A Comprehensive[[1]](#footnote-0) Masterdoc of All the Information Needed to Endure the College Application Process

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# welcome!

Hello hello. I genuinely did not anticipate so many people ever seeing this doc, but hopefully it’s helpful and answers some questions you may or may not have about the college app process!!! You can use the table of contents above to navigate by clicking on the title of each section.

## !please read!

When I first wrote this, I was a graduated high school senior who had freshly undergone the college admissions process. It was summer 2020, I was bored, obsessed with elite universities, and had nothing else to do.

As of winter 2023, I am 22 years old and a senior at WashU. I will be graduating in a semester. Crazy enough, I wrote this doc when I was 18, literally *four years ago*. WashU isn’t even a top 20 by *US News* standards anymore LOL. Regardless, I do not know a single crumb of information about college admissions anymore. Frankly, you will find that getting into college becomes this trivial thing a year, four years, a decade later. I won’t lie and say that I haven’t sometimes had the passing thought pondering what my life would have been like at some high and mighty ivy, but again, you will find that it becomes more of a thought experiment, a tilt of the head moment, if you will, rather than something agonizing and haunting.

Regardless, I don’t think I can give informed answers to admissions questions anymore. I’m okay with reading essays and giving feedback about quality, but I cannot tell you if it’s a Good College Application Essay That Will Get You In. I try my best to respond to emails, but again, most times I don’t feel comfortable answering just because I literally don’t know what the correct response would be.

This doc will not be updated past this point. All information included, unless explicitly stated, is from summer 2020 and has not been revisited since. If you happened to forget, a little tiny global pandemic has perhaps changed some things, so definitely take everything with more than a grain of salt. Again, I don’t know how college admissions has changed, which it inevitably has, so I don’t know if anything in here is still relevant. This is your very clear warning.

Good luck everyone!!!! Just know that once you’re in, you’ll finally understand that college admissions is severely inconsequential to the rest of your life. Try your hardest, but don’t be too hard on yourself.

## 

## abt me

I’m Gracie! I just finished my freshman year at Washington University in St. Louis. Demographics wise, as mentioned in the disclaimer above, I am a Chinese-American girl from an upper-middle class town in New Jersey. I went to a competitive public high school that sends multiple people to T20 colleges every year.

## survey

You don’t have to, but **it would mean a lot to me if you could** [**fill out this Google Form**](https://forms.gle/kpQChFpCUFtnjNN1A). before or after you look through the doc, it doesn’t really matter. I don’t ask any identifying questions! It’s mostly just for myself. I'm also just super interested to know who exactly is visiting the doc & how I can make it better!

## features //none of these documents are regularly updated so don’t bother clicking through all the links!!!

Here are all the specialized resources that this doc offers you!!!

1. Feel free to contact me!!! I’m down to discuss anything, whether that be your essay and any ideas you have for it, your college list, advice, etc. Emailing me at [gmzstudent@gmail.com](mailto:gmzstudent@gmail.com), or pming me at [u/apsuffer](https://www.reddit.com/user/apsuffer) both work.
2. [Google Form for any suggestions/edits](https://forms.gle/oT11v4i6THASLDss7) for this doc. If you see any errors, let me know. If you want anything included, let me know.
3. [Google Form for questions](https://forms.gle/vd9eUnwHqV44M2Cy6) about the college admissions process or any specific university.
   1. [Google Doc where all general questions](https://docs.google.com/document/d/11iUfzEbPqA8FqEEIZvqQPmkZIf-T5gtVUS6nEM7vbpw/edit?usp=sharing) will be continuously answered
   2. [Google Doc where all university-specific questions](https://docs.google.com/document/d/14kE6FkrYAwTOMy-H7KHxKXPWSzS0pcI9BbB_dumgh64/edit?usp=sharing) will be continuously answered
4. [Google Doc with my notes](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1T7PHT9U73su10pyzfdd9-2NekWOM1hQPFRj73hgmM0s/edit?usp=sharing) from all the college tours & information sessions I attended. There are a total of 17 schools on there!
5. [Google Doc with a bunch of introspective questions](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-XNVo2zVcgBz4GeRIuuM_tRqOjmF49Z7o_k-InQoMeM/edit?usp=sharing) I found from r/A2C posts to help you think of personal statement topics.

# Q&A: audience participation!

**//none of these documents are regularly updated so don’t bother clicking through all the links!!!**

If you have any questions at all, please feel free to fill out this [google form](https://forms.gle/vd9eUnwHqV44M2Cy6). I will add the questions with their answers under this section as they come in. I can also ask my friends/do more research if needed!

If you have any specific questions about Washington University in St. Louis (go bears!!!!) I will happily answer all of them. I will actually be a tour guide next semester, so if you ever want to call or text, just email or pm me.

## general questions

\*[Here is the doc](https://docs.google.com/document/d/11iUfzEbPqA8FqEEIZvqQPmkZIf-T5gtVUS6nEM7vbpw/edit?usp=sharing) where any incoming questions will be continuously answered!

## university specific questions

\*[Here is the doc](https://docs.google.com/document/d/14kE6FkrYAwTOMy-H7KHxKXPWSzS0pcI9BbB_dumgh64/edit?usp=sharing) where any incoming questions will be continuously answered!

Schools you can ask questions about as of right now (aka the schools my friends and I are committed to lmao): Washington University in St. Louis, Tufts University, Princeton University, Carnegie Mellon University, New York University (Stern, CAS, & Tisch), Columbia University, University of Pennsylvania (CAS, Engineering, & Wharton).

## people to contact

\*[Here is the doc](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Y3YParIyKLqy8ZH6IeDSaw1eThfK2YdGAdYDidWwVb4/edit?usp=sharing) where you can find volunteers and their information. I will update this once/if ppl start to volunteer.

# crash course

A long-ass introduction to the college admissions process and all related topics.

## forums & communities

It’s important to address that the people who seek out these communities belong to a [self](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gq2gwk/are_there_any_average_people_here/)-[selecting](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gucq7r/ra2c_2020_census_results_class_of_2024/) [group](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bigth3/ra2c_class_of_2023_profile_results_advice/). You're probably going to find someone who has been plotting their acceptance to Harvard since [coming out of the womb](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gn3zcs/this_subreddit_normalizes_academic_excellence_and/). Because of the sheer number of high-achieving students, obsession around prestige is inevitable. And prestige is a daily conversation. It’s a lifestyle, a fucking religion. So be prepared to feel [incompetent](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/b3dv5j/shoutout_to_everyone_who_thought_they_were_special/) and [inadequate](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/dxonh7/a_rant_realizing_that_i_fucked_up_in_hs_average/). However, outside of this bubble, it’s also important to realize that the [majority of U.S. colleges admit most students who apply](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/09/a-majority-of-u-s-colleges-admit-most-students-who-apply/). Sub-10% acceptance rates are not normal. Prestige shouldn’t reign over your life or your philosophy. College shouldn’t be the end all be all. Fact is, for the majority of students, it isn’t really that important. It’s just another step in their life. And that’s what this is: it’s another step in your life. It’s an opportunity for growth and discovery.

1. [**COLLEGE CONFIDENTIAL**](https://www.collegeconfidential.com/): Also known as CC; the largest forum for anything related to college admissions. It has an insane amount of threads and discussions about literally everything you need to know. Seeing how everyone who seeks out these forums is most likely within the top 1% of applicants, CC can be fairly toxic. Parents also crawl around. Bottom line: it can be useful (actual results threads, figuring out when decisions are coming out, gauging the culture of a school, etc.), but try not to get too consumed in this hellhole.
   1. A [*New York Times* article](https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/31/education/college-admission-angst-finds-a-forum-on-web.html) from 2006 (!!!! we love everlasting obsessions surrounding prestige) about CC if you’re really that bored
2. [**r/APPLYINGTOCOLLEGE**](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege): Also known as A2C, it’s basically a less neurotic version of CC. Lots of good advice, memes (!), and angst posts. Conversely, admissions experts also crawl around. A good place to start off if you don’t know much about the process; it also has a pretty thorough [wiki](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/wiki/index) with relevant information. An added bonus: inside jokes & quality content (UC higao, St. Anford, Yale kissing interview, etc.)
   1. [**r/CHANCEME**](https://www.reddit.com/r/chanceme): Don’t recommend. A place where anxious kids post their stats and ask other kids (who couldn’t possibly know!) whether they will get into a certain school. Just thought I would include because chance me’s are a big part of the college admissions “culture” lmao.
   2. [**r/COLLEGERESULTS**](https://www.reddit.com/r/collegeresults/): Highly recommend! A large repository of students who describe their stats, EC’s, etc. and list which schools they got into/rejected from. A good place to reassure yourself that college admissions is so fucking random. Basically equivalent to Naviance but more detailed.
   3. [**r/A2C\_CIRCLEJERK**](https://www.reddit.com/r/A2C_circlejerk): Pretty self-explanatory.
   4. [**r/COLLEGEESSAYREVIEW**](https://www.reddit.com/r/CollegeEssayReview): If you don’t have anyone to read your essays, this is a nice resource to have. I used it myself and there were people who were immensely helpful and robust with their edits. However, be careful with who you share your essays with. Make sure to never publicly distribute documents—always do it through private messages. People do scour these subreddits just to steal essays. If you’re going to share yours, I recommend you check the post history of the user in order to verify that they either have reviews from people they’ve helped, have posted elsewhere (meaning they’re not just commenting on essay review requests), or have credentials.
3. [**QUORA**](https://www.quora.com/topic/College-and-University-Admissions): You’re going to find a lot of simple questions with even more anecdotal answers. But it’s kind of a good place to start if you know nothing, or if you just have hours to waste (throwback to me in APUSH learning not about the Great Depression but about some man’s life-changing trip to Thailand, complete with stock photos). There’s not much of a community element because Quora is a large platform for inquiries about basically everything, but there’s some good information, maybe.
   1. Tom Stagliano is a star. The more college-related questions you look through, the more likely you’re going to find him. For some hints, he went to MIT from 1972-1976, he Loves intramural Sports, and his best Advice is glowing hot Recommendation letters.

## glossary

*r/ApplyingToCollege* already has its [own glossary](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/wiki/glossary) if you want to check that out! [Here’s](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/f72riv/a2c_abbreviation_master_list_for_dorks_like_me/) a post on all relevant abbreviations and what they mean. I pulled some terms from both lists, but I also separated everything into different categories and added in other words.

### central components of your application

**Grade Point Average (GPA):** A standard measure of academic acheivement. Different schools have different scales, but GPA is typically measured out of 4.0 in which each letter grade has a correlating point value. For example, an A would be a 4.0, a B would be a 3.0, etc.

* **Unweighted (UW GPA):** Unweighted GPA does not take your course rigor into consideration. It is usually measured on a scale from 0.0 to 4.0.
* **Weighted (WGPA):** Weighted GPA does take your course rigor into consideration. Honors and AP classes are weighed more than standard classes. Weighted GPAs go beyond the 4.0 scale.
* **UC GPA:** The Universities of California recalculate GPA so that only sophomore and junior grades are taken into account.

**Standardized Test Scores:** Just another barrage of numbers that act as a supplement to your GPA. Essentially the second part of the “stats?” question.

* Includes SAT, ACT, SAT II/Subject Tests, AP/IB, and PSAT scores

**Extracurriculars (ECs):** Any activity that you do outside of school not related to your academic work.

**Honors:** Any award or achievement you received at any point during your four years of high school.

**Letter of Recommendation (LOR, rec):** Letters written by your teachers, guidance counselors, and/or mentors on your behalf to colleges.

**Interview:** A meeting with an alumni or admissions official affiliated with the school. Interviews give students the opportunity to present themselves to a representative of the school and to ask questions about the college.

**Personal Statement/Common App Essay:** A written statement about yourself. Because every other part of the application is sterile and concrete, this is your opportunity to show admission officers who you are as a person. Almost all colleges will require the personal statement. 650 word limit for Common App. 550 for Coalition.

**Supplements:** Some schools require you to write supplemental essays. Additionally, some schools allow you to submit supplemental materials such as a portfolio, a school essay, a research paper, etc. This can all be found on the Common App, or on individual school websites.

### misc components (most of which u have no control over)

**Affirmative Action (AA):** A controversial policy intended to support members of disadvantaged group who have suffered and still suffer from discrimination. AA’s intention is to level the playing field for underrepresented minorities.

* A [*New Yorker* article](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/01/20/have-we-outgrown-the-need-for-affirmative-action) on the history of AA and how it continues to evolve
* Deeper dive into the legal side of AA from [*Cornell Law*](https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/affirmative_action)
* Some statistics about URM at top universities from the [*New York Times*](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/24/us/affirmative-action.html)

**Demonstrated Interest:** Any show of interest towards a school. Not all universities track this, but some do, especially when trying to increase yield.

* [List of colleges](https://blog.collegevine.com/which-colleges-consider-demonstrated-interest/) that consider demonstrated interest
* Be aware that some schools who claim that they don’t track demonstrated interest are tracking demonstrated interest. So, it never really hurts to open the emails and wildly click on the links. Who knows.

**Hooks:** A special characteristic, trait, or talent a student possesses that gives them an edge in the admissions process. A “hooked” applicant fulfills an institutional desire for the college. Very few people have hooks. Additionally, hooks alone usually do not ensure admissions.

* **Legacy:** Someone whose parents (or relatives, depending on the school’s policy) has an undergraduate degree from an institution. Legacy alone isn’t a big deal, though it can act as a tie-breaker. Legacy connected to big donors though? You’re in.
* **Recruited Athlete:** Student athletes in communication with a university’s coaches. They do not undergo the typical application process.
  + If you’re interested, [here’s a thread](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/dybazd/people_need_to_stop_saying_recruited_athletes/) about recruited athletes and their merits. There is a [whole](https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2019/5/28/athlete-advantage-commencement-2019/)/[conversation](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/bribery-scandal-points-to-the-athletic-factor-a-major-force-in-college-admissions/2019/06/12/b2fc39dc-7e3a-11e9-8bb7-0fc796cf2ec0_story.html)/[here](https://www.dailyprincetonian.com/article/2019/10/ivy-league-athletics-are-the-new-money-ball), not just about recruitment but also the [NCAA](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/10/the-shame-of-college-sports/308643/), so [feel free](https://www.npr.org/2020/04/29/847781624/college-players-are-now-closer-to-getting-paid-after-ncaa-board-oks-plan) to do your own [research](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/11/sports/should-college-athletes-be-paid.html).
* **Spike:** When an applicant has god-tier awards/extracurriculars in one specific field. This can be considered a hook only if you’re at the very TOP of the field, backed by immense talent and prestigious awards.
  + If you’re not at the top, but you can still have a “spike” such that you focused on one specific field through your EC’s, classes, awards, etc. There’s a lot of debate about whether being “spiky/pointy” or being “well-rounded” is better. Most people like to say that individual applicants should be “spiky” but the entire incoming class must be “well-rounded.” This isn’t necessarily true. You don’t want to be one-dimensional. You’re a multifaceted person after all, right?
* **Underrepresented Minority (URM):** Students who identify as Black, Hispanic/Latino, and/or Native American. Racial categories that have been historically underrepresented at American universities.
  + **Overrepresented Minority (ORM):** Basically just Asians. Add on 10 points if you’re an Asian male in computer science (CS). This can be considered an “anti-hook.” In general, all Asians are lumped together in the admissions process. The [umbrella term “Asian-American” and the concept of “model minority” are both harmful](https://stanfordpolitics.org/2019/05/11/asian-americas-diversity-problem/), especially for members of underrepresented groups such as Hmong, Vietnamese, or Fliipino who continue to experience low college-attendance rates.
* **First Generation (first-gen):** The first person in your family to be attending college.
  + **FGLI:** Acronym that stands for first-generation/low-income.
* **Feeder Schools:** High schools that historically send a large number of their students to top universities. They can range from private and boarding schools to outstanding public high schools. This may not necessarily be considered a hook, but it can give students an advantage in admissions.
  + [Harvard’s callout post @ itself](https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2017/3/9/feeder-schools-bridge-program/)

**Out-Of-State (OOS):** Out of state students have a more difficult time getting into state schools compared to in-state students. OOS students also have higher tuition at public schools. OOS status is not considered by private schools, and tuition is typically the same between OOS and in-state applicants at private schools.

**School Profile:** An overview sent to colleges by your high school. The school profile includes your school’s academic program, grading system, course offerings, and other features. Admissions offices use this information to evaluate your application in the context of the opportunities offered to you.

**Test-optional:** When a school does not require SAT or ACT test scores. They may still require other standardized exams such as AP tests or SAT subject tests. In the time of COVID-19, a sizable number of schools are going test-optional.

* [Here’s a complete list](https://www.fairtest.org/university/optional) of universities who are going test-optional for the 2020-2021 admissions cycle.
* [Here’s a continuously updated list of T20](https://www.forbes.com/sites/christopherrim/2020/06/09/updated-testing-policies-for-top-20-colleges-during-the-2020-2021-application-cycle/#6a412dea4cea) testing policies for the 2020-2021 admissions cycle.

**Test-blind:** When a school does not consider test scores. This usually applies to subject tests. Not only are the test scores not required, they are also not considered.

### how to apply in the first place

**Common Application:** The most common system that students use in order to apply to US universities. Supports more than 800 colleges and universities around the world. Limits applicants to 20 schools.

**Coalition Application:** A similar system to the Common Application. Supports around 150 schools throughout the US.

* Coalition emphasizes diversity and equality. Its goal is to break down barriers for underrepresented students. The reason why it has less schools is because it requires at least a 70% six year graduation rate, and affordable tuition or need-based financial aid.

**Other Applications:** Some schools have their own application systems such as the Universities of California, the California State Universities, MIT, Georgetown, SUNY/CUNY, etc.

**Questbridge National College Match:** A program that connects high-achieving low-income students with elite universities. [You must meet their academic criteria and have household earnings of less than $65,000 per year for a typical family of four in order to qualify.](https://www.questbridge.org/high-school-students/national-college-match/who-should-apply)

* [Here’s a complete explanation](https://www.questbridge.org/high-school-students/national-college-match/how-it-works) on how it works. Those who match early will receive a four-year scholarship. Those who are admitted through Regular Decision receive generous financial aid. It! is! an! incredible! opportunity!
  + [Applications open up in late summer. Please don’t miss it.](https://www.questbridge.org/high-school-students/national-college-match/how-to-apply)
* For any sophomores: Questbridge also has the [College Prep Scholars Program](https://www.questbridge.org/high-school-students/college-prep-scholars), which gives you the opportunity to receive awards and guidance for the app process. Applications usually open up in the February of your junior year. If you are accepted, your application will also carry over for the National College Match program. The same requirements are in place in order to qualify.

**Fee Waiver:** Each application you submit will have a fee that most likely ranges from $30 to $90. On average, one application will cost $40. A waiver eliminates the need to pay for this fee.

* [Schools that do not have a fee](https://blog.collegevine.com/complete-list-of-colleges-with-no-application-fee/)
* Make sure to check your emails! Some schools will offer an automatic fee waiver in order to encourage more students to apply. Other schools will provide you with a priority portal that does not have a required fee.
  + [Here’s a list of schools](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-d3agGpESHhDsTWPL29riWXWkreosCuPmfViVl_NzWQ/edit?usp=sharing) that provided fee waivers for the class of 2024. This should give you a good idea of which schools will provide fee waivers for your class.
* If you received a fee waiver from the College Board, you are [automatically eligible](https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/get-in/applying-101/college-application-fee-waivers) to receive college app waivers. To waive the fee, you must fill out a survey through Common or Coalition App.

### finances

**Need-Blind:** A policy in which applicants are judged solely on their merits and not their ability to pay for tuition. Some schools are need-blind to all applicants while others are only need-blind towards domestic applicants.

* A [complete breakdown](https://blog.prepscholar.com/need-blind-colleges-list) of the need-blind policy and which schools abide by it

**Need-Aware:** A policy in which an applicant’s ability to pay for tuition is a factor in their admissions decision.

* Okay,,, all I’m saying is the US college admissions process is the grandest showing of elitism. A [*New York Times* article](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/your-money/college-admissions-wealth.html) on need-aware policy and full-pay families.
* WashU is a need-aware institution. This is a policy that I do not support and honestly, I’m kind of embarrassed about. Here’s a [*New York Times* interactive](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/18/upshot/some-colleges-have-more-students-from-the-top-1-percent-than-the-bottom-60.html) on the least economically diverse universities in 2017, of which WashU is in the top. If you’re wondering why a T20 institution is still need-aware, here’s an [article from WashU’s student newspaper](https://www.studlife.com/news/2019/03/31/our-moral-responsibility-martin-on-need-blind-admissions/).

**Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA):** A free form used to apply for federal and state financial aid, such as federal grants, work-study, and loans. Most colleges require FAFSA in order to determine your eligibility for school aid. You can submit the FAFSA every year, even in college, if you want additional aid.

* FAFSA opens on October 1 each year. Fill it out as soon as possible!!!
* A little [more information](https://blog.collegeboard.org/what-is-the-fafsa) about FAFSA from the *College Board*

**College Scholarship Service (CSS) Profile:** The form used to determine eligibility for non-federal financial aid. It is administered by the *College Board*. Most colleges require the CSS profile to determine a student’s financial aid package. Unlike FAFSA, there is a fee to apply. The first application is $25 and any additional schools are $16 each. Fee waivers are granted.

* The CSS profile also opens on October 1 each year. Again, fill! it! out! asap!
* [Here’s an article](https://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/loans/student-loans/know-college-financial-aid-applications/) from *NerdWallet* about the differences between FAFSA and CSS.

**Meet 100% of Demonstrated Financial Need:** Demonstrated financial need is the amount your family can reasonably afford to pay. This is determined through the FAFSA and CSS profile. 100% need met schools pledge to meet 100% of their students’ financial needs. They guarantee you receive all necessary money through a combination of grants, loans, work-study, and/or scholarships.

* [List of schools](https://blog.collegevine.com/schools-that-meet-100-percent-financial-need/) that offer 100% financial aid

**Net Price Calculator (NPC):** Each college offers a net price calculator. Net price is the attendance cost that students and parents need to pay for out-of-pocket, or through student loans. The NPC asks questions about the parents’ income, taxes, and assets to estimate the college’s total cost minus any grants and scholarships the student might be eligible for.

* [NPC for all schools](https://collegecost.ed.gov/net-price) from the *US Department of Education*
* [More information](https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/paying-for-college/articles/2019-05-08/what-to-know-about-a-colleges-net-price-calculator) from *US News* on NPC and its potential issues

**Financial Safety School:** A school that you are not only very likely to get into, but also able to pay for. Just as everyone should have a safety school, everyone should have a financial safety school. In April, when all acceptances have been sent out, there are too many people grappling with the idea that they won’t be able to pay for college. Don’t put yourself in that position.

### 

### building ur college list

**Reach School:** A college that you are unlikely to get into. This might mean that your academic credentials do not fall within their average range. It might also be defined as a college with an acceptance rate that is lower than 30/40%.

**Match/Target School:** A college where your academic credentials fall well within the school’s average range for accepted students. It is not completely guaranteed that you will get in, but it is not unreasonable to expect an acceptance.

**Safety School:** A college you are guaranteed to get into. Your academic credentials exceed the school’s range for the average accepted student.

**Shotgunning:** The act of applying to a large number of reach schools in order to increase your chances of getting into at least one.

**Fly-in/Diversity Programs:** A two/three day, all-expense paid trip to a college campus for prospective students from diverse backgrounds. Not exclusive to only underrepresented minorities, fly-in programs look for a wide variety of applicants who traditionally wouldn’t have the opportunity to visit. The target demographic is high-achieving but disadvantaged high school seniors (first-gen, low-income, and/or minority group).

* Free to apply to, and even if you don’t get in, you will likely receive a fee waiver! Being admitted indicates that you are a competitive applicant, which is good news for regular admissions.
* A great way to really experience the college’s culture. You are able to attend classes, talk to current students, judge the food, live in a dorm, etc.
* [Here’s a spreadsheet](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1omn7IR1RTzMFqTrQ_XVMzEXRg2EUsfAk1IFSiQ76tMo/edit#gid=0) with all 2020 fly-in programs. It is continuously updated.
  + [Here’s a complete list of 2019 programs](http://blog.collegegreenlight.com/blog/college-fly-in-and-diversity-programs/).

### 

### once ur application hits the admissions desk

**Admissions Officer (AO):** The person evaluating your application.

**Likely Letter:** A message sent to select students before an institution makes its official admissions decisions; the message indicates the college’s intent to accept the student. Therefore, the student is “likely” to get in. Extremely rare; sent to the strongest applicants in order to increase yield rate, especially among URM applicants.

* In the College Confidential and A2C community, likely letters crop up around late February - early March. But, I want to reiterate: likely letters are EXTREMELY rare. Not receiving a likely letter is the norm, and it does not mean you are not accepted.
* Not all top schools send out likely letters. [Here’s](https://talk.collegeconfidential.com/college-admissions/1965452-which-schools-send-or-have-sent-likely-letters-and-when-do-did-they-send-them.html) a CC thread with more information.

**Fit:** The holy question: are you a good fit for the school? This goes both ways. The AO has to ask this of you, and you have to ask this of the college.

**Yield Rate:** The percentage of accepted applicants that attend the school. Colleges must estimate yield rate in order to know how many students to accept. Yield rate can also be a measure of prestige. The higher the yield rate, the more “desirable” the school is to applicants.

* [Some data for you!](https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/universities-colleges-where-students-are-eager-to-enroll)

**Yield Protection:** When a highly qualified applicant is either waitlisted or rejected from a school because he/she is not expected to attend. Also known as “Tufts Syndrome.”

* Yield protection is [usually not a legitimate reason](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/fi1fvc/unpopular_opinion_stop_assuming_every_rejection/) for why an applicant was not accepted into a school.

### types of admissions

**Early Decision (ED):** A contractual agreement with a college (signed by you, your guardian, and your guidance counselor) which states that if you are accepted, you are obligated to attend and to withdraw/decline all other applications/offers. You can only apply to one school ED. The deadline is usually November 1. Admissions decisions typically release around mid-December.

* You can break an ED contract if you have an exceptional circumstance, such as an inability to pay.
* [A complete list of ED schools](https://blog.prepscholar.com/early-decision-schools-and-colleges-complete-list)

**Early Decision II (ED2):** Similar to ED. The only difference is the deadline, which is usually January 1. Admissions decisions typically release around mid-February.

* [A complete list of ED2 schools](https://www.forbes.com/sites/kristenmoon/2019/12/21/the-complete-list-of-ed-ii-colleges-and-deadlines-for-the-2019-2020-cycle/#6913d56419e4)

**Early Action (EA):** A non-binding early application. The deadline is usually November 1. Admissions decisions are typically released from mid-December to late-January. You can apply to as many EA universities as you like. You do not have to withdraw/decline any applications/offers if you are admitted.

* [A complete list of EA schools](https://blog.prepscholar.com/early-action-schools-and-colleges-complete-list)

**Restrictive Early Action (REA)/Single Choice Early Action (SCEA):** A non-binding early application. However, applicants are generally barred from applying to private universities through early action/decision. The rules differ from college to college so make sure you verify school-specific policies. Typically, if you apply to a college through REA/SCEA, you are not permitted to ED/EA to another private institution, though you can apply EA to any number of public schools.

* [A complete list of REA/SCEA schools](https://greatcollegeadvice.com/what-the-heck-is-restrictive-early-action-a-review-of-application-deadline-options/), including their individual ED/EA policies

**Regular Decision (RD):** The standard admissions process; nonbinding. The deadline is usually January 1. Admissions decisions start to release around March. Applicants can apply to as many schools as they like through RD. They have until May 1st to decline or accept an offer.

**Rolling Admissions:** When colleges evaluate applications as they are received instead of waiting to evaluate all applications after a hard deadline. The earlier you submit, the earlier you will receive an admissions decision. Some have priority deadlines, meaning that they will give greater consideration to applicants who applied by a certain date. Others may operate on a first-come, first-serve basis for housing and financial aid.

* [A complete list of schools that offer rolling admissions](https://blog.prepscholar.com/colleges-with-rolling-admissions)
* [List of schools that still had](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gebjfb/updated_list_of_colleges_still_accepting/)/[open applications after January](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/fkedqd/updated_list_of_colleges_with_extended_deadlines/)

### decisions, decisions, decisions

**Acceptance/Rejection:** You probably already know what both of these are. It's the best of times and the worst of times is all I’m saying.

**Deferral:** When your application is carried over from an early round (ED/ED2/EA) to the RD round. Deferral does not mean rejection. It simply means that AOs want to evaluate your application against the applicants in the RD pool. You will receive your final decision when RD decisions are released.

* Applicants are deferred for a number of reasons. You could be a borderline applicant, meaning that you don’t necessarily stand out in the early applicant pool. Sometimes AOs want to see your first-semester grades. The school might also want to consider their institutional needs and whether you fulfill them.

**Waitlist:** In blunt terms, you are a backup. AOs have finished reviewing your application and determined that while you are qualified and capable of succeeding at their institution, you might not be exactly what they’re looking for. Maybe they didn’t think you were the right fit for their school. Maybe they didn’t think you would attend if accepted. Maybe there was something of concern in your application.

* Very rarely are people pulled from the waitlist, especially at top schools. You have to hope that a spot opens up in the matriculating class.

**Letter of Continued Interest (LOCI):** A concise message to the college that you were either deferred from or waitlisted at. It’s a good way to let the school know that you are still interested in them, and that you are still extremely qualified. Typically, the LOCI affirms that the school is one of your top choices; it also gives you the opportunity to update the AOs (aka you can brag about recent academic and extracurricular achievements).

* This is the last thing you have in your arsenal. It is very possible that your LOCI will sway the final admissions decision, especially if other applicants do not send one in.

**Recinscion:** When a college revokes an acceptance due to low grades or [other factors](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bjy2lw/how_to_avoid_rescinded_admission/).

* When second semester hits, everyone seems to think their [B- is going to ruin their lives](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/dumepb/some_of_yall_need_a_reality_check/). Most times you will be okay. However, your grades should not drastically or collectively fall. If you’re in that position, the best thing you can do is contact your AO and explain the situation.
  + However, be aware that each school has different policies. [Some UCs do not accept anything less than a C](https://admissions.ucsc.edu/apply/conditions-faq.html). [Columbia is known to be relatively strict with grades](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/80jkos/calling_out_columbia/). [UMich basically just says a decline in grades is enough of a reason to be rescinded.](https://umich.custhelp.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/300/~/revoking-admission)
* ALSO!!! Be a decent human being? I feel like that’s a pretty standard rule, but colleges can and will rescind offers if you do something stupid, like being! racist!
* Ok but here are some [horror stories](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/64qukh/does_anyone_have_any_scary_rescinding_stories/) to [keep you up @ night](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/96hqq4/rescind_stories/) sorry my guy

### forms of higher education

**Historically Black College/University (HBCU):** Institutions of higher education that were established with the intention of primarily serving the African-American community.

**Liberal Arts College (LAC):** An institution with an emphasis on undergraduate study in the liberal arts and sciences. LACs are small, and prepare their students for graduate school.

* **WASP:** Williams, Amherst, Swarthmore, Pomona; acronym for the top LACs.

**Art School:** I don’t think I need to explain this. Fun fact though! RISD (Rhode Island School of Design) has an unofficial mascot nicknamed Scrotie. He is in fact a penis.

**Community College (CC):** A good alternative to a typical four-year university. Students either receive their associate degree after two years, or transfer to a four-year university.

**T10/20:** The top 10/20 universities in the United States. Usually T20 is considered to be the cutoff for “most prestigious.” The smaller the number after “T,” the higher its ranking.

* **Ivy League (ivies):** Princeton University, Harvard College, Yale University, Columbia University, Brown University, University of Pennsylvania, Cornell University, Dartmouth College
* **HYPSM:** Harvard College, Yale University, Princeton University, Stanford University, MIT; acronym for top universities that ppl SYMP !!!!!! over

**Universities of California (UC):** California’s state universities. The best public university system in the country. Good financial deal for in-state residents, less so for OOS students.

* UC Berkeley (also known as Cal because it was the first UC to be established and acts as the flagship campus for the UC system), UCLA (A2C loves her), UC Riverside, UC Irvine, UC Santa Barbara, UC San Diego, UC Santa Cruz, UC Davis, UC Merced, UC San Francisco (solely for graduate/professional education)

## holistic approach

If you have ever been to a college info session, they will probably say “holistic” at least once. Bet.

The most widespread misconception about the admissions process amongst the general public is the importance of stats. Most people think that an applicant with a 4.0 and 1600 will unconditionally be accepted anywhere he applies. However! It’s actually a goddamn free-for-all!

Elite institutions receive more qualified applicants than they can accept. [They must rely on more subjective factors to assess a student.](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/05/college-admissions-gpa-sat-act/561167/) These factors can even be considered [arbitrary](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/b3es6k/how_i_view_top_20_admissions/). That’s where the *holistic* buzzword comes in. AOs look at your application as a whole person. As a living, breathing human being. Which means that you must give them the necessary materials for them to accurately construct an image of who you are.

And that is why everyone loves to say “[college admissions is a crapshoot](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/d0ggwm/ivy_admissions_are_indistinguishable_from_a/).” It’s true, though. The work that AOs do is not the work of a computer. It’s a more intuitive process that involves evaluating the potential and fit of an applicant. It can also involve luck. Here are [documents from Harvard](https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.thecrimson.com/pdf/2018/10/24/1333425.pdf#viewer.action=download) that reveal how they break down each application. It’s an interesting read; you can see the amount of thought put in for every student.

AOs are trying to build a well-rounded student body. They want their incoming class to be diverse, to consist of different perspectives, different backgrounds, different talents. They cannot assess all that through stats alone. They have to look at your essays, your extracurriculars, your recommendations, etc.

Regardless, your numbers are still important. But they only get your foot in the door!!! You have to drag your body forcefully through with sheer personality alone. Or you could just leave it up to fate. Repeat after me: college admissions is a crapshoot.

## 

## college emails

This is a side note, but if you have ever put down your email on some random College Board test, you’ve probably been bombarded by thousands of messages from schools you have never heard of.

Sometimes these emails can be useful. They have fee waivers, priority portals, or deadline extensions. They’re also a way for schools to track demonstrated interest. Keep an eye out, especially for colleges that you care about.

However, emails from Harvard or Cornell or whatever elite institution do not mean anything. I’m not sure what gullible junior needs to hear this, but that is a mass email buddy! They send it out to everyone! The same goes for college mail. It’s just an email, but on paper. Whatever it is, emails/mail are not evidence of Harvard accepting you or even potentially accepting you. They are advertisements because guess what! Colleges are businesses first.

Anyway, here’s some cool data for you:

1. [An analysis of 3,069 college emails](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gcswb4/an_analysis_of_3069_college_emails/)
2. [A brief analysis of 2374 college email](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/aibmii/a_brief_analysis_of_2374_college_emails/)

## college rankings & prestige

ok!!! This is the spiciest of all topics so far. Prestige. T20. All that stuff. I will attempt to break it all down here.

### when college prestige DOES matter

In general, there’s no real consensus. [Here is a discussion](https://talk.collegeconfidential.com/college-search-selection/2063109-when-does-prestige-actually-matter.html) on CC about the value of prestige. Here is [an article from *The Atlantic*](https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/08/does-college-matter/400898/) about a study done on the correlation between salaries and college prestige. [Another article from *The Atlantic*](https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/05/does-it-matter-where-you-go-to-college/257227/) answering various questions about the importance of prestige.

Something else to note: sometimes local prestige matters more than national prestige. For example, one of the top schools that sends students to Silicon Valley is [San Jose State University](https://qz.com/967985/silicon-valley-companies-like-apple-aapl-hires-the-most-alumni-of-these-10-universities-and-none-of-them-are-in-the-ivy-league/). The location of a school can weigh heavily on where its graduates end up.

Some industries/fields where prestige is important:

1. **FINANCE (Investment Banking, Consulting, Wall Street type shit, etc.):** There’s a whole world in finance that I know literally nothing about. But from preliminary research, [investment banks largely recruit from target schools](https://www.investopedia.com/articles/career-compensation/091616/heres-where-investment-banks-are-recruiting-gs-c.asp). There is a [hierarchy](https://www.wallstreetoasis.com/faq/what-are-a-target-semi-target-and-non-target-schools), and to be at the top of the hierarchy is most preferable for finance.
   1. [Unanimous agreement](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/6fzpnt/wall_street_colleges_what_you_need_to_know/) that [prestige matters](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/g8i1rs/unfortunate_truth_for_people_making_final_college/) for [finance](https://www.businessinsider.com/investment-banking-recruiting-report-biggest-takeaways-2018-2)
2. **GRADUATE SCHOOL:** This speaks to the greater value of prestige; while the brand name of your undergrad school will not give you a significant advantage, the [brand name can grant you opportunities that less elite schools cannot afford its students](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/03/education/edlife/why-you-cant-catch-up.html). For example, a more prestigious university will have access to better alumni networks, faculty, university resources, and connections with future employers. You may be able to include recommendations from well-known scholars; you may be able to pursue research through funding, grants, etc. So while you may receive the same education at a less prestigious school, it’s these extravagant bonuses that might not be available to you.
   1. Bottom line: the prestige of the college itself does not weigh on graduate school admissions. It’s the resources that the prestige offers you which can bulk up your application.
   2. **HUMANITIES:** I don’t have any solid evidence to back up this claim (so if you would like to shoot me ANYTHING credible, that would be cool), but in general, any study in humanities is much more hierarchical than STEM. Connections are important. The same reasoning for why prestige matters in grad school applications would therefore be relevant here.
3. **COMPUTER SCIENCE:** In general, prestige is not applicable within the CS industry. Skill and competency matters more. However, top schools such as MIT, CMU SCS, and Stanford can provide unique opportunities due to more specialized instruction. CS has its own ranking system synonymous to the “target schools” of finance. [Top tech companies (FAANG, etc.) recruit from a specific group of universities.](https://www.cnbc.com/2017/06/28/the-30-colleges-with-the-most-alums-at-top-tech-companies.html) 
   1. Here’s a [more thorough breakdown](https://www.reddit.com/r/cscareerquestions/wiki/faq_school#wiki_which_universities_do_the_.22big.22_tech_companies_recruit_from.3F) from Reddit if you find that more trustworthy than a newsource lmao.
   2. The [ranking system of CS](https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-science-schools/computer-science-rankings) is completely different compared to the general national rankings. [Ivies are not superior to top public schools.](https://www.reddit.com/r/cscareerquestions/wiki/faq_school#wiki_which_universities_do_the_.22big.22_tech_companies_recruit_from.3F)
4. **BIG LAW:** Obviously this is not applicable to undergraduate degrees. However, I thought I would include it to give a little contrast. The school you go to for undergrad does not matter for law school admissions. Your GPA and LSAT score are most important. Though, if you want to go into Big Law, the best position you can put yourself in is attending a T14 law school.

### otherwise, prestige does NOT matter

And that is the ultimate takeaway. For the majority of fields, prestige matters way less than hard work. [What you do is more important than where you do it.](https://www.investopedia.com/articles/personal-finance/051915/university-prestige-really-important.asp) Let me state it again, but in a different way just in case you’re having a difficult time: your drive and ambition are invaluable. Read this [whole ass study](https://cdn.theatlantic.com/static/mt/assets/business/dalekrueger_More_Selective_College.pdf) about how merely applying to elite schools indicates [initiative](https://www.nber.org/papers/w17159). And such initiative goes a long way.

* If you don’t believe me, here’s some [anecdotal evidence](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/fat9yk/it_doesnt_matter/) that I’m sure is extremely credible.
* A lover of analogies? [I got you.](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/e7m0r5/an_alternative_take_on_stanfordtop_schools_and_if/)
* Back to more [concrete evidence](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-47963633) that demonstrates how [motivated students](https://time.com/5210848/prestigious-college-doesnt-matter/) do not need elite colleges to succeed.
  + ALSO: [the list of colleges where Fortune 50 CEOs attended undergrad](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gb18pt/list_of_colleges_where_fortune_50_ceos_attended/)

Moreover, if it’s salary that you’re most concerned with, [overhaul your entire idea of T20](https://www.payscale.com/college-salary-report/bachelors). And anyway, in the long run, [going to an elite school produces no net benefits over going to a lower-ranked one](https://time.com/54342/it-doesnt-matter-where-you-go-to-college/). Nearly every single college can offer you a quality education, not just the Ivy Leagues. Ultimately, it will always be up to you and how you take advantage of the resources available to you. It’s you who has to build up those employable skills. So, what if we started a revolution right now and change the very core of what it means to be a T20. What if we just abolished the entire idea of T20. LMAO. I’m fucking joking. Obviously. Unless????

One thing I want to stress: unfortunately, most of this does not apply to [disadvantaged students who lack social capital](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/upshot/elite-colleges-actual-value.html).

SO! In most cases, the [obsession](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/en4zk5/i_let_it_ruin_my_life_dont_make_the_same_mistake/) surrounding [prestige](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/f1wzro/thoughts_from_a_prestigeobsessed_freshman_and/) is [superficial](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bws042/are_we_sheep/), [toxic](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bho7cv/the_parents_on_this_subreddit_concern_me/), and [destructive](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/fpwqdf/toxicity_on_this_sub/). It’s what brought about the most recent college admissions scandal. It’s the source of [devastating anxiety](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/e7zlez/unpopular_opinion_a2c_is_a_toxic_sub/) for many high-achieving students. It’s [probably](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/g8qo8i/does_reading_this_subreddit_make_anyone_else_want/) why you’re [on this document](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/a08mpd/im_done_with_this_sub_its_affecting_the_way_i/) right now. Admittedly, it’s a concept I’ve been enamored with for the past four years. I’m not trying to make the argument that elite institutions do not offer advantages. But I do want to provide a [sense of relief](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/fow4w1/ivy_day_is_the_anniversary_of_my_suicide_attempt/). [The college you go to does not in any way define you](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/fs5903/i_was_rejected_by_every_college_i_applied_to_last/). And I know that sounds like an empty sentence, but I literally spent an hour trying to find all that proof.

In conclusion, I don’t want to reduce the value of prestige. I simply want to recognize its overblown importance.

* [An exhaustive examination of the benefits of attending a top college](https://talk.collegeconfidential.com/parents-forum/187878-what-are-the-lifetime-advantages-of-attending-top-colleges.html); I didn’t read the whole thread because it’s a whopping 98 pages, and I probably never will lmao, but there’s guaranteed to be decent discussion.
* [Advantages I had previously mentioned](https://www.crimsoneducation.org/us/blog/campus-life-more/top-university-success/), verbatim: access to better alumni networks, faculty, university resources, and connections with future employers.
  + Some other advantages: high academic rigor, elite student body, etc.
* A [post on A2C](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gar45h/ama_20_things_i_wish_i_knew_before_going_to_an/) that I quite literally hate to my very bones, and which demonstrates all the fun!!!! things that the idea of prestige perpetuates!
  + Something else of note: this post shows a different side to rankings and why you should stick them up your ass. The implication that students who go to lower ranked schools, or state schools, just aren’t as intelligent or interesting or ambitious as students that go to Ivies is so fucking dumb.
* Two books I recommend: [*Educated* by Tara Westover](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/35133922-educated) and [*Hillbilly Elegy* by J.D. Vance](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/27161156-hillbilly-elegy). Both are memoirs about an underprivileged student who worked their way to the very top of academia, with Westover attending BYU, then Cambridge through a Gates-Cambridge scholarship and later, Harvard, and Vance attending Yale Law School after going to OSU for undergrad. Both are really good!!! And they also demonstrate how the white, rural demographic is commonly overlooked as a disadvantaged population.
* Finally, here is a [study that demonstrates how everyone has a baseline of happiness](https://www.thecut.com/2016/01/classic-study-on-happiness-and-the-lottery.html). Whatever your situation, you will very well adapt (the scientific term is ~hedonic adaptation~). If you relate the lottery winners with people who go to T10 schools, and the paraplegics with people who go to T500 schools (obviously a very unfortunate parallel but bear with me), you will see that everyone will ultimately end up with the same level of enjoyment out of life. Pulling in the previously made point, what really differentiates two people is their character.
  + Also, I don’t know if any of you have read *The Stranger*, and I don’t want to sound really really pretentious, but it honestly relates to this idea. Meursault doesn’t take the promotion because he believes that working an office job will provide him the same amount of happiness as a more ostentatious, profitable career. He’s simply content with what he has because regardless of his circumstances, he will adapt. The shininess will fade away.

### T20: what is it really?

With the prestige talk, rankings are inevitable. They quantify the level of status and reputation each school should be regarded with. So here comes the highly contentious debate about something that really should be concrete. We’re dealing with numbers right??? What more is there to say???

Because T20 isn’t just a label. It’s a feeling.

That sounds absolutely ridiculous I know, but the reason why it becomes something of a disagreement is because schools like Georgetown, Cal, CMU, UMich, etc. don’t break T20. Not to say that they’re that far behind, but T20 is generally thought of as the cutoff. T30 doesn’t hold the same flair. T10 though? Even better. T5? Someone’s about to nut. So to think these great schools don’t have the coveted T20 label is something of a crime to some people.

Generally, [*US News*](https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges) is the most commonly referred to source. Others include [*THE WUR*](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2020/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats)*,* [*QS WUR*](https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2020)*,* [*Round WUR*](https://roundranking.com/ranking/world-university-rankings.html#world-2020)*,* [*Shanghai ARWU*](http://www.shanghairanking.com/ARWU2019.html)*,* [*CWUR*](https://cwur.org/2019-20.php)*,* [*Niche*](https://www.niche.com/colleges/search/best-colleges/)*,* [*WSJ*](https://www.wsj.com/articles/explore-the-full-wsj-the-college-rankings-11567638555?mod=ig_collegerankings2020)*/*[*WSJ & THE*](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/rankings/united-states/2020#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats), and[*Forbes*](https://www.forbes.com/top-colleges/#2a5ff2b21987). [Here’s](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/fe3gnn/history_of_us_news_national_university_rankings/) the [data](https://publicuniversityhonors.com/2017/09/13/u-s-news-rankings-for-57-leading-universities-1983-2007/) of historical college rankings if you’re interested in that.

* I’m sure it can be unanimously agreed upon that this is the most [important ranking system of them all](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/f9zxlk/ranking_t20s_based_on_the_distance_to_the_closest/).

Arguably, you can put all the T20 in tiers based on academic reputation, brand name, endowment, etc. For example, as much as WashU kids like to BS and say we are the “Harvard of the Midwest,” obviously WashU and Harvard are not in the same tier. I would say tiers are equally as useless as ranks, but they can be helpful when trying to figure out the minute differences in reputation.

Obviously what it really comes down to is prestige. “Which colleges deserve to be in T20 and which colleges don’t?” Well, sis, why does it matter?

### the dark side of college rankings

I really had to sprinkle in some intrigue with that title.

The most logical step is asking whether or not these rankings even mean anything. I’m sure you can already figure out the answer. Your analytical skills? Unmatched.

If you want a thorough and complete report, [the *New York Times* has one of the best articles](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/09/10/magazine/college-admissions-paul-tough.html) I’ve read during this entire research process. It explains literally everything you need to know about money-driven colleges and their practices.

Otherwise, [*The Atlantic* went hard](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/09/your-annual-reminder-to-ignore-the-em-us-news-world-report-em-college-rankings/279103/) with the criticism. [*Wikipedia* also pulled through](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_college_and_university_rankings_(North_America)) with a concise summary. As mentioned in the article, Reed College is the most famous school to [renounce *US News*’ system](https://www.reed.edu/apply/college-rankings.html). It is currently ranked #68 according to the rankings of National Liberal Arts Colleges by *US News*. Most would generally agree that Reed’s ranking is [severely deflated](https://talk.collegeconfidential.com/reed-college/1703900-how-prestigious-is-reed.html) considering its [academic prowess](https://talk.collegeconfidential.com/reed-college/2049435-why-does-everyone-on-here-love-reed.html).

Regardless, gaming the college ranking system is completely doable. [Northeastern University has been successfully doing so for years](https://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/2014/08/26/how-northeastern-gamed-the-college-rankings/), which is why it was ranked #162 in 1992, and now in 2020, it sits comfortably at #40. Whether or not a rise in rankings also concurrently improves the institution itself is the real issue up for dispute.

And in most cases, the answer is a resounding no, it doesn’t. In fact, many schools manipulate their data in order to improve their standing. Oftentimes this isn’t just done [by directly submitting false numbers](https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-perspec-college-rankings-0828-story.html). Though don’t worry; [blatant forgery is still an option](https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/01/education/gaming-the-college-rankings.html). Sometimes, the rankings directly influence who a college accepts; they opt for affluent high-scoring, low GPA students who are lazy, but can afford to pay for tutors and play the game.

The [most challenged parts of the *US News* ranking](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/02/14/the-order-of-things) are the peer review and the selectivity measures. In its 2020 methodology, it completely removed its use of acceptance rates, but still considers so-called “student excellence” through test scores and high school class standing. It also continues to utilize peer review, which to me, encourages incestuous relationships among top universities. It’s a circlejerk for the very elite. For some comic relief, though: [Clemson University admitted in 2009 that it purposefully gave bad ratings](https://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/05/clemson-explains-its-approach-to-us-news-rankings/) on its peer assessment. A petty legend.

Furthermore, similar to how choosing which applicants to accept is an intuitive process, choosing which colleges to apply to is also an intuitive process. [What university rankings attempt to do is squeeze subjective qualities into objective numbers](https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2018/10/15/stanford-study-says-rankings-do-not-point-students-best-college-fit). It focuses solely on prestige rather than fit. What is the true difference between a school ranked #20 and #21 when they’re multi-faceted institutions with contrasting strengths, cultures, and resources that a mere number cannot convey? Similar to how AOs don’t judge you based on stats alone, you shouldn’t judge a university based on rankings alone.

Okay. So what? I’m sure someone’s asking why any of this means anything. No one’s forcing you to look at rankings, you say.

Well, the true harm comes from the [glorifying of prestige and selectivity](https://www.educationdive.com/news/elite-colleges-acceptance-rates-continue-to-drop/551804/). Do we really have to discuss how these rankings preserve the already rampant [elitism](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/opinion/sunday/why-college-rankings-are-a-joke.html?mcubz=1&_r=0) and [structural](https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2018/09/10/us-news-says-it-has-shifted-rankings-focus-social-mobility-has-it)/[inequality](http://politico.com/interactives/2017/top-college-rankings-list-2017-us-news-investigation/) in the higher education system? More importantly, no one is going to ignore these rankings. High school students and their families trust them. My dad once told me that he didn’t think it would be worth paying for my college education if I went to a school that wasn’t T30. Clearly rankings have already deeply embedded themselves into college admissions culture. Therefore, they will continue to dictate institutional priorities for as long as they exist.

Despite *US News* moving to abolish its evaluation of acceptance rates, it still evaluates selectivity. And elite colleges will always maintain their low acceptance rates, even if they don’t explicitly advertise them. Because, without a doubt, the [mirage of exclusivity](https://www.businessstudent.com/topics/college-acceptance-rates-over-time/) brings on the image of prestige [at the expense of all applicants](https://www.forbes.com/sites/willarddix/2016/05/24/rethinking-the-meaning-of-colleges-low-acceptance-rates/#18bc58901dd0).

Moreover, the ways in which universities achieve this perceived selectivity can range from innocuous “cheating,” to systemic suppression of those in a lower economic class. For example:

* **ED/ED2/EA/Waitlists:** UChicago is the first school that comes to mind. It offers the ED, ED2, and EA admissions track. With all three options, they are able to dramatically increase their number of applicants. The ED and ED2 tracks ensure close to 100% yield. Therefore, for the RD round, they can superficially lower their acceptance rate by admitting a small number of applicants out of the total applicants from the ED, ED2, and EA rounds. Furthermore, sometimes top schools waitlist high-achieving applicants, which functions to lower their acceptance rate while also assessing whether or not these applicants have enough interest to attend. Some universities will take these applicants off the waitlist only if they promise to commit.
* **Fee Waivers:** While fee waivers are helpful, especially for those who cannot afford to pay the obscene amount of money required for college applications, they are also a strategy to increase the number of applicants. Some schools will send out fee waivers to students who would have otherwise never applied had there not been a free application involved.
* **Merit Scholarships:** Typically, merit scholarships are regarded as a way to [poach high-achieving students](https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/22/education/edlife/a-rise-in-students-receiving-merit-awards.html) from more elite universities. They are also a way to increase institutional test averages; students who receive merit scholarships usually have higher scores. Additionally, when a school offers merit scholarships, [sometimes they are also taking away funding from need-based aid](https://www.chronicle.com/article/Too-Much-Merit-Aid-Requires/137365). Though, on the other side of that [argument](https://www.npr.org/transcripts/4627362?storyId=4627362?storyId=4627362), it can help middle-class families who do not receive need-based aid [afford college](https://talk.collegeconfidential.com/financial-aid-scholarships/1988941-in-defense-of-merit-aid.html).
  + To be completely transparent, WashU is one the top schools who engage in this practice (and it also offers ED/ED2 while considering demonstrated interest). I myself received merit aid.

No school is innocent from participating in the rankings race. Harvard is literally getting sued over it. WashU has lists upon lists of shady ass procedures. UChicago, despite being an absolute force, still flexes an inferiority complex. The only pure and wholesome institution we stan is MIT. [All my homies love MIT](https://mitadmissions.org/apply/process/selection/): they are completely transparent in their admissions process, and their blog is literally so beautiful. Sometimes I just look at it and cry.

One final thing of note: none of these critiques apply to niche rankings. If you know the field of study you wish to pursue (or even if you have a general idea), looking at the rankings for a specific major is a smart move. It’s easier to quantify major rankings versus the ranking of the entire institution. You can ascertain the quality of instruction, level of resources, number of renowned faculty and other factors through major rankings. Of course, don’t rely on those alone, but it’s a better place to begin your college search versus just looking at overall rankings.

## college influencers

You’ve probably come across someone on YouTube or TikTok or even Reddit who is either offering advice on the admissions process or creates content about the college they go to/got into.

[They have no idea what they’re talking about.](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gtzma5/college_students_and_prefrosh_are_not_qualified/)

Simply being accepted into a top university does not make someone qualified enough to give advice on the admissions process. Because here’s the big catch: they don’t know why they were accepted. Of course they can speculate, but we can speculate about a lot of things. I can speculate that the moon is made out of cheddar cheese because it has holes. That doesn’t make it true.

Their lack of knowledge can be misleading. This issue is further exacerbated when they make broad-sweeping statements about the admissions process. These statements usually never add anything new or useful, and sometimes they can be [wholly deceptive](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/fuzm72/unpopular_opinion_being_accepted_to_a_t20_doesnt/) (for ex: “test scores don’t matter!” while

[wielding a 1560](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/e4b3cj/ivy_league_college_youtubers/)).

I recognize the irony of expressing disapproval while I, a freshman, give you advice. However, as I said in the disclaimer on the title page, the difference between this document and those college influencers is the quantity of research. This document is not composed of only *my* advice, but also advice from a plethora of trustworthy sources. And I highly encourage you to do your own research outside of whatever information this document provides you. Read some of the articles I linked. Scroll through Reddit/CC. Contact admission counselors/AO’s.

Not all college influencers are bad. Some actually provide a unique lens into a school, and give decent advice about the college app process. But others exploit the prestige of their school for clout. And like I said, a lot of them do nothing but spout misinformation. Just be careful, my dude.

## college admissions scandals, plural

I can’t go into all of them because there’s just too many to name. The college admissions process itself is a scandal with its complexity, elitism (lmao apparently this is my favorite fucking word), and greed. However, these are some that you should be aware of.

### secure campus act

Senator Tom Cotton (R-Arkansas) and Senator Marsha Blackburn (R-Tennessee) first unveiled the Secure Campus Act on May 27, 2020. The legislation is [intended to block Chinese nationals](https://www.newsweek.com/2-gop-senators-propose-bill-deny-chinese-nationals-student-visas-amid-growing-tensions-china-1506949) from receiving visas to the United States for graduate/post-graduate studies within the STEM fields. [There are other components to the bill](https://www.cotton.senate.gov/?p=press_release&id=1371), including the requirement for universities, labs and other research institutions to vow that they will not knowingly support participants of China’s “foreign recruitment” programs.

As someone who is Chinese-American, I have a shit ton to say. I could probably write pages upon pages on not just the legislation itself, but also its implications and the long history of oppression it is based in. But, I’ll spare you. [Here’s a post from Reddit that has 10/10 discussion](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/guaqzs/fellow_chineseamericans_how_are_you_feeling/).

### 

### 2019 bribery/varsity blues conspiracy

The [FBI investigation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019_college_admissions_bribery_scandal#:~:text=In%202019%2C%20a%20scandal%20arose,at%20several%20top%20American%20universities.&text=At%20least%2053%20people%20have,or%20agreed%20to%20plead%20guilty.) into a criminal conspiracy to influence admissions decisions was made public on [March 12, 2019](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/us/college-admissions-cheating-scandal.html), confirming long-held suspicions about bribery and connections at elite universities (no seriously, does anyone really think [Trump got into Wharton by merit alone](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-who-often-boasts-of-his-wharton-degree-says-he-was-admitted-to-the-hardest-school-to-get-into-the-college-official-who-reviewed-his-application-recalls-it-differently/2019/07/08/0a4eb414-977a-11e9-830a-21b9b36b64ad_story.html)? And [let’s not forget Jared Kushner](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2019/03/12/college-admissions-scam-kushner-harvard-acceptance-under-scrutiny/3147027002/)). [53 people have been charged](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/us/felicity-huffman-lori-loughlin-massimo-giannulli.html), of which some have pleaded guilty or agreed to [plead guilty](https://www.insider.com/college-admissions-cheating-scandal-full-list-people-charged-2019-3). Some universities involved include USC (Lori Loughlin is the big name connected to this—she cheated Olivia Jade’s way into the USC rowing team), Yale, Stanford, among others.

Some articles for you:

1. *New York Times:* [Here’s How the F.B.I Says Parents Cheated to Get Their Kids Into Elite Colleges](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/us/admissions-scandal.html)
2. *New York Times:* [College Admissions Scandal: Your Questions Answered](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/14/us/college-admissions-scandal-questions.html)
3. *New York Times:* [What Happened to the Students Caught up in the College Admissions Scandal?](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/25/us/college-admissions-scandal-students.html)
4. *Time:* [A Year After the College Admissions Scandal, Here’s What Has (And Has Not) Changed](https://time.com/5801167/college-admissions-scandal-changes/)
5. *Los Angeles Times:* [Did This Student Deserve Admission to UCLA’s Renowned Gymnastics Team?](https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-07-20/la-sp-ucla-athlete-recruits-children-coaches-admissions-20190721)

### harvard lawsuit

The Students for Fair Admissions organization filed the lawsuit against Harvard and the very principle of [affirmative action in 2014](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Students_for_Fair_Admissions_v._Harvard). The judge involved [ruled on October 1, 2019](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/01/us/harvard-admissions-lawsuit.html) that Harvard’s admissions practices [do not discriminate against Asian-Americans](https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2019/10/3/admissions-decision-explained/). The SFFA organization proceeded to file for an appeal.

The lawsuit also opens the door a little, giving us a look into what really happens on those admissions committees. [It honestly seems like a small and exclusive cult, which just makes the college admissions process that much spicier](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/29/us/harvard-admissions-asian-americans.html).

Some articles for you:

1. *Harvard University:* [Harvard Admissions Lawsuit](https://admissionscase.harvard.edu/)
2. *NPR:* [Federal Judge Upholds Harvard’s Race-Conscious Admissions Process](https://www.npr.org/2019/10/01/730386096/federal-judge-rules-in-favor-of-harvard-in-admissions-case)
3. *Washington Post:* [The Harvard Affirmative Action Decision is Not a Loss for Asian Americans](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/10/04/harvard-affirmative-action-decision-is-not-loss-asian-americans/)
4. *Forbes:* [Admissions Lawsuit: Harvard’s Ahead, but It’s Not Over](https://www.forbes.com/sites/richardvedder/2019/10/02/admissions-lawsuit-harvards-ahead-but-its-not-over/#3ccb185f603e)

### t.m. landry college prep

The *New York Times* has a great and short (because we all know our attention spans are barely there otherwise I wouldn’t have watched it lmao) [video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LRewodHw-8E) about the entire situation. Additionally, they have a [complete investigation](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/30/us/tm-landry-college-prep-black-students.html) into the [various abuses](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/12/tm-landry-and-myth-meritocracy-education/578149/) of the [school](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/02/us/politics/tm-landry-fbi-college-admissions.html).

### college board as a “nonprofit” organization

We’re all aware of the *College Board*. It [sucks](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/exvs5i/a_declaration_of_independence_against_the/), bordering on being a [scam](https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/10/ap-classes-are-a-scam/263456/) operation.

### 

### mistaken acceptance letters

[This](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/edgr7z/fuck_you_lehigh_you_are_an_asshole/)/[happens](https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/manhattan/columbia-university-accidentally-sends-277-acceptance-letters-article-1.2975845)/[literally](https://abcnews.go.com/US/university-south-florida-st-petersburg-mistakenly-emails-430/story?id=60568577)/[all the time](https://time.com/3637980/college-admissions-mistakes-johnshopkins/)/[but](https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/15/us/mayo-clinic-school-error-trnd/index.html)/[it is so! cruel!](https://www.teenvogue.com/story/i-got-a-mistake-acceptance-email-from-my-dream-school)

## an addendum: privilege

I originally did not include this section because it’s clear enough that I have a certain distaste for the college admissions process (“elitism,” “prestige;” it’s a drinking game at this point). However, with current events in mind, I want to acknowledge that there is a certain level of privilege required to even think or careabout these issues.

I’m not going to rip apart decades upon decades of systemic injustice. I can’t. It’s simply too large in magnitude. However, I will recognize that as an upper-middle-class Chinese-American, I am extended certain privileges that others are not. The [*r/A2C census*](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gucq7r/ra2c_2020_census_results_class_of_2024/) demonstrates that the sizable number of users also experience these luxuries. Moreover, [WashU is one of the least socioeconomically diverse schools among all the T20s.](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/washington-university-in-st-louis)

The 2019 admissions scandal emphasizes how the criminally rich only crave prestige. And for some of us, we think about T20 a lot. But for students that are the most disadvantaged, T20 is a way out. My discussion above on prestige is rendered null when considered in the context of URM, low-income, first-generation students. For them, T20 means full need met. [T20 means social mobility and generations of a better life](https://www.dailyprincetonian.com/article/2019/04/the-problem-with-college-admissions-a-system-that-perpetuates-economic-inequality). Even so, many qualified low-income applicants [don’t even have a chance](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/09/no-point-in-applying-why-poor-students-are-missing-at-top-colleges/279699/). They don’t have the information to truly understand the college application process. They don’t have the proper guidance to steer them towards top universities. What’s worse, students who are smart and have potential don’t have access to the same opportunities, resources, or connections needed to shape them into smart applicants with potential.

The very fact is, not every student is given equal opportunity to succeed. It’s not surprising that only [3.8% of students come from the bottom quintile of the income distribution](http://brown.edu/Departments/Economics/Faculty/John_Friedman/coll_mrc_qje_paper.pdf) at top universities. Children from families in the top 1% are 77 times more likely to attend an Ivy-Plus college compared to the children from families in the bottom quintile.

Hard work only goes so far. And even then, no matter how persevering and resilient a student is, the college admissions process is similar to the myth of Sisyphus. The student climbs and climbs, only to be pushed down all over again.

For example, let’s approach this through two different applicants. One lives in an affluent neighborhood and attends a competitive private school. Another one lives in a [violent neighborhood](https://www.vox.com/2016/6/6/11852640/cartoon-poor-neighborhoods) and attends a [poorly-funded public school](https://www.forbes.com/sites/lindadarlinghammond/2019/08/05/americas-school-funding-struggle-how-were-robbing-our-future-by-under-investing-in-our-children/#10a385695eaf). Already, there are very apparent discrepancies.

Standardized testing is the first one to come to mind. [Student One is posed to succeed](https://www.cnbc.com/2019/10/03/rich-students-get-better-sat-scores-heres-why.html). Simply put, [the richer you are, the higher your SAT score will be](https://smartech.gatech.edu/bitstream/handle/1853/54227/impact_of_income_on_test_scores_dadasheu.pdf).

But for even deeper disadvantages, Student Two’s school is crowded, with under-paid teachers. It does not offer a single club. [He has no available extracurriculars to join](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/01/the-activity-gap/384961/). And even if he did, he doesn’t have the time to commit. Both of his parents work, and neither of them can provide him transportation after school. He has to ride the bus. And once home, he is obligated to take care of his siblings while also finishing school work. [Student One, however, has plenty of resources available to him](https://www.edsurge.com/news/2019-04-24-extracurriculars-are-more-than-nice-to-have-they-re-essential). His high school is one of the best and his county is the most wealthy in the state. He’s on the debate team, which places nationally. He’s the captain of Science Olympiad, and his team is about to go to States. His father is friends with a professor at a well-known university. He is aware of TASP, and SSP, and RSI, and every other acronym.

To dig even *deeper*, URM, low-income, first-generation students are all victims of a very broken system. [URM students face perpetual dehumanization and racism](https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2020/05/30/chris-cuomo-george-floyd-tale-of-two-cities-may-28-sot-cpt.cnn). Low-income students must constantly worry about financial burdens. First-generation students have no insight into what it means to go to college. These issues aren’t independent of each other. Some students are both URM and first-gen. Some are low-income and first-gen. [Others are all three.](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/daxxwc/from_a_low_income_urm_and_first_generation_senior/)

[And the struggles](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/09/10/magazine/college-inequality.html)/[don’t stop there](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/03/privileged-poor-navigating-elite-university-life/585100/).

To ignore the privileges that many of us are gifted does an egregious disservice to applicants who cannot get by on ambition alone. And I’m in no way trying to invalidate everything you have done in the past four years, nor am I trying to make you feel guilty for something you cannot control. Changing the system isn’t easy. It requires complete upheaval. [It requires an examination into our own desire to attend an elite university](https://www.dukechronicle.com/article/2018/08/180828-becker-elitism-column). [It requires us to really question whether we want prestige, or if we want equality](https://time.com/5676174/universities-equality-eliteness/). Until then, I urge you to keep things in perspective as you move forward.

Okay, I’m done with my virtue signaling now, lmao.

## a final thought: your worth in context to the app process

Congratulations on finishing the crash course. Next up is a draining, months-long process.

[It’s easy to lose yourself](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/a0frer/dont_let_the_application_process_make_you_lose/). You’ll be seeing everyone around you get in. [You’ll receive some rejections](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/a4do35/didnt_get_in_to_my_dream_school_and_imgrateful/). You’ll struggle with draft after draft, questioning how to capture your entire being in 650 words. [You’ll wonder whether four years of blood, sweat, and tears will pay off](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/ehh80p/as_app_season_winds_down_im_realizing_we_mightve/).

Worse of all, you’ll be hit with the realization that you’re growing up.

Embrace it.

As a senior who has lost my second semester to a global pandemic (this literally sounds like it’s pulled from some YA disaster novel), I will tell you that I miss it. I wouldn’t relive it, but I miss the late nights of questioning my future. I miss sitting in boba shops with friends, choking back tears. I miss cinematic drives, mindlessly yearning for something more. It’s all part of the experience. And as someone who has come out of it just barely unscathed, I will tell you that this process has taught me a lot about myself. It has made me appreciate everything and everyone I had previously taken for granted. It has shown me that the little things matter so much more than the extravagant and grandiose.

After it all, I feel like a more solid person. I feel real.

I hope you know that you will end up where you belong. Like I said, this is just [one step](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/e503to/its_crazy_how_little_this_really_matters/) in a long, long life.

# other paths outside of t20 universities

I want to fully recognize that four-year universities are not for everyone. And seeing how everyone loves the T20 label, I also want to highlight how there are other paths beyond this limited idea of prestige. Furthermore, sometimes your current situation doesn’t allow for the dreams that you have for yourself. That’s okay. There are other options available to you.

## community college

[Destroy](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/aoxcw4/failed_high_school_today_i_got_accepted_to_umich/)/[the stigma](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gbjltr/i_cant_believe_i_did_it_some_hope_for_the_out_of/)/[around](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/cqakh4/update_applying_to_college_with_a_14_gpa/)/[community college](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gnm5bz/normalize_going_to_community_college/)!!!!!!

First of all, community college is a great financial deal.

* According to the [*2019 Trends in College Pricing*](https://research.collegeboard.org/trends/college-pricing/resource-library) report released by the *College Board*, two-year colleges cost on average $3,730 per year for in-state residents.
* Some states also have [free community college programs](https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertfarrington/2020/03/25/these-states-offer-tuition-free-community-college/#61f3069d14cf) based on the student’s financial and academic need.

Many people who go to CC transfer after two years to four-year universities. Until then, they receive personalized attention, elements of a traditional college, academic flexibility, and a school-life balance. It gives them time to explore their interests, and to refine their academic skills.

* [Nearly every state has a CC transfer program.](https://www.mykidscollegechoice.com/2018/08/23/community-colleges-and-guaranteed-transfer-programs/) Some universities have [programs](https://www.communitycollegereview.com/blog/how-to-guarantee-your-admission-to-a-state-university-after-community-college) with neighboring CCs to guarantee admission.
* Within the California system, UCLA offers the [Transfer Alliance Program (TAP)](http://www.admission.ucla.edu/Prospect/Adm_tr/ADM_CCO/tap.htm). Six other UCs also offer the [Transfer Admission Guarantee (TAG)](https://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/admission-requirements/transfer-requirements/transfer-admission-guarantee-tag.html).
  + *oh no nina* is a youtuber who first attended CC and then later transferred to UC Berkeley. Some of [her earlier videos](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tq0vb5h2kYk) go into the [entire experience](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32qCtOnsB0U). Highly recommend, 10/10.

You can also earn your [associate degree](https://www.geteducated.com/careers/highest-paying-associate-degree-jobs/) in two years [if you want](https://thebestschools.org/careers/associate-degree-jobs/)! No transferring involved.

## state school/t(insert #)

I know it’s insane to even include this because a large majority of people attend their state flagships and think nothing of it. But for those of you who have the sentiment that “[I worked my ass off for four years and now I’m going to the same college as people who didn’t take a single AP class](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/ac881h/on_ending_up_in_the_same_place_as_someone_who_put/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=ios_app&utm_name=iossmf),” this one’s for you.

First of all, if you’re in-state, you will be paying less tuition compared to the tuition of a private school. You won’t go into debt! What’s even nicer is that you probably qualify for their [honors program](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_honors_programs_and_colleges_in_the_United_States)/[college](https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/these-public-schools-offer-an-honors-college), which sometimes offers merit scholarships.

* What’s good about honors programs is that they also offer you [opportunities](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/e4lbef/youre_not_wasting_your_time/) that other students do not have. For example, sometimes you receive priority registration and/or housing, specialized advising, and research resources. You will also be academically challenged through honors classes/seminars.
* Something even better to consider! Maybe AP classes weren’t a scam. Most public universities accept college credit unlike private schools, meaning that you might be able to circumvent some gen-ed requirements. You could graduate early (saving you more money), or have more academic flexibility.
  + I know this is anecdotal, but my school’s valedictorian from last year chose Rutgers over Georgia Tech. He’s in the honors college, which is actually kind of hard to get into (aka: I didn’t get in >:^((), and he will be graduating two years early with literally no student debt. And he’s also a fucking genius so I trust his life decisions.

[Many schools offer full-ride scholarships](https://blog.prepscholar.com/colleges-with-full-ride-scholarships). What’s more, receiving a scholarship usually also puts you into a scholars program. This can include the same benefits as a honors program/college and maybe even more. Please do your research. [Here’s a post about the Clemson National Scholars Program](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/dprx2c/my_story_t20s_are_great_but_you_yes_you_need_to/), which can give you a good idea of what these programs can offer. But still! A full-ride scholarship!

Also, [fit almost always trumps prestige](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/fr9y0o/why_im_choosing_to_go_to_my_safety_state_school/). State universities are completely different from private universities. They’re not even comparable in terms of school culture. They are typically larger and have more school spirit due to sports. Additionally, because they are so much bigger, they most likely have more activities, more alumni and therefore more connections, and more infrastructure such as labs, research centers, and gyms. They usually have well-established study abroad programs and other developed resources/opportunities. Also, some kids just really like large lectures. Who knows.

You’re going to receive the same level of education. [The same applies to T100, T200, T500 schools](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/ch32lk/i_go_to_a_school_with_a_100_acceptance_rate/). And what’s even better, you will be a [big fish in a small pond](https://www.businessinsider.com/malcolm-gladwells-david-and-goliath-2013-10). You will stand out. You will be in a position to thrive.

* I highly recommend everyone read [this article from the *New York Times*](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/15/opinion/sunday/frank-bruni-how-to-survive-the-college-admissions-madness.html) which basically shows that private schools don’t mean much, you can do anything you want as long as you work hard etc. etc.

## graduate school

Another really stupid one, but it’s worth mentioning. I’m sure many of you expect to continue your education after undergrad. If you don’t get into the school that you had hoped to, it is [always possible](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/e7lqvm/i_was_a_b_student_in_high_school_did_well_at_a/) to do so through a [graduate program](https://www.removeddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/figxab/i_was_rejected_from_harvard_as_a_senior_in_high/).

## transferring

Basically the same as graduate school, but with a twist. Don’t fucking go to a school with the expectation of transferring. Such a bad idea (unless, of course, you were offered a transfer option as an incoming freshman at another school; even this decision should be considered carefully). Otherwise, most people have valid reasons for transferring, whatever it may be. [Here’s a guide to introduce you to the process](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/b936yy/guide_to_college_transfers/).

## 

## international universities

Maybe you’re looking for that push out of your comfort zone. Maybe you just want to go to a prestigious university, but Canadian. Maybe you want to experience another culture, or learn another language. Maybe your preferred field of study encourages international experience. Foreign universities might be what you’re looking for.

The U.S. is literally [one of the only countries](https://www.cnbc.com/2017/07/13/heres-how-much-it-costs-to-go-to-college-in-the-us-compared-to-other-countries.html) that charges obscene tuition prices. You can most likely [get a better deal](https://www.cnbc.com/2019/11/23/as-us-college-costs-soar-some-students-find-bargains-overseas.html) at international universities. However, it’s important to keep in mind that you might not qualify for financial aid, even if you do at American universities. Living abroad can also be expensive. You might have to deal with a language barrier. Additionally, European countries typically have a different approach to college life, opting to be more hands-off compared to American universities. Getting a degree from a foreign country may also hurt your chances at acquiring a job in the US.

There are other pros and cons, but it’s really up to the individual. Obviously going out of the country is a big decision, so you should *definitely* do your research. Three links to get you started:

* *r/ApplyingToCollege:* [Give British Schools (Or Overseas Schools) a Look](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bgkuik/can_i_just_give_out_an_advice_to_all_americans/)
* *r/ApplyingToCollege:* [Don’t Study in Europe Unless You Are Comfortable Living in Another Country!!!](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gxt86i/dont_study_in_europe_unless_you_are_comfortable/)
* *New York Times:* [A Guide to Getting a Bachelor’s Abroad](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/06/education/edlife/a-guide-to-getting-a-bachelors-abroad.html)

## 

## gap year

Again, another decision that requires a lot of consideration. If you want to attend university after your gap year, it can't be spent going through Netflix’s entire inventory. Two links to get you started:

* *Forbes:* [Here’s Every Reason You Should Take a Gap Year Before College](https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertfarrington/2019/06/10/heres-every-reason-you-should-take-a-gap-year-before-college/#20fa97591ac8)
* *College Confidential:* [Gap Year Anecdotes](https://talk.collegeconfidential.com/musical-theater-major/1978488-gap-year-antecdotes.html)

Also, to be topical, due to COVID-19, college plans for prefrosh are susceptible to change. It’s up to you what you’re going to do, whether that means dealing with possible online classes, or deferring enrollment, or just taking a year off. You’re not alone:

* *USA Today:* [Rethinking College, or at Least Fall Semester, During Coronavirus? You Risk Not Graduating](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2020/05/17/coronavirus-fall-semester-2020-low-income-college-students-graduation/5196478002/)
* *Washington Post:* [College Students Consider Gap Years Amid Pandemic](https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/05/13/gap-years-college-covid/)
* *New York Times:* [Colleges Face Rising Revolt by Professors](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/us/coronavirus-college-professors.html)
* *New York Times:* [Expecting Students to Play It Safe If Colleges Reopen Is a Fantasy](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/15/opinion/coronavirus-college-safe.html)
* *CNBC:* [7 Ways the Coronavirus Pandemic Could Change College This Fall and Forever](https://www.cnbc.com/2020/06/19/7-ways-coronavirus-pandemic-may-change-college-this-fall-and-forever.html)

## 

## military/military academies

Once again, [this is not a decision](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/egq6he/after_a_stressful_season_of_applications_ive/) to be taken lightly. The military requires commitment, and involves inherent risks. Additionally, the U.S. military academies are extremely selective, more so than some private universities; admission is in no way guaranteed.

Some links to learn more about enlisting:

* *Money Crashers:* [Joining the Military After High School—Benefits & Risks](https://www.moneycrashers.com/joining-military-benefits-risks/)
* *American Honors:* [Insight From a Veteran](https://americanhonors.org/blog/article/military-or-college-insight-veteran)
* *Your Teen Mag:* [Q&A With a Recruiter](https://yourteenmag.com/teenager-school/teens-high-school/army)

Some links to learn more about the military academies:

* *Forbes:* [What Students Need to Know Before Applying to One of the United States Military Academies](https://www.forbes.com/sites/kristenmoon/2019/08/20/what-students-need-to-know-before-applying-to-one-of-the-united-states-military-academies/#539813a348c8)
* *PrepScholar:* [What Are the US Military Colleges? Should You Go?](https://blog.prepscholar.com/us-military-colleges)

## other options

Of course, you don’t have to pursue any form of higher education. You can always enter the job market out of high school or explore personal endeavors.

1. Entrepreneurship: I’m pretty sure we all know about Mark Zuckerberg and Steve Jobs and Bill Gates and the worthlessness of college. Also, Gary V is always screaming about how all you need is innovation and ideas. It’s really up to you. Let me reiterate: college is not always the right path.
2. [Trade/](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/03/choosing-trade-school-over-college/584275/)[Vocational School](https://www.thesimpledollar.com/investing/college/why-you-should-consider-trade-school-instead-of-college/)
3. Internship/Fellowship/[Apprenticeship](https://www.niche.com/blog/apprenticeships-can-be-a-great-option-for-students-and-where-to-find-them/)/[Job](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/g4wdl2/got_rejected_from_every_college_and_just_signed/)
   1. [Praxis](https://discoverpraxis.com/)/[Echoing Green](https://www.echoinggreen.org/fellowship)/[Techstars](https://www.techstars.com/)
   2. [Thiel Fellowship](http://thielfellowship.org/)
   3. [Real Estate Agent](https://www.kapre.com/resources/real-estate/how-to-become-a-real-estate-agent/)/[Other options](https://www.businessinsider.com/high-paying-jobs-dont-require-bachelors-degree-2015-10#40-computer-network-support-specialists-1)
4. etc. etc. etc. do your research & so on

# admissions journey timeline

Alright future seniors. It’s your time to rise up. Here’s a loose interpretation of how you can and should spend your next few months. Buckle up.

## summer

Take it easy. You don’t need to get everything done; you will still have time going into your senior year. Just make sure that you’re preparing yourself for what is to come.

1. **LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION:** You can ask for your LORs as soon as March, but you don’t necessarily have to! Some people wait until September to do so. Ask your friends or upperclassmen when the best time is and go from there.
   1. If you’ve already asked, it’s always good to check in with your teachers sometime in late-July, early-August. I asked how they were, and sent in a little summary of what I had been doing since school ended. However, if your teacher explicitly tells you when they will be done with your recs, it may not be necessary to shoot them an email. You know them better than I do.

* Remember to also talk to your guidance counselors. They can help you keep organized and offer plans for classes and colleges.

1. **SUMMER ACTIVITIES:** I’m not sure how feasible summer programs are during COVID-19, but even personal projects count. Do something you’ve always wanted to do. Get a job. Hang out with friends. Savor these moments.
2. **FINISH TESTING:** Again, not sure how feasible this is during COVID-19. However, if you can, get everything together. Finish with the SAT/ACT/subject tests so you don’t have to worry about them later.
3. **PUT TOGETHER YOUR COLLEGE LIST:** Extremely important! Do your research! Pick one or two safety schools that you love. Talk to current students, learn about the culture of each school, pore over the programs they offer. Although you can’t visit campus, you can always watch videos, take virtual tours, attend online information sessions, and engage with social media accounts. Think about what you want from a school. Consider fit.

* AGAIN!!!! Do your research. Compile all information into a doc so you can refer back to it when writing supplements. Basic Google searches might not seem tedious, but they’re fucking tedious.
* You might also want to start capitalizing on demonstrated interest. Attend info sessions if possible. Sign up for updates from the university. Go onto their page and request information. Follow them on social media. Open all the emails they send, and click on links in the email.

1. **READ & WRITE A LOT:** And not just your college essays. You don’t need to be a writer, but building up your voice through prose is extremely important. Your personal statement is a central part of your application, and you definitely want it to accurately portray who you are as a person.

* As someone who is constantly writing, I highly recommend you start a daily journal (yes, a diary). I know that sounds like some middle-school girl trope, but honestly,,,,,, I resent that. Journaling is really good for your mental health, and it’s an easy way to loosen up your words, especially if you’ve only written AP Lang essays.
* Reading exposes you to different writing styles. You can become an intellectual in the span of one summer. Go back to school as Shakespeare. Try to hit different genres, such as memoirs, some classics, some self-help books, really up to you. Message me if you want book recs/want to talk about books! I can also include a Google Doc here with a list of novels I particularly enjoyed, who knows.

1. **BRAINSTORM & FIGURE OUT YOUR NARRATIVE:** Who are you? What do you love? What are some things that make you different from other people? Do you have any small quirks or passions? Most importantly, what do you want AOs to know about you? These are some questions to think about. Really squeeze out that introspection. It can be helpful when brainstorming.
2. **MAKE A COMMON APP/COALITION ACCOUNT:** The website updates on August 1 with new essay prompts. You shouldn’t worry too much about that, but filling out any miniscule information like family details, educational background, activities/honors will prevent you from having to spend time on those logistics later.

* Not everything rolls over when the site updates. While your data will be saved, your answers to questions from specific colleges, rec letter invitations/forms, FERPA selection, and other answers will not be. I highly recommend you just fill out the logistical information. Don’t even look at college-specific stuff, and never work directly out of your Common App account.

## fall & winter

And so it begins: the biggest grind of your life. Don’t overwhelm yourself. Prioritize and take breaks.

1. **CHECK IN:** You definitely want to talk to your recommenders and see how things are coming along. Email them, or even better, visit them in person. Also, meet with your guidance counselor. From what I remember, they might need to help you with setting some things up through Naviance or Common App.
2. **FINALIZE YOUR COLLEGE LIST:** It’s time to figure out where you plan on applying early, whether that be through ED/EA/REA. Your RD schools can be subject to change, but having an idea of where you’re applying will offer some sense of security.
3. **SEND IN SCORES:** Once you know which schools you’re applying to, you can start sending in your standardized test scores. Get this over with so you don’t forget later. Also be aware that some schools allow you to self-report your scores.
4. **ESSAYS:** Your time will be consumed by the personal statement and supplement after supplement. Don’t be afraid to go through multiple drafts. You can switch between your personal statement and supplements, but make sure that you are moving forward with the essays. Have your friends and teachers read them. Be open to criticism.
5. **COMPLETE YOUR APPLICATIONS:** Depending on how the early round goes for you, you might want to do a complete overhaul. Regardless, you will be more prepared for RD. Edit your personal statement if necessary, finish your supplements, and press the button.
6. **INTERVIEWS:** After (or sometimes even before) you submit your application, you will start receiving interview requests. Check your emails. Make sure to fill out the appropriate forms. Be aware of priority deadlines where you are guaranteed to be granted an interview. There’s no point in stressing if you don’t receive a request. Try to go to as many as you can.
7. **LOCI:** If you were deferred early, you should send in an update around mid-January to early-February.
8. **TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF:** They say junior year is hard? Senior fall was *bad*. Juggling college apps, AP classes, and rejections. It’s definitely not fun, but remember to remind yourself that you are present. You deserve to have easy days. Focus on your health, both physical and mental.

## spring

Oh, the relief. You’re almost done.

1. **FOCUS ON YOUR GRADES:** Senioritis is real. Push through. It would suck to be rescinded.
2. **GIVE YOURSELF A BREAK:** The period between submitting apps and receiving decisions was one of the best times of my life. I just let go of everything. Spend time with friends and family. Or don’t. Do something you love. Stop thinking about it. There’s nothing you can do now.
3. **GRIEVE & CELEBRATE:** It’s going to be hard or it’s going to be euphoric. Take some take to grieve. Take some time to celebrate.
4. **LOCI:** If you’re waitlisted and you care about the school, send in a LOCI sometime in mid-April to early-May.
5. **REALLY CELEBRATE:** You’re done! You’re graduated! You’re finally fucking free!

# ur application as a living, breathing human

Your app is all that an AO will see of you. It’s important to know how you’re going to approach each element, and how an AO will approach each element. Also, some advice from those who have already been through it. Let’s just jump into it.

## from the AO’s perspective

Imagine we are in the admissions office. Let’s take a little peek into how your application is considered.

### works cited

I don’t want to continuously link the same sources, so I’ll just list where I got the following information. I also want to be abundantly clear and say that I am obviously not an admissions officer. I’m not even in college yet. Nothing is from personal experience; all of it is from research.

1. [*Inside the Yale Admissions Office* Podcast](https://open.spotify.com/show/4rZtfCyIZEfAVkg7aHzhzC?si=4NFYIDVUTjqlYpWkk_B1fQ): Surprisingly well-made? I lowkey stan Hannah and Mark now. Really easy listen, only four episodes so far, reveals a lot of helpful details about the entire process and how AOs read applications.
2. [*How Colleges Read Your Application*](https://prepmaven.com/blog/applying/how-colleges-read-your-application-a-4-step-process/): Informative breakdown of how AOs consider each app, goes into college-specific procedures.
3. [*Lifting the Veil on the Holistic Process at UC Berkeley*](https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/04/education/edlife/lifting-the-veil-on-the-holistic-process-at-the-university-of-california-berkeley.html): Basically shows how big schools have to take an adjusted approach to reading apps.
4. [*Interesting Statistics and Info Regarding Harvard Admissions*](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/cfwru7/interesting_statistics_and_info_regarding_harvard/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x): Explains the scoring system. I didn’t go into it below because it’s too specific to one school, but if you’re interested, definitely check the link out.
   1. [*I’m a Harvard Freshman Who Saw His Admissions File*](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/eplf0c/im_a_harvard_freshman_who_saw_his_admissions_file/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x): Again, about the scoring system but in context to an actual applicant who got in.
5. [*Interesting Notes From a Stanford Admissions Officer*](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/fys18x/interesting_notes_from_a_stanford_admissions/): Debunking common myths, a decent picture into the process.
   1. [*What it Takes*](https://stanfordmag.org/contents/what-it-takes): Straightforward description of what the AOs do, contradicts the post above in terms of the importance of institutional requirements so??? It is pretty old though. A lot of jerking off legacies if you really want to read about how they struggle.
6. *Ask Me Anything from:* [Duke Admissions](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/e8glqs/ama_with_duke_admissions_1211_at_7_pm/), [T5 AO](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/9f8zl3/ama_top_5_usnews_university_alum_worked_in_alma/), [former Cornell AO](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/3fmqfm/hi_im_nelson_ure%C3%B1a_i_am_a_former_admissions/), [current AO](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/3mpf59/im_a_college_admissions_officer_ama/), [Reed Dean of Admissions](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/40ypsw/im_milyon_trulove_vice_president_and_dean_of/)
7. *Admissions Experts on r/A2C:* [u/scholargrade](https://www.reddit.com/user/scholargrade), [u/admissionsmom](https://www.reddit.com/user/admissionsmom/), [u/williamthereader](https://www.reddit.com/user/williamthereader/)
8. *School Websites:* [UCB](https://academic-senate.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/approved_freshman_admissions_policy_2019_0.pdf), [UMich](https://admissions.umich.edu/apply/freshmen-applicants/selection-process)

### the process

Every school has different procedures, but they all follow a basic framework. This really reminds me of AP Biology and trying to understand the central dogma. Remember kids, it’s DNA to RNA, and *then* protein.

1. **FIRST READ/AREA READ:** Most schools will assign you a regional AO. For Yale specifically, they have 25 AOs who are each in charge of various regions in the U.S. and the world. Your regional AO will be the first person to read your application, and they are ultimately the person to fight for you.

* Regional AOs have specific knowledge about their assigned area. They can therefore better understand the applicants from their region.
* You can see how many AOs a school has by just checking out their admissions website.

1. **OUTSIDE/SECOND READ:** Not all schools guarantee you a second read. Sometimes the second opinion will be from someone who has a specific area of expertise related to your app.

* Yale seems to be relatively liberal with the number of outside reads an applicant gets. Cornell goes with the first reader, second reader model. Vanderbilt also guarantees two reads. NYU goes to committee after the first read. For Stanford, everyone is guaranteed only one read. Legacies are guaranteed two.

1. **THOROUGH READ:** Every single application is read from front to back. The general consensus seems to be 15 minutes per app. Your AO’s main goal is to understand you as a person, discern your idiosyncrasies, and really figure out the bigger picture. They look at every detail, from your hometown, to your grades, to your essays. They want to learn about your community, your passions, your intellectual approach. They want to figure out what kind of contributor you will be to their incoming class.

* Most colleges will not compare you to other people in your class. There’s usually not a certain number of spots per high school. However, UC universities do compare.
* Some colleges use ratings, but they generally describe it with the vague “it’s not as quantitative as you would think.” Basically, it’s not a rubric where you can just check things off. No part of your application sits in a vacuum. Everything is considered in context to one another.
  + For example, UMich uses the spectrum of “outstanding, excellent, good, average/fair, below average/poor” for each app.
  + As revealed through the Harvard lawsuit, every school will have their own mnemonics. For example, Stanford has one that is CPE, which means See Personal Essay.
* Large schools like Cal may bring in outside readers who help rank applicants on the first read. Each ranking is reviewed by an experienced lead reader. Everyone is required to undergo intensive training beforehand.

1. **INFORMATION SHEET:** The info sheet contains a summary that AOs refer to during committee. This is the most!!!!! important!!!!!!! part of your read!!!!!!! First, they document the objective information. Then comes the critical analysis. They need to evaluate each part of your app, and see how all the pieces come together. The final sheet attempts to synthesize a dynamic person into a two-sided piece of paper.

* Yale calls it a “work card.” Cornell calls it a “first/second reader sheet.” Stanford just asks you to do it for them.

1. **THE SLATE:** Not every applicant is brought to committee. As Yale describes it, your regional AO decides who to bring to the slate. However, in general, another person will read your information sheet. They can propose looking at an applicant even if said applicant isn’t chosen by their regional AO. This either involves a full discussion or just a check-in.
2. **THE COMMITTEE:** Each school has a different number of people on their committee. First, everyone considers the information sheet(s). Your regional AO might present your app. Then, the committee deliberates; this can take anywhere from five minutes to an hour. Sometimes they will pull up parts of your application, such as an essay or a rec. It all seems like an absurdly consequential Socratic seminar where the topic is a kid’s future.

* Yale has five members: the area AO, another AO, the chair AO (who guides the conversation, asks for feedback or thoughts, and decides when it’s time to vote), and two other people (might be a faculty member, or a dean).
* Harvard has four to five members on their subcommittee. Some apps will move onto the full committee.
* For Cornell, if both of the First and Second Reader agree, then the decision is pretty much already made. If they disagree, the committee has a discussion.

1. **THE VOTE:** The fundamental discourse centers around what role you will play in the school’s community. At the end of their discussion, they vote. Typically the vote is final.

* For Yale, they literally use clickers to put in their votes. The audacity. You need 4 out of 5 votes to be directly admitted.

1. **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS:** Sometimes the AOs have to consider institutional priorities. This is a pretty stupid example, but let’s hypothetically say a school has a quota of five tuba players. If you’re the sixth tuba player, you’re fucked. Obviously it’s not as simple as that, but they do have to consider demographics, when admitting a student. They also have to consider yield, though at top universities, that’s not as much of a problem.

* So yes, the major that you put down might be considered. Schools have to make sure that their departments are filling up, or aren’t overcrowded. Some majors are definitely more competitive than others. However, putting yourself as undeclared might be harmful because your major adds to your overall narrative.

Everything is very much deliberate. Also, my disappointment is immeasurable: AOs are actual people. I’ve always imagined a group of lawyer-type professionals with long limbs, and cartoonish faces, all holding gavels, deciding the fate of each and every high school senior with complete apathy. How insane would that be? More entertaining than reality at least. However, and I’m sorry to say this, AOs are not your enemies. It isn’t their job to seek out revolutionaries. It’s their job to intimately understand the people who could potentially make up the matriculating class. They form personal attachments. They come to love your quirks. They root for you. So give them something to root for.

Though, it would be absolutely remiss of me if I didn’t, you know, slide in the fact that the [admissions process is corrupt](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/02/whats-wrong-with-college-admissions/462063/) and [luck is still part of it all](https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/30/books/review/Leonhardt-t.html).

### what they are looking for

The Duke AMA produced this absolute banger of a quote:

For selective colleges it’s generally a matter of identifying students with strong academic factors to distinguish among those students. You don’t have to be a national or international winner, and you don’t have to be an athlete. We’re interested in what matters to you, how that gets manifested in how you spend your time, and then if you’ve had some kind of impact in that area. I think you’d be surprised (or pleased) at the degree to which small differences in academic credentials fade away when we discuss students, and how much we try to understand the student as an individual in the context of the complexity of their life and as a potential member of the Duke student body.

Basically, there is no perfect applicant. Oh shit, prepare yourself: I’m about to say something really corny, but how can I pass up on this? ***There is only one you.***

LMAO. It’s true, though. You are the only one who will pursue those ECs, have those recs, write those essays. You are the only one to have that specific narrative. What’s more, your application is considered in full. Nothing stands by itself. Everything provides context for everything else. So you don’t necessarily want to stand out. But you do want to stick with your AO. You want them to remember you. Chase after the things you really care about. Be authentic. Be genuine. Okay, I’m stopping, this is starting to sound like a self-help book.

As for each particular university, look at their websites. [Here’s](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gb1xm2/understanding_what_a_particular_college_is/) an elaborate analysis of Rice’s. Admissions sites will straight up tell you what kind of students they are looking for. They also describe their academic philosophy (definitely look up their mission statement), and sometimes the school’s culture. If they go out of their way to include it, you can pretty much assume that it is important to them. A lot of schools also have FAQ sections and their own application tips.

In general, if you don’t want to go through all the pages, just search up “[school’s name] what we look for.” You will most likely find a detailed outline of everything they consider important in an applicant.

This information is so! good! when you start shaping your own application. Each school’s culture is different. It can be to your benefit to peddle a certain aspect of your app if you know that a college favors it. Supplements are really helpful in that regard. Your “why school” essay is the best place to gas yourself up. You basically just have to convince the AOs that you’re pretty cool, and completely irreplaceable. Easy enough.

## general app advice from quasi-experts

I compiled a bunch of tips from various Reddit posts made by seniors who have already gone through it. Hence the “quasi” modifier, but we survived, so, I mean, we kind of know what we’re talking about.

1. [Juniors/Underclassmen, Here’s What I’ve Learned the Hard Way](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bah3y8/juniorsunderclassmen_heres_what_ive_learned_the/)
2. [Staying Sane During College Admissions](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gnb9fs/staying_sane_during_college_admissions/)
3. [How r/A2C Helped Me Achieve My Dream - Advice & Hot Takes](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/g3ez8m/how_ra2c_helped_me_achieve_my_dream_advice_hot/)
4. [To the College Class of 2025](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/fqqxf5/to_the_college_class_of_2025/)

### before we begin

* Don’t believe everything you see on A2C or CC or wherever. You’re rarely ever given a full story with all the facts or circumstances. They’re decent posts to read, but don't try to extrapolate anything about your own chances.
  + Survivorship bias is a very real thing. For every one person declaring how they got into any ivy, there are ten (probably more, let’s be real) people that didn’t get in .
* There are maybe 500 kids in the world each year who could basically get into any place they want. These include everyone from ISEF winners to international olympiad winners to Greta Thunburgs. For the rest of us, we’re honestly smuggling it out on the playing field. This is why a balanced list is important.
* The most ideal scenario would be to enter the college application with a clear, defined vision of your future goals. It helps when writing essays, especially when you’re trying to craft a “narrative.” Figure out what your story is, and run with it.
* Don’t underestimate yourself, but also be realistic. So many people are on the opposite ends of the spectrum, where they either apply to all safeties and very little reaches, or they only apply to reaches with no safeties. You want to find a balance.

### mental preparation

* Fall in love with a safety school. Don’t just randomly choose your state’s flagship that you know nothing about. Put the same energy into researching your safety as you do with all your schools. You never know what will happen, and having a solid safety that you adore will undoubtedly be good for your mental health.
  + EA/apply through rolling admissions if possible. The relief of your first acceptance is unmatched.
  + Make sure your safeties are also financial safeties. Look for a college that not only offers your major, but will also give you merit/financial aid. That way you also know that you have at least one affordable option.
* Don’t get overly attached to a T20 school. You have to remember that the majority of students are rejected or waitlisted. If it has a 10% acceptance rate, that means that 90% of people do not get in. The odds are only in a select group’s favor. Please don’t crush your own soul in the process.
  + You’re allowed to hate “prestigious” schools, schools that are good for your major, or whoever’s alma mater. You are also allowed to really love schools you really didn’t think you would.
  + Moreover, as much as I absolutely rip on prestige, I understand that it’s inescapable. You shouldn’t feel guilty for considering a school because it’s elite. I definitely did the same thing. But don’t pick a college *only* because it’s selective or has clout. That’s not a good enough reason.
* Figure out how you’re going to approach the social aspect of college apps. Depending on what kind of school you go to, if it’s hyper-competitive or just really fucking gossipy/nosey, you might have some added stress just navigating the talk. Some people are going to be jealous. Some people will doubt your abilities. Some people will talk about whether you were accepted/rejected. Are you going to tell your friends where you applied? Are you going to tell kids in your AP Gov class what your dream school is? How much do you trust these people? It’s really up to you.
  + I personally told everyone everything LMAO. They knew I was EDing to Cornell. They knew I was deferred. They knew I was ED2ing to WashU. They knew I was accepted. I’m sure people were talking about my deferral. I’m sure people were talking about my acceptance. I’ve never been *that* affected by what other people say. I guess my logic was that, by putting all this out there, I would have some type of mental preparation rather than having people find out from someone who wasn’t me and being caught off guard by it.
  + Something else: it’s okay to feel jealous. It’s not okay to be a shitty person. We’re all human beings and we’re all inherently selfish. But to go out of your way to put someone down is just so unnecessary and cruel. College apps are literally so insignificant if you consider the rest of your life. Stop being a dick.
* Don’t stress about college apps after you submit them. There’s nothing you can do anymore. Relax. Take care of yourself. It’s your last year of high school. Be sentimental. Go do things that you’ve always wanted to do. Hang out with your family, or your friends, or yourself.
  + Do NOT reread your essay. Before WashU came out, I looked through my personal statement and my supplement, and tore them apart. I destroyed myself, pointing out everything I did wrong. This is so unproductive. Go drink some water or something, jesus christ.
  + Appreciate the journey of how much you’ve achieved throughout high school. Recognize that you’re not the same person you were in freshman year. You’re probably not the same person you were from before college apps. That’s a good thing.

### organization

* Create a new email for all your college portals and your Common App account. If you start early, you can use this email to sign up for tours and put on your standardized tests when you opt in for college advertisement. Make sure it isn’t stupid, because you will most likely use this email to contact AOs and interviewers.
* Check your portals often. They will list all the materials they have received/still need. Sometimes they put interview sign-ups or scholarship apps there. I would check literally every day, but that’s bordering on insane, so maybe don’t do that. Twice a week should be okay.
  + Also, I highly recommend you make a spreadsheet that has all your passwords and the links to your portal. I used [Notion](https://www.notion.so/), but you can also use Google Sheets or Excel, or just bookmark all of them and group them into a folder.
* Write your essays in a separate document. I highly recommend you just make a Google Drive folder and organize all your docs in there so you don’t go crazy trying to find everything. Do NOT write directly in Common App because you will lose everything.
  + Reuse your goddamn essays. Everyone does it. Don’t waste your time.

### application

* Start early, but don’t panic. I know that everyone tells you to get everything done over the summer, but literally no one does that, which is probably why they’re warning you. Anyone who actually finishes their essays before school starts scares me. Yes, you want to begin as early as you can. But, if it’s September and you haven’t gotten anything done, don’t dwell on how little time you have left. Your earliest deadline will most likely be November 1. Trust me, you have time.
  + BUT OBVIOUSLY, start early!!!!!!!!!!!!! You can tell yourself that you work well under deadline-pressure, but in reality, you probably don’t.
* Prioritize. Breathe. During app season, you will have a lot going on. Keep your grades up. Take breaks if you need to. Let your essay sit for a few days. Figure out what you need to do first, and don’t overwhelm yourself.
  + It’s easy to forget about your grades, but all universities will ask for your first semester report. If you are deferred, your school might want to see how you’re doing in your classes. Don’t let your grades fall.
  + Work hard on your apps, of course, but don’t throw so much of yourself into them that you resurface some time later to find high school’s passed you by. Some people are perfectly fine with that, but make sure you get a chance to make that choice.
* Be extremely careful of “hidden” deadlines. Some scholarship or priority deadlines are actually before the RD deadline. You don’t want to miss out on an opportunity just because you overlooked it.

## a game to be played

For all you cynics out there, I know that you’re just itching to describe this entire charade as a very easily manipulated game. Here are all the rules. Here is how you can follow them, undefeated. It’s that easy right? Because can’t “genuine” and “authentic” be fabricated? How are AOs supposed to know the difference?

It’s me. I’m the cynic.

My biggest question towards A2C and CC relates to the intention of every student: are you working this hard out of vehement interest, or the need for financial stability, or the desire to win and to be validated? I see so many kids on these forums who want to go into the most profitable industries, namely finance and CS. Rarely are they pursuing social sciences or pure science.

It’s understandable though. I’m not enough of an idealist to think money and prestige don’t matter at all. I ask myself constantly if I really want to go into chemistry and writing (hopefully scientific journalism if my final form isn’t some jaded pessimist; a PhD is also an option). There’s not really a fortune to be made in a dying industry. And similar to how I can’t singlehandedly dismantle the elitism of college admissions by complaining, I also don’t see how I’m going to take down capitalism by not getting a job.

Basically, there are larger issues at play here. I mean, we can definitely go in *so* many directions. The possibilities are endless. But, I’ll just narrow the topic down to one very specific focus: elite colleges. I’m sure none of you expected that one.

Elite colleges condition students to approach their education as a game. To approach their passions as a game. To approach life as a game. And ultimately, students will be so conditioned to the game that they’ll no longer be a person. [They’ll just be another player participating in the machinery of it all.](http://paulgraham.com/lesson.html)

William Deresiewicz has already written an entire book about the [*Excellent Sheep*](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/13/books/excellent-sheep-william-deresiewiczs-manifesto.html) at top universities (and for some tea, [a couple people, academics in particular, really hated it](https://psmag.com/social-justice/william-deresiewicz-excellent-sheep-alienate-many-readers-91907)). [Here’s a basic summary](https://newrepublic.com/article/118747/ivy-league-schools-are-overrated-send-your-kids-elsewhere): students are taught to stifle their creativity and fervor for learning to achieve a more rigid definition of success. They are left not knowing who they really are, not knowing what they really love, but knowing what to think rather than how. [Most are overachievers, but many are also overworked](https://mitadmissions.org/blogs/entry/meltdown/). They are lost and unsure, [without any drive for intellectual conversation but all the facilities to climb the hierarchy of any corporation they desire](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2001/04/the-organization-kid/302164/).

This all starts well before matriculating into a university. First, you have to get in. And admissions is the [first big game any of us have to play](https://www.removeddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/g0xhv8/hot_take_colleges_know_that_many_of_their_best/). We study for 4.0s and 1600s. [We join the extracurriculars that make us the most “spiky,” compete in the most impressive competitions, apply for the most selective summer programs](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/b73rci/aos_cant_actually_detect_authenticity_or_passion/). We kiss up to teachers, [we write essays that glorify who we are](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/edslo1/unpopular_opinion_admissions_officers_cant_tell/). And it works. We get in. And we continue to play the game. Or it doesn’t. We don’t get in. And we continue to despair about losing.

But why would you want to do that? Why would you want to shape yourself into someone who can get into an elite college, [but is otherwise lifeless](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/deaqv2/im_tired_of_this_game/)?

I know it sounds like I’m preaching. I’m not trying to attack the application itself. I actually think it tries its best to hold up the “holistic” promise. In some ways, I’m just mad at myself for caring so much for so long. My freshman and sophomore years were absolutely miserable. 3AMs were spent browsing College Confidential, and figuring out which AP classes I could take to increase my GPA, which ECs would look the best, which competitions were the most known, which summer programs would give me the biggest boost. I literally had panic attacks thinking about my B in geometry. I hated how stupid I was compared to everyone else. I wasn’t HYPSM material. But I could be.

And then, I really couldn’t give a shit anymore. I started learning just for the sake of learning. I started reading again. I started writing again, more importantly. I started paying attention to the news, and forming opinions, and I don’t know. Lowkey was on that 180 IQ bender!!!!! That’s a lie, I’m dumb as fuck. But at least I’m not miserable anymore.

I encourage you to do the things that you want to do. And if you don’t know what that is, I encourage you to find out. Of course, you can’t completely forget about college. But don’t let it be the sole motivator behind everything you do. If you play the admissions game, you’re signing yourself up for a much longer one, one that is harder to escape. Maybe AOs can’t detect authenticity or passion. [However, they can detect someone interesting, someone who is three-dimensional, and complex, and flawed](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/aqqtys/how_to_get_into_stanfordby_someone_who_didnt/).

And at least you’re not hinging your happiness on something that is out of your control. At least you’ll be able to find happiness elsewhere, in the things that *you* want to do.

# building ur college list

Not to be gross and profound, but your college list is infinitely important because it decides all the different futures ahead of you. Each one represents a version of yourself, a version of who you will be in ten, twenty, thirty years. So don’t overlook it! Take it seriously!

Anyway, crisis over. Let's do this, losers.

## personal experience

I thought we could do a little case study and look at some college lists, starting with mine. Here’s a Sparksnotes version of why I applied to every school and if I would do it again.

### early round

1. **Cornell (reach, ED, deferred):** Yes. In many ways, Cornell was everything I *didn’t* want in a school. But the reasons it wasn’t where I imagined my next four years were also the reasons I might have enjoyed it most. The college town ~vibes~ in Ithaca are unmatched. The Gorges? Gorgeous, ey hey. Big school: more people to meet, more clubs to join, more classes to explore. Admirable philosophy of educating the masses. Academic flexibility. Good CS department. Ice cream making course that I will never be able to take :^(((((((((((
2. **Washington University in St. Louis (reach, ED2, accepted):** Obviously, yes. Everything I *did* want in a school. Midsized. Academic freedom. Far from home. Good writing department, and accepted me into their Nemerov Writing Scholars Program. Good STEM support. People like to attack St. Louis but she’s very beautiful to me. Midwestern politeness. Welcoming and supportive student body. No sports, but still a unifying proudness to be at the school. Best campus, best dorms, best food, tempurpedic mattresses.
   1. And because this is the school that I will be attending, I want to stress that not every university is perfect. Even the school that you love the most will have its faults; it’s a little naive to think otherwise. WashU’s economic diversity is lacking; its location isn’t the best, especially if you want to go to major cities on either coasts after graduation; no brand name recognition, which isn’t too big a deal because “employers will definitely know WashU!”; pre-med/pre-professional culture is just not it for me; no party scene LMAO. But, here’s the thing, none of these factors are deal-breakers. Don’t ignore the flaws of a school. Do they outweigh the benefits? Would you still attend knowing all this?
3. **Rutgers (safety, EA, accepted):** Yes. I would have been perfectly content attending RU, which was why I didn’t bother applying to other safeties.
4. **Northeastern (match, EA, accepted):** Yes. City and campus integrated together. Co-op program. Offered merit aid.
5. **University of Chicago (reach, EA, deferred):** Yes. All of my dark academia dreams are set at UChicago. Quarter system. Core curriculum. Investment in thought, passion, and learning. Quirky student body.
6. **University of Michigan (reach, EA, deferred):** No. Too big for me. I really only applied because it’s a top public school and I thought I had a solid chance. Submitted my LOCI on the last possible day, which was definitely an indicator that I just didn’t care that much. Sorry, Mich, it’s not u, it’s me. but mostly u.

### regular round

1. **Amherst (reach):** Probably, but I really don’t know the difference in terms of culture between Amherst, Williams or Pomona. LACs appealed to me because they’re small and offer personal and intimate experiences. Good feeders into grad school, too. Also remote living in the mountains? Sign me up.
2. **Williams (reach):** Yes, see above.
3. **Pomona (reach):** Maybe not, probably would not have gone all the way out to the west coast.
4. **Reed (reach):** Yes. They seem to really care about their students. The senior thesis could potentially prepare me for grad school. Encourages intellectual pursuit, similar to UChicago. Progressive, quirky. Portland. Aesthetic mail and website design.
5. **Case Western Reserve (match):** No. Wanted a match school. No supplements.
6. **Tulane (match):** No. Free application and that’s it. Also no supplements.
7. **Columbia (reach):** Maybe. Core Curriculum. NYC. Good journalism program.
8. **Yale (reach):** No. Literally only applied because it’s Yale, and that was a moment of weakness on my part. I would not have fit in at all. Also, I probably stunk up the admissions office with how shitty my supplements were.
9. **Emory (reach):** Yes. Really love my soda, what can I say. Beautiful campus and weather. Atlanta. Southern hospitality. Good writing program. STEM support.
10. **Tufts (reach):** Maybe. Big focus on internationalism and volunteering which I’m not too interested in. LAC type vibes, but larger school. Near Boston.
11. **NYU (reach):** Maybe. Lack of campus *really* bothered me. NYC. Diverse student body.
12. **Northwestern (reach):** Yes. I even regretted not EDing for a while. Great chemistry program. Even better journalism department. The campus is breathtaking. Near Chicago; Evanston has the college town feel. But it’s also extremely cliquey, and after reading tons of posts about why it sucks to make myself feel better, I definitely would not have ED’d, even with a second chance.
13. **Vanderbilt (reach):** No. Just a diluted Duke, and I have a burning hate for Duke.

### conclusion

I clearly applied to a lot of schools. It can be considered shotgunning.

(be prepared for some rambling): My biggest regret is not having a finalized college list before applying early. I would’ve EA’d to Reed if I was aware of that option. I also would have given greater consideration to my ED school. My parents and some friends were convinced that I could get in somewhere “better” than WashU. I distinctly remember telling people that WashU was my number one choice, and them answering with the classic “you might as well be settling if you ED’d there.” So, Cornell it was. My parents hand-picked it for me, and I didn’t have enough of an opinion to argue against it. Of course, if I had the chance, I would have ED’d to WashU. However, if I was gonna be forced to apply to a higher ranked school, it might not have been Cornell, or honestly, it might have been; I still don’t know. Afterwards, all I could think about Northwestern. Funny enough, I hated NU after visiting. I just couldn’t see myself there, especially with the sheer number of theatre kids. Only after doing more research did I realize how much I could’ve belonged. But ALSO, if I had learned more about Cornell, I might’ve fallen in love with it instead of lowkey resenting it throughout the entire process lmao. Ultimately, WashU remains my top choice. I’m happy with how everything turned out.

Additionally, I had such an inferiority complex. And! I don’t want to admit it but! I did care about prestige! Together, these two factors resulted in me applying to schools that I just didn’t care about. I wasted time on submitting applications because I thought I had some chance of getting in, even if I really didn’t (UMich, Tufts, NYU, Vanderbilt). I also applied to schools that I wouldn’t have gone to over Rutgers even if accepted; I just wanted more “prestigious” backups (CWRU, Tulane). And finally, the pure prestige thirst traps (Yale, Pomona, maybe even Columbia). As you can see, my 19 schools could have been reduced to 11. I could have spared myself hours of unnecessary supplements and stress and saved so, so much money.

### other examples of college lists

Definitely check out [*r/CollegeResults*](https://www.reddit.com/r/collegeresults) to see how other people approached their college lists. You can also see where they were accepted/rejected. The mods have been doing a good job sorting through all the posts and adding flairs so it’s actually a really good reservoir of data. I love her very much.

Another helpful resource is from [*College Admissions Hub*](https://www.reddit.com/user/CollegeAdmissionsHub/), which provides documents that show real applicant profiles and their safeties, reaches, and matches. It’s basically the same thing as *r/CollegeResults*, but just prettier.

1. [Class of 2022](https://www.docdroid.net/tf21WnY/real-safeties-matches-and-reaches-from-the-class-of-2022-domestic-pdf)
2. [Class of 2023](https://www.docdroid.net/Mq1ocV5/real-safeties-matches-and-reaches-from-the-class-of-2023-pdf)

## factors to consider

I know how hard it can be to start putting together your list. Here are some things to take into account.

### the importance of “fit”

Yes, I’m bringing this up again because it is really important!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! All schools have [distinct cultures, student bodies, traditions, values, stereotypes, etc](https://talk.collegeconfidential.com/college-search-selection/1359801-ivy-league-stereotypes.html). For example, let’s take the [eight Ivy League colleges](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jy9TfP2z9r4). [Every admissions cycle you’ll hear news about some extraordinary student who gets into every single Ivy](https://www.thedp.com/article/2019/04/ivy-league-harvard-yale-penn-princeton-dartmouth-cornell-columbia-brown-acceptance)*;* a huge issue arises when you realize that those eight schools are completely different. It is literally impossible for a single student to feel as if he belongs at every one of them.

Focusing on just UPenn (wait, do u mean penn state??) and Brown, you will see stark variations. Penn is basically the epitome of “work hard, play hard.” [It is competitive, and pre-professional](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/d3wehk/letter_from_an_ivy_league_student_and_former_a2c/). Brown is known to be at the very opposite of the spectrum. It doesn’t have a core curriculum. Everyone’s laidback, quirky, progressive, whatever. Someone who thrives at Penn will *not* thrive at Brown, and vice versa.

We’re talking about the next four years of your life. You don’t want to make a decision purely based in prestige. You want to go somewhere that you care about, and that cares about you. Fit is important.

### 

### creating ur own college

There are thousands of universities in America. First, you need to pick general parameters to narrow that list down, and then consider their fit, in addition to their academic programs, resources, and opportunities. You can also bring in some more technical details after the fact, such as safety, transportation, inclusivity, academic support, etc. [Here’s a spreadsheet that provides a simple list of all those factors.](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1KTsePXF7dSfqFxUnLSbH_-Xyz38zNJ0NpImfaRMF3ek/edit#gid=0)

Before we do any of that, let’s all hold hands and participate in a fun activity. You can close your eyes, I don’t know, whatever you want. Imagine you’re allowed to build your perfect college. No restraints, fully-funded. What would it be like? Some things to think about:

* How many students are there? Big, small, midsized?
* Where is it? Near home, far away? West coast/east coast/midwest/south?
* Is it in a city? Suburban, rural, college town? Would you want to live in this area after graduating? Where would you like to live after graduating?
  + Consider the things you will miss the most/want the most: Do you want to go hiking? Do you want to explore the city? Will you be happy in a quaint little town? Will you miss the ocean, or suburbia? Do you still want to go to concerts? What can and can’t you give up?
* Is the campus integrated with the surrounding area? Does it have its own campus? What is the architecture like? Is the campus big or intimate? What is the library like? What are the lecture halls like?
* What is the dorm life like? Is there a professor who lives in the same building? Do you want to be close with your roommate? Do you want your hall to be like a family?
* What is the weather like?
* What are the students like? Are they collaborative, competitive, pre-professional, quirky, liberal, intellectual, nerdy, down for an impromptu conversation about Nietzsche?
* What is the culture like? Is there school pride? Greek life? Parties, drinking, drugs, etc.? Is it sports-dominated? Politically correct?
* What kind of academic programs does it offer? What areas is it strongest in? Does it offer study-abroad, close relationships with professors? Is it a strong feeder into grad schools? What are the lectures like? Are they discussion-based or in big lecture halls? Is there a lot of freedom, or is there a structured approach to the curriculum? Is it part of a consortium? Do they have co-op opportunities?

Alright. So yeah, sorry to say, but that college probably doesn’t exist. However, you can definitely find schools that come close to fulfilling your criteria. I recommend using the [*Big Future*](https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/college-search) search tool, which produces a list of colleges from your inputted responses. [*Money*](https://money.com/best-colleges/build-your-own-rankings/)has a similar search tool, but they also include rankings of ROI, so if you’re concerned with your career outcomes you can check that out.[*CollegeVine*](https://www.collegevine.com/) has an entire system in place for building your college list. You should also start looking at major rankings, state flagships/potential safeties, or even the top 100 universities & LACs on *US News* if you really have nowhere to start. [*Fiske Guide to Colleges*](https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/fiske-guide-to-colleges-2021-edward-fiske/1133879181)has descriptions of more than 300 schools. You can probably find it in your local library (save that money sis), along with other similar books. Otherwise, you can just look at [this CC thread](https://talk.collegeconfidential.com/college-search-selection/2165222-most-elite-colleges-universities-for-academics-2020-fiske-guide-to-colleges.html) where they give you free content based on paid content. Eat the rich.

Conversely, if you had a hard time with that activity, you can start thinking about criteria that you *don’t* want, or criteria that you just don’t care about. At least for me, I was pretty flexible with a lot of things, as you can probably tell by the big schools vs. the LACs. However, I knew that I didn’t want to attend a rural school, a school that was too dominated by sports/party/pre-professional (the irony with WashU & premed) culture or greek life, a school that didn’t have a campus, a school that wasn’t co-ed/had religious affiliation, a school that was too close to home, or a school that didn’t have structure to its core curriculum. With those “don’t wants,” you can pretty much figure out what you *do* want.

Lastly, similar to how some schools are extremely different from one another, there are also schools that are extremely alike. For example, Tufts and Brown are literally the same colleges. My friend who ED’d to Brown (and was rejected, rip) later committed to Tufts because “they have the same vibes” but also, “Tufts is basically just a Brown reject school >:^(.” Here’s a [video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFf_ySSA7Nc&pbjreload=101) & a [post](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gme6pz/what_t20s_to_apply_to_for_juniors/) showing comparable colleges. So, if you really like a university, maybe seek out some alternatives!!! Also, there are [safeties/matches](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtnwB1k6SOQ) out there that have similar characteristics to your favorite reaches.

Your college list doesn’t need to be confined to a certain type of school. It can have variety, a little spice!!!!!!!! But each school on your list should have multiple, valid reasons for being on there. Like I did with my own college list, you should just as easily write out a short summary of why you chose that school. If you can’t name more good things about it than you can name bad or unfavorable, maybe it just shouldn’t be on there.

One side note, but do not immediately write off LACs, even if you’re hoping to go into STEM. They are such underdogs (i love underdogs,,, that’s why when i inevitably fell into my one direction phase in middle school, i created full on scenarios in my head abt liam payne,,, & now we’re here, discussing it. life’s crazy) and can offer you so much that a university cannot offer you. Check them out.

And finally, another side note: same with HBCUs!!! They have good academic programs, especially in STEM, and more importantly, the communities??? You won’t find them elsewhere.

### research

Oh, dude. Research is definitely the hardest part. I know I keep putting it out there, that you need to look into the “culture” and the “fit,” but actually trying to figure out what that means takes so much fucking time. I got you, though. Here are a couple of resources that I used in order to decipher all of that.

1. **COLLEGE INFORMATION SESSIONS & CAMPUS TOURS**. Starting from sophomore year, I visited maybe around twenty schools? and went to every info session. In general, they say the same things in the sessions, though sometimes they throw out relevant stats or advice. The tours give you a really good idea about what it’s like to be there. You can also get input from the tour guides; it’s going to be one-sided because obviously they’re not going to roast their institution, especially when they’re getting paid to praise it. In my opinion, tours are pretty worth it because you can get a feel for the ~vibes~ while there.
   1. Here’s a [doc with my notes from all the tours](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1T7PHT9U73su10pyzfdd9-2NekWOM1hQPFRj73hgmM0s/edit?usp=sharing) I went on. It’s really not that useful, but idk.
   2. **FLY-IN DIVERSITY PROGRAMS:** I talked about this in the crash course section, but definitely apply to as many as you can, especially if you’re part of an underrepresented group (ORM and white students included!!!). They give you the chance to visit even if you otherwise would not have had that opportunity.
   3. **VIDEOS OF CAMPUS:** I understand that not everyone can go on a spontaneous road trip across the country to visit some of these schools. Don’t worry. [This person did it for you *and* included a few helpful stats](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/ftvyu3/i_visited_100_top_colleges_360_campus_tour_videos/). Godsend.
   4. **VIRTUAL TOURS:** I’m pretty sure every single school offers a virtual tour, whether that be on their website or through YouTube or whatever platform. You just have to search it up.
2. **COLLEGE YOUTUBERS.** I stay away from this niche of social media, but I used to religiously watch Cath in College and I mean, she did such a good job showing Stanford that I literally caught feelings, so. Most of these people don’t make only school-related content, and some only make like one video; if you sift, it’s there. Here’s a condensed list:
   1. **“DAY IN THE LIFE”/ALL SCHOOLS:** [Crimson Education](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_f7C43GUWhif5_yPsamdfA), [Domonique Cynthia](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCD2xV_vKP-JzLus_KQWCJCw/videos), CampusReel [website](https://www.campusreel.org/)/[YouTube channel](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCE16KLWxJ_5K9vJ1yQMnaqg/videos)
   2. **VANDERBILT:** [Eliot Choi](https://www.youtube.com/user/ELLIOTCHOY), [Alexandra Kusio](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnd33EPNtgcHCT-7FSZeEEA/videos)
   3. **UMICH:** [Jack Liu](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdjl8JRayQZqVpvrlG7-mtA/videos), [Bella Jung](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWAaY6XTmmjf49i5r6t9n_Q/videos), [Jayde Emery](https://www.youtube.com/user/JaydeLora/videos), [SophRita](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJJppFTOPUs_e4NkBr7A-Qw/videos), [Maddy Kim](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCxjTvcY9EHHdtg8zwSAXKUw/videos), [Lorena](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0Kwvj3oQP7VR-cChT4ypeg/videos)
   4. **STANFORD:** [Arpi Park](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCGHfNdzi6_e4tYuoaqbdQpA), [Cath in College](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9E_7b2JdHHrN_r0har7ifA), [The Kath Path](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDyOQFc-pAuIEjICmoq3VLw/videos), [nazjaa](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTf_izuJZrmmlPeiyCB-17Q/videos)
   5. **CORNELL:** [Anna From Indiana](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3QJQD-BiABKq_7u-Gy-Gqg), [Katie Tracy](https://www.youtube.com/user/alohakatiex), [Reece Lopez](https://www.youtube.com/user/xoreecenoelle/videos)
   6. **BROWN:** [May Gao](https://www.youtube.com/user/maystachio), [Kaito Ran](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZcu5QzBMZHvURZgl_D8pYw), [Alexis Elena](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7zzfaOl_QNttKqMQZaj5fg), [Angie Kim](https://www.youtube.com/user/angiekim21/videos)
   7. **PRINCETON:** [Nicolas Chae](https://www.youtube.com/user/nicolaschae123/videos)
   8. **DARTMOUTH:** [Joelle](https://www.youtube.com/user/JustJoelle1/videos), [Hanna Likes Science](https://www.youtube.com/user/hannahjb47), [heyitsjoshco](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXzyJp2tuwDrtKVFiOyr0gQ)
   9. **SWARTHMORE:** [tbhstudying](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCc1tG1M1qP4IE6AQLXXWyww), [chili shi](https://www.youtube.com/user/peppermintmix/videos), [jane](https://www.youtube.com/user/MsSmartyPants00/videos)
   10. **UCB:** [Michelle Yuan](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbsRxPYlkNiOM3PXPZJw5EQ), [Angelica Song](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9_M4M1Vu4Y9pYVxJlOW4EQ/videos), [Edward Sa](https://www.youtube.com/user/IngeniousEdits/videos)
   11. **UCLA:** [gina min](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCu0ehiQdonlRcvv20VVabvw/videos), [lifeofmeili](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCD73DUsDcWrpJU7NNNBuTpg/videos), [Ally Gong](https://www.youtube.com/user/ally1on/featured)
   12. **HARVARD:** [John Fish](https://www.youtube.com/user/MrFish235) (idk,,, mans doesn’t even make Harvard content anymore, but he’s definitely the most well-known Harvard kid), [Sienna Santer](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCn6BJylSkl-Gd66qepnmHzg/videos), [christine lee](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUzy4w3TfWgoXTLXyXwEbHw/videos), [SmileyEssie](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQk_GhpInqu0SMVdKYPm3rg/videos)
   13. **YALE:** [Josh Beasley](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWZs3J4-EI5nfznIV_lTMJQ/videos),[Ris](https://www.youtube.com/user/TheCroatianQueen/videos), [Victoria Lim](https://www.youtube.com/user/jadecalypso/videos), [Hannah Maria](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCrkBbpzGuo6tdfaJO6x57_g/videos), [Louisa Nordstrom](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnikTfmIFT180qMFkW9KPsg/videos)
   14. **COLUMBIA:** [Natasha Martina](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCP-oI4NDtNTOPdObOH16-Gg/videos), [sophia qureshi](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZ2DRtmMmGccMZqbNNnJvNA/videos), [Krystle DiCristofalo](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCj18ZeOBE_gaJF-pW-6gVCQ/videos)
   15. **NYU:** [amandamaryanna](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCmHAVcXFFUcFRI7Gs4HQ6Kg/videos), [heyitsbridge](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWRr0_n_1OGYAxvzDkC2sow/videos)
   16. **WASHU:** [Maya Par](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2aFLtco7kU_ubPwfZEP4lw/videos), [Nathan Card](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCmb8tTGnt91Tha_F7SdsSdA/videos), [Ru Kam](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCmAj-_x7ef4uP1AyBZrqcUg/videos)
   17. There are a lot more!!! Just hit up YouTube and search whatever school you’re looking for.
3. **GOOGLE SEARCH:** Okay, yes, this one is obvious, but strategic! searching! is! key!!! I would always look up “best/worst parts of [insert school]” which would give me a pretty multi-faceted idea of the university. You can also do “what makes [insert school] unique.” CC is literally so useful for this stuff so adding College Confidential after any search will yield some good threads. They usually also have stuff like “101 reasons to attend [insert school].” Going with the classic “[insert school] stereotypes,” or “[insert school] culture” or “[insert college] vs [insert another college]” will usually give you solid information and comparisons. [*Unigo*](https://www.unigo.com/) will ALWAYS show up; however, I still think [*StudentReviews*](https://www.studentsreview.com/) has the worst web design, but the best opinions.
4. **SCHOOL’S WEBSITE:** Did I judge schools based on the aesthetic of their websites????? Yes. I’m not even ashamed; that shit is important. But what’s on the inside matters too. You’re probably going to have to look through their website when writing your supplement, so you might as well start early. Look for traditions, activities, mission statements, fun facts, etc. Admissions websites have more material geared towards potential applicants, but their general website will probably have most of the boring stuff like research, diversity, student affairs, recent events, which are all equally as relevant. Comb through it all, my dude.
5. **ISSUU/SCHOOL PUBLICATIONS:** A lot of schools will put their online publications on [Issuu](https://issuu.com/). Just search up the university’s name, and sometimes if you’re lucky, you will get some really good stuff!!! If you have no hobbies like me, this is a solid way to pass time. You can also just look up student publications, like magazines or newspapers.
6. **LINKEDIN, CAREER OUTCOME DATA:** Slightly embarrassed to admit it, but I would literally die for career outcome data. Especially if it’s nicely formatted (@ northwestern, [urs is my fave](https://www.northwestern.edu/careers/about-us/post-undergraduate-survey-data/assets/beyond-northwestern-2019.pdf)). Where a school’s alumni end up shows the overall academic pursuits of the student body. Insight into the school’s culture? I think so. Also, if you look at the university’s LinkedIn page and go onto the Alumni page, you can straight up see the statistical breakdown, which is usually more transparent than career outcome reports from the school itself. Knock yourself out.
7. **SOCIAL MEDIA OF SCHOOL/BLOGS:** Usually very polished, but you might get something out of it. Check out their blogs if they have any! Said blog will probably have some type of list detailing why they’re superior to every other college, which is always a riveting read. Side note: I don’t know why it’s so funny to me that [UChicago has a Tumblr](https://uchicagoadmissions.tumblr.com/), but it’s on brand and I do respect them just a little bit more for it.
8. **SOCIAL MEDIA OF STUDENTS:** I’m not recommending that you track people down LMAO. But visiting some student-run accounts that center around the school, and maybe even reaching out to ask questions can be helpful. Definitely look at meme accounts and college-specific subreddits. All schools have Barstool-affiliated Instagrams (very entertaining!!!! always a fun time!!!!! can u tell that i am constantly bored!!!!!!). These meme pages are a really candid look into the school’s culture, and are usually reflective of the student body. Also, *r/ApplyingToCollege* will have plenty of kids interested in the same schools, especially if it’s T20. They have an abundance of [hot takes](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gvbb5w/colleges_as_avatar_nations/) and [other rad posts](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/hf71yl/colleges_by_myersbriggs_personality_type_16/).
   1. Also, if you dig *deep*, like 5AM-been-awake-for-24-hours type deep, you’ll find so much stuff. Not even obscure stuff. Just, in general, tons of stuff. It’s all out there. For example: [here’s a doc](https://docs.google.com/document/d/14Mn1CrA-CV5YZAkOZtrMKTmn2O4oL-2EhIXhzXZbO0A/edit?usp=sharing) with a bunch of information from current students of many different schools!!! [Here are appreciation posts](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/hjlef8/lac_highlights_8_reed_college/) for LACs and public universities!!!!! Now it’s your turn; I’ve really just been carrying you this entire time.

### determining safety, match or reach

A lot of people define safety/match/reach differently. Some say it’s up to your stats, some say it really depends on the acceptance rate. I personally believe both schools of thought are valid and correct. Once a college has a sub-40 acceptance rate, it’s going to be a reach for anyone (unless u have insane hooks). Your stats help determine whether a university is a safety or match. A safety is a school that you are GUARANTEED to get into. No questions asked. A match is a school that you are likely to get into.

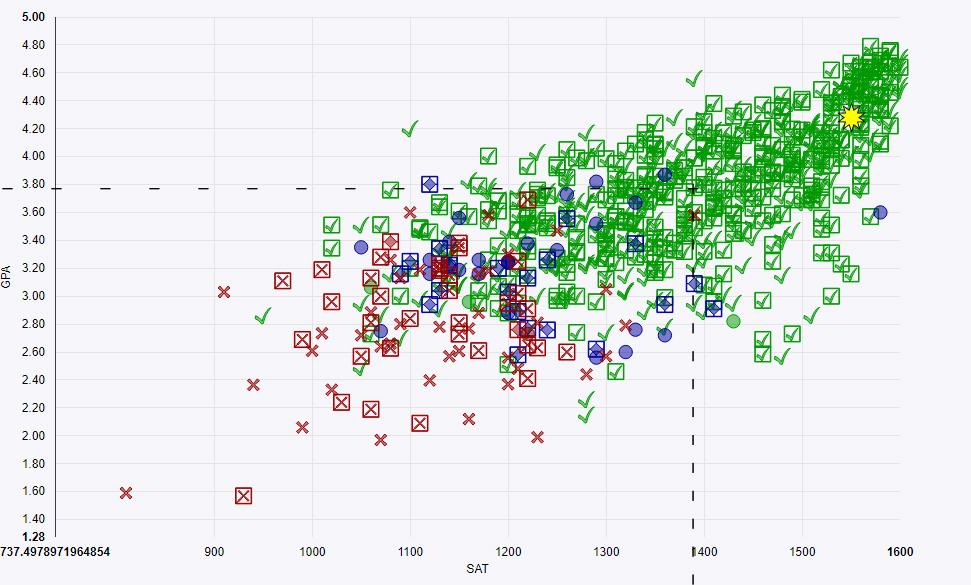
You also really need to consider financial safeties. Do not ignore the money aspect of college because in the U.S., that’s just not realistic. Even if you are likely to get into a school, will you be able to pay for it with the potential aid? Prepare for the worst. Make sure you have a school that can offer you a suitable financial deal; you don’t want to be left without any options at the end of April. Run the [net price calculator](https://collegecost.ed.gov/net-price), find schools that [meet 100% demonstrated financial need](https://blog.collegevine.com/schools-that-meet-100-percent-financial-need/), and universities that offer merit aid, full-ride scholarships or honor colleges. If you’re interested in what attendance costs, [here’s a website](https://coda.io/@collegetuition/) that breaks down tuition for various universities across America.

Alright, so onto finding the relevant data. For acceptance rates, always go directly to the school’s website. They usually put out reports every year that not only state how many people were accepted, but also how many applicants they received. Sometimes looking at acceptance rates is not enough. Some universities become increasingly popular; even if they accept the same amount of people, the change in applicant number can drastically change the acceptance rate. Don’t be hit by a waitlist/rejection from a university who you fully expected to get into.

You can also look at common data sets (CDS), which compile some of the most important facts and figures that you need to know about a school. Not only does it include acceptance rate, but it also breaks down admissions and enrollment statistics. You can also compare your stats to the average test score/GPA of who was accepted, which can be a good way to see whether it’s a match or a safety. You can ALSO just search up “[insert school] freshman profile” to see the basic stat information. ALSO!!! [*College Insight*](https://college-insight.org/explore/) presents all the important material in a very digestible form. If you don’t want to go searching for every school, definitely use this tool (ey hey, that rhymed).

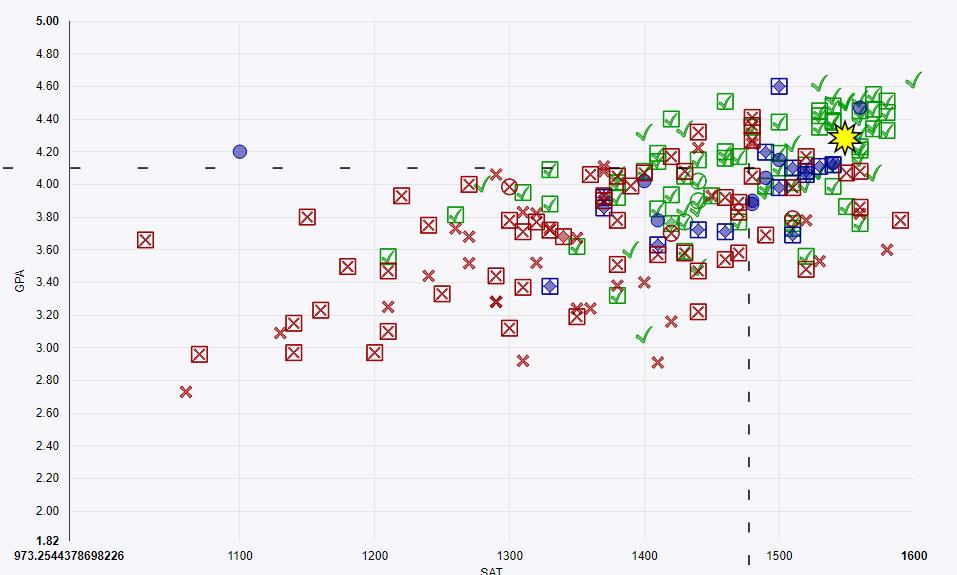
And finally, Naviance. I feel like this resource gets ignored so often but it’s??? literally??? so??? good???? You can see fairly clear trends on the scatterplots. Here are some examples from my own Naviance. In all the pictures, I’m the yellow star.

1. **SAFETY:** **RUTGERS UNIVERSITY-NEW BRUNSWICK**

As you can see, I’m surrounded by a sea of green. She’s a surefire safety. We stan.

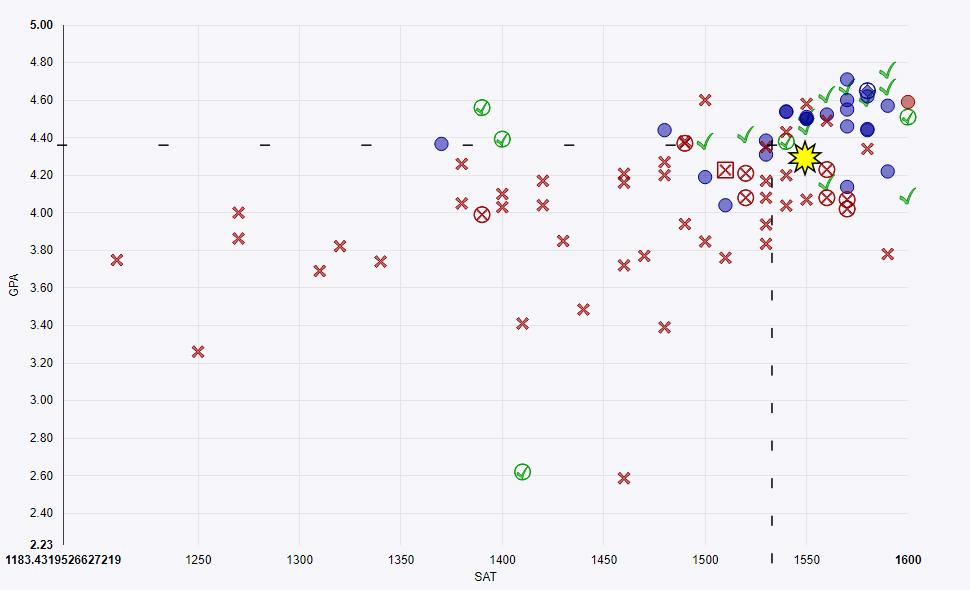
1. **MATCH: NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY**

Less green, more reds and blues, but my stats put me in a fairly comfy range. I had a decent chance at getting in.



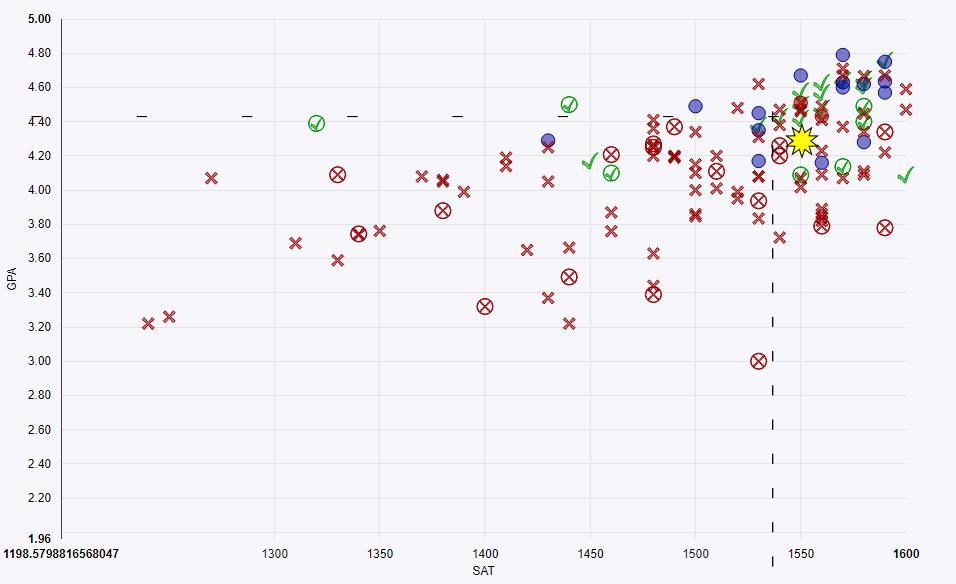
1. **REACH: WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS**

We’re getting a little more variable, a little more risky. The acceptances are more sparse, and in some ways, more random. The majority are in the top right corner, but you also have some to the left, and one at the bottom. The bad thing about Naviance is you’re only given stats. I have no idea who the 2.6 GPA kid is, and what their circumstances were.



1. **ANOTHER REACH: CORNELL UNIVERSITY**

I just wanted to show again how reach schools are more random than you might think. Although acceptances are concentrated at the top right, you also have a few more to the left and the bottom. Even then, there are high stat kids that were either straight up rejected, or waitlisted. There’s no guarantee here at all.



Ultimately, figuring out your safeties, matches, and reaches helps you build a more three-dimensional list. You definitely don’t need to categorize every school, but you still want to make sure that you’re not setting yourself up for rejection after rejection. Because,,, that would be unfortunate.

### 

### dream schools

Dream schools are genuinely such a stupid concept. Colleges are not utopia. None of them are perfect, not even Stanford (even though, to be honest, St. Anford does seem so perfect that it’s unreal).

Having a dream school is essentially being in love with the idea of a school. It’s complete romanticization. It’s wearing the darkest tint of rose-colored glasses. Like, just imagine having a crush on someone and then realizing that they seriously believe mustard can make them ascend. Your goddamn heart would be crushed.

That’s what you’re setting yourself up for. Don’t be afraid to fall in love with some schools. But also don’t put your feelings in the hands of an illusion you yourself made up. Because let’s say you get in: now you have insurmountable expectations that just can’t be fulfilled. And let’s say you don’t get in: visceral sadness isn’t as poetic or exciting as it sounds.

### 

## the final list

Oh shit, here we go.

### how many to apply to

It’s really up to you. I regret applying to as many schools as I did, but I also didn’t do enough research. Had all 19 colleges been colleges that I equally loved, maybe it wouldn’t have been so brutal. Or maybe it would have. I have no idea.

However, for a fact, you should have at least 1-2 safety schools and 3-4 match schools. Don’t be cocky, but also don’t be insecure. I’ve seen people apply to like six safeties and not enough reaches, and other people apply to all reaches with one safety. They basically all regretted it. Don’t be extreme!!! Balance isn’t that hard to achieve!!!

In general, the formula has always been 2 safeties, 2-6 matches, and 1-3 reaches; 5-11 schools in total. People on A2C & CC always have crazy lists. I think the most I’ve ever seen is 40, which is basically a full-time job. And they’re not even getting paid for it????

Two things you should consider: (1) writing supplements takes time, (2) submitting applications costs money. No matter how much copy pasting you do, trust me, you will still be spending hours writing short essays. Do you really want to compromise quality for breadth? I know that a lot of my supplements were shit because I just didn’t have enough time to devote to them. If you truly believe that you can write quality essays for 20 schools, you’re wrong. Why waste time on a college that you’re chasing solely for prestige if you can use it for a college that you really care about? And yes, while I did get fee waivers, I still had to pay a fortune. Not only for apps, but also for transcripts and scores.

The number of reaches is up to you. But, the same way you should love your safeties and matches, you should also have a valid reason for loving your reaches. I’m personally not against shotgunning, but you should definitely be smart about it. Don’t apply blindly just because you think you’re the chance applicant who will get in based on a spectacular essay. If you’re a Penn type of guy, but you end up accepted into Brown, is it really that great of an accomplishment?

But to give you a little push, a little encouragement, I say apply. You can never shoot too high. If there’s a reach that you’d never get into, never in a million years, then what do you have to lose? Always prioritize the applications that are most important to you, but if you have the means to add in one more app, I think that’s worth a lot more than the regret of never having tried at all.

As for people who are in unique circumstances, who need large amounts of financial aid or want admissions into special programs, it’s up to you, times two.

### whether or not to apply early

Before we get into all of that, I highly recommend you apply to as many colleges through EA as possible, especially your safety schools. It’s not binding, and receiving that first acceptance is such a goddamn relief. I literally cried at 3AM knowing that I had gotten into Rutgers even though I fully expected it. I have to mention this, though: UMich is literally fucking satan because they will defer you, drag your decision out for months, and then waitlist you; UChicago has a really low EA acceptance rate, maybe even lower than RD, but that seems kinda impossible so I’m not sure. For these top schools, EA might not be the smartest decision.

Otherwise, REA and ED are another level of commitment. For REA, you miss your chance at EDing to another school, or EAing to a private university. As for ED, you are obligated to commit if you are accepted.

The shared benefit of ED/REA is demonstrated interest. Applying early, especially through ED, tells a university that they are your number one choice. You are willing to give up all other schools for them. This can mean a lot, moreso if the school heavily considers DI. However, for most schools that offer REA, demonstrated interest doesn’t matter at all. They already have high yields, so they’re not worried about whether or not you’d pick them. You probably would.

Something else: ED/REA can bring closure or improvement. If you’re accepted, you know that you don’t have to write any more essays. All the hard work paid off. However, if you’re rejected, you now know that maybe you should change some parts of your application. You might even end up bettering your app. Deferral can also give you another chance. I know that this year was different because of COVID-19, but I have a friend who was deferred from Penn, and was later accepted to not only Penn but also Princeton. I have another friend who was deferred from Brown and was later accepted RD. By applying ED/REA, you are giving your app a few more opportunities to stick with the AOs.

A lot of people use ED/REA strategically because they think they have a better chance at getting in. This boost is usually present, but it might not be as significant as you want it to be. Acceptance rates for early rounds are artificially increased because athletes, legacies, and those with hooks are given much more preference. For example, Penn only considers legacy status during the ED round. So yes, while the acceptance rates [may seem insanely high](https://www.collegetransitions.com/dataverse/early-vs-regular-decision-admission-rates/) for ED, it’s usually because the applicant pool is different. Also, many hyper-competitive applicants will apply early, making the pool much stronger.

For some schools, there is a *very* clear advantage. UChicago is known to defer applicants for EA, but then accept them through ED2. WashU has an ED1 acceptance rate of around 40%. Remember that early rounds, no matter how prestigious the school, will increase their yield.

As for REA, [there’s really no boost at all](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/hhgng9/i_am_an_international_student_and_im_no_longer/fwabaol?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x). HYPM defers nearly everyone. Stanford is the only exception, and usually deferrals are as impressive as acceptances. I’ve seen a lot of people regret applying REA because they know they missed out on the ED advantage. Obviously people who get in don’t regret it lmao. If you’re an extremely strong applicant, or your dream school happens to be Harvard, or maybe it’s both, then consider applying REA. Otherwise, REA does not help.

So, ultimately the question comes down to: should I apply ED?

First of all, only apply early if you’re financially able to. Run the NPC and make sure that it is viable to enter a binding agreement. Applying ED doesn’t mean you won’t be granted aid, but you obviously don’t want to be caught off guard. You can break the contract if finances don’t work out, but that situation isn’t ideal and you shouldn’t go in expecting to do so. Also consider whether or not you want to compare aid packages later on; you won’t be able to do that if you’re accepted through ED.

Otherwise, apply ED to a school you absolutely love. Don’t apply somewhere just because you think you have a better chance at getting in. Trust me, regret sucks ass!!!!!!!!!!! Stop thinking about strategy and think about your next four years. If you get in, will you be sad that you won’t be able to shoot your shot somewhere else? If yes, it’s not the school for you. Don’t apply. I guess the only time this doesn’t matter is if you’re ambivalent either way.

Also, if the school offers ED2, this might be the time to bring in the strategic element and chase after something higher for ED. I’m still unsure on how I actually feel about my own experience (introspection?? nonexistent), but I’m happy I got to try for Cornell. It wasn’t someplace I ever wanted to go, yet, it was still nice to apply and be recognized. Moral of the story: I crave validation. However, keep in mind that ED2 is typically more competitive because all the deferred but accomplished T20 applicants are going to be gunning for another chance.

Anyway, for everyone doing the whole: should I apply to WashU because it has a higher acceptance rate or Dartmouth because it’s my dream school? Definitely go for Dartmouth. At least you’ll know that you tried, and that you can always try again someplace else.

# dissecting ur application

AKA reassuring you that the process is holistic and one thing will not bring your entire app down.

## 

## sTaTs?

No, you don’t need a 4.0, 5s on all your AP exams, 800s on all subject tests, a 36/1600 to get into a top school. It’s definitely helpful, but also, is that humanly possible??????

You just need the minimum score. I would argue that your stats are the least important part of your application. Think about all the 4.0s that Harvard AOs see. There’s no way they’re accepting all of them. A single B will not hurt you. I literally got a B in every single math class I took (maybe you’re shocked but imagine how my Asian mom feels about that) and was still accepted as a STEM major.

Also, some schools recalculate your GPA. All the UCs, UMich is also pretty transparent about that, etc. It’s one way to level the playing field. Similarly, class rank usually means nothing unless they’re comparing you to your classmates, or your school. Top 10% is worthless when you’re looking at applicants from all across the country and even the world.

Stop worrying about something you can’t change. Keep your first semester grades up. Be realistic. Check Naviance. Don’t under or overestimate yourself.

Onto standardized testing. I know that this year is different and a decent number of schools have gone test-optional. Test-optional does not mean that the college is no longer considering test scores. Test-optional means that the college is no longer *requiring* test scores. If you don’t send in a score, it probably will not hurt you. However, if you do send in a good score, it will definitely help you in some capacity.

Some schools are going test-blind, which is different from test-optional. Test-blind means that they are not accepting test scores at all. Check out each individual school for their policies.

Bottom line: take your standardized tests if you’re able to. Send in your scores if they’re decent. Otherwise, don’t stress about it.

If a school requires you to send in your full testing history, don’t! freak! out! They will always look at your highest numbers, and will not hold your lower ones against you, as mentioned by several AOs at several info sessions. (fun fact: the first time I took the Math II subject test, I ended up scoring a 570 out of 800. I later got a 780, which is still kind of rough, but I was fully prepared to send in both scores to Cornell. They changed their policy this year, meaning only my final score saw the beautiful light of day, but all I’m saying is, I doubt the 570 would have really hurt my app).

And finally, AP scores!!!!! I feel like this question gets brought up in every info session so let me say it again: you’re evaluated in the context of your school. If you were only offered 3 AP classes, and you took 2, no one’s going to publicly shame you for it.

As for whether or not you should report: your AP scores will never be the most important factor an AO considers. I highly doubt it has ever tipped a decision one way or another. Of course, if you got a 1 or 2 on an AP test related to your major, that’s a little questionable (but yes, this can be counterbalanced by a stellar LOR, or a good grade because the process is hOliStiC). Not reporting might bring about questions as to why you chose not to do so.

Send in your 4s and 5s. Your 3s are most likely inconsequential. Anything lower is up to you. If you don’t want to send them in, you definitely don’t have to, and it most likely will not hurt you in any substantial way.

For some context, I got a 3 on AP Physics 1 (literally didn’t know anything, I’m genuinely surprised I passed), and a 4 on AP Computer Science (still pressed about this, but it’s fine), and I reported both of them.

Send in your scores as soon as possible. If the school allows you to self-report, don’t lie.

## honors/activities

You don’t need to cure cancer to get into Harvard. Sorry to break it to you.

### how do i fill this goddamn thing out

Contrary to popular belief! major awards are not a requirement for top schools. Obviously they help, but you cannot tell me every single Columbia student has received some gold medal from an international olympiad. It’s just not realistic. Most ordinary but intelligent high school kids do a couple of clubs they care about, maybe win a regional science fair, and get good grades. A kid from my school who got into Harvard literally only did SGA, volleyball, and robotics. If you scroll through *r/CollegeResults*, the majority of people will have decent ECs, but nothing exceptional.

On the Common App, you have room for five honors, and ten activities. You do not need to occupy everything. AOs can tell if you’re just putting down fluff. Only fill out the activities that were meaningful to you, or that you spent a lot of time on. As for honors, if you don’t have any, you don’t have to scramble to find some. If you have random ones, put those down. Trust me, all of my honors were subpar.

List your most time-intensive, most prestigious, and/or activities that most closely align with your intended major at the top of your activities. It should go from most important to least important, top to bottom.

As for hours, don’t overestimate them, but also don’t underestimate them. Include all the time you spent on the activity. Traveling to sports practice counts. Working on projects outside of club meeting counts. Making phone calls outside of volunteering time counts. After filling out all your activities, make sure that you’re not spending more than 24 hours on all of them together. I’m guessing AOs can do basic arithmetic, even if you can’t.

1. Here’s a more comprehensive post: [How to Write Your Common App and UC Activities List](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/6lx32y/how_to_write_your_common_app_and_uc_activities/)

### 

### what counts and what doesn’t

Anything you did outside of school is considered an EC. Anything. One of my friends put down “writing” as an activity; she’s committed to Princeton. Don’t sell yourself short!!!!!

1. Here are more comprehensive posts: [What You Should Do If You Have No Extracurricular Activities](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/6eg8jq/what_you_should_do_if_you_have_no_extracurricular/)
2. [FAQ: What Counts as an EC, Anyway?](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/cls7c1/faq_what_counts_as_an_ec_anyway/)

Even if your activities seem tame or boring or sparse, like I said, you don’t need to cure cancer to get into Harvard.

### 

### writing

You have a grand total of 50 characters for position/leadership position and organization name, along with 150 characters for the activity’s description. For honors/awards, you have 100 characters for the award title.

Characters. Not words. Use up every single one. Abbreviations and symbols are completely okay, but make sure you use universal ones that are well-known. Describe your activity to its fullest extent. For awards, if they're more regional or less common, make sure that you elaborate on what it is, and why you received it.

Here are two example activities from my own Common App:

Journalism/Publication

[redacted] Magazine, Founder & Editor-in-Chief

***(46 characters)***

Manage over 70 staff members; oversee social media presence; collaborate with graphic design team for annual digital publication; 10,000 readers

***(144 characters)***

8 hrs/week

45 weeks/yr

Computer/Technology

[redacted club @ school], Co-Founder & Co-Coordinator

***(37 characters)***

Lead biweekly coding workshops; prepare members for hackathons & other comp sci opportunities; participate in community outreach programs

***(137 characters)***

2 hrs/week

20 weeks/yr

Also, under your activities, you can include summer programs. Here’s an example:

Other Club/Activity

[redacted summer program], [redacted university]

***(37 characters)***

One of ten Americans selected; participate in cultural exchange; attend daily workshops & global lit seminars lead by esteemed international authors

***(148 characters)***

168 hrs/week

***(I only put 24 hrs/day because it was a dorm situation. I have no idea if this***

***number of hours is customary, but my friends also listed 168 hrs/week for***

***their overnight summer programs.)***

2 weeks/yr

As you can see, in the description, I listed all of my responsibilities and even added a few numbers to form a more concrete image. Make sure that from this brief introduction alone, anyone can understand what you’re contributing. Make sure they can learn something about you; that you’re a leader, an organizer, someone with multifaceted talents, and so on.

1. Here’s another More Comprehensive post: [Activities and Awards: Making the Most of Your Character Count](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/cky9bl/activities_and_awards_making_the_most_of_your/)
2. Some inspiration! bullshitting is indeed an art: [Free Embellishing ECs Service](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/d4d13p/free_embellishing_ecs_service/)

## letters of recommendation

Your LORs add another dimension to your app. Someone else’s perspective. Insight into who you are as a student, and the impact you have on the classroom environment.

Typically you want to submit at least one LOR from an academic teacher. You should preferably have a recommendation from one humanities and one STEM teacher who can speak to not only your personality, but also your work ethic, your intellectual vitality, and your interests. They should be teachers you had in junior year.

Pick a teacher who knows you as a three-dimensional person. Maybe you struggled in their class, but you worked hard. Maybe you interacted with them in afterschool clubs. Whatever it is, don’t pick someone who only knows you for your good grades. If you don’t necessarily have a teacher who comes to mind, pick the teacher who you think knows you best.

Ask as early as possible. The best time is around the end of your junior year, starting from March, maybe even February, who knows. Ask in person!!!!!! Doing it through Zoom is also okay. If you absolutely cannot pull off face-to-face, send them a well-crafted email.

Prepare a brag sheet. This is basically just a resume listing out all your activities, your awards, and anything else you want to include. Maybe add in some personal details, such as what you’re hoping to pursue, what you do in your free time, etc. Note any information that you want them to emphasize in their rec letter. Also slide in some reasons why you chose them to write your LOR, and why you enjoyed their class.

My teachers gave me their own brag sheets with their own individual questions. I spent a considerable time on them!!! Don’t skimp out!!!!

As soon as you know which schools you’re applying to, follow up with your recommender. Let them know where they should send in their letters. I may or may not know this from personal experience, but it feels pretty bad sending an email to your retiring AP Bio teacher over winter break that she needs to submit a rec letter to a last minute school that you end up withdrawing your application from anyway. You know, hypothetically.

You will need to waive your FERPA rights, which basically means that you are not allowed to read your LOR. This essentially shows that there was no bias in writing the letter, and that you trust your recommenders. Your guidance counselor will walk you through this step; for me, I just had to fill out a slip and submit it.

Speaking of guidance counselors, the process remains the same for them. However, they are a good conduit for you to address extenuating circumstances. Let them know if they should mention anything significant from your four years of high school.

If you want to ask outside recommenders, don’t go crazy. They should be able to add something meaningful and different that your teachers/guidance counselor are not able to. At literally every info session the AO will pull out an applicant who sent in like 96 LOR. Do not become some urban legend.

And finally, say thank you. Give handwritten notes. Maybe slip in gift cards.

1. Step-by-step process for LORs: [Rising Seniors - Now Is the Time to Ask About Letters of Recommendation](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bw5h8u/rising_seniors_now_is_the_time_to_ask_about/)
2. Commonly asked Q’s: [Letters of Recommendation 101](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gm1jbc/letters_of_recommendation_101/)
3. Brag sheet template: [The Secret to Having Excellent Letters of Recommendation](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/6damac/the_secret_to_having_excellent_letters_of/)

## demonstrated interest

Some universities are insecure and need constant reassurance that you still like them. Demonstrated interest is probably the easiest thing you will engage in during this entire admissions cycle *and* it can actually mean something. Some ideas:

* Apply ED/REA. Basically the best thing you can do.
* Sign up for info sessions and tours.
  + Go to regional college fairs or info sessions.
  + Meet with AOs during high school visits.
* Attend a webinar.
* Open emails from the school. Also click on links! Apparently they have tools that track whether an applicant opens emails from the college and for how long and how many links you click which is ~scary~ and a sign that we’re living in a ~surveillance state~ (jkjk but kind of not).
  + Sign up for emails or request more information.
* Reach out to an AO.
  + There’s a lot of debate about whether or not you should email your AO at all. Don’t contact them every day, but if you have a genuine question about the school that isn’t easy to Google, or a question about your application, it doesn’t hurt to ask.
* Write a LOCI. This only applies for deferred/waitlisted kids, but it’s always important.
  + Sometimes people send in updates to their RD school. I say only do this if you actually have something meaningful to add. Otherwise, it’s a waste of your AO’s time.

Make sure you have a centralized email where all your college stuff goes. Then it’s easier for them to track you :’^)

## additional/supplemental information

If you have something you think is important to include in your application but don’t know where to put it, here’s the place!!!!!!!!!!!

### what to write abt & how to write abt it

I’ve heard conflicting opinions about what you should include in the additional information section. Some people say it’s only for extenuating circumstances, nothing else. I’ve also seen some people put overflow activities there. One girl from my school who got into HYMP literally included an additional essay.

Don’t fill it out simply to fill it out. However, if you have something that was not fully addressed in the rest of your application, the additional information section is a good place to put it. This can mean awards that you couldn’t fit under the honors section. Most likely it means touching upon extenuating circumstances that had an impact on your grades, standardized test scores, or your ability to participate in ECs. If you do have such circumstances, this section and your counselor’s LOR are the best places to explain them. Don’t use your personal statement as an opportunity to write a sob story. Use it as an opportunity to show who you are.

Be as concise as possible. Use bullet points if you can.

1. Here’s a better guide: [How to Use the Common App Additional Information Section: Guide + Examples](https://www.collegeessayguy.com/blog/common-app-additional-info-guide-examples)

### supplemental material

Some schools allow you to attach a resume. If you feel as if your activities section accurately portrays everything you did during high school, don’t be redundant. If you want to elaborate on your ECs, or just don’t have enough room, even with 10 slots, then a resume might be a good idea for you. It should really come down to whether or not you’re giving the AOs new information, or just repeating what they already know.

1. A template for all you try-hards: [High School Resume Template (.docx & .pdf Included)](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/cm4l7w/high_school_resume_template_docx_pdf_included/)

Other schools let you submit an arts supplement, which they’ll mention in Common App. If this is something you want to do, make sure that you familiarize yourself with SlideRoom beforehand because it sucks and freaking out at 11:58PM will literally just give you an ulcer. According to Duke, if you do submit a supplement, they have an arts faculty evaluate it. I’m assuming the procedure is similar at other schools. Supplemental material can also include research abstracts, which I think you should always submit, especially if you mention the research elsewhere. As for writing, sometimes schools bundle that in with the arts supplement. Make sure to verify their individual policies because sometimes they’ll only take art art rather than “art,” such as !poetry!.

If they have something that is optional, such as Brown/UChicago’s video submission, it’s straight up optional. You can send something in, but you don’t have to.

### COVID-19

We’re basically experiencing the apocalypse. A tame and monotonous apocalypse, but an apocalypse nonetheless. It will definitely affect admissions, and Common App knows it. That is why, for the 2020-2021 admissions cycle, [there will be a new section](https://www.commonapp.org/blog/COVID-19-question-common-app), similar to the additional information slot, dedicated solely to complications caused by COVID. Here is what Common App has to say about it:

Community disruptions such as COVID-19 and natural disasters can have deep and long-lasting impacts. If you need it, this space is yours to describe those impacts. Colleges care about the effects on your health and well-being, safety, family circumstances, future plans, and education, including access to reliable technology and quiet study spaces.

Again, don’t fill out this section simply to fill it out. If the only thing that shifted in your life was a stay-at-home order, don’t write an entirely new essay about how coronavirus changed your life. However, if summer plans were cancelled, if living conditions worsened due to impacted finances, if a family member or close friend was directly affected, and so on, please use this section. A global pandemic, no matter how dull it may seem, is fucking serious.

## deadlines

You’re probably not going to understand the gravity of the information I’m about to give you, but trust me, when the time comes, you *will* understand.

The two most common dates that will ring through your big, big brain these next few months are: November 1 and January 1, the former being the early deadline, and the latter being the regular deadline.

November 1 means that you must submit your application on November 1, 11:59PM, your local time. January 1 means January 1, 11:59PM, your local time. Whatever date means [insert date], 11:59PM, your local time. Before the day ends, not before it starts.

Additionally, even though you shouldn’t be banking on it, a lot of schools will give grace periods for their regular decision deadline. They want to increase the number of apps they get. So January 1 may be dragged out a couple days, maybe an entire week. Again, don’t bank on it, but if there’s a school that you aren’t sure about applying to, maybe just let fate decide if you should at all.

Tons of schools have deadlines well-beyond the dreaded Jan 1 date. If things didn’t work out the way you expected, here are two posts from the 2019-2020 admissions cycle to give you a few ideas, just in case:

1. [Schools With Deadlines January 15 or Later](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/endptt/happy_2020_heres_my_new_years_present_to_you/)
2. [Updated List of Colleges With Extended Deadlines, April 1 Deadlines, or Later](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/fkedqd/updated_list_of_colleges_with_extended_deadlines/)

# writing the personal statement

Your essays are arguably [the most important part of your application](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/a8zz9n/williamthereader_what_your_essay_looks_like_from/). While a bad personal statement won’t necessarily hurt you, a good personal statement can be the reason why you’re admitted.

This is your chance!!!!! It’s your opportunity to show AOs who you are. What you think about in the silence. What keeps you up at night. What you cry over. What your heart skips a beat for.

Essays are hard to pull off. They’re the one thing you have control over when everything else is already set in stone. So yes, you’ll be writing and writing and writing. And hopefully it’ll pay off.

\*I’m literally so down to read any essays you send my way!!!!! For free!!!! While I can’t offer you advice as to how they will hold up in admissions, I can definitely help with the writing itself, and tell you what exactly I learned about you. If you want a second pair of eyes, feel free to hit me up at [gmzstudent@gmail.com](mailto:gmzstudent@gmail.com) or [u/apsuffer](https://www.reddit.com/user/apsuffer/). Some of my credentials just to convince you: all my EC’s are writing related LMAO, I received a few selective writing awards, and I was ultimately chosen as a Nemerov Writing Scholar for WashU, which only 10 applicants are selected for (as a condition of the scholarship program, I will be minoring in writing). I’m also down to just talk with you about ideas you have, or where you want your essay to go.

## example essays

I’m putting this at the very beginning so you can revisit. Don’t read example essays if you haven’t started writing your own!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! You’ll only be limiting yourself to preconceived notions of what a “successful essay” is. What’s worse, you might subconsciously mimic what someone else wrote, even if that wasn’t your intention.

If you’ve already started and have a concrete idea to land on, then reading example essays can give you a feel for the different possibilities. Here are some places you can find them:

1. **REDDIT:** People will literally just post their essays, or essays of someone who got into x many ivies. For example: we have the [essay of a girl who got into all 8 ivies](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gqbyw5/essay_of_the_girl_that_got_into_8_ivies/), and [accepted Stanford essays](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1scLTWVp1DQzi2H6EMi0Oo5WAA1AzEeS5m0a0hvmXI0U/edit) and many more. You’ll also get unsolicited opinions in the comments, which is always the best part.
2. **COLLEGE WEBSITES:** [Johns Hopkins](https://apply.jhu.edu/application-process/essays-that-worked/), [Tufts](https://admissions.tufts.edu/apply/advice/past-essays/common-application-essays/), [Connecticut College](https://www.conncoll.edu/admission/apply/essays-that-worked/), [Hamilton College](https://www.hamilton.edu/admission/apply/college-essays-that-worked/2014-essays-that-worked) and other schools put out essays every year.
3. **“SUCCESSFUL PERSONAL STATEMENT” GOOGLE SEARCH:** You’ll mostly get [consulting websites](https://www.collegeessayguy.com/blog/personal-statement-examples-for-college), a [bulk of personal statements](https://www.apstudynotes.org/common-app/) that you’ll never get through, or [book advertisements/pdfs](http://www.qianmu.org/u/lystu/school/file/0hme5mn180002vc/0hmlotdce00040a.pdf). At this point, you’re better off just focusing on your own essay; a lot of these personal statements are actually kind of bad, or they’re just put out there without any verification for their success. Just because someone got into Princeton doesn’t mean their personal statement was actually good.

## capturing who u are in 650 words

It’s a little daunting, I know, but you got this.

### resources

I tried my best to compile and summarize a lotof tips and tricks. And before I’m accused of plagiarism, yes, I did directly take, with giving proper citation, from the following sources. @ every English teacher I’ve ever had, I’m so sorry. But!!! they explain everything so much better than I possibly can. So, if you want to read advice from much more experienced and eloquent people, I got you:

1. [*Hack the College Essay*](https://www.hackthecollegeessay.com/uploads/1/0/9/5/109505679/hack_the_college_essay_2017.pdf): A free, 35-page manual on everything you need to know. I sped through the entire thing and learned new stuff too. [Look through his site if you want bonus content](https://www.collegeessayguy.com/).
   1. [*Outstanding Essay Examples and How to Build Yours from the Ground Up*](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5df17d111692551404077c9b/t/5df316c293135176b06f6c0b/1576212378765/McNeil+Admissions%3A+Guide+to+the+College+Essay): This time, a free, 30-page manual on everything you need to know. Some good graphics too, ngl.
2. [Masterpost of Common App Resources](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/cmcu72/masterpost_of_common_app_resources/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x): I took basically all the following information from this masterpost. If you want to look through the source material, it’s all there.
3. [My World-Ending Guide to the College Essay](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/95hbdn/my_worldending_guide_to_the_college_essay/): World-ending? Debatable. So helpful that you don’t really need to read anything I write below? I decline to answer because I already spent too much time putting everything together.

Once you start writing, and you want to gauge how exactly you’re doing, these specific posts should give you a solid idea. First up is common tropes:

1. [The Worst Essays You Can Write](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/e20pcf/the_worst_essays_you_can_write/)
2. [5 Most Overdone Essays and How to Avoid Them](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/cezbly/5_most_overdone_essays_and_how_to_avoid_them/)
3. What I’ve Learned From Reading Tons of Your Essays (as a College Senior) [pt 1](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/dti2r7/what_ive_learned_from_reading_tons_of_your_essays/) / [pt 2](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/du0axm/what_ive_learned_from_reading_tons_of_your_essays/)

Next is common mistakes:

1. [If You Don’t Have a First Draft Yet, Don’t Read This](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/9zg9sc/if_you_dont_have_a_first_draft_yet_dont_read_this/)

I highly recommend you look through everything above!!!! Sorry for the half-assed works cited.

### personal experience

So before we get into technicalities, I thought I would soften the pressure by giving you a dramatic retelling of my tumultuous months-long essay-writing hell.

I did not begin writing my personal statement until the middle of September, when I finally remembered that I was an actual person with real responsibilities. I was jolted into a panic, choosing to cope by sitting in front of a blank Google Doc for hours on end.

Here was my dilemma: I was clearly a kid who loved to write, but also wanted to major in chemistry. The humanities/STEM disconnect was already confusing to me. How was I supposed to explain that to complete fucking strangers? More panic rising up in my trachea, like disgusting, familiar bile.

More importantly, how was I going to convey to these people that I was a girl who cried everyday, tears sprouting from anger, happiness, love. I was a girl who felt empathy for everyone, a girl would willingly spend the rest of her life reading, thinking, listening to music, burrowed under her hoodie and layers of blankets, safe and at peace. I was a girl who made herself laugh, who talked and talked and talked, who had big, bubblegum dreams that even she was afraid of. How was I going to tell these people, people that I didn’t even know, that I deserved a chance?

So September passed, and I had typed, re-typed paragraphs upon paragraphs. The November deadline loomed, whispering malicious reminders. I had an idea, but I didn’t know where to go with it. I read ten, twenty successful essays and wondered, how the fuck I was going to pull this off.

[Here’s the essay I submitted to all my early schools](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1noiEraBDoP3hqWBYZHWQHFliNA-Mb7wl/view?usp=sharing). It’s pretty bad. And I knew it at the time, but I couldn’t really do anything about it, especially with the time constraints. My first personal statement reads like a meaningless, pretentious, convoluted “why major” essay.

To top it all off, I single-handedly wrote my UChicago uncommon essay the day it was due.

And so I was deferred by all three reaches.

From that point on, I stopped trying to prove myself. Who cared if I was a writer, but also an aspiring chemist? Why did it have to make sense? Why did I have to make myself small, give them a smooth line of reasoning, so that they could be comfortable with my narrative?

When I write, I usually bang out a draft, edit it for a few days, and leave it be. Yet, for my Common App essay, I labored over it. It’s the first piece of writing that I revised, let other people see, changed, mutated, thought about endlessly, typed for eternity.

[My second personal statement isn’t perfect](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_vebcLSNmJrrU3ZFxmw1H4x-IL7O53TV/view?usp=sharing). Your personal statement won’t be perfect. Even now, I read it and think it’s a little bit too pretentious, too prose-like, too much storytelling. It’s probably not the best essay an AO has ever read. But it’s the best essay I possibly could have written.

I had more fun with my supplements. They filled in the gaps, built upon the foundation my personal statement set in place. I talked about my obsession with making Spotify playlists, my need to understand William Faulkner, my early car rides to school.

And I got through it!!! As will you, I promise <3.

### purpose

Your personal statement should not be a resume!!!!!!!!!!!!!! It’s your fucking *personal* statement, dude. It should answer the question, “who are you?” It should be vulnerable and authentic. Move away from description, and think more along the lines of introspection, something that isn’t elsewhere in your application.

At Columbia’s info session, the AO told us that our essay should pass two very important tests. First, if you were to mix in your personal statement with five other personal statements, would your best friend know which one is yours? From voice and character alone, could she/he tell? Second, if you were to give your personal statement to a complete stranger, could they give you an accurate description of who you are?

I would avoid talking about academics in general. And if you do, it shouldn’t be the focal point. It should connect back to the bigger story you’re trying to tell. Talk about something that is central to your life, even if it doesn’t have anything to do with your major or your ECs. AOs want to know that you have passions (but try to avoid the word “passion” in your actual essay). Throw away the idea that you have to be a “spiky” applicant. You just have to be ***you***. Wow, love the motivational speaker thing I have going on.

As I said before, your AO wants to root for you. You don’t need to necessarily stand out, but you do need to stick with them. Give them a reason to remember you.

One of you is thinking, right now, *okay, but I’m so fucking mediocre, I’m just a middle-class white kid, I haven’t experienced anything life-changing, what am I supposed to write about?*

!!!!!!!!!!!! stfu!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! I absolutely refuse to believe that you’re a sentient being just barely surviving on three brain cells floating through the fabric of the cosmos. Your life experiences are as valid as anyone else’s. You are complicated and flawed, just like anyone else. And what’s more, AOs know that their applicants are 16/17/18 years old. They don’t expect your essay to make them cry, or win the Nobel Prize in literature. They expect to learn something about you that stats and ECs can’t show.

Some essay topics that my friends wrote about & where they’re committed:

* WashU (me lmao): hating poetry
* UChicago: Boy Scouts & his uncommon essay was about squirrels
* Tufts: nature & art
* Columbia: loving poetry using only 450 words!!!!
* CMU: nature & art
* Cornell: chess
* NYU BA/DDS program: playing Scrabble with her dad
* NYU Stern: wushu, AKA Chinese kungfu

As you can see, there’s overlap in what we all wrote about. None of the topics are even that exciting. But we weren’t trying to be flamboyant, we were trying to be true to ourselves. There’s always something that you can write about. Stop underselling yourself.

### ur narrative

I have read a shit ton of personal statements, whether that be those of my friends, random kids on the internet, or “essays that worked” websites. Most of them followed a very clear character arc. They all showed growth.

It starts with the premise, then moves onto the realization, and finally ends with the lesson, the change, the future.

We’re all 18 years old or younger. The most important thing we have done so far is grow as a person. None of us are perfect human beings. We have all made mistakes. But we have also learned from them. That’s probably the reason why so many essays follow such a predictable structure. But that structure *works*, because it’s genuine. And in many ways, it’s revolutionary. The best thing you can do in life is grow and change and better yourself, and you’ve been doing it since birth.

Another essay type I’ve seen is the small to big one. I’ll take an overdone example: playing with Legos is a small act, but it leads into something bigger. Now, you want to be an engineer. This is basically the same thing as the growth essay, just not as obvious.

Of course, there are many different types of essays. I’m not trying to force you into a rigid composition. I don’t want you to constantly think, “this essay needs to show growth, it needs to show growth,” because as long as your story progresses, I guarantee you that it will not only show growth, or some type of lesson, but also, repeat after me, *who you are*. I just want you to remember that your essay should be personal to you. It should be your character arc. It should show that you are flawed, but capable of learning.

What’s more, I don’t want you to steal an essay that isn’t yours. When you’re just starting out, it’s generally not a good idea to read someone else’s personal statement. It’s easy to model your own essays after a successful one, even if it’s done implicitly.

So how should you go about this?

You want to capture the world from *your* perspective. You want to focus on *your* thoughts. AOs want to see your mind in action. They want to see you talk candidly about your own experiences, the details that you remembered or noticed, the narration that only you can contribute. Don’t shy away from including inconvenient facts. The worst thing you can do is recount an incident without saying anything valuable about yourself. Anyone can write an essay about what happened to you, but only you can write an essay about how it shaped you.

It seems a little selfish to be focusing on just yourself, but that’s the point. The AO doesn’t want to hear about how your friend is failing AP Bio. They want to know about how dissecting a frog grossed you so much that you swore not to become a surgeon like the rest of your family and instead pursue ecology because you knew that your beloved frog belonged in a greater ecosystem that cared about it. Or whatever. Regardless, your essay should be less about how things appear to the rest of the world, and more about how they appear to you. The whole point is to be subjective.

Something more, don’t fall into sweeping statements or generalities. Stay away from truisms. Stop pushing yourself into pretentious and profound territory. Although the lesson learned will always be, to some extent, cliched, don’t rely on the whole “never giving up taught me that I’m stronger than I thought.” That’s good for you, but make sure you have specifics to back up such a claim. Make sure your essay isn’t built upon some aphorism.

Lastly, try to focus on only a few character traits, ranging from 2-5. This goes for your entire application, including your supplements. All your essays should tell a very complete story. If you try to do too much, you won’t do it well. Your AO has to quickly summarize who you are in a few words. Don’t complicate their job. Take the most important aspects of your character, and craft your essays around them. For example, my main thing was that I was a storyteller, and from there I highlighted my empathy, my need for connection and communication, and my curiosity.

It takes time. As someone who obsessively journals as an attempt to figure out why I’m feeling this way and all that teenage angst bullshit, I struggled with figuring out who I truly was. And I would say I’m somewhat of an expert at ~introspection~ so you can only imagine. It’s exhausting. Ask yourself the hard questions, but don’t push yourself. It takes time.

At the end of it all, you should be able to confidently say that these were essays that only you could have written.

### 

### ur prose

AOs don’t want some bootleg version of Shakespeare. If they wanted to read Shakespeare, they would just read Shakespeare.

Your voice is really important. A well-written essay doesn’t mean it’s good. A well-written essay doesn’t mean it’s authentic. Stop worrying about whether or not your essay is Harvard dissertation level. You’re not in AP Lang/Lit anymore. Instead, worry about whether or not your voice shines through. It’s your voice that completes everything, that convinces the AO that you’re there with them, in person.

Don’t waste time on flowery descriptive language (ok I know my entire personal statement was just flower descriptive language but that’s just how I *write*, idk; I’m just a pretentious kid lmao). Choose small words, words that you would use in everyday conversation. Yes, your personal statement should be, to some extent, formal, but it shouldn’t be stiff or cold. Use contractions if you want. Don’t abuse the thesaurus. If you’re searching for a word that you know but you can’t quite place, then hit up thesaurus.com, no problem. But don’t creep around trying to find vocabulary that a 50-year-old man wouldn’t even use.

You’re going to have to kill your babies. At some point, you’re going to write something so beautiful, so poetic, so moving that you start dreaming of your book deal. But, if it isn’t productive to your essay, if it’s just empty words that sound melodic but don’t contribute anything, you’ll have to cut it out. And it’ll be painful, but it has to happen. Be open to criticism. Don’t get too attached.

Another don’t: don’t be someone you’re not. If you’re just not a funny person, don’t write an unbearable comedy special that no one claps for. However, if your humor is super dry, slide in those deadpan quips. Play to your strengths. Don’t force yourself to be someone else entirely.

*Another* don’t! Don’t just show!!! I know we’re taught from the moment we’re out of the womb that we should show, not tell. Valid advice. But in this instance, you don’t want to confuse your AO. You won’t be there to explain what exactly you mean. Put together the facts. Say what you did, what you felt, and what you think. Be clear. There is a time where you should show, but there is also a time where you should straight up tell. Go beyond the scene that you have articulated and draw a soft conclusion.

From there, you want to emphasize specificity. As I said before, you can throw out grand statements, but if you have no examples or evidence as to how this relates to you, then ????? ok???? how is this relevant??? And from specificity comes perspective. Or maybe from perspective comes voice. Whatever it is, they’re all connected. These elements come naturally. Your essay should feel natural.

If you have no idea where to start, try recording yourself. Tell your story, out loud. Maybe even talk with a friend. Listen to how you two interact, the way that you assert yourself, the way you just exist. That’s what you want to capture in your essay. That’s the voice that your essay should convey.

If you’re still having trouble, I highly recommend you just read or write more. A lot of people don’t write outside of English class, and trust me, English class does not prepare you for your personal statement. Start writing about your day, about your thoughts, about whatever. Stream of consciousness is always fun. If that’s too scary for you, then read a book! A memoir! A fiction novel! Anything!

Finally, a common sense tip, but don’t make yourself the villain. Excessive bragging, self-absorption, entitlement, etc. is not cute. Acting like the victim is also not the best strategy. Your essay should fundamentally be about your strengths. Your essay should make you likeable. While it’s good to acknowledge your shortcomings, you don’t want the AO to sharpen their knives and hunt you down. They know where you live.

### 

### brainstorming

Most people focus too much on the topic rather than the actual story. Instead of original, think *personal*. Maybe your topic isn’t novel, but the way that you tell it, your thoughts and experiences, will be.

One of my friends could not get over this Krispy Kreme essay that an AO had referenced in an info session. The student had used donuts as a metaphor for her life. It was unique! memorable! qUiRkY! All the selling points, checked off. Yet, my friend ended up writing about dancing alone in her kitchen, and how that taught her joy and vulnerability; an equally good essay topic.

While brainstorming, don’t stress over whether or not your topic is unique. As long as it's special to you, you’ll be able to write an essay that is honest and reflective. For my first personal statement, I tried too hard to stand out. I don’t go to sleep!!!! And I dream about chemistry!!!! That’s a pick me, love me, choose me type move. I literally do not care about my shitty sleep schedule. I do care about writing and poetry. My second personal statement was so much easier to finish, and so much better.

Disclaimer: common topics do exist. Sports injury, mission trip, divorce, moving to a new city, death of a family member, meta essays, etc. These all show up in droves. While you *can* write a good essay centering around a common topic, you’re also going to be competing against kids who have the same exact story. My advice is to start small. Don’t think about big overarching moments, think about the tiny, overlooked things that make you an idiosyncratic individual; specific events, vignettes, conversations, characteristics that are significant, pivotal or foundational to you. “Microcosm” is usually the word people use.

With that being said, here are some brainstorming techniques to help you out a little:

1. **INTROSPECTIVE QUESTIONS:**  If you have literally no idea where to begin, asking yourself super intense, vague inquiries about the state of your life is a quick way to get into it. I have [compiled a list of questions](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-XNVo2zVcgBz4GeRIuuM_tRqOjmF49Z7o_k-InQoMeM/edit?usp=sharing), but you can also find your own out there, on the world wide web.
2. **HAVE A CONVERSATION:** Either with yourself, or with a friend. Not gonna lie, I talk a lot to myself. If you’re able to have a thorough discussion on your own and you’re not afraid to feel insane, then maybe do that and record yourself. Otherwise, speaking with a friend and just following the course of your conversation can lead to places that you never really thought about. If you’re stuck, ask “so what?” Whatever you’re talking about, where does it originate from, why does it matter to you, why is it significant?
3. **WRITE SOMETHING VERY BAD:** Sit in front of a blank Google Doc and type the most stupid shit you can think of. No pressure. Just write. Write whatever is on your mind, whatever is stressing you out, whatever you’re feeling. If your screen is still empty, maybe take some of the introspective questions and physically write out your answers. Give yourself a time limit ([this website does it for you!](http://www.themostdangerouswritingapp.com/)). Who knows; maybe your stream of consciousness will unlock something *beautiful*.
4. **START BACKWARDS:** You know that your application should show a few key characteristics about yourself. Rather than make a list of topics, you can make a list of quirks that make you uniquely who you are. From there, you can start thinking about not only what you want your essay to be centered around, but also what you want to convey about yourself. Keep in mind the whole “growth” thing. Which quirk shows evolution? Is this a trait you’ve had all along or something that you grew into?
   1. I used this technique. All of my topics stemmed from characteristics: I have horrible eyesight, I pull all-nighters, I consume YA novels as if my life depends on it, I go to my local library all the time. I am really empathetic, I value deep talks, I think a lot. Then, I paired two things together and ran with it. The YA novels and empathetic combination was the most true to who I am.
   2. As I mentioned before, try not to do too much. Two to three facets should be the cap. Your main elements should be the backdrop (aka the topic), the growth, and the final characteristic(s) you’re trying to capture.
   3. Another riff on this technique is [half-ideas](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/g37nsu/my_personal_system_for_easily_creating_fun/)!!!
5. **COMMON APP PROMPTS:** Let’s say you’re really struggling. You tried everything above and you're still empty-handed. As a last resort, you can turn towards the Tried and True [Common App prompts](https://appsupport.commonapp.org/applicantsupport/s/article/What-are-the-2020-2021-Common-Application-essay-prompts). While you shouldn’t directly answer the questions, they can be a good jumping off point.

Now that you have important experiences, people, or periods of time in mind, start delving into sensory details that surround those experiences, characters, and times. Think about the feelings, the settings, the random observations. Start planning the narrative that you want to convey. From there, you’re ready to start.

### getting started

When writing your first draft, you shouldn’t think about [quality](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/djpb31/stuck_on_your_essay_heres_a_psychological_trick/) or word count. Just try to get the words on paper. If you don’t start somewhere, then you won’t start at all.

Some kids get so caught up on their introduction that their entire essay is just set-up. Again, you’re not in AP Lang. You don’t need a topic sentence. Don’t rely on overarching declarations that summarize your entire personal statement.

[In a lot of ways, you’re writing a story](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bdyf1d/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_2_throw_away/). As the main character, your reader should feel a connection to you from the very beginning.

Here are some examples from some short stories and personal essays:

1. **“MOTHER TONGUE” BY AMY TAM:**

I am not a scholar of English or Literature. I cannot give you much more than personal opinions on the English language and its variations in this country or others.

I am a writer. And by that definition, I am someone who has always loved language. I am fascinated by language in daily life. I spend a great deal of my time thinking about the power of language—the way it can evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea, or a simple truth. Language is the tool of my trade. And I use them all—all the Englishes I grew up with.

1. **“1999 WAS THE LAST TIME EVERYTHING WAS FINE” BY DOREE SHAFRIR:**

When I graduated from college in 1999, the economy wasn’t just humming—it was *roaring*. Yes, the tech industry was making a lot of the noise, but everything else seemed to be doing just fine, too. Certainly we had typical senior-year jitters (*Should we take the LSAT? Sure why not)*. And the stakes, of course, seemed incredibly high, as they always do when you’re 21 or 22. I spent a few afternoons in the career services office, thumbing through binders (yes, actual binders) full of printed-out job postings, but nothing seemed that appealing. At my school, a lot of business majors had already accepted jobs at consulting firms and investment banks before spring semester had even begun, but those of us who had majored in English or art history or, fuck, even French weren’t worried. *Tout sera bien*.

1. **“A HANGING” BY GEORGE ORWELL:**

It was in Burma, a sodden morning of the rains. A sickly light, like yellow tinfoil, was slanting over the high walls into the jail yard. We were waiting outside the condemned cells, a row of sheds fronted with double bars, like small animal cages. Each cell measured about ten feet by ten and was quite bare within except for a plank bed and a pot of drinking water. In some of them brown silent men were squatting at the inner bars, with their blankets draped round them. These were the condemned men, due to be hanged within the next week or two.

As you can tell, each beginning leads straight into the action. There’s no unnecessary explanation. Although those examples do spend time establishing the setting, every single detail contributes to a larger story.

I highly recommend you use a cold open, otherwise known as *in media res* (AP Lit has taught me nothing but useless terms so let me just have my moment). If your reader is confused and disorientated, that’s good. That means they’re interested. They want to know what’s going to happen. Any context needed will be filled in as you go. Gradually unveil each facet of yourself. Sprinkle in a little intrigue. Don’t you dare do something like this:

Vulnerability is important for building strong relationships. For many people, revealing their deepest emotions is hard, me included. However, if I didn’t tell my best friend how I felt when she unknowingly picked on my insecurities, we probably wouldn’t be friends today.

Bro, that’s some elementary bullshit. I already know from this introduction alone that reading the rest of the essay will be torture. It’s so boring. Remember, your essay is supposed to be personal. Don’t ponder abstractly. No one cares about your fake philosophical observations. Stop hesitating. Start with the action. Get to the point.

### the meat & the ending

Remember back in kindergarten when you had to bring in an object that was special to you? The sheer excitement of sharing it with your class was unparalleled (you’ll never get that feeling back smh). Being in front of the class, object in hand, telling everyone why you love this object so much. Show and tell.

That’s what you want to do with your essay.

Zoom in on specific examples. Avoid being vague. Any time you make a claim or assert a fact, you should also provide examples. Your essay is supposed to elaborate on various characteristics fundamental to who you are. Don’t just toss out the “I’m a hard worker” and expect an AO to believe you. Concrete examples should make up the majority of your essay. Highlight experiences, thoughts, feelings, observations that are unique to you. This is where you would be showing.

You! are! the! protagonist! And every good protagonist is dynamic, three-dimensional. Similarly, you want to be believable and approachable. So while you have flaws, and you’ve made mistakes, you still want to be relatable, likeable, respectable, etc. Build up your character throughout the story. Open up. Be vulnerable enough to establish rapport with the reader.

At some point, typically towards the very end, you should depart from your story and give direct commentary. This is where telling comes in. Affirm the conclusions that you have been developing. Take the main idea, lesson, characteristics that you’re trying to showcase in your story, and go one step further. Explain why you did, said, or thought those things. Upack what it means to you, how you’ve grown or changed in that area, or what/how you hope to build on those attributes further.

This is the best way to wrap-up your essay. Don’t just end abruptly, or summarize, or whip out the sweeping generality. Instead, add something new. Tell the AO why this matters, how this will affect your future, etc. Or, do something cheeky, idk. Reference something you mentioned early, provide a satisfying ending to the story you were previously telling, inject a little mystery. Endings are hard, but they’re also one of the most gratifying things to write, trust me.

### tl;dr

If you really don’t want to read all of that, the bottom line is, your personal statement is an important part of your application, if not the most important part.

It should exclusively be about you and who you are, but not necessarily what you do. Remember, this is one time you can, in a sense, speak to your AO. Don’t rehash something that’s already on your application. Instead, delve into what you think, believe, value. Instead, make it personal.

## finalize

You can always just full send it. Or, don’t be stupid, and actually edit your essays.

### word count

You have 650 words. You don’t necessarily need to use all of them. However, if you’re over or severely under word count, it do kind of be a problem.

The Common App requires a minimum of 250 words. You should be well beyond that. If you aren’t, here’s a post to help you out:

1. [What to Do When Your Essay Is Too Short](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/aefjas/what_to_do_when_your_essay_is_too_short/): Along with all of that advice, you shouldn’t feel too much pressure to extend your essay. If you’re satisfied, and anyone who has read your essay is satisfied, then maybe that’s just all the words you need to convey who you are. Too much stuffing isn’t good.

As for being over word count, all you really need to do is scheme:

1. **HYPHENATE, ABBREVIATE, OR USE CONTRACTIONS WHERE APPROPRIATE.**
2. **ELIMINATE WORDS THAT ARE NOT NECESSARY.** This can include the “very”s, “truly”s, “really”s, and even “that”s. And although I’m an advocate for adverbs, sometimes they’re just too much. If you can replace your adverb with a more descriptive verb, you should definitely do that.
3. **SHORT SENTENCES:** Basically the same thing, but sometimes you’re just using too many words when few words do trick. If you can rephrase a sentence to be more concise (which means, you get rid of anything that is not significant and you stop banking on big adjectives), then go with few words.
4. **KILL YOUR BABIES.** Sorry dude. It might be straight poetry, but if it doesn’t contribute anything, you have to get rid of it. This refers to introductory sentences, set-up phrases, tangents, and anything that doesn’t directly build up your story.
5. **REMOVE REPETITION:** If you have sentences that literally reiterate the same idea, just using different words, you don’t need it. It’s redundant.
6. **USE ACTIVE VOICE:** “It was done by me.” Bro!!!! Just say “I did it.” You don’t need to sound like a guilty child from the 19th century. Or at least, how I imagine a guilty child from the 19th century sounds like.

If you’re still having trouble, step away from your essay. Sometimes when you look at the same words over and over again, life starts to feel like a fever dream. Take a walk, have a friend read it, let it sit for a few days, maybe even a week. I guarantee when you come back to it, it’ll feel like ice cold lemonade on a moist summer day (wow look at that simile,,, if u couldn’t tell i’m basically the next Hemingway). From there, you can start looking at it more analytically.

If worse comes to worse, rewrite the entire thing. Take the same idea, but just rewrite. See which details you decided to include and which ones weren’t relevant. Or, you can just cut until you hit word count and rebuild from there.

### proofreading

I will start you off with this: [A Comprehensive List of Essay Editing Tools](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/cnwczp/a_comprehensive_list_of_essay_editing_tools/). Grammatical errors are unacceptable in the age of spell-check!!!!!!!!! I stand by that. However, if you truly don’t know what the right rules are, *Grammarly* always has the [best explanations](https://www.grammarly.com/blog/category/handbook/). You can also read your essay backwards, which helps to catch things that you might have missed.

As for checking the actual content, I highly recommend you read your essay out loud. If it sounds like you’ve inhaled a thesaurus, go back and use words that you know and understand. You should also be aware of the flow and the tone. Does it feel natural? Are you bumping through the entire essay; reminiscent of that one street in your town that hasn’t been paved over in two decades and everyone just accepts it as fact? When you hear your words out in the world instead of just your brain, it’s easier to get a feel for your essay.

If you’re tired of that, you can also use text to voice converters or Google Translate. Also, printing out your essay and marking it up is an entirely different experience compared to looking at it on screen.

Finally, have someone else review your essay. An outside perspective is invaluable. They can tell you if parts need more detail or explanation, or if you can cut some stuff out. You can also do the whole “read these five essays and pick which one is mine” thing if you’re getting a little desperate.

A little warning though: do not let someone else completely change your essay. You do not have to accept every suggestion that comes your way. If another person’s edits are heavy-handed, you risk losing your own voice, which you do not want. You don’t owe this person anything. While you should be open to any and all criticism, you also have the right to be protective.

## submit & get on with ur life

The dumbass move would be to submit 10 minutes before the deadline. You really shouldn’t do that, but I’m sure all of you will have a dramatized story of the minutes passing, the sweat dripping, the submit button pressed before the clock chimes 12AM to tell your friends.

In the best case scenario, copy and paste your essay into the portal a few hours, maybe days before the deadline. I recommend rereading it one last time, just so you’re slightly reassured. When I submitted my Rutgers app, I didn’t realize that none of the apostrophes had transferred over. That sucked. For Common App specifically, it will most likely bold your entire essay. Just unbold it, it’s fine. Also, if you happen to use em dashes, it might get a little messed up. Either change all the em dashes, or just use two hyphens (-- vs —).

Once you submit, do not reread!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! That’s some masochistic type shit. There’s nothing you can do anymore. That one grammar mistake is permanent and nervous sweating about it at 4AM after your third all-nighter is not a good idea. I’m pretty sure people die in conditions like that lmao.

However, if there’s something glaringly wrong with your app that you notice later on, do not freak out. Most schools offer correction forms. If they don’t, just email whoever the college refers you to (most likely your regional AO).

# writing the supplements

Yeah, there’s more.

You can find all supplements for each school on their website. They usually release them gradually over the summer. Once Common App boots back up, you can also see the prompts under each individual school you add onto your account.

## general

Together, all your essays should tell a very complete story. Your supplements should connect the final dots.

Typically, supps have shorter word limits, which means all personal statement advice is now on steroids. Don’t waste time on flowery language, arbitrary set-up, meaningless details. Get straight to the point. Moreover, all your supps should have three very explicit parts: first, you need to answer the prompt; second, you need to provide evidence that supports your claim; finally, you need to explain why any of this matters.

Have a little fun. Your supps are a good place to throw in relevant anecdotes, to develop your voice. More importantly, they should support everything you presented in your personal statement. Before you submit, you should definitely read your entire application, including your essays, from start to finish. Can your AO easily write a summary for you with all the information you give them? If not, go back and reevaluate your application. Make sure everything is coherent.

My favorite tip, the one I hold very dear to my heart: reuse your goddamn essays. There is absolutely no way you will be able to write a novel essay for every prompt. And why would you? If you already wrote something that can be used for another school, why take time to write something else??????? Copy and paste, kid.

And finally, remember to fucking proofread. Or maybe don’t and [submit something deeply genius](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/ac61tr/i_put_this_for_princeton_as_a_joke_and_forgot/).

## why school

The big misconception about “why school” essays is that it’s supposed to be about the school. You're supposed to kiss their asses, tell them they’re amazing, sweeties, validate them a little.

That’s wrong. They already have big egos.

Like every other part of your app, “why school” essays are about you. AOs want to picture you at their university. They want to know how you will contribute to the community, how you will take advantage of the resources available to you. They want to know that you are intellectually on par, you will engage in school activities, you will lead in thought and action, you will add a unique perspective, skill, value, vision, talent, ability, etc. to their student body.

This is your time to convince them that you belong!!!!! And in order to do that, your essay needs to be tailored to you. If a sentence can apply to any other school or applicant, it's useless.

You need to do research, which you should have done while you were building your college list. For a little refresher: look through college websites, your notes from campus tours and information sessions, student publications, blogs, social media. You should also check out classes that look interesting to you. Find professors and any interesting research. Look through clubs and activities that you can see yourself being involved in.

Your essay should be as specific as possible. And it should also have a balance between you and the school. Everything that you bring in about who you are should in some way connect back to why you belong at the college and what you can contribute.

Write about the past, present, and the future. What are your interests, and how did you pursue them? How do these interests relate to the school? How do they align with the offerings that the school has? This doesn’t need to be just about your major. It can also be about your hobbies, your personality, your childhood dreams of overthrowing Elon Musk, and so on. You still want to keep your voice. You still want to demonstrate your passion. And ultimately, you want to show the school that not only are they vital to your future, but you are vital to their student body.

I fucking hated writing “why school” essays. They’re hard. They require you to do a lot more work compared to other supps. But they’re also a good way for a university to determine whether or not an applicant actually cares about their institution. So don’t breeze past them. And anyway, once you write one, you’ll have the perfect template for the ten others that you need to finish.

Side note: Northwestern’s supplement is not optional. Even if they frame it as an airy additional essay, they’re not going to accept you if you couldn’t even bother writing their “why school” essay.

Here are some links to help you out:

1. [“Why Major/Why School” Essays 101: A Formula & an Example Essay Reviewed](https://www.reddit.com/r/CollegeEssayReview/comments/hfctat/why_majorwhy_school_essays_101_a_formula_an/)
2. [LPT: Please Rid Your Essays of the Following Cliches](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/e5zjru/lpt_please_rid_your_essays_of_the_following/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x)
3. [Why Tufts Essays](https://admissions.tufts.edu/apply/advice/past-essays/why-tufts-essays/) from *Tufts Admissions*

## why major

Oh, [woe is me](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/hgzip9/dear_colleges_please_stop_asking_why_i_do_stuff/).

The “why major” essay can be approached like any other supplement. Take the prompt as something like Pomona’s “what gets you excited about your academic interest selection(s) above?” or Columbia’s “please tell us what from your current and past experiences (either academic or personal) attracts you specifically to the field or fields of study that you noted in the Member Questions section” and answer the question. Provide evidence. Explain why it matters.

You don’t have to have some direct response. Similar to the “why school” essay, you can always pull from your past, present, and future. Your interests, how you pursued them, and what more you want to do. Use anecdotes. Introspect a little.

For a little inspiration, here’s the essay I wrote for WashU. The prompt was:

Tell us about something that really sparks your intellectual interest and curiosity and compels you to explore more in the program/area of study that you indicated. It could be an idea, book, project, cultural activity, work of art, start-up, music, movie, research, innovation, question, or other pursuit. (300 word maximum)

A little different from the standard “why this major,” but basically asking the same thing. I had put down chemistry and English as my two areas of study.

I don’t usually buy books. Dog-eared paperbacks of my local library comfort me with the spirits they have once stirred. However, *Chemistry* by Weike Wang resides on my bookshelf, unapologetically mine, its pages worn from the number of times I’ve idly flipped through its words.

My favorite novel serves as a constant note to self: the study of science and English, the objective and the visceral, are not two irreconcilable identities. Instead, they meld together into a mutualistic performance.

In *Chemistry*, the unnamed main character ponders her burnout as she conducts experiments in her graduate school lab. Atoms embed themselves in her philosophy—according to her, the chemist “sees the glass completely full, half in liquid state and half gaseous.” Her imagery of microscopic particles taught me that science is storytelling. Hand in hand, prose and chemistry can explain the inexplicable.

While the universe is infinite, I comprehend infinity as a series of chemical reactions dancing through meticulous choreography. The law of conservation dictates that all matter and energy cycle through earth and sky. Chemistry captures nature’s elegant plot, and it was *Chemistry* that showed me the inherent narrative behind each reactant, catalyst, and product.

I’m always in pursuit of the next great mystery, from the seamless color change in my beaker to the nuclear fission taking place against the night sky. I’m always in pursuit of the next great story. The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, carbon cluster C60 (often considered the most beautiful molecule), entropy, and everything else the naked eye cannot see are what stir my spirit.

I wish to become a scientific journalist, to make complex theory accessible to the common man. To me, chemistry is immortal art that should be shared. Methodical process gives way to open-ended solutions, much like how a good book encourages everlasting thought.

Okay, a little pretentious, I get it. But, I do the three things: I answer the prompt, I provide evidence (weak evidence relying on pathos alone, but to be honest, my chemistry experience is lacking), and I explain why it matters. That’s all you have to do. Don’t try to make your love for science something deep. Just explain it as it is.

# writing the loci

Deferred and (oop that sucks)/or waitlisted? Time to slam out The Letter of Continued Interest.

## why even send anything at all

Most students who are deferred or waitlisted don’t bother with the updates. So, some simple math: if you’re one of the few who do send in a LOCI, you’ve already distinguished yourself from hundreds, maybe even thousands of applicants.

## how to send

Some schools will give you a specific place to submit your LOCI or any other updates. I know that UMich allows for nothing more than a 250 word slot. Other colleges might have a form, they might ask you not to send anything at all, you might have to email your regional AO. Check their blogs, your portal, or your decision letter to see if they’ve explained further.

If they don’t say anything at all, it’s highly likely that you should just email your assigned AO. Your portal will give you a line of contact. Send the text of your LOCI in the actual email, and attach a pdf of the LOCI if you want (“I have attached a pdf just in case it’s easier for you to upload to my file”).

## what to send

This isn’t really like your personal statement or your supplements. It borders on being another “why school” essay; however, you should be more formal and succinct. Still be yourself, but don’t add on an endearing little story. You want to be blunt.

Start out with the banger, “you remain [one of] my top choice[s],” or any other variation of that. You can also tell them that you will attend if accepted, as long as that statement is true. Then, include any updates since applying. If you won an important competition, if you’ve been working on your ECs, if you finished a personal project, whatever it is, tell them. You can bullet point your recent accomplishments, or have it as a new paragraph. Finally, reaffirm why this school is such a good fit for you; a mini “why school” monologue, which yes, means more research. Tell them why you need them, but also why they need you. Draw new connections between yourself and the school. You can also include an additional letter of recommendation. Choose someone who can present a side of you that they might have seen. And then send it.

Once you’ve done that, don’t bother your AOs. While they do read everything you give them, you don’t want to seem mentally unstable. They’re busy people.

Here are much more complete guides to the LOCI, including examples:

1. [Deferred? How to Write a Letter of Continued Interest](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/7rt7t1/deferred_how_to_write_a_letter_of_continued/)
2. [Deferred? It’s Time to Think About That Letter of Continued Interest](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/eakf78/deferred_its_time_to_think_about_that_letter_of/)

## when to send

If you were deferred, the best time to send is mid-January to early-February, which is the very latest. If you were waitlisted, mid-April to early-May should work.

# after submitting ur app

Oh my god, you’re almost there. And I’m almost done with this doc LMAO.

## interviews

Interviews vary in importance, but [they are almost always based on availability](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/etgvwt/official_interview_policies_source_for_ivies_mit/). Don’t read too much into it. Some schools will automatically connect you with an alumnus and you won’t have to do anything. Sometimes they’ll do it before you even apply. Others will have you sign up for an interview, usually through your portal. Either way, take advantage of it if you’re offered one. If you’re not, that’s okay too. Just means you won’t have to meet up with a stranger at some random Starbucks on a Monday afternoon.

Check your email regularly. When you’re contacted, be courteous and timely in responding. Write as if you’re talking to a teacher. You don’t have to be overly formal (“shall we convene in a fortnight?”) but you also want to be polite. Answer any questions they have. Address them as Ms., Mr., by first name if that’s how they introduce themselves, or however else they prefer.

Colleges are basically trying to verify that you’re not insane. They want to assess your personality, and gauge whether or not you’re a good fit for their school. You’re not trying to flex the pure amount of knowledge you have on the nature of race relations in Catalan, or anything remotely intellectual. You’re trying to have a conversation (so, I mean, if the conversation naturally ebbs and flows into Spain’s control over Catalan, then flex a little; just don’t force your responses in one way or another).

Prepare by reading up on the school. A common question is “why do you want to attend [insert college]?” Blubbering your way through your response is really not that reassuring. If you want, you can also learn your interviewer’s background beforehand. They almost always have a Facebook or LinkedIn (maybe log out of your own account so they don’t see you creeping). For me, it was a good way to familiarize myself with what they studied and what they do now, and actually see their face. As someone who is just generally anxious, this definitely calmed me down and confirmed that they were a real person. It also would’ve helped when, at my first interview, I was in the middle of a coffeeshop 30 minutes away from my town and I had no idea who tf anyone was.

At the end of the interview, they will ask if you have any questions. You should always say yes. Have some ready; ask about their experiences in school and since graduating, their favorite traditions, what they liked most about the school, etc. On the day of the interview, make sure to bring a resume. Sometimes they ask for one, sometimes they don’t; either way, you’re prepared.

The one thing you shouldn’t do is have a 45 minute speech ready, or any rehearsed answers at that. However, you should talk more than usual. When you answer a question, don’t just say “yes,” or “no.” Elaborate. Insert little details, specific examples, relevant experience. It’s usually better to over-explain your answer rather than under-explain. If you don't know exactly what to say, assume that every question has a “why?” following it. That way, you always have that reminder to give additional insight.

As for the interview itself, wear something nice. It doesn’t have to be a full on tux, but don’t show up in sweats either. Look put together, at least. Arrive a little early; 10-15 minutes should be sufficient. There’s really no reason to be nervous. Like I said, you’re basically just having a conversation. And as excruciating as small talk is, be comfortable with small talk. Make eye contact, give them a firm handshake, introduce yourself, and let them get the interview started. They’ll probably have a spiel about themselves and their background. Answer any questions they have, and if they happen to move away from the Q&A format, then keep up with them. However, no matter how casual they seem, make sure that you always seem presentable and respectable. [Don’t lean in for the fucking kiss](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/eqriom/i_tried_to_kiss_my_interviewer_are_my_chances/).

[Here are a few common interview questions](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/eoomyt/common_interview_questions_and_general_interview/). [Here are some more](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/7c41qc/how_to_prepare_for_interviews_a_guide_by_novembrr/). For me, the only one that caught me off guard was, “what other schools did you apply to?” This man, with his lizard eyes, stared into my soul and at that moment, my mind was smooth. Empty. I ended up spitting out schools that were culturally similar to Yale. Assuming every question is intentional, your answers should be too.

Afterwards, send them a follow up email later that day, or the next. Simply thank them for meeting with you. From there, the alumnus will complete a report or brief summary about the interview, including his/her impressions of you. This report will be reviewed by the AO. In general, interviews matter very little.

If you happen to reserve an on-campus interview with an AO specifically, then yea, this might be the time to be a little nervous. Seeing how they have direct access to the decision-making process, you should conduct yourself in a similar manner as any other interview; just make sure that your answers and your questions are slightly more polished.

Sometimes, your interview sucks. In any situation where you experience something aggressive, offensive, off-putting, etc. go about the interview as usual. However, [don’t be afraid to contact the admissions office later](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/9vw5qw/i_got_roasted_in_my_stanford_interview_yesterday/). They will *not* hold it against you. They want all their interviewers to be supportive and open; after all, these interviewers are representing the school itself.

Some more posts to prepare and ~soothe~ you:

1. [Here’s My Interview Cheat Sheet](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/aclutj/up_close_and_personal_the_interview_heres_my/)
2. Anything from [u/icebergchick](https://www.reddit.com/user/icebergchick/posts/)
3. [I Asked Four of My Friends About the Worst Moment From Their Alumni Interviews](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/f939ya/i_asked_four_of_my_friends_about_the_worst_moment/)

## scholarships & financial aid

My titles are getting less creative, smh.

### scholarships

Finding scholarships, especially after applying, can be hard. If you start early, you can shoot your shot at bigger organizations, like the [Coca-Cola Scholars Foundation](https://www.coca-colascholarsfoundation.org/apply/). However, there are still scholarships out there for graduating seniors.

First, look for regional scholarships. These are typically smaller in amount, but that also means that they have less applicants, and therefore, less competition. Talk to your guidance counselor. My high school specifically had a town-wide scholarship competition.

From there, you can start looking at the national awards. Just searching up “scholarships for high school seniors” on Google will bring about some results. Opposite to the regional scholarships, these typically have more applicants, and therefore, more competition. You can also look for really niche areas, because some scholarships are *really* niche. Some are focused on your intended major, home state, parent’s place of employment, race/religion/ethnicity/sexual orientation/gender/native language/etc. If you do use sites like *Unigo*, *Scholarships.com*, etc., sign up with a separate email; these sites spam a shit ton. You can also check out the subreddit [r/Scholarships](https://www.reddit.com/r/Scholarships/).

Most scholarships will ask for essays. You can probably repurpose your supps/personal statement. If you can’t, a lot of scholarships will ask the same question over and over again. Which means, back to saving the environment with the standard reduce, reuse, recycle.

### financial aid

You got your financial aid package from your first-choice university and its subpar. [Appeal for more financial aid](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bbde6t/i_requested_more_financial_aid_from_one_of_my/). [You can always ask for more](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gx5612/miracles_do_happen/). The worst that can happen is they tell you “no.” So basically, you have nothing to lose. They’ve already accepted you.

Call or email the financial aid office. Ask about their appeals process, or just explain your situation. Identify the special circumstances that affect your ability to pay for college. If a peer institution offered you a better aid package, use that as leverage. The university will probably match, if not give you more. When asked for any documents, send it to them promptly. Financial aid offices are bitches; do your part and speed up the process.

Good luck!!!!!!!

## when decisions typically come out

Oh to be a highly-strung, brittle, hysterical senior with 231 tabs open, refreshing College Confidential every 32 seconds again.

1. Here is a [megathread with schools](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/a3hoxl/megathread_schools_and_their_edeascearea_dates/) and their early decision dates for the 2019-2020 admissions cycle.
2. Here is a [spreadsheet with schools](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/12NnsHOjtevUATb-yYIgDFFLyYajiHxhJ6xHiJnIXj-8/edit#gid=1861559720) and their regular decision dates for the 2019-2020 admissions cycle.

## grief & celebration: the duality of man

Palms sweaty, tummy turning. Decisions are coming out.

### prepare urself

First things first: one decision is not indicative of any other decision. The college admissions process, let’s say it together, is a crapshoot!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! There is literally no causation going on. If you were rejected from your ED school, that doesn’t mean your fate is set at any other T20.

And even so, [rejection is normal](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/b72lur/our_school_made_a_college_rejection_wall_for/). Normalize!!! rejection!!! Schools with a 10% acceptance rate are turning away the other 90% of applicants. You just never hear about them. Anyway, in the grand scheme of things, what is life but [failure after failure](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/a7c5rp/stressed_anxious_overwhelmed_depressed_this_is/) LOL. At the same time, what is life but [success after success](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/e9tdm7/worried_that_early_admissions_wont_go_your_way/).

If you really think you need to emotionally prepare yourself for any possible outcome, [here are decision letters](https://ivyhub.org/decision-letters/) from top schools. [Here are some more](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/wiki/decision-letters).

### coping: that school sucked anyway

No school is perfect. They all stink (uh oh, stinky) in one way or another. Just go on *r/ApplyingToCollege* and search up “make me hate [insert college]” and you’ll find reasons. If you’re really doing the sad boy hours, I guarantee you will find information anywhere on the internet slamming on whatever college you want. [Here’s a post about Duke](https://talk.collegeconfidential.com/duke-university/1974900-reasons-why-you-may-dislike-duke-a-memoir-from-an-unhappy-student.html). The [vendetta against RPI](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/9es1z2/do_not_apply_to_rensselaer_polytechnic_institute/) is too fucking good. [Here’s something else that Freaked me out after I got into WashU](https://talk.collegeconfidential.com/washington-university-st-louis/1712518-why-our-son-is-looking-to-leave-wustl.html). Anything that has to do with “why I’m transferring from [insert college]” is always a gold mine.

I’ll leave you with this: [Post Your Dream School and Someone Else Will Tell Why it Sucks](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gubgje/post_your_dream_school_and_someone_else_will_tell/).

### imposter syndrome

Know that you were accepted for a reason. A waitlist does not dilute your accomplishments. AOs are not dedicating months of work, hours of reviewing applications, to make one big mistake on you. Sorry to say, but you’re not that special. The university wants you at their school, no other reason but that.

I’m not really good with the sappy comforting shit, so here are two posts:

1. [Imposter Syndrome](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/ebvv2a/imposter_syndrome/)
2. [How to Handle Imposter Syndrome](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/edyphz/how_to_handle_imposter_syndrome/)

### a moment of epiphany

Listen sis, I don’t know how much more I can hammer this in, but it is 2:06AM right now, and I want you to know that getting into a T20 is not all that matters in life.

When I think about my friends and what I admire about them, their college has never come to mind. When I think about me and what I admire about myself, WashU has never come to mind. Your school will never be the most important part of who you are. Instead, it’s what got you here, to this very moment, that will get you even further.

You have years and years ahead of you. I know it’s hard to take a macro view on your life, but you have so many more paths to take. One day, you will get into graduate school, you will sign the lease to your first apartment, you will meet someone you really love, you will move to the city that your ten-year-old self idolized, you will be hired at your dream job, you will see your childhood friends, your younger sibling grow up. You will experience so much beautiful joy.

Grieve. Mourn. Cry. Do what you need to do. But do not limit yourself. Whichever college you end up going to, you have full power and control over your life to thrive.

And some more catharsis:

1. [Having Survived Rejection](https://mitadmissions.org/blogs/entry/having-survived-rejection-guest-post/)
2. [I Got Into My Dream Ivy League School 10 Years Ago—Another Perspective](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/fomnzw/i_got_into_my_dream_ivy_league_school_10_years/)
3. [Dear Therapist: I Staked My Identity on Attending an Ivy League School](https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/05/dear-therapist-my-dream-college-rejected-me/611407/)

### personal experience

The last time I’ll unnecessarily add in my own trauma :’) we’ve come so far.

I opened my WashU decision letter at my local library. It seemed oddly symbolic seeing how I had spent the last four years studying here. Everyday after school, my friends and I would walk together, down the path around the Oval, and suddenly soften our voices as we entered. I thought about my freshman self and how indestructible her ambitions had seemed.

My hands shook. I refreshed College Confidential. Approximately two hours ago, my friend had called and screamed. We both did. She had gotten into Stern. I wondered what my call would be like.

Someone posted that they were accepted. The entire table vibrated with nerves. Press one button. Then two. Then a big congratulations.

I slammed the screen of my computer down, stuffed it into my backpack, and ran to the bathroom. I was going to throw up. Holy shit. Was that fucking real. Was that fucking real. Was that fucking real.

An old lady was fixing her hair. I slammed my way into a stall. I could barely stay still; my entire body felt as if it didn’t belong to me. I was sobbing. The old lady left. My mom was on the phone. I got in, Mom. I did it, Mom.

My dad picked me up. I decided not to take the car that morning because I was a bad driver and emotional instability probably wouldn’t make me better.

What followed was euphoria. But as I came down from it, my parents wouldn’t stop talking about what ifs. What if I hadn’t gotten in. Maybe I would have been accepted somewhere else, somewhere better. Columbia, Yale, Cornell, who knows? And as they asked, I also wondered. What about Northwestern, Amherst, Tufts?

Ivy Day was more brutal than I thought it would be. Who got into where? My mom looked wild with yearning.

But everytime I really gave into it, really let myself think about these other schools, I couldn’t see a future there. Genuinely, it felt like a shell of a dream. It felt empty, artificial. When I thought about WashU, there was nothing but technicolor. Even when I was opening up decision letters, Cornell was preceded by no feelings. I just opened my portal. UChicago and UMich were read with friends and closed right away. Conversation continued.

I think there will always be a phantom feeling within me, thinking about hypotheticals. It’s because I spent so long looking at rankings that they’re imprinted in my mind. I spent so long dreaming about Stanford’s ugly Taco Bell architecture that I couldn’t imagine anything less. Yet, WashU is literally a fucking T20. And it is the closest I have ever been to a dream school. And knowing that I will be there for the next four years feels like utter tranquility.

## choosing between schools

Congratulations on all your acceptances!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

We’re back to the research. You probably have more resources available to you too, such as webinars, admitted student days, current student contacts, etc. Take advantage of all of them. Also, financial aid packages are important. So is [free college merch](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/him6sz/what_colleges_give_out_shirts_when_you_get/).

I’m about to share with you an absolute fucking GEM that I have literally memorized. It is my bible, and I’m still sad I lost the Reddit post where I first found it. Here it is: [My Exceedingly Thorough College Decision](https://docs.google.com/document/d/17po7ljzFKTV_70dxwQHS1eBB_bip-6MmDbMyQAKgvH4/edit?usp=sharing). I have no idea who this man is, but he is my goddamn hero. The dedication? Impeccable. I’m excited to go to the same school as him.

Although you don’t need to be as comprehensive as that, you should dedicate some time to parse through each school. While looking into academic programs is important, [prioritize fit](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/d3wehk/letter_from_an_ivy_league_student_and_former_a2c/).

I’ve probably said it before, I don’t know, it’s 3:02AM and we’re starting to get into delirious territory. I’ve probably said it before, but you’re spending the next four years (possibly more, possibly less) here. You don’t want to get there and realize that you simply don’t belong. Don’t rely on prestige alone. Look into culture.

What’s more, you should seriously consider finances. If you plan on attending grad school, more specifically law or med school, going to the best college you can is not always the best choice. Consider how much debt you will be in, and whether or not you will be able to pay that off with your potential first year salary. Will you still be hemorrhaging money afterwards?

Take your initial list, and whittle it down to two or three schools. From there, think about what you really want in a university. Go back to that “perfect college” activity we all did together. Figure out which colleges best fulfill your requirements. Research, research, research. And research.

Making the actual decision can be hard; pro/con lists, excel sheets, existential crises might not help. Ultimately, the best advice is to flip a coin. While you’re waiting for it to hit the solid surface in front of you, which side do you want to land on? Which school is your gut hoping for? That’s your college, right there.

Two things to help you out:

1. [A Little Bit of Perspective From a 21 y/o College Student](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/9qfjl5/a_little_bit_of_perspective_from_a_21_yo_college/)
2. [Choosing a College](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGtN8EkIhZk&) from *studyquill* on YouTube
3. Help me decide: School X vs School Y Megathread [I](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/fl2l11/help_me_decide_school_x_versus_school_y_megathread/) / [II](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/fne9ui/help_me_decide_school_x_vs_school_y_megathread_ii/) for the 2019-2020 admissions cycle

## accept ur offer

May 1 is decision day. For early decision folks, your decision day is earlier. You must notify your college of choice that you intend to enroll by this deadline (unless we’re still going through a pandemic, then idk). To do so, your school usually has a spot in their portal where you either accept or decline their offer.

As for securing your spot in the matriculating class, you must pay a deposit. I think the one for WashU was $500?? That’s pretty typical for most universities. This money will be applied to your tuition later, so you’re not just throwing cash into the wind. However, if paying the deposit is a financial strain, reach out to the college and ask for a waiver.

Do not double deposit. Some people will enroll in multiple schools at once in order to extend the time they have to make a decision. [This is just a bad idea and morally gray](https://thescholarshipsystem.com/blog-for-students-families/college-decision-time-double-deposits-ethical/). If you really cannot make a choice, or your financial aid package has not come in yet, contact the schools and ask them for a possible extension.

Remember to also send in your final transcript by the required date.

## wait on ur offer

If you were waitlisted, you should still submit a deposit to a university that you were accepted to. You should’ve fallen in love with another school anyway. Don’t bank on getting off the waitlist because to be straight up, that is very unlikely to happen. While this may be considered “double depositing,” it’s completely okay to submit a deposit while still on a waitlist.

Sometimes admissions offices will call, or they will send email updates asking whether or not you are still interested in their institution. Keep up with them.

It’s possible to be on a waitlist up to the start of school. Most colleges will send you sporadic news, whether that be the waitlist has closed, or the waitlist is still accepting students.

And if you happen to get off, [you lose the money](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/gb4nee/i_got_off_a_waitlist_30_seconds_after_i_submitted/), but [who fucking cares](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/hepuji/omg_just_got_off_the_stanford_waitlist/)!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! You’re in!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

## withdraw ur app / deny ur offer

Oh boy. Don’t be fucking selfish.

If you were accepted to a school early decision, withdraw all of your other apps. Not doing so is a violation of your ED contract. If your college finds out, you might lose your spot.

You might also be [hurting applicants](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/fcy8i5/psa_withdraw_your_apps/) who are in the regular decision pool. Saying “yes” to your app might be saying “no” to someone who would have committed to that school. Not withdrawing your app is really just greed and nothing else.

Most schools will have somewhere in the portal where you deny your offer. If there isn’t, you should contact your regional AO and let them know that you were accepted to a school through early decision.

The only exception would be financial circumstances. If you are denying your offer at your ED school, then you do not have to withdraw any outside applications.

As for waitlists, don’t accept a spot if you don’t really care about the school. Seeing if you get in is again, saying “no” to someone who would have committed.

## u did it! i am so, so proud of u!

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! finally !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I am, I am, I am. I am so fucking proud of you!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

# fin: onto the rest of ur life

Take it from a senior who has had her second semester ruined: there is no greater relief than knowing that high school is over LMAOOO. I’m excited to move on, and more importantly, to move out. As some girl who I follow on Instagram because she’s also WashU ‘24 (NOT 24’) famously once captioned her post: from misery to Missouri.

And the same goes for you. No matter where you are in the college application process, just know that there is a shiny, glorious end. No matter how good or bad high school was for you, you’re about to get a fresh start. Cleansed, like holy water.

The final posts that I ever will grant you:

1. [I Made a Mock AP Pokemon Test!](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/codh5u/i_made_a_mock_ap_pok%C3%A9mon_test/)
2. [A Gift From the Yale GroupMe (A Play Based on the Famous Interview Kiss)](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/fs1j9i/a_gift_from_the_yale_groupme_a_play_based_on_the/)
3. [My Favorite A2C Stories From a Senior Who’s Been Here for 2+ Years](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/frc3lx/my_favorite_a2c_stories_from_a_senior_whos_been/)

# my final half-assed works cited

This doc is already sputtering along like an elderly man who’s close to death, so I’m sure overloading it with more links will just cause infinite loading. If you want to find the complete list, [here she is](https://docs.google.com/document/d/16HGpgwviKVRSddaA4b9w01wpNKI6Oj8z9HyNW3p36EM/edit?usp=sharing).

1. Disclaimer: this entire document was compiled solely by me, a graduating high school senior from the US (created in the summer of 2020, before COVID massively affected college admissions & basically everything else). I only included information that I was familiar with/was able to extensively research. For example, I did not delineate the application process for international students because I did not think I could accurately capture that experience. So yes, technically there was a little false advertising going on, but you know, you gotta do what you gotta do. I also want to acknowledge that I am in no way an expert! Like I said, I was just a prefrosh (at the time of writing this) who has no idea what goes on behind the closed doors of admission offices. Please do not use this document as your only source of information. I urge you to do your own research and check out some sources/links that I included. While I did sporadically (ok . maybe more like frequently) insert my opinion, that is the opinion of an upper middle-class, Chinese-American girl living in New Jersey.

   All further inputs are welcome. Email [gmzstudent@gmail.com](mailto:gmzstudent@gmail.com), pm [u/apsuffer](https://www.reddit.com/user/apsuffer), or fill out this [google form](https://forms.gle/oT11v4i6THASLDss7) with suggestions/edits. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)