

A Complete Guide to the College Application Process

Find answers to common questions prospective college students have about deadlines, essays and more.

By [Cole Claybourn](#) USNEWS. Sept. 18, 2023

Students should generally begin working on applications the summer between their junior and senior year of high school, experts say. The [college](#) application process can seem intimidating, especially if students don't have parents or siblings who have already been through it and can offer advice. Since there are several steps, such as [writing an essay](#) and obtaining [letters of recommendation](#), **experts say a good way for students to get started is to create a to-do list during their junior year of high school.** "Once you can see it visually, the number of tasks and a schedule to do them, it simplifies a lot of things," says Christine Chu, a premier college admissions counselor at IvyWise, a New York-based education consulting company. "It will take away a lot of the anxiety." (School One students can get a better head start at School One by joining the College Committee for the 2nd trimester of their junior year and drafting their college essay by our deadline in early April – Cary)

Here's what prospective undergraduates need to know about completing a college application.

What Are the Important College Application Deadlines?

High school seniors have multiple deadlines to choose from when applying to colleges.

The Step-by-Step Guide to Applying to College

Applying to College

- [Complete the FAFSA](#)
- [Fill Out the Common App](#)
- [Write a Standout College Essay](#)
- [Ask for Recommendation Letters](#)
- [Learn the Ins and Outs of Financial Aid](#)
- [Decipher College Tuition Costs](#)
- [Find Scholarships to Pay for College](#)

Early Decision

First are [early decision](#) deadlines, usually in November. Students who apply via early decision, or ED, hear back from a college sooner than their peers who turn in applications later. ED admissions decisions often come out by December. However, **students should be aware that ED acceptances are binding, meaning an applicant must enroll if offered admission.** Some schools also have a second early decision deadline, ED II, which is also binding. The difference is in the timelines. ED II deadlines are usually in January, and admissions decisions often come out in February.

Early Action

[Early action](#) is another type of application deadline that tends to be in November or December, though some schools set deadlines as early as Oct. 15. Similar to early decision, students who apply via early action hear back from schools sooner. The difference is EA acceptances aren't binding.

(Early Action is highly recommended for all students – Cary)

Regular Decision

Students can also choose to apply by a school's regular decision deadline, which is typically Jan. 1. **Students who apply regular decision generally hear back from schools in mid-to-late March or early April.** This is the most common way students apply to schools. One other admissions policy to be aware of is [rolling admissions](#). **Schools with rolling admissions evaluate applications as they receive them and release admissions decisions on an ongoing basis. These schools may have a priority filing date, but they generally don't have a hard cutoff date for applications.** The institutions continue accepting them until all spots in the incoming class are filled. (For rolling admissions, your chances of financial aid diminish significantly the longer you wait. – Cary)

Regardless of the type of decision students pursue, it's important to start the application process early, says Denard Jones, lead college counselor at Empowerly, a college admissions consulting company. Jones previously worked in college admissions at [Elon University](#) in North Carolina and [Saint Joseph's University](#) in Pennsylvania. "If you chunk it up and break down these tasks and can get ahead and start early, you're not stifling your creativity because you're trying to rush through to get everything done by October or November deadlines," he says. "Time management is something you're going to have to deal with the rest of your life, regardless of what you go into."

In deciding when to apply, as well as how many colleges to apply to, students should consider [financial aid implications](#). **Experts say if money is a concern, as it is for most families of college-bound students, applicants should choose nonbinding deadlines – EA and regular decision. This will enable families to compare financial aid offers from multiple schools.**

Experts also suggest students research applicable scholarships, like those related to their [hobbies](#), to help offset costs. For regular decision deadlines, students typically have until May 1 to [decide which school](#) they will attend and pay an enrollment deposit.

Which College Application Platform Should I Use?

Students have several options when it comes to college application platforms.

The Common Application

One popular choice is [The Common Application](#), which is accepted by more than 1,000 colleges, including some outside the U.S. Students fill out the Common App once and can then submit it to multiple colleges. However, in addition to the main application, Common App schools often have a supplemental section, Chu says. The supplement sometimes includes [additional essay](#) questions, so students may need to budget time for more writing. Some schools do not accept the Common App, such as the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#) and [Georgetown University](#) in Washington, D.C. Students have to fill out separate applications for these schools, generally through the school's website.

Other application options include the [Common Black College Application](#), accepted by most historically Black colleges and universities. Additionally, some colleges have school-specific or university system-specific applications. For example, the University of California system has its own application – the only platform used by UC schools – and students can apply to multiple campuses with one application. Students can visit a college's website to find out which application platforms are accepted. Also, the [Common App](#) and [CBCA](#) websites list their partner schools.

What Do I Need to Know About the College Application Essay?

As part of the application process, most colleges require students to submit at least one writing sample: the [college essay](#). This is sometimes referred to as a personal statement. There's usually a word limit of around several hundred words for a personal statement. The main essay on the Common App should be around 650 words. The Coalition Application website says its essays should be between 500 and 650 words. Institution-specific supplemental essays typically have a word count of around 250 words.

Regardless of which application platform they use, students have [multiple essay prompts](#) from which to choose. "The application essay prompts are broad and open-ended, and I think that's sometimes what challenges students the most," says Niki Barron, associate dean of admission at [Hamilton College](#) in New York. "But they're open-ended for a reason, and that's because we do really want to see what students choose to write about, what students feel is important."

Experts say students should try to tell a story about themselves in the essay, which doesn't necessarily mean writing about a big, impressive accomplishment. **Barron says the most memorable essays for her focus on more ordinary topics. "But they're done in such a self-reflective way that it gives me so much insight into who a student is as a person and gives me such a sense of the student's voice,"** she adds.

What Are the Other Key Components of a College Application?

Here are other parts of the college application that prospective students should be ready for.

Personal Information

In the first portion of a college application, students have to provide basic information about themselves, their school and their family.

High School Transcript

Colleges also ask for an official high school transcript, which is a record of the courses students have taken and the grades they have earned. Admissions offices typically ask that a transcript be sent directly from the high school rather than from the student, says Geoff Heckman, school counselor and department chair at [Platte County High School](#) in Missouri. Students usually submit a transcript request to their high school's counseling office, but some schools use an online service, such as Parchment or SENDedu, that allows students to request the transcript be sent through a secure online provider, Heckman says. Students can also send their transcript via a registrar if their school has one rather than through the counseling office. (At School One, advisors do this as well as the Counselor recommendation, so students should pick two other teachers for teacher recommendations. – Cary)

Standardized Test Scores

Many schools require applicants to submit [SAT or ACT](#) scores, which are usually sent by the testing companies. The number of schools requiring standardized test scores has dropped dramatically as the coronavirus pandemic upended these exams. Prospective students should know, however, that testing policies vary even when such exams are not required. Key terms to pay attention to include test-blind and [test-optional](#). **Test-blind means that scores will not be considered if submitted. By contrast, test-optional colleges do not require [ACT or SAT](#) scores but will consider them if submitted as part of an application.** Chu notes that "admissions officers still want to see test scores if possible" and that high marks will only help. Strong scores can lead to scholarships, in some cases, experts say. A good [ACT or SAT](#) score varies by college, and Chu encourages students to look at a college's first-year student profile to determine admission goals. **(Competitive colleges will also assume lows scores if they are not submitted, and this will hurt the application – Cary)**

SAT-takers are allowed four free score reports each time they register for the exam. Students can select which schools they'd like their scores sent to before or up to nine days after the test, according to the College Board, which administers the standardized test. The fee for each additional score report is \$12. Similarly, students who sit for the ACT can send their score to up to four colleges at no cost, according to the [ACT website](#). Additional score reports are \$18 each. However, some students may qualify for a [fee waiver](#), which allows test-takers to send additional score reports for free to colleges and scholarship agencies at any time during the college search process, according to the ACT website.

Letters of Recommendation

Colleges often ask students to submit two to three [letters of recommendation](#). Students should seek out recommenders – often they have to be teachers or counselors – who know them well and can comment not just on their academic abilities but also their personal qualities and achievements, Chu says. **It's a good idea for students to provide recommenders with a copy of their resume (or activity list for the Common App – Cary) to help them cover all these bases, Heckman says.**

Students should request letters of recommendation well before the application deadline. Chu advises at least two months in advance. "The more time students can give the authors of those recommendations, I think the more thorough and helpful those recommendations are going to be for us," Barron says.

Information on Extracurricular Activities

College applications give students the chance to provide information on the extracurricular activities they participated in while in high school. In this section, students should detail all of the ways they spend their time outside of class, Barron says. This includes structured activities like sports or clubs, as well as family obligations such as caring for siblings or part-time employment, she says.

Some admissions officers spend significant time evaluating this section, Jones says, but he adds this is often the most overlooked part of the application. Many students rush through it and don't thoroughly explain the extent to which they were involved in an activity. Be sure to explain any leadership roles or accomplishments, he says. "The extracurriculars are the things that they spend their entire high school career doing that lead up to these wonderful moments and accolades over time," he says. "So take the time and be detailed."

Do I Need to Submit a Resume?

On some college applications, it may be optional for students to upload a [resume](#). But much of the information generally contained in a resume – such as awards, work experience and extracurricular activities – is asked for in other parts of a college application, often in the activities section.

How Much Do College Application Fees Cost?

There's no set price for college application fees, which experts say typically range from \$50 to \$90 per application, though costs can stretch upward of \$100 in some instances. Prospective students should check college websites to determine these individual fees.

How Can I Get a College Application Fee Waiver?

There are several ways students from low-income families can [submit college applications for free](#). **Students who received SAT or ACT [test fee waivers](#) are eligible for college application fee waivers from the testing companies.** The College Board sends such waivers automatically to students. Not all schools accept these

waivers, but many do. In addition, eligible students can request a fee waiver within the body of some college applications, including the Common App.

There are other times schools [waive application fees](#), and not just for low-income students. Students can sometimes get an application fee waived by participating in instant decision day events at their high school or on a college's campus. Applicants should also keep an eye out for free application periods in some states, when some colleges waive fees to apply.

Using a College Visit to Decide Where to Apply

A common piece of advice offered by admissions consultants and college officials alike is to tour a campus (when it's in session – Cary). [Visiting a college](#) can help prospective students get a sense of the culture and community and understand how they may or may not fit in. While it's not part of the formal application process, exploring a college can help students determine which schools to apply to.

Such visits, Chu says, offer a "glimpse into a day in the life" of students living and learning on those campuses. But in the absence of the opportunity to visit – say, due to cost restrictions or other travel limitations – **students should consider [virtual tours](#)**, which emerged as a popular option for applicants after the coronavirus pandemic began. While virtual tours may offer fewer opportunities to make personal connections, students should still attempt to forge them. "Virtual visits can be the next best thing" to an in-person tour, Barron notes. She also encourages applicants to "check college websites for offerings and opportunities to connect virtually with current students, admission staff, professors, coaches and others."