



Empowerly's Guide To



The College Application

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Applying to college can feel overwhelming, but there's no need to stress!

This guide will walk you through the entire application process, providing tips and strategies to help you put your best foot forward and gain admission to the universities of your choice.





The College Admissions Process

The college application process in the United States involves several steps, and it's important to stay organized and proactive throughout. Here's a brief breakdown of what you'll need to do.

Check Admission Requirements

Start by reviewing the basic admission requirements for each college you're interested in. While these requirements can vary, most schools require a high school diploma, GED, or equivalent certificate, as well as a minimum GPA. Make sure you're on track to meet these standards by your senior year.

Prepare Your Application

You'll typically apply to college one year before you plan to enroll. Application forms will ask for personal identification, your educational background, and written responses to essay questions. Some schools may also request additional materials, such as letters of recommendation or a portfolio, and academic test scores.

Additionally, most colleges and universities will also request parental information, like employment and educational histories. This often ties in with financial aid information that can determine your eligibility for scholarship assistance.

Submit and Wait for Decisions:

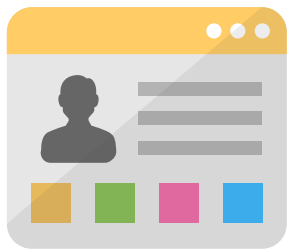
Once your application packet is complete, submit it by the deadlines and then wait for decisions. The response time can vary, but you should receive an answer within a few weeks to a few months.

If accepted, the next step is to follow through. Make an official deposit to secure your seat as an incoming student and finalize your financial aid package so you are ready to pay your tuition. If needed, submit final transcripts and test scores, finish your senior year strong, and prepare for college life.



Common Elements of College Applications

While each college may have its unique application format, you can expect to encounter several common elements. To make the process smoother, gather the following items before you begin.



Personal & Parental Information

Each student will fill out their full name, contact details, and date of birth, as well as information about family and siblings. For instance, you will be asked for your parents' names, occupations, and if/where they attended college.



Extracurricular Activities

Take some space to highlight your involvement in school sports, clubs, volunteering, hobbies, and work experience. This is your chance to show colleges how you spend your time outside the classroom, as well as where you excel! For instance, your personal passion projects and extracurricular competitions. Most applications will give you several spaces to list awards, as well.



Educational Background

Provide details about your high school education, including your GPA and any honors or advanced coursework. Colleges typically require official transcripts sent directly from your high school, as well as any colleges and universities you may have attended.



Standardized Test Scores

Although some colleges have become test-optional, many still consider SAT or ACT scores. Choose the test that best reflects your strengths, or consider taking both to maximize your options.





Personal Essays

Essays are a critical part of your application. They allow you to share your story and demonstrate your writing skills. Be authentic, specific, and thoughtful in your responses.



References or Recommendations

Most colleges ask for two or more recommendations from teachers, counselors, or other adults who know you well. Choose recommenders who can speak to your strengths and character.

Finally, most colleges and universities will grant applicants space on the form to include any additional relevant information. If there are unusual circumstances (like past criminal charges, expulsion, or cheating) on a student's record, this would be the place to explain what happened. This section may also include context for student illnesses, family hardships, or any other unique circumstances that have significantly impacted your journey.

In the following sections, we'll dive deeper into how to approach each of these elements, offering detailed tips and advice to help you stand out in the college application process.

Personal and Parental Information



Providing personal information on your college application is straightforward, but it's important to stay organized. This section typically asks for your name, contact details, date of birth, and citizenship status in the US. You may also be required to include details about your family, such as your parents' occupations or educational backgrounds. Make sure this information is accurate, as colleges will use it to identify you and communicate with you during the admissions process. Additionally, this information can be used to determine how much financial aid you can receive from the university.



Educational Background

In this section, you'll list your academic achievements, including your GPA, any honors or AP classes, and your overall high school performance. Most colleges require official transcripts sent directly from your high school. If you took courses outside of your high school, you will list your dual enrollment grades here as well. Be sure to request these records early, so there are no delays in processing your application.

Looking to go above and beyond? Highlight any standout academic achievements, like honor roll placements, awards, or advanced coursework, to strengthen your application.



Extracurricular Activities

Your extracurricular activities are a vital part of your application. Colleges look for well-rounded students who contribute to their communities both in and out of the classroom. In this section, you can showcase your involvement in school clubs, sports, volunteer work, and other interests. Be specific about your role in each activity, the skills you developed, and the impact you made. This is your opportunity to demonstrate your passions and leadership qualities.

Standardized Test Scores

The SAT and ACT are the most commonly accepted standardized tests for college admissions. While some schools have moved to test-optional policies, many still consider test scores an important part of the application.

Choosing between the SAT and ACT depends on your strengths. The SAT is often preferred by students with strong math skills, while the ACT may suit those who excel in reading and writing. If you're unsure, consider taking both tests to see where you perform best. Also, remember to prepare thoroughly—practice tests, prep courses, and study guides can help you achieve your best score.





Personal Essays

Personal essays are one of the most important parts of your college application. They offer a chance to tell your story and provide insight into who you are beyond grades and test scores. Here are some tips to help you craft a compelling essay:

- **Start Early:** Give yourself plenty of time to brainstorm, draft, and revise your essay. Writing under pressure can make it harder to convey your thoughts.
- **Be Authentic:** Colleges want to hear your voice, so be honest about your experiences and aspirations. Don't write what you think admissions officers want to hear; write what matters to you.
- **Be Specific:** Avoid generalities. Focus on specific events, experiences, or ideas that have shaped you. Specific details make your essay more memorable and engaging.
- **Tell a Story:** A well-told story can make a powerful impact. Consider structuring your essay around a narrative that illustrates your growth or a key moment in your life.
- **Revise Thoroughly:** After writing your essay, set it aside for a few days. Then, revisit it with fresh eyes to refine your ideas and ensure your writing is clear and impactful.

References or Recommendations

References or recommendation letters provide colleges with additional insights into your character and abilities. Typically, you'll need two or more recommendations from teachers, counselors, or mentors who know you well. Experienced college counselors recommend one recommendation from a STEM teacher and one recommendation from a humanities or social sciences teacher, to show range.

When choosing your recommenders, select individuals who can speak to your strengths, achievements, and personal qualities. It's a good idea to give them plenty of notice and provide them with any materials they might need, such as a resume or a summary of your accomplishments. A strong letter of recommendation can make a significant difference in your application.



Your College Application Timeline

The college application process can feel overwhelming, but with careful planning, it doesn't have to be. The key is to start early and give yourself plenty of time to complete each step. Here's a general timeline to guide you:



Spring of Junior Year

Begin researching colleges and securing recommenders early. Consider taking college tours, attending information sessions, and refining your college list.



Summer or Fall of Senior Year

Start working on your applications, including essays and gathering recommendation letters. Take standardized tests if needed and ensure your transcripts are sent to your chosen schools. Proactive students can start drafting personal statements for common essay prompts, as many questions don't change year to year.



Winter of Senior Year

Complete and submit your applications before the deadlines. Most colleges have application deadlines between November and January, but it's best to submit as early as possible. Additionally, you will need to submit your FAFSA to be eligible for financial aid.



Spring of Senior Year

Wait for admission decisions, and once accepted, compare financial aid packages, visit campuses if possible, and make your final decision.

Remember, organization and time management are crucial to staying on top of the college application process.



For more tips on how to schedule your entire, four-year high school journey for college success, check out our guide:

[Link: The Road to College Admissions](#)



Make the Most of Your Summers!

Taking advantage of your summers can give you a significant edge in the college admissions process. Here's how you can make the most of each summer in high school:



Rising Freshman Summer [8th-9th Grade]:

As you transition to high school, use the summer to prepare for new challenges. One way to do this is to explore clubs, sports, and activities that interest you. Another way to prepare is to familiarize yourself with your new school and start thinking about your academic and extracurricular goals. For advanced students, start thinking about what big questions might stoke your interest in an independent "passion project."

Rising Sophomore Summer [9th-10th Grade]:

This is the time to start building skills and exploring interests. Consider taking a class at a local community college or online. As you explore, focus on developing strong study habits, improving your writing, and participating in extracurriculars that align with your passions. It's also a great time to participate in research or competitions while you don't have the pressure of schoolwork.



Rising Junior Summer [10th-11th Grade]:

Junior year is critical for college preparation. Use the summer to deepen your knowledge in subjects you're passionate about. Start preparing for standardized tests, and research colleges to narrow down your list. During this critical time, look for ways to earn awards or accolades that demonstrate the depth of your talents.

Rising Senior Summer [11th-12th Grade]:

This summer is all about getting ready for college applications. Apply for competitive summer programs, internships, or research opportunities to enhance your resume. Start working on your college essays and gather all the materials you'll need for your applications. And, before you run out of time, take a few hours to prepare a brag sheet and reach out to your chosen teachers for recommendations.



Final Summer Before College:

Enjoy your last summer before college by spending time with family and friends. Check off any bucket list activities and prepare for the transition to college life. Some schools offer bridge programs to help you adjust to the academic workload—consider enrolling if available.





Who Should Apply to College Early?

Deciding whether to apply to college early can be a tough decision. Early application plans, such as Early Decision and Early Action, offer certain advantages but also come with commitments. Here's what you need to know:

Are You Sure About Your Top Choice?

If you're certain about your top-choice school, applying through Early Decision could be a good option. Early Decision applications are binding, meaning if you're accepted, you must attend. This option can give you an edge in the admissions process, especially at competitive schools. However, it also means you'll have to withdraw applications from other schools if accepted.

Do You Need Financial Aid?

If financial aid is a significant factor in your decision, Early Action might be a better choice. Unlike Early Decision, Early Action is non-binding, allowing you to compare financial aid packages from different schools before making a final commitment. Applying early can also increase your chances of receiving financial aid, as some schools offer aid on a first-come, first-served basis.



Carefully weigh these factors before deciding whether to apply early. It's essential to be strategic about your application timeline.





What NOT to Do on the College Application

When filling out your college applications, there are a few common mistakes to avoid. These pitfalls can hurt your chances of admission, so it's important to be mindful:



01. Don't Procrastinate

Waiting until the last minute to start your applications can lead to unnecessary stress and mistakes. Start early to give yourself plenty of time to complete each part of the application thoughtfully.



02. Don't Be Vague

Avoid generic answers and clichés. Colleges want to learn about the real you, so be specific and authentic in your responses.



03. Don't Overlook Instructions

Each college may have different requirements and instructions. Make sure you carefully read and follow the guidelines for each application.



04. Don't Ignore Deadlines

Missing a deadline can disqualify your application. Mark all deadlines on your calendar and set reminders to ensure you submit everything on time. This includes components with separate deadlines, like standardized tests! Secure your top score before submitting applications to be sure.

For more tips on what not to do during the college admissions process, check out our guide:

[What NOT to Do on Your College Application](#)





Final Thoughts: Your College Journey Begins Here

Now that you have a slightly more comprehensive understanding of the college application process, it's time to put your knowledge into action. Remember, the key to a successful application is preparation, organization, and authenticity. Start early, stay on top of deadlines, and be true to yourself throughout the process. Your college journey is a unique opportunity to shape your future, so make the most of it!

If you're feeling overwhelmed or want personalized guidance, Empowerly is here to help. Our team of expert counselors can support you every step of the way, from choosing the right schools to crafting standout applications. Visit our website to learn more about our services and how we can help you achieve your college dreams.

Empowerly's College Application Checklist

Preparation:

☐ **Research Colleges:**

- ☐ Identify colleges that match your academic and personal goals. Based on your research, compile a final list.
- ☐ Review the admission requirements for each school, including minimum GPA, standardized test scores, and any specific materials needed.
- ☐ Sort your college list into three categories based on your admission odds: safety, target, and reach. Ensure your final list is balanced with options in each category.

☐ **Secure Recommenders:**

- ☐ Choose teachers, counselors, or mentors who can provide strong recommendation letters.
- ☐ Give them plenty of notice and provide any necessary materials, such as a resume or summary of achievements.



Gathering Information

☐ **Personal Information:**

- ☐ Ensure accurate details for your name, contact information, date of birth, and family background.

☐ **Educational Background:**

- ☐ Request official high school transcripts early to avoid delays.
- ☐ Highlight any honors, AP courses, or special academic achievements.

☐ **Extracurricular Activities:**

- ☐ Compile a list of school clubs, sports, volunteer work, and hobbies.
- ☐ Rank your activities list from most important to least important, according to your level of involvement and impact.
- ☐ Detail your roles, responsibilities, and any leadership positions held.
- ☐ Take time to revise and consolidate your activity descriptions. Use action verbs and short, fragmented language, similar to resume bullets, for brevity.

☐ **Standardized Test Scores:**

- ☐ Compile a list of school clubs, sports, volunteer work, and hobbies.
- ☐ Rank your activities list from most important to least important, according to your level of involvement and impact.
- ☐ Detail your roles, responsibilities, and any leadership positions held.
- ☐ Take time to revise and consolidate your activity descriptions. Use action verbs and short, fragmented language, similar to resume bullets, for brevity.



☐ **Personal Essays:**

- ☐ Start brainstorming topics and drafting essays early.
- ☐ Be authentic and specific, and avoid generalities.
- ☐ Proofread and revise multiple times to ensure clarity and impact.

☐ **References/Recommendations:**

- ☐ Confirm that your recommenders have submitted their letters by the required deadlines.
- ☐ Send thoughtful thank-you notes to recognize their effort and time on your behalf.

Application Submission

☐ **Complete Application Forms:**

- ☐ Double-check all information for accuracy.
- ☐ Follow each college's specific instructions carefully.

☐ **Submit Applications:**

- ☐ Meet all application deadlines (mark them on your calendar and set reminders).
- ☐ Submit applications as early as possible.



After Submission

☐ **Monitor Application Status:**

- ☐ Regularly check for updates or additional requests from colleges.
- ☐ Fill out the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) in January to be considered for financial assistance.

☐ **Prepare for Admission Decisions:**

- ☐ Compare financial aid packages and consider attending admitted student events.
- ☐ Submit final transcripts or test scores that are still pending.
- ☐ Finalize your college choice and submit your enrollment deposit.

Summer Planning

☐ **Maximize Summer Opportunities:**

- ☐ Participate in internships, summer programs, or volunteer activities.
- ☐ Continue preparing for college by refining your study habits and building skills.

Final Steps Before College

☐ **Enjoy Your Last Summer:**

- ☐ Spend time with family and friends.
- ☐ Prepare for the transition to college life by attending bridge programs, if available.

