

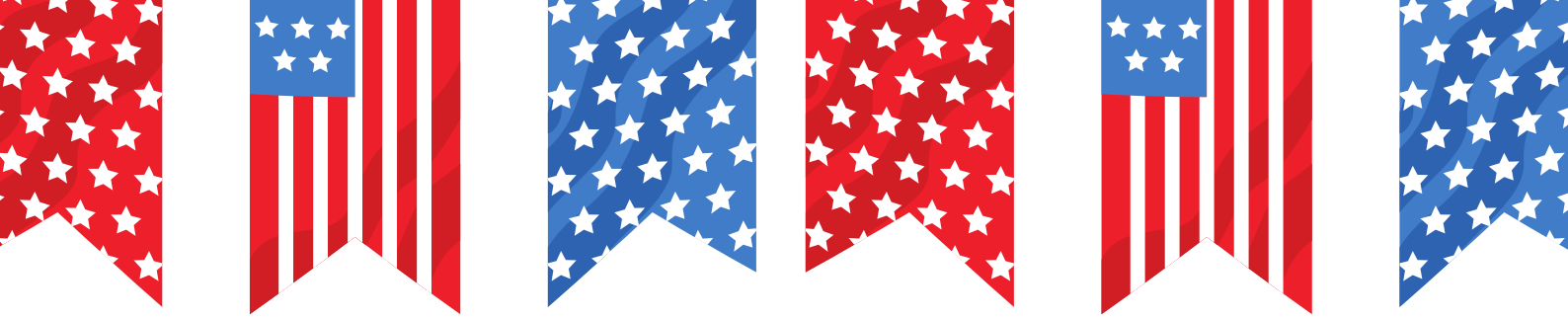
# **HEO'S**

## **2025 GUIDE TO WRITING FOR YOUR US APPS**

It usually takes more than three  
weeks to prepare a good impromptu  
speech. -Mark Twain

*Are you ready?*





# THIS GUIDE COVERS

- Key Application Info
- Writing the 5 Academic Honours
- Writing the 10 Activities
- Essays
- Notes on Early Apps, agents and NS



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# Key Application Info

## Portals & Deadlines

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### The Application Portals

**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 unique portals. Please follow these accordingly. For all other schools which have CA as an option, **to 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 mid-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.**



### 2025 deadlines to adhere to

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

- **All Early apps (Fri 17 Oct 1700h)**
- **All Regular Decision apps (Mon 15 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.**

Students will want to note that UCs have just one deadline: **30 Nov.**



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# Key Application Info

## What makes a good app

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### Readiness and fit

Given the current geopolitical and social climate in the US, it is wise for students to first and foremost consider the environment you can thrive in, and to keep a close watch on geopolitical currents.

Be prepared to deal with uncertainty and fluxes, some of which can occur on the spur of the moment given rapid policy changes. Leaving aside politics, there is also the social aspect to consider, in a culture increasingly experiencing polarisation. Thus, question well what you are able to take on now, **and** are prepared to take on in your university years, **before** you initiate US apps.

Your key question: **is the US right now an environment you are ready to take on for four years, and can thrive in?**



### Timeliness and thoughtfulness

US apps take a LOT of time, effort and money. You'll need to do your research into schools, write meaningful essays for every single choice, in a timely manner. The research and writing will take months of effort, so if you are considering a US app, **start early. This means from as early as June-July, you will want to shortlist your schools and begin drafting your 5+10.**

**Healthfully take on what you can manage in Sem 2, based on your own ability to manage. Do not apply simply because others are applying!**

**HEO's recommendation: 5-8 universities, tops.** It's fine to apply for fewer. In general, quality of apps is inversely proportional to quantity of apps.

A common misperception is that applying to more schools equates more chances. This is untrue. Each school values different qualities and personalities. Even if the same quality is valued, it is not necessarily in the same way. Essays that work for one school, rarely work for another wholesale. Thus, curate a meaningful list, so that apps can yield and the process is enjoyable.



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# Key Application Info

## What makes a good app

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### In writing: originality and authenticity

**Do:** write your application yourself. This *will* be hard, as it entails self-reflection, and authenticity. *Your voice* is what matters. No one writes you like you.

**Don't:** leave it to others or AI to write your story. Artifice is not the same as authenticity: a false voice has a hollow ring to it, and readers can tell.

**Writing a US app is really a journey of self-discovery.** In putting together your app, you fundamentally answer these questions: Why and to what end have you pursued what you pursued? What have you learnt, and what have you given in return? For whom, what and why do you live?

**Who are you, as an individual?**



### Consistency between what you say and what you have done

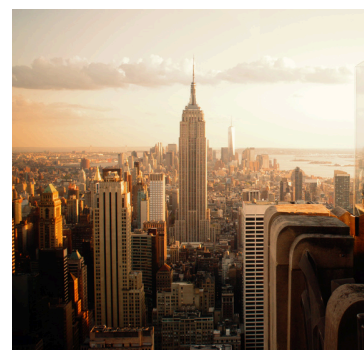
It is not just about writing on what you think the schools are looking for, or laundry-listing medals. **There is no model portfolio.**

Rather, your activities and honours will showcase what you have done, and your essays fill out the portrait of you, by illuminating the reasons, motivations and learning behind all you have done. **Consistency** across the entire app is key to drawing the portrait of yourself. By **sense-making**, and really figuring out the whys, you will enable a genuine consistency, that reflects the individual you are.

### Knowledge of the schools

In determining match, it's important to know what the school is looking for, how and why you fit in. Each school's website is highly telling of what they look for. Take time to read well and consider why your values, talents and personality aligns with the schools.

In writing, what you are really demonstrating is the **fit** with the school, in terms of alignment of values, principles and beliefs: the sum of who you are.



# Writing the 5 Academic Honours

## What is an academic honour?

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: you have up to 100 characters to describe the Honour won, state the year(s) you were awarded, and the level of recognition. These can be at school-wide, nation-wide, region-wide or the international levels.

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

**Tip:** Prior to writing this, it is useful to 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, consider curating an appropriate list of schools. Be aware that if your list comprises of top schools, where admission comprises the top 1-2% of the global population, the 5 Hons should not be difficult to fill in. This is to ensure you are competitive globally.



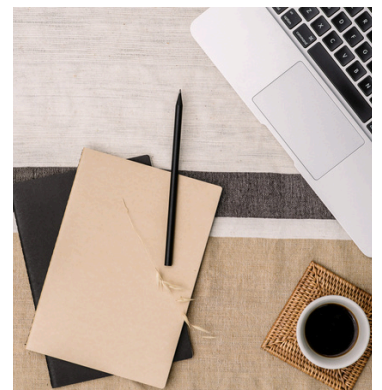
## Examples in the local context

**Examples of valid academic honours:** science fair presentations & paper publications, ABRSM/Trinity certificates & diplomas, essay writing competitions, Olympiads and related 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 should be talked about in your Activities or essays, if you want to demonstrate a different facet of yourself).

## Three tips for writing your Hons

- Avoid acronyms that a foreign reader will not understand.
- Include **specific detail, so the level of competition and degree of excellence** is captured. E.g., “Awarded: Gold” does not say as much about the degree of excellence as “Awarded Gold: 1 of 10 in a field of 2,000.”
- Should you have more than 5 Hons, it’s useful to select what best represents you **as a person**, especially in context of your 10 activities and your essays.





# 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.

To note: **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.

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



## The details of what you write

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.



## 5 Tips for a Great 10!

- **For Name/Title:** your identity should come across. Titles like 'member' say little. What exact role did you play? *How* do you identify yourself?
- **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.**
- **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.
- **Consciously use adjectives, verbs and nouns** to convey dynamism, purpose and individuality. It is not just about the doing.
- If you forget everything else, remember this: **People, not portfolios, are admitted.**





# Essays

*The empires of the future are the empires of the mind.*  
-Sir Winston Churchill



## The details

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.



**Tip 1:** 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.

**Tip 2: Curate a practical number of schools that you are able to write well for.** Avoid putting in so many apps that you get frazzled and meaning is lost.

**HEO's recommendation is 5-8 schools max.** Less is perfectly fine.

**Tip 3: As hard as this may be, enjoy writing. Try.** After all, if you don't enjoy writing about yourself, why would your readers enjoy reading about you?

## On use of ChatGPT & other AI

You may be tempted to use ChatGPT to write essays. **Don't.** In writing, the authentic heart matters. There's also the issue of open source--**what you feed in becomes fodder for others.**

**Generated writing rings hollow: experienced readers pick this up in a heartbeat.**

Where AI may be useful: on generation of ideas, if for instance, you need some words to choose between, or if you are stuck on how to phrase a certain line. In all cases, **never** put your entire essay into an AI software.



# Essays

*We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.*

-T.S. Eliot

## As you write: the big picture

Be aware that you are **writing to demonstrate fit with the university**. Thus, consider, what aspects of yourself are a match? These should be the focal points of your various essays, regardless of the prompts. **Never answer without relevance to the self *and* school.**

**Consistency** across the entire app is critical. Your activities & honors already represent what you have done. Now, explain the *whys* behind your pursuits, the *hows* you have grown and learnt.

**Avoid repetition** between prompts. There is no need to use 2 essays to demonstrate one quality about yourself.



## As you write: some questions to think about

- Who are you as an individual? What makes you stand out?
- 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 can you give to make their place better than it already is?**

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



# Notes on Early Apps, agents & NS

## Note 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.** This is **not** to be taken lightly. 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 Early/Regular status.**

## Note on agents

**In line with the US universities, HEO does not approve of the use of private consultancies and agencies. Be aware that these do not necessarily operate in *your* best interests.**



## Note 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. 😊

*People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did.  
But people will never forget how you made them feel.*  
-Maya Angelou

***All the best in writing your story!***