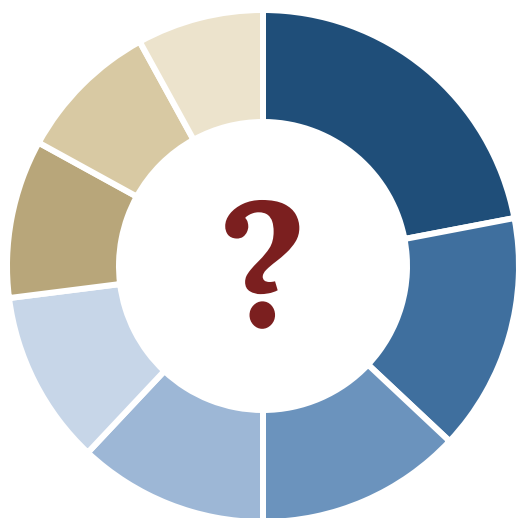


You’re the Admissions Director

Who deserves a seat, and who gets to decide?

A reading guide and extension activity for *Justice*, Chapter 8: “Who Deserves What? / Aristotle” · Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?*



Aristotle asked what a flute is **for**, then gave the best flute to the best player.

This packet asks the same question about college.

Part 1 walks through the chapter. In Part 2 you build your own admissions formula, test it on two applicants, then compare it with how real colleges decide.

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Justice, Chapter 8: Who Deserves What? / Aristotle

Discussion guide and key concepts · Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*

Sandel opens with the real case of Callie Smartt, a cheerleader with cerebral palsy who was removed from her squad, to introduce Aristotle's theory of justice. From there the chapter moves outward: from flutes and cheerleaders, to the purpose of politics, to virtue and habit, and finally to Aristotle's defense of slavery.

ΤΕΛΟΣ

Telos. According to Aristotle, everything in nature has a telos, or end goal. The telos of a knife is to cut; the telos of a shoe is to protect the foot. Every activity has a telos, which answers the question: *why are you doing this?*

The core idea: for Aristotle, figuring out what something is FOR comes before figuring out who deserves it.

1. Justice is teleological

To figure out what people are entitled to, you first work out the purpose, or telos, of the practice in question.

2. Justice is honorific

Arguing about that purpose is really arguing about which virtues and excellences a practice should honor and reward.

Key vocabulary

Telos	The purpose, end, or essential goal of a thing. Example: the telos of a knife is to cut, the telos of a flute is to be played well, and even a role like teacher has a telos: to help students actually learn.
Teleological reasoning	Figuring out what is fair by first figuring out what something is FOR. Example: before deciding who deserves a cheerleading spot, you first have to decide whether cheerleading is FOR gymnastics or FOR inspiring school spirit.
Distributive justice	The fair way to divide up goods, honors, or offices among people.
Honorific purpose	A practice's role in celebrating and rewarding certain virtues, separate from its purely practical (instrumental) use.
Moral desert	The idea that people deserve certain goods or honors based on merit and virtue. This is the core of Aristotle's definition of justice: giving each person their due.
Practical wisdom	The skill of knowing which rule or action fits a specific real situation, not just knowing rules in the abstract.
Virtue	Excellence of character, built through habit and practice, not just taught as a fact.
Natural slave (Aristotle's term)	His claim that some people are naturally suited to be ruled by others. Sandel points out that many enslaved people in Aristotle's Athens were free people captured in war, not "natural slaves" even by his own definition. That is why Sandel treats this as the weak point of the theory.
Ethic of choice and consent	The modern liberal view: justice means letting people choose their own roles freely, not fitting them to a "natural" purpose.

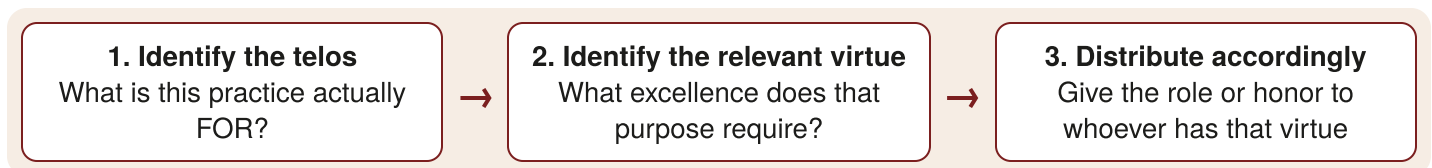
Aristotle vs. Plato: what is the actual difference?

	Plato	Aristotle
Where is truth found?	In abstract, unchanging Forms (Ideas) that exist beyond the physical world: a perfect “Justice” that exists separately from any just act.	In the physical world itself. You find the purpose (telos) of a thing by studying the thing, not by looking beyond it.
How do we learn virtue?	Through reason and philosophical knowledge of the Forms. Knowing the Good is close to being good.	Through habit and practice. You become brave by doing brave acts, the way you learn the flute by playing the flute.

A note on this comparison: Sandel only mentions Plato briefly in this chapter. This table is background context that helps explain WHY Aristotle looks for purpose inside the physical world rather than in an abstract realm of Forms.

How teleological reasoning actually works

The 3-step pattern Aristotle uses every time



Example: Flutes

1. Telos of a flute → to be played well
2. Relevant virtue → skill at flute-playing
3. Who gets the best flute? → the best flute player, NOT the richest, best-looking, or highest-born

Example: Cheerleading (Callie Smartt)

1. Telos of cheerleading → disputed! Gymnastics skill? Or inspiring school spirit?
2. Relevant virtue → depends entirely on which telos you pick
3. This is WHY the case got so heated: people disagreed at Step 1, before they ever got to Step 3

Try it yourself: Tennis courts

1. Telos of a tennis court → to be used well, for excellent tennis
2. Relevant virtue → tennis skill
3. Imagine two famous scientists playing a casual, mediocre game when the varsity team arrives needing the good court. Even if the scientists are more distinguished people, Aristotle’s logic gives the court to the varsity players, because they can make the most of what the court is FOR.

This example applies Aristotle’s reasoning; it is not a case from the book.

Key idea: you can’t answer “who deserves this?” until you first answer “what is this thing actually for?” And reasonable people often disagree at that very first step.

Discussion questions

The Callie Smartt case

A popular freshman cheerleader in Andrews, Texas, who has cerebral palsy and cheered from her wheelchair. In 1996, at the urging of some cheerleaders and parents, school officials removed her from the squad, citing safety. To cheer again, she would have to try out like everyone else, with splits and tumbles.

The Casey Martin case

A pro golfer with a circulatory disability that made walking painful asked the PGA Tour to let him use a golf cart. In *PGA Tour v. Martin* (2001), the Supreme Court ruled 7 to 2 in his favor. Justice Scalia dissented.

Section A: Callie Smartt, flutes, and teleological reasoning

1. Callie's opponents said requiring gymnastics was fair since it applied to everyone equally. Her supporters said the standard itself was unfair because it assumed one narrow definition of "cheerleader." Which reading is more convincing, and why?
2. Aristotle says the best flutes go to the best flute players, not because it makes listeners happiest, but because that is what flutes are FOR. Can you think of a modern case where people disagree over whether something should go to whoever will use it best, whoever pays the most, or whoever wins a lottery?
3. Sandel suggests the father's real objection was not about safety but about honor: a sense that Callie's inclusion cheapened the honor his daughter had earned. Is this a fair read of his motive, or is Sandel reading too much into it?

Section B: The purpose of politics, virtue through habit, and slavery

1. Aristotle says politics exists to cultivate virtue and character, not just to keep the peace or grow the economy. Which vision feels closer to how most people think about government today, and which is closer to how you think it should work?
2. Aristotle argues we become virtuous the way we become good musicians: by practicing, not by reading about it. Do schools actually teach ethics or citizenship this way? What would a class built around "practicing virtue" look like?
3. Sandel argues that Aristotle's own framework, applied honestly, condemns the slavery of his time, since many enslaved people in Athens were war captives, not "natural slaves." Does this defense hold up, or does the fact that the theory could accommodate slavery at all count against it?

Section C: The whole chapter

1. Aristotle's justice is teleological, based on a shared purpose. Modern liberal theories try to stay neutral and let individuals choose their own goals. Which approach handles disagreement in a diverse society better?
2. Like the Casey Martin case, pick a live debate you know of in sports, education, or work. What is really being argued underneath? Is it about fairness, or is it actually a disagreement about what the activity is FOR?
3. If justice means giving people what fits their merit, what happens to people who never had a fair chance to develop that merit in the first place? Does Aristotle have a good answer, or is this the weak point of the whole system?
4. In the Casey Martin case, Justice Scalia argued that games have no purpose beyond amusement, so no rule inside them can really be called "essential." If he is right, does that also undercut Aristotle's flute example? If he is wrong, what would you say back to him?

Connecting to the modern era

Each debate below is really a telos argument in disguise. Both sides usually agree on fairness in the abstract; they disagree about what the practice is actually FOR. Use these as a model, then try the same for/against structure on a debate of your own.

1. College admissions ← Part 2 of this packet

FOR considering more than test scores

A university's telos is not pure scholarship alone; it also includes shaping future citizens and leaders. If that is the purpose, a class that reflects a capable, varied citizenry fits the mission, the same way Aristotle wanted political office to go to whoever best serves the common good.

VS

AGAINST considering more than test scores

A university's telos is academic excellence, period. Admitting on anything besides ability is like handing the best flute to someone other than the best player: unfair to whoever actually earned the spot.

2. Disability accommodations (Casey Martin's golf cart)

FOR the accommodation

Golf's telos is shot-making, not walking. If walking is not essential to what the game tests, a cart does not change the sport's purpose, and denying it punishes Martin for something irrelevant to the game.

VS

AGAINST the accommodation

If enduring fatigue over 18 holes IS part of what separates elite golfers, removing that challenge changes what is being tested and gives Martin an edge. Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus made this argument in the actual case.

3. Merit-based systems (testing, hiring, algorithms)

FOR merit-based sorting

Aristotle says resources go to whoever can use them best: the best flute player gets the flute. Tests and hiring criteria try to do the same thing, sorting people by real ability so the most capable land in the right roles.

VS

AGAINST merit-based sorting

"Merit" measured this way often rewards whoever had the most tutoring, prep, or family resources, not who is most able. That is not rewarding the best flute player; it is rewarding whoever got free lessons.

4. The gig economy

FOR: consent is enough

Nobody is forced into a delivery job or a warehouse shift. Under the modern ethic of choice and consent, a worker freely agreeing to the wage and conditions is what makes the arrangement fair.

VS

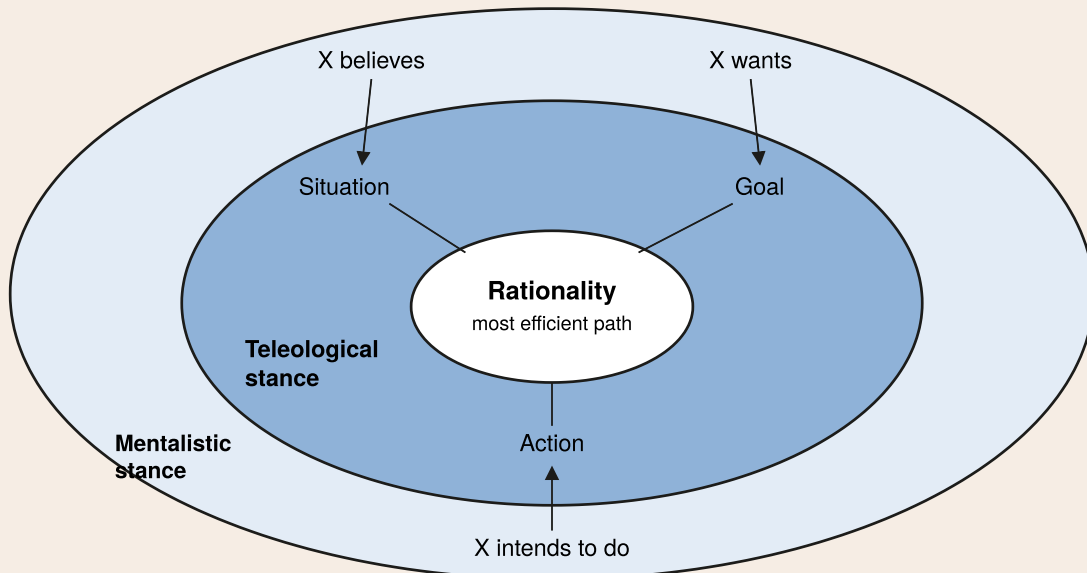
AGAINST: consent is not enough

Aristotle would say some jobs are so repetitive, dangerous, or deadening that they do not fit human capacities at all, no matter how willingly someone signs up. Consent does not make an unfit job fit.

Discussion prompt: pick one debate above and ask, "If both sides had to agree on the telos first, would the disagreement even survive?"

Telos never left

It is still in cognitive science



Simplified redrawing based on Gergely and Csibra (2003), *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*

Psychologists György Gergely and Gergely Csibra found that even one-year-old babies make sense of what people do by asking what the action is **for**. Babies connect an action to a goal and to the situation, and they expect people to take the most efficient path to that goal. The researchers called this the **teleological stance**. As we grow up, we add a richer layer on top: what someone believes, wants, and intends.

Aristotle's 2,400-year-old question, "what is this FOR?", never actually left. It turns out to be one of the first ways humans understand each other.

Try it: map one of your own actions

Pick something you did today, like coming to this class. Fill in the teleological stance for it.

Action: _____

Goal: _____

Situation: _____

Was your action the most efficient way to reach your goal? If not, what does that tell someone watching you?

Coming up in Part 2

In Chapter 8, people fought over a cheerleading spot and a golf cart. Underneath, they were really fighting about what cheerleading and golf are FOR. College admissions is the same kind of fight, with much higher stakes. In Part 2, you run admissions yourself: decide what college is for, build your own formula, and test it on two applicants.

You're the admissions director

You run admissions at a very selective college. Harvard, for example, received 47,893 applications for its Class of 2029 and admitted 2,003 students, and most applicants had great grades. How should you choose? Aristotle would tell you to start with one question: **what is this thing FOR?**

Step 1. In one sentence, what is college FOR?

100%

Step 2. Decide how much each part of an application *should* count. Write a percentage for each part. A part can get 0%. **Your total must be exactly 100%**, not 99 and not 101.

Part of the application	What it should count
Grades and course difficulty Your GPA and how hard your classes are	%
SAT or ACT score A standardized test score	%
Activities Clubs, sports, jobs, what you led	%
Essays Your story, in your own words	%
Teacher and counselor letters What adults at school say about you	%
Interview A conversation with a graduate	%
Showing interest Visiting, emailing, applying early	%
Character and background Grit, kindness, first in family to go to college	%
Family connection A parent went to this college	%
Total (must be 100%)	%

1. Which part got your biggest percentage? How does that connect to your answer in Step 1?

2. Which part is the least fair to count? Who does it help, and who does it hurt?

Put your rules to work

Two students are left for the very last seat. An admissions reader has already scored each part of their files from 0 to 5. **The ratings do not decide who gets in. Your percentages do.** Copy your percentages from page 6, multiply each one by the rating, and add them up. The higher total gets the seat.

Denzel

- Expensive private school in the US
- 4.0 GPA with 12 AP classes
- 1560 SAT after two years of private tutoring
- His dad went here and donates every year
- Toured campus twice and applied early
- JV tennis and a paid summer program
- Polished, confident interviewer
- Essay on a family trip abroad: polished but forgettable

Meg

- Public school that offers only 4 AP classes, and she took all 4
- 3.8 GPA
- 1420 SAT, studying alone with free online practice
- Works 15 hours a week at her family's restaurant
- Founded her school's MUN club, now 30 members
- First in her family to apply to college
- Could not afford to visit campus
- Essay on running the register at age 12; teachers call her the best leader they have seen

Part	Your %	Denzel rating	Denzel score	Meg rating	Meg score
Grades and course difficulty		5		4	
SAT or ACT score		5		3	
Activities		2		5	
Essays		2		5	
Teacher and counselor letters		3		5	
Interview		4		3	
Showing interest		5		3	
Character and background		2		5	
Family connection		5		0	
Total	100				

Rating key: ☐ 0 ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

0 = nothing, 1 = weak, 2 = below average, 3 = solid, 4 = strong, 5 = top of the pool

Example: if you gave grades 30% and Denzel's rating is 5, his grade score is $30 \times 5 = 150$.

3. Who got the last seat under your rules? Does that feel like the right call?

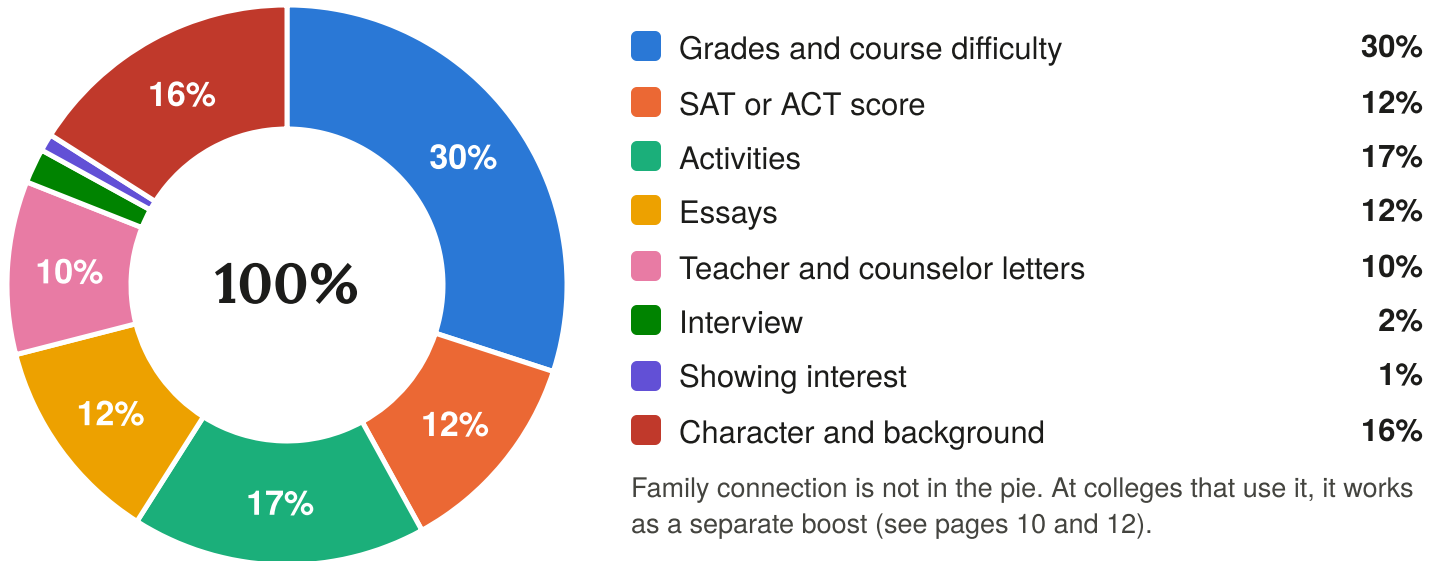
4. Change your percentages so the other student wins. What did you have to change, and is that version more fair or less fair?

How real colleges split the 100%

No college publishes an exact formula, so these pies are careful estimates, not official numbers. Each one is built from what colleges report about themselves, a national survey of colleges, and court records from a lawsuit against Harvard. The box under each pie shows exactly where the numbers came from and how sure we are. Page 13 explains the method.

Very selective colleges

Examples: the Ivy League, Stanford, MIT. Most admit fewer than 1 in 10 applicants.



What stands out

- Grades are the biggest single slice, but less than a third. For Harvard's Class of 2019, more than 8,000 applicants had perfect grades and about 2,000 were admitted. Grades decide who stays in the pile.
- Activities, essays, letters, and character together make up 55%. Among students with great grades, these decide who is picked.
- Showing interest is worth almost nothing. Harvard says it does not consider it at all (Source 11).

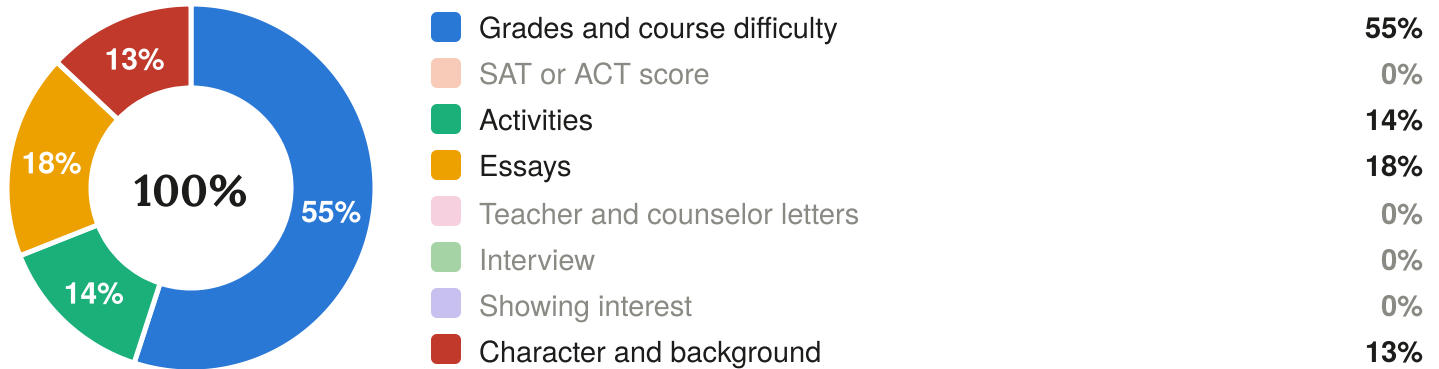
Where these numbers come from

How sure are we? **Medium**

- › **The colleges' own ratings:** each college rates about 19 factors as Very Important, Important, Considered, or Not Considered in its Common Data Set. We used summaries of those ratings from more than 100 selective colleges (Sources 5, 6).
- › **Harvard court records:** a 2018 trial made Harvard's real reading process public, including how it rates academics, activities, and personal qualities (Sources 7, 8).
- › **Limit:** the ratings tell us which parts matter most, not exact percentages. We turned the ratings into shares of 100%.

University of California

Based on UCLA's own 2025-26 report. All UC campuses share the same testing rules.



- SAT and ACT: 0%. You can still send scores, but readers do not use them to decide admission. They are used only after you are in, for things like course placement. AP and IB exam scores are different: they can count as part of your academic record. The SAT rule is under review for fall 2028 or later.
- Letters, interviews, and family connection: 0%. UCLA does not use them, so the essays are the only place your own voice shows up.

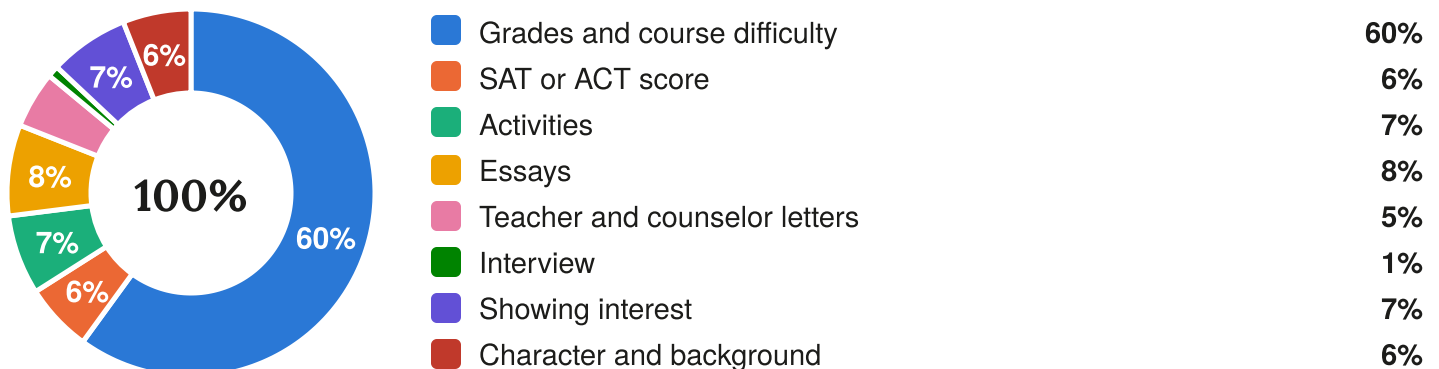
Where these numbers come from

How sure are we? High for the zeros

- › **UCLA's Common Data Set 2025-26:** rates grades, course rigor, and the essay Very Important, and tests, letters, and interviews Not Considered (Sources 3, 4). The UC system gives no legacy boost (Source 22).
- › **UC testing policy:** test-blind for 2026-27; submitted SAT/ACT scores are used only for placement (Sources 12, 13, 23, 24).
- › **Limit:** the zeros are facts. How the rest splits is our estimate.

Most colleges

Colleges that admit roughly 30 to 70% of applicants. Many state universities and private colleges fall in this range.



- Grades are 60%. This kind of admissions is close to a formula.
- Tests are only 6%. In the survey, only about 5% of colleges said test scores were of “considerable importance.” Showing interest is 7%, because these colleges need to predict who will actually enroll.

Where these numbers come from

How sure are we? Medium

- › **NACAC survey, Fall 2023:** 185 four-year colleges rated each factor. About 77% gave grades “considerable importance,” far ahead of everything else (Sources 1, 2).
- › **Limit:** this is an average of many different colleges. Any one college may look quite different.

The numbers, side by side

Part	Very selective Ivy League, Stanford, MIT	Univ. of California based on UCLA	Most colleges admit 30 to 70%
Grades and course difficulty	30%	55%	60%
SAT or ACT score	12%	0%	6%
Activities	17%	14%	7%
Essays	12%	18%	8%
Teacher and counselor letters	10%	0%	5%
Interview	2%	0%	1%
Showing interest	1%	0%	7%
Character and background	16%	13%	6%
Family connection	Boost at many*	0%	Varies*
Total	100%	100%	100%

* Harvard and most of the Ivy League still consider family connection. MIT, Caltech, Johns Hopkins, Amherst, and Carnegie Mellon do not. Most public universities do not (Sources 21, 22).

Compare. Put a star next to the part where your page 6 percentage was furthest from the real colleges. Why do you think you disagreed?

Round 2 results: who gets the seat?

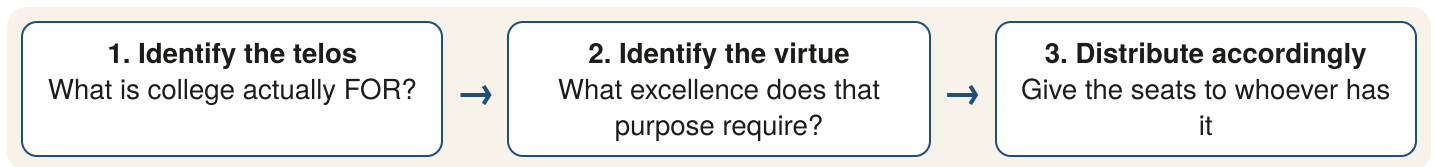
Using the real percentages from	Denzel	Meg	Seat goes to
Very selective	343	440	Meg
University of California	365	445	Meg
Most colleges	426	412	Denzel

Same two students, different winner. At most colleges, grades count so much that Denzel wins. At very selective colleges and at UC, Meg wins. **The rules decide the outcome as much as the students do.** Why is Meg’s grade rating a 4 and not a 5? See page 12.

If you apply from Taiwan: international applicants often face tougher odds. Readers may not know your school, so your test scores, your counselor’s letter, and your school’s profile do extra work explaining it. Some colleges also consider whether an international student needs financial aid (Sources 14, 17 to 20).

What would Aristotle say?

Look back at Part 1, especially pages 1 and 2. Sandel says Aristotle's justice is **teleological** (start with what a thing is for) and **honorific** (arguing about purpose is really arguing about which virtues to honor). Admissions fits his 3-step pattern:



Each pie is a different answer to Step 1

One way to read the pies: very selective colleges act as if college is for finding future leaders, so activities, essays, and character matter a lot. UC and most colleges act as if college is for students who are academically ready, so grades dominate. Like the Callie Smartt cheerleading case, the fight often happens at Step 1, before anyone gets to who deserves a seat.

Fair does not always mean equal **Ethics V.3**

Aristotle says justice is a kind of equality, but a proportional one: people with more merit should get more. He says quarrels start in two ways:

“when either equals have and are awarded unequal shares, or unequals equal shares” (Nicomachean Ethics V.3, trans. W. D. Ross)

Everyone agrees on merit. No one agrees on what merit is. **Ethics V.3**

In the same passage, Aristotle notices that people all say rewards should follow merit, but they mean different things. **Sort it:** write each of the nine parts from page 6 into the box for the kind of merit it rewards. Some parts may fit more than one box.

Merit = being a free citizen The democrats' answer. Today: everyone who qualifies counts the same.	Merit = wealth or family The oligarchs' answer. Today: money, connections, who your parents are.	Merit = excellence The aristocrats' answer (closest to Aristotle's own view). Today: skill and character.
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5. Which box did the real colleges reward most? Which box did YOUR page 6 percentages reward most?

Is it fair? Four hard tests

Test 1: Does wealth make you play better? **Politics III.12**

Aristotle's flute argument says the best flute goes to the best player, not the richest or best born, because money and family do not make anyone play better. Apply that to family connection: at Harvard (2014 to 2019), children of alumni were admitted at 34%, about 5.7 times the rate for everyone else. **The twist:** Denzel's two years of paid tutoring probably *did* raise his SAT score. If money can buy real skill, is the skill still fair to reward?

"unless the advantages of wealth and birth contribute to excellence in flute-playing, which they do not"
(Politics III.12, trans. B. Jowett)

Test 2: Rules or judgment? **Ethics V.10**

Aristotle says laws have to speak in general terms, so sometimes a wise judge must correct the rule for a particular case. He calls this **equity**, and it needs the **practical wisdom** from the vocabulary on page 1. The rule says Meg's 3.8 is below Denzel's 4.0, so she got a 4. Judgment says she took every AP class her school offered, so maybe she deserves a 5. **Try it:** change Meg's grade rating to 5 and rescore her with the real percentages. Does anything change at "most colleges"?

Test 3: Aristotle's own blind spot **Politics VII.9**

Here is the uncomfortable part. Aristotle believed virtue needs free time. He wrote that citizens should not live the life of workers or traders, because that life leaves no leisure for virtue. By his own rules, he might pick Denzel over Meg, who works 15 hours a week. Page 1 calls slavery (the "natural slave" idea) the weak point of his theory. Is this the same weak point?

"leisure is necessary both for the development of virtue and the performance of political duties" (Politics VII.9, trans. B. Jowett)

Test 4: Where does virtue come from? **see page 2**

Aristotle also says we become virtuous by practice, the way you become a flute player by playing. Running a register at 12 and building a club from zero are practice. So is Meg's job a barrier to virtue, or proof of it?

Your final ruling

6. Use Aristotle's three steps to argue for OR against the family connection boost.

7. Pick one test above. Does Aristotle's theory pass it? Explain.

8. Write one rule you would make every college follow to keep admissions fair.

How these numbers were built

What the numbers are

Careful estimates. No college publishes a percentage formula. The pies turn what colleges say about themselves into rough shares of 100% so they can be compared.

Step 1: What colleges say matters

Almost every US college fills out a form called the Common Data Set. Section C7 rates about 19 factors as Very Important, Important, Considered, or Not Considered. We used UCLA's 2025-26 report and summaries covering more than 100 selective colleges. We also used NACAC's Fall 2023 survey, in which 185 four-year colleges rated how important each factor is.

Step 2: Turning ratings into percentages

Very Important factors got the biggest shares and Not Considered factors got 0%. For “Most colleges” we followed the survey’s order: grades far ahead, then character, essays, and interest, with test scores low. For very selective colleges we followed the Harvard trial record, where grades act as a first filter and activities, personal qualities, and letters decide among strong applicants.

Step 3: Checking hard facts

Some numbers are facts, not estimates. UCLA does not use SAT/ACT scores, letters, interviews, or family connection, so those are 0%. Harvard says it does not consider demonstrated interest, so that is close to 0%. The admission numbers on pages 6, 8, and 12 were checked against the original documents.

The Aristotle quotes

All three quotes come from public-domain translations: W. D. Ross's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Benjamin Jowett's *Politics*. Each was checked against the full text (Sources 25 to 27). Book and chapter numbers are given so you can find them in any translation.

What we did not do

We did not use any secret or leaked formula; none exists in public. We did not put legacy or athlete boosts inside the 100%, because they work as separate boosts, and many colleges do not use legacy at all. We did not use race; the Supreme Court ended race-conscious admissions in 2023. Denzel and Meg are made-up students, and their 0 to 5 ratings were invented for this activity.

Checking Part 1

The Callie Smartt details were checked against 1996 news coverage, and the Casey Martin details against the Supreme Court’s decision. Part 1 is based on Sandel’s Chapter 8 (Sources 29 to 32).

Limits to keep in mind

The Harvard data covers US applicants from 2014 to 2019. “Most colleges” averages hundreds of different schools. Rules change: UC is reviewing its test policy, and Princeton and Columbia will require the SAT or ACT starting with the 2027-28 cycle (Sources 16, 28).

Read, but not used for the numbers

Research on how family income shapes admissions (Opportunity Insights, 2023), how essays and recommendation letters can favor wealthier students (Science Advances, 2021; Discover Education, 2024; Research in Higher Education, 2025), and school profiles (Harvard’s Making Caring Common). These are good starting points for an AP Research question. Links are on page 15.

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All facts checked against these sources, September 2026

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Used for: Grades rated most important; the “Most colleges” pie

<https://www.nacacnet.org/factors-in-the-admission-decision/>

2. NACAC, Fall 2023 survey slides

Used for: 185 colleges; exact percentages, including tests at about 5%

<https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1707774516/shorelin-eschoolsorg/yucdy4l209jbazfracqh/SOCAAAdmissionFactorsPowerpointNACAC.pdf>

3. UCLA, Common Data Set 2025-2026

Used for: The University of California pie

<https://apb.ucla.edu/file/d1ab04b3-ee89-4cf2-9124-8dc0471b5e5a>

4. Cosmic College Consulting, UCLA Common Data Set 2025-26

Used for: Plain-language check of UCLA's ratings

<https://www.cosmic.nyc/blog/ucla-common-data-set-2025-2026>

5. Coopers International, Common Data Set analysis 2024-25

Used for: Ratings across 117 selective colleges

<https://coopersinternational.substack.com/p/what-actually-matters-in-college>

6. GradGPT, Common Data Set Explorer

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<https://www.gradgpt.com/common-data-set>

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8. Card, Expert Report for Harvard (2017)

Used for: Second check on the perfect-GPA figure

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