

Personal Insight Questions (PIQ) vs the Common App Essay

PGHS Counseling
September 2025

Senior Shorts Information Series

University of California (UC) Personal Insight Questions

What You May Know Already

Comprehensive review

- **13 factors** that allow the Office of Admissions to evaluate students' **achievements in light of opportunities available** to them.
- Responses should provide readers with information that **add value** to their **comprehensive review**.
- While all UC campuses use the same factors to evaluate applications, they often **apply these factors differently**.
- **First-year comprehensive review** ★

The 13 points of comprehensive review are:

1. ~~Grade-point average~~
2. ~~Performance in and number of courses beyond minimum a-g requirements~~
3. ~~UC-approved honors courses and advanced courses~~
4. ~~Eligibility in the Local Context (ELC)—CA residents only~~
5. ~~Quality of senior-year program of study~~
6. ~~Academic opportunities in California high schools~~
7. **Outstanding performance in one or more academic subject areas**
 - a. For Engineering at Berkeley, Math/Science is important (Prompt #6)
8. **Achievements in special projects**
9. ~~Improvement in academic performance~~
10. **Special talents, achievements and awards**
11. **Participation in educational preparation programs**
12. **Academic accomplishment in light of life experiences**
13. ~~Geographic location~~

The crossed out areas of review are likely to be elements covered elsewhere in a student's application—in other words, probably not in the PIQs. Those bolded are the ones a student likely needs to address within the PIQs. As a student, ask yourself: Am I checking most of these boxes? Better still, how could I be checking *more* of these boxes using my PIQs? (Example: Could I perhaps write about an academic subject, if I haven't already?)

How and why

How do UCs use the PIQs?

Each question aligns to one or more of the **comprehensive review** criteria that campuses consider in their admission decisions.

All questions have **equal value** in the admission selection process.

Yes – we read all responses! The UCs want to get to know the student **beyond** grades and extracurricular activities.

Why do we use the PIQs?

This is the student's **conversation** with the UCs to show who they are and what matters to them the most.

We use the PIQs to better understand the student's **experience** and their **individual circumstances**.

It's about getting to know the student's personality, background, interests and achievements in their **own unique voice**.

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Decisions, decisions...

Selecting the best prompt

Students should feel empowered to choose what they want to talk about.

If an answer doesn't come naturally, encourage your students to choose another prompt.

This should not be forced!

Deciding what to highlight

Students should use the prompts to highlight important details about themselves.

All four PIQs should tell us something new and different.



Remember the content is more important than the topic.

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Getting started

Student activity idea:

Encourage students to answer the prompt out loud and record their answer. The transcript of this recording can serve as a great first draft!

Once the student can identify their key point, we can then help them build the rest of their response.

What to avoid:

- ✗ Rhetorical questions
- ✗ Famous quotes
- ✗ Definitions
- ✗ Hook or lead-in sentences
- ✗ "Flowery" language

Crafting the response

Bring student stories to life...

Conversational in writing

Responses should read naturally in the student's voice.

"I" and "my" statements are welcomed and encouraged.

Personal and genuine

While others may play a pivotal role, others should not take the limelight.

The student should be the main character!

Relevant to experiences

Responses should address a recent experience or a dramatically impactful past event.

Students can also discuss future aspirations!

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...with a little **CPR!**

Using Artificial Intelligence

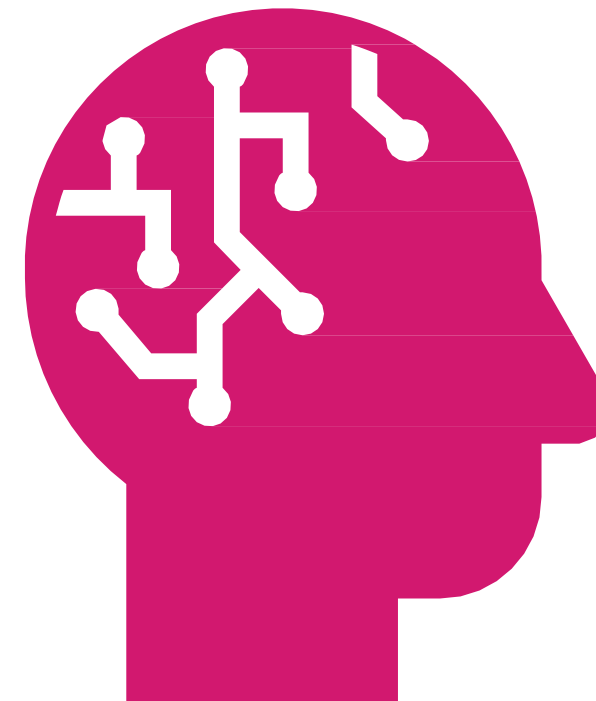
AI writing tools

If used thoughtfully, AI tools might assist in the early stages of the writing process. But students should ensure that their final PIQ responses are entirely their own in voice, substance, and reflection.

AI is not a replacement for a student's own words!

Encourage students to write authentically in their responses — we want to admit a human, not a robot!

It is possible that these tools may pull content from other sources (i.e., plagiarized content) which can result in cancellation due to plagiarism.



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Personal Insight Questions Basics

- Students select to answer 4 of a possible 8 questions.
- There is a 350 word maximum per response.
- Students are directed to select the questions that will provide the most information about them.
- All questions are given equal consideration. There is no advantage or disadvantage to choosing one question over another. The questions are numbered, not ranked.
- When sharing examples, explain why they are relevant to the person you are today. Focus on the present and or recent past.

8 Personal Insight Questions: Select 4 Responses

1. **Leadership:** Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influences others, helped resolve disputes, or contributed to group efforts over time.
2. **Creativity:** Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.
3. **Talent/Skill:** What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed it and demonstrated that talent over time?
4. **Educational Opportunity or Barrier:** Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant education opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.
5. **Challenge:** Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement.
6. **Subject that Inspires You:** Think about an academic subject that inspires you. Describe how you have furthered this interest inside and/or outside of the classroom.
7. **Community Contribution:** What have you done to make your school or community a better place?
8. **Strong Candidate:** Beyond what has already been shared in your application, what do you believe makes you a strong candidate for admissions to the University of California?

What You May Not Know

Value-added responses

- Focus is on the impact on the student and/or the impact they have on others
- Centers self in the response
 - Uses “I” and “my” statements
- Provides specific examples
 - Specific or tangible examples that focus on the decisions, action, and/or impact of the student.

Missed opportunity responses

- Does not provide much context about the student’s experience
- Focuses more on structure than content
 - Most of the response is focused on the story/setting the scene when the focus should be how the situation has impacted them
- Centers others’ narratives rather than their own

Pitfalls to Avoid

- 1. Impressionistic or creative writing**
 - Avoid **hooks, quotes, excessive metaphors, and similes.**
 - Be direct and to the point as if speaking with an admissions representative.
- 2. Hardship without context**
 - If the hardship is mentioned but has yet to be processed or reflected upon within the context of the student experience, it may be best not to write about it.
- 3. Themes**
 - Do not weave all responses into an overall theme.
- 4. Repetition**
 - Take advantage of the four responses to tell more about yourself.

Resources

- How to answer UC's Personal Insight Questions ★
- Personal Insight Questions Guide (English) ★
- Personal Insight Questions Guide (Spanish) ★
- Personal Insight Questions | UC Admissions ★

Guidance for Each PIQ from the UC

Personal Insight Questions | UC Admissions ★

Q1: Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes or contributed to group efforts over time.

1. **Things to consider:** A leadership role can mean more than just a title. It can mean being a mentor to others, acting as the person in charge of a specific task, or taking the lead role in organizing an event or project. Think about what you accomplished and what you learned from the experience. What were your responsibilities?
2. Was there a time you stepped up and took the role of leader in a group, team, family and/or work setting? Briefly describe the experience, then explore what that experience meant to you.
3. How did you grow from that leadership experience? What, if any impact did that have in other places in your life?

TIP: You do not need to define leadership.

Q2: Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.

1. **Things to consider:**

- What does creativity mean to you?
- Do you have a creative skill that is important to you?
- What have you been able to do with that skill?
- If you used creativity to solve a problem, what was your solution?
 - What are the steps you took to solve the problem?

2. How does your creativity influence your decisions inside or outside the classroom? Does your creativity relate to your major or a future career?

Q3: What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?

1. **Things to consider:** If there is a talent or skill that you're proud of, this is the time to share it. You don't necessarily have to be recognized or have received awards for your talent (although if you did and you want to talk about it, feel free to do so).
 - Why is this talent or skill meaningful to you?
2. Does the talent come naturally or have you worked hard to develop this skill or talent? Does your talent or skill allow you opportunities in or outside the classroom? If so, what are they and how do they fit into your schedule?

TIP: You may have always had this talent or skill but the UC hopes you will focus your answer on the present or recent past when it relates to this skill.

Q4: Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.

1. **Things to consider:** An educational opportunity can be anything that has added value to your educational experience and better prepared you for college.
 - For example, participation in an honors or academic enrichment program, or enrollment in an academy that's geared toward an occupation or a major, or taking advanced courses that interest you; just to name a few.
2. If you choose to write about educational barriers you've faced, how did you overcome or strive to overcome them? What personal characteristics or skills did you call on to overcome this challenge? How did overcoming this barrier help shape who you are today?

Q5: Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?

1. **Things to consider:** A challenge could be personal, or something you have faced in your community or school. Why was the challenge significant to you? This is a good opportunity to talk about any obstacles you've faced and what you've learned from the experience. Did you have support from someone else or did you handle it alone?
2. If you're currently working your way through a challenge, what are you doing now, and does that affect different aspects of your life? For example, ask yourself, How has my life changed at home, at my school, with my friends or with my family?

TIP: While your challenge can be personal, we are asking how it impacted your high school academic achievement.

Q6: Think about an academic subject that inspires you. Describe how you have furthered this interest inside and/or outside of the classroom.

1. **Things to consider:** Many students have a passion for one specific academic subject area, something that they just can't get enough of. If that applies to you, what have you done to further that interest? Discuss how your interest in the subject developed and describe any experience you have had inside and outside the classroom such as volunteer work, internships, employment, summer programs, participation in student organizations and/or clubs and what you have gained from your involvement.
2. Has your interest in the subject influenced you in choosing a major and/or future career? Have you been able to pursue coursework at a higher level in this subject (honors, AP, IB, college or university work)? Are you inspired to pursue this subject further at UC, and how might you do that?

Q7: What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?

1. **Things to consider:** Think of community as a term that can encompass a group, team or a place like your high school, hometown or home. You can define community as you see fit, just make sure you talk about your role in that community. Was there a problem that you wanted to fix in your community?
2. Why were you inspired to act? What did you learn from your effort? How did your actions benefit others, the wider community or both? Did you work alone or with others to initiate change in your community?

TIP: Even small changes can have a big impact. Do not include links. Readers cannot search for your accomplishments online. Explain your contribution without external factors.

Q8: Beyond what has already been shared in your application, what do you believe makes you a strong candidate for admissions to the University of California?

1. **Things to consider:** If there's anything you want us to know about you but didn't find a question or place in the application to tell us, now's your chance. What have you not shared with us that will highlight a skill, talent, challenge or opportunity that you think will help us know you better?
2. From your point of view, what do you feel makes you an excellent choice for UC? Don't be afraid to brag a little.

TIP: The UC does not review unsolicited supplemental information (LOR, transcripts, resumes, etc.). Think of this question as a chance to add context or clarification about what we will find in your application.

Let's Review: Additional Comments

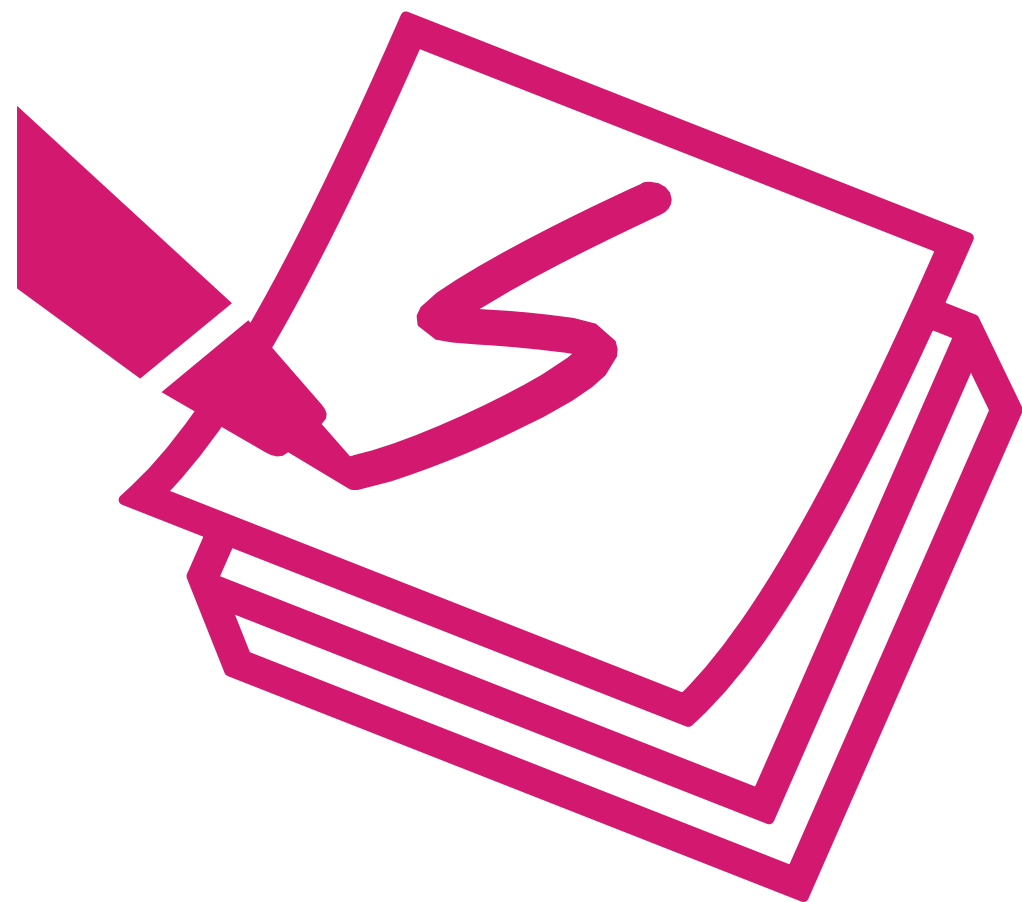
Personal insight Additional comments



* required

If there's anything else you want us to know about you, now's your chance. But remember, you should use this space only if you want to describe anything that you have not had the opportunity to include elsewhere in the application. This shouldn't be an essay, but rather a place to explain unusual personal or family circumstances, or anything that may be unclear in other parts of the application.

Additional comments logistics



Keep it brief

- This section is not required, but available if additional information/context is needed
- There is a space limit and is meant to be brief

Where students will find it

- After the 'Academic history' section
- After the 'PIQ' section

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Utilizing the additional comments

Additional comments are:

- Used to provide important additional details and/or context
- An optional opportunity to share additional details that cannot be found elsewhere in their application

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Additional comments — Academic history

Examples on how students can use the Additional comments after the Academic history:

- Clarifying unusual grading systems or scales
- Explanations for not being able to enroll into a certain course
- Changes in curriculum
- School or student name change
- Gap year
- Unusual decline in grades

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UC Personal Insight Question vs the Common App Personal Statement

Common App Essay

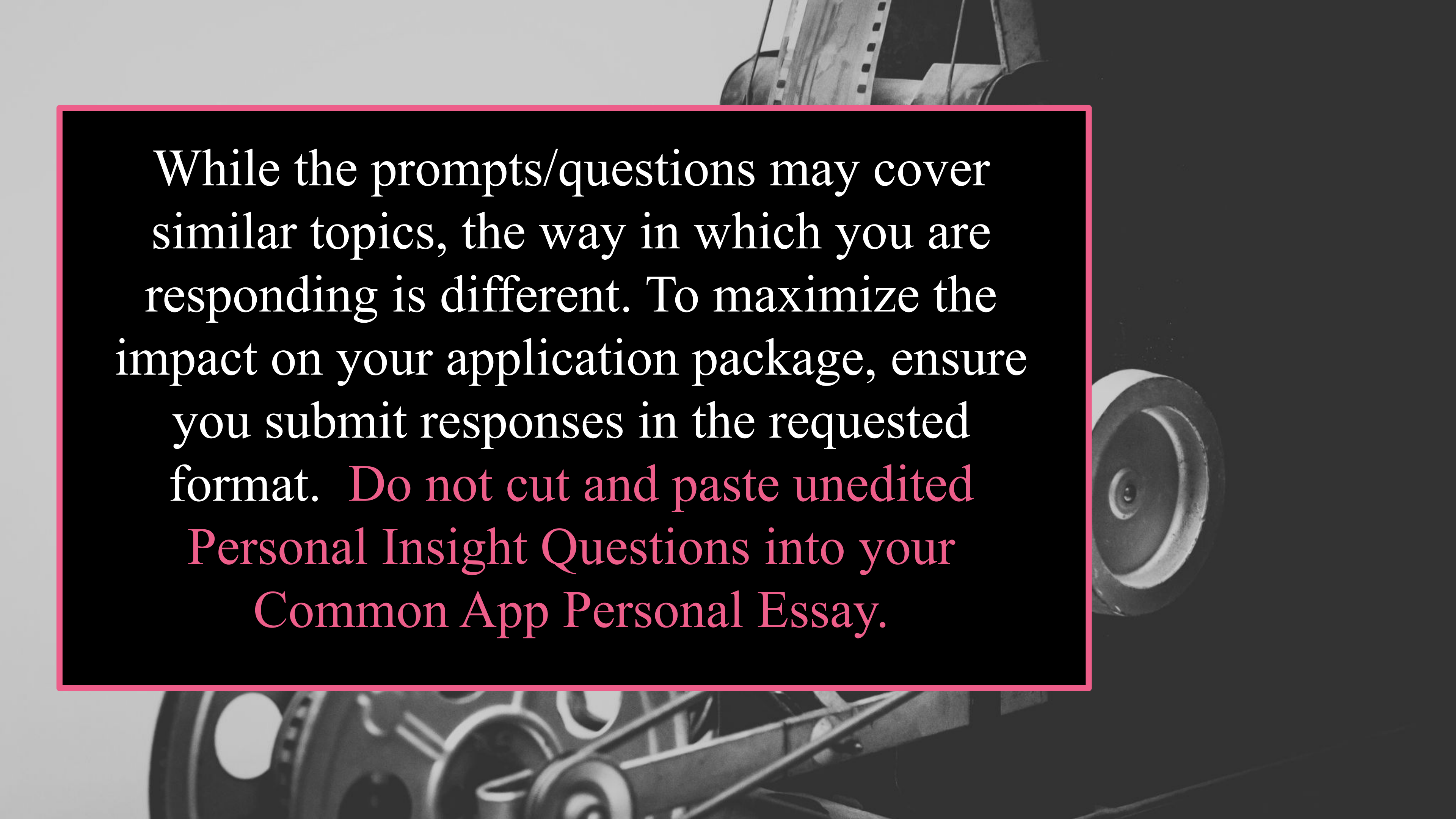
The key difference between a UC Personal Insight Question (PIQ) and a Common App essay is that the PIQ is a series of shorter, more focused prompts designed to reveal specific aspects of your background and experiences, while the Common App essay is a single, longer narrative that aims to provide a holistic view of who you are as a person, often with more creative flexibility in storytelling.

Common App Personal Statement vs. UC Personal Insight Questions (PIQs) ★

Personal Statements vs UC Personal Insight Questions

	Personal Statement	Personal Insight Questions
Where do you apply?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Common App (usually), also Coalition App and Common Black College App	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• On the UC website
Format	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1 essay, standard margins	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 4 written responses (called "personal insight questions")
Length	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Typically 500-650 words	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 350 words each (minimum of 250 words)
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To demonstrate the skills, qualities, values, interests you'll bring to college	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To correspond to the 13 points of comprehensive review
Tone	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More personal, sometimes creative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More factual, informational
Essential qualities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Core values, insight, vulnerability, craft	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Information, clarity, actions taken, growth, lessons learned
Style & grammar	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Important elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not considered in the evaluation process (but also not a reason to be sloppy)
Introduction & conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can make for a "next-level" essay, taking it from good to wow!	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not 100% necessary if no room



The background of the slide features a dark, monochromatic image of a film reel and its associated mechanical components, such as the film strip and reels, creating a cinematic or technical aesthetic.

While the prompts/questions may cover similar topics, the way in which you are responding is different. To maximize the impact on your application package, ensure you submit responses in the requested format. **Do not cut and paste unedited Personal Insight Questions into your Common App Personal Essay.**

Common App Essay Basics

- The Common App essay is your primary writing sample within the Common Application. **All your prospective schools that accept the Common App** will read this essay to understand your character, background, and value as a potential student.
 - **Save college names for supplemental essays**
- 250-650 word limit
 - At least 500 words is generally considered effective
- Telling your story ★ Common App Essay Flyer
- Breaking down all 7 Common App essay prompts | Common App ★ Video

Q1: BACKGROUND Common App Personal Essay Prompt

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

Think about:

- Your community, environment, family, and culture
- What you're deeply curious about and how you spend your time
- What makes you proud

Ask yourself:

- What's missing from the rest of my application?
- Is there context to help the colleges understand who I am?

Q2: CHALLENGE Common App Personal Essay Prompt

1. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

Think about:

- All obstacles: big, small, personal, and societal
- Hardships faced by family or friends that also impacted you
- Unresolved challenges you're still struggling with

Ask yourself:

- How did I cope? How did I grow?
- Who helped me?

Q3: BELIEF Common App Personal Essay Prompt

1. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?

Think about:

- Anywhere you spend time: school, clubs, work, home, place of worship
- Everyone you interact with: friends, teammates, family, teachers, coaches

Ask yourself:

- Did the experience clarify or change my values?
- What was the impact on my relationships?
- Did I surprise myself or anyone else?

Q4: GRATITUDE Common App Personal Essay Prompt

1. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?

Think about:

- All types of interaction: Compliments, criticism, gifts, advice, support
- People who know you well and people who don't

Ask yourself:

- What made the interaction surprising?
- How did I feel?
- How did I react?

Q5: ACCOMPLISHMENT Common App Personal Essay Prompt

1. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

Think about:

- The full range of your achievements, both public and private
- Small or everyday experiences that had a powerful impact on you
- Times when you were surprised by what you learned or discovered

Ask yourself:

- How did I change?
- How can I continue to grow?
- How can I share what I learned with others?

Q6: TOPIC Common App Personal Essay Prompt

1. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?

Think about:

- How you choose to spend your free time
- Your hobbies, your classes
- What you read, what you write, what you create

Ask yourself:

- How did my curiosity start?
- What does this interest tell others about me?
- What does this interest tell me about myself?

Q7: CREATE YOUR OWN Common App Personal Essay Prompt

1. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

Think about:

- What you want to share, not what you think colleges want to hear
- Topics that reveal who you are and what matters to you

Ask yourself:

- Does this essay provide new information to my colleges?
- Is there anything left unsaid in my application?

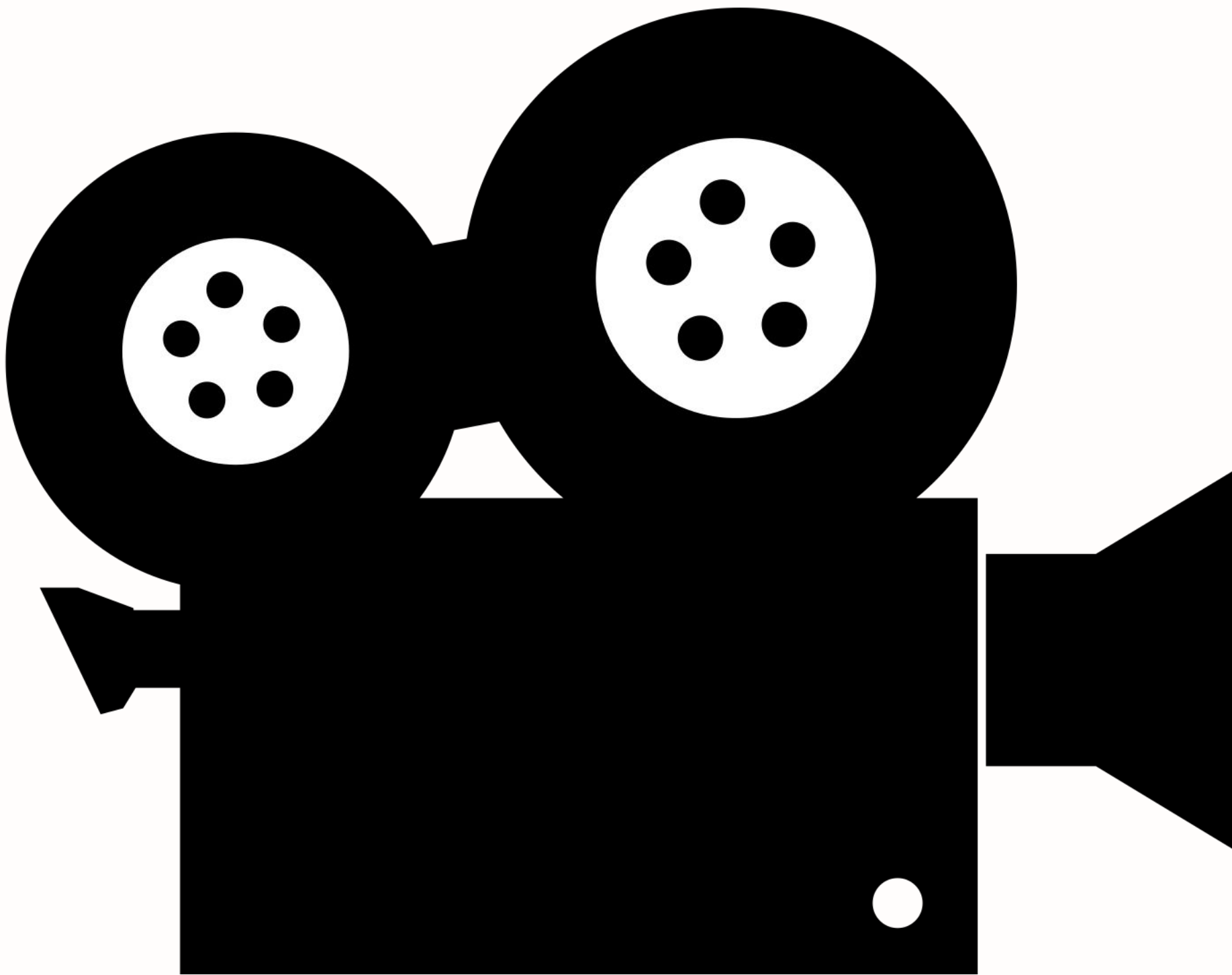
Don't Forget About Your Supplemental Essays

1. **Some colleges only require a personal statement, but many colleges, particularly highly-selective schools, require additional essays, usually referred to as supplemental essays.**
 - Supplemental essays give you the opportunity to highlight for the school why you are a good fit and excited to attend a specific campus.
 - Many colleges include short answer questions or essay prompts within the essay section of the Common App. You can find specific information about each college's individual writing prompts at: [College Specific Writing Requirements](#) ★
 - Here's where you can share your love of a campus!
2. Please see the following link for School-Specific Supplemental Essay Resources: [Learn How to Write Great Supplemental College Essays](#) ★

Unlimited Edits

1. You are allowed unlimited edits to the essay after your first application submission.
2. To edit your personal essay, go back into the Common App tab and click on the Writing section. Simply click within the text box and make any changes that are needed. Be sure to save any changes by clicking 'Continue' when you're finished.
3. Please note, the changes to your essays will be for upcoming or new applications, but do not change previously submitted applications.

Upcoming Events



25 August 2025: Early Action/Early Decision
1st period, Lunch, 7th and 8th period

15 September 2025: PIQs vs Application Essay
1st period, Lunch, 7th and 8th period

22 September 2025: Make the Most of the
Extracurriculars Section
1st, Lunch, 7th and 8th period

29 September 2025: Adding DE to the
Application
1st period PGHS Library, all ENGL1A/1B

1 October 2024: Applying to College
PGHS Library: 6:30-7:30 PM

Cash for College FAFSA Workshops
PGHS Library: 6:30-7:30 PM

A row of empty black theater seats, viewed from the side, receding into the distance. The seats are arranged in a curved pattern, typical of a theater or lecture hall. The lighting is dim, with the seats appearing as dark shapes against a slightly lighter background.

Questions & Answers