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# Putting “You” in the UC Application: Guide to the Personal Insight Questions

UC High School Counselor Conference  
September 2018

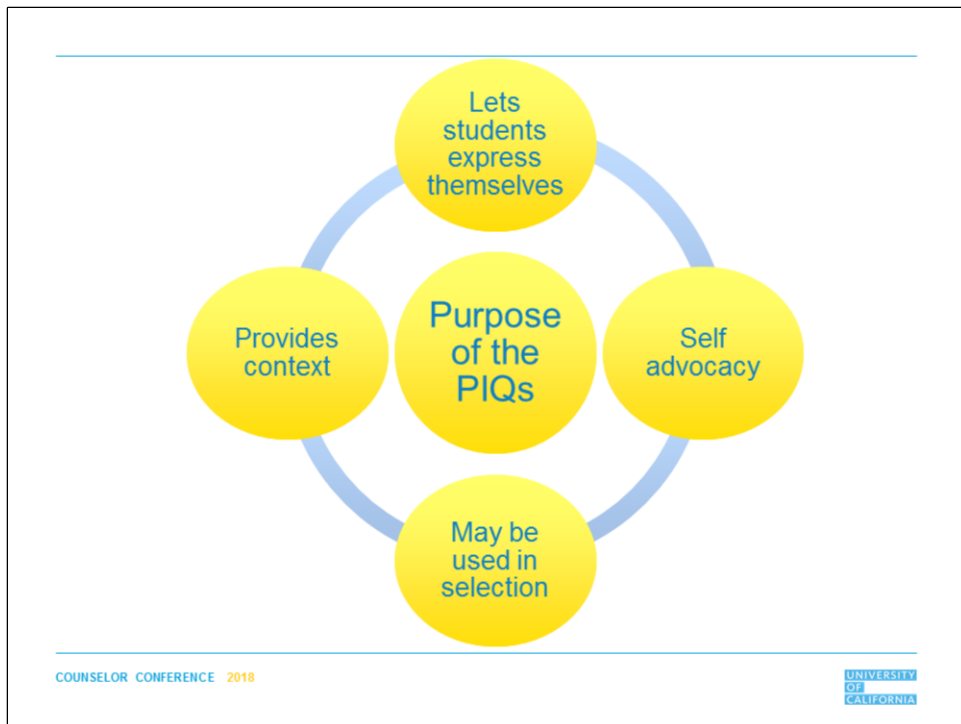
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# Agenda

- Purpose of the PIQs
- PIQ Basics
- Review of the PIQs
- Tips and Recommendations
- Case Studies
- Additional Comments

PIQ is an acronym for the Personal Insight Questions



#### PIQ Purposes:

- Allows students to express who they are, what matters to them and what they want the UC to know
- Provides context for selection, scholarships, gaps in education, etc.
- Allows the student to tell their own experiences...We want to hear it!
- Most UC campuses don't conduct interviews or accept letters of recommendation—this is the student's opportunity to self-advocate

Every campus uses the information differently: some for financial aid/scholarships; some for selection; some for both scholarship and admission selection.

Beyond academics or what is already listed on the application, allows students to express who they are, what matters to them, and what they want UC to know

Keep in mind that most students who apply to the UC are already academically selective, so we are looking for students to go beyond that. Context is key in the UC application because we are not comparing student to student, we are looking at each student's individual experiences and environment.

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Each question aligns to one or more of the 14 comprehensive review factors for freshman admission

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Freshman applicants must respond to 4 of the 8 questions

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Maximum of 350 words for each response

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Students should select questions that are most relevant to their experiences and that best reflect their individual circumstances

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All questions have equal value; there is no advantage or disadvantage to choosing certain questions over others

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It's important to note these are Personal Insight Questions, not essay prompts. We are not looking for thesis statements or topic sentences. Rather, we seek focus and clarity; a direct response to the question.

These responses are not read for style or grammar, though proofreading helps. Aligning with the 14 comprehensive review factors helps UC understand the full context of the student, including personal background, personal characteristics, their school, the environment at home, and their community.

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## The Questions

1. Describe an example of **your leadership experience** in which **you** have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes, or contributed to group efforts over time.
2. 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. What would **you** say is **your greatest talent or skill**? How have **you** developed and demonstrated that talent over time?
4. Describe how **you** have **taken advantage** of a significant educational opportunity or worked to **overcome** an educational barrier **you** have faced.

Notice that the questions state “you” and “your” so the responses should be “I” and “my”.

There are a variety of topics within the questions. We encourage that students answer the question that provides the most context.

Students should respond to the question that they are asked as directly as possible. Thorough reading of the questions will give students guidance on what to include in their responses.

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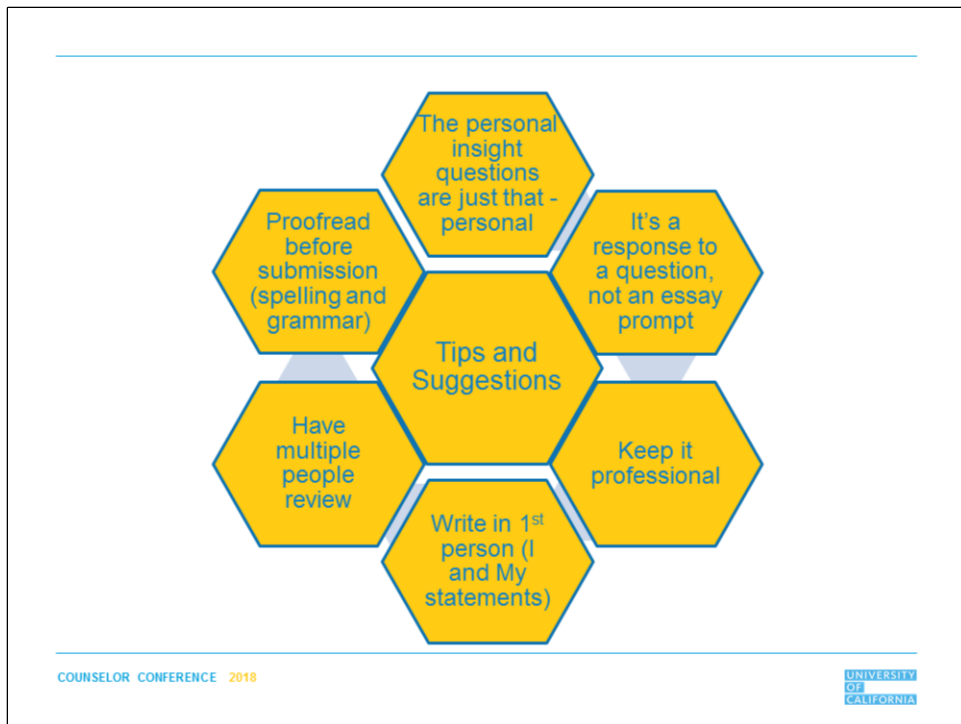
## The Questions

5. 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. Think about an **academic subject that inspires you**. Describe how you have furthered this inside and/or **outside of the classroom**.
7. What have you done to make your school or your community a **better place**?
8. Beyond what has already been shared in your application, what do you believe **makes you stand out as a** strong candidate for admission to **the University of California**?

Students who address one specific experience or example across all four questions may not be providing thorough context. We would encourage students to address separate experiences/examples in each response, if possible.

Please encourage students to avoid exaggeration, as students may be randomly selected to verify parts of their application.

Students should discuss recent events, or events that may have happened in their past that continue to impact them in their daily academic or home life. Students should only discuss past events as they are relevant to their current situation. Understanding who the student is and what the student is doing now will help us better understand the kinds of contributions, talents, interests, and abilities that student might bring to the campus.



### Best Practices:

Recommend having students have multiple people read their responses: one a person they know, another person from a class or club that don't know well, and an English teacher review (English teacher for grammar only, not style!)

Encourage the use of one or two concrete, specific examples in the response to show us what students are trying to convey. Students should avoid descriptive, general language in favor of speaking in detail about their experiences.

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# Missed Opportunities

- Acronyms
- Quotations or Dialogue
- Philosophical questions
- Creative Writing
- Titles
- Flowery Language
- Story Telling/Scene Setting
- Jokes and Sarcasm

These are among the most common elements of responses that often lead to missed opportunities:

- Acronyms: Don't assume that the reader is familiar with your acronym.
- Quotations: Space is limited, and we would rather hear the student's thoughts and words
- Philosophy: These responses should be direct rather than abstract and philosophical
- Creative writing: Poems, cliches, or haikus are less helpful in this type of writing; we want the student to write about their creativity rather than submitting a creative writing sample
- Titles: Re-stating prompts takes away from available word count so students do not need to do so
- Flowery language: We want to hear the students everyday voice, so students should use language that reflects who they are
- Story Telling/Scene Setting – Students should be direct and intentional rather than descriptive
- Jokes and Sarcasm - Everyone has a different sense of humor, and a reader may not understand or agree with the student's humor



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## Case Studies

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## Case #1: Leadership

I have had the unique opportunity to be an instructor at my family's **martial arts school since the age of nine**. The role as a black belt instructor has allowed me to work well with others while developing qualities such as maturity, patience, and attention to detail. Through teaching, I've learned **to communicate with a wide variety of individuals from the ages of four to eighty-two**.

Every student develops at his or her own pace, and being an effective instructor means understanding the individual needs and teaching the individual in a way in which they can learn best. As a young instructor, I have gained confidence and respect by overcoming a cultural barrier. In the martial arts world, rank supersedes age in the standard of hierarchy. Whereas, society dictates the contrary. Thus, it is daunting to instruct a student who is, for example, twenty years older than me. However, **I realized that it is my duty to earn the respect of the students who are older than I am, but of a lower rank**. I work diligently to earn my students' respect by keeping a positive attitude and by helping them with any confusion they experience. I learned the **values of building relationships with other people who may differ from me physically, mentally, and ethically**.

As an instructor in martial arts, I was able to experience both being a teacher and a student. As a teacher, I learned to see the perspectives of other teachers who instruct me. By **experiencing this relationship as a teacher, I learned to better understand my role as a teacher and better fulfill my role as a student**. This experience has given me a sense of confidence to overcome obstacles in the face of adversity. Through the unique experience of teaching at a young age, I learned to become a hard working and heedful student that can capitalize on viewing multiple perspectives. This has given me a sense of confidence to overcome obstacles and a depth of experience by working with a diverse set of people.

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## Case #1

Would this response be deemed as successful or needs improvement?

### Successful

- Insightful response on what it means to be a leader
- Demonstrates growth
- Connect their experience back to being a student
- Clear, concise, and genuine
- Leadership Qualities



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This student is able to provide an insightful response on what it means to be a leader and connect it back to their experience as a martial arts instructor.

“However, I realized that it is my duty to earn the respect of the students who are older than I am, but of a lower rank. I work diligently to earn my students' respect by keeping a positive attitude and by helping them with any confusion they experience. I learned the values of building relationships with other people who may differ from me physically, mentally, and ethically.”

The student is clear and concise so it's easy to understand the message they're trying to convey.

They also feel genuine and demonstrate their growth through the experience of being both a student and an instructor.

“Through the unique experience of teaching at a young age, I learned to become a hard working and heedful student that can capitalize on viewing multiple perspectives.”

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## Case #2: Creativity

Music has been my longest running passion, my lifelong best friend, and my deepest connection with my family and myself. **When I was 11, I started taking violin lessons to prepare to join the orchestra when I started middle school, and it wasn't until about halfway through 7th grade that I realized this love for classical music was going to stick.** I spent my entire middle and high school career under the musical direction of Mark Wardlaw. The discipline, care, and sharpness that his class required formed me in ways that nothing else could have.

There is no feeling parallel to that of sitting among bandmates on a hot stage under blaring lights, about to play the first note of the piece you have all slaved over for the past three months. The hours of sounding terrible, not getting it, going to rehearsal every day and practicing every night, all come down to this moment. This first note that acts as the passage into your communication with the audience all of the work, hours, and love you have put into doing this piece of music justice.

It feels like an eternity of anticipation, staring into the stage lights as your conductor introduces the piece, as you hold the seed of your labors in waiting hands. Then, it happens. The first note, then the second, and suddenly you're putting your everything into playing this piece one last time. The only way to describe this feeling is that the music carries you. Your personal relationship with your instrument, your bandmates, and the music itself are telling a story beyond words. It is in this moment that I feel my soul shining, that I feel my truest self, that I feel pure joy.

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## Case #2

Would this response be deemed as successful or needs improvement?

### Needs Improvement

- Lacks connection to creative outlet or problem solving
- Focuses more on practice instead of creativity
- Too descriptive not a lot of reflection

The connection of music to problem-solving is not as clear and we didn't get a strong sense of the importance of music in their life as a creative outlet.

This PIQ response is more of an expository writing piece on the process of what it takes to be a musician, the dedication and steps necessary in preparing for performance.

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### Case #3: Significant Challenge

Throughout my life, peers from Palo Alto classrooms to Sunday school halls have assumed my identity based off of my blond hair and hazel eyes, telling me I was lying when I said that I was Muslim. Growing up, I never felt that I truly fit into one category because while I don't look "Muslim" enough for the media, my French-Algerian and Swedish background sets me apart from most of the people in my classroom.

As a young child, I wanted to share my uniqueness with everybody and anybody, but after receiving too many "I don't believe you" responses and judgemental looks, I began silencing myself in order to fit in. However, after noticing just how many innocent people were being subject to discrimination, I recognized that my silence was detrimental to my community and took it upon myself to begin using my voice and my privilege as a white Muslim.

Sophomore year, my teacher asked us to create a presentation on a topic we feel passionate about. I immediately thought of Muslim discrimination. I made a video where I highlighted how, regardless of your religion, it's important to speak up for yourself and others. When presenting, peers from elementary school weren't surprised by my topic, but newer faces were shocked. Looking into my classmates' eyes, I challenged them to educate their peers, referencing America's current divide. Their facial expressions said it all. Teary eyes and open mouths told me I had made a positive impact on my class. While I'm still continuing to develop and understand my own faith, I am proud of my individuality and background, never muting myself.

The initial struggle but ultimate embrace of my identity has led me to feel comfortable in my own skin and made me eager to speak up. During class, my strong sense of individuality has pushed me to speak up and ask more questions. Outside of class, I've embraced my own unique perspective by confidently spreading my feminist ideals through art. In addition, my childhood fearlessness is now also reflected through my immediate and improvisational style.

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## Case #3

Would this response be deemed as successful or needs improvement?

### Successful

- Applicant kept response focused on themselves
- Student learned to stand up for themselves and others
- Demonstrates growth
- Connect their experience back to being a student
- Genuine, succinct and purposeful



This applicant made sure she was the focus of her story. As she faced prejudice and bias, she learned not only to stand up for herself, but for other marginalized people as well. We see growth over time, a sense of responsibility and leadership characteristics. This statement is not cluttered by quotes, sayings or lyrics. It is genuine, succinct and purposeful.

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## Case #4: Stand Out

Growing up, finding one's self and what one wants to achieve is a journey unique to each and every one. Growing up can be difficult and there comes a point where one hears, "Who's your role model?" or "Who is the person you want to be like when you get older?" When we are children our response would be "mom or dad or even an older sibling", I grew up thinking of the reality of the situation and not having that many "fantasy" jobs. I knew that I would not be able to be the best doctor in the world or achieve my wildest dreams. "You can do anything you want in life" is a usual phrase one hears adults say to encourage them to explore their dreams and pursue endless possibilities. Not so much in my family. **I grew up hearing that everything in this world is expensive and that it is going to take hard work to be able to achieve a goal you want.** As we transition into making our own decisions, one looks to a person for guidance.

My parents were not raised in the United States; therefore, **they do not know the difficulties of school and don't know how to be of help.** My older sister took a different path in life, and she wasn't able to guide me because she never had to experience it herself. Not having anyone to help me, **I had to reach out to school for help and took every opportunity that came my way.** I had to go through all of the high school journey **trying to figure out what is the best choice and what is the right option.** I created a path where I want to do the best I can and sometimes it fails or takes a long time but I know that all my hard work and long hours will pay off. Not having that someone to look up to has made me work harder because I know that if I accomplish my goals it is going to mean so much more to me.



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## Case #4

Would this response be deemed as successful or needs improvement?

### Needs Improvement

- Too many broad statements and 3<sup>rd</sup> person perspective instead of writing in 1<sup>st</sup> person
- Too many rhetorical questions
- Topic unclear until very end
- Doesn't focus on their life and their experience enough

This student is vague throughout their answer. We want students to be specific and always tie it back to them. We also tell students to refrain from using quotations as it does not have additive value and can waste their word count.

The student has a point that they are trying to make, but it does not become clear until more than halfway through their response. There isn't enough content about them being a first generation student to help us understand what that experience was like for that student. It would have been more helpful for this student to have focused more on themselves and their experience being first gen instead of giving us vague examples and referring to others in the beginning of their response.

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Case #5: Stand Out

Living in both a remote village of seventy people in northern Sweden and the bustling metropolis of Los Angeles has cultivated two different versions of me, each with a unique perspective on the world. The political climates of my two homelands seem to contradict. Sweden values health care, the environment, and democratic socialism, whereas the United States is a hub of global activity and economic might. This dichotomy fostered my interest in government and politics from a young age as I witnessed my incredibly liberal American family bemoan the Bush administration while my ultra-conservative Swedish family complained about the near-socialist agenda of their mother country.

My Swedish relatives consistently challenge my own beliefs. They have caused me to understand the logic and reasoning behind opposite opinions, rather than blindly rejecting them. With hopes for a career in politics, being able to step into another's shoes and consider the rationale behind whatever viewpoint they may hold is a valuable skill that I've begun to adopt as a result of this duality.

This helped me realize that the disparity between these two nations is not so noticeable beneath the surface. While the language may be different, the problems are universal. Whether I'm arguing with my hyper-religious grandfather in Swedish or getting into disagreements in the comment section of a friend's Facebook post, the underlying issues bear resemblance. It's the way that these problems are addressed that draws the distinction between these nations, and seeing these differences has caused me to develop a multi-faceted view of life and politics.

Sweden is an integral part of my identity; it has shaped who I am and guided me to discover my passions. These contrasting aspects of myself have allowed me to develop a mentality of open-mindedness that is essential to the learning experience at the University of California, which attracts students from a myriad of backgrounds representing a multitude of viewpoints. Through my Swedish heritage, I've cast off a one-sided mindset and learned to view the world and its flaws as more nuanced than merely right and wrong.

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## Case #5\*

Would this response be deemed as successful or needs improvement?

### Successful

- Student focused on depth of topic vs breadth
- Experiences challenge the applicants thinking and helped inspire future goals
- Draws parallels between contrasting experiences and cultures
- Kept it focused on applicant



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The introduction synthesizes what the response will be about in one sentence.

The reader learns about the student's upbringing and how it's shaped them in a way that is clear and specific. This gives strong value by adding more context that we did not get anywhere else in the application. The student focused on depth of the topic instead of breadth.

The student draws from two very different and contradictory experiences that challenged the applicant's thinking and helped inspire their future goals, but was clear and coherent in their response.

The ability of the student to draw parallels between contrasting experiences added value as well.

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## Case #6: Stand Out

What makes me a stand-out candidate for admissions to the University of California is, I am not afraid to cross boundaries and take chances. The rest of the candidates rather fall into the same category, with me the beauty of my aura is, you can't place me into a specific category. Academically I have improved tremendously unlike any other, my future is far different, you can't pick an applicant who wants to use all their future salary to start their own foundation. **To help at-risk youths, aid economically disadvantage teens receive scholarships, low-income families, and animals of all kind.**

Simply put it, I am the complete package the University of California has been looking for to put on those brochures, I know some students have higher test scores than me, but doesn't take away from my credibility. I make up for that mistake in how I elevated my coursework from my freshman year to my junior year, the adversary I have overcome and I'm the only one who can succeed out of my comfort zone. Put me in any situation, have me stranded with no source of hope, I guarantee you I will make you regret your decisions. If it's a quiz I haven't study for, trying to complete a last-minute project with limited materials, **██████████** can without a shadow of a doubt get the job done. Say for example, I go up against three stand out debaters from UCLA and I hadn't had any practice and my admissions ticket is on the line, I'm taking on that challenge full throttle, and don't be surprised if I turn some heads in the process (take chances).

In terms of crossing boundaries, in ninth grade I tried out for the lacrosse team without ever playing and no knowledge of the game, I had to go up against highly skilled athletes. I went home battered and bruised, but I do not regret crossing that boundary and trying something new. All in all, I'm the complete package who desperately wants **to prove the doubters wrong**, give me a chance!

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## Case #6\*

Would this response be deemed as successful or needs improvement?

### Needs Improvement

- Too many ideas and examples in one response
- Difficult to follow their thoughts
- Lack of depth and follow-through on examples
- Grammar and spelling mistakes makes it difficult to understand
- Does not focus on own achievements and compares self to others

This applicant definitely does not lack confidence and knows how to talk about themselves. This is an example of a strong voice.

However, this student included too many ideas and examples which overwhelmed the response. It is hard for a reader to follow what the student wants us to know about themselves. Choosing one or two specific examples of how they are a “stand-out candidate would add more context and help us to understand this individual.

This is also a good example of how grammar and spelling will not affect our admissions decision, but it does hinder us from understanding the applicant completely.

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## Additional Comments Section

- Information not found anywhere else on the application
- Gaps or deficiencies in the application
- Additional Honors/Awards, Extracurricular Activities
- NOT space for 5th PIQ response
- Open Format

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- There are two optional additional comments sections, one after the academic section and the second after the PIQs.
  - The academic comments should be used to explain gaps in education, curricular choices, repeated grades, and term definitions. This section is intended to give us insight into the academic history of the student that is not made clear in the coursework section.
- This is an opportunity to add additional information that has not been mentioned anywhere else on the application, but these are NOT to be viewed as two additional responses.
- Students can input information however they wish, bullet points, short sentences, short paragraphs, so long as they can give us more information to help us understand the student and their experiences.
- Students may choose to include a short comment about a specific honor or award, include a research abstract from their own work, or clarify a work or volunteer experience. These are just a few examples, but students can use this section to tell us something about themselves and their experience that doesn't fit anywhere else on the application or that needs clarification that doesn't require an entire PIQ response to answer.

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**Thank you!**

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