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# THE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS HANDBOOK

A 10 STEP GUIDE  
TO GETTING ACCEPTED

The college process can be pretty daunting. In the past couple of years, getting into college has gotten much more competitive. According to the Newsweek article [Getting in Gets Harder](#), 75% of four-year colleges and universities said they received more applications in 2008 than in 2007. The number of applications is expected to increase until 2015.

So what's a student like you to do? Hopefully you've been taking challenging classes, studying hard, getting involved, and getting to know your teachers. Now that you're thinking about where you want to apply, you need to put your best foot forward. That's why MakeCollegeReality.com created this guide: to help steer you through the college admissions process.

Nothing can guarantee you admission to any school, but if you follow this guide you should be confident that you're sending the best application possible. Remember you can always visit MakeCollegeReality.com for more information on the college process.

Let's get started!

# 1. MAKE A LIST OF COLLEGES TO APPLY TO

## *Summer before junior year*

Even though you won't apply until the beginning of your senior year, you should have a list of colleges you'd like to apply to before your junior year starts. This list doesn't have to be set in stone, but creating it early on will give you plenty of time to request information, visit the campus, talk to current students, and take the required standardized tests.

- Check out sites like [princetonreview.com](http://princetonreview.com) and [collegeboard.com](http://collegeboard.com) to help you with your college search.

You will want to apply to a mix of safety, match, and reach schools:

**Safety:** These schools generally aren't very competitive, but you're almost certain you'll get in. It's important to apply to safety schools as a back-up plan. Plus, they're most likely to give you scholarships.

**Match:** These schools will deliver a good balance of challenging and interesting courses and activities for you. You should be fairly certain you'll get in.

**Reach:** These schools will be very challenging and your chances of getting in will be pretty low, but it's worth a try. Note that Ivy League schools are reaches for everyone.

Also figure out if these factors are important to you:

**Geographical region:** Do you want to stay close to home or explore a whole new state?

**Surrounding area:** Would you rather go to school in a city, town, or a rural area?

**Size:** Bigger schools mean more options but smaller schools will provide more support.

**Majors:** Are you thinking about majoring in something not every college will have?

**Diversity:** This can be anything from race to religion to number of first generation students.

**Academic rigor:** If it's too hard or not challenging enough, you might not be motivated to finish.

**Housing:** Is living on campus mandatory? Is it guaranteed? What are the options?

**Cost:** Private schools have a big price tag but they might be able to give you more scholarships.

Once you think you've found some schools you like, do a little bit more research:

**Schedule campus visits:** A school may seem like the perfect fit on paper, but visiting in-person might change your mind. Overnight visits will give you the best sense of the culture.

**Get in touch with current students:** Talk to someone from a similar background who shares similar interests, if possible. This will give you an insight to what your experience might be like.

**Talk to family and friends:** Find out why people did or did not like the college they attended. They might also know of colleges that would be a good fit that you haven't thought about yet.

**Choose a college for the right reasons:** Don't choose a school just because your boyfriend or girlfriend or your friends are going there. Try to resist pressure from your parents if you can.

Once you have an idea of where you'd like to apply, it's time to gather information about each college:

- Admission deadlines
- Which standardized test scores they require
- How many recommendations you need
- What the essay questions are
- How much the application fee is

Look for this information on the schools' websites in a section called "prospective students" or "admissions." If you're gathering this information your junior year, the application won't be the same one you'll use senior year but you can still get an idea for what they require now.

Use the college worksheet on the next page to help keep your information organized.

**Name of college or university:**

**Type of school (check one):**

Safety     Match     Reach

**Admissions address:**

**Regular admissions deadline:**

 /  /

**Early application deadline:**

 /  /

**Application fee:**

 \$

**Standardized tests:**

SAT/ACT:  Required  Optional      SAT II:  Required  Optional

**SAT II subjects:**

**Pros:**

**Cons:**

**Name of college or university:**

**Type of school (check one):**

Safety     Match     Reach

**Admissions address:**

**Regular admissions deadline:**

 /  /

**Early application deadline:**

 /  /

**Application fee:**

 \$

**Standardized tests:**

SAT/ACT:  Required  Optional      SAT II:  Required  Optional

**SAT II subjects:**

**Pros:**

**Cons:**

## 2. TAKE REQUIRED STANDARDIZED TESTS

### *Beginning of junior year*

Schedule your first test for September or October of your junior year. Schedule a second one sometime between November and January, even before you get your first test scores. This may seem very early, but you want to get the tests out of the way your junior year so you can focus on other parts of your application senior year. This will also give you plenty of time to take a test prep course if you feel you need it.

- Register for the SAT: <http://sat.collegeboard.com/register>
- Register for the ACT: <http://www.actstudent.org/regist/index.html>

Most schools require or recommend the SAT or ACT. The SAT is popular among schools on the coasts whereas the ACT is popular in the Midwest. However, almost all schools will accept either. You might score significantly better on one test than the other, so it will be to your advantage to figure out which one would be best for you:

**SAT:** If you're a bookworm or a good test taker, this might be the test for you. It covers critical reading, math, and writing. This test can be a little intimidating because the questions gradually get harder as you go through the test, certain questions are designed to try to trick you, and you will get points deducted for wrong answers.

**ACT:** If you've worked hard in challenging classes, if English isn't your first language, or if you're an international student, this might be the test for you. It covers English, math, reading, and science, plus an optional writing section. However, if science isn't your strongest subject or if you haven't had much exposure to lab reports, the science section could bring your score down.

If you still don't know which test you'd do better on, take some practice tests. You can always take both tests and just report the better score.

- You can convert SAT and ACT scores here: <http://www.act.org/aap/concordance/>

Testing centers have a limited number of slots, so register as early as possible. The day of the test they will ask you if you want to send your test scores directly to several schools. Unless you are only going to take the test once (which is not recommended), do not write down the names of any schools. Especially if you're taking the test your junior year, your choice of schools might change and you don't want to send schools your lowest score.

Visit <http://makecollegereality.com/prepare/standardized-tests.html> for study tips and for more information on standardized tests.

### ***End of junior year***

SAT IIs are subject tests that you may need to take in addition to the SAT or ACT. Not all schools require them, so doing your homework could save you the hassle of taking extra tests.

There are 20 different subject tests covering English, history, math, science, and foreign languages. Only about 60 colleges require SAT IIs, and another 50 or so recommend them. Over half the schools that require them will accept the ACT in place of SAT IIs.

- Use this search to find out if the school requires or recommends the SAT IIs:  
<http://test-prep.ivywest.com/sat-subject-test-score.aspx>
- See a list of subjects that are offered and register:  
<http://sat.collegeboard.com/practice/sat-subject-test-preparation>

Check with each school for which subject tests to take and how many you need – each college or university will have different requirements. If the school lets you choose the subjects, pick ones you are comfortable in and/or subjects you wish to study in college. Make sure you've taken at least two full years of a language, and at least one year in other subject areas.

SAT IIs should be taken at the end of your junior year if possible. However, you may also be taking AP or IB exams around the same time, so you may want to schedule them for late spring or early summer. You could also get one or two out of the way at the end of your sophomore year if you studied any of the subjects that year.

Visit <http://makecollegereality.com/prepare/resources/sat-ii-study-guides.html> for SAT II study guides.

Taking all these standardized tests can get very expensive. Depending on your financial situation, you may be able to receive vouchers. Check with your school counselor to see if you qualify.

### 3. BUILD YOUR RESUME

*Summer before senior year*

A resume will help you organize your list of activities, give you ideas for essays, and some schools may even require you to submit it with your application.

Make a list of all the activities you've been involved in since freshman year. This should include sports, clubs, jobs, and volunteer work. Do not include clubs you only went to once or twice. More isn't necessarily better, so don't be discouraged if you only have a few things on your list.

Here's the information you should include for each activity:

- Any titles you may have held, such as captain, secretary, or treasurer.
- The dates you participated in each activity.
- How many hours a week you worked.
- How many hours a week you volunteered, or the total number of volunteer hours per position.
- A short description of what you did (one or two sentences).

In addition to your activities, you'll also write down a little bit of information about your academics:

- Cumulative GPA
- Class rank, if you know it
- The number of honors, AP, and IB classes you took (this is optional)
- Honor roll
- Other academic honors or awards

You should also make a list of any other honors, awards, or scholarships you may have already won, other languages you speak, and anything else you think a college would be interested in.

Aside from listing your activities and awards, also make sure your email is professional. You don't want to give your sweetpumkinpie2020 email to your teachers, and definitely not to colleges. Get a simple email address with your name or initials, and don't forget to check it.

# SAMPLE RESUME

# JOSE GARCIA

1234 Main St., Apt #1  
Springfield, MA, 01234

555-555-5555  
j\_garcia@email.com

## **EDUCATION:**

## **Springfield Senior High, Springfield, MA**

2007 - 2011

- Cumulative GPA: 3.78/4.0, including 5 honors and 3 AP classes
  - Top 15% of class
  - “A” honor roll

## **ACTIVITIES:**

## Soccer Team

2007 - present

- Goal keeper for varsity team for three years and junior varsity for one year
  - Voted most valuable player in 2009
  - Team placed second in state for 2008 and 2009

## **Marching Band**

2007 – present

- First chair trumpet player for two years
  - Marched in 8 parades per year, plus a half-time show for homecoming football game

## Diversity Club

2009 – present

- Secretary for one year
  - Participated in organizing team for school-wide diversity week

#### **WORK AND VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE:**

Mike's Pizza

2010 – present

- Cashier for one year: 5 hours a week during school year, 20 hours during summer
  - Known for punctuality and courteous service

## **Boys and Girls Club**

2009 – present

- Summer soccer coach for 6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> graders: 20 hours a week
  - Mentor for 7<sup>th</sup> grade student: 2 hours a week year-round

## **AWARDS:**

## Student of the month for Algebra II Comcast Leaders and Achievers Scholarship

January 2009  
October 2010

## 4. WRITE YOUR ESSAYS

### *Summer before senior year*

The essay is the only part of your application where you can really show your personality and it could even mean the difference between getting into your dream school or not. Starting the summer before your senior year will give you plenty of time to craft your best essay.

Unless every school accepts the [Common Application](#), you'll need to check out the application for each school to find out the essay topic. Updated applications should be available by August 1<sup>st</sup>. Be sure you pay close attention to the directions and make sure you're answering their question(s).

1. **Brainstorm:** You can use your resume to help you think about what your essay topic should be. Make a list of things you think would be interesting to write about and don't cross any off yet. Think about one specific moment that changed your way of thinking or that shows your perseverance or dedication. You might also want to write about a challenge you faced and how you overcame it. Make sure the story is positive – steer clear of things like your parents' divorce, a family death, depression, etc.
2. **Write a draft:** Once you've chosen one story you'd like to tell, go ahead and write it down.
  - If there aren't any guidelines for length, try not to go over 1 ½ pages double-spaced.
  - Make sure you're writing a story only you can tell.
  - Keep it focused on one single story.
  - This is not an English paper – no need to use big words you don't know how to use.
  - Be as descriptive as possible.
3. **Proofread:** Once your story is written down, read it out loud to make sure it flows. Check for mistakes spell-check might not catch (to vs. too, your vs. you're, it vs. it's, etc.).
4. **Revise:** How can you make your story even better? Ask yourself these questions:
  - Is this story about me?
  - Is it interesting?
  - Is it positive?
  - Does it show a side of me you can't see in the rest of my application?
  - Is there anything that doesn't make sense?
  - Is there anything I could describe in more detail?
  - If I read this story to someone, would they be able to tell that I wrote it?
5. **Have someone else read it:** Ask a friend, parent, or teacher if they could look over your essay. Make sure they don't rewrite it for you – this is just to see if the story is interesting, if it makes sense, if there are any mistakes, and if they have any suggestions for improving it. If you ask a teacher to look it over, give them at least two weeks to give it back to you and be sure to thank them.

If you're uncomfortable having someone else read your essay, remember this is a critical part of the process. Your essay might make sense in your head, but you want to make sure it makes sense to others before you send it to colleges.

6. **Revise:** Once you've had someone look over your essay, it's time to revise it once again. It's ok to disagree with some of their suggestions – after all, this is *your* story. Make sure this is the best story you can tell.
7. **Proofread:** Always proofread your essay after making any changes. You don't want your application to be thrown out because you rushed your essay and missed a small mistake. If you mention the name of the school in your essays, make sure you have the correct name.

If you are confident at this point that this is the best essay you could possibly write, you can stop here. If not, go through another round of revising and editing until you are satisfied.

Visit <http://makecollegereality.com/apply/essays.html> for more tips on essay writing including ideas and topics to avoid.

## 5. ASK FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

*September of senior year*

Teachers will be swamped writing recommendations during the fall, especially if they teach mostly juniors and seniors, so you'll want to ask them as early as possible. You don't want them to rush and you don't want to put off sending in your applications because you're waiting on recommendations.

**1. Check the requirements:** Some schools require three recommendations from specific people, and others may not require any recommendations at all. You can find the requirements for each school on their application.

**2. Decide who to ask:** Getting a recommendation from your AP Calculus teacher might seem like a good idea, but if you've only known them for one month, there's not much they can say about you. Ask teachers you have a good relationship with and you've known for a while. Just because you received an "A" in the class doesn't mean that teacher will be able to write a good recommendation. Make sure you ask someone who knows your personality.

If you are applying to a science, business, or engineering school, make sure you get at least one recommendation from a science or math teacher. Similarly for an art school – make sure you ask an art teacher or someone who can testify to your artistic ability.

Don't limit yourself to teachers you've had for classes. You can ask a coach, counselor, supervisor, or a teacher you've worked with outside the classroom.

**3. Give them your information:** Don't assume the people you're asking know everything about you. Give them a copy of your resume, transcript, and your essays. Let them know where you're applying to and why you want to go.

Give them any special forms that might be included in the application. Some schools may have special instructions to seal the recommendation in the envelope and sign across the flap. Others may want them to send the recommendation directly to the school, in which case you should give them an addressed, stamped envelope. Ask them to give you a few extra (signed and sealed in an envelope) in case you decide to apply to a school last minute.

**4. Gather your recommendations:** Give each person at least two weeks to write your recommendations. It's ok to check up with them after two weeks have passed, but don't nag them.

**5. Thank them:** The people you asked for recommendations took time out of their busy schedules to help you out. Be sure to send them a handwritten thank-you note and let them know what schools you got accepted to and where you plan on attending.

Visit <http://makecollegereality.com/apply/recommendations.html> for more advice on getting recommendations.

## 6. ASK COUNSELOR TO SEND TRANSCRIPTS

*September or October of senior year*

Fall is also a very busy time for counselors. The sooner you ask them to send your transcripts, the better. This will help ensure that the schools receive them on time. And if your transcripts get lost in the mail, you want to have plenty of time to re-send them.

If the application deadlines for the schools you are applying to are in January, you might be tempted to send out your transcripts after your first semester grades come in. However, you might not even receive your first semester grades until the application deadline has passed. Even if you plan on getting them a week or two before the deadline, you don't want to take the chance that your counselor won't send them in time. It's best to send them in the fall.

## 7. SEND STANDARDIZED TEST SCORES

*September or October of senior year*

By the beginning of your senior year, you should have taken all the required standardized tests. If you are taking a test in September or October, make sure the scores are sent directly to the colleges you are applying to.

If you took any test multiple times, you only need to send the best score if you also scored the highest on all the individual sections. Below you can see that you would only need to submit scores from test B:

Scenario 1.

Test	Math score	Critical Reading score	Writing score
A	700	550	600
B	720	600	650

However, if some of your scores went up but other scores went down when you took the test a second time, you should send both scores. Here's an example:

Scenario 2.

Test	Math score	Critical Reading score	Writing score
A	700	550	600
B	600	600	550

Some schools will combine your best scores from both tests to give you a "superscore." Others may just look at the test with the highest composite score. Either way, it doesn't hurt to send both scores in this case.

If you took the SAT and the ACT to see which you would do better on, use this chart to convert your scores and see which test you scored the highest: <http://www.act.org/aap/concordance/>. If the scores from both tests are similar, you may want to send both.

If you already received scores from AP or IB tests, you can choose to send those scores as well. These scores are usually used to grant you credit once you enroll, but if you received a 3 or higher on AP or IB tests, it could help counteract a poor SAT, ACT, or SAT II score. So for example, if you received a 550 on the SAT II Physics test but a 4 on the AP Physics test, the 4 on the AP test will help offset the mediocre SAT II score.

It's not required to send your AP or IB scores with your application and you only need to send them after you're admitted if you want credit for the classes. For admissions purposes, schools are usually more interested in the grades you received in AP and IB classes than your test scores. So if you got an "A" in an AP class but a 1 on the AP test, you don't have to report it to the school.

## 8. FILL OUT APPLICATION

*October of senior year*

Filling out applications is easy if you're organized. Make sure this is a focused project and you don't just apply to one college here and there. If you have a filled out Common Application, your family members can help you fill out the others.

Before you start, gather these materials to help you get organized:

- **Manila folders:** To keep your application materials separate.
- **Calendar:** To keep track of all the deadlines.
- **Sharpie:** To write down deadlines and important information.
- **Large manila envelopes:** To send out applications.
- **Booklets of stamps:** To send out applications.
- **Printer/Copier:** To make copies of your applications.
- **Printing paper:** To print the copies of your applications.

Also make sure you have a dedicated space to spread your things out. This could be your kitchen table, a desk, or even your bedroom floor.

Many schools have the option to apply online. The advantage with this is that you will get confirmation immediately that they've received the information. If you choose to apply online, make sure you print out all the filled-out information for your records.

Remember that these applications usually have a fee so you need to have some funds available. Make sure you actually have a chance of getting into the schools you're applying to before you spend money on the applications.

Sending out applications can be very expensive. Depending on your financial situation, you may be able to get vouchers to help you apply to colleges. Check with your counselor to see if you qualify.

## 9. GATHER YOUR MATERIALS

*November of senior year*

It's time to gather all the pieces together. By now you should have everything you need to send out your applications. Use this checklist to make sure everything is done:

- Filled-out application
- Final essays
- Application fee or waiver
- Supplemental materials, if applicable
- Recommendations, sealed and signed (if necessary)
- Confirm with your counselor that your transcripts were sent
- Double check that your standardized test scores have been sent

## 10. PROOFREAD, FINALIZE, AND SUBMIT

*November or December of senior year*

Before you send out your applications, proofread everything. Read over your applications to make sure all your information is correct, that you followed the directions, and that you didn't miss any sections.

Also re-read your essays one more time. Make sure you clearly answered the questions and that there are no misspellings. If it's a short answer question, make sure you meet the word count requirements. If it's a longer essay, try to not exceed one page.

Pay attention to whether the schools you're applying to have rolling admissions. If they do, that means they will start reviewing applications and accepting students right away. They may still have some slots open by the time the deadline rolls around, but you should send in your application as soon as you can.

Lastly, double check that you have the correct address and that you are sending the right information to each school. The last thing you want to do is send the wrong application.

Remember to make copies of everything you submit. It will make it easy to re-send any information if it gets lost in the mail. If you applied online, print out hard copies of your application.

After you send your applications, you'll probably have to wait a couple months before you find out if you're accepted. For now, you've done all you can do!