# Soren Brekke - Common App and Tufts questions (2026-27, Regular Decision)

Duluth, MN · soren.brekke.test@example.com · Applying to: Tufts University undergraduate admission, 2026-27

*Fictional applicant written for this sample; the school, diner, ski program and aphasia group are invented.*

## Profile

- School of Arts and Sciences, Regular Decision. Intended major: Cognitive and Brain Sciences. Also interested in Community Health and Linguistics.
- Lives with his mother (a dental hygienist) and his sister (14). His grandfather Arne lives two blocks away.
- Languages: English (native), Spanish (intermediate, Spanish 4 Honors), Norwegian (a few hundred words, from his grandfather).

## Education and tests

- Lester River High School, Duluth, Minnesota (public, ~1,100 students). Class of 2027.
- GPA 3.71 unweighted, 4.08 weighted. School does not rank.
- Senior courses: AP Psychology, AP Statistics, AP Calculus AB, AP English Literature, Spanish 4 Honors, Anatomy & Physiology.
- Earlier APs: US History (4), English Language (4), Biology (4), Chemistry (2; semester grades C+ and B-).
- SAT 1380 (Evidence-Based Reading and Writing 720, Math 660), submitted.

## Activities

1. **Prep cook (formerly dishwasher), Hartley's Diner** (grades 10-12, 16 hrs/wk during school, 30 hrs/wk in summer, paid). Works weekend breakfast shifts at a 60-seat diner. Promoted from dish to prep in fall 2025 and trained 3 new dishwashers. Pays his own car insurance and has saved $4,200 for college.
2. **Volunteer, then lead volunteer, North Shore Adaptive Ski Collective** (grades 10-12, 5 hrs/wk, 14 wks/yr). Ski buddy at Spirit Mountain for skiers with physical and developmental disabilities. Lead volunteer for the Saturday youth session in 2026. Made a picture-card system for nonspeaking skiers. Recruited 6 classmates as volunteers.
3. **Family caregiving** (grades 11-12, 6 hrs/wk). Since his grandfather's stroke in March 2025, runs his speech-therapy practice at home and drives him to appointments.
4. **Nordic ski team** (grades 9-12, 12 hrs/wk, Nov-Feb). JV for three years, then varsity as 7th skier in 2025-26. Wax-room captain, responsible for maintaining the team's 40 pairs of skis.

5. **Psychology Club, co-president** (grade 12, 2 hrs/wk). Revived a dormant club, which now has 11 members. Members discuss one study a month. Ran a replication night in which 60 students took the Stroop test.
6. **Volunteer, Lakehead Aphasia Café** (summer 2026, 4 hrs/wk, 10 wks). Helped run a weekly conversation group for stroke survivors at a community center. Set up tables, ran word games and partnered with one member each week.
7. **Peer tutor, Writing Center** (grades 11-12, 2 hrs/wk). Works mostly with 9th graders on their first research papers.

## Honors

- AP Scholar (2025)
- North Shore Adaptive Ski Collective Volunteer of the Season (2026)
- Lester River Nordic Coaches' Award, for wax-room work (2026)

## Common App personal essay (prompt: an accomplishment, event or realization that sparked personal growth)

The first word my grandfather said after his stroke was "boat." He was pointing at a spoon.

For weeks, everything was "boat" or "the thing." Before the stroke, he had been a man who did crosswords in pen, so this was frightening to watch. His speech therapist explained that he had aphasia. The words were still in there, but the path to them was damaged. She gave us homework: picture cards, naming drills, sentences to finish. My mother works full days, so the homework became mine, four afternoons a week at his kitchen table.

I was bad at it at first. I would give him the answer the second he hesitated, because the silence was unbearable. The therapist told me the silence was where the work happened. So I learned to wait: ten seconds, sometimes twenty. I learned that if I said the first sound, "sp-", he could often finish the word himself. I learned that he could sing the whole first verse of a Norwegian hymn without a mistake, even on days he couldn't say my name. That fact made no sense to me until I read that singing and speaking rely partly on different parts of the brain. That was the first time I went looking for a scientific paper on my own.

At the same time, I was working weekend breakfasts at Hartley's Diner, where nobody writes anything out in full. "2 OE WW, hash X" means two eggs over easy, wheat toast, extra hash browns. At 7 a.m., with twelve tickets on the rail, I realized I was doing at work what my grandfather was doing at home: getting meaning across a narrow channel. The cooks and I had built a code so we would need fewer words. He was rebuilding his words one sound at a time.

By that winter I noticed narrow channels everywhere. At the adaptive ski program, one of my skiers, Mateo, doesn't speak. He was getting frustrated because we kept asking yes-or-no questions he didn't care about. I made him a ring of laminated picture cards: lift, hot chocolate, again, stop, cold. On the second run he held up "again" four times in a row.

My grandfather now speaks in short sentences. Last month he told me the toast was "too burned, Soren," and I have never been happier to be criticized. I'm not a prodigy at any of this. I'm a decent prep cook, an average skier and a B student in chemistry. But I have spent two years watching how people get meaning across when the usual route is blocked, and I want to understand what is happening in the brain when they do.

## Additional information

AP Chemistry (junior year): my grandfather had his stroke in March 2025, and I was working 16 hours a week. I fell behind and didn't ask for help until the unit on equilibrium, which was too late. I scored a 2 on the exam. Senior year I take Anatomy and AP Statistics, I go to office hours every Thursday, and I currently have an A- in both.

## Tufts questions

### Which aspects of the Tufts undergraduate experience prompt your application? In short, "Why Tufts?" (100-150 words)

Tufts treats Cognitive and Brain Sciences as one interdisciplinary major, and that is exactly the question I keep circling: psychology, linguistics, neuroscience and computation all pointed at how a mind makes meaning. I'd like to take Introduction to Linguistics and the psychology-of-language and cognitive neuroscience courses, and to add Community Health classes, because recovery from a stroke depends as much on rides, insurance and caregivers as on neurons. I want a research lab where I could help with real data, the way our replication night only pretended to. Outside class, I'd look into the Leonard Carmichael Society for volunteering, the Tufts Ski Team, and the Mountain Club for weekends in New Hampshire. I also like that Tufts students seem to argue about ideas without needing to win.

### Using a specific example or two, tell us about a way that you contributed to building a collaborative and inclusive community. (200-250 words)

When I became lead volunteer for the Saturday youth session at the North Shore Adaptive Ski Collective, we had nine skiers and only seven reliable volunteers. Families were being turned away at the door. I asked six classmates from Nordic and Psychology Club to come once, promising hot chocolate. Five stayed for the whole season.

The bigger change was in how we communicated. Several of our skiers don't speak, or speak very little, and volunteers kept talking over them or asking their parents instead. I made picture-card rings like the one I'd made for Mateo and taught new volunteers the rule I learned from my grandfather's speech therapist: ask, then wait ten seconds before you help. We wrote a one-page guide that is now handed to every new volunteer.

Not everything worked. I tried pairing the same volunteer with the same skier every week. That broke down whenever someone got sick, so we switched to pairs of volunteers, with each skier knowing at least two people.

By March we had no waitlist. A parent told the director that her son had asked, using his cards, to go back up "again" for the first time. At Tufts, I'd like to bring that habit of building in the waiting time, whether in a lab group, a club or a volunteer program.