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It's not an essay!

How to help your students write insightful PIQ responses

September 2022

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Session Goals

By the end of this session, you will understand:

- What a PIQ is, and how it is not an essay
- The purpose of PIQs and how they are used in the admission process
- How to provide support for students to explore their voice and share their insights
- What works and what doesn't in a PIQ based on real examples

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PIQ refresher

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What is a Personal Insight Question?

- The Personal Insight Questions are the written portion of the application
- Applicants can share their voice and personal details with the reader
- This is not to be confused with an essay or personal statement

8

Personal Insight Questions

4

responses per applicant

350

word maximum per response

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Imagine UC was a person. If we met face-to-face, what would your students want us to know about them? These personal insight questions allow them to tell us. They could write about their creative side. Their thoughts on leadership. A challenge they've faced. Whatever questions your students answer, make sure they show us their personality—just as they would in real life.

The UC system created eight questions that students are asked to read and review. Of the eight questions, each applicant must select four questions to answer. Students cannot answer more than four. Each PIQ response has a maximum of 350 words, this is showcased to students with a word counter posted in the application. We suggest a response have between 250-350 words. Responses that are less than 250 words lack substance and often leave the reader with more questions than answers.

There is no preference for which questions the student should answer. Each question ties to one or more of the UC's 13 admissions selection factors. We hope counselors will ask students to select questions which share new information about the student, clarify details about accomplishments reported in the application, and/or showcase the students' abilities. Statistically, applicant data shows that no one question is answered more than another. When we share that all questions have equal value, we mean that every question has the potential to be the "right question" for a student. There is no advantage to answering one topic/question over another.

Lastly, we remind you that there are also two 'additional comments' sections with 550 characters and 550 words available in the academic history and personal insight sections, respectively. Details about the academic history additional comments section can be found in the UC application overview hosted during the counselor conference.

Weblinks and Resources:

- **Personal Insight Questions**
<https://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/how-to-apply/applying-as-a-freshman/personal-insight-questions.html>
- **13 Factors for Comprehensive Review**
<https://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/how-to-apply/applying-as-a-freshman/how-applications-are-reviewed.html>

UC Personal Insight Question (PIQ) overview

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.

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As we review the questions, note the words in gold. These are highlighted as they are the primary focus of that question.

UC Personal Insight Question (PIQ) overview

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 interest 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 a strong candidate** for admissions to the University of California?

Breaking down the Personal Insight Questions

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We are going to break these ALL the way down for you and really dig into what the questions are and how to best take advantage of them

Personal

per·son·al

/ˈpɜrs(ə)n(ə)/

adjective

of or concerning one's private life, relationships, and emotions

Tips to help students get personal:

- DO write about yourself - find your voice and express yourself
- DON'T write about a friend, relative or other person
- Use "I" statements
- Share relevant information about who you are and what matters to you
- Answer the question as if you were telling someone in person

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Let's define PIQs.

When we say personal, we mean details of or concerning one's private life, relationships and I want to emphasize emotions.

Student sometimes ask what is too personal, is there such thing as TMI? No, students are welcome to share as much or as little as they want. Sensitive experiences are acceptable, and vulnerability is often helpful in getting to know the student. NOTHING a student shares on the UC application will be held against them, and all that is shared is held confidentially by the admissions reader.

Insight

in-sight

/ˈɪnˌsaɪt/

noun

the capacity to gain an accurate and deep intuitive understanding of a person or thing

Insight is rooted in reflection

Insight starts with choosing questions that will allow students to share experiences and details that matter to them and their journey.

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Insight should include reflection as well as the application of that insight. It's easy to tell a story that happened, but we really want to focus on the outcome, what students have learned, and how it has and will inform their futures on UC campuses - in other words the **insight and self-awareness** they have gained.

Students should choose prompts that will allow them to talk about experiences that really matter to them, not just experiences that they think will make them "look good" or that they think we want to read

As students are choosing which question might fit best have them ask...

Why am I choosing this question?

What did I learn from this experience?

How did this experience make me feel?

What does this question allow me to share about who I am?

Brainstorming to elicit the best content

- What do you do with your free time?
- What do you like about yourself?
- What are you good at?
- How do your friends/family members describe you?

Build from these with the WHY

- Why do you play this sport? Why do you do this service activity?
- Why do practice this talent/skill?
- Why did this event shape you?
- Why is this important in getting to know you?

Here are some helpful brainstorming questions to help your students develop their responses.

APPLICATION

As students are writing, remind them to relate back to their reflection, tying it all together and making it easy to understand their perspective

Things to ask your student to help them share that insight:

- How has this experience made you a better candidate for UC?
- How has this experience informed your academic future?
- How might what I learned from this contribute to my campus?
- How did this experience shape who I am and might become as a student?

Keep in mind student's goal of being a UC student

Reflection can also include application - how have they utilized what they have learned, how has it changed how they see things? What they want? Who they are?

Have students ask themselves...

- Why am I choosing this prompt?
- What did I learn from this experience?
- How has this experience made me a better candidate for UC?
- Does this experience demonstrate a personal quality I am proud of, such as determination or persistence?
- How has this experience informed my academic future? (Major choice, academic interests, extracurricular activities they would like to continue)

Question

ques·tion

/ˈkwesCH(ə)n/

noun

a sentence worded or expressed so as to elicit information

es·say prompt

/ˈesāˈpräm(p)t/

noun

a statement that focuses on a topic or an issue, followed by questions, the purpose being to inspire an essay response to test writing, reasoning and analytical skills

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This may seem to be the same as an essay prompt, but the questions here are more intended to provide structure for students to more easily share aspects of themselves that a reader needs to know. This is not for us to assess their grasp on English or writing capabilities, nor is this an opportunity for us to gauge a student's stance on a particular topic or build an argument to persuade us one way or another. This is formatted like an interview. We have various question options so students can share what is most important to them, rather what is important to us. The responses are short so we can cut back on the fluff and just get the details and the insight as previously mentioned.

How are PIQs different than academic essays?

Academic essays

- Argumentative or expository format
- Introductory paragraph with thesis statement + body paragraphs with evidence + conclusion paragraph
- Research-based
- Argument supported by quotes from experts or external data
- Sources cited with footnotes/references list

PIQs

- Interview format
- Text block, conversational voice, no introduction and conclusion necessary
- Examples from life experiences
- No quotes
- No external sources or links

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- Whether they are writing an argumentative essay with their own interpretation of a novel or an expository essay on a scientific topic, chances are your students were taught to write well-structured paragraphs with a thesis statement in the first paragraph, followed by a discussion of each main point of evidence to support the thesis in the body paragraphs, and conclude with a paragraph that summed up the argument, and thoughts on future research. Students may have been given prompts by their instructors as a starting point for their writing, but they were most likely expected to go to the library and research what had been written about that topic in the past, so that they could (in the best case) come up with their own new argument about the topic. Their essays are expected to be in dialogue with other texts, whether the primary sources they were analyzing or the secondary sources they were using to support their thesis. And the main thing that was probably drilled into your students over and over was to cite their sources! (Remember MLA format for footnotes?)
- Now, let's consider the PIQs and how the questions differ from essay prompts. First of all, answering the PIQs is more like answering interview questions. Instead of a prompt as the starting point of a formal argument, your students just need to answer in as direct a manner as possible. Think of it almost like a job interview in writing. The main goal is not to convince a reader that your student's interpretation of research data is the most logical one, but rather to explain their experience and qualifications in more depth. Just as if a transcript of a spoken interview were written out, the PIQ responses do not have to have a formal paragraph structure. That said, providing a couple pieces of evidence to support the main point your students want to make is advisable, just like how they would speak about specific past experiences in a job interview that highlight their readiness to take on new responsibilities.
- An obvious difference is also that for PIQs, students are drawing evidence from their own life experiences, feelings, and thoughts, and not from online or library research. For an academic essay, students are usually taught to avoid using the first person and instead to write in a more abstract style. The PIQs are personal and students are encouraged to use "I" statements.
- For the PIQs, unlike for an academic essay, we discourage using any kind of quote, whether it's a quote from an expert, song lyrics or dialogue. The student's own voice should prevail.
- For the PIQs, there are also no external sources. The PIQ responses are not an essay, and they are also not a portfolio or an audition. As application readers, we are not allowed to consider any supplemental materials that are not specifically requested. We cannot click on a YouTube link to watch a sample of a student's artistic or athletic performance or look at a research article to which a student has contributed. So we advise against using the limited space of the PIQs and Additional Comments box for external links. Instead, have your student provide us with a summary of what is in that link and what its significance is to your student.

How are PIQs different than the Common App essay?

Common App Essay

- 1 prompt, 650-word maximum
- Writing style important, 5-paragraph structure recommended
- Literary tone
- Centers on anecdote with “hook”
- Supported by recommendation letters
- Focus on personal values and growth experiences
- Core of prompt: “Who are you?”

PIQs

- 4 responses, 350-word maximum each
- Not scored on structure or style
- Factual tone
- Examples over storytelling
- Self-advocacy
- Focus on actions taken, impact
- Core of questions: “What have you done with available opportunities?”

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- No doubt many of you advise your students on writing Common App essays as well. Let’s now discuss the ways that the Common App prompts differ from the PIQ questions. These are fine distinctions, so it’s not surprising if some students believe that they can just cut and paste sections from their Common App personal statement essay into the PIQ response boxes, but this is not the most effective way to answer the PIQs.
- We’ll first consider the format of the Common App personal statement. Students writing this essay have seven prompts to choose one from, including an “essay on any topic of [their] choice.” There is a 650 word maximum, and many counselors recommend that students follow a traditional essay structure with five paragraphs, including an introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs with exposition, and a conclusion paragraph. In terms of word choice, creativity and a literary tone are encouraged, since the essay functions as a demonstration of the applicant’s writing skills, while also revealing the individuality of the applicant. Many counselors advise students to craft an engaging narrative by starting the story with a “hook” to draw in the reader and then use plotting techniques such as suspense to keep the reader’s attention until the “so what” moment in the conclusion. Since the Common App essay is supplemented by letters of recommendation from counselors and teachers, the letters can be used to address any challenges the student has faced that may have affected their grades, and the applicant can use the entire 650 words to tell a story about their personal values instead. The essay prompts for the Common App ultimately aim to reveal who the applicant is as individual.
- Now let’s compare the PIQs. Of course, we at the University of California also want to get to know your students as individuals and we are very interested in their growth experiences. But the PIQ questions are worded to elicit a different format of response from applicants. One obvious difference is that there are four shorter PIQ responses rather than one essay structured in discrete paragraphs. Since each of the PIQ questions asks something different, we don’t recommend that your students cut and paste from their Common App essay that likely tells the story of a single scenario, since that would lead to too much repetition in the responses. A better strategy would be to answer each PIQ focusing on a different life experience. We do not score the PIQs on the writing style, grammar or spelling, since the PIQs are not a writing test. However, sloppy style can get in the way of communicating effectively, and you will certainly want to help your students minimize grammar and spelling errors for the sake of clarity. Students should compose their work in a separate document, spell check, proofread, revise, and then proofread again. What your students don’t need to worry about with the PIQs is writing in a highly creative, idiosyncratic style, and they don’t need to worry about storytelling techniques like a “hook.” The aim of the PIQs is not to assess a student’s writing ability, but rather to gain more context relating to the UC’s 13 points of comprehensive review. We are particularly seeking to understand what applicants have done with the opportunities that have been available to them, or if they had limited opportunities, what they have done to negotiate these limits. Just like responding to questions in a job interview, a factual tone is most appropriate for the PIQs. Since the UC application does not ask for letters of recommendation, students should practice self-advocacy and use the PIQs and the Additional Comments section to explain any circumstances that may have affected their academic performance or the availability of courses and extracurricular activities. While both the Common App essay and the PIQs seek to understand a student’s journey of growth and what they might contribute to their future college campus, the way many of the PIQs are worded asks applicants to discuss what they have *done* in the past, what the significance of this is for them, and any impact of their actions. The PIQs are less about narrating a story of oneself as a completely unique character.

How responses are used and reviewed

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Comprehensive review factors

UC uses 13 factors for freshmen review

- We are seeking academic achievements in light of the opportunities available to students and demonstrated capacity to contribute to the intellectual life at UC
- PIQ responses should give us details that we can use in our comprehensive review



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1. Academic grade point average in all completed A-G courses, including additional points for completed UC-certified honors courses.
2. Number of, content of and performance in academic courses beyond the minimum A-G requirements.
3. Number of and performance in UC-approved honors, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate Higher Level and transferable college courses.
4. Identification by UC as being ranked in the top 9 percent of the high school class at the end of the junior year ([Eligible in the Local Context](#), or ELC).
5. Quality of the senior-year program as measured by the type and number of academic courses in progress or planned.
6. Quality of academic performance relative to the educational opportunities available in the high school.
7. Outstanding performance in one or more specific subject areas.
8. Outstanding work in one or more special projects in any academic field of study.
9. Recent, marked improvement in academic performance as demonstrated by academic GPA and the quality of coursework completed or in progress.
10. Special talents, achievements and awards in a particular field, such as visual and performing arts, communication or athletic endeavors; special skills, such as demonstrated written and oral proficiency in other languages; special interests, such as intensive study and exploration of other cultures; experiences that demonstrate unusual promise for leadership, such as significant community service or significant participation in student government; or other significant experiences or achievements that demonstrate the student's promise for contributing to the intellectual vitality of a campus.
11. Completion of special projects undertaken in the context of the high school curriculum or in conjunction with special school events, projects or programs.
12. Academic accomplishments in light of life experiences and special circumstances, including but not limited to: disabilities, low family income, first generation to attend college, need to work, disadvantaged social or educational environment, difficult personal and family situations or circumstances, refugee status or veteran status.
13. Location of the secondary school and residence.

Each UC campus evaluates each application without knowing the status of the same application at another campus. In making admission decisions, campuses do not consider where students have applied or their admission status to other campuses. All campuses consider an application simultaneously, yet independently of all other campuses applied to.

Gaining new information and perspective

- **PIQs allow us to learn more about the student FROM the student**
- **New information could include soft skills, struggles, personal experiences that have shaped them etc.**
 - These are all examples of things that wouldn't have a natural place elsewhere on the application but are important things for us to know about the applicant
- **Allows us to understand the student on a personal level outside of courses and grades**
 - This is usually the why or how: why do they like this certain activity, why is it important to them, how have they grown from this? (the insight!)
 - Demonstrate a student's character - leadership, determination, and commitment, perseverance

Campuses may use them differently

Things PIQ responses might be read for at different campuses:

- Demonstrated major interest
- Examples of persistence and positive self-identity
- Explanation of any academic difficulties

Notice that NONE of them are looking for an essay/writing sample

Despite using the responses differently, they should still be written the same way!

Student should be focusing on **context** and **depth** with significant **personal** details and self-reflection to showcase their **voice** and **insight**

PIQ response examples

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PIQ example 1

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

"What leadership means to me is putting the interest of others ahead of my own. In my family, I look up to my mother the most as she embodies the qualities of the ideal person I want to be. Although uneducated, she is a selfless woman who works two jobs while taking care of my disabled father and her 3 children at home. Stemming from a humble background with a younger sibling that I look after, I always put my best self forward to act as a 'second parent' for the family. At home, my leadership role is to take care of my family.

Every weekend, helping my mother wheel dirty laundry to the laundromat a mile away in a shopping cart never fails to put a smile on my face. Similarly, even when I have to put in backbreaking effort to do all the chores at home in lieu of my disabled father, it gives me a sense of satisfaction that I am able to contribute to my family. Aside from the supportive role in the household, I am also an advocate for my family. Given my parents' language barrier and ethnicity, our landlord would attempt to take advantage of my family by increasing rent every few months despite the signed annual lease. I would also take my disabled father to his doctor appointments and speak on his behalf to the physician.

I have many titles and hats I put on including: student, son, sibling, caretaker, peer educator, volunteer. Each one of these represent a part of what it means to be a leader and advocate. Although exhausting at times, I love my work and the positive rippling impact I have on my family, my friends, and my community."

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- Good example
- Shows clear examples and skillsets answering the prompt
- Not a lot of fluff, gets right to the point
- Can be more concise and still have a great PIQ

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PIQ example 2

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

"I must admit, I enjoy the serenity of poetry and literary pieces. I like writing the thoughtful essay with the sweet words of euphony; the ones that make pen ink into honey and paper pages into fawn's fur. They're little scenes of nature; they leave your heart feeling fuzzy.

But there's something about a deviation from nature that obsesses me. Like on the days that I step into my English classroom and the teacher announces there will be a timed in-class argumentative essay. On days like these, I hear the faint hum of engines starting in the nervous sighs of backpack zippers and the ripping of serrated notebook papers from their spines. And the air is choked up with almost silent anticipation as the teacher hands out a prompt to everyone, face down, ambiguous. Then the flag waves. Papers flip in unison, like screeching rubber tires against asphalt, thirty eyes run left to right again and again down the page, urging, breathing strained, and veins pulsing. Pens scratch and skid. The words written are echoed by an announcer sitting in my head, now transformed into a broadcast booth. He shouts out each play, critiques each turn, and cheers me on when he knows I'm pulling ahead. Every sound reverberates in my head and every thought shouts down at my paper. On my final paragraph, my black pen against the white paper becomes a checkered flag. By then, I know if I have won the argument; if I have pulled ahead of the opposing view, or if they have succeeded in cutting me off at every corner, keeping me in their rear-view mirror. And, when the bell rings, and every student in unison stands up, and every backpack strap shivers and every chair groans, they are a roaring crowd.

The argumentative essay is a cacophony, it's a race. And I love the sport."

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- Missed opportunity
- Very beautifully written, not what we're looking for
- Has scene setting, long descriptions, flowery language, philosophy, imagination
- Did not learn anything about the student
- Did not answer the prompt

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PIQ example 3

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

"My greatest accomplishment is predicting the ending of Dr. Strange.

As I watched the scene where Dr. Strange and his soon-to-be mentor first meet, I realized and blurted out that the mentor would betray Dr. Strange, though eventually become his ally. And 40 minutes later, that's exactly what happened.

My talent is for understanding cinematic nature. I used to predict the endings of almost every movie and show I watched; some obvious, but others seemingly random. I used to pride myself in seeing where a story was going, understanding why the camera remained on one character's face for half a second too long, knowing exactly how a plot would be tied up with perfect amounts of suspense, sacrifice, and satisfaction.

Lately, I've been putting my talent toward a better use. I've learned that I can understand human nature in the same way that I do endings. I can perceive the causes of a friend's use of confrontational texts coupled with passive in-person conversations. Or I can recognize the signs that someone is faking their happiness in the small comments they make. Now, I pride myself in my skill of analyzing others, because it allows me to help them; I can have a tell-all conversation with someone who hides their opinions, I can comfort someone who struggles to express vulnerability.

My passion for being the cleverest movie-watcher, the most attentive and calculative, led me to be the same type of person. It never lets me settle in comfortable ignorance; when something is wrong, I know it, and I always try to fix it. I truly think my talent has made me a better person. But it has also made me terrible to watch movies with."

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- Missed opportunity
- While student uses a lot of I and my statements, there's nothing for a reader to use
- No tangible examples or activities that are helpful in this case
- Feels as though student is reaching
- 2nd to last paragraph, *almost* getting at something (talking about skill)
- Don't need to be philosophical or edgy/unique to get our attention
- REMINDER: Students should think about 4 topics or events they want readers to know, then choose their topics

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PIQ example 4

Question: 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?

"Ever since my parents couldn't afford to pay the rent for our apartment, my family moved into a garage with more affordable rent. We had to throw away all our large furniture like tables, chairs, drawer sets, and couches because of space restrictions. The only items we could afford to keep were legal documents, clothing apparel, the refrigerator, a small tv, and three beds. Although the beds monopolized most of the available space, the limited real estate we had allowed me to adapt and work through challenges. For example, I would try to nap during the afternoon when my family would be loud at home and study during the night when everyone else was asleep. Alternatively, I would sometimes camp in the public library near my school to finish my homework there. Without internet access at home, I would oftentimes go over to a friend's house to study together while finishing up my own work. These sessions not only helped me learn by practicing the subject material, but also encouraged application through peer teach-back.

I never let my limited resources define me and prevent me from performing my best. I managed to remain astute in my studies and continued to serve as a well-rounded member of my school community. My living situation has taught me how to work diligently, seek alternative solutions to everyday problems, and perform well under pressure. Because of the unique way in how I overcame my struggles and my unwavering motivation, my family compliments me on my perseverance and positive attitude at home. As a college student, I will take the grit I have developed and apply it to my studies as I continue to seek opportunities to expand my positive impact on my family and community."

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- Good example
- Clearly answered prompt with example of challenge and how they overcame it/are still working through it
- Very relevant, brings us forward to who they are today
- Not looking for a clear resolution!
- Concise and clear

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The logo for the Counselor Conference, featuring the words "COUNSELOR" and "CONFERENCE" stacked vertically within a white rectangular border.

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CONFERENCE

THANK YOU

The official logo of the University of California, consisting of the words "UNIVERSITY", "OF", and "CALIFORNIA" stacked vertically in a white, sans-serif font.

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