

Plan Ahead With a College Search Checklist

Getting into the school of your dreams is a four-year process, but it doesn't have to be a grind.

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FRESHMAN YEAR

It's important to remember as you enter high school that this is not just a four-year audition for college. Still, for anyone planning to go to college, it will help to know what will be important to colleges three (short!) years from now.

The philosopher Aristotle observed that excellence is not an act but a habit. Your grades reflect what you do day after day and month after month. Take your studies seriously. And remember that colleges like people who are successful, whether as students, athletes, musicians, or community volunteers. Most colleges also like test scores but, by and large, that is not a big deal for another year or so.

[Read more about a [college search timeline](#).]

Grades:

—Grades are important in ninth grade, as they will contribute to your overall GPA. So is academic rigor. Seek advice from someone you trust when choosing your classes.

—Writing will be central to nearly every class in high school and college. If you don't write as well as you think or speak, work at it.

—How many times have you groaned over a bad essay grade, then stuffed it into a binder without another thought? Stop! Accept that C as constructive criticism, really read your teacher's comments, and seek advice on doing better.

Scores:

—If your school offers an ERB (a skills and knowledge test) or the PSAT in the ninth grade, use these scores to identify academic strengths and weaknesses. Don't worry about preparing for these tests, but do talk with a parent or guidance counselor to better understand any underperformance and get extra academic support in areas where you were weaker.

—Read voraciously (look that word up if you don't know it)—books, newspapers, magazines, blogs, whatever. As with any skill, you can't improve without practice, and strength with words is key to success.

Activities:

—Get involved. Not only are you developing talents and interests that will catch a college's eye, but school is more fun when you have activities to look forward to.

—When planning for summer, don't think "no more pencils, no more books..." Find programs that build on favorite subjects, extracurricular activities, or hobbies.

Legwork:

—Establish good sleeping habits and stick with them. Studies show that well-rested students complete academic tasks better and in less time than those who are tired, meaning you'll have more time for the things you enjoy doing—like sleeping!

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—It's not too soon to look into requirements for honors or scholarship programs at colleges. Your freshman year could affect your candidacy.

—Are you a good athlete? If so, learn about the NCAA Clearinghouse requirements if you plan to pursue athletics in college.

[Start researching [how to pay for college](#).]

SOPHOMORE YEAR

Now that the dust has settled, begin thinking about scores and continue to focus on grades. While you might not be required to take the PSAT or PLAN this year, any test taken seriously can help you gauge strengths and weaknesses.

Grades:

—While registering for 10th-grade courses, also check out your options for 11th grade. Take note of classes you are very likely to excel at or are interested in and whether they have prerequisites. If so, sign up for them now.

—Watch out for academic overload. You want the best grades you can get, but you also want to stay sane.

—Work on study skills and writing. You are still exploring how you learn best.

Scores:

—You will get info in September from your counselor about the PSAT. You don't have to take the test in 10th grade, but it's not a bad idea as a diagnostic tool.

—Consider taking an SAT subject test at the end of 10th grade. You don't have to take one at this point, but if you are enrolled in an AP or honors course now and have the information fresh in your mind, the timing may be good. The College Board, the firm behind the test, also makes practice versions. Take one.

Activities:

—While lounging by the pool or TV can be relaxing, neither makes for the most compelling college essay. Work, volunteer, play sports, or take a college course over the summer.

Legwork:

—Use the Web for something other than Facebook. Explore college websites and resources like *U.S. News's Best Colleges* site. Jot down appealing things about this college or that, and save your notes.

[Find the [right school for you](#).]

JUNIOR YEAR

Essays and testing and APs, oh my! OK, let's be serious. Junior-year grades, test scores, and activities constitute a big chunk of the data colleges use for admission. Do your best in class and prepare for the tests you take. But it's not all toil and trouble. This can be a time of leadership in the world outside academics. Explore activities that interest you so you can flourish—not just because they look good on an application.

Grades:

—These will be the most recent grades a college will have when you apply next year. So study hard, and do not hesitate to ask a teacher for extra help. Again, pay attention to sleep. Well-rested brains work better.

—It's important to show you can handle rigorous courses, but choose wisely. If you struggled for a C in an honors science class, don't sign up for the AP class. Challenge yourself, but know your limits.

—Speak up in class. You will need to ask two junior-year teachers to write a recommendation. They can't know you

without hearing your thoughts.

Scores:

—Standardized testing intensifies. Keep in mind, though, that grades remain the key part of college apps.

—You will take the PSAT in the fall. If you think you have a shot at a National Merit Scholarship based on your 10th-grade scores, consider preparing for the test.

—Talk over SAT or ACT test prep—timing, budget, and options—with your parents. Ask seniors about their test prep experience.

—Discuss testing plans with parents and a guidance counselor. Use a practice ACT and SAT to help you determine which test you should take in the winter. And don't worry if you don't get your ideal score on the first try. You can try again in the spring.

—If needed, take SAT subject tests in the spring (May or June) in those areas where you will shine, or in subjects you have covered in junior year. Practice!

[Get tips for improving your [SAT and ACT scores](#).]

Activities:

—Being a leader shows you've worked hard, are dedicated to an activity, and play well with others. Start a new after-school club, run for team captain, or head a community service project.

—Make a résumé (really!) of activities, academic experiences outside the classroom, hobbies, etc. It helps you take inventory of all you've done.

Legwork:

—Once you have your PSAT scores or an initial SAT or ACT score, talk to a counselor to begin building a college list with a balance of safeties, targets, and reaches.

—Make plans for college visits over spring or summer break. Enjoy these visits and take notes. Remember, you're the one shopping for a college.

—Attend college fairs, but know that there is much more to a college than its fun handouts. Talk with the folks behind the tables, who can give you a better feel for a school and might be good future contacts.

—Procrastination doesn't make for a good college essay. Aim to have first drafts done by Labor Day. Get feedback on drafts from an English teacher or counselor, but remember that colleges want your words, not your mom's!

SENIOR YEAR

You made it. Let's party! Well, not quite yet. This is also a year of hard work and continued preparation. Colleges can and will rescind offers to students who slack off. Retake the ACT or SAT if you need or can get better scores.

[It's application time! Learn more at *U.S. News's* [applying to college](#) guide.]

Grades:

—Make sure you're completing your graduation requirements and meeting course requirements of the colleges on your list (these are often outlined on their websites). Watch out for foreign language, science, and math requirements.

—Your admission is contingent upon a consistent academic performance on the final transcript. Keep up the good work!

Scores:

—This is the final chance to retake the SAT, ACT, or subject tests, if needed. September or October test dates are often

the last chance before early action or early decision deadlines.

Legwork:

—SEPTEMBER: Learn your high school's procedure for obtaining teacher recommendations and requesting that your transcript be sent to colleges. Complete appropriate forms and secure two teacher recommendations.

—SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER: Review your college list with a counselor and your parents. Decide whether to apply early decision or early action if these options are offered.

—OCTOBER/NOVEMBER/DECEMBER: Keep track of admissions deadlines and fill out each application carefully. Edit essays one more time. Officially send your SAT or ACT scores with each submitted application, and check that each college received records and recs from your high school.

—BY FEBRUARY: A month from the date you submitted your application, call colleges and confirm that it is complete.

—FEBRUARY 1: Many colleges require FAFSA and CSS (financial aid) forms to be turned in by February. Again, earlier is better.

—MARCH/APRIL: Decisions arrive. Stay calm. Breathe.

—APRIL: Explore colleges where you've been accepted. Visit the campuses again, talk with alumni, or attend an accepted-student reception.

—MAY 1: Make your college decision official by sending in your deposit. Finally!

—Double-check with your guidance counselor that your final transcript will be sent to the college.

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