

# Your UWC Selections Journey

Working Towards a Successful Application

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Right now, you are reading this because you are a prospective Filipino UWC student. You hope to study in one of the 18 UWC schools and colleges for two life-changing years. But before you can step into one of the UWCs, you must go through the selections cycle, and write essays and come talk with a lot of our alumni and parents. This can be a stressful process for you, as it can be an unconventional admissions process in contrast to most schools in the Philippines. I am writing this for you, a prospective UWCer, so you can work towards a successful application.

## What are we looking for?

If you read our website, we look for candidates who can embody the UWC values. However, one mistake that applicants make is thinking too much about how they think they should be. They think that we have a single mold of an ideal UWC student, but in fact, we don't. We do have criteria, but we understand that our applicants come from different socioeconomic backgrounds. We search for applicants who have the potential to maximize their skills and their understanding of the world and their place in it. You do not have to be an extrovert to share your culture. You do not have to flash off your awards to show that you have skills. You do not have to think that "you should change the whole world," because doing that would require more than you.

At your age, you should be concerned about understanding who you are, what you want, and why you want to help others. In short, ask yourself: why should we look for people like you?

## Understanding what the application is

Your application, to put it simply, is a package of yourself. You put parts of your story that will help us understand who you are. These stories are short defining moments, or they can be a long, enduring narrative about your development. You can talk about your relationships with other people, your attachment to a certain thing, or a commitment to a hobby.

You must also understand what you are applying for. This way, you have an idea about what you're getting into. Visit our [website](#) to learn about UWC, or you can freely ask us through the contact information given on our website. Your application will benefit a lot if you know the UWC Mission and Values, and have a notion of what the UWC experience might be.

But know this: all these stories must be about you, and it is your job to package your application in such a way.

## Parts of the Application

There are four parts to the application, and we will go through them succinctly one by one.

### 1. Academics and Grades

In your two-year stay at a UWC, you will be studying to complete the International Baccalaureate (IB). The IB is a rigorous academic curriculum that prepares you for

college and encourages a different way of thinking, in contrast to how the Philippine education system is set up. Because of that, we want our applicants to be prepared academically, emotionally, physically, and mentally for a different system. Understand that we do not require you to have straight A's or a line of nines to demonstrate that you can thrive in a UWC environment. We understand that some applicants have incredible aptitudes in other fields that our schools here in the Philippines may not measure, and we want to ensure that we comprehend your strong points, be it in painting, playing the piano, declamation, or journalism.

We do not have grade cut-offs. We believe that our applicants are more than just numbers. Your grades only indicate to us your academic performance throughout high school. This will help us understand whether one can withstand the academic pressures of the IB. Understand as well that even these are just numbers, grades tell us a story of how you did in your long time in high school. We will see progressions. We will see declines. These all tell us a story of performance and, of course, circumstance. If you had a constant high Math grade, then you had one low grade in a single quarter, which tells us that circumstance played a role.

At this point, do not fret about your grades. You have done what you can in your earlier grade levels, and it is more important to focus on other aspects of this application.

## 2. Recommendations

Recommendations give us a perspective of who you are from a person who knows you well. In terms of recommendations, a common question that I get is this: from

whom should I ask for a recommendation letter? I consistently answer them: a person who knows you well enough to vouch for your skills and interactions, be it in your school or elsewhere.

In my application, I chose my principal to write my recommendation, because we had known each other for four years, and we worked in different capacities as I was deeply involved in student engagements in my public high school in Novaliches. My second recommender was a friend and my Math instructor, whom I've known for six years at the time of my application. He knew me well enough to talk more than my Math skills, but also my literary and musical relationship that I have with him.

Your recommender does not need to be the prime expert in your field. They need to have enough credibility to confirm your skills, but at the same time, enough experience with you so that we can see the humanity behind your skills and work. They also have to show their engagement with you and your peers within your institution. This way we can understand how you interact with others, how you work with them, and how you care for them, too.

A common thing I see in recommendations is that they only list your awards and tell us little about the story behind getting these achievements. Remember, we want to know the story behind these achievements as well. It helps that you have a talk with your recommender about these so that they make sure to tell your story through their own eyes.

### 3. Achievements and Special Interests

In your application, we ask you to list achievements and interests that are most important to you. These activities must tell us about the things you care about the most, and your achievements are a testament to the commitment and passion you have. You must describe in a clear and concise manner what these activities are. For achievements, also provide evidence (pictures, certificates, etc.) to prove them. You need to show us a mix of activities that accurately describe your interests. If you are a musician, it is natural to have several music activities, but it is also good to show us other non-music activities to display your skills in other fields. However, since you have limited space, you need to think carefully about which activities are representative of your potential and skills. Remember, we don't know who you are; the mix of activities in your application affects how we understand you and your story.

Ask yourself: what activities represent me well? What activities resonate with me, and what activities do I want the selections committee to know about me?

The last segment is the essay, and it is fitting to have its own lengthy section.

## Understanding how to write an essay

### What is the essay about?

When extracurriculars and grades are all at par with all applicants, the essay is arguably the most important element when deciding who gets in. This is the part of the application where we get to hear your voice. This is your chance to tell us your story

with your own words and to unpack the narratives behind the achievements and struggles that you have.

The essay is not about impressing us with how eloquent you are. We care little about the fluffiness of your prose. We care about the content and the story. Many people are afraid to apply because writing can seem daunting. You also compete with others who have experience in essay writing and competitions. None of this matters. The most important thing is that you tell us who you are to help us understand how your story fits into UWC. Nothing more. Nothing less.

### What language to use?

*Do I use English or Filipino? Is there a preferred language?*

No! We wouldn't put up choices if we prefer a certain language. We want to give our applicants the flexibility in their essays, especially since this writing is about expression.

Use the language that you can best express yourself. Use the language that materializes your story. If it means writing in Filipino, please do so. My personal go-to for Filipino works are from Ricky Lee, like *Bahay ni Mart*, or the essayist Bob Ong for a more modern take on Filipino with English transliterations. Writing in Filipino does not mean that it has to be classical. As long as you use the language in a way that fits your voice, personality, and style, then it works fine. Bob Ong wouldn't be successful without his creative use of the Filipino language. If you are interested in writing in classical Filipino, I personally like short stories like Efren Abueg's [\*Mabangis na Lungsod\*](#), Lualhati

Bautista's [\*Tatlong Kuwento ng Buhay ni Julian Candelabra\*](#), or Rene Villanueva's [\*Nemo ang Batang Papel\*](#). Of course, there are more styles out there that you can read from.

For English, I recommend reading EB White's [\*Charlotte's Web\*](#), Haruki Murakami's "[\*The Second Bakery Attack\*](#)" from *The Elephant Vanishes*, and for something extremely short yet a beautifully written horror short story, Angela Carter's "[\*The Snow Child\*](#)" from *The Bloody Chamber* is an excellent piece of work that demonstrates a strong punch in less than 500 words.

Leaving all these book recommendations aside, the most important thing is that you write in your own voice and in a style that you can call your own.

### Introspect: Don't Tell but Show

The majority of the time spent writing an essay is when you are not writing it. Before you even write anything, you must think deeply about (1) what the question is asking from you, (2) what idea and story you will be presenting, (3) why that story is the one you want to show us, and (4) how you will present it. Many applicants tend to list their achievements and activities in the essays and show very little about the vital process that shows us their commitment, meaningful struggles, and joyful moments that come together with their activities. For us, it is more important to choose a specific topic and dig deep instead of spreading yourself too thin.

We also need you to show us through examples and narratives why and how you are engaged in a certain activity. At a minimum, some applicants just tell us that they are committed to a hobby—arts, for example—but they never show us evidence of how

and why they are committed. It is not enough to tell us that you are committed to swimming just because you competed in the Olympics. In fact, you might risk sounding too arrogant and pompous, if you just stick that Olympic achievement out there. We want to know why you wanted to be in the Olympics and how (the process) you got there. Those narratives give us a better insight of who you are as a person.

We want to hear your story and your purpose, and how you surpassed hardships. We want you to answer the questions “how” and “why” with genuineness. We know when you make up stories. We want you to introspect because your ability to introspect will determine how much you will learn from your potential UWC experience. It’s not all about academics. In fact, more important things go beyond it. We understand—applicants are about 15 to 18 years old. There is just so much that you can write about that seems so wise. We are not looking exclusively for wise people. We are looking for people who want to delve into various experiences and learn a great deal from them—akin to people who are “madiskarte.” Whether that experience is five minutes short or two years long, it does not matter as long as we know that you have the ability to synthesize and learn from it. That is what matters.

**Write about what you really want.** If you’re stuck, then you need more time to think about your life. Think about when you were born. Think about your parents. Think about your environment. Oftentimes, the small things are those that influence us the most, and we neglect them. We want you to think about those small things, and they might help you understand who you really are, and that will definitely result into a lucid and genuine essay. Therefore, you don’t have time to cram. You need to think a lot



about this process and digest these experiences, because for most of you, this might be one of those few times that you do extreme reflection.

This [essay](#) by Patti Smith in the New Yorker is an example of introspective writing. It's about when music overwhelmed her, and she paused in her performance of Bob Dylan's "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" during the Nobel Prize Ceremony. In Filipino, check out this 2015 Palanca-winning essay by Karl Gabrielle B. de los Santos entitled, [Hindi Ko Alam](#). It is a witty and fascinating essay on Filipino solidarity and literature. Remember that these works only serve as an example. You should not exactly tailor your essays to replicate them. Instead let them be a guide to allow you to discover how introspection works for you.

### Cut the Fluff

You only have so many words to tell us your story. Be economical. Each word in your essay must have a purpose. Be as simple as possible when telling your story. No need for complex, ~~highfalutin and discombobulating~~ words. You do not need to show us that you know these words, as they are not a sign of excellence in writing. A sign of excellence is knowing what words to use, their specific impact, and how to create a flowing prose so that your reader can understand everything smoothly. We know when you are merely using words to fill your essays. Cut the fillers and go straight to the real deal. This is how we know that your essay is lucid and clear. We only have so much time to assess more than a hundred essays, so keep it short and simple. This way, you are helping us understand you and your story.

**Do not sway us with words.** Some applicants tend to use flowery words that are beautiful indeed, but empty. Avoid such prose. This is what I call the “beauty queen prose.” They stir the heart, because they are so emotionally charged and hastily general that anyone who hears the prose can fit their experiences to it. In this prose, there are few to no examples at all and minimal explanation of purpose and process. When you are in a beauty queen pageant, you only have 30 seconds to about a minute to catch the audience’s and the jury’s attention. Using the beauty queen prose’s stirring effects can guarantee that. However, in this application, you are writing an essay, and you have weeks to introspect and fill your writing with meaningful content. Use your time before the application deadline wisely. Don’t think of punchlines that will catch our attention, because what will catch our attention the most is a consistent, strong voice and content in all five of your essays. You can’t have only one great essay, and the rest are not given attention. Your greatness must be consistent in all essays, and trust me, this will take a lot of time to do.

### Revise. Reject. Rewrite.

Like any form of writing, it is important to revise your essay. When you finish your essay, it is like a newly made artisan table, but its rough surface and edges still need some polishing. Check for grammar mistakes and awkward structures at a minimum. Make sure that the flow of your paragraphs makes sense. Many sites will tell you to have an introduction, the body, and then the closing. But this is a personal essay, even though that structure applies to this type of essay, you do not need to fully adhere to it.

Sometimes, some writers prefer to free-write and just write whatever they feel like writing. They go with the flow. After that, they revise this raw essay and then see if their paragraphs still flow or if they need some restructuring.

There are times when you need to reject your whole essay and start over again. That's fine. It is better to write a better essay anew than go with an essay you know that does not work. Great essayists and authors constantly reject their own writing and start over again. Toni Morrison, a Nobel Prize Winner for Literature, has a deep and beautifully interwoven prose that required her to rewrite and reject many of her passages, even chapters. If you feel that the essay does not speak to your soul, throw it away and write another one until it feels right.

A bit of good advice is to let another good writer read your work. A person's advice will be as good as their skills in writing. Ask your English teacher to read your work or a person you believe has experience in writing this kind of work. You might be surprised at how much advice they can give. Don't be afraid to look into other works to understand what beautiful prose is. I recommend having a look at William Strunk, Jr.'s *The Elements of Style*. I prefer the edition with EB White's additions and revisions. If buying the book is a huge cost, the original edition without White's revision is publicly available at [Project Gutenberg](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/10000/10000-h/10000-h.htm).

At the end of the day, no matter how much changes other people ask you to do, it's always up to you. Do you feel that it's right or not? Read it out loud and determine if the flow is right. Most of the time, when your writing feels right and sounds right, then it is mostly right.

**This is the most important thing: do not focus so much on the beauty of your essay; rather, focus on whether your essay actually represents who you are.** Remember, we want to know who you are. Even if you write in broken English or Taglish, we care little about that. We care about the content—the story—within those essays. As long as we get to know who you are in those essays and your purpose, why you want to become a UWCer, that is what counts.

## Wrapping up the Application

Now, you have finished submitting your transcript, you're done with your list of activities, and you have written your essays with clarity and beauty. Everything has been signed, and your recommenders told you that they submitted their letters to us. It is time to submit your application.

At this point, I invite you to check everything and make sure that your application reflects your personality, the breadth of your skills and talents, a sense of your identity and environment, and most importantly, your story. Each part of your application should tell something new about you, but at the same time, all these elements must be cohesive—they must make sense. Think of your favorite dish, imagine putting gourmet yet random ingredients in the pot. Or think of putting too many carrots or too much vinegar than called for. Do you think your favorite dish will still taste the same? Probably not. It's the same with your application; do not repeat the same thing in different parts of your application, nor put different and random characteristics that will not make sense. But of course, like in any type of cooking, you are the only person who would know when it tastes right. There is no right path in creating your application, for all of you are

different people, but ask yourself: *Is this application a snapshot of who I really am? Is this representative of my skills, personality, and my story?*

We understand that we are asking a lot from you, and because of that, we treat your application with utter respect. Between the time you submit your application and the announcement of the shortlist, you will be full of stress and tension, especially at night (at least for me when I was applying). But you have done your best, and it is now our time to do our work in Selections to read and take care of all your applications.

Whether you get in or not, the important thing is that you learned (we hope) a lot about yourself in this process—anything more than that is a bonus. If you get in, make the most out of the experience to develop yourself and make lifelong friends. However, if you don't get in, stand up and continue pushing forward. Attending a UWC is not the only path to contributing to better lives and success, there are countless paths you can take. It is not about what path you take anyway; it is what you do with what you have that will determine your future. If you stay stuck on the road, you won't get anywhere—so continue forward no matter what happens.

On behalf of the Philippine National Committee, we wish you the best with your application and beyond!