

Higher Ed Hacks: How to Ace Your College Applications and Essays

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What you'll learn

- Tips for completing college applications
 - How to use the Common Application
 - How to write your college application essay
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With ample career opportunities and higher earnings potential, a college degree is a major key in building your prosperous future.

That said, it's not a secret. According to our recent research report, "[Higher Ambitions: How America Plans for Post-Secondary Education 2020](#)," 94% of American high school students are likely to pursue a higher education. With all of these people [going after their college dream](#), you have to make yourself stand out when it comes to your college application.

Wondering how you can stay on track or how to stand out? Below are some tips to help you stay on top of your college applications, navigate through the Common Application, and write a compelling college application essay.

Tips for completing college applications

1. Know your deadlines

This might be the most important point on the list, especially if you're applying to multiple colleges. Few schools will even look at your application if it comes in after their deadline. Create an excel spreadsheet and list each college you're pursuing with their different application deadlines. Whether you plan on submitting your application early, or your school accepts applications on a rolling admissions timeline, here are some options and types of deadlines you should become familiar with:

Early decision. With early decision, you are telling the school you are 100% committed to going there if you're accepted. Students submit their applications around November and schools will send their decisions by December, well before a

schools' regular decision timeline. If you're accepted to the school you applied for with early decision, you must contact any other colleges you applied to and withdraw your application.

Early action. Similar to early decision, students submit their applications around November, and schools' decisions are sent out by December. However, if accepted, you are not required to attend the school. Students get their college decisions early, but still can wait until "Decision Day" (typically May 1, but June 1 or later this year in light of COVID-19) to make their final choice.

Regular decision. If you're applying for the upcoming fall semester, regular decision deadlines for colleges usually extend into January or February. After the application deadline closes, schools will sort through their applications and send their decisions out in the springtime, typically around April. Similar to early action, you are not required to attend any of the schools that accept you on the regular decision timeline. If you still haven't chosen your top school before the early decision and early action deadlines, regular decision is the option for you.

Rolling admission. Rolling admission isn't a deadline you necessarily "choose," it's a way some schools receive and evaluate the applications that come into their doors. Instead of specific deadlines, schools will weave through applications until they have filled all the slots for their incoming class. Similar to early action and regular decision deadlines, rolling admission gives you the freedom to choose from the schools you're accepted into.

Remember, each college you're considering will potentially receive thousands of applications. If you're laser-focused on one particular school and want to get ahead of the application rush, apply early.

2. Leverage your letters of recommendation

Whether you're applying for a college, a competitive scholarship, or a particular program of study, a good letter of recommendation can help you unlock your full potential. While you're thinking about choosing the perfect person to write your letter of recommendation, here are a few tips:

Find someone who has witnessed your growth. Most students think that the person who should write their letter of recommendation is the teacher of their most successful class, or the coach of the team they were a captain on. That's not necessarily true. When choosing the author of your letter, find the person that has seen you grow and overcome obstacles. Someone who has seen you persevere through hard times and achieve greatness. This person can be a teacher or a coach, but it also could be a principal, a school counselor, or a community member. Choose someone who you've built a relationship with and you've known for more than a marking period, if possible.

Ask them in person. In this day and age where everything is communicated via a text message, phone call, or email, go beyond the norm and ask your recommender in person. Once you determine if they're comfortable with writing a letter of recommendation for you, make sure you provide them with the necessary resources, whether it's a link or your school's mailing address, and give them plenty of time to complete it before the deadline.

Say thank you! No matter who you end up asking, your recommender is giving up some of their time to further your success. Send them a handwritten thank you card, thank them in person, or send a small gift to show your gratitude.

3. Evaluate your social media accounts

Ever heard the saying, "Check yourself before you wreck yourself?" I can't think of anything more fitting when it comes to college admissions and your social media accounts. You want to make sure that your accounts are portraying the same person you are describing on your college application. The power of social media is real, and colleges will check your social media accounts to see your true colors. Do yourself a favor and go through each one of your accounts and delete anything that could come across as offensive or inappropriate.

I'm sure you're thinking, "What if my accounts are private?" It doesn't matter. While you may think all your followers are your friends, screenshots are forever.

4. Confirm that your materials have arrived

A few days after you submit your application, contact the school's admissions office to see if they have received your materials. Make sure they have your high school transcript, your SAT/ACT test scores, and letter(s) of recommendation.

Pro tip #1: Save everything! This includes your applications, your transcripts and test scores, and any other materials that are part of the application process. If you find out that a school is missing any parts of your application, you'll be able to send it their way immediately.

Tips for the Common App

Some schools also use a one-stop-shop college application program that helps students apply to colleges with ease. The Common Application, also known as the "Common App," is a non-profit membership organization that represents nearly 900 higher education institutions. According to their [website](#), they connect applicants and those who support them to a wide array of public and private colleges and universities across all 50 U.S. states, and 20 countries.

If your potential school uses the Common App as an application tool, use these tips and tricks to best utilize the program:

1. Utilize the entire app

The Common App is a great resource for finding and applying to colleges. Its “explore colleges” function allows you to search for colleges based on criteria like the location of the school, the campus setting, the types of financial aid awarded, and even by specialized missions (for example, an all-women’s or all-men’s college, a tribal college, or a Historically Black College and University). This is a great function that can help you find your perfect college fit, even if you’ve never been exposed to it before.

2. Start your application early

The latest and greatest edition of the Common App goes live on August 1 every year to kick off the college application season. For those students and families who may be tackling the Common App for the first time, starting early is a great opportunity to familiarize yourself with the program before things like homework and after school activities become a reality.

Be sure to review some of the requirements for schools you’re considering, as well as some of the background information they’re seeking before you dive in headfirst.

Starting early also allows you to take your time! You can focus more on the quality of your work rather than meeting a certain deadline. You don’t want to be the applicant that spells their name wrong. 😊

3. Ask for help

This may be the first time you’re filling out a college application or using the College App, and that’s okay. If you run into any confusion, or if you have any questions in general, the Common App has a “[Solutions Center](#)” that can be reached 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In some cases, you may be able to even utilize their live chat function.

Pro tip #2: Even though it’s super easy to apply to a ton of colleges on the Common App at once, don’t overdo it. Make sure you still do your research and [apply to colleges and universities](#) that align with your goals for your future.

Tips for the college application essay

Whether you’re applying to college directly through the school’s website, or through the Common App, your college application essay is still a key aspect of your overall application. Here are some ways you can take your essay to the next level:

1. Pick the perfect topic

Instead of writing about a topic that you think a college admissions professional would want to read, write about something you're passionate about. What do you want your potential college to know about you? Your essay should let admissions professionals see a unique side of you that is different than your high school transcripts and list of activities.

Sometimes, college essay prompts may be published beforehand. For example, the Common App published their essay prompts for the 2020-21 school year. They are:

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma — anything of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

Whether one of the listed essay prompts catches your eye, or you wish to write about something else, picking a topic that you want to write about will help let your creativity shine. An admissions professional will be able to feel your passion and interest through the paper.

2. Take advantage of your resources

You have about 400 characters to “wow” your potential college and you may not be the J.K. Rowling of your generation. But that's okay! If you need help picking the perfect topic, or if you have no clue where to start, use the resources available to you. Sometimes a brief conversation with a friend, mentor, or a teacher can spark an idea. There are also online resources, like the [College Essay Guy](#), that will help guide you through the college application essay process.

3. Be honest

Not only should your college essay be different than the rest of your application, it should be honest, too. Just because a college may use the same essay prompts year after year, doesn't mean you should use a previous applicant's essay. Colleges can, and will, check your claims and references. Make sure your listed ideas and achievements are accurate and legitimate.

Last, but certainly not least, do not have your parents or guardians write your essay for you. You're the one getting ready to go to college, not them. This will only hurt you in the long run.

4. **Proofread, and proofread again**

Your college essay is a written representation of your true self. Show college admissions panels that you're a serious applicant by staying structured. Make sure your essay is free from any grammatical errors and misspellings. Ask a friend, family member, or one of your high school teachers to look over your college essay before you submit. It's always helpful to get a second set of eyes on your work to make sure it's complete and accurate.

Applying to college should be an exciting time for both students and families. You are getting ready to invest in your future self and open a door to endless opportunity. Use these tips, tricks, and resources and go ace your college applications. And remember, if you run into any speedbumps throughout the process, don't be too shy to ask for help.

Best of luck, future scholar!

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