

A Senior's Guide to Applying for College

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Tip #1. Start Early.

The applications generally become available in early August, although some schools open their application late (such as University of California schools). Schools using the common applications (www.commonapp.org) open their application in July. The common app is useful for getting started. Very many schools such as Johns Hopkins University, Duke, Washington University in St. Louis, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale use the common app. Therefore, it is definitely a good idea to start on the common app pretty early so that you can have a feel of what you're going to do. I strongly suggest starting early, not because it helps you to get in, but because you won't force anything at the last moment.

Some schools such as Duke and Yale offer both the common app and their own personal application. Which one do you choose? I think this rule should apply: your top few choices should be the school's application, but other than that, do every other school using the common app if offered. It is better to apply using the college's application for psychological reasons, because the college itself doesn't discriminate on what application you use. However, if you don't get into your dream school and you use the common app, then you'll wonder if using the own school's application would have made a difference.

Tip #2. Essays can be your best friend or your worst enemy.

I wrote my essays in June. Actually, I wrote them even before the prompts came out. This may seem illogical to some, but I really liked this setup. This is because when you write without any point to prove, then you really can write about your passions. An important thing about the essay is that you really do need to personalize it. There are too many applicants to choose from, and so you want to write from your own voice. Also, don't be shy and tell them things that really do intrigue you, even if they may be a little pushy or bold. It was really tough in the beginning for me, and I didn't use my first essays in my applications. After a week, however, I had ten to twenty five-hundred word essays that reflected my different interests. If you have a busy summer, then two or three work as well. However, writing more essays just for fun seems to improve your

understanding of what you're capable of writing.

Do not flood your candidate essays to parents and teachers to edit. A fully-edited essay from all these people will lead to a very crisp essay that doesn't really reflect who you are. Also, admissions officers may doubt your authorship if it's unbelievable, although I'm sure some essays are amazing. Ask a teacher to do you the favor of proofreading for grammar details and basic structure, and generally teachers will be pleased to evaluate your writing. Also, have a fellow friend (preferably a grand senior) skim your essay and tell you whether it sounds like you after reading it. If it doesn't, then you will have to rewrite it.

Most students complain about the essays. However, if you get them over with at the very beginning, the application stage will be a breeze. Writing essays is also an ongoing process. You'll find that it's actually fun to write essays, and throughout the year you can write new ones for scholarships, from which you can constantly improve upon your essays. You can even mix parts of separate essays to match a specific prompt.

Tip #3. Extracurricular Activities and Academic Awards.

Everything you really need in this section should mostly have already happened in the past three years, so the most important things is to dig into your memory and remember all the wonderful things you've been doing while other people were playing computer games and watching TV. Make a list of everything you've done, and that's a wonderful start. This should range from clubs (make sure to remember if you have some sort of leadership role like President or Founder) to sports, volunteering, academic awards, research, and work experience.

Most students have some illusion that the only people who get into college are those who are involved in every club possible and do thousands of hours of community service. I don't think that's actually true. The problem is that students will embellish their record to look nice, and so you'll be compelled to follow suit to compare with these people.

Actually, I think it'd be better if you just stuck with the essentials. The first thing is: don't send schools a "résumé." Michele Hernandez, an admissions officer at Dartmouth, states in her book *A is for Admissions* that admissions officers don't enjoy reading

résumés because they feel that high school students aren't qualified enough to actually merit an actual résumé and that students who attach such documents think too highly of themselves.

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have to find the teacher at a particularly busy time.

Who do you choose to ask for a recommendation? Some schools ask for one humanities and one science/math recommendation, so have that in mind. Don't just choose a



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Princeton University is one of eight coveted Ivy League institutions.

each individual applicant, don't include the event unless it's special to you, substantial, or worth including in your application. If you give them too much information, then they will have less time to read the other parts. Also, don't include things such as Who's Who among American High School Students, AMC participant, or your casual participation in clubs because these accolades don't really mean much. Who's Who wants to make money, so it's not really competitive by these colleges' standards, and anybody can take the American Math Contest. Also, don't include too many activities. Include the ones that you really like. For example, for me, I really enjoy math and Science Olympiad, so I included these two activities. However, you should keep the number of activities to a minimum.

Also, it would make sense to include activities that you spend a lot of time on because you should particularly enjoy these events. If you still have trouble, it may be appropriate to group activities by theme. For example, if you really like violin, then you can include the fact that you're a member of the Greensboro Symphony Orchestra, winner of a few national or state violin contests, along with volunteering as a judge at a local violin contest. For academic awards, don't include being "best in school" because everybody applying will basically be the best at their respective school.

Tip #4. Teacher Recommendations.

Once again, start early. There's a tendency for students to panic at some point and then flood teachers with requests. If you give teachers plenty of time (at least a month I suggest), then you won't

teacher in a subject you did well. Your participation and interest in the class is what matters. If your teacher really enjoyed teaching you, and if you exhibited great improvement in the class, then I'm sure that the teacher would be happy to write a recommendation for you.

Before leaving for school in the summer, it would also be nice to ask teachers if they'd consider writing a recommendation for you before leaving as a courtesy. Thus, they can be ready when you provide them with information early in senior year. By the time you ask your teacher for the recommendation, you will need to include some things. Some teachers, such as Dr. Allen, provide specific questions to let her know more about you. However, regardless of the teacher, you should include a cover paper with all the colleges you would like a recommendation letter for along with the deadline date so that they may keep track of them. You should also include a résumé (a résumé is okay for teachers to see since it's compact, and you can easily write this if your application is finished since you already have everything on paper), and this is helpful because then they can know more about you outside of class as well, although their recommendation will mostly concentrate on you in the class.

From my college visits over the summer, the general statement is that have your junior-year teachers write your recommendations because your senior-year teachers haven't taught you for enough time, and because you probably have changed since junior year. However, I had an amazing time with my tenth grade history teacher in AP World and AP US History, so I asked

him to write a few recommendations, and I think cases like that are acceptable.

Tip #5. Prepare for Interviews.

Many schools provide interviews, and it doesn't hurt to take them. Interviews for schools generally are conducted by alumni, and for some schools they come to the library. If they call you to set an appointment, then you can arrange for an interview in either the library or elsewhere such as the Regulator Bookshop on Ninth Street.

Although people always tell me that interviews are a waste of time, I actually really like interviews. My tip is: prepare for them. Before you walk into any interview, have a list of an hour's worth of material stored in your mind (don't memorize words for an hour, just material). Each item of the list should be some broad interest. For example, I went to the Early College at Guilford during my sophomore year, and I had some pretty interesting stories about a school in its first year of existence along with my experiences with a college campus. Therefore, I decided that I could introduce myself by this experience, and let things continue from there. I also picked some research activities, things I do for fun, some academic stuff. Since in an interview you must answer the question being asked, try to direct questions to these answers you've already prepared. This makes it easier to perform well in an interview. There's also the basics of keeping eye contact, keeping a firm handshake, and asking intelligent questions to the interviewer. Ask for your interviewer's business card after the interview out of common courtesy, and send a thank-you email or letter after your interview, because they volunteer for these roles. This is also helpful for scholarship interviews as well.

Grandseniors are good resources for college advice. Every grand-senior at NCSSM has gone through the process of applying to colleges. It only happens once in your life (the undergraduate admissions process), so make the most of it as you can. For me, I finished applying to all my schools in October, and so I was able to relax while others were frantically making January deadlines. College itself isn't an end. It's whatever you want to make of it. What you do with your college experience is what matters; hopefully, you'll be intellectually challenged and explore amazing fields of study.