

Should You Apply Early Decision To College?

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If you're reading this, you or someone close to you is probably applying to college this year. Most likely, you're either thinking about those applications way too much or not enough ([college essay procrastination is serious, but curable](#)). But the most important thing at this stage isn't to think endlessly, or to mull over, or to avoid—it's to *decide*, and decide strategically.

The fact is, there are a large number of super-high-achieving students out there who have access to serious resources, insider and familial knowledge, and sophisticated strategies to get into the best colleges in the country—and whether you count yourself in that group or not, you're competing against them, so you'll need to implement some of the same strategies they use.

This isn't about the dark side of college admissions that came to the forefront this year—from the [Varsity Blues cheating scandal](#) to the [Asian-American discrimination lawsuit against Harvard](#)—but both stories have served to emphasize the advantages that some students have in the elite college admissions process. There are many [perfectly above-board ways](#) that students from privileged backgrounds and those with insider knowledge use to get an edge in the competitive college admissions process.

And one of the most important is applying Early Decision—an option that is available to every student, but is generally only used by a small subset of students who are well-versed in what it takes to get into top schools. Unlike many other strategies these students use to get an edge, applying Early Decision is an option that is equally available and accessible to every student—and you should definitely be considering it. Here are some of the most commonly asked questions about applying to college early decision—and the real answers.

Should I apply Early Decision? Where should I apply Early Decision?

The short answers: you should probably apply Early Decision, but you should only apply Early Decision to one of your dream schools. That way, you're less likely to regret it or wonder 'what if?' But don't discount the danger of regretting *not* applying Early Decision!

Deciding whether—and where—to apply Early Decision is a deeply personal and emotional question, and one that I've written an [extensive step-by-step guide](#) about. But there are plenty of other questions to consider—

Does applying Early Decision help my chances?

Yes.

Does applying Early *Action* help my chances?

Not very much!

Why? What's the difference between Early Decision and Early Action?

Early Decision is binding. If you get in, you have to matriculate and attend. And because it's binding, it *really* helps your chances of getting in. Having a high percentage of admitted students matriculate (attend) is called a yield rate, and schools with a high yield rate are ranked higher and considered more prestigious.

You may have heard some version of this joke before—(please insert your school rivalry of choice): “What’s the difference between a student at [rival college] and a student at [our college]? They both got into [rival college]!” The implication is that, had students at [rival college] been accepted to [our college], they would have matriculated there instead, but they didn’t, and had to settle for ‘second best.’ Applying Early Decision is your way of saying to a college “I think you’re great and would choose you over any other school.” That can be a winning argument even at the most prestigious schools—applying ED is the ultimate expression of ‘demonstrated interest.’

On the other hand, Early Action is non-binding, so there’s not much benefit in terms of yield. You’d think the demonstrated interest would still be a strong factor, but it’s not. In my experience, many high-achieving students come up with their list and then apply early action to whichever schools offer it, just to ‘get it out of the way.’ So the only thing it indicates is that it was on the list, and the student is on top of their workload (which is something, I suppose). The third option, Single Choice Early Action or Restrictive Early Action, is non-binding in terms of matriculation, but you can’t apply early (ED or EA) to any other private colleges. This is a bit better than EA in terms of demonstrating interest, but not enough to choose that option instead of Early Decision, which, again, *really helps a lot*.

Can I get out of an early decision agreement?

Not generally. Many students wonder how Early Decision is enforced—to be clear, it’s not a legally binding agreement, but it is a serious pledge, and breaking it will jeopardize your status with other colleges.

When other schools you’ve applied to discover you’ve broken your ED agreement, they are likely to remove you from the applicant pool or rescind your offer of admission. And they will find out—most colleges, admissions counselors, and guidance counselors adhere to a code of ethics (often the NACAC code) that require counselors and colleges to inform the other colleges on your list that you applied in bad faith. So no, technically you don’t *have* to go to your Early Decision school (they won’t hunt you down and frog-march you onto campus), but if you don’t, you likely won’t be able to go to another college.

There’s no good excuse for applying ED to more than one school—that is completely unacceptable and risks your applications to both schools. That being said, if you apply ED to one school and change your mind after getting in, you may have a chance. After all, college

admissions officers are human beings, and if you make a strong enough case to your ED school, it's possible that they will let you off the hook.

That being said, students with strong cases are rare—"I changed my mind" isn't a good reason to back out of an ED agreement, and neither is "I applied ED to go to the same school as my boy/girlfriend, and we just broke up."

What if I apply early decision and then the financial aid isn't enough?

Many students wonder if they should apply early decision if they need financial aid—and the answer is yes! Just [be sure that you get a decent estimate of what the school will actually cost YOU before you apply](#). This isn't as complicated as it sounds—all schools are legally required to offer Net Price Calculators on their websites that allow prospective students to estimate their financial aid package and Expected Family Contribution. To be extra careful, you can then get in touch with the admissions office at the school to make sure it's a good estimate (they can't guarantee anything but they'll let you know if you left off important information).

Be sure to do this, though! "I didn't use the Net Price Calculator or check what my EFC would look like before I applied Early Decision and it's nowhere near enough" isn't a strong place to negotiate from, and may come across as just an excuse to get out of the ED agreement.

You can absolutely negotiate your financial aid package—and being an accepted ED student is a powerful position to negotiate from! If you are accepted to your early decision school and your financial aid package is less generous than the Net Price Calculator said it would be, or if since applying, your family's financial situation has changed and the package doesn't reflect that, you can definitely work with the school to make sure you have options. The far more likely outcome is that the school will work with you and renegotiate your financial aid package. But if they don't or can't fully accommodate you, they will release you from the ED agreement. Again, though, they will want to negotiate—they admitted you for a reason, after all!

Should I apply Early Decision even though I'm still improving my GPA and SAT or ACT scores during senior fall?

I prefer to answer this question on a per-student basis, as it does depend on which school you're applying to, what your current transcript looks like, etc. But as a general rule, I wouldn't encourage students to pass up the boost they can get from applying Early Decision. If you currently have, say, a 1350 on the SAT and multiple tutors have guaranteed that you'll get a 1500+ on the December test date, then yes, it may be a good idea to wait—but in general, if your application is 'borderline' and may be improved by a slight increase on tests or grades, you probably will get deferred into the regular admissions pool rather than getting rejected outright, and then you will be able to send any updates to bolster your application.