
We just want to talk:

Approaching the PIQ
conversation with purpose

September 2025

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Session overview

The Personal Insight Questions (PIQs)

What are they and how do the UC campuses use them

The Prompt

Answering the right question for the student

The Point

Getting straight into it with student's responses

The Purpose

Why students are answering these questions

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Let's see some examples

We will be reviewing some samples of Personal Insight Question responses later in this presentation

Scan this QR code to pull up the samples on your device!



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What are the Personal Insight Questions (PIQs)?

8 prompts — 4 responses

Students will select 4 prompts to highlight their readiness for a UC education.

Not an essay

The PIQs are short answers to help the UCs get to know the student on a *personal* level.

350 words maximum

350 words is not a lot! We want to make sure students select the right prompt and get to the point with purpose.



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Personal Insight Questions (PIQs)

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.
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 stand out as **a strong candidate** for admissions to the University of California?

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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 extra-curricular 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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The prompts

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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 students want 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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Student activity idea

Independent of the PIQs, have the student make a list of 4 things they think someone should know about them. Then use the prompts to highlight what is most important.

This will help students work backwards to fully answer the question with content that is relevant.

By knowing what they want to share, they will be able to answer questions naturally and easily.

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Time for some examples

We will be looking at some samples of PIQ responses from the UC Application now!

Scan this QR code to pull up the samples on your device



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PIQ question #5 – Sample 1

"I love being a kid with no worries or problems. I was in my little world, having the best time, but that's when my alarm clock hit; I was back to reality; rubbing my eyes, I looked across my room and noticed my older sister wasn't in her bed; strange, I said to myself I didn't see her get home last night either. Walking towards the bathroom, I turn to my right, my parents' door wide open, bed neat. When doing school at home, I realized problems as I hadn't seen them before. Our money problems were worse than I thought: opening the fridge and not seeing any food, the inability to find a house, no necessities. My older sister could not balance work and college while doing college during the day and work at night, while my dad worked the whole day and rarely saw him. My mom could not cook for us as there was no food in the fridge, and I slept on an empty stomach, seeing my older sisters crying from the stress. Watching this made me feel useless. I would be overthinking what to do, and I couldn't focus on academics. Everything around me distracted me. I couldn't help finding a job as my parents didn't want that. In these moments, the best way to help was to have my grades up.

Looking at my older sister and Dad's physiques, I saw their red eyes, eyebrows, and weak bodies. My eyes watered, and my mom and I stared at each other, seeing our loved ones were overworked. But something was missing in our tiny home. The atmosphere was dull and dark, needing a spark of optimism. I wanted to be a positive family member, so that is what I became. I started helping around the house more with my mom and little sister, giving out messages of positive advice. I learned that life hits in the wrong places, but we don't let it get inside our heads. No matter what strikes my family and me, we will be okay."

PIQ question #5 – Sample 2

“During my childhood, I was forced to grow up very rapidly. At the age of 6 years old, I was working at the local grocery helping my mom. The difficulty of obtaining money, paying bills, and buying food always filled my mom with stress. Although I was only six years old, I understood the economic difficulties that my mom and I were facing. The challenge of always having to think if we had enough food while seeing other kids with fewer struggles made me wonder about how I was going to overcome this. This economic hardship affected my learning and academic opportunities where I had moments when I couldn't do my homework because I had to help my mom prepare food. I wasn't able to access school supplies or resources because I would spend the majority of my time helping my mom rather than focusing on my education. I didn't have access to brand-new uniforms at the beginning of each school year, so I had to sew my uniform and my shoes so they could last a few more months. Our life changed when my mom was able to obtain a sustainable job at a hospital as a receptionist and with financial help from my dad. I was able to return to school not having to worry about if there was going to be food to eat if the bills were going to be paid on time, or if my home was going to be lost. As a first-generation student, this affected my academic achievements throughout high school as well, the acknowledgment of the hardships my parents had to overcome motivated me to strive for academic validation and take advantage of the academic opportunities. The hardships I had to face at a young age have always marked my life and been an ineffaceable experience that will be my biggest motivation to achieve my career goals and reward my parents for all the sacrifices.”

Finding the prompt – Sample PIQ

PIQ samples for question #5

Sample #1 – Missed opportunity



- Unclear explanation of the challenge/hardship or timeline
- Did not fully answer the prompt – how did you overcome this?
- Not clear how student's situation affected their academics
- Focused on family members rather than self

Sample #2 – Value added



- Clearly explained economic hardship and how it negatively affected academic preparation
- Included pivot point where the student was able to overcome their hardships and move forward
- Student's story fit well with the selected PIQ

The point

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Getting right into it

In 350 words or less a student will...

- Provide readers with new details about themselves we wouldn't otherwise know.
- Fully answer the prompt.
- Provide personal insight that directly relates to their achievements or aspirations.

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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

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!

PIQ Question #6 – Sample 3

"My interest in Science started developing when I discovered my true passion for medicine. As I grew up, I saw most of my family members passing away due to heart attacks, cancer, and diabetes. I didn't have knowledge of the power of medicine in the human body and how it can provide hope. My interest in biology developed at a young age when my brother was diagnosed with cancer at three years old. I was too young to comprehend what cancer was but as I heard my mom talking about the disease that would take away my brother's life, I started expanding a sense of curiosity. The disease was reaching my brother's lungs and the percentage of survival after a surgical procedure was minimal. Although it was a doctor, my mom decided to contact one of the best pediatricians in Colombia. It was discovered that my brother didn't have cancer, it was an infection that could be kept under control with antibiotics and amoxicillin. My curiosity and need to save many lives by giving the right diagnosis continued to develop and inspired me to learn about human biology. I started to gain knowledge when I took Biology my freshman year of high school, chemistry in tenth grade, physics in eleventh grade, and Fundamentals of Biology at Compton College. I challenged myself in my senior year by taking AP Biology and developed an interest in how the human body would adapt to the new environment which influenced my decision to major in human biology. Outside of the classroom, I was able to learn cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and I would practice these skills on pillowcases which improved my confidence to perform this emergency procedure. To expand my knowledge, I looked forward to constantly researching and finding resources that would inform me about new medical innovations such as the artificial heart implanted, which promises to pump blood and maintain blood pressure like a real heart. My interest in medicine goes beyond a favorite subject, it derives from the medical experiences that have shifted my life and inspired me to become a pediatrician."

PIQ Question #6 – Sample 4

"There are many different academic subjects that many people take solace in. A lot of the academic subjects can become hobbies and bring peace into someone's confusing life. One of my favorite academic subjects is math. Mathematics is a subject that offers a unique blend of logic, creativity, and problem-solving, and provides a sense of peace and fulfillment to many people. Mathematics is a language that the universe uses to describe the patterns and structures found in the natural world.

Inside the Classroom, I have been able to engage with challenging topics. Learning not to shy away from difficult problems and instead embrace challenging mathematical concepts and tackle complex problems. From this, I've learned to deepen my understanding and enhance my problem-solving skills. I've also been able to be a more active participant in classrooms, from discussions I can provide new perspectives and learn from my fellow peers as well. Outside the Classroom, I've engaged with Mathematics Enrichment Programs like Math Enrichment and Evergreen Valley Community College Classes. These programs often featured lectures, interactive sessions, and problem-solving activities conducted by experienced mathematicians. My interest in math has also led me to engage in math-based hobbies like chess and coding. These activities often require mathematical knowledge and promote intellectual growth, curiosity, and critical thinking.

In conclusion, mathematics has illuminated my academic and personal pursuits. By embracing challenging concepts and actively engaging in discussions, I've sharpened my problem-solving skills and deepened my understanding. My dedication to this subject is not just a pursuit of a grade, but a way of shaping my worldview and enhancing my critical thinking."

Finding the point – Sample PIQ

PIQ samples for question #6

Sample #3 – Value added



- Conversational and genuine
- Shares relevant context
- Directly addresses the question, and provides concrete examples
- Gives outlook for once they're at a UC campus

Sample #4 – Missed opportunity



- Lacks a personal voice
- Details are non-specific to the student
- Includes unnecessary definitions to terms and concepts
- Written in a rigid essay format

The purpose

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Purpose of the PIQs

Clarification & context

Students can fill in any information that we should know about their life circumstances, interests, or experience.

Can add context that might not show up in the academic history or activities & awards.

Selection

PIQs are used as an important factor in the selection process.

Campuses may use PIQs in different ways to assess areas like major interest, involvement, leadership experiences, and other contextual achievement.

Scholarships

Some campuses may use PIQ responses for scholarship consideration.

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Remembering the purpose

The PIQs are one part of a *college application*

Help students remember that they are applying to be a UC student

Information shared should be:

- *Relevant*
- *Recent*
- *Reflective of the student*
- *Not repetitive*

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Conversations with students

Does this story need any additional details or context to make sense?

What do you want the admissions office to learn about you by sharing this?

Why are you including this information?

Is this new information that you haven't already shared?

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PIQ Question #8 – Sample 5

""Why do you play video games so much?" My parents asked me.

They only knew of video games as a useless, time-consuming, waste. For me, however, it was more than that. It was how I became comfortable socializing. Throughout my life, I had never been very social and even struggled to talk to adults and other people around me. I often found myself choosing to stay quiet for fear of being made fun of because of my lisp. On top of that, I had the same small group of friends moving from middle school going into high school, which made life changes even more nerve-racking.

However, during my freshman year and the following summer, I was able to meet and connect with several new people through online video games. Everyone was playing online games due to the lockdowns, which led to being invited to online communities with people I had never met before. Before long, I found myself connecting within those communities and being more sociable. As a result, this made me more comfortable around peers in my own grade and showed me that there is no need to be worried about meeting new people.

Video games have taught me to be more comfortable when talking to crowds of people as well, which has carried over to many aspects of my life. It showed me to be confident and speak loudly when presenting in front of people in my job interview, and beyond that when I would converse with customers and my coworkers without being anxious. It has led me to meet many new people I wouldn't have otherwise met, and many of my friends would now even describe me as talkative and extroverted. Overall, I have realized being social is a great asset in connecting with my classmates and teammates, and I owe it all to video games. By playing video games, I learned that being sociable and confident are tools that can help me, and those around me, grow. So take that, Mom and Dad."

PIQ Question #8 – Sample 6

"In my sophomore year, after coming to the realization that student advocacy in my school district was entirely dependent on the whims of administrators, I decided that we could resolve this disempowerment by creating a student's union. Working with students I had gathered from across the district, we created a structure utilizing unique forms of political organization. As my junior year came to a close, I created a detailed constitution. With this complete, we began a campaign to grow student support for the cause.

Around this time, I learned about Boys State, an educational program focused on simulating the state government. After sharing my union story with the local selection committee, I was chosen as a delegate and soon sent to Sacramento. For the first time, the program was co-ed. Participating in this change was an incredible experience, and yet, an issue quickly arose; our female delegates were being excluded from the national program. In response, I co-authored a bill proposing a boycott of Boys Nation if they didn't allow us to send a female delegate, prompting a program-wide dialogue. After discussing the best course of action, we decided to form a new group: Advocates for Boys & Girls Nation (ABGN).

After the program, I found myself splitting my activism between the union and ABGN. While gearing up the union for a renewed push, I simultaneously helped establish dialogues with congressional representatives and White House staffers regarding Boys Nation. Most notably, two women from the program and I wrote a letter that was received by President Biden's office, and we soon learned it had prompted him to cancel his planned meeting with the program due to its exclusionary policies.

Through these experiences, I learned more about myself. I have found that I am not just a person who finds systemic shortcomings; I go further and actively pursue solutions. I look at the spaces I am in and strive to improve them not only for myself, but for everyone else affected by them. I've done this in high school, and I will do this on my college campus"

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Finding the purpose – Sample PIQ

PIQ samples for question #8

Sample #5 – Missed opportunity



- Has put style over content
- Lacks specific details
- Doesn't answer the question
- Doesn't connect back to student's purpose – it's unclear why they're sharing this information in the context of their application

Sample #6 – Value added



- Recent and relevant
- Direct and straight to the point
- Specific and detailed
- Answers the question
- Connects back to the student's purpose in sharing this information

What about AI?



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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PIQ Question #8 – Sample 7

“Beyond what I’ve already shared in my application, I believe my resilience, intellectual curiosity, and commitment to community make me a strong candidate for admission to the University of California. While my academic record reflects my dedication to learning, it’s the experiences behind the grades that truly define who I am and what I hope to bring to campus.

Growing up in a low-income household, I learned early on the value of hard work and perseverance. Balancing school with part-time jobs to support my family taught me time management, responsibility, and the importance of staying focused on long-term goals. These challenges didn’t deter me—they motivated me. I sought out every opportunity to grow, from enrolling in honors and AP courses to participating in community service projects that addressed food insecurity in my neighborhood.

What drives me most is a deep curiosity about the world and a desire to make a positive impact. I’ve always been fascinated by how systems—whether biological, social, or technological—interact and evolve. This curiosity led me to start a science tutoring program at my school, where I helped classmates not only improve their grades but also develop confidence in their abilities. It also inspired me to pursue independent research on environmental sustainability, which I presented at a local youth science fair.

I see the University of California as a place where I can continue to grow—intellectually, personally, and socially. I’m excited by the opportunity to learn from world-class faculty, collaborate with diverse peers, and engage in research and service that align with my passions. I believe my background, perspective, and drive to contribute meaningfully to the campus community make me a strong fit for UC. I’m not just ready for the challenge—I’m eager for it. And I’m excited to bring my energy, ideas, and voice to the UC family.”

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Using Artificial Intelligence – Sample PIQ

This response was written by UC Irvine's admissions chatbot!

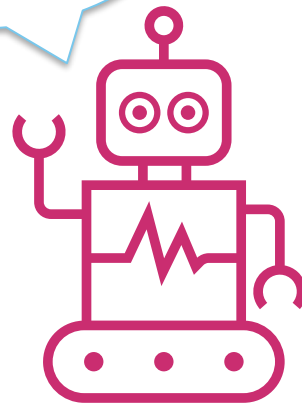
Impersonal...even potentially dishonest

- Sounds personal but isn't using facts
- Not representative of the student...or anyone for that matter
- Would need **a lot** of editing to be true to the student

Style vs. content

While the writing ChatGPT may generate is stylistically very good, that isn't the goal of the PIQs and isn't worth sacrificing the student's voice – sorry bots...but not really!

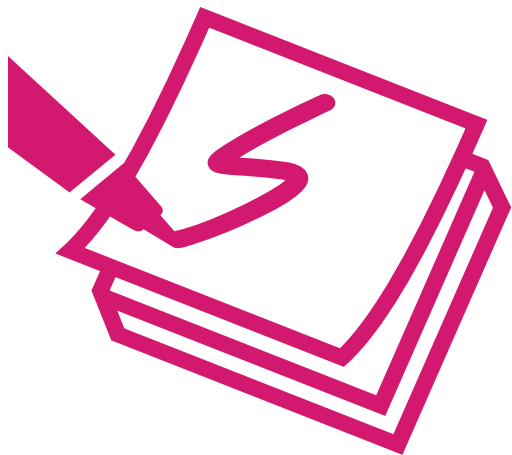
*How was
my PIQ
response?*



A photograph of three people sitting around a wooden table, laughing and interacting. The person on the left is a man with dark hair and glasses, wearing a grey jacket. The person in the middle is a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a light blue polo shirt. The person on the right is a woman wearing a white hijab, glasses, and a dark jacket. They are all smiling and looking at each other. The background features a large, colorful mural with various figures and text, including "POWER TO THE PEOPLE" and "WHOSE OUR". A window is visible on the right side of the image.

What about Additional comments?

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

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

Additional comments are **NOT**:

- A place to add a 5th PIQ response
- An opportunity to continue with a previous PIQ response
- A space to link portfolios, websites, resumes, videos, personal websites, social media, or any external source
- An opportunity to impress the reader by adding a short story or poem

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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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Additional comments – Academic history examples

- My school has had significant turnover and instability in my four years of high school. I have had four principals in my four years, more than a dozen assistant principals, and many of the AP teachers I have had either left or were new to the curriculum. We routinely have 20-30% teacher turnover each year.
- Our district, during my freshman year, limited the opportunities for concurrent enrollment. I would have liked to have taken more classes at the local community college, but they made a decision to no longer take them for concurrent credit (with the exception of PE and some art courses.) I would have liked to have taken more comprehensive courses in science as well, but our district adopted a new curriculum. In so doing I wasn't able to take chemistry or physics, which are two courses that are vital for me to take in order for me to go into the field I am interested in.
- During my sophomore year I suffered a severe injury, that resulted in me staying in the hospital for more than 6 weeks. As a result, I missed a lot of school and wasn't able to make up the coursework. This is why my grades are lower than typical during the first semester. But I was able to recover and make up the work I missed and finish the year with nearly straight A's!

Additional comments — PIQs

Examples on how student can use the additional comments after the PIQs:

- Changes in extracurriculars
- Changes in family circumstances
- Additional details about something mentioned only briefly in the application
- Additional personal responsibilities or environmental factors

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Additional comments – PIQ examples

- During my junior year my school unexpectedly cut the girl's lacrosse team. I had played lacrosse since the 6th grade, but was forced to stop as there wasn't an affordable club option available to me. I hope to play lacrosse in college.
- During my sophomore year my dad got sick and had to quit his job. This forced me to look for a part-time job so that I could help my parents financially. I started working at a local restaurant and picked up as many hours as I could, but this meant I couldn't stay in the marching band as the practice times usually conflicted with my work hours. This had a big impact on not just my activities, but my mental well-being during this time. My dad fully recovered and was able to start working again just this past summer, so I plan to reduce my work hours and join band again.
- In my free time, I like to practice woodworking in my dad's woodshop. I made a YouTube channel where I show people what I make and over the years my channel has gotten really popular. What started as a hobby has now grown into a real job with nearly 70,000 followers. I now spend close to 20 hours a week working on my projects, while also editing recordings and sharing the content online. I had to learn a lot about video editing and use my earnings to buy new equipment.

Wrapping up...

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Tying it all together...

The PIQs are a way for students to **provide context**, share their story in **their voice**, and demonstrate that they are **ready to grow and learn on a UC campus**.

This is as close as the UC campuses can get to sitting down and talking to your students!

We want to get to know your students and help them be clear about what conversation they want to have with us.

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Tying it all together

The Prompt

We want to help students identify which questions are best for them to answer.

The Point

We want to help students be clear and concise in their writing focusing on content to best share their story.

The Purpose

We want to help students remember why they are answering our questions and reflect on how their experiences make them ready to pursue a UC education!

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PIQ guide for first-year applicants



English



Spanish

PIQ resource page



Questions?

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Thank you!