

Applying 101 (from Educationplanner.org)

Applying for college involves much more than just filling out a form. This overview will let you know just what to expect, as you get ready to fill out those college applications.

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Standardized Tests

You will probably have to take at least one mandatory test for college admission.

- Most colleges require you take the SAT I, the ACT Assessment, or both.
- If your native language is not English, you may also have to take the TOEFL test.
- Take the necessary tests your junior year of high school and again in your senior year if you're trying to improve your scores.
- [Learn more about standardized tests.](#)

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The Application

The application is your way of introducing yourself to a college admissions office so you'll want to make a good first impression.

Know the requirements

Read the application carefully to find out what the college or university needs from you:

- Application fee and deadline
- Required standardized tests
- Number of essays
- Interview requirements
- Anything else to help improve your chances for acceptance

Along with the actual application, you may also need to:

- Ensure your standardized test scores and high school transcripts arrive at the colleges to which you apply.
- Submit teacher recommendations. Select teachers who know you and your abilities well. Allow them plenty of time to complete the recommendations.

Do it yourself

Complete college applications yourself. You can learn a lot about a school from the information it asks for in its application.

- State university applications often tell you how they are going to view their applicants. Usually, they select students based on GPAs and test scores.
- Colleges that request an interview, ask you to respond to open-ended questions, or require an essay are interested in a more personal approach to the application process. These colleges may be looking for different types of students than those sought by a state school.

Tips for filling out your application

- **Follow the directions to the letter.** You won't make a very good first impression if you have to ask an admissions officer for exceptions.
- **Review** the application and work through a rough draft before submitting your final application.
- **Proofread all parts of your application**, including your essay. Again, the final product indicates to the admissions staff how meticulous and careful you are in your work.
- **Submit your application early.** This gives you plenty of time to work with admissions staff if they found any problems with your application.
- **Follow up.** Whether you apply online or by mail, make sure you follow up with the college to ensure they received your application.
- Learn more [Application Do's and Don'ts](#).

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The Application Essay

Some colleges may request an essay or short-answer responses to learn more about you and how well you communicate. Admissions officers, particularly at small or midsize colleges, use the essay to determine how you'd fit in at that college.

Where other portions of your application (transcript, test scores, extracurricular activities) reflect what you've accomplished up to this point, your application essay is an opportunity to present yourself in the here and now.

Common essay topics

- Simple themes: writing about yourself and your experiences; explaining why you want to attend that particular school.
- Imaginative or creative themes: writing about a favorite author; commenting on a hypothetical situation.

Tips for writing a winning essay

- **Make sure the essay reflects** your enthusiasm, maturity, creativity, ability to communicate, talent, and leadership skills.
- **Set aside enough time to write the essay, revise it, and revise it again.** Running the "spell check" feature on your computer will only detect a fraction of errors. Take a break, then come back and reread your essay. Fix any style, content, or grammar problems—and find ways to improve the essay overall.
- **Always answer the question**, making sure that you are specific, clear, and true to your personality.
- **Enlist the help of reviewers** who know you well—friends, parents, teachers. They are likely to be the most honest and will make sure you're presenting your true self.
- **Take the [Essay Writing Course](#).**

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The Personal Interview

Although most colleges **do not require** a personal interview, many **recommend** you take the opportunity for a face-to-face discussion with a member of the admissions staff. Read the application materials to determine whether the college places great emphasis on the interview.

What to expect

- On average, a personal interview lasts about 45 minutes.
- It allows you to find out more about the college and admissions staff to evaluate your skills and strengths in person.
- You will meet with a member of the admissions staff who will assess your personal qualities, high school preparation, and your capacity to contribute to campus life.

When to go

- Generally, students choose to visit campuses in the summer or fall of their senior year.
- A summer visit, when the campus is not in session, generally allows for a less hectic visit and interview.
- A fall visit provides the opportunity to see what campus life is like in full swing.
- Learn more about [planning campus visits](#).

Making the most of a personal interview

Schedule your visit.

- Always make an appointment.
- Avoid scheduling more than two college interviews on any given day.
- Multiple interviews hinder your chances of making a good impression and clearly remembering each campus.

Prepare.

- Visit the website or read the college catalog to gain a better understanding of what the college has to offer.
- Spend some time thinking about your strengths and weaknesses and what you're looking for in a college education.

Ask questions.

- Your questions give the interviewer insight into your personality and priorities.
- Not having any questions may suggest that you're unprepared or, even worse, not interested.
- Make sure the answers matter to you and have a bearing on your decisions when it's time to choose where to attend.
- See our [list of College Interview Questions](#) for ideas.

Relax.

- Remember to relax and be yourself.
- Avoid drinking caffeinated beverages prior to the interview. Caffeine may make you jittery.
- Your interviewer will expect you to be somewhat nervous but try to suppress habits like leg-wagging, finger-drumming, or bracelet-jangling.
- As you get a few interviews under your belt, they will get easier.

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The Final Decision

Once you start receiving acceptance letters, it's time to compare your options. You and your family need to review financial aid packages, fill out more forms, and make that final decision.

Our [Deciding section](#) has everything you need to feel confident you've made the right choice.