Mateo Arriaga - Common App and Harvard questions

Pueblo, CO · mateo.arriaga.test@example.com · Applying to: Harvard College, 2026-27

This is a fictional applicant written for this sample.

Profile

- Regular Decision. First-generation college applicant.
- **Family:** He lives with his mother, a medical records clerk at a Pueblo hospital, and his father, a maintenance mechanic at a rail-car plant. His sister Lucía is 13. His grandfather, Ramón Arriaga, worked at the steel mill for 31 years and died in February 2026.
- **Languages:** English (native) and Spanish (native, spoken at home). Colorado Seal of Biliteracy.

Education

- **School:** East Mesa High School, Pueblo, Colorado, Class of 2027.
- Public school, about 1,250 students and 302 seniors.
- About 70% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch.
- The school offers 9 AP courses, plus concurrent enrollment at Pueblo Community College.
- **Grades:** GPA 3.86 unweighted, 4.21 weighted. Rank 14 of 302.
- **Senior courses:**
- AP Calculus AB
- AP Government
- AP English Literature
- Physics
- Spanish for Heritage Speakers IV
- Intro to Statistics (Pueblo Community College, fall 2026)
- **AP exams:**
- US History: 5
- Spanish Language: 5
- English Language: 4
- World History: 4
- Chemistry: 3
- **SAT:** 1430 (Evidence-Based Reading and Writing 740, Math 690). This was his second sitting; the first was 1340.

Activities

1. **Volunteer archivist, Bessemer Heritage Archive** (grades 10-12, 5 hrs/wk, 45 wks/yr).
2. The archive is a two-room nonprofit in the old mill office.
3. He scanned 2,300 employee cards dating from 1918 to 1983 and built a searchable spreadsheet of them.

4. He recorded oral histories with 11 retired steelworkers, 4 of them in Spanish.
5. **Counter and prep worker, Rodarte's Tortillería** (grades 10-12, 16 hrs/wk, paid).
6. Opens the shop on Saturdays at 5 a.m.
7. Runs the masa machine and the register.
8. Trained 3 new hires.
9. **Founder and captain, Knowledge Bowl** (grades 11-12, 4 hrs/wk).
10. Restarted the team, which had been dormant since 2019. It now has 9 members.
11. The team placed 3rd at regionals in 2026.
12. **Cross country** (grades 9-12, 10 hrs/wk in season).
13. Ran JV for three years and made varsity as a senior.
14. 5K personal best: 18:52.
15. **Volunteer interpreter, St. Anselm's parish food pantry** (grades 9-12, 3 hrs/wk). Interprets intake forms and conversations for Spanish-speaking families.
16. **Family responsibilities** (grades 9-12, 8 hrs/wk). Drives his sister to school and practice, and cooked dinners during his grandfather's last illness.
17. **Independent research paper** (grade 11). "Who Got the Hot Jobs? Department Assignments at a Pueblo Steel Mill, 1940-1970."

Honors

- AP Scholar with Honor (2026)
- Colorado Seal of Biliteracy (2026)
- Southern Colorado History Fair, 2nd place, senior research paper (2026)
- Knowledge Bowl regional tournament, 3rd place (2026)

Personal essay (prompt: a background or identity)

Card number 1,147 was mine before I knew it. Every Tuesday after school I scan steel-mill employee cards at the Bessemer Heritage Archive: name, department, date hired, date "separated." Most of the cards are brittle and smell like a basement. In October of my junior year, one said: *Arriaga, Ramón. Laborer, Blast Furnace. Hired 3-12-1962. Speaks little English.*

My grandfather had told me about the mill a thousand times, always the same three stories: the heat, a foreman named Kowalski, and the day in 1983 when half his crew was let go. I had stopped really listening. By then he had dementia, and the stories came out in a loop.

I brought him a printed copy of the card. He read it slowly and laughed at "speaks little English." "I spoke plenty," he said in Spanish. "They didn't ask." Then he told me something I had never heard. For eleven years he had asked for a transfer to the machine shop, where the pay was better and you weren't next to the furnace. Every time, he was told there was no opening.

I wanted to know whether that was just his luck. The archive had the cards, so I counted. I entered 900 cards from 1940 to 1970 into a spreadsheet. Workers with Spanish surnames made up 38% of hires, but 61% of blast-furnace laborers and only 9% of machinists. I am careful about what this proves. Surnames are a rough proxy, and I can't see who applied for transfers. But it was not nothing. It was

the first time a number told me something a story couldn't, and the first time a story told me where to look for the number.

Before this, I thought history was what happened to famous people and the mill was just a rusting thing by the highway. Now I think the most important records are boring index cards, and that someone's grandfather is in every one.

My grandfather died in February. At his rosary, three men I had interviewed for the archive came up and told me stories about him I'd never heard. I wrote them down that night. I want to spend college learning how to ask better questions of records like card 1,147, and how to listen better to the people the cards leave out.

Harvard supplement

Briefly describe an intellectual experience that was important to you.

My steel-mill spreadsheet made me take Intro to Statistics at the community college. I wanted to know whether my 38%-versus-9% gap could be chance. Professor Ortega showed me a chi-square test. My first attempt was wrong because I had double-counted workers who were rehired. Fixing it took a weekend and shrank my result, but it held. The lesson I keep is that I wanted the gap to be big, and wanting it was exactly why I needed a method that didn't care what I wanted.

How have your life experiences shaped who you are?

At Rodarte's, I'm the one who switches languages mid-sentence: Spanish with Doña Rosa at the masa machine, English with the hospital night-shift workers buying breakfast burritos at 6 a.m. At the food pantry, I interpret for families filling out intake forms. I've learned that translation is mostly deciding what someone actually needs to know. I'd bring that habit to a dorm full of people from everywhere.

Briefly describe an extracurricular activity, job, or responsibility that has been important to you.

East Mesa hadn't had a Knowledge Bowl team since 2019. I found a willing chemistry teacher, recruited eight people by promising pizza, and organized practice around who knew what. Our first meet was a disaster; we scored 14 points. What changed things was letting our quietest member, a sophomore named Dev, run the buzzer drills, because he was the only one who studied the rules. By the end of the season we placed third at regionals.

How do you hope to use your Harvard education in the future?

I want to concentrate in History, add a secondary field in Statistics, and work with archives the way I did at Bessemer, only bigger. Harvard's libraries and its history faculty who use quantitative methods are what draw me. Long term, I'd like to help small towns like Pueblo build archives of their own, so their history isn't only kept in other people's buildings.

Top three things your roommates might like to know about you.

1. I wake up at 4:30 on Saturdays out of habit. I'll be quiet about it.

2. I listen to Colorado Public Radio in the morning and Dan Carlin's *Hardcore History* on long runs. I will recommend episodes.
3. My favorite book is *Bless Me, Ultima*, and I'm halfway through *The Warmth of Other Suns*. I'll lend either one.

Additional information

My grades in the second half of junior year dipped: I got a C in AP Chemistry first semester and a 3 on the exam. My grandfather was in hospice from December to February, and I took over driving and dinners. I retook the SAT in August after he died and improved from 1340 to 1430.