



Tips for Crafting a Successful College Application

Many college admission offices begin accepting applications on August 1. Here's how to navigate the process and put your best foot forward.

By Meilee D. Bridges
August 1, 2019

Ahhh, summer. If you're a rising high-school senior, you might be hanging at the pool, absorbed in the latest beach read, or sacked out on the couch in front of Huflix Prime. Or maybe you've been doing the 2-to-10 shift at Camo Sporting Goods or Froyo Cupcake Juice Bonanza. Perhaps you've been volunteering at your local library and jaguar rescue. Whatever the case, once that calendar flips from July to August, college application season officially begins, so it's time to start planning for the next few months. But never fear: we're here to guide you through the often-nerve-racking process of college admission.

Procrastination is a nonstarter

We know that senior year is a busy time, but putting off requesting recommendations and transcripts, filling in forms, and writing application essays will only compound your stress and anxiety. Make life easier by creating a calendar that lists each school's major deadlines and any other important dates: when applications are first accepted, SAT and ACT registration, early decision, early action, honors colleges, regular admission, etc. Then—and this is key—plan to beat each deadline. Admission offices are flooded on deadlines, and websites can crash, so rise above the fray and avoid potential tech glitches by submitting early. This can also impress on counselors that their school is your priority, which will make you more memorable.

You'll need to carve out time devoted to each application, so assign specific hours of each day or week to working on your materials. Familiarize yourself with the Common App, the New Coalition App, and university-specific forms so that you know which information is required and can estimate how long it will take to fill each one out. (Pro tips: don't underestimate this one, and include OST, or Obligatory Sighing Time, which is the cumulative number of minutes spent groaning at having to input your address and GPA for the umpteenth time). Give yourself at least three weeks to work on your application essay—longer if written supplements are required or you struggle with writing (if you're gulping here, stay tuned for more tips on crafting the essay itself).

Finally, remember that other people are involved in your admission process, so ask your beloved teachers and other mentors for their recommendations now (yes, now)—and no later than the first week of September. They lead hectic lives, too, so give them plenty of time to expound on your accomplishments and endearing personality. (Good to know: Give your references an organized packet that includes deadlines, lists of extracurricular and community-service activities, copies of work that you're especially proud of, and even transcripts so they'll have all the necessary information at their fingertips when they draft your recommendations. They will appreciate your organizational skills and your willingness to go above and beyond, which you'll want them to remember when they're writing about you.

This should go without saying

But read the directions. Carefully. And follow them. Carefully. The majority of mistakes made in application processes result from errors of not paying attention to instructions, leaving required fields of a form blank, or providing the wrong information, and these are all-too-easy reasons for admission counselors to swiftly move an application to the rejection pile.

Slow your extracurricular roll

There's no denying that participating in cross country, lacrosse, and Quidditch while volunteering at a literacy organization on top of being a member of everything from the Soufflé Club and Student Disco to the Lumberjack Society and Parkour Intramurals is impressive. And yes, universities do want to see engagement beyond the classroom. But keep in mind that most college-admission staff are looking for leadership and depth of interest, not a list of one-off activities that might signal flighty or noncommittal tendencies—or, even worse, résumé padding.



When describing your extracurriculars in essays or during interviews, focus only on the organizations that mean the most to you, and *explain why*: How do they represent your values? How have they helped you grow in terms of your skills, your education, and/or your character? What contributions have you made to your school or community? If, like *Taken's* Bryan Mills, you have "a very particular set of skills," articulate how that surprising talent would help you contribute to the diversity of the university's student body. And don't be overly concerned if the activities you're most devoted to do not appear related on the surface. If you can illuminate the connections between your role as vice president of the Baker's Guild and your plan to pursue a degree in mathematics, or if you clarify how volunteering at the food bank and being an avid rock-climber both illustrate how you are dedicated to seeing the world from multiple perspectives, you will help admission counselors see not only how you think but also how you will fit into the university community.

Opt for the optionals

Do as the international athletic-apparel company tells you: simply complete the task. Think of optional parts of the application not as “unnecessary” or “only if you’re up for it” but rather as opportunities to round out the profile you’re creating for the admission office. Even more importantly, submitting portfolios or completing supplemental essays will help you set yourself apart from other applicants.

See and be seen

Visiting one or more college campuses is not in the cards for every applicant, but if you can, do so—and make sure it’s official because admission staff will consider that in reviewing your application. If possible, set up a tour and a formal interview with an admission counselor. (Life hack: Have them set up chats with faculty and current students in your areas of interest, too, so that you can better assess whether the school is the right fit for you.)

What if visiting a school isn’t feasible? First, the Internet is your portal. Request interviews via your favorite video chat app so that you can get face and talk time with an admission counselor, faculty member, and/or current student. Second, ask whether the school will be coming to you. That is, alumni, parents, and admission staff from many schools offer local receptions and interviews for prospective students, so try to attend such events in your area so that you can make an impression and have your own questions answered. Building connections is a significant benefit of the college experience, so why not start early?

Just like in job interviews, coming prepared with meaningful questions about the university is crucial. First, it makes for a better conversation; few admission counselors, professors, current undergrads, or alumni want a monologue about the university. Second, asking questions about topics you care about—such as what faculty-student interactions look like or whether there are opportunities to explore sustainability and social justice on campus—can help admission staff gain a deeper understanding of your intellectual curiosity and passions. Even though you’ll be the one posing the questions, you’ll be shaping how they perceive you, and you want to present yourself as a thoughtful and interesting future member of their campus community.

By the way, if you *really* want to make an impression, a concise but warm thank-you note to any event hosts or interviewers is always a great idea. Email is fine, like a velvety vanilla ice cream, but a handwritten message on nice stationery is like pecan honeycomb crunch on caramel gelat—wait, what were we talking about?

Celebrate and wait

You’ve requested your transcripts and recommendations, you’ve filled out the forms, you’ve proofread the essays, you’ve interviewed with college representatives—now what? Save. Make copies (always make copies, young Padawans). Submit. Breathe. It’s probably going to be a while before you hear anything, except for maybe an automated message notifying you that your application was received, so now is the time to refocus your energies. Distracting yourself with schoolwork, spending time with family and friends, and improving your lumberjack or Quidditch techniques will help you play the waiting game. But you can walk away knowing that you’ve grinded your way through, achieved your best-efforts badge, and made it to the next level. Good luck!