

How Do I Apply To College?



In the summer after your junior year in high school you should request applications or print copies from the school's website. You can submit your request by writing, calling, or sending an email to the admissions offices of the schools you have selected. It can take as long as three weeks for a college to send the application and information you have requested. You should submit your request early in order to receive an application as soon as they become available. Most schools have their applications online or ready to mail in August.

By having your applications on-hand before the beginning of your senior year, you can get a head start on the application process by reviewing all the materials and getting them organized. You will have plenty of time to contact the people you want to write your recommendations, to request transcripts, and to register for required entrance exams that you still need to take.

When you have received or printed your applications and are ready to get to work, you should start by reading all of the instructions that come with each application packet. Make sure you know the deadline for each school and the specific information required. Be sure to make a checklist for each school and



keep your materials organized in a binder to keep you on track. You should have a separate section in your binder for each school.

Make a copy of each application form. Use the photocopies or computer generated copies as worksheets. Transfer your information to the online forms or the original paper copy only after you have filled out your worksheets completely and have corrected all of your mistakes. As you work on your drafts, take time to answer each question completely. Ask your parents or your guidance counselor for help if you need it. One of the admissions officers' most frequent comments is that they wish the students would read the instructions.

Many colleges and universities in the U.S. now use the Common Application. Even if the schools that interest you do not use the Common Application, it would be worthwhile to look it over to get an idea of what your school(s) may require. In your high school, there should be a Common Application that you can copy; ask your counselor. You can also download a copy of the Common Application at www.commonapp.org. There is no fee for this service. However, you will be required to register with the website in order to gain access to the application.



Get Organized Before You Apply

- **Make a checklist for each school**
- **Know the deadlines for each school**
- **Organize materials in a binder with a section for each school**
- **Use photocopied or computer generated applications as worksheets**

Some colleges offer students the option of applying before the regular application deadline and receiving early notification. The process is known as early admission. There are two types of early admission; early action and early decision.

Under early action, you apply to only one school before the regular application deadline and are notified of your acceptance or rejection well in advance of the regular deadline. You still have the option, however, of rejecting that offer and applying to other schools by the regular deadline.

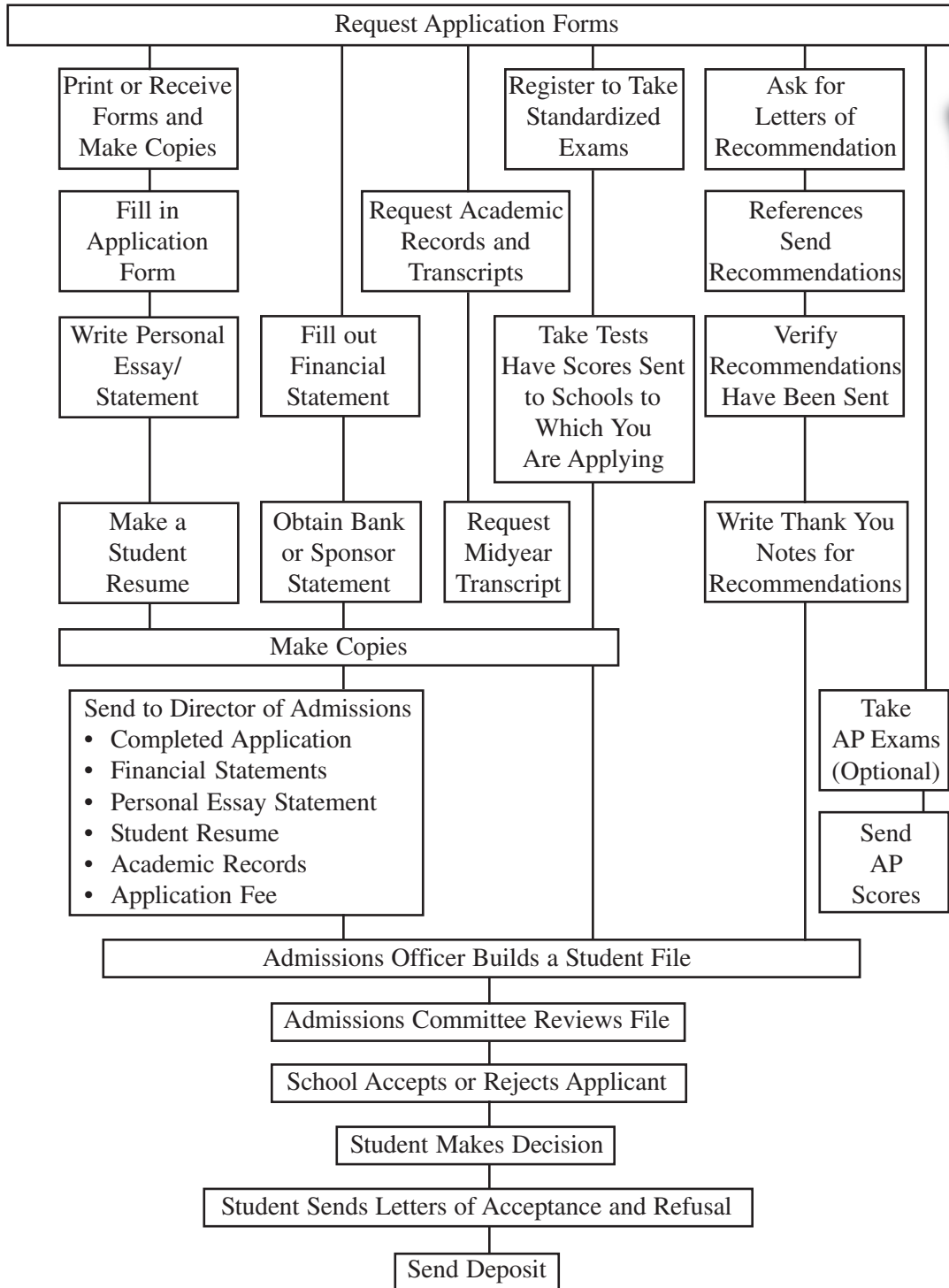
Under early decision, you also apply to only one school before the regular application deadline. The difference is that if selected, you must accept the offer. The only way you would be able to accept an offer from another school would be to obtain a formal release from the early decision commitment. If you are rejected during early decision, your application will be reconsidered without penalty during regular admissions.

Some of the nation's top schools have discontinued their early action and early decision programs because they believe it places those in need of financial aid at a disadvantage. Other schools may follow. In the meantime, if you have excellent grades, high test scores, and are among the best of your peers, you may have an excellent chance of being accepted during early admissions. Nevertheless, you should carefully consider the advantages and disadvantages.

The sooner you find out if you have been accepted, the more time you will have to plan and prepare for your college experience. You will also be free of the stress and time required to continue filling out applications for other schools. You can focus your attention on doing the very best you can during your senior year. If you are taking AP courses, you will have more time to prepare for the AP exams that could give you college credit and save money in the long run.

There are some disadvantages as well. You must be certain that you want to attend a school if you apply early decision. Your acceptance restricts your options if you change your mind. Many students lose their motivation to do well during their senior year after learning they have been accepted by the school of their choice. This condition or frame of mind is referred to as "senioritis" and sometimes causes grades to drop dramatically. You then run the risk of having the college or university rescind their offer of acceptance. Finally, unless you have an exceptionally strong record, you may have a better chance of being accepted during regular admission when the competition is not as great.

APPLICATION PROCESS





ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Although every school has their own admissions criteria for acceptance, they look at the same basic elements: course work, grade point average, standardized test scores, rank in class, activities, essays, letters of recommendation, and interviews (refer to section on admission criteria, page 29). It is worth taking time to learn exactly which elements each school considers most important and what other factors enter into their evaluation. For example, do they base acceptance solely on academics and test scores, or do they favor in-state residents, alumni connections, diversity, demonstrated leadership, or other factors?

Schools normally fall into one of three admission selection categories: open admissions, selective admissions, or competitive admissions.

The schools that use open admissions accept almost every student who has a high school diploma. They do not place a lot of emphasis on the usual selection criteria. There are many community colleges that use open admissions. They often have agreements with state universities to accept their students who do well and obtain an associate's degree.

The majority of schools in the United States use selective admissions. These schools try to offer admission to almost all of the students who meet their requirements. However, they almost always have more qualified students apply than they are able to select. Acceptance at these schools can be reasonably expected but not guaranteed. It is better to be able to show that you have exceeded the basic requirements.

Schools that use competitive admissions also have many more applicants than they can accept. Even though you may meet the requirements, you cannot be certain you will be accepted. Your record will be compared to many others who are equally qualified. Competitive schools are the ones most likely to see if you have other characteristics or achievements that make you stand out. What unique qualities do you have that will make you a desirable candidate for admission to their freshman class?

Always try for the school you want the most, but keep an open mind. If you are focusing on the most selective colleges, you may be overlooking your own personal needs. Selective does not always mean better. You need to focus on the schools that are right for you, where you can develop your talents to their fullest potential.

Also keep in mind that if you have your heart set on a major that is very competitive, it may be better to pick an easier major or select the undecided option. If you do well in your courses, you may be able to transfer to the harder major later on. For example, if you apply for engineering, the school would most likely compare your record to others interested in the same major and select the best qualified.

If you are not accepted at a particular school but really don't want to give up, there are a few more things you can try. You can write or call the school to make

sure there has not been a mistake. You can send a letter outlining why you should be accepted. You can ask to be put on a waiting list. You can ask for deferred admission and take courses at a local community college in the meantime. Finally, you can pursue an associate's degree from a community college that has guaranteed admissions to the four year school of your choice and then transfer at the beginning of your junior year.

Recommendations

Most colleges and universities require two or three letters of recommendation. It is a helpful way for them to learn more about you from someone who knows you well. They want to know if you are a good student and an interesting person.

It is important to ask people who can address your academic potential and probability of success. The best references are your teachers, your guidance counselor, or your principal. Other references from friends, religious leaders, etc. may be helpful if they can talk about your leadership abilities, professionalism, emotional stability, and work relationships. Read the colleges' instructions about what categories of people they would like to write the recommendations. Then decide who in those categories knows you best and whom you would like to ask. Explain that you are applying to colleges and universities and ask if they would be willing to write a letter of recommendation for you. If they say yes, thank them and make a follow-up appointment to provide them the materials they will need.

At the follow-up appointment, make sure they know the deadlines for the recommendations you need. Give them a copy of your student resume, senior information profile or notes about anything you consider especially important, parent questionnaire, recommendation forms, and pre-addressed, stamped envelopes. You should provide all information about two months before the recommendations are due.

You should waive your right to read the recommendations once they are written. Most schools feel that the person writing the recommendation will more candidly discuss your strengths and weaknesses if they know you will not read what they write. Admissions committees may also consider a recommendation with a waiver more accurate and valuable.

Check with your letter writers periodically and remind them of the deadlines. If they are swamped with commitments, they will appreciate the reminder. You will also feel more at ease and will have a better chance of having the recommendations arrive at the school on time. When the people writing the recommendations let you know they are finished, take time to write them a thank you note.

Samples of a senior information profile, parent questionnaire, and sample student resume are outlined on the following pages.





Senior Information Profile

Name: _____ Phone: _____
Social Security Number: xxx-xx-____ (Last four digits only for identification.)
Two teachers who know you well: _____

Postsecondary Plans

_____ College: _____ Four Year _____ Two Year
_____ Job _____ Military _____ Vocational Training

1. List two academic strengths and give specific examples to document or support each.
2. List two personal strengths and give specific examples to document or support each.
3. What are your present career/college major goals? Why?
4. What is the most satisfying course you have taken? Why?
5. If your counselor were to meet 1,000 seniors, how would he/she remember you?
6. Are there any other areas you would like emphasized on the recommendation?

This profile was adapted from a form used by a high school in Fairfax County, VA.



Sample Student Resume

Some schools require a student resume; others do not. In either case, we recommend that you prepare one to send with your application package. It gives a quick thumbnail sketch of who you are and what you have accomplished. It is a good way for you to highlight the things your target schools consider important. It helps you keep all of your activities in mind when you write your essay and it helps those who are writing your recommendations to mention important things about you.

James Edward College
SSN: xxx-xx-6789 DOB: MM/DD/YYYY
123 Main Street
Anytown, VA 20000
Phone (571) 555-1234
JCollege@email.com

Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2006-Present: Liberty High School, Anytown, VA • Senior (Graduation year 2010) 				
		Grades			
School and Extracurricular Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homecoming Committee • Yearbook • French Club 	9	10	11	12
Athletics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spring Track 		10	11	12
Athletic Awards/ Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varsity Letters 			11	12
School Honors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A/B Honor Roll 	9	10	11	12
Community Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer at Homeless Shelter • Sunday School Teacher 		10	11	12
Community Honors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invited Participant - Future Business Leaders of America • Outstanding Community Service Award 		10	11	12
Work Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Associate at Video Store 			11	12

Writing a Personal Statement or Essay



Most undergraduate schools require a personal statement or essay as part of the application. It is perhaps the most important part of the application but also the most difficult and time-consuming. Although the required length varies by college, it is usually about 300 to 500 words. Be sure to follow the rules and stay within the required word count. Since the essay can reveal personality, creativity, and values that cannot be revealed by grades and tests alone, it can separate your application from those of other candidates who have similar records. It could be



the deciding factor in your acceptance at the school of your choice.

Schools want to get an idea of what kind of person you are and how you think. Evaluations and recommendations give the admissions committee others' opinions of you, but the statement or essay is the only place where the selection committee sees your opinion, the only place where they can hear your voice. This added insight gives the committee a more complete picture and shows how well you can express your ideas in writing. One winning asset revealed in your essay can tip the balance in your favor if it is a close contest between you and another student.

Before you begin, think about your audience. You are not writing for a teacher, friend, or relative. Admissions officers or an admission selection committee will read what you have written. They are a busy group of people and have to get through a lot of material in a limited amount of time. You want them to understand and enjoy your essay. Do not write what you think a college admission committee wants to hear. They are looking for an impression. That impression is mostly an emotional reaction to you rather than an intellectual analysis of your work. You want them to conclude that they like the student who wrote this essay.

Carefully read the instructions describing what you should write. The college may give you a specific topic or they may have you choose a topic. Some schools want you to write about yourself. You will want to show that you are a focused student with a goal. The following questions may give you some ideas:

- Why do you think you would be a good fit at “our school?”
- How will your studies prepare you for what you plan to do?
- Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
- Why are you passionate about certain subjects or activities?
- What is your greatest achievement or proudest moment?
- Are there any new experiences you would like to have?
- Who do you admire?

- Who has had the greatest impact on your life?
- How do others see you?
- Have you had special trips or other experiences that have been especially rewarding or enlightening?

If you are instructed to select your own topic, pick one that will reveal “you.” Limit your topic; stay away from huge ideas like global warming. Write about what you know, something about which you have a passion. Try to make your essay personal, unique, interesting and as original as possible. Your writing should reflect who you are—your values and what you consider important. It should reveal something about your personality. Show that you are special, not typical.



- Before you select a topic, brainstorm to collect your thoughts.
- Make a list of everything important to you. Examine what you have written. Can you group any of your ideas?
- Did you learn any valuable lessons from the things that you recorded?
- Think about your character, experiences, or other aspects of your life. For each thought, describe the event and feelings you had.

Get ideas from parents, friends, and teachers. They can help you remember special things you have done that may seem insignificant to you, remind you how you have changed, or point out patterns of activities that define your personality.

Whether you are given a topic or choose your own topic

A good essay requires a lot of thought and reflection. Allow a sufficient amount of time to think, discuss, plan, write, and revise. You want to write a concise meaningful piece that will make a positive impression. As you write, you may find the following tips helpful:

- Read the instructions again
- Be yourself
- Be honest
- Be clear
- Do your best
- Do not be modest. If you won a special award, say so. It is more significant to have been the only one who received a special recognition than to have been one of many.
- Stick to the space limits. They are not meant to restrict what you say but to see if you can get to the point quickly.
- Make sure your essay has a clearly defined beginning, middle, and ending.

- Instead of just telling what someone said in your narrative, use images and stories to evoke a picture of what you are saying. Avoid too many facts; concentrate on providing observations, reactions, opinions, perceptions, and reflections. Stick to the main point; don't drift. Use active not passive voice. Favor specific rather than general statements, and be concise. Do not be negative, vulgar or tasteless. Avoid using slang and sounding angry, cynical, silly, sarcastic, or confused.

Write several drafts; it will help you develop your thoughts. Add more of your own personal style and better organize what you have written. Carelessness does not leave a good impression. Always check for spelling, grammar, and typing mistakes. Have someone check your work. Get other opinions, comments, and suggestions. Revise, rewrite, and make the final essay as neat as possible.

Interviews

Most colleges do not require interviews as part of the admissions process. Some offer an interview by request, and some do not offer one at all. You should take advantage of the opportunity for an interview if at all possible. Not only does it give the school more information about you, it gives you a better idea of whether or not the school is right for you. You will be able to get those final questions answered.



Interviews are conducted either on-campus by admissions personnel or off-campus by an alumnus in your area. Alumnus interviews are sometimes done by telephone. Regardless of the setting, the most important thing to remember is to be yourself. Be thoughtful and articulate; answer the questions openly and honestly. Try to anticipate questions that may be asked of you such as: Why do you want to attend this school? What are your goals? Also review essay question ideas for potential interview questions. In addition, have a list of questions you want to ask. Preparing yourself will help you get your thoughts together. However, you don't want to rehearse them to the point of sounding unnatural. You need to look at the interview as an opportunity for mutually beneficial dialogue—not an interrogation.

If the interview is in person, arrive early, dress conservatively, make eye contact, and smile (if it feels natural). For both in person and telephone interviews, get the name and address of the interviewer so you can follow-up promptly with a thank you note.

SAMPLE THANK YOU NOTE

**James Edward College
123 Main Street
Anytown, VA 20000
(571) 555-1234**

January 2, 2010

[Interviewer's name]
Anytown University
One University Row
Anytown, VA 20000

Dear [Interviewer's name]:

Thank you very much for taking the time to interview me yesterday for admission to your university. I enjoyed meeting you and learning more about your school and all it has to offer.

The interview strengthened my enthusiasm for Anytown University. I believe my educational and social experiences would allow me to fit nicely with the environment that your school provides. I am certain I would receive an outstanding education, and make a significant contribution to the Anytown University environment.

I would like to reiterate my strong interest in your school. Anytown University provides the kind of opportunity I am seeking. Please contact me at the telephone number listed above if I can provide you with any additional information.

Again, thank you for the interview and for your consideration.

Sincerely,

James College

James College

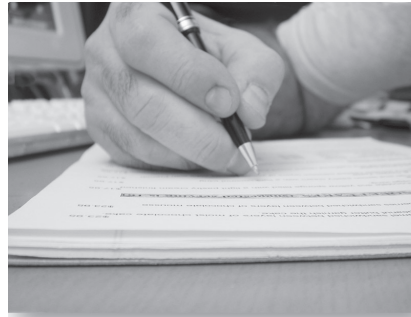
Filling Out and Submitting The Application

If you are applying online, carefully check for typos. Do not rely only on spell check. If you are submitting a hard copy (paper) application by mail, carefully transfer the information from your photocopied application (worksheet) to the original application form. Use erasable black ink and your best penmanship. Since the application is the school's first impression of you, it is very important that it look neat and well prepared. It will show that you care about your work and that you take time to do it well.

Make sure your name and address are on each piece of correspondence you send to the college or university, and that it appears the same on each page. If the name on your application form is James Edward College, do not write Jim College on other documents. Review the instructions and be certain that you have included all required documentation. See Sample Checklist for Application Completion.

If you are submitting online, make sure the website is secure. You will be sending important confidential information. Keep your account information for each school in your organizational binder. You will be able to track your application and its status online.

For paper applications, prepare a cover letter to the Director of Admissions that indicates exactly what your package includes. Keep a copy of the application form and of everything you send with it. Make a note of the address where you mailed the application packet and the date it was mailed. Send your completed packages by first class mail with a return receipt requested to verify delivery.



Tips For Filling Out The Application

- **Read all directions before you start**
- **Carefully transfer information from worksheet to original application or to online form**
- **Be neat**
- **Type carefully for online applications**
- **Use your best penmanship and erasable black ink on paper applications**
- **Make sure your name is on each page**
- **Copy completed application form for your binder**



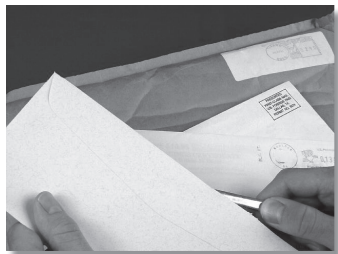
Sample Checklist for Application Completion

- ✓ Cover letter identifying contents of application package
- ✓ Completed application form
- ✓ Application Fee
- ✓ Official Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or American College Test (ACT) results
- ✓ Official Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) results if applicable.
- ✓ Official transcripts or records of your last four years of secondary school
- ✓ Certified copies of results of any qualifying or national examinations you have taken
- ✓ Your completed Confidential Statement for Financing Studies
- ✓ Student Resume
- ✓ Required essay(s)
- ✓ Letter(s) of recommendation

Note: All documents you submit become property of the college or university.

Letters of Acceptance and Refusal

Most colleges send letters of acceptance and refusal by mid-April and ask for a reply by the first of May. Early action and early decision candidates may find out in November or December. Online applicants may receive online notification, whereas those who have sent hard copy applications will be notified by mail. If you receive a thick envelope from a school, that is a good indication that you have been accepted. Acceptance letters usually include a lot of other information regarding housing, health care, orientation schedule, etc. You should immediately notify the schools that accept you of your decision. The school you choose may require a deposit to hold your place, whereas the schools you refuse will want to be able to offer your place to another student. You can use the following format as a guide for your letters of acceptance and refusal.



Sample Letter of Acceptance or Refusal



Your Address

Date

Addressee's Name and Address

Salutation

Acknowledgment of the letter sent by the university

Reference to information in the letter sent by the university and your decision

Thank you

Closing

Your Signature

Print your name