

UC PERSONAL INSIGHT QUESTIONS

What Admissions Officers Are Looking For

The University of California's Personal Insight Questions help admissions officers understand students' experiences, interests, accomplishments, and circumstances. Unlike the Common App essay, these responses are not primarily exercises in storytelling. They are opportunities to communicate meaningful information directly and specifically.

THE QUESTION I ASK

After reading these four responses, do I understand what your student has experienced, what matters to them, what they've contributed, and, most importantly, what they've learned?

What We're Looking For	Strong Evidence	What May Need Work
Direct Response	The student answers the selected question clearly, specifically, and completely.	The response wanders, avoids the question, or spends too many words on setup.
Specific Evidence	Concrete examples illuminate the student's experiences, responsibilities, decisions, or accomplishments.	Broad claims replace specific information.
Student's Role	The reader understands what the student personally did, thought, decided, or contributed.	The response focuses primarily on other people, organizations, or circumstances.
Depth of Experience	The student moves beyond describing participation to reveal meaningful engagement, sustained effort, or a deeper exploration of an interest or experience.	The response lists activities or accomplishments without exploring the student's involvement or investment.
Reflection & Growth	The student explains what they learned, deepened their understanding of, or discovered about themselves or others, and why that insight matters.	The response tells us what happened without revealing what the student learned or how the experience affected them.
Authentic Voice	The response uses natural, direct, first-person language that reflects the student's perspective.	The writing feels rehearsed, exaggerated, overly formal, or artificially polished.
Clarity & Purpose	Every paragraph contributes meaningful information without unnecessary storytelling or repetition.	Elaborate introductions, metaphors, or conclusions obscure the actual answer.
Application Context	The response adds meaningful information or depth to the overall application.	The response largely repeats information already communicated elsewhere.

AUTHENTICITY IN THE AGE OF AI

UC admissions officers are looking for information, not literary performances. Students do not need dramatic hooks, elaborate metaphors, or perfectly crafted conclusions.

AI-generated language can make responses sound polished while removing the specificity and individuality that make them useful. The strongest PIQs are grounded in what the student actually experienced, accomplished, considered, or learned.

Direct, honest writing is more valuable than manufactured sophistication.

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

[University of California Admissions — Personal Insight Questions](#)

[University of California Admissions — First-Year PIQ Guide](#)