access the pdf, but if this workbook is inaccessible to you in its current format, please contact us at [College101@admissions.upenn.edu](mailto:College101@admissions.upenn.edu).

### If you're using a printed version of this workbook..

- It can easily be printed in black and white and filled in with your favorite pen or pencil.
- Feel free to use the extra pages in the back to take notes.
- We encourage you to keep it in a safe place—like a folder!

## Reflect: What are Your Motivations for Going to College?

The college application process is about reflection. People decide to go to college for a variety of reasons. You might be serving as a role model for your sibling or community. You might have a passion for a certain subject area. You might want to join a new community. Or maybe you are looking for a pathway to a specific career.

**Use the questions below to reflect on your motivations for going to college.**

- **What are you most excited about?**
- **How do you want to impact your future campus?**
- **What kind of communities are you hoping to join?**
- **How do you think college will shape your future?**

*We hope these questions can serve as a starting point to spark reflection. There's no need to engage with ALL the questions above, but feel free to answer the ones that speak to you.*



## Plan: Your College Application Timeline

Regardless of where you are in your college search journey, it's important to keep in mind your timeline for preparing your application and the deadlines for when to submit your materials—because they are often not flexible. Staying organized is really important as you apply to college, especially after being admitted. Take the time to practice these skills now and your future self will thank you for planning ahead!

**You can use the spaces below as a calendar to help you manage your time and prepare for key deadlines. Keep track of these dates in your personal calendar and set yourself reminders too!**

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## Checklist: Your College Application Materials

This checklist can help you understand all the application materials you will need to prepare yourself and other materials you may need to source from counselors, family members, or others within your support team.

**Use this checklist to keep track of all the materials you will need to prepare for your college applications.**

- College Application Forms**  
*Schools house their applications on different forms like the Common App or the Coalition for College App. Make sure you are using the appropriate one for the schools on your list.*
- Financial Aid Applications**  
*FAFSA, CSS Profile, and/or school-specific forms.*
- Application Deadlines**  
*For both your college applications and financial aid applications.*
- Application Fees and Fee Waivers**  
*Most schools will ask you to pay a fee to submit your application. Connect with your school counselor first to apply for a fee waiver for colleges on your list or ask a college admissions officer if you can waive the application fee.*
- High School Transcript**  
*You can request an unofficial copy of your transcript to see how your grades and courses are listed.*
- School Profile (Optional)**  
*Your high school has a profile that gives an overview of what's available in your school. You might want a copy of this to understand what Admissions Officers see when evaluating your transcript.*
- Standardized Testing (Optional)**  
*You might be required to submit standardized test scores to some of the colleges on your list, and other colleges might be test optional. Talk to your school counselor about how to submit your test scores with your applications.*
- Recommendation Letters**  
*Make sure to ask teachers who know you well and can speak to your academic interests. Give them enough time to write a good letter by asking early.*
- List of Activities**  
*All of your commitments outside of the classroom like athletics, clubs, responsibilities, and more.*
- Essays**  
*Personal statement, and some schools may ask you for supplemental essays, or short answers.*
- Interviews**  
*If schools on your list offer an opportunity to interview, you should strongly consider it. Not all schools will offer this option to applicants.*



## Reflect: How Do You Spend Your Time Outside the Classroom

Schools want to learn more about you: how you spend your time outside the classroom, what's important to you, and how you're involved in your community. Different college applications will ask you to list out your activities and may give you categories to help define them (*see examples below*).

- Academic
- Art
- Athletics
- Community Service
- Computer/Technology
- Cultural
- Dance
- Speech and Debate
- Environmental
- Faith-Based Communities
- Family Responsibilities
- Global Exchange Programs
- Journalism/Publication
- Junior R.O.T.C.
- LGBTQIA+ Clubs
- Music
- Research
- Robotics
- School Spirit
- Science/Math
- Student Government/Politics
- Theater/Drama
- Work

**Using the list above for inspiration, reflect on the following questions:**

**What activities are you involved in at your school?**



**What do you do for fun? Do you have any hobbies or activities that bring you joy?**

**Do you have responsibilities within your home, family, or community? This may include babysitting a sibling, taking care of members of your family, or being part of a faith-based community.**

**Do you have experience working—like family businesses, part or full-time jobs, internships, or other career-related activities?**

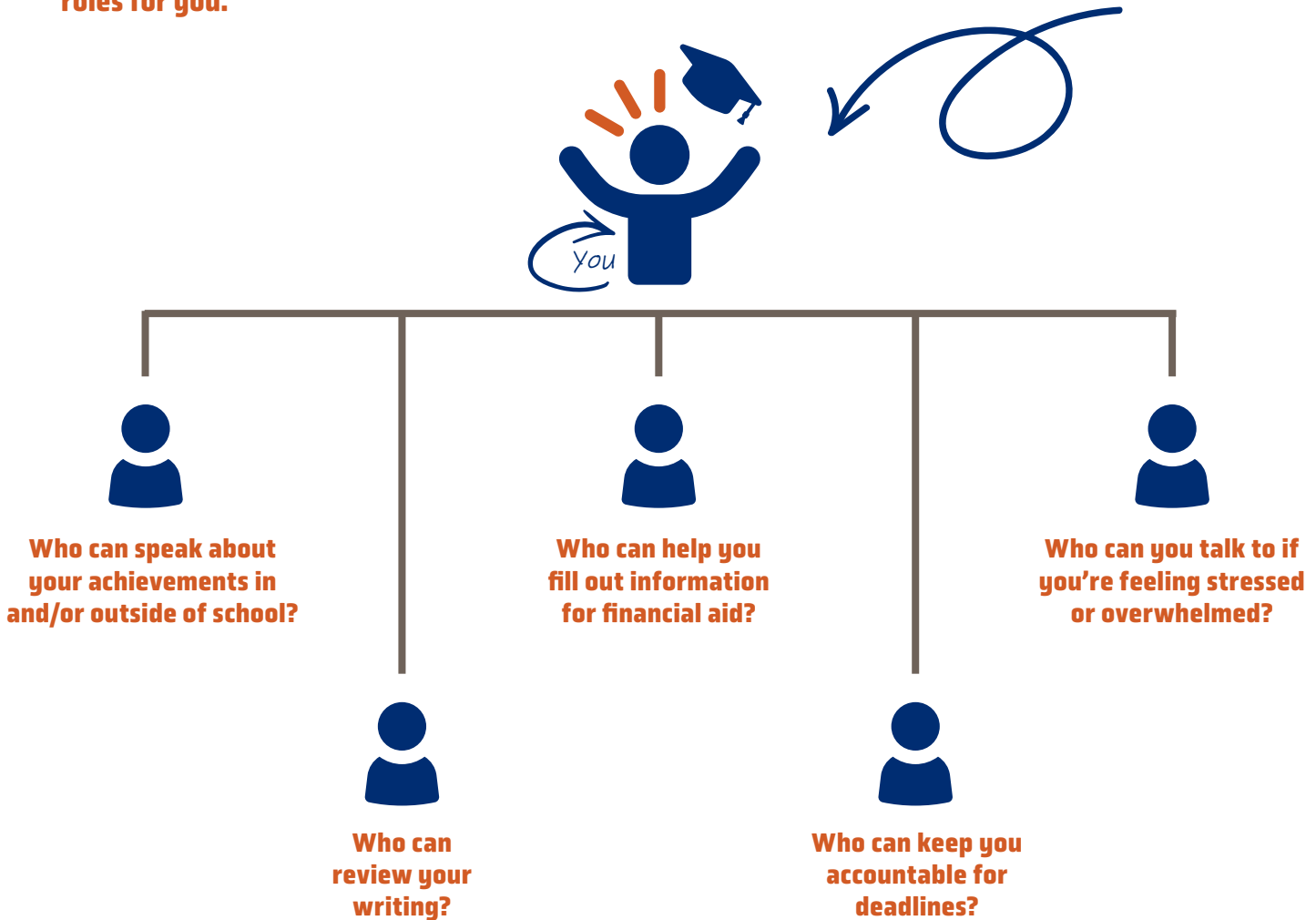
**Are there any other activities you pursue outside of school that you didn't list above?**

## Plan: List Out Your Support System

Your support system can play a big part in many areas of your college search. Your supporters may be members of your family, your community, your school, or part of your broader network of people that you know through various aspects of your life—coaches, neighbors, supervisors at work, friends, and so on.

We encourage you to think carefully and thoughtfully about who these people are, and to lean into the idea of involving them throughout your application process.

**Using the diagram below, fill out names of people you know who may be able to help support you through the college application process. There may be some people who fulfill multiple roles for you.**





## **Reflect: Writing A Note of Gratitude**

Applying to college can be stressful, and during those moments practicing gratitude for the folks who are supporting you through this journey can be helpful. There are so many people who have helped you get here, and they would love to know how they have encouraged you along the way. This is a great skill to practice now, as there will be opportunities to thank people who have helped you on your college journey.

**Choose a member of your support team from the Identifying Your Support System activity and practice writing a thank you note below.**

**Here are some suggestions to consider as you write your thank you note:**

- **Be specific in how this person has supported you and name what you are thanking them for.**
- **Be authentic and don't overthink it.**
- **This can be as long or as short as you want it to be, and you can write as many as you like.**

*You are welcome to share this note with the person you wrote it to — but no pressure! If you need more inspiration, see our “Thank You” note at the end of this workbook.*

## Reflect: “I - Statements” Chart

While you’re applying to college, you’re also learning more about yourself. This is an opportunity to reflect on what brings you joy, what you can imagine yourself doing in the future, and how you want to impact the world around you. Centering yourself in this process will help you prioritize what you want to get out of your college experience.

**Reflect on the I-Statements in the boxes below and fill in the blanks with your own responses. Use as many rows as you like. It can be helpful to recall your responses from the How You Spend Your Time Outside the Classroom reflection.**

I’m good at...	I love to spend my time doing...	I believe the world needs more...	I think I could sustain myself doing...

*Do you see any threads between the boxes you filled out?  
What stories can you tell about who you are?*

## Reflect: Explore Your Interests and Tell Your Story

The **I-Statement chart** may help you reflect on who you are, identify connections across your interests, and communicate your goals for college. You have the power to tell your own story in your college applications—through your personal statements, supplemental essays, lists of your activities, and maybe even interviews. Colleges want to learn about who you are and what kind of future community member you will be. Taking some time to explore your interests and reflect on what you care about can help you prepare for your college search.

### Reflect on what you wrote in each box in the I-Statements Chart.

- **Were there any responses that felt easy to write?**
- **Were there any responses that felt difficult to write?**
- **Do you see any connections across the boxes?**
- **What stories can you start to tell about who you are?**

*We hope these questions can serve as a starting point to spark reflection. There's no need to engage with ALL the questions above, but feel free to answer the ones that speak to you.*



*Refer back to this exercise as you practice connecting your story to the opportunities available at the schools you're applying to.*



## Reflect: Create your List of College Priorities

As you continue to explore different colleges, the list of schools that align with your goals may continue to change and become more specific. Finding the best college fit is all about understanding alignment. Alignment refers to how well a school's attributes matches what you are looking for—and that requires you to know yourself really well.

The list of college search categories below is not a complete list, but you can use these categories as a starting point when researching which schools might be a good fit for you. You can also consider these categories while using different college search engines.

**Use this activity to help you determine your priorities during your college search process. The first column lists some common college search categories students often think about. The second column offers questions to help you consider what's important for you in your college experience. Use the last column to write what your priorities are, and why they matter to you.**

College Search Categories	Questions to Consider	What are your priorities for college? Why is this important for you?
Cost and fees	Will this school be able to support you financially? Is the estimated cost affordable for you?	
Available academic offerings	Does the school have academic programs that align with your ever-evolving interests?	
Distance from home	How easy or difficult is it to get home from campus? Do you want to live on or off-campus?	
Size of campus	How big or small do you want your campus to feel? Are you looking for a larger research university or a smaller liberal-arts environment?	
Location and surrounding environment	Do you want your campus to feel more urban within a city, in the suburbs, or more rural with access to nature?	
Academic support and career services	How does the school support your academic goals, learning, and career interests?	
Community and campus life	Do you feel a sense of belonging? Are there clubs, activities, or volunteer opportunities that you're interested in?	
Safety	What does safety mean to you? How safe do you feel on the campus?	



Feel free to add your own categories, priorities, and reflections with the free spaces above!

## Reflect: Create Your List of Potential Colleges

It's time to start compiling a list of colleges to apply to! You likely have some questions you'd like answered to better determine if the colleges you are considering are a good fit for you. There may be some questions you can find answers for through your own research—like on admissions websites or social media channels.

**Use the spaces below to start filling in more information about why you're interested in each school on your list.**

*Make sure to refer to this activity as you compare and contrast what you learn about each school throughout your college search process.*

**SCHOOL:** \_\_\_\_\_

- **How does this school align with your priorities for your college experience?**
- **What questions do you have for current students, admissions officers, or financial aid staff from this school?**

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**SCHOOL:** \_\_\_\_\_

- **How does this school align with your priorities for your college experience?**
- **What questions do you have for current students, admissions officers, or financial aid staff from this school?**



## Checklist: Write Your Essays, Activities List, and More!

The application is an opportunity to share more about yourself through your writing. You will be responsible for writing essays, preparing your list of activities, and giving any additional context about yourself in your application. This is your way to tell an admissions committee about you in your own words. We recommend reviewing this checklist before you write your first drafts (if possible), and definitely after you've completed drafts of your essays to make sure you didn't forget anything important.

### College Essays

You've probably written an essay for a class, but the essays you write for your college application may feel different because they're for a new audience. The admissions officers who are reviewing your applications are not focused on grading your essays, rather, they are reading your writing to better understand who you are and what makes you a great fit for that school.

For each school you apply to, you will need to submit a personal statement, but some schools' applications may also ask for specific supplemental essays that typically ask a question like "why are you interested in applying to our school?"

**Below is a checklist to keep in mind as you prepare your essays for your applications. Use this checklist to ensure that your writing is effective and represents you authentically.**

- Does your writing answer the prompt or question asked?**
- Are you answering the question authentically?** *It's important to write from your own perspective, and be sure to create original writing that is not plagiarized from another source.*
- Are you considering your audience?** *Have you chosen an appropriate topic? Will someone with little context about you be able to understand and learn about you?*
- What do you want your reader to learn about you?** *Consider what you want your reader to learn about you from your writing.*
- Did you proofread your writing?** *Read everything aloud to try to catch any mistakes that spellcheck may miss.*
- Does your writing have structure?** *Are your essays easy to follow, or would it confuse your reader?*
- Have you written within the word count?** *Keep in mind how much space you will have to share your essay and make the most of it.*
- Have you asked someone else to review your writing?** *Ask who you identified from the "List Out Your Support Team" activity what they learned about you through your essay, and whether your writing sounds like your voice.*

### Supplemental Essays

**Here's some specific tips if your application requires supplemental essays or short answer prompts:**

- Is your writing focusing on alignment?** *This is an opportunity to show how well a school's offerings may match with what you are looking for and why. Focus less on what makes the school so great, and more on why it's great for YOU!*
- Does the detail in your writing show that you have done your research?** *While there might be similarities between schools on your list, try to draft responses that are unique for how you connect to each school's academic and social offerings. Make use of the resources to demonstrate your knowledge of a campus community.*
- Did you read and fully answer the question?** *Schools signal what's important to them by the questions that they ask, so make sure you are offering the information they are looking for.*



## Your Activities

“Activities” refers to everything you do outside of the classroom. These activities give additional insight into who you are as a whole person, not just as a student. Some items on your list might be things you choose to do, and others might be responsibilities.

Sharing your activities in your college applications reveals aspects of your personality, your skills, and gives insight into how you might contribute to a college’s community.

**Take the time to polish your activities section of your application using the checklist below:**

- Did you spell out all acronyms?** *Sometimes an admissions officer won’t know what a club’s acronym stands for, so be sure to spell out the whole thing.*
- Did you list the amount of time you spend engaging with each activity?** *Writing out the number of hours spent on each activity helps colleges understand the depth of your involvement and impact.*
- Did you clearly list your role/responsibility within the activity?** *It can be helpful to name your role within the activity i.e., “Vice President”, or “member”.*
- Did you give details about your participation, and list numbers where possible?**
- Have you fully captured how you spend your time outside the classroom?** *Is there anything missing from your list of activities? Do you need to use an Additional Information section to give more context?*

## Sharing Additional Information

There are other opportunities where you can share information with schools. Schools only know as much as you tell them. To be your own best advocate, you can give admissions officers more context for reviewing your application by sharing additional information in your college application, in a letter, in an email, or during an interview. These documents are not required, but your self-advocacy can help give admissions officers a fuller picture of who you are.

- **Is there additional context you can provide about how your time is spent outside of the classroom?**
- **Do you have a long commute to school, or responsibilities within your home or community that may prevent you from engaging in certain activities?**
- **Has there been a big change in your life that has impacted your grades or participation in activities?**
- **Is there context about your school that you want to provide?**

Thank you for taking the time to engage meaningfully with this workbook!

Thank you for the time, energy, and thoughtfulness that you put into this every step of the way. We hope this workbook has been a useful exercise for practicing organization and a meaningful space for reflection. We also hope that you take a moment to reflect on everything you've learned—about the college search process, resources you can turn to, your support systems, and about you. We're so excited for your journey!

On behalf of Penn Admissions and Heights Philadelphia, thank you. We believe in you and hope this workbook has given you even more new reasons to believe in yourself. You've made it to the end of the workbook, but this is just the beginning of your journey! Good luck! You've got this!



Need to get in touch  
with us?

Email us at  
[collegel01@admissions.upenn.edu](mailto:collegel01@admissions.upenn.edu)







**Notes:**

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