



ACT[®]

The Ultimate Guide to Applying for College:

**HOW TO COMPLETE A COLLEGE APPLICATION
THAT STANDS OUT**

Introduction

It may seem like the process of applying for college will take up just a small part of your entire high school career.

But when you actually start the process - filling out forms, asking mentors for letters of recommendation, crafting multiple personal statements, writing essay... after essay... after essay - you'll find that applying to college can be a HUGE undertaking. The pressure of submitting a strong application, coupled with the pressure of deadlines, can make this a time-consuming, stressful period.

Becoming familiar with the application process and having a plan can ease your stress, making applying for college more manageable, even exciting!

TO SAVE YOU TIME FROM SEARCHING THROUGH VARIOUS RESOURCES, **USE THIS BOOK AS A ONE-STOP RESOURCE WITH INFORMATION ON:**

- **When to apply to college**
- **How many applications to complete**
- **Which college application deadline is best for you**
- **The parts of a college application**
- **What you can do after applying**



Chapter 1

WHEN SHOULD I START APPLYING TO COLLEGE?



Chapter 1:

When should I start applying to college?

You'll face college and scholarship application deadlines throughout your senior year. You may believe that this is the time to start thinking about and gathering materials for your applications, but with schoolwork, extracurricular activities, graduation, and other college planning on your plate, it's important to **PLAN AHEAD**.

Begin the process in the spring of your junior year and accomplish **these four things**:

1. Create a college list

There are more than 4,500 degree-granting colleges and universities in the United States¹. How do you sort through all these options and select the few institutions you want to learn more about?

The type of colleges you consider will depend on your goals and expectations. There are plenty of aspects to consider, but start with these:

a. **Major:**

What subject would you enjoy studying? Which colleges offer that subject as a major? If undecided, which colleges have support systems that help you explore interests and majors?

b. **Location:**

Do you want to attend a school close to home? Do you want to live in a big city, or is a small town more appealing? Is there a certain part of the country where you'd like to live?

c. **Size:**

Do you prefer a more intimate atmosphere or more anonymity? Would you enjoy larger facilities, more programs, and a greater range of extracurricular activities? Or more discussion-based classes, a greater chance of participation, and less distance between you and professors?

If the spring of your junior year has already passed, it's OK. You still have time.

These are just helpful ways to get a jump start on college applications.

¹Information sourced from the [National Center for Education Statistics](#)

Chapter 1:

When should I start applying to college?

d. **Cost of attendance:**

What is the cost posted on the college or university website or materials? What scholarships and financial aid options does the college provide? Will you receive any help paying for college?

e. **Extracurriculars:**

Is there a specific activity you'd like to explore in college? Which colleges offer clubs or organizations in that area?

f. **Admission difficulty:**

When comparing yourself to your graduating high school class, how do you rank? Do you think you'd be able to get into a selective college?

Once you've considered these qualities, which is your highest priority? Use it to start finding and researching colleges. For example, if staying close to home is the most important thing to you, search for colleges near you and start compiling your list.

If you find that more than 20 colleges align with your highest priority, move to the second-most-important priority. For example, if you find multiple colleges with great programs for your major, and you know being at a large school is the second-highest priority, you can eliminate smaller colleges from your list.

Keep going down your priority list until you have around 8-15 colleges you really want to spend time researching.

[Learn how to pay for college and university.](#)

See the “Create a College List Worksheet” at the end of this book to help compile and narrow down your college list.



Chapter 1:

When should I start applying to college?

2. Achieve a competitive ACT® test score

Whether you're planning to meet early or regular decision deadlines, you want to know what your ACT score could give you by then. One point on your ACT test could make the difference in acceptance into college and/or thousands of dollars in scholarships.

If you think you might take the test more than once, it's a good idea to take it in the fall/early spring of your junior year. Doing this gives you:

a. **A benchmark:**

To see where you are at and where you can improve

b. **A familiarity with the testing environment:**

You've gone through the experience and know the process

Next, if you want to improve your score, consider testing again in the spring or summer. The format of the test, the types of questions on it, and the environment are all fresh in your mind - not to mention the knowledge you've gained during your junior year. Couple this "in-between" time with practice on the subjects where you need to improve, and it's likely you'll raise your score.

As you consider retesting, check your target colleges' and universities' score preferences. Does your score meet their expectations? Could you increase your chances of getting into a certain program, or could you qualify for a scholarship if you raised your score, even by one point?

Understand what opportunities your score reflects, and plan accordingly. Use your scores on previous tests to continue focusing on the areas that need more instruction, and know that the more you progress through your high school career, the more prepared you'll become for the ACT - and college.

Students achieve the highest gains in their Composite score one to three months after taking their first ACT.

Chapter 1:

When should I start applying to college?

3. Visit campuses

Once you have a narrowed list of colleges, our advice is to visit as many of these as you can. We know visiting multiple campuses can be difficult, but until you take the time to visit a campus and experience firsthand what it's like to be a student, you won't know if that college is the right choice for you.

A school may look great on paper or online, but you might be surprised when you step foot on campus for the first time. Successful college visits give you insights into what your life might be like if you decide to attend and if it matches what you want.

We've already written an **'ultimate guide'** for campus visits. It goes into detail on the **'when'** and **'how'** to do these.

4. Ask your counselor, teacher, or mentor for a letter of recommendation

Requesting that someone write a recommendation letter for you can be a daunting task. You're putting yourself "out there," hoping they know enough about you to describe your personal character. You may be worried they'll say no.

However, you'll find that your educators (counselors, teachers, and principals) usually have lots of experience writing recommendation letters and they want to see you succeed. If you've spent time cultivating good relationships with them, they will be more than happy to write you a recommendation.

Here are two things to consider when requesting recommendation letters:



Choose someone who knows you best

The goal of a recommendation letter is to humanize you, to tell admissions officials about you as a person as well as a student, and to tell a bit about your character. Be sure to ask someone who you've spent a lot of time with, someone who can speak to your personality and give insight into who you are behind your grades.

Ask someone who you're interacting with already, like a junior-year teacher or counselor. If you're currently a student in their class or interact with them often, you'll be at the forefront of their mind, and that will make it easier for them to write your letter.



Ask a few months before applications are due

Try not to wait until the last minute. At the very least, ask someone to write a letter a month before the application deadline. It's best to alert your letter writers during the spring of your junior year. This gives them plenty of time to plan ahead and fit in writing your letter with their school schedule and summer vacation.

If you can, make your request in person. This will make the request personal, respectful, and responsible. Practice what you're going to say beforehand. The request should be heartfelt, and tell them how you've enjoyed their instruction and guidance, and how you would be honored if they wrote you a letter.

Chapter 2

HOW MANY COLLEGE APPLICATIONS SHOULD I COMPLETE?



Chapter 2:

How many college applications should I complete?

You'll see a difference of opinion if you look online or elsewhere for suggestions. But, here's the REAL answer: it depends.

Helpful, right?

The number of schools you apply to is unique to your situation. Maybe you have a DREAM college in mind, the only one you've ever wanted to attend. You apply early, get accepted, and that's it – your dream has come true. And you only had to apply to ONE school. Or maybe you have a list of schools, all of which you like, and it'll be a tough decision having to choose one.

If you don't fit into one of those categories, we recommend that you apply to 5-10 colleges, equally distributed between reach, target, and safety schools (*more on these in a bit*).

Why 5 to 10? This will help you if you're undecided about which college to attend or want to increase your chances of being accepted.

We recommend not applying to more than 10.

You'll only have so much time. Maybe you love the idea of applying to 15 or even 20 colleges, but realistically, amidst your classes, exams, extracurricular activities, and social obligations, applying to this many schools could put unnecessary stress on you.



Chapter 2:

How many college applications should I complete?

Here are **THREE FACTORS** to help you narrow your college list and get you into that 5-10 range:

- 1. Price of applications**—If you have a limited amount of money to spend on application fees, this may force you to cut down your list. **However, if you take the ACT test using a test fee waiver, you can [request to apply to college for free!](#)**
- 2. Due dates of applications**—Gauge how much time you'll have before deadlines, and fill out a reasonable number of college applications, eliminating those you cannot fit in.
- 3. College fit**—If you've done your research and gone on a campus visit, you should have a pretty solid idea of the environment and your likes and dislikes. Eliminate schools from your list that are a bad fit for you, whether it's related to a program of study, atmosphere, etc.

Earlier in the chapter, we discussed the importance of applying to an equal number of **reach**, **target**, and **safety schools**. What are the definitions of each?

Reach: A school where you have a smaller chance of being accepted - your academic profile matches **25% or lower of the students admitted**

Target: A school where you feel confident you'll be accepted - your academic profile matches **50% of the students admitted**

Safety: A school where you're sure you'll be accepted - your academic profile matches **75% or higher of the students admitted**



Chapter 2:

How many college applications should I complete?

As you're doing your research, make a point to document the academic profile of an average admitted student. Usually colleges will have this information on their website or on websites that profile colleges – average ACT scores, GPAs, class ranks, etc. Compare your academic profile to the average.

We recommend you apply to 1-2 “reach,” 1-2 “target,” and 1-2 “safety” schools to have a good chance of getting into a college or university that’s a good fit for you. And you never know, some of those “reach” colleges might be within your grasp.



Chapter 3

WHICH COLLEGE APPLICATION DEADLINE SHOULD I MEET?



Chapter 3:

Which college application deadline should I meet?

Here are the two big college application deadlines to remember – **early and regular decision deadlines.**

- **Early decision or early action deadlines:**

type of college admissions process that requires students to submit applications earlier than regular admissions
(usually between November 1 and December 1)

- **Regular decision deadlines:**

normal time frame that students submit college applications
(usually between January 1 and February 1)

The most common question regarding early deadlines is whether or not it gives you an advantage over regular decision deadlines.

Among the most popular colleges, the average acceptance rate for applicants who applied to early decision and early action was about 68% compared to a 51% acceptance rate for applicants who applied to the regular decision deadline¹. **That's a difference of 17%.**

So, the numbers imply that there is an advantage to applying early, which is good news, but make sure you know all the college's early admission requirements and conditions. **You may be obligated to attend if you're accepted.**

¹Information sourced from [US News and World Report](#)



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Which college application deadline should I meet?

Early Decision and Early Action

EARLY DECISION

If a school allows “early decision” applications, then you can submit your application by November or December. You’ll hear back from the college earlier than you would if you went the regular decision route, but **if you’re accepted, you must withdraw all other applications and attend the college.**

If you decide to back out and do not have a good reason to do so, colleges view this as a violation of trust and honor, and this can hurt your other college offers.

What are Early Decision I and Decision II deadlines?

These indicate time in which early decision applications are due. Early Decision I deadlines are earlier and Decision II deadlines are later.

ADVANTAGES



Your application will be seen by admissions officers sooner

You’re competing with fewer applicants

You’ll know sooner if you got accepted

DISADVANTAGES



You can only apply to one early decision school

If accepted, you must attend

You cannot compare financial aid offers

DO THIS IF



You’ve done extensive research on that college and know for certain you want to attend

You’re not relying on financial aid

Find a list of [early decision colleges here](#).

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Which college application deadline should I meet?

EARLY ACTION

Early action deadlines are the same as early decision deadlines in that you can submit your application in the fall and hear back earlier if you're accepted. The difference is that you don't have to decide to attend until May and can decline if you want.

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES	DO THIS IF
		
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Similar to early decision deadlines (see above)You can apply to other schools simultaneouslyYou don't have to accept until laterYou can compare other financial aid offers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">If you're not accepted, there's little time to submit to regular application deadlines at other schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none">You're sure about the schools in which you're applying, but want to keep your options openYou want to compare financial packages from other schools

Find a list of [early action colleges here](#).

Chapter 3:

Which college application deadline should I meet?

REGULAR DECISION DEADLINES

“Regular decision” deadlines are due in January or February, and offers of admission are sent back in March or April. This is when a majority of other students submit their applications. You are under no obligation to enroll if you are accepted, but most colleges want to know of your decision by May. Most colleges will adhere to this deadline.

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES	DO THIS IF
		
<p>More time to submit applications and achieve higher ACT scores for additional scholarships</p> <p>If you're undecided about where to go, this will give you more time to think it over</p> <p>No pressure to commit early if accepted</p> <p>Again, you can compare your financial aid offers from other colleges</p>	<p>You will not hear back from colleges until later in the spring</p> <p>This is a busy time of year for you with graduation plans, exams, and other commitments on top of applications</p> <p>Everyone else is submitting their application at this time, so it might be harder to stand out</p>	<p>You want more time to submit applications and achieve higher ACT scores for additional scholarships</p> <p>You have a few schools you're interested in attending</p> <p>You want to compare financial aid offers</p> <p>You're not sure of the major you want to pursue</p>

Chapter 3:

Which college application deadline should I meet?

ROLLING ADMISSIONS

Some colleges use rolling admissions program, meaning a large window (usually a six-month period) for applicants to submit their applications. Instead of submitting an application to a particular deadline and hearing back during a specific time, colleges evaluate applications as they come in and accept until all their spots are filled.

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES	DO THIS IF
		
<p>The earlier you submit, the earlier you'll hear back</p> <p>If you're accepted, you're not obligated to the college or university</p> <p>If you're not accepted at early or regular decision colleges, then there's a possibility a rolling admissions college is still accepting applicants</p>	<p>It is harder to get into a rolling admissions college the longer you wait</p>	<p>The college you want to apply to is using rolling admissions anyway</p> <p>You want a non-binding but quick response of acceptance</p> <p>If you were not accepted into an early or regular admissions deadline</p>

Find some popular colleges with rolling admissions in [this article](#).

Chapter 4

WHAT'S INCLUDED ON A COLLEGE APPLICATION?



Chapter 4:

What's included on a college application?

Each college will ask for different information to learn more about you, but what we want to cover are the most common components of a college application.

1. Application form

These are usually the first forms you fill out online. They typically require information like your full name, Social Security number, address, etc. Sometimes a college will not let you attach the rest of your application materials until you've completed the general application form.

DO NOT wait until the last minute. After you submit this form, it may take a couple of days for the college to process it and send you a link to attach the rest of your materials.

This part of the application process requires a lot of attention to detail and focus. Here are some tips to keep in mind as you are filling out a general application form:

- **CHECK** for grammatical errors or misspelled words
- **READ** all the fields and requirements carefully
- **LIST** the needed information accurately
- **KEEP TRACK** of the deadline and complete this section well in advance
- **USE** an appropriate email address when applying (no words or phrases you wouldn't use in the classroom)
- **WRITE** the application yourself but ask your guardian or counselor for help if you need it
- **CLICK** "submit" once you complete the form
- **CHECK** your email after you submit for a confirmation that the college received your application form



Chapter 4:

What's included on a college application?

2. Application fee

Some colleges will require you to pay a fee after you submit your application, while others will only require it once you are accepted. Application fees can range from free to around \$100. When you're researching schools, take note of the total amount in application fees and factor them into your budget. If you can only afford a certain amount, this may help you narrow your college list to fit that total cost.

Some colleges offer application fee waivers. You can qualify for a waiver when you apply for financial aid at that college, or the college might have a separate application portal just for fee waivers.

3. Transcripts

Your official transcript is your high school's certified statement of your academic record. Colleges will ask that it be mailed or emailed to them, so read the requirements carefully.

Before your transcript is sent, read through the classes, grades, credits, and scores to make sure they're correct. Your counselor will be the one to send your transcript to your applied colleges.

Start saving! As soon as you can, start setting aside some money, weekly or monthly, so you can become financially ready for the application process.



Chapter 4:

What's included on a college application?

4. ACT® test scores

When you register to take the ACT® test, you can select up to four colleges, for free, to receive your scores. There's a common myth that it's better to wait and see your scores before actually sending them, but this can be costly. If you send your scores as you're registering, you will show your selected colleges you're very interested and receive more targeted information that can help you when you apply.

When it comes to admissions, colleges only look at your highest score. So, if you take it again and raise your score, colleges will replace the old score with the new one. After the test, each additional college you want to send your scores to will cost a small fee and can be requested at: www.act.org/the-act/scores.

Do colleges “superscore” the ACT?

Superscoring is the practice of factoring in your highest subject area scores to produce the highest possible Composite score. Make sure to check if the colleges at which you're applying use the superscoring method. This can help if you just need to focus on one subject area during retesting. And, [new research](#) shows that if you test multiple times to achieve that desired score, you may be indicating a “will do” attitude, showing colleges your motivation and persistence.

Colleges will look at your ACT Composite score when making admissions decisions. Most college websites will have information about what their incoming classes commonly score on the ACT. You can compare your Composite score to your desired college's range of accepted scores to see how you stack up against students they accept.

If you need to raise your Composite score to help get into the college you want, focus on your weakest subject areas, prepare, and try again.

[Learn what you can do](#)

before, during, and after the ACT test in order to maximize your score.

Chapter 4:

What's included on a college application?

5. Letters of recommendation

See page 6 for information on how to request these from teachers, counselors, mentors, and other adults. **Here are two more recommendations for working with your letter writers:**



a. Make it easy on your recommender

After you've asked for a letter of recommendation, give that individual all the supplemental material they need to "brag" about you. This should include a document(s) describing:

- Future aspirations and goals
- Intended major and why you're choosing it
- Awards, honors, or accomplishments
- Relevant extracurriculars
- Schools you're applying to and due dates for the letters

These materials will complement the wonderful and personal input your recommendation writer puts in their letter.



b. Follow up and send a thank you

As the application deadline approaches, it's a good idea to contact your recommenders and politely remind them to submit their letters if they haven't already.

After they've submitted your letter, write them a thank-you note, buy them a small gift, or find another way to show how much you appreciate what they've done for you.



Chapter 4:

What's included on a college application?

6. Resume

You may think a resume is only useful when trying to find a job, but some colleges encourage you to include one with your application materials. Effective resumes give colleges a greater idea of who you are and what you're interested in. Resumes should illustrate beyond what colleges see in a transcript and highlight experiences you weren't able to mention in an essay or application form.

Here's how to craft a college application resume that stands out:

Step 1:

List all that you've done

What have you accomplished during your high school career? Awards, honors, leadership roles, community service projects, skills, talents, work experience, etc. - write it all down.

Step 2:

Decide what should go into your resume

Once you have everything written down, cut down the text until what you have left are your most impressive accomplishments and roles. This is where a counselor, teacher, or parent could help you decide what to ultimately include.



Chapter 4:

What's included on a college application?

Step 3:

Format your resume

A general rule is to keep your entire resume on one page (*two pages, at the most*). Have a header with your name, email address, phone number, and home address. If your rank is not highlighted on your transcript or any other documents, or if it's an emphasis for a college's admissions process, include this at the top of your resume along with your high school's name and GPA.

Next, include the accomplishments and roles you selected to go on the resume, grouped into specific sections. For example, you may have some, or all, of these sections on your resume:

- Summer programs
- Honors and awards
- Extracurricular activities and your roles within them
- Volunteer activities
- Work experience
- Skills and/or talents

Each section should list the most recent accomplishments and roles first. Describe each experience in a bulleted list format, making it easily readable for admissions officials. Begin each bullet with an action verb and use concise language, including numbers that describe your accomplishments (money raised, etc.).

Step 4:

After you have a draft, review it

Then ask a counselor, teacher, friend, or parent to review it, too.



Chapter 4:

What's included on a college application?

7. Essays

For some, this might be the most stressful part of the application, requiring a lot of time and effort. But, application essays can be the most effective way for you to communicate your uniqueness to admissions officials and show how passionate you are about their institution.

Some colleges will have specific prompts they want you to answer. Others will ask for you to just describe your story. Whatever it is, be yourself, speak in your voice, and don't try to fit in a bunch of words from the thesaurus.

Colleges want to hear from YOU.

Here are some tips for crafting a stellar essay:

1. Start early

The first thing you should do is plot out how many essays you need to write and their deadlines. It's a good idea to start the spring of your junior year or summer of senior year so you give yourself plenty of time to think through the topics and brainstorm writing points.

2. Create an outline

Take the prompt (the question asked) of each essay and break down its parts. Think about why an admissions official would ask this and what they are hoping to get from you. Next, pair personal stories or experiences that illustrate your answers. Organize your thesis along with these anecdotes, in bullet-point format, into a clear beginning, middle, and end. This is your outline.

3. Read some examples

Some colleges will publish essay examples on their website. See if the college you're applying to does this and, if so, check them out. It's a great opportunity to get a feel for what that college identifies as a strong application and what it doesn't.

Otherwise, if you search online for "sample college essays," many examples will pop up, giving you an idea of what a strong essay might look like. (Just remember NOT to plagiarize them.)

4. Address what's NOT on your transcript

Think of your essay like an in-person interview. As you write your essay, imagine you're sitting in the room with the admissions official. You've given her or him your transcript and resume. The question he or she keeps asking you is, "what else should I know?"

That's what you should keep in mind as you're forming your essay. How could you expand upon the information presented in the other parts of the application or bring to light new facts and traits about yourself.

5. The deeper you go, the better

For your anecdotes, focus on specific details and really flesh out the scene. You might not have enough space to tell your entire life story, but if you focus on a couple of examples, it can make your essay vivid and make it come to life.

6. Have a few people review it

After you've finished a draft of your essay, have someone you trust (a parent, counselor, or teacher) review it. Check for grammatical and spelling errors. But limit the number of people who review your essay to one or two. Too many voices can muddle yours.

Chapter 4:

What's included on a college application?

What part of the application is the most important?

This question is asked a lot and rightfully so. Many students want to know what to “make shine” in order to stand out. **The truth is, the most important part is making sure you submit your application on time.** Give yourself a couple of buffer days to have all of your stuff done just in case of an emergency. You can work diligently on the different parts of an application, but unless you submit it, your time will be all for naught.

The truth is, every college weighs applications differently. Maybe you have to be in the top 10% of your class to apply, or maybe you have to show extensive participation in extracurriculars, or maybe showcase a potent written voice in an essay.

Whatever it may be, the best thing you can do is to make sure each part of your application is filled out with your utmost effort and focus. **Most colleges are looking for a well-rounded individual that shows promise in a lot of areas.** If you make every section a “standout” section, then you will have crafted a strong application.



Chapter 5

WHAT CAN I DO AFTER I APPLY TO COLLEGE?



Chapter 5:

What can I do after I apply to college?

After you submit your application, check for a confirmation that the college received your submission and all the correct materials.

This confirmation might come in an email or in the online portal of the college itself. It's possible to submit an application incorrectly and miss out on being accepted by a dream college.

Once you've confirmed that your application is safely with the school, it's time to wait. Most schools will take a month or two to get back to you depending on the number of applications they receive. Sit back, relax, and take pride that you submitted the best college application you could. The worst thing you can do is worry, constantly monitoring your email or checking online forums. Shift your energy and finish your last year of high school strong.

Good luck this application season! And remember, our mission is to see you succeed. That's why we created this eBook and why we're here with you every step of the way.



Create a College List

Print this worksheet and use this tool to help you sort through different colleges and universities and find the institutions that match your priorities and preferences.

Create a college list

The first step is to search for a list of colleges and universities where you might want to apply. Put those in the “college or university” column. Then, go down the table and research each quality listed (*major, location, size, etc.*) There are a few open columns for you to insert qualities that are important to you.

After doing your research, insert a...

2: If you LIKE that quality

1: If you are INDIFFERENT about that quality

0: if you DISLIKE that quality

...about each college

There's a line at the bottom of each column where you can total your points for each school. The colleges or universities with higher point totals indicate a better fit based on your interests and priorities.

COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY:

Major:

Location:

Size:

Cost:

Extracurriculars:

Admission difficulty:

(Insert own):

TOTAL:

COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY:

Major:

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Extracurriculars:

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Admission difficulty:

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TOTAL:

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