

# TOP 100 ANSWERS



*to Your College*  
Admission Questions

DANNY RUDERMAN

INDEPENDENT COLLEGE COUNSELOR

*and Author of The Ultimate College Acceptance System*



We are pleased to be able to provide you a copy of the revised Top 100 Answers to Your College Admission Questions, by Danny Ruderman. This book has been approved by the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District. Mr. Ruderman kindly donated copies of this book to the Education Foundation for the benefit of our students and families – we hope you find it useful!

The mission of the Santa Monica-Malibu Education Foundation is to engage the community to invest in a vibrant educational experience for all students in the Santa Monica and Malibu public schools. The Foundation works hand-in-hand with the District to allocate funds in ways that result in the greatest impact.

To learn more about the Education Foundation, the programs we fund, or to make a donation to support our students, visit **[www.smmef.org](http://www.smmef.org)**.

1645 16<sup>th</sup> Street • Santa Monica, CA 90404  
310-396-4557 • **[info@smmef.org](mailto:info@smmef.org)** • [www.smmef.org](http://www.smmef.org)

## CONTENTS

<b>SUCCEEDING IN HIGH SCHOOL</b>	<b>Page</b>
1. How can students get and stay organized?	10
2. Why should students talk to their teachers?	13
3. How can students become better test takers?	16
4. How can students get motivated to do their schoolwork?	19
5. What study skills should students be learning and how can they start to apply them?	22
 <b>TESTS</b>	
6. When is the best time to take the SAT/ACT/SAT Subject Tests?	25
7. What are the differences between the SAT and the ACT, and which is better?	27
8. Are the SAT Subject Tests mandatory?	31
9. How important are standardized tests in the admissions process?	32
10. Is it true that some colleges do not require standardized tests?	34
11. Do AP (Advanced Placement) scores count in admissions?	35
12. How many times should students take the tests?	37
13. What if students don't have any AP test scores? Will it hurt their chances of getting into college?	39
14. When should students send their test scores to colleges?	42
15. What is the best way to improve standardized test scores?	44
16. Can students with disabilities get special accommodations?	46
 <b>LEARNING ABOUT COLLEGES</b>	
17. What is the difference between a college and a university?	47
18. How do students learn about different colleges?	48

19. How do community colleges and junior colleges work?	53
20. What if students don't know what they want to do?	54
21. Are there colleges that provide assistance for students with learning disabilities?	55
22. How does the number of students at a college affect the experience?	57
23. Should students consider out of state schools?	58
24. What factors should students consider when choosing a college?	60
25. How do students find out how much diversity a school has?	61
26. Why do students get mail from colleges they have never heard about?	62
27. Should students pay attention to all the mail that colleges send them?	63
28. Are the summer programs that students receive in the mail legit?	64
29. What should students know about fraternities and sororities?	65
30. What should students keep in mind about the weather?	66
31. What should students consider about a rural college?	67

#### **ADMISSIONS**

32. How can students determine how hard it is to get into a specific college?	68
33. What is the most important factor considered by admissions officers?	72
34. Is it better to take an AP or IB class and get a B or an Honors or regular class and get an A?	74
35. How important is community service?	76
36. Is getting a job a good idea?	80
37. What should students do in the summer to increase their	81

chances of getting accepted?	
38. Does a student's choice of major impact his/her chance of admission?	84
39. How much does legacy matter?	87
40. What other special categories do admissions people use to "flag" applications?	89
41. What are Early Decision and Early Action?	91
42. Does applying early impact the admissions decision?	94
43. How should athletes go about getting recruited? What about scholarships?	96
44. Should artists or performers submit extra materials? If so, how?	100
45. What does a deferral mean?	103
46. What does getting wait-listed mean?	104
47. What can be done to increase a student's chances of getting accepted off a deferral or a wait-list?	106
48. How important are senior-year grades?	108
49. How do students calculate their GPAs?	109
50. What do colleges mean by "class ranking"?	111
51. How does taking community college/junior college classes in the summer impact admissions?	112
52. If a student's GPA and test scores are below a college's averages, should he/she still apply?	115
53. How do students know what activities to put on an application?	117
54. Is it okay to send extra letters of recommendation? How many is too many?	120
55. How do students ask teachers for recommendations?	123
56. Is it important to interview? Are there different kinds of interviews?	124
57. What should students wear for their interviews?	126

58. What if a student cannot visit a college in person?	127
59. If a student has a B or C average, can he/she still go to a 4-year college?	128
60. How many schools should students apply to?	129
61. What does “creating a balanced list of colleges” mean, and why should students do it?	130
62. What are the Common Application and the Universal College Application?	131
63. How do students find out if a college accepts the Common or Universal App?	133
64. What do students have to do if a college has its own application?	134
65. Do colleges look at Facebook?	135
66. Do colleges care about students’ e-mail addresses?	136
67. Do colleges verify everything students put down on their applications?	137
68. Is it better to be well-rounded or passionate about one thing?	138
69. Do teachers submit recommendations on paper or online?	139
70. What is the CEEB code?	140
71. What if students can’t afford the application fees?	141
72. What should students put in the “Additional Information” section of a college application?	142
73. How do students let colleges know about special circumstances?	143
74. What happens if a student realizes he or she has made a mistake after the application has been submitted?	144
75. What is a mid-year report?	146
76. Should students include information from elementary school or middle school?	147
77. Do students need to create a resume?	148

**ESSAYS**

78. How important are the essays?	151
79. What does the typical college essay question ask? (And what is the first key to answering it?)	152
80. What is the most important thing that admissions people look for in the essay?	154
81. How do students come up with ideas for their essays?	161
82. How long do essays need to be?	164
83. Can students go over the word limit?	165
84. How many essays do students need for the Common Application?	166
85. Is there a maximum length for the Common Application main essay?	167
86. Can students use the same essay for multiple schools?	168
87. Who should students ask to edit their essays?	170
88. How do students write what is known as the “Activity Essay”?	172
89. How do students write a “Why do you want to go to this college?” essay?	173
90. How do students write the University of CA System essays and other college essays?	176

**FINANCIAL AID/SCHOLARSHIPS**

91. What is the difference between financial aid and scholarships?	182
92. How does a family determine if they are eligible for aid?	184
93. What are the required forms and the deadlines to apply for aid?	186
94. Do families have to apply each year for aid? What if a family’s situation changes?	187
95. How do students find scholarships?	188
96. What documents are needed to apply for aid?	191

97. What if a college doesn't provide enough aid?	192
98. What other options are there to pay for college?	193
99. What is a 529 savings plan and how does it impact financial aid?	195
100. What are five "secrets" to paying for college that you may not have heard about?	197
For Notes	200



## PREFACE

Hi everyone! Thanks for picking up this book. I sincerely hope it gives you a lot of answers and helps you navigate the often unnecessarily complicated admissions process. Why is it so complicated? There are conspiracy theories out there involving extraterrestrials, but I think it has something to do with the fact that just about every college has its own rules, standards, and qualifications—and a college does not want to change its structure just to play nice with the other kids.

Nevertheless, as you will soon see, the admissions process is not *that* bad—especially if you do your homework *before* the night of the deadline. Parents, I am really talking to you here. Even though I have phrased many of these questions as if I were talking to one of my students (just in case a miracle happens and one of your children actually picks up this book), I really enjoy educating parents so that they know what to expect during admissions season and can help their kids stay on track.

When I started writing this book, I also realized that it could easily become 750 pages of advice I have picked up over the last 13 years of working with families. But given that my goal is to make things *less* stressful, I have kept the answers short and to the point (with the occasional bad joke thrown in).

For more information, feel free to go to my website **[www.dannyruderman.com](http://www.dannyruderman.com)** There I have additional great resources to help you through the process.

Thanks again,  
Danny

**SUCCEEDING IN HIGH SCHOOL****1. How can students get and stay organized?**

I have 2 very simple suggestions for students on how to get and stay organized. Now I know that even though I'm going to write this, most of you students out there will probably say, "Oh, that sounds like a good idea!" and then in 3 weeks will completely ignore the advice. So please understand: your parents didn't pay me to tell you this. Instead, I'm going to tell you what's worked in the past for my students, and I'm going to say that it takes 3-4 weeks of practicing the strategy before it becomes a habit. Here we go:

**Number 1:** You know that thing they give you in school like a "binder reminder" or a calendar where you're supposed to write down your assignments? Well, you should actually use it, or you should use something like it. You see, what many students do is this: they start off at the beginning of the year saying, "I'm going to be organized, I'm going to have everything done, and I'm going to keep track of everything!" But then some teachers put their assignments online, some give out syllabuses, and some just verbally state the assignments, causing many students to write the homework down on the back of their hands thinking they are going to remember it. This usually ends badly.

Instead, at the end of every class, rather than waiting until the bell rings, grabbing all your stuff, and running out the door, take out the calendar (or heck, even your iPhone) and write down the assignment for every class. Even if a teacher gives you the homework online, there's something about writing it down that helps you remember what you need to do. When you then get home,

you can remember things like, “Oh yeah, I’ve got that huge 10 page research paper I’ve been putting off all semester due tomorrow.” You can also prioritize your assignments each day and then actually remember to turn them in. I mean, remember when you did that math assignment but then got a 0 because you never took it out of your backpack? Yeah, I did that as well.

Trust me—your life will be a lot easier if you simply write down assignments because you won’t get that 0 when you forget to turn something in. And just one simple 0 or incomplete can cost more than you think that it does.

**Number 2:** Most of you probably have a backpack, and at the bottom of the backpack there’s a bunch of papers from September that have been shoved down there. Or you started off the year getting a huge binder thinking you will keep it organized, but around the 6-week mark, the 3-ring part of that baby starts to break open and your papers fall out into your backpack. Then you accidentally leave your bag out in the rain or in a puddle of Sprite, and well, you know what happens.

So my suggestion is to get a binder for each class, stock each one full of paper and take notes in that 3-ring binder like you normally would. But then, at the end of every month, after you take out all the stuff you don’t want your parents to see, hand your backpack over to your mom or dad and let them take all the papers, handouts, quizzes, etc. you do not immediately need (or you can do this yourself). Then put them all in a simple filing box where each subject goes in a separate file folder. Algebra gets a file; English gets a file, etc. Just shove all the papers into files so you know where it all is. Then you’ll have such nice clean notebooks that you can use for a month with only the

most important stuff in it. And when it comes time for midterms or finals, you'll have all that paperwork in the file box, which you will be able to read because it hasn't gotten soaked in Sprite. You're also not digging under your bed trying to find stuff that you've lost, or calling your friends to fax/scan/photograph/text you that math assignment you can't find.

The bottom line is that these are two simple and basic suggestions, but if you do these two things, I can say with absolute confidence that they will actually help.

## 2. Why should students talk to their teachers?

13 years.

13 years I have been working with students as a teacher, tutor, and college counselor. And this next suggestion is something I've probably said to over 1000 different students, yet only 9-10% have actually taken me up on the challenge. At the same time, I've never had anybody come back to me and say,

"Yeah Danny, that was a dumb idea."

Ok, here it is.

Whether you are in 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, or 12<sup>th</sup> grade, this one thing can totally make your lives easier and help your grades go up.

**You should...**

**Wait for it...**

**Start talking to your teachers!!!!**

Yay.

I know. I know it sounds awful because your teacher doesn't like you, your teacher can't teach, your teacher smells funny—whatever it is—I've heard all the reasons. Hey, I went to high school too, and I had a bunch of those teachers.

But the thing is that since I used to be a teacher (don't hold it against me), I can tell you that when I had a student come to me who really wanted to make an effort and try, I naturally wanted to help that student. This means whether your teacher can *actually help* you or not doesn't matter. The fact that you start seeing your teachers regularly will result in lots of benefits that you don't even know about yet.

For example, you know when you're on that line between an A-/B+ or a B-/C+ and you really want to get that better grade and you're begging and pleading to your teacher, and your teacher says "no"? That really sucks, huh? Well, if you've been regularly seeing your teacher (and I'm talking like once every week or once every two weeks—not one day before the final), he or she is going to be more likely to give you the A- or B- because he or she knows you have been making the effort.

The second thing you should know is that teachers will break their own rules. I've had teachers and I've seen teachers who say, "I will NOT help you for the test; I will NOT give you any of the questions beforehand"—except if you go visit them. For example, I had the chicken pox when I was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, about two weeks before finals. When I got back to school, my Spanish teacher called me up to the front of the room while he was grading some papers. He motioned for me to bend my head down so he could talk to me and whispered, "Danny, don't worry about the final, I am not going to make you take it."

"I'm sorry, what did you just say?" I replied.

"Yeah, don't worry about the final, but don't tell anyone."

This was freakin' awesome, because I soooo did not want to take that Spanish final. I didn't like Spanish. The only reason that my teacher did what he did, however, was because I had regularly seen him throughout the year, and he knew that I was really trying.

I've since had students who got answers to tests, and I've had students save themselves hours of work because the their teachers said something like, "You know what, because you come in here regularly, I'm going to tell

you that in this book, you should only focus on pages 30 through 60 for the test...(instead of 15-95)”

Fantastic! And this same thing happens in college. I have had college students come back to me and say, “It’s the most brilliant idea to go meet with professors or TA’s because they can save you hours of work!”—but only after you get in the habit of visiting them.

Now sometimes teachers won’t visit with you. Sometimes teachers really don’t help. I’m not saying that every single teacher will save you time. Nonetheless, I suggest you try talking to **three different teachers—at least twice**. If, after meeting with each of them **two different times**, it doesn’t help and is a complete waste of time, you can write me and tell me. But I pretty much guarantee you that if you start doing this, you will see the benefits right away with at least one or more of the teachers. And I bet that it will be something that you will do for the rest of your time as a student.

### 3. How can students become better test takers?

I'm going to break this into two parts: standardized tests and school tests. For standardized tests, the key is **practice**. Practice taking timed sections of **past real** tests. **At home**. Not lying in your bed. Not outside while playing basketball. Not while driving to your tutor's office (my student did this last year). Find a quiet space where you're actually being timed (like by a parent), because this helps you understand how fast you have to go.

You can even go someplace like a library and sit where there are other students around, so it's not so comfortable, and take timed sections there. It really comes down to building confidence so that you will be able to tell yourself "All right, I've already done this critical reading section 14 different times, and I know how long it will take me. I've also been taking real tests for practice so I know I'm not going to see anything that I haven't seen before." These beliefs will help you overcome anxiety.

For the most part, the same thing holds true for school tests. But let me specifically talk about math tests because these are the ones for which I usually hear, "I do my homework, and then I get there and the teacher makes the hardest tests in the world and I don't recognize anything!" This is often true. Teachers can make a test that everybody fails, or they can make a test that everyone gets an A on. The key for math (or really for any school test) is to avoid doing your homework as fast as possible and then thinking that you're prepared for the test. Nor is simply "reviewing your notes" enough.

If you want to start doing better on math tests, the key is to take practice problems over and over and over



again. For example, a typical unit test will have 3, 4, or 5 different sections from your math book. So you need to basically make yourself a mock test by trying various random homework problems from each of the sections. Take your math book, open it up, and you should be able to point to a question in one of the sections and be able to do that problem. If you can't, then you need to ask either your teacher or one of your friends to show you how to do that problem. This way you end up practicing all the different types of questions so you can be prepared for whatever your teacher may throw at you.

As you all probably know, math problems typically get harder as you go through an assignment. So, practicing only one question from a single page and saying "I know the material" typically isn't going to work. You have to practice 8, 9, 10 different problems from each section over and over again until you know that you've seen pretty much everything. If you do that, your math score on your test will most likely improve because you'll feel confident that you can do any problem, and as a result, your anxiety about the test will decrease. In fact, this is what a good tutor will do. A tutor will give you a mock practice quiz and keep making you try practice problems.

Now, who wants to do this? Virtually no one. I get it. But in terms of increasing your grade it really does work.

The same thing is true with any other test. It's about actually doing your homework and not copying it or doing it at the very last minute. Having said this, I was a HUGE procrastinator, so I totally know how the procrastination cycle works. Nevertheless, the key is to know what you don't know a couple days before a test so you can ask your teacher or ask your friends and figure out what you need to

know. You want to avoid showing up to a test, looking at the first question and going, “Uhhhhh...”

But don’t just take my word for it; give these things a try and see if they work for you.

#### 4. How can students get motivated to do their schoolwork?

Ok parents—this one is for you. How in the world do you get a teenager motivated to do his or her work? As I mentioned in the last answer, I was a HUGE procrastinator in high school, putting off every assignment until the last minute. Based on my experience over the years with teenagers, you (the parents) probably aren't going to be able to change your children's procrastination habits until they either get really rocked by a bad grade or simply mature and realize that they don't need the stress in order to do well. Unfortunately, that's probably not going to happen in high school.

One method that I have seen work hundreds of times to motivate high school students to actually do the work is to allow them to see *why* they should *want* to be doing their homework.

In other words, adults say that college is really important and that students need to go in order to get a good job. That's all true, but college is also amazingly fun. For those of you who went to college, think back and recall how much time you actually spent doing work versus sleeping or playing Frisbee or eating. College is *amazing*. You may have class on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 10, 11, 1:15, and then you go and you spend time with a thousand other students your age with no parents and **no rules**.

For many high school students, these are reasons to start doing better in school. So what I often recommend to families is to take their children to go see college campuses when those campuses are in session. Go on the tour, go to the dorms, and talk to students. More often than not, your

child will come back saying something like, “Oh my god, the guys at USC are SO hot!”

Great! Now if she really wants to go to USC or whatever school it might be, she has an external motivator for doing what is necessary to get in. Once students really understand what college is about and can see themselves there, something often changes in terms of motivation. Of course, students also go to college for the opportunity to get a great education. I’m just saying that for the average teenager, he or she needs to realize that the pain of studying for an Algebra 2 test is worth the reward of having an amazing four years in college.

Having said this, for freshman and sophomore parents, it may be too early for your children to see college campuses. It all depends on your son or daughter. If a student isn’t yet “tuned in” (meaning he/she can’t yet see that college is going to be a reality for him/her), you may visit a campus and find that your son or daughter isn’t paying much attention to what’s going on.

However, I have had more junior boys come back to me and say, “Dude, why didn’t anybody ever tell me college was so awesome? I wouldn’t have screwed around my first two years if I knew then what I know now.” Of course, everyone might have been telling him exactly how awesome college is, but he hadn’t really heard it yet—he had to see it for himself.

You don’t necessarily need to wait until spring semester of your child’s junior year to go see colleges; it really depends when he or she is ready. Additionally, you don’t have to fly all over the country if it is not financially or logistically feasible. Instead, you can take local trips to see colleges in your area. For example, in Los Angeles, you

could see UCLA (big public school); you could see Chapman University (medium private school); and you could see one of the Claremont Colleges (small private schools) just to get a sense of the different types of colleges out there.

### 5. What study skills should students be learning and how can they start to apply them?

First, let me say that I am not a parent yet, so I wouldn't presume to tell parents how to parent, but the suggestion I am about to give here (and the ones I discuss throughout the rest of this book) are based on my experiences as a teacher and tutor, as well as on suggestions I have gotten from other parents about what's worked for their families.

When students enter high school, many times they don't have strong study skills because schools rarely teach them. I could spend an entire book laying out study skill strategies, but I have three really good ones I want to address here.

Number 1 is to learn how to **prioritize**. Parents have shared the value of sitting down with their son or daughter and prioritizing what assignments should be done when. In a previous answer, I suggested that students write down their assignments every single day. In my experience, students want to push off the subject they least like until the end of the night. For me, I didn't want to do my history homework in high school, so I would wait until 11pm, after I got all of my other homework out of the way, and then I would try to read. Inevitably, I would fall asleep, usually with the book on my face.

- So what I usually teach students to do is to take a look at all the homework they have to do on a specific night.
- Then I will have them assign times to each assignment by asking a question like, "How long do you think it's going to take to do your math homework?"

- I then have them look up what assignments/tests are coming up to make sure they know if there is a test tomorrow or a research paper due next week.
- Then I have them prioritize each class based on the most pressing subject. At the end, we have a list that looks something like this:

Monday

1. Math – need to do homework because there is a test in 2 days. Should take 45 minutes.
2. History – we are supposed to read Chapter 17 by Friday, but the teacher usually gives quizzes on Tuesday on the first 10 pages, so I have to make sure it gets done tonight. Should take 30 minutes.
3. Spanish – vocab test on Wed on 25 words. I can make notecards tonight and then study them tomorrow. Should take 15 minutes.
4. English – we just started the Scarlett Letter, and I am supposed to be reading every night for 20 minutes, but there is no assignment or quiz until at least next week, so this class is not the most important tonight. Also, I have a good grade in English, while I have been struggling in math, so I will get to this reading only if I have time.

I don't expect students to write all of this, but they should be thinking through each assignment like the example. Another suggestion that parents have made is that when their children entered high school, they sat down with them and literally taught them how to read a textbook. I don't mean how to actually understand the

words on a page, but how to read intelligently for a specific class.

For example, let's say you are taking a history class. The history teacher gives a test, and on the first test, you don't do so well. **You should look at the answers you got wrong and try to determine where the questions were coming from.** Did the teacher pull the questions from his or her own lecture notes? Did they come from the book? And if they came from the book, what pages did they come from? Did they come from the boldfaced terms or from the diagrams and pictures?

By really examining how a teacher constructs a test, you can (either as a student or a parent) begin to understand what items to pay attention to as you read. So many times I've heard kids say, "I did all my work, and I studied really hard!" The problem is that they didn't actually study the right things. They did all this work, but they then got asked questions on different material. Each teacher is like a different puzzle to figure out. Once you understand how the pieces fit, your success and the time you have to spend to get better grades improves.

Lastly, I always suggest that students look at a teacher's syllabus. How much is everything worth? In some classes, homework may be worth 5% of the entire grade. In other classes, homework may be worth only 50% of the grade. Knowing this helps you set priorities because in a class where homework counts for 50%, one zero on a missed assignment can make a huge difference.



## TESTS

### 6. When is the best time to take the SAT/ACT/SAT Subject Tests?

Let me break this down. It is a bit complicated, and I have a particular philosophy that may differ from the norm, but I will give you the general recommended times when most students take these exams. First of all, there's a big push right now to take these tests earlier and earlier, so many people say you should take them sophomore year or at the beginning of your junior year.

My perspective is that it all depends on the student. If you are really motivated, you've taken enough math (typically through Algebra 2), you really want to get the test out of the way, and you're **prepared to study** the summer before junior year, you can take the real thing in December. But most students I've worked with aren't ready and aren't motivated to study for the exams in the summer before 11<sup>th</sup> grade. I mean, it is pretty boring.

**BUT** when students find colleges that they love, they then say things like, "Whatever I have to do to get into X school, I will do it." Unfortunately, this sometimes doesn't happen until fall of senior year.

So, parents—you have to know your child as to the best time when they're going to maximize any money you put out for test prep (books, classes, tutors, etc.). I'm not saying that a student shouldn't start studying early; I am saying that a parent should **maximize the time when their children are really serious about taking the test.**

For most students, I generally advise they start taking the SAT and ACT the second semester of their junior year. Students—this means that you can take the SAT in

January or March. Then you also have the May and June test dates PLUS dates in October, November, and December of your senior year.

The trick is if you're going to take the SAT Subject Tests, they are given the same day as the SAT, so you have to choose. Most colleges (except the most selective) do not require the Subject Tests anymore, so for many, this will not be a concern.

For the ACT, the timeline is a little bit different. I would recommend that you take it for the first time in February or April of your junior year, then again in June. Then if you need to, you can take it again in September, October, or December of your senior year. These dates are on completely different weekends than the SAT and SAT Subject Tests, so the exams do not conflict.

Most students end up taking one of the tests 2-3 times. If you don't end up getting the score you want by the third time, you generally should have a really good reason for taking it a fourth (although I have definitely had students improve on the fourth test).

Yes, it's possible for students to get it out of the way the first time; it just depends on how and when they prepare.

## 7. What are the differences between the SAT and the ACT, and which is better?

If you live on the West Coast or the East Coast, the SAT is generally the standard. A lot of you might not even know what the ACT is. But if you live in the Midwest, you're probably in opposite camp. You're taking the ACT and wondering if you really have to take the SAT. Which one is better?

The reality is that every college in the U.S. takes both tests; there is no preference. What I suggest is that you determine which test is the best for you **early**, and that's the one that you'll prepare for. If you take the PSAT in 11<sup>th</sup> grade in October, then I would recommend that you go to your college counseling office or go on the ACT website and **get a sample full-length ACT**. Then take it at home, have one of your family members time you, and then **compare that score to your PSAT score**. (Note some schools offer the PLAN, which is the practice ACT. If your school offers this along with the PSAT, then you can compare the two practice tests to see which one is better for you.)

Whichever test you do better on is the one you'll probably end up preparing for. Most students don't prepare to take both. It takes too long. And I've seen students score 200 points better on one of the tests over the other just because of the way that the tests are written.

What are these differences?

**The SAT** is 3 hours and 50 minutes long (with the optional essay). There are now are 4 sections made up of 2 different parts: An Evidence-Based Reading and Writing

Reading Test and a Math Test. There is also an optional essay (check with your colleges to see if require this essay).

**The ACT**, on the other hand, is 15 minutes shorter than the SAT. It also has math, reading comprehension, and grammar, but it also has a science section. It, too, has an optional essay.

The math section on each of the tests is one of the major differences between the two. On the SAT, they take a lot of the math you've learned in school and make you apply it to logic questions. In other words, the SAT is more of a reasoning test. Typically, this means that students who did well in geometry are going to like the SAT because it's very logical.

The ACT math, on the other hand, is going to be more of what you've seen in school. This does not mean the ACT math is easier necessarily; some students just prefer one test to the other.

The reading comprehension questions on the SAT and ACT are very similar. You read a passage and answer some questions. However, the SAT now includes grammar questions that are similar to the ones on the ACT with a few different rules thrown in.

As of 2016, neither the ACT nor the SAT penalizes students for wrong answers. This means if you don't know something, you just guess.

The trick with the ACT is timing. Students often run out of time, especially on the reading comprehension and science sections. It takes more practice to get it down, and if you're the type of student who's a slow test-taker, the ACT may not be the right test for you.

Additionally, that science section on the ACT is a bit tricky at first. While you don't necessarily have to know

any science to do well (since it tests your ability to read graphs and interpret experimental results), the more science you've taken, the better you'll do because you'll be used to thinking scientifically. The bottom line for the science section is that it gets easier with practice, but at first it seems really difficult to most students.

## 8. Are the SAT Subject Tests mandatory?

The SAT Subject Tests are exactly what their name implies: they are tests of your knowledge of a specific subject. They are each an hour long. You can take them whenever you want, but I recommend that you take them in **May or June of your junior year** since that's when the information is still fresh. Having said this, if a sophomore is taking AP Biology, it makes sense for her to take that subject test at the end of her sophomore year because that's when the information is fresh.

While most colleges don't require Subject Tests, many of the most selective institutions typically require 2 Subject Tests. Very few schools like to see 3 Subject Tests. Georgetown, for example, recommends 3 but doesn't require 3. This simply means that if you can score well on 3 of the tests, it is in your best interest to take them.

Note: Colleges can change their policies on what tests they require each year, so be sure to check a school's website or call an admissions office to double check what they require.

Having said this, the majority of colleges don't require Subject Tests at all, so you don't have to worry about them.

If you do have to take Subject Tests, make sure you don't take them like I did and go in cold. That was a laughable mistake. Instead, you should go out and grab a book by The College Board called **The Official Guide to All SAT Subject Tests**. This book contains a sample full-length exam for every single subject test available. By taking timed practice tests beforehand, you can discover what you

need to study and which tests might be the best ones for you.

**9. How important are standardized tests in the admissions process?**

It depends on the schools to which you're applying. As an example, many of the Cal State (in California) schools don't even require the SAT or ACT anymore. So for these schools or for community colleges, the tests don't matter at all. On top of this, there's a list of over 850 4-year schools that don't require standardized tests, which can be found at **[www.fairtest.org](http://www.fairtest.org)**.

Now, if we look at Yale or a similar school with a high selectivity rate, it's going to be more important that you take these tests (and receive a higher score). On the other hand, you should realize that they are only tests, and not everyone is an amazing test taker (me included).

However, you can definitely do something about your scores. If you're a senior and currently applying to college, you already have the majority of items ready for college to look at: your GPA, your recommendations, your extracurricular activities. So if you are, in fact, a senior, the one thing you can still control is your test score, and you should continue practicing until you get the score you want, you run out of test dates, or you burn out and move to Jamaica.

I am not saying that test scores are not important; at a lot of colleges, the admissions offices first look at your grades and your classes, and then they look at your test scores. At the University of California system for example (UCLA, UC Berkeley, UCSB, etc.), they have to have a way of narrowing down the pool of applicants because so many students apply. As a result, they use GPA and test scores to eliminate applicants who do not meet what is called the UC



eligibility requirements. Not every school has eligibility requirements, but the UC schools do, so it makes sense to try to get your test scores as high as possible.

Having said this, please don't think that the ACT or SAT will affect the rest of your life. You should study for them, but again, there are really good colleges that don't believe in standardized tests and don't require them. Other colleges will allow you to submit portfolios of your work and talent in place of the tests. Just do your research by going on a college's website or by asking an admissions representative so you know how each school uses the tests scores in evaluating your application.

**10. Is it true that some colleges do not require standardized tests?**

Yes. It is absolutely true that many colleges out there do not require standardized tests. In fact, there is a website ([www.fairtest.org](http://www.fairtest.org)) that lists all these schools. Many of the colleges on this list may be schools you've never heard of, but there are many nationally recognized schools that don't require tests or that allow you to submit other information. Bates, Pitzer, and Lewis & Clark are all examples of colleges that don't require standardized tests. At Lewis & Clark, in particular, you can create a portfolio of your work, papers, math tests, and artistic work that will substitute for your test scores and allow you to show another side of yourself.

### 11. Do AP (Advanced Placement) scores count in admissions?

If you ask most college admissions people, they will say no; they don't formally consider AP scores in evaluating a student's application, but that doesn't mean those scores won't help you, especially if you've done well. For example, I had a student who earned four scores of 5 on four different AP tests, so I suggested he put these scores in his application since they showed he had mastered those subject areas.\* If he had received four scores of 2, I would not have recommended reporting them. Therefore, at the end of the day, it is up to you whether you want to report your AP scores or not.\*\*

\*Students have to send their SAT, SAT Subject Tests, and ACT scores from the testing agencies (College Board and ACT, respectively) directly to each of the colleges to which they are applying. Simply listing the scores in the applications is not enough. For AP Tests in particular, most colleges allow students to initially **only self-report** the scores on the applications and only **require** students to pay to have the College Board send the official results to the school they decide to attend. If you don't pay to have the AP scores sent to the college you will be attending, you will not get college credit for the scores of 3, 4, or 5 (some colleges only award credit for scores of 4 or 5).

\*\*There is another program called International Baccalaureate (IB) that some high schools offer instead of or in addition to Advanced Placement courses. The results of the IB Exams can also earn a student college credit,

typically for scores of 6 or 7. Students who have scored well on the IB Exams should also self report them on the applications and then formally have them sent to the college they eventually attend in order to earn credit. ☐

Finally, students should double-check all policies with the specific colleges to which they are applying because policies do change each year!

**12. How many times should students take the tests?**

On average, students take the SAT or ACT two or three times, and their scores typically improve each time they take it. In other words, if you do nothing else but take one of these tests a couple times, your score will go up.

That being said, there are students who take one of the tests the first time, get a great score they're happy with, and then are done.

If you are not one of these students and instead want to take the ACT or SAT more than 3 times, there really should be a reason (like you were sick or you had a terrible day). Having said this, I have seen plenty of students take it 4 times to try to get the highest score possible.

If, however, you do take one of these tests more than once, you might wonder which test scores you should send, or whether you have to send a particular set of scores at all.

The answer is a little bit complicated. The ACT has something called score choice, which means you have to select the individual test dates and pay to send *only* the scores from that date. Then, if you want to send your *other* test results, you have to pick another date and pay to have those scores sent too.

This means you can choose only the scores you really want to send from a single test date (you can choose to only send one section from one test date, if that makes any sense).

For some of you, you might want to pick and choose individual ACT test scores to send if you have a huge difference in scores. For example, if you got a lower score on the April test date (say a 23) and then a higher score in June (say a 30), you might only want to send the 30. There

are other students who will want to send multiple test date results because some colleges “super score,” which means they will take the best individual English, math, reading, and science scores across test dates. For example if you got 26, 26, 26, 26 (on each of the 4 sections, respectively) on the April ACT but then 24, 28, 26, 27 in September, you would want to send both sets of scores to colleges that super score because it would give you a higher composite.

The SAT handles things a little differently. The College Board instituted score choice a couple years ago, but the way it works is not the same as the ACT. You have a checkbox of all the scores that you have earned for all the dates you have taken the tests, and you can check which scores you want to send. But not *all* colleges allow you to pick and choose; some make you send the scores from all of your test dates.

AAAAAAAhhhhhhH!! ☹

I know. It’s a bit overwhelming and confusing.

**The bottom line is that you shouldn’t worry too much if you need to send all of your scores to a particular college because at the end of the day, they will simply use your best ones. Sure, you can control sending the ACT scores a bit more than the SAT scores, but colleges are really just looking to see your best effort. This is why many colleges just advise to send in all your scores so they can figure it out.**

Of course, like always, you can look online and see (or call each of your colleges and ask) what they prefer, and then make the best decision from there.

**13. What if students don't have any AP test scores? Will it hurt their chances of getting into college?**

As I mentioned earlier, AP test scores aren't typically part of a college's formal evaluation process. AP scores are simply used by students to earn college credit. For example, if you took three AP courses but didn't take the tests, you would be fine.

But the bigger question is this: what if students don't take any AP (or IB) classes at all? Will this hurt their chances? Like many of my answers to admissions questions, the answer starts with, "it depends."

Students absolutely DO NOT have to take AP (or IB) courses to get into colleges. There are typically no AP requirements for acceptance. However, the more selective a college is, the more it will value a student's curriculum rigor. In other words, if you want to go to Yale, most of Yale's applicants have taken multiple AP classes. Thus, to stand a good chance of getting accepted, you would want to challenge yourself and take as many AP courses as possible. This does not mean that you have to take every AP course offered in your high school. It simply means that a university like Yale has some of the most qualified students in the country applying so the more challenging classes you take (and hopefully do well in), the better chance you will have of getting in.

However, let's say you wanted to attend a college like the University of Arizona. AP classes will still help you for sure, but the average student applying to Arizona does not have a lot of AP courses (if any), so it is not as important to have this kind of curriculum.

Does that make sense?

BUT—please do not fall into what I like to call the “rankings trap.” My opinion is that a college that is ranked higher in something like *U.S. News and World Report* is not a “better” college than the ones ranked below it. Instead, I believe that it is what a student does while at a particular college that will dictate how “good” it is. So, if a student went to Harvard, blew off most of his classes, and didn’t learn anything or improve himself, it wouldn’t matter that he went to Harvard. If, on the other hand, a student went to Arizona, really made the effort to work with professors, did research, and got internships, this student will be successful later in life because of who he or she is, not because of where he or she went to college. The truth is that the University of Arizona has wonderful courses and professors—students just need to take advantage of the opportunities.

I know. I know. I hear you out there. “But Danny,” you say, “going to a college like Harvard will open more doors.” I have two thoughts on this.

First, you may be right that by being a Harvard graduate, people will almost always assume you are smart. You may also make connections at Harvard that help you in the future. And it may even help you get your first job.

However, I have met, talked to, and worked with some of the most influential people in entertainment, business, medicine, etc. and the majority of these people have told me that hiring a person or achieving success is more about a person’s drive, work ethic, recommendations, and personality than it is about where he or she went to college, especially after a person has worked his or her first job. So a “name” might have a few benefits, but if you are not taking 18 AP classes or you don’t get into an Ivy League



school, you still have every opportunity to be successful in any field. Really.

No really. There have been studies done, for example, where they have tracked students who attended an Ivy League University, along with students who got accepted to an Ivy but went somewhere else. After 5 and even 10 years, there was no substantial difference in terms of median salary or position.

Second, just because you can get into a super selective school does not mean that it is the best place for you. I had a student who told me he only wanted to go to Johns Hopkins. He then said he was really interested in architecture. Guess what? Johns Hopkins doesn't offer architecture.

So, regardless of whether you are in all regular classes in high school, a few honors classes, or all APs, there are amazing colleges out there that you can get into and really enjoy.

All you gotta do is look.

**14. When should students send their test scores to colleges?**

*Wait, I have to send my test scores?* Yes, yes you do. It's not automatically done for you. When you sign up for the ACT or the SAT or an SAT Subject Test, and you get your scores back, you have to then send those scores to the college you're applying to and pay for them individually. When you register for the SAT, the College Board gives you the opportunity to send your scores upon completion. In fact, they give you 4 free schools, so when your test scores are ready, they will be sent automatically from the College Board.

This is a great way to save money, but in the past, I have not done it this way because I want to see the scores *before* I send them. Especially if a college accepts score choice (see answer 12 for more about score choice), then I want to choose to send a student's best scores, if possible.

I also don't want to pay to send multiple tests over and over again. What I mean is that you could pay to take the SAT twice (as an example) and pay to send the scores twice, or you could just take the SAT twice and only pay after the second test to send all the scores at once. This saves you money.

The ACT is different because you have to pay to send every individual test date that you took, so it's not so advantageous from a cost perspective, but I still like to see how a student does on all the tests before I send the scores.

Having said this, if you're taking the SAT at the last minute, (say the November test date for a college to which you are applying Early Decision/Early Action or the December test date for a college to which are applying

Regular Decision in January), you might have to get the scores to a college as soon as possible. In this case, it's possible you will want to send your scores before you actually take the test so you know that the college will get the results in time. For example, if you are a senior and you want to apply to the University of Michigan Early Action (Nov 1), but you still want to take the SAT on the November test date, you would want to designate Michigan as a score recipient at the time you register for the test. This way, as soon as your scores are available, they will be sent directly to Michigan. If you wait to see your scores from the November date first and then send them, it may be too late because the nice people in the admissions office at Michigan may have already made a decision on your file.

**15. What is the best way to improve standardized test scores?**

Practice.

What do I mean?

I mean that you can improve your score by using test prep books, taking a course, or utilizing individual tutors—they all work —***as long as you practice taking the tests.***

You have to know yourself as to which one of these test prep methods are going to work best for you (or for your child). For most students, one-on-one work is going to be the most effective because tutors can hold you accountable and specify what you need to study based on your strengths and weaknesses. But many families can't afford one-on-one tutors (mine couldn't).

So what you have to understand is no matter whether you have a tutor or a book, the key to increasing your test score is to take practice tests. Why? Because the ACT and the SAT are incredibly predictable tests. For example, on the math sections of each test, you may very well come across a "sequence question." If you learn how to do sequence questions and you practice them, by the time you take the real thing, you'll know how to do them.

The problem is that a lot of students don't understand this concept, so if they have a tutor come to their house, they just blow through their homework 20 minutes before the tutor arrives, just to get it done. They don't earnestly go through each question, look at the answer, and go back to any questions for which they made a mistake and try to understand why they made that mistake. This is the **big secret**, by the way, to improving

your score. If you go back into your work and see what you're doing wrong, your brain can tell you not to do that again on future tests.

Is this fun?

No.

Does it require effort?

Yes.

But if you really want to improve your score, regardless of whether you're being tutored or not, it works.

My next strategy for my students is that I make them always take **real** practice tests. Both the College Board (SAT) and the ACT people have written books chock full of full-length real tests. (*The Official SAT Study Guide* and *The REAL ACT Prep Guide*.)

No, these books are not good at teaching you the strategies (there are other test prep books that are good at that, including anything by Princeton Review or Kaplan), but these books of real tests are incredibly important because you will be exposed to the exact questions you will eventually see on the real thing. If I made you spend four hours a day jumping rope, you would probably get pretty good at it (and really tired of jumping rope). The same holds true with the SAT and ACT.

**16. Can students with disabilities get special accommodations?**

**Yes**—students can get special accommodations for disabilities.

What does that mean?

It means you can get extra time (typically time and a half but sometimes double time) to take the tests; you can take them in a separate room without the distraction of other students; you can take them on different days if you have religious restrictions; you can get bigger text; you can take parts on your computer—all of these are options depending on your disability.

But in order to get these accommodations, you have to follow the specific procedures for the SAT and the ACT. Fortunately for you, here are the web addresses for the policies:

**SAT:**

**<http://professionals.collegeboard.com/testing/ssd>**

**ACT: <http://www.actstudent.org/regist/disab/>**

Most of the time you're going to have to provide proof or educational testing that documents your specific disability.

This means that when a student asks, "What if I have ADHD? Can I get extra time?" the answer is maybe. You have to get tested by a licensed psychologist, a psychiatrist, or an educational therapist, and that testing has to be submitted to the testing agency so they can determine whether or not you get such accommodations.

You should also know that neither the College Board nor the ACT reports to your colleges that you had accommodations.

## **LEARNING ABOUT COLLEGES**

### **17. What is the difference between a college and a university?**

Very simple. A **college** will only have undergraduate students (like you) who are getting a bachelor's degree. A **university** has grad students or those who are getting masters degrees or PhDs.

What this means is that colleges are typically smaller than universities in terms of campuses and number of students.

## 18. How do students learn about different colleges?

I'd like to break this answer down into three steps.

The **Number 1** step can actually be found on The College Board website ([www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com)).

If you look on the homepage, on the left-hand side about 3/4 of the way down, you will see a purplish button titled "STUDENTS." Click that bad boy.

This will take you to a different page for which you should also look on the left-hand side about 3/4 of the way down. Here you will see a box titled, "Find Colleges," underneath which is a blue box called "Search." Click this, or just use this link:

<https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/college-search>

This database will then take you through a series of questions ranging from the size of a college to the majors you are interested in, etc. and trim down the list of 3,954 colleges to the ones that match your preferences.

There's going to be many schools on those lists that you haven't heard of, but at least you have a place to start. You can then take a rough list of schools to your high school guidance counselor, and he or she can give you some other ideas of colleges that match your interests—or you can take some of these schools and move to Step Number 2.

The **Number 2** step is to take a rough list of colleges and begin learning about college life at each of them. The two resources I use with my own students are as follows:

1. *Fiske Guide to Colleges* – a book available on Amazon, in bookstores, and in many libraries.



## 2. [www.collegeproowler.com](http://www.collegeproowler.com) and [www.unigo.com](http://www.unigo.com)

The *Fiske Guide* is a big ol' green book that gives 3-4 page summaries for over 300 colleges, which means it obviously doesn't have every school in the country, but it has a lot of the most popular ones. What's great about this book is that the authors discuss everything relatively objectively, including what the most popular majors are, what students typically do for fun, what the surrounding area is like, how challenging the courses are, etc.

What I suggest you do is this: take 3-4 colleges a week and read the summaries in the *Fiske Guide*. Underline **what you like, what you don't like, and what you don't understand**. This will give you a very general idea of what is out there, how colleges differ, and what may or may not be important to you.

After looking at the *Fiske Guide*, I suggest looking at either **CollegeProwler.com** or **Unigo.com**. I like College Prowler, in particular, because it hires a student on each campus who then interviews other students about what it's like to go to school there. Then these reviewers grade things that are important to students, such as how good the food is, how hot the girls/guys are, what the nightlife is like, how bad the drug scene is, how hard the academics are, and much more. The website has tons of very biased but also often accurate summaries and student quotes about what a particular college is like.

If you were to spend 20 minutes reading about a single school on one of these websites, you would get a really good idea about the workload, the environment, and the professors. And what you should be looking for are **trends** in the comments. If one student said he hates the

place but hundreds of others say they love it, you can infer that it is probably a pretty likeable place. If, however, you read many student testimonials discussing how cliquish a college is, you might want to do more investigation to see if it is a place at which you can feel comfortable.

The **Number 3** step is the one that is the most involved, the most useful, and the most ignored by students. This involves taking a college you are interested in, going to that school's website, and spending a good amount of time (ideally 45 minutes or more—yes, really) looking at all the different academic programs, available courses, clubs, study abroad opportunities, intramural sports, etc.

With my students, I call this the “why” research or learning why you want to attend a certain college. The reason why students do not take advantage of this step is:

- a. Almost every college website is somewhat challenging to navigate.
- b. Despite the fact that college itself is exciting, reading and researching dense websites is not.

This is exactly why I make my students do it—because almost no one else does. In fact, there are 3 **HUGE** reasons why this research is important:

**#1 HUGE REASON** – you discover what is actually available. I have had more students say things like, “Wait, I didn’t know I could major in music business (or some other major they found interesting). Or, “Hey, psychology sounds interesting, but wait, what is psychology exactly?” By reading about the programs and looking at the classes offered, students can discover academic interests they might not have known about.

**#2 HUGE REASON** – you get to compare colleges.

Let's say you find a college that has great political science courses, an amazing business minor, a study abroad program in Florence and Italy, and a Quidditch Team (yes, like the ones in Harry Potter, except students run around with broomsticks between their legs—YouTube it). You are excited.

Then you research school #2 and realize they only have a political science program but none of the other offerings. Well, then no matter how good of a “name” this college is, it may not be the best match for you.

**#3 HUGE REASON** – you can stand out in interviews and on a college's supplemental “why do you want to go to our school” essay. Not all colleges have interviews or “why” essays, but many do. By doing this kind of in-depth research, you can definitely stand out. Consider this typical interview question.❏

Question: “So what interests you about USC?”

Standard Answer: “Well, I love the campus and the spirit that comes with USC sports. I like that USC has a business school. My friends say that students balance social life and academics. And I just feel that I would fit in well.”

Super Answer after having done research: “Well, I am not quite sure what I want to study, but one of the things I am interested in is entrepreneurial business because I have been running my own car wash business for the last 2 years. What stood out about USC is that the Marshall School of Business offers a concentration specifically in entrepreneurship. On top of this, USC has a minor in real estate development in the School of Public Policy that I haven't been able to find at any other college on my list. This is why USC is my top choice.”

☐ See what I mean?

These three reasons mean that doing this kind of in-depth research on your colleges is one of the **BIG SECRETS** to getting into a college (especially a selective one). This is why I also advise parents to do this same kind of research. Not only will it help parents know what is out there, but they can also share this research with their children to help them, given that most will burn out on this research after a couple of schools.

My last piece of advice is this: while it is important to spend time on the colleges' websites to find what you want, you can also simply go to Google and type in exactly what you are looking for, such as "Kenyon College Courses." This is often an easier way to get where you want to go on a school's website. Then, once you have found something interesting, **you should copy the text from the site and paste it into a Word or Pages document**. In other words, make a document for each college on your list and paste in everything you find interesting. This way you will have your notes easily accessible for when you are writing an essay or preparing for an interview.

Oh and one last thing. I know many students won't have any idea what they want to do, so please don't think that I am saying that every 17 year-old knows he wants to do real-estate development. I would argue, however, that many students at least have an interest in something, or at the very least know what they don't like. When doing research and even writing a "why" essay, students need to find things they might be interested in and talk about them.

### 19. How do community colleges and junior colleges work?

Community colleges and junior colleges are a great way to save money and get a lot of college credits out of the way. You can go to a local 2-year college and take the General Education classes that are required at most 4-year schools for a fraction of the cost.

These 2-year colleges are also designed to help students transfer to 4-year schools. That being said, this route is not for everybody. Students typically miss out on living in the dorms and attending football games and that whole traditional college experience (at least for the first two years.)

The important thing to remember if you do want to explore the community/junior college route is to sit down with a counselor from that college and make sure you know **everything you need to take** in the 1 or 2 years you plan on being there, so you aren't surprised to find that you don't have enough units to transfer to a 4-year college or university. The more you hold yourself accountable, the easier it will be to transfer later on.

Now some 4-year colleges will take transfer students after 1 year, like USC, and some will make you wait until you've had at least 2 years of community/junior college, like UCLA. So if you want to go to a 4-year college, make sure you know what that college requires beforehand so you can make a good plan of action.

**20. What if students don't know what they want to do?**

Not.

A.

Problem.

I didn't know what I wanted to study in college, and I applied as an undeclared major. This is okay. In fact, I thought I wanted to major in something like political science, and I ended up majoring in human biology at Stanford.

Like I wrote in Answer 18, students do not have to know what they want to study. This is part of the college experience—finding out what you like and what you don't.

**21. Are there colleges that provide assistance for students with learning disabilities?**

Yes.

There are definitely colleges that have programs for students with learning disabilities. In fact, just a simple search online will bring up many lists. There are also books such as *The K&W Guide to College Programs & Services for Students with Learning Disabilities or Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder*.

It's important to note that there are different **levels** of services that you can get depending on the school to which you're applying. For example, the University of Arizona has the SALT Program. It is an entire building with tutoring and note-takers and workshops and lots of support for students with disabilities. This program requires a separate application and fee to utilize the services. Then there are other colleges with programs that are less structured.

Thus, if you have a disability and you come up with a list of colleges, I would suggest calling up the general phone number for a given college and asking the operator for the department that houses the learning disability services. Then you can ask the department directly what they provide.

You might be wondering if you should even tell colleges that you have a disability? My belief is that students with learning disabilities should be advocates for

themselves, meaning that if an LD is something that you've overcome or something that has made you work harder, it benefits you to tell colleges about it; in fact, I see it as a strength. This does mean that every student will want to disclose his or her disability, and I do not necessarily recommend writing about the disability in his or her main personal statement. Instead, most college applications have an "Extra Information" section, which is what I would use to give some background about a student's learning challenges.

Learning differences are also very common these days, so it's not as if you're going to get a big red check mark by your name. If you've done decently in school, it doesn't matter whether you have a disability or not; in fact, a college might need to know in case you want to get extra time or note-taking help, etc. For those of you who have had more serious academic challenges, you might also want to talk about these challenges so that a college knows your full story.

Also know that the SAT and the ACT no longer report if a student has received special accommodations, so if you don't want to say anything, no one will know.



**22. How does the number of students at a college affect the experience?**

The way that I break down colleges in terms of size is this:

**Small:** you've got 1-3000 students

**Medium:** you've got 4-10,000 students

**Large:** you've got more than 10,000 students

**Super large:** you've got over 20,000 students

Each of those 4 categories has their pros and cons.

The smaller the college:

The more attention you're going to get.

The more advising you will typically have access to.

The smaller the class sizes will be.

The easier time you will have in accessing professors.

The more tight-knit community you will encounter.

The easier it is to get your courses.

The larger the college:

The more diversity you will typically have among the students.

The more spirit and sports teams are present.

The more classes/majors you will be able to choose from.

The more activities there are to participate in.

So if you can visit schools (or even just talk to people who went to the schools), I suggest you sit in on a class and talk to students about their experiences because this will help you decide what sizes are best for you.

### 23. Should students consider out-of-state schools?

Where a student grew up and where his/her parents went to college will often have a lot of influence over his/her decision to apply to out-of-state schools.

Having a new experience with different types of students from different cultures and backgrounds can be wonderful for some students and downright frightening for others. Some students want to go out of state because they feel they will eventually move back, so college is a perfect opportunity to try someplace new in a safe environment. Others want the comfort of what they know and to stay close to their families. It is really up to the student and his/her family to decide what is best.

However, something you may want to consider when looking at out-of-state schools is tuition, because out-of-state students typically pay quite a bit more than students who reside in state for **public colleges**. In other words, if you live in Oregon and you want to attend the University of Oregon, it will be less expensive for you than for a student coming from Wyoming. If, however, you wanted to go to Reed College (near Portland), you will pay the same price as someone from Wyoming because Reed is a private college and charges the same fees to everyone. (Although, when you get to the answers on financial aid, you will learn why you probably shouldn't rule out private colleges just because they cost more.)

A great resource is the **Collegeboard.com** website because you can look up each college on your list, and it will list the in-state tuition compared to the out-of-state tuition rate. Specifically, on the homepage about 1/2 the way down on the left, you will see a search box. Type in the

name of a college, and it will bring up a profile with all kinds of statistics and facts, including the tuition amounts, which can be found under the link **PAYING** on the left.

**24. What factors should students consider when choosing a college?**

Well, it really depends on what's important to you.

When I start with students, I give them a list of 13 qualities students look for when choosing a college, independent of money, and I have them rank these qualities in order of importance from most important (#1) to least important (#13). They are:

- Geographical location
- Setting (urban, suburban, rural)
- Size (number of students)
- Climate
- Reputation or prestige
- Has a specific type of program
- Has an active sports program to watch
- Has a sport that you want to participate in
- Has an active fraternity/sorority life
- Has small class sizes
- Has diversity in student population
- Is known for students who are serious about ideas (how intellectual the students are)
- Political climate

This process starts students thinking about things they haven't thought about. So parents, you can go through this list with your child and it will help in prioritizing what to look for (at least initially).

**25. How do students find out how much diversity a school has?**

To find out how much diversity a school has, there are really three ways you can do it.

1. Go on the **Collegeboard.com** website. On the homepage about 1/2 the way down on the left, you will see a search box. Type in the name of a college, and it will bring up a profile with all kinds of statistics and facts, including the amount of diversity, which can be found under the link **CAMPUS LIFE** on the left.

2. Go to the college website itself. Usually the school posts statistics of their admitted class in terms of acceptance rate, SAT score, and diversity under the “Admissions” tab.

3. Pick up the phone and call an admissions office and ask; they’ll be more than happy to answer your questions.

**26. Why do students get mail from colleges they have never heard about?**

Colleges get information about you when you sign up for standardized tests, and then they send you a ton of stuff in the mail.

Unfortunately, this does not always mean you'll hear from the colleges you're interested in. But if you want information from a specific college, just go on their website, submit your information to their mailing list, and they'll send you brochures, application forms, information on majors, and things like that.

Understand, however, that just because they send you postcards, emails, letters, brochures, posters, and stacks of cash (wait, no)—it does not necessarily mean that you'll get in. It simply means they are running a good marketing campaign. But it's still good information to have, and you can recycle the mail from the colleges you're not interested in.

**27. Should students pay attention to all the mail that colleges send them?**

A lot of the initial mail consists of simple letters or postcards that colleges typically send during your junior and senior year.

However, after the initial letters, colleges may send you really useful information like their “viewbook.” A viewbook is a big ol’ brochure with pictures of smiling students on the front. Inside, though, there is a ton of information about admissions statistics, campus life, and academic programs that can be useful for you in learning about the college (and doing the “why” research—see answer #17)

Having said this, most students completely ignore just about everything they get in the mail, instead letting it pile up in a corner of their rooms. Parents, this means that you might want to keep an eye out for important mail from the schools on your child’s list. You should pay particular attention to the mail you get in the fall of your child’s senior year, especially the big envelopes because these typically contain the viewbooks.

Once a student applies, the mail becomes much more important because you will receive, oh I don’t know, things like acceptance letters, housing forms, letters that say your application is missing certain items, and other REALLY IMPORTANT STUFF. So even in the age of email, pay attention to the paper stuff when the time is right.

**28. Are the summer programs that students receive in the mail legit?**

For the most part, much of the mail that comes to you with opportunities to study abroad or go to Washington D.C. or go to another place (because you've been recommended or selected by your high school) are simply companies trying to get students to pay for their programs. If there's a cost involved, it's usually not a real honor you can put on your resume.

Now, some of their programs are totally legitimate; I've had students go to Washington D.C., the U.N., or abroad, and they've had amazing experiences. But you have to be careful, because there are also scams out there.

If there is a program that you're interested in, ask around and see if anyone you've known has taken advantage of it. Call the program and ask them a bunch of questions before you send any money to anybody, and remember that colleges are looking more for what you've done on your own in high school than anything you've paid for.

There are also letters you might get from organizations like The College Board stating, "Congratulations, you are a National Merit Semi-Finalist!" This is something you actually want to pay attention to.



**29. What should students know about fraternities and sororities?**

Some schools do not have any Greek system whatsoever. Some schools have fraternities (for guys) and sororities (for girls), but the majority of the school's population isn't involved, so it's not a huge part of the social life. And some colleges have a Greek system that really dominates the social life.

So, if you're interested in going Greek, you can ask students you know who attend college what it is like, or you can look a school up on a site like **CollegeProwler.com** (see answer #18 for more) and see how engaged the fraternities or sororities really are.

Also know that there are a variety of types of fraternities and sororities that can exist at a single college. For example, some fraternities are the type that lock you in a trunk full of alcohol and drive around until you finish it. I wish it wasn't that way, but it actually happens. There are also others that don't haze and don't treat new pledges like...well...like pledges. Some are mellower, some are dedicated to community service, and some are even focused on things like business networking.

If you visit a college, you can walk to fraternity row and ask students what the system is like, and then you can make the best choice for you.

**30. What should students keep in mind about the weather?**

Obviously, this comes up more for students from sunny climates because going to the snow is typically a harder adjustment than going to live near a beach.

All I can say is that approximately 70% of my students go someplace that isn't Southern California and has four seasons. These students say that the first winter kind of sucks because they aren't used to it being cold or wet or grey so much of the time. But the majority of these students also say that after that first winter, they know what to expect, they're better prepared, and that it isn't nearly so bad.

So, take some time to consider whether you could spend four years in a place like Seattle, where it rains a lot, or upstate New York, where it gets really cold. And if you can, visit these schools during the winter when the weather is most severe so that you can get a firsthand experience of what it's like.

**31. What should students consider about a rural college?**

When I talk to students from Los Angeles, most aren't interested in a rural school because they think it's in the middle of nowhere. And sometimes they're right.

But like anything else, there are advantages to schools in a city, schools near a city, and schools outside of a city. I'm going to generalize here, but you owe it to yourself to investigate each different type of school and not just base your decision off of what your friends think.

Let's take a school like Oberlin, for example. Oberlin is considered rural, but it's 35 miles outside of Cleveland. Yes, Oberlin is not surrounded by a bustling metropolis, but what you'll find at a more rural school is that everyone is *really* nice, and there's a real sense of community among the students and the professors. So, what you might lack in terms of say, the vibrancy of New York City, you might gain in terms of the relationships you can build, the fact that all the activities are on-campus, and the fact that it's so comfortable and homey. The bottom line is that a rural college may or may not be right for you, but I would suggest checking out different types of schools (even those in your local area/community) to get a sense of what different areas are like.

**ADMISSIONS****32. How can students determine how hard it is to get into a specific college?**

I'm going to give you a few steps.

The first thing to do is to check your numbers. This means two things:

1. Your GPA and where you are in the class if your high school ranks students (top 10%, top 20%, top 50% etc. based on your grades).
2. Your test scores.

Then, go to back to our friends at **Collegeboard.com**, look 3/4 down the homepage on the left, and use the search box I have mentioned in previous answers to type in a name of any college. Once you get taken to that college's homepage, click on the **APPLYING** link on the left. This will show you the school's acceptance rate and a general classification of what they're looking for in terms of GPA. Sometimes they list their median range of GPA (for example, a 3.2–3.5), which means that their average accepted student has a GPA in this range.

Other colleges just list ranges of GPAs in terms of percentages (for example, 60% of accepted students typically have a GPA that places them in the top 25% of their graduating class).

Colleges also list ranges in terms of median test scores that you can use to see what the averages are. Just understand that these ranges typically represent the 25–50<sup>th</sup> percentile. This means that 25% of the accepted class had higher test scores and 25% had lower test scores.

Also remember that there are many reasons **BESIDES** GPA and **TEST SCORES** that colleges use to admit

students, so don't freak out when you look at these ranges. Instead, you can simply use the information to compare one college to another.

Let's say, for example, that one college has a 45% acceptance rate, 50% of their students have between a 3.2–3.5 GPA, and their average SAT scores fall between 1800 and 1900. You might find another college on your list that has a 10% acceptance rate, 80% of their students have above a 3.5 GPA, and their average SAT scores fall between 2050 and 2150. Based on this information, you know that the second school is harder to get into than the first.

So, what you're looking for is where you fit within a school's profile. (By the way—most colleges also show a profile of their admitted class on their website that is more specific than the one found on the College Board.) If your GPA and your test scores fall in the middle range of a college's numbers, you know that you stand a decent chance of getting accepted.

If we go back to the example, let's say you have an 1850 (SAT) and a GPA of 3.4. You would fall right in the middle of the first college's admitted class. If you have above a 1900 and a 3.5, you would look even better. If your score was below 1800, the college is going to be more of a reach.

AGAIN—this doesn't mean you won't get in. I have students who fall outside the range but still get accepted into a particular college because they might be athletes, they might have an artistic abilities that a college wants, they might be going into an unrepresented major, or their GPA doesn't tell the whole story (say a student got all Cs in 9<sup>th</sup> grade but As in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade).

I simply use these initial numbers as a blueprint to

help you rank your schools as “Reaches” (harder to get into), “Likelies” (realistic possibilities), and “Safeties” (most definitely going to get into).

Students who go to high schools that use Naviance Family Connection may also have access to a feature called “Scattergrams.” These are graphs that show this history of acceptances, deferrals, wait lists, and denials from your particular high school over a number of years. So, you can look up a college like University of Alabama, and see how many students got in, as well as what their GPA and test scores were. The graph will then show your GPA and test scores as a circle on the graph, so you can check your chances against students from previous years at your high school.

The problem with Scattergrams is that both parents and students obsess over them and treat them like they are gospel. I think they can be very useful ROUGH tools, similar to the Collegeboard profiles, but things have to be kept in perspective. I like to use Scattergrams simply to see how a particular college “likes” a particular high school. In other words, colleges do have high schools they will take more students from over others. I know of a very reputable private school in Los Angeles from which many students get accepted into top colleges, but very few get accepted into Northwestern. Why does this happen? Only Northwestern knows, but information like this is simply good to know so you can set your initial expectations appropriately.

Having said all this, I am still a big believer in the motto, “If you don’t ask, you can’t get.” Sure, there are probably colleges you won’t get into. And yes, you should absolutely make sure your college list has some likely and

safety schools, in addition to the reach schools. But I have students who get into their reaches each year. Besides, if you know my personal story, my principal told me I would never get into Stanford because my high school's reputation was such that only two kids had gotten accepted in the prior 20 years before I applied. If I had taken her advice, I wouldn't have applied, and I wouldn't have gotten in.

**33. What is the most important factor considered by admissions officers?**

Surprise, surprise! It's your grades.

More accurately, it is your performance in high school. Notice I didn't simply say GPA. Despite what I have stated in the previous answers, admissions officers don't just look at your overall GPA—they look at the grades you got and the classes you took. This is a lot more information than a single number of your GPA.

So let's say you're one of those students who didn't start out as strong as you would've liked. In 9<sup>th</sup> grade, your grades may have been a bit shaky; I mean, you were getting used to high school and weren't real motivated yet, right? Or you had a really hard science class your sophomore year in which you got a much lower grade than you did in the rest of your classes. You are not out of luck.

Your college counselor at your high school has to send each college a profile of what your high school is like, including how many AP and Honors classes are offered, the profile of SAT/ACT scores from your high school, etc. This way, colleges have a way of comparing you to everyone else who goes to your high school, and they have a way of comparing your high school to other high schools in the area.

What this means for you is that even if you started shaky or got a bad grade here or there, if you raise your grades during high school—especially during the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester of your junior year and your 1<sup>st</sup> semester of your senior year—you're doing yourself a great service because you are showing to colleges what kind of student you are right before you apply.



Your better grades might not undo that D you got in 9<sup>th</sup> grade geometry (nor does straight As in only your last semester guarantee you are going to Princeton), but they do show you're making progress. Colleges recognize this progress and take it into consideration.

The opposite is also true. I met a student who had 4 As and 2 Bs his 2<sup>nd</sup> semester of junior year, but during his senior year, he didn't really pay attention and got 2 C minuses and a D plus his first semester. Please don't do this. Colleges don't like it so much.

The best thing you can do, no matter where you are in high school right now, is start making an effort in your classes so that you can have more opportunities. This doesn't mean that you need to get a 4.0; there are thousands of different schools for thousands of different types of students. But the better you do, the more colleges you will have to choose from.

**34. Is it better to take an AP or IB class and get a B or an Honors or regular class and get an A?**

The answer, of course, is not simple.

First, an AP (Advanced Placement) and IB (International Baccalaureate) are typically the most challenging classes in high school. Not all high schools have AP or IB programs, but you should know which one your high school offers.

My general advice is that I would rather have students go into the highest class they can possibly get into and give it a shot, because the more selective the college, the more they're going to be looking to see if you took advantage of these harder classes. This is because AP or IB courses are typically taught at a college level, so the most selective schools have applicants who are taking the most challenging courses.

Having said this, not every school in the country needs you to take AP or IB classes in order for you to get in; in fact, most don't. So the answer to how many APs/IBs (if any) you need to take really depends on the selectivity of the colleges that you are looking at.

Additionally, if you're taking an AP or IB class and it is too hard, most high schools will allow you to drop down to the Honors or regular class, but not the other way around.

Yet, while I am suggesting you challenge yourself with the highest-level course you can take, you should keep several things in mind:

1. Find out what the teacher is like. Some classes are difficult, but some teachers generally give out A's to everyone, while others might typically give out C's to

everyone. Thus, you should ask other students who have taken a class to see what they say. And you should talk to multiple students, not just one.

2. Know yourself. If you're taking AP U.S. History and you're also thinking of taking AP Biology, but you find out from other classmates that bio is going to require four hours of homework per night, and this amount of work is basically going to suck all your time and lower all your other grades, then you might want to reconsider taking it.

So, my final answer is that I would rather get an B/B+ in a harder class than an A in an easy one, but there are many factors that can change my mind given a particular student's situation. You need to know yourself and the colleges to which you want to apply.

At this point, I should also remind you that IT'S ONLY COLLEGE! If you've read my other answers, you may start to realize that you will be fine wherever you end up attending.

Really.

**35. How important is community service?**

It often shocks people when I say, “Community service is not important.” Of course service is important in the sense that it’s always good to help others; in fact, it’s beneficial for everyone involved. But it’s not a requirement for the majority of colleges in the U.S. This means that if you don’t have community service on your resume, you can still get into colleges—great colleges. Some colleges really value community service, and reading their websites will tell you more about these schools (Tulane comes to mind as a school who emphasizes service), but I’ve had many students who have not done any community service and gotten into all the schools on their list.

What is important, however, is that you do have some activities you participate in other than playing Xbox. When colleges talk about wanting to see extracurricular activities, it’s not about something *specific* that you have you do, it’s that you do *something* you actually enjoy. I don’t like padding the college resume with things that “look good to colleges.” I would much rather have a student try something that he or she may have an interest in and build off of it over time.

For example, if you had an interest in advertising or marketing, maybe you take a marketing class one summer at a community college. Or maybe you get an internship the next summer working at an advertising firm. During this internship, you might just be filing and throwing things away, but you’re at least being exposed to the world of advertising. Maybe you get to sit in on some meetings or talk to an executive about what he or she does. Or maybe you get a job working at a grocery store, and you observe

how the store markets itself.

Then, when you apply to colleges as an advertising or marketing major, you have done things throughout your high school career that support that choice.

In other words, **do things that interest you.**

But what if you're an athlete? I played sports in high schools so I know that a lot of times, the sport doesn't allow you to do other significant extracurricular activities. Are colleges going to "take off points" from your application because you can't do community service or some other extracurricular?

Absolutely not.

Colleges value how much you're going to be participating in sports (typically 10, 12, 15+ hours a week), and obviously you're doing something constructive with your time. And if you plan to continue playing that sport in college, that's even better.

I would say, however, that you should still see if you can try other things you are interested in, even if you do play sports. For example, I had a student who played so much soccer that he really didn't have time for anything else. Then, the summer before his senior year, he learned that he would not have soccer for a month and when he did start playing, he would only have to play in the afternoons. As a result, he got a job as a pool boy at a local hotel. He also ended up taking a night class in psychology at the local community college, and he liked it so much, he chose to take another one in the fall, instead of an elective.

By the time this student applied to college, he had more than just soccer to put in his apps—he had a job and 2 psychology classes. When he then applied as a psychology major, his background supported his choice.

Please don't feel that you have to book every hour of every day. I know some of you are going to be completely tied up with drama or music or sports or a job. Again, you don't need a certain amount or a certain type of extracurricular activity; I am just encouraging you to try things you like when you can fit them in your schedule (and still try to do well in school).

Finally, if you start an activity that you do not like, it's ok to try something else. Sure, it looks good to be consistent and earn a leadership position, but life's too short not to do something that interests you.

Of course, some students just get burned out for a while. I talked with a student at one of my workshops who asked me if she could stop playing violin her senior year and instead pick up photography. She said she had been playing for 12 years. I asked her if she wanted to stop because she really hated it and never wanted to play again OR did she just need a break for a while because she was a bit burned out? I asked her if she had the time to try photography and still play violin, and I asked her if she wanted to play music in college. My advice would be different depending on how she answered these questions.

If she truly never wanted to pick up a violin again, or if she just wanted to play on her own and not be in the orchestra (for whatever reason), then at least she was replacing the time with a new activity, such as photography.

The only challenge for students is when they want to go to a selective college, and they start dropping activities and/or classes in their senior year without replacing the time with anything else. Hey, I know what "senior-itis" feels like—believe me—but you want to make

sure you're dropping something for the right reasons and that you're showing colleges that you can commit to something (or at least commit your time to something) that interests you.

### 36. Is getting a job a good idea?

Like I suggested in the last answer, of course it's a good idea.

If you're a high school student and you want to get a job either during the school year or during the summer, it shows that you are actively doing something, and it shows responsibility. Therefore, having a job can look really good to colleges.

Having said this, it's not *necessary* to have a job in order to get into college. If you do get a job, just make sure that you are keeping your life balanced. I've had students who work during the year and spend so much time working that their grades start to slowly drop off. Keep it balanced. There's not a minimum or maximum amount of hours that you need to work; you just need to know or at least experiment with what you can handle.



**37. What should students do in the summer to increase their chances of getting accepted?**

In terms of summer activities, I like to make categories of the types of things you can do.

**Category 1:** Play Nintendo Wii. Not on the list.

**Category 2:** Get a job. This is on the list

**Category 3:** Get an internship. This is on the list. Internships are not the easiest thing for high school students to get, but you can also volunteer. If you're willing to work for free, it's amazing what people will allow you to do, even if it's just answering the phones. Doing menial tasks in an area that you're interested in will at least expose you to the industry. I am also the type of guy who says go for the top, which means you should think big. I had a student several years ago who wanted to work in sports, so he said "maybe I can get an internship at the local radio station." I said, "Maybe you can. *Or* maybe you could go to Fox News here in Los Angeles, or you could go see about working for the Dodgers."

Why not?

You are smart, and you are willing to work hard for free. **If you don't ask, you can't get.** So ask around to see if anyone knows someone in an organization that you would love to work for. Or make a phone call/send an e-mail with a resume. Put yourself out there for internships, and you'll be amazed what you can find.

**Category 4:** Take a class at the local community/junior college, OR take a class at a college summer program OR take a class overseas OR take classes at your high school in the summer. There are also international programs in which you can take Spanish classes or other varieties of

courses, depending on the program. Some count for college credit; some just count for experience. Both have their merits.

Now I hear you out there, and you might be thinking, “Should I take classes outside of what I would take in high school, or should I take classes that get rid of requirements for next year?” Both can work. I know many students that take a class like U.S. History in the summer so they don’t have to take it junior year. If you do that, it’s either because you really want more time next year to devote to your other classes, or you’re going to take something else to replace the class you took over the summer. In other words, you either want 5 classes instead of 6 next year, or you want to take an elective (say AP Psychology instead of U.S. History), and by taking the history class over the summer, you will have room in your schedule for psych.

My preference for extra classes would be to take something new over just trying to get a class out of the way. So take anthropology; take political science; take something that’s not offered at your high school.

**Category 5:** Do community service. You can volunteer locally, or you can go on an international trip to somewhere like Costa Rica where you build houses for 2 weeks. Like I mentioned in the last answer, doing community service isn’t required, but it is never a bad thing. I would rather have students volunteer locally throughout a year than just do 8 hours one time so they can fulfill their community service requirement at school, but I understand this is not possible for everyone.

Among these 5 categories above, one isn’t necessarily “better” than the other. Like I have mentioned,

it really should be dictated by what you're interested in. Anything that you have to pay for, like an overseas community service trip, is not a bad idea because of the experience you get, but I prefer when students do something like get a 20-hour (or more) per week job or volunteer locally because this will show to colleges that you have initiative. But then again, you don't get the experience of going to another country. And let's say you were really interested in Spanish or another culture—then it would make sense for you to go somewhere else and volunteer. Also, be aware that you don't always have to pay to go to a foreign country to volunteer; there's a variety of free service programs out there available for teenagers, so all you have to do is ask your college counselor at your high school, or Google it and look around.

**38. Does a student's choice of major impact his/her chance of admission?**

By this point in the book, you may have noticed that my favorite answer starts with the words: "It depends."

So, it depends.

Some colleges do take major choice into account; others do not. Like I often recommend, if you really want to know, take out your phone and call the admissions office and ask.

"Gasp! Call someone! Can't I just email them?" you might be thinking.

You can always email an admissions office with questions. But sometimes it is easier and faster to make the call. You don't have to say who you are—just say you are a student who is wondering whether the major you pick has any influence on the admissions decision. Now, an admissions person might say something like, "Well, if you apply into our business or film schools, they are more selective." If you are not interested in either one of these schools, you can then ask more specifically, "I was thinking about potentially majoring in either biology or linguistics, and I was wondering if it makes any difference what I put down as my first choice."

For the colleges that do consider which major you select on your application, you want to make sure you are NOT just picking one because you think it can help you get in. Instead, you should *actually* have some demonstrated interest in that subject area. Let's say someone told you that your favorite college has a "backdoor" way in—that if you apply to the forestry major, you have a much better chance of acceptance since very few students end up

choosing that program. Well first, if you are legitimately thinking about applying as a forestry major, you'll probably want to have taken biology and chemistry. It would also help to have some experience working or volunteering outdoors (in forests would be good). Otherwise, colleges aren't going to believe that you really have an interest in it (they pretty much know all the tricks too).

Additionally, you have to be careful that a certain college does not require you to stay in a particular major for a certain amount of time. If you apply as an engineering major at some colleges, for example, you will not be able to switch out of the engineering school for a year or more. Not every school works this way; in fact, most students change their majors pretty quickly in college, so it is generally not a big deal. But you may want to check with an admissions office or look at a college's website for the program you are considering so you don't get surprised once you're there.

A good example of this idea can be illustrated by two students I had several years ago: a girl and a boy. Both applied to Tufts. The girl had straight As and over 2100 on her SAT; the boy had a 3.7 (ish) and just under a 2000 on the SAT. She is the stronger candidate, right?

Well, he got in and she did not. BUT the girl applied as an International Relations major while he went in as an English Literature major.

How many boys do you know that love English lit?

Exactly.

In addition to this, the boy got a stellar letter of recommendation from his English teacher; his scores on the SAT Critical Reading and SAT Subject Test in Literature were quite strong (as compared to his math scores), and he wrote excellent essays—one about his love of books by

Kurt Vonnegut.

The girl, meanwhile, was applying to one of the school's most popular majors (especially among girls), and she didn't have a lot that made her stand out in the area other than her good numbers. She did end up going to a great college that she liked even more, so everything worked out (it usually does).

But can you see what I mean about showing a demonstrated interest in a subject and how/why it can make a difference in admissions? The bottom line is that some colleges want to fill certain programs, so your choice of major or concentration could help.

PLEASE KNOW, HOWEVER, that it is TOTALLY FINE to not know what you want to major in. Most students don't. I didn't (in fact, I applied as an undeclared major). One of the purposes of going to college is to figure out what you like and what you don't.

Having said this, I would argue that most of you do have academic interests (or at least subjects you hate less than others). If you are applying to a college as an undeclared major, but they ask you in an interview or in an essay why you want to attend, you can definitely say you are not quite sure what you will eventually major in BUT you **do have some interests that match up with what the school offers**. This is an honest answer that also shows you have done your research, and it will help you stand out.

### 39. How much does legacy matter?

A legacy is when a student applicant has a family member that attended the college that student is applying to. Most colleges will give you legacy status if your parents or siblings went/go to the college, and sometimes colleges will grant legacy if your grandparents attended. Some colleges count undergraduate and graduate degrees, while others have more restrictions. Typically, if your aunt or cousin attended, it will not count. So, if you really want to know how a particular college defines legacy status, you can call the admissions office and ask them.

But what does it mean in regard to admission? Well, of course it depends. What legacy status generally means is that your application is flagged. A flag is a special consideration that is given to your application when it is being reviewed. Legacy status will not help you if your grades and test scores are substantially lower than a college's averages, but it can help if you are right on the line with the college's generally accepted numbers and you need an extra push.

Typically, your application is put into a pile and compared with other legacy students. This means that the acceptance rate for legacy admits is typically higher than for those students without legacy. This admissions "bump" varies widely by school, and you can get the statistics by either calling a college or by going on a college's website—most schools publish their admissions statistics each year. But know that having legacy does not mean that you are automatically going to get in.

People often ask if a student only gets awarded legacy status if a family member has given a ton of money

to the school. The answer is generally no; you are granted legacy status simply if a family member attended. If, however, you do have a family member who happens to have donated a building or is named Bill Clinton, your application will be flagged with a different type of “special case” consideration.

These types of discussions can upset students who do not have legacy. But the reality is that only a small percentage of students typically get legacy status, so please do not worry about your spot being given away. If you simply present the best application possible, admissions people will evaluate you on your merit.



#### 40. What other special categories do admissions people use to “flag” applications?

Adding to my last answer about legacies, I thought I would give you an example of how a “flag” or special consideration works.

Two students, James and Tamika, both apply to XYZ College. Both are from the same school and have generally the same profile: a 3.2 GPA, 1830 SAT, decent essays, strong recommendations, somewhat involved resumes, applied for early decision. Because everything is exactly the same between these two, they should both either get accepted, denied, or wait-listed.

But wait, Tamika is a strong pianist. She has placed second in a national competition. She has sent tapes to XYZ's music department, and she has even corresponded with several professors about her interest in XYZ.

The XYZ admission department has been notified by the music department that it is actively seeking musicians, specifically piano players of Tamika's ability, because XYZ has just opened a new music center. After evaluating Tamika's tape, the department puts in a good word on Tamika's behalf.

Tamika's application is now *flagged*. Between James and her, Tamika will now have a better chance of getting in if there is one spot left and XYZ has to decide between the two. Of course, she still has to meet the parameters XYZ uses to accept other students. If she had a 2.2 GPA and a 1200 on her SAT, the piano wouldn't help her.

Here are some general categories of flags used by admissions officers:

- Underrepresented minority status

- Athletes
- Legacies
- Artistic or musical talent
- International students (at some colleges)
- Special cases (your mom gave \$10 million to a college)

Note: geographical location and choice of major aren't normal flags, but they can have some influence on your chances, especially if a college does not have any applicants that fit in those categories. So, if you are the only student from Montana who is applying or if you know 5 languages and apply as a linguistics major (for which a college got very few applicants), it can help you stand out.

#### 41. What are Early Decision and Early Action?

First, let me define some terms.

Regular decision refers to the normal application process that usually requires you to turn in applications around January 1, January 15, or February 1, (depending on the school), and lets you know the decision sometime in April. Applying for an early admissions program refers to the following list of application options that offer students certain benefits by getting everything in earlier.

##### **EARLY DECISION**

Early Decision (ED) means a student submits all of his or her application materials, including a shortened financial aid form, to a certain school by early November. Application deadlines are usually November 1 or 15, but schools will often accept test scores from the November dates. The college then responds before Christmas.

The catch is that you have to sign a form that states you will attend that school if you get in early. Therefore, you've got to be sure you want to attend a school before you apply for early decision. You can apply to only one school for Early Decision.

A student can be:

- Accepted. You find out in December that you got in, and you also get your financial aid package early.
- Deferred. This is limbo land. You are not accepted or rejected. You are put back in with the students who are applying during regular decision, and you will have to wait until April to learn your fate. Note that at the most selective colleges, only about 10% of students who get deferred are later admitted, but it

can vary.

- Rejected. This is unfortunately self-explanatory.

## **EARLY DECISION 2**

Colleges that do not like losing the best students to other ED I schools have developed ED II to give them a second chance to apply early. For example, Vassar offers the choice of applying for Early Decision by November 15 (notifies in December), for ED II by January 1 (notifies in February), or for regular decision by January 1 (notifies in April).

Confused? Here's the simple scoop: Early Decision II is for students who are still willing to commit to a school and who want to be notified early. (Note that the ED II application deadline is the same as that for regular decision, but notification is typically in February rather than April.)

Why would you want to apply for Early Decision II?

- You have applied for an Early Decision at another school, but have been deferred or rejected. Well, guess what? You get another chance for an early decision from schools that offer ED II.
- You want to apply early but also want to use the first part of your senior year to improve your grades, test scores, or both.

## **EARLY ACTION**

Early Action (EA), is also sometimes referred to as Early Notification. With early action, you can apply early, like in ED, but you don't have to go to the school if you get in. Great, right? I agree, but over the years, schools figured out that they like ED better because they lock in their class

and don't lose the best students to their competition. Thus, not all schools offer EA—a few examples include Georgetown, Harvard, Tulane, Michigan, Stanford, SMU, and Chapman.

EA can be tricky though. Some schools that offer ED allow you to also apply to schools that offer EA, while others do not. So, if you plan on applying for ED and EA at two different schools, you must find out if they allow this by looking online, asking your counselor, or calling a college directly.

But wait, there's more! A few schools now offer what is called "Single Choice Early Action." (Examples include Stanford, Yale, and Harvard.) This means that while you are not committing to attending like with ED, you cannot apply anywhere else early, hence the "Single Choice" part.

### **ROLLING ADMISSIONS**

Rolling admissions is an option used by many state colleges and some other selective schools—for example, Indiana University and University of Arizona. These schools allow you to submit applications anytime after they open admissions (usually around August), and they respond to you in a month or two. The schools keep admitting students throughout the year until the class is full. There is no early commitment required if you get in. The key is to get your materials in early (if everything is ready and you are happy with your grades, tests, and so on) so that you have a better chance of getting accepted.

**42. Does applying early impact the admissions decision?**

"I heard that applying early helps your chances of getting in." True or false?

Time's up!

The answer is: true *and* false.

Booooo.

Let me explain.

Many people believe that by applying early, they will increase their chances of getting accepted because the acceptance rate is higher for this pool of students than for those who apply regular decision. Although this is generally true, you should realize that the students who apply early are usually quite strong in terms of GPA, test scores, and special considerations (flags). Therefore:

- Only students who are toward the top of the range of a given school's GPA and test scores should think about applying early. Even though acceptance rates are higher, so is the level of competition. For example, although you may not be considered a top prospect at Yale, you may be at the top, say, at Tulane. If Tulane were a college you really wanted to attend and were willing to commit to, applying early there would be a much better idea than applying early to Yale. This would also apply if your choice was between Harvard and Tulane; even though Harvard is EA and doesn't require you to commit, your decision to apply early would still benefit you more at Tulane.
- Early applicants must be sure their grades and test scores are where they need to be. Students often get

deferred because schools want to wait and see how they do on their senior-year grades. Whether you should apply for early admission depends on where you fit in a school's profile of accepted students. If your stats would be at the top of the class of a college's recently admitted freshmen, you might apply early, even if you think there is room for improvement during senior year.

- Early applicants should seek recommendations that give concrete examples of how they match up for that particular school, rather than just a general letter that will serve for all schools.
- Early applicants should definitely interview if they can. If your early-decision school is truly your first choice, you'll want every opportunity to prove it to the admissions staff.

Remember, you can also apply for Early Decision II at another school that you may have a better chance of getting into.

If you are totally confused about what to do, be sure to consult your high school counselor or call a college's admissions department and ask questions.

**43. How should athletes go about getting recruited?  
What about scholarships?**

Last year I had a student who was a basketball player. She was a starting point guard for her high school team and the star player. And she wanted to play for colleges. How did she go about getting recruited?

In her case, she had to figure out how good she really was, so she asked her coach whether her coach thought she'd be playing Division I (big sports schools you will generally see on ESPN) or Division III (usually smaller or mid-sized schools whose teams are a step down from those in D1). There is also a Division 2, but not many colleges are in this division.

So she figured out what level she was by talking to her coach and by going to some college showcases. This is where you play with other high school players in front of college coaches, and you get a real good sense of how good you are in comparison to other players.

She and I determined that she was the bottom of Division I and the top of Division 3, meaning that she could play D1, but that'd probably mean she'd sit the bench, at least for the first year or two. If she went to a D3 college, however, she'd pretty much start right away and make an impact on the team.

She had to figure out whether she wanted to play or be on a really high-profile team and not play so much. She decided that she would rather go to a D3 school and try to start.



Once she made that determination, she had a choice to make. Because she was really good but not one of the top female basketball players in the country, coaches weren't coming to her. Instead, **she had to reach out to coaches.**

There are many companies out there that will put together your profile and video and send it to coaches to get them interested. I know some people that have used these companies, and they do work, usually. You're going to want to ask those companies for referrals to make sure that they know your sport, that they know the coaches, and that they can really help you. These companies are best for students who want to get the maximum exposure to the most schools. In other words, playing their sport is the most important thing, and they will investigate the college once they hear from the coaches.

For many athletes, however, it is reversed. They first want to find a college that interests them based on other reasons than sports, and then they want to see if the coaches are interested. If this applies to you (or even if the first example applies to you), you can get recruited by doing the work yourself.

What this girl did was make a list of the schools she was interested in, based on academics, size, etc. Then she separated the list into those schools with basketball and those without. Then she went on the athletic websites of each of these colleges, looked up who the coaches were, and sent an e-mail to these coaches telling them who she was and who she played for. She attached a sports resume that highlighted her height, her statistics from last season, how well her team did, and a recommendation from her coach. Finally, she wrote the coaches, "I am happy to send you a video or any other information; please just let me

know what materials you would like.”

Sometimes it takes a week to hear back from a coach, and sometimes it takes many weeks; it depends on what time of the year it is. Sometimes you have to follow up with a coach multiple times to get a response. But most coaches want to find talent, so most of them got back to this girl and said, “I really want to see you at my camp this summer,” or “I want you to post a video on YouTube,” or “I want to talk to your coach on the phone.”

Coaches will pretty much let you know what they want, and then you just keep in touch with them. A coach might want you to visit the school if you can and meet the rest of the team.

The bottom line is that coaches will typically be really candid about whether they want you or not.

You may have heard that D1 colleges have scholarships available but D3 schools do not. This is generally true, but it doesn’t mean that the coach at a D3 school can’t help you get in. Also, if you are applying for financial aid at a D3 school and you are being recruited, you might get a bigger aid package. This is not a sports scholarship, but it may help you decide if you want to attend.

The girl ended up going to Williams and starting as the shooting guard right away. But before she formally applied, the coach wanted her to send her application and transcripts so that he could take it to the admissions office and tell them that he wanted this girl on his team. This didn’t mean that the girl was automatically going to get in, but it did mean that she got extra consideration.

So, if you are an athlete who wants to play in college, be very proactive. Don’t wait for the coaches to

come to you. Reach out to them and give them everything they need.

**44. Should artists or performers submit extra materials? If so, how?**

If you're a student interested in majoring in the arts (music, drama, film, fine arts), there are a few things you'll want to think about first.

One is what type of school do you want to go to? They come in three different categories.

The first category is the conservatory model, where you're going for that specific discipline. So, whether you want to go to Juilliard or Cal Arts or the Berkeley School of Music, you're concentrating in the arts. Now, that doesn't mean that you won't take academic classes; almost all of these schools have some academic courses that you have to take, but the majority of the curriculum will be centered on your discipline.

The second category can be illustrated by the music school at the University of Miami. There, you have an actual school of music where the majority of classes that you take will be in your discipline, but you can also double-major or minor and take classes in the other academic schools to balance out your curriculum.

The third category is a school with an art major *within* a school of liberal arts. So, let's say you wanted to study music at Wesleyan University. They have a music department (and a dance, art, theater, and film program), but it doesn't involve a separate application/audition as do Miami or Juilliard.

The kind of school you are looking for will dictate what kind of materials you need to send in. If you want to apply to a conservatory, they typically require a separate application, which usually involves sending in materials

(DVDs, CDs, YouTube links, etc.) and most likely auditioning (depending on your discipline).

For an institution like Miami, you have to fill out the application for the regular school of Miami, **and** you have fill out an application for the music school at the same time. And yes, you have to do **both** sets of requirements. Oberlin is yet another example. Like Miami, Oberlin has a school of liberal arts and a music conservatory, but you can choose to either apply only to the conservatory (1 application) or apply to both the conservatory and the liberal arts school (2 applications).

Regardless of what category your schools fall in, be very careful about collecting the proper requirements so you can make sure you're doing everything by the deadlines.

Now, for schools that do not require any additional information, like Wesleyan, this doesn't necessarily mean you shouldn't send in anything.

You can sometimes send in a CD of your photography, a DVD of you singing to showcase your talent, or a YouTube link of your latest short film. Not all colleges will accept this extra information, however, so you should call and check just to be sure.

Some colleges will give these extra materials to the art/music/film/dance department so they can evaluate you. If the department sees that you have talent and wants you, they may advocate for you with the admissions office. Other times, the admissions people will take a look at your materials themselves just to get a sense of how much commitment you've made.

First determine the category of school you want go to, then figure out the requirements, and if it is possible,

send in evidence of your skill. You can also contact a professor that would be in charge of teaching you. For example, if you wanted to be an oboist, you'd probably want to contact the oboe teachers at different schools, talk to them, and even book private lessons. This will give you a sense of both the schools and the professors that you would be working with.

**45. What does a deferral mean?**

A deferral typically means that you've applied for Early Action or Early Decision at a college, and they haven't made up their mind yet as to what they want to do.

This means that they're not accepting or rejecting you— they're putting you back into the regular applicant pool to give you a second look. This is not a bad thing. This gives you a second chance to improve your grades and test scores.

You will also want to make the most of this second chance by sending them updates on things that might prove useful. For example, if you won a new award, you've been heavily involved in an extracurricular activity since you first applied, your team won league championships and you were named MVP, you took the ACT again and got a better score, or your first semester grades look really good, you want to make sure they know. This way, when they do re-evaluate you, usually after January, they're going to have reasons to say yes the second time around. Even if you don't have a lot of new information to report, you may still get in because the school might be willing to take a bigger chance on you during the regular decision period than they did during the early decision or early action period.

**46. What does getting wait-listed mean?**

This is what happens when you apply during regular decision, and they don't make a decision on you yet. You don't get accepted and you don't get rejected—you get put in a strange wasteland called the wait list.

This means that the school needs to find out how many of the students they accepted actually commit to going before making a decision on your application. If, after May 1, not enough students have said yes, and the school has spaces left, it will go to the wait list to fill the spaces.

This can be frustrating because you have to pick a college to attend, and then you may have to change it if you are admitted from the wait list someplace else. This happened to me actually. I enrolled at Pomona and sent in a deposit by May 1, while I was on the wait list at Stanford. When I later got into Stanford, I still had to wait for the financial aid package to see if I could afford to go. I then cancelled Pomona, lost my deposit, and headed to Palo Alto. (Colleges will allow you to back out of a commitment if you get in off the wait list somewhere else.)

So, if you are wait-listed, decide whether you want to stay on the wait list. There is usually a card with the wait-list letter (or a link in the wait-list email) that you will have to send in stating your preference. (If there is no card, call or send the school a letter stating your preference.)

Realize, however, that you will most likely have to pick another school and send in the deposit and your commitment (see above). A school may notify you about a change in your wait-list status anytime between May and September, so be ready to lose the deposit and change your plans if you get in and decide to go. Remember, though,



that most students do not get in off the wait list. But, hey, it happens. It happened to me.

**47. What can be done to increase a student's chances of getting accepted off a deferral or a wait list?**

I have already mentioned above that keeping the schools updated about your progress is a great way to get off the deferral or wait list.

But in many cases, there may not be much to update them on, except for your first semester grades. (It's not as though you suddenly won an award for developing a new laser.) So, at the very least, you want to write a letter to the school (or e-mail your admissions reader if you know who it is or can find out by calling) and write "I've done research on all these schools. Here are the reasons why your school is the best match for me."

Even if you don't know exactly what you want to do, you can say that a school has such and such program that interests you because of classes that you've taken and past experiences. In other words, show them why you match up with their institution.

If this sounds familiar, it's because it's written similarly to a "why essay," described earlier in this book. If you have already written a why essay for a school, you can simply restate your reasons in the deferral or wait-list letter.

Most importantly, you should let a school know that if they take you off a deferral or a wait list, **you will absolutely go**. A college does not want to waste an acceptance letter on someone who is going to go somewhere else.

It's not that you should send them cookies or briefcases full of hundred-dollar bills (you want to be persistent, not annoying). Don't send an email everyday,

for example. You want to do what is appropriate, but you also want to make sure you are in contact with the admissions office so that they know you're serious about the school.

**48. How important are senior-year grades?**

Some students want to party, go to the beach (if you have one nearby), or skip classes their senior year. Unfortunately, your senior grades are also factored into your GPA and college evaluation process.

**If you are applying early, many colleges will contact your high school and ask for your quarter or mid-report grades. No, really.**

**If you are applying regular decision, most colleges will use your first semester senior grades to evaluate you. (An exception is the UC schools in California.)**

**Even your second semester, *after you've already been accepted into college*, can make a difference**—so don't let your grades go downhill. Colleges can actually overturn your acceptance and say, "too bad, you didn't take the classes you said you would and you didn't keep your grades up." This happens rarely and usually requires a substantial drop in grades, but you need to be aware of it because I see it happen every year.

So do as well as you can senior year. Trust me, it will be worth it.

**49. How do students calculate their GPAs?**

This is a complicated question, because high schools and colleges do it differently.

My simple answer involves you going to your high school advising office and asking them how they do it. The standard GPA is based on a 4 point scale, meaning that As are worth 4 points, Bs are worth 3 points, Cs are worth 2 points, and Ds are worth 1 point.

You basically take your grades and add up the points—let's say you've got 3 As and a B, that would be 15 points. 15 divided by 4 will give you your GPA.

Where it gets complicated is that some high schools use minuses and pluses, which are different numbers. For example, if a B is 3, a B+ could be a 3.25, and an A- could be a 3.5. The bottom line is, you're always going to be adding up all of your grades and then dividing by the total number of classes.

You will also want to know if a college counts all of your grades or just the academic classes. For example, most schools will take your overall GPA. But the UC system in California only looks at your academic classes and your arts classes—the ones that fulfill their admissions requirements. They don't count P.E., unfortunately.

For a student who lives in California, this means that he or she might have two separate GPAs—an overall and a UC/Cal State (Cal State schools use the same system as the UCs).

In addition to this, certain high schools “weight” the GPAs based on whether you took AP, Honors, or IB classes. If a student got straight As all the way through high school and took several AP or Honors classes for example, his or

her GPA would probably be above a 4.0. This is how GPAs can get so high.

However, parents and students often obsess over the GPA (“Wait...I have a 3.45 not a 3.47!!!!”) The reality is that the GPA is only a number, and colleges typically look at much more than this, as I’ve said earlier in this book. They are looking at the grades you got and the classes you took, so please try not to freak yourself out and calculate your GPA every week of your senior year for every college to which you are applying. Simply go get a copy of your transcript and ask your counselor/advisor to explain how your school calculates your GPA. This way you will know what to put down on your applications and you can make sure your school hasn’t made any mistakes.

**50. What do colleges mean by “class ranking”?**

A lot of schools don't use class ranking anymore even though college applications ask for it. Class ranking is where you stand in relation to everybody else in your graduating class.

If you have a graduating class of 400, and according to your GPA, you were ranked 30<sup>th</sup>, then you'd be in the top 1% of your class. Colleges like to compare students at the same high school to see how well they've done, but again, many high schools have stopped ranking; if this is the case for your school, you would leave this section of the application blank.

**51. How does taking community college/junior college classes in the summer impact admissions?**

You don't have to take community college classes in order to get into college, but if you do want to take them, there are two types you can take:

1. **You can take classes outside of your high school curriculum.** Let's say you have already finished your junior year and it's the summer before your senior year. You've taken everything you need for high school, but you want to take an additional psychology, sociology, political science, or neurobiology course (or whatever course you are interested in). You will not only gain exposure to a new topic, but you will quite possibly earn college credit that you can apply towards your general education requirements for graduation at whatever college you do attend.

2. **You can take a class at a community college and get rid of one for the next year of high school.** For example, some students take U.S. History *before* their junior year so that they don't have to take it *during* junior year. (You could also take a community college class to make up for a class you failed.)

Taking community college classes, especially ones outside of your high school curriculum, can definitely help you in admissions because you're showing colleges that you're able to: A) do well in college classes and B) go above what you're expected to do in high school.

If you do end up taking a class to free yourself of that period the next year, just make sure your only reason for doing it isn't so that you go home early from high school. In other words, are you taking that U.S. History



class before junior year because you need the time in your other classes in order to do well? Will you be using that free time to do work or do an extracurricular activity? If so, then it makes sense.

If you're taking the class so you can have more time on Grand Theft Auto, then I might suggest you either take history at your high school OR replace it with another academic class in high school. There shouldn't be a hole in your academic schedule if you can help it. If you're used to taking four or five or six classes, you shouldn't automatically start taking three just because that's all you need to graduate.

Of course, this all depends on the colleges to which you are applying. I have a student right now who is a straight A student and also a virtuoso oboe player. He most definitely will go to a conservatory, so his senior year he is only taking 4 academic classes (as opposed to his usual 5) because he is spending the rest of his time playing for different orchestras or practicing. His experience and audition will be more important than whether he takes physics, so in his case, his lighter schedule is justified.

Having said all this, certain colleges are easier to get into than others in terms of requirements. This simply means that you should be aware of the types of classes your colleges typically look for, and you should be aware that the fuller you keep your schedule with academics, the more opportunities you'll have when it comes time for you to apply for college.

Even if you think you want to go to a community college right now, and you're taking the minimum amount of classes just because you know that you can get in, realize that you might change your mind when all your friends

start talking about 4-year schools. By taking a full schedule, you are at least setting yourself up to have the opportunity to apply to more selective schools.

Finally—parents out there—this answer does not imply that a student *must* take community college classes to get into “good” colleges. I have many students get into some of the best colleges in the country without ever having taken a college course. Doing so is simply an option for those students who want to get ahead or have specific outside interests.

**52. If a student's GPA and test scores are below a college's averages, should he/she still apply?**

If you have read this far, seen me speak, or read/seen any of my previous works, you will know that one of my main mottos is, "If you don't ask, you can't get."

I am living proof that you should go for what you want because if I had listened to what just about everyone told me about my chances of getting into Stanford, I never would have applied.

However, like I detailed in answer #32, you should know the range of accepted grades and test scores each one of your colleges typically accepts so you know where you stand. I have also mentioned throughout this book that colleges look at many factors beyond grades and test scores when evaluating an applicant.

So I can answer the question by stating that many of my personal students apply to what we in the business call "Reach" schools—or colleges where their generally accepted numbers are above an applicant's numbers. So, a student with a 3.8 GPA and 1980 test scores may apply to the University of Pennsylvania, even though these numbers are below Penn's averages. However, she might be a legacy or an athlete or have a talent or have stellar grades in English and history but only had a few Bs in math that are bringing her down. There is no guarantee she will get in, but she shouldn't just rule herself out because someone told her that her grades are too low for Penn.

However, if she had a 2.7 GPA and a 1500 SAT, I would show her and her family Penn's generally accepted numbers in order to educate them on her chances of getting into Penn, which would be very low. Unless this girl

was an Olympic athlete whose parents gave \$20 million to Penn, and/or she was going to star in the next Spielberg movie, I would try to find her other colleges that she not only would have a better chance of getting into but also would probably like better.

Remember, my other main motto is “just because a college is ranked higher does not mean it is better.” To be truly successful in the admissions process, you want to find schools that match your academic and social interests.

**53. How do students know what activities to put on an application?**

First, you should know that you don't need to list every activity you have ever done since kindergarten.

I have parents who ask about this all the time. They send me resumes with four thousand activities on them, including things like "When Billy was four and he played..."

No.

The activities you list on your college applications are typically only those that you have been involved with in high school. However, if you've been practicing music since you were four, and you have continued playing through high school, then you can put down that you've been playing since you were four.

Second, you have to prioritize which activities are the most important. These priorities come in two categories. Category #1: Time commitment, meaning how much time you have spent on an activity. If you're playing a sport or you're involved in theater, for example, these usually represent a significant time commitment, say ten to fifteen (or more) hours a week. These types of activities can be classified as priorities.

Category #2: Importance to you, meaning how important you consider an activity to be. Maybe you're the president of a club at a school that only meets once a week for an hour so you only spend about two or three hours a week on it, but the work you do is really important to you. These types of activities can also be considered a priority.

What I suggest is that you sit down with your parents and make a list of everything you've done in high school without trying to edit or prioritize yet: yearbook,

student government, newspaper, sports, theater, singing—anything you’ve done in high school should go down on a piece of paper.

Then you should list everything you’ve done outside of high school: Playstation? No. Community service, work, jobs, internships, extra classes, summer programs? Yes. Make a gigantic list.

Then you will have to estimate the number of hours per week and the weeks per year for each activity. This is a little bit tricky because activity time commitments are so random. How do you figure out how many hours you spend on a sport when you have tournaments on the weekends? You estimate to the best of your ability. Let’s say, for example, you have two hours of practice a day, and spend another couple of hours on games, tournaments, travel, etc. You will probably list 10–15 hours per week for 12–20 weeks per year for this sport (because a typical sports season is 12 weeks long, but some schools practice 1/2 year or all year long.)

A school year is typically made up of 30–33 weeks a year, so when you write down all your time commitments, just keep this in mind. Please also make sure that you’re not putting down so many hours per week that it would be physically impossible to accomplish (stating 120 hours of extracurricular activities per week, for example, is downright silly).

Finally, many college applications have a limit to how many activities you can list. The Common App, for example, limits you to ten activities, so you will want to pick your strongest ten if you have more to choose from. If you have fewer, DON’T WORRY, you will be fine. Students that are involved in activities with major time

commitments often do not have ten activities, and other students simply don't get as involved or spend so much time doing homework that they do not have the time to do things like start a charity for orphaned squirrels or the like. If you do have more activities than an application will allow, look for a section on the application that allows you to include additional information. Many times, you can list the extra activities here.

**54. Is it okay to send extra letters of recommendation?  
How many is too many?**

The first thing to know is that some colleges don't require or even accept recommendations, such as the University of California schools. Others want one recommendation, some want two, and some colleges will accept extra recommendations from an art teacher or a coach or a boss. The bottom line is that for most selective 4-year colleges, students will usually ask two academic teachers for recommendations.

Many colleges also want a letter from a high school counselor, sometimes called a "secondary school report." Your counselors will typically know which schools these are and will handle it for you as long as you give them your list.

This means that for many selective colleges, you will be sending three recommendation letters. Beyond these three, it really depends on who you are and what you want to showcase. For example, if you are an amazing artist, you may want to think about getting another letter of recommendation from an art teacher because he or she can help *paint* a more complete picture of who you are as an applicant (sorry, I couldn't resist the pun).

Or let's say that you are really involved as a volunteer at your church—you might want to get a priest or a rabbi to write a letter on your behalf speaking about your work ethic and your commitment. Your boss can write a letter of recommendation if you've worked a job. And you will definitely want to get a recommendation from your coach if you want to continue playing your sport in college. The key to getting extra letters of recommendation



is to make sure the person says something unique that will add to the profile beyond your academic classes.

A lot of people ask me, “Well, what if I know a family friend who’s on the board of a college. Should we get a letter of rec from this person?” These letters can have some effect, although much of the time they don’t do a whole lot because parents are getting recommendations from their friends or acquaintances who don’t really know the student. So, unless a person has donated the wing of a building and has a direct line to the admissions office, it’s not really helpful to send their extra letter of rec unless that person can say something specific about the student such as, “I’ve known the student for fourteen years, I’ve seen him work, he’s worked for me, I’ve seen him in a variety of different aspects of his life...etc.”

Again, if the recommendation can add something unique to your application, then you should call your colleges and make sure they will accept an extra letter of rec. If a rec adds nothing new to your file, I probably wouldn’t send it because colleges start thinking, “Why does this student feel like he needs to add this recommendation? Doesn’t he think that his application is strong enough as it is?”

For most students, sending what is required is enough. And sending more than 4–5 total recommendations is not recommended because you do not want to annoy an admissions officer who already has over 1000 applications to review.

Finally, getting two recommendations from your academic teachers when a college only asks for one is generally acceptable unless a college specifically states not to send more. But again, I suggest you go onto a college’s

website and look at their requirements or call an admissions office directly and ask.

**55. How do students ask teachers for recommendations?**

You can ask them directly if they'll do it, but what I like to suggest instead is that students ask this question:

***"Mrs. Johnson, do you think that *you would be a good person to write my letter of recommendation?*"***

If there's any doubt, or if you're trying to decide between multiple teachers, this question can allow you to gauge how enthusiastic a teacher is, and it also allows them to politely decline if they wish.

**56. Is it important to interview? Are there different kinds of interviews?**

This is a complicated question, so I'm going to break it down in parts.

First, interviews aren't required for admission at the majority of schools. However, there are certain colleges that really like interviews. For example, the University of Denver likes to interview the majority of their freshman candidates. On the other hand, there are also other colleges that do not offer interviews at all, including the California State University System and the University of California System.

Having said all this, the interview is not what it used to be. In the 1940s and 1950s, the interview was more important; now the essays have really taken the place of the interview because not all students can interview. It would be unfair to give a lot of weight to an interview when not everyone can do it.

So, here's the good news: if you have a chance to interview, you should probably do it unless, of course, you have a giant dragon tattoo on your face. First of all, admissions people are not scary. I know they might seem scary, but they're really not. Once you get through your first interview, you will realize that it's not some guy with a clipboard saying, "So, Mr. Ruderman, explain to me what a grand jury indictment is and argue for its constitutionality." No, it is simply a "get to know you" conversation. It's also designed for the school to sell themselves to you so that you learn more about the college. The bottom line is don't worry.

**Important:** There are different kinds of interviews:

evaluative and informational. Evaluative interviews are ones where the notes that the interviewer takes get put in your admissions file and will become part of the evaluation process. An informational interview is just what it sounds like—it is an opportunity for you to learn about the school, and it's not part of the formal evaluation process.

Both types of interviews are useful because they show that you're interested in a college. For example, Oberlin has an informational interview, but if you were to either go to Oberlin personally or have an alumni interview where you live, you can demonstrate that you care enough about your application simply by showing up and asking good questions. Again, the notes won't get put into your file, but they will know that you had an interview.

Just remember that unless you strip naked and run around the office screaming, they're not going to judge you. However, the way to knock the interview out of the park is to really know *why* you want to attend. Like I mentioned earlier in this book, you should research specific programs and opportunities at every school on your list so that you can show an interviewer that you have taken the time to consider how your interests and the school's offerings match up. You don't need to know exactly what you want to do, but you do need to discuss what you're interested in and why you're interested in it. Most students do not do this, so if you take the time to do your homework, you will definitely stand out.

**57. What should students wear for their interviews?**

What you should definitely NOT wear for an interview: A tuxedo. A ripped T-shirt and jeans.

I suggest you dress for an interview like you would dress for church or temple or a nice dinner. For guys: a button-down collared shirt (it could be a polo or a long-sleeve shirt), decent pants like khakis, belt, shirt tucked in, and decent shoes (not the ripped Converse All-Stars that you've had since seventh grade). For girls: dress, skirt, or nice pants and top, decent shoes (not Ugg boots).

In other words, look presentable and show respect for the interview. You don't have to wear a suit and tie or sweater vest unless you know that all the students at the college wear that kind of outfit or you just feel comfortable wearing these items. The bottom line is, be who you are. If you like wearing funky clothes, then wear funky clothes, just let them be tasteful. You shouldn't have to change who you are to fit a school. You need to find a college that accepts you for who you are, but you also want to be respectful and show that you're taking it seriously.

**58. What if a student cannot visit a college in person?**

If you can't visit a college initially, it's totally fine. Of course it often helps to visit because you get a sense of the place, but many families cannot afford to fly all over the country.

However, if finances are an issue, **once you get accepted** you can call a university and say, "I'd really like to come visit to figure out whether I want to go there, but I need some financial help." Many times, a college will step up and help you pay to see the school. Now, they won't do this before you get in, and they cannot do it for everyone. But you would be amazed what colleges will do if they want you to come, so make sure you ask.

Just know that it is not absolutely necessary to see a college first in terms of how an admissions office evaluates you. In fact, the majority of students do not visit all their schools before they apply. What is important is that you learn as much as possible about a college before you apply by reading the guidebook, researching a college's website, and talking to current students or alumni.

**59. If a student has a B or C average, can he/she still go to a 4-year college?**

Yes! You absolutely can!

Now, I'm not saying there's anything wrong with the community college system; as I've talked about in another answers, community colleges and junior colleges have definite advantages. However, if you do want to go to a 4-year college, there are over three thousand colleges and universities in the country.

This means there are colleges that look for students with GPAs of 4.5; there are colleges that look for students with B averages; and there are colleges that look for students with C averages. One book I recommend for students with less than spectacular grades is called *One Hundred Colleges Where Average Students Can Excel*, by Joe Adler. This book is not readily available anymore, but you can get it on Amazon.

Remember that there are also colleges for students who want to focus on art or music or a number of other programs beyond academics. If you're an amazing photographer and you want to go a college with a strong photo program, for example, many art schools will first evaluate your talent (although some might still want to see your grades and test scores).

The key is to keep an open mind and do your research to find colleges that best fit your interests.



**60. How many schools should students apply to?**

It depends (surprise, surprise). For my students, I typically recommend they apply to between five and twelve colleges.

Why?

Because it's competitive out there, and by applying to five to twelve colleges, you're giving yourself choices. Let's say, for example, that you're applying to six schools. Ideally, your list would consist of two "reach" schools, two "likely or target" schools, and two "safety" schools, which I explain more about in the next answer.

I have had students apply to as few as three colleges when they know that they will definitely get into at least one of the schools on their list based on their grades and test scores.

On the flip side, applying to more than twelve colleges is typically a lot of work. I wouldn't want you to rush through the applications or sacrifice the quality of your essays just because you want to apply to twenty-two schools. I know that some students (and parents) fear they won't get in anywhere, so they think they have to apply to a large number of colleges. If, however, you do your homework, look at the statistics, and make sure you apply to a balanced list of schools like I discuss in the next answer, you do not need to apply to more than five to twelve.

**61. What does “creating a balanced list of colleges” mean, and why should students do it?**

Creating a balanced list of colleges means making sure your list includes colleges with different selectivity levels.

Huh?

In other words, you want to make sure you look into the stated admissions statistics for each of the colleges on your list and make sure they fall into at least three different categories: “Reaches,” “Likelies” or “Targets,” and “Safeties.”

A **REACH** college is one where your GPA and test scores fall *below* a college’s average accepted numbers.

A **LIKELY** or **TARGET** college is one where your GPA and test scores fall *within the range* of a college’s average accepted numbers.

A **SAFETY** college is one where your GPA and test scores fall *above* of a college’s average accepted numbers.

As I have mentioned throughout this book, there are many other factors that colleges consider when evaluating applicants, but it is important to make sure you have colleges on your list that fall into all three categories so that you can make sure you get into places you want to go.

Of course, this means that you must find safety schools that *you would actually want to attend*. This is often the most difficult part about making a list. Picking schools that you know you will get into but ones you have done no research on or ones you know deep down you do not want to go to means you have not found true safety schools.

For more details on how to research the statistics, please see answer #32.

## 62. What are the Common Application and the Universal College Application?

The Common Application or “Common App” is one that over five hundred colleges and universities have agreed to accept.

This means you fill out one application, select the schools you want to apply to, and then submit the one application to all your schools without doing any additional work. This sounds great, right?

The Universal College Application is essentially the same thing, except only 37 colleges and universities accept it. Having said this, there are some colleges that take the Universal App and not the Common App, so you’ll want to check out both.

Here’s the trick. A lot of students don’t realize that many colleges also require a Common App supplement. This is an additional section of the Common App that colleges can individualize in order to ask specific questions and **require additional essays**.

Yay.

For example, University of Pennsylvania requires that you complete an additional essay that states why you want to attend Penn. Stanford requires three additional short essay answers.

So, make sure you check all of your schools when you’re applying with the Common App so you will know what to do well before the deadlines.

Remember, though, there are over three thousand colleges and universities in this country, which means that there are a lot of schools that don’t take the Common App or the Universal App. Instead, they have their own

applications, which have different essays and different deadlines. Many state schools, such as University of Wisconsin, University of Arizona, University of Indiana, University of Oregon, all the Cal State Universities, and the University of California system (just to name a few), use their own apps.

Once you get your list of colleges together, go on the Common App and search for each of your schools. If one doesn't show up, you will most likely have to go to that school's website and fill out the application online.

**63. How do students find out if a college accepts the Common or Universal App?**

The easiest thing is to do go to **www.commonapp.org** or **www.universalcollegeapp.com** and click on the member schools link on each of their homepages. It's pretty much as simple as that.

**64. What do students have to do if a college has its own application?**

If a college has its own application, usually you have the choice of filling it out online or printing it out and sending it in via snail mail. Most colleges prefer online submission, but you can still typically choose either one.

If you have colleges that require their own apps, I suggest having a single place where you keep all the passwords so you don't forget them.

I also recommend that you set up an email address just for college stuff that you regularly check. If something is missing in a school's application, the college will typically let you know via email.

Finally, when you finish an application, I suggest you print it, and/or save a copy on your computer. This way, in case anything goes wrong, you will have a copy that you can then send to the school without having to fill it out all over again.

**65. Do colleges look at Facebook?**

Most colleges say they don't, but the practice is becoming more widespread (at last count, 25% of colleges say they will sometimes look at social media to see what they can find out about their applicants). There are many conspiracy theories about what colleges can see and how they can see it, but the bottom line is that, with so many pictures being posted and tagged, you want to be smart about your social media presence.

Before you apply, you should do more than just change your Facebook name; you should take down any objectionable material and run a search on yourself to see what you can find so you can get anything sketchy taken down too.

This does not mean you have to quit Twitter and dump your Facebook account. You just need to be aware that the Internet is a big place, and you probably don't want colleges seeing that picture of you standing on a table wearing a Speedo from last weekend.

**66. Do colleges care about students' e-mail addresses?**

Here's a true story:

A few years ago, a parent who had seen me give a workshop called me and asked me to talk to her son about his email address.

Many students still have email addresses like sparklepony13@aol.com that they made when they were 9. This is not a big deal, although I would think you might want to change it just because you're not 9 anymore.

So, I got the boy on the phone and asked him, "So what's your email address," thinking it would be something cutesy.

"AssMan37@aol.com," he replied casually, like he didn't see any problem with it.

"Uh, yeah, you're gonna want to get a new address," I told him.

Truthfully, a college admissions person might not even notice your email address, but if you have an account that could be deemed objectionable by anyone (or one you would be embarrassed to give your grandma), you probably want to change it so you don't give off the wrong first impression.



**67. Do colleges verify everything students put down on their applications?**

If you are a senior currently filling out applications, you might be wondering, “Should I put down two hours or three hours for that activity? What if I get caught?”

I typically suggest NOT lying on the application at all, because if you were to get caught, you would be automatically rejected. However, if you round up the hours on an activity, it is not a big deal; you just have to be careful about what you do put down on an app.

For example, when you type in your senior year classes, it means you are committing to take those classes. This means that you can’t drop Economics second semester just because it sucks and you hope a college doesn’t notice. Colleges get your final transcripts, and they will notice if you didn’t do what you stated on the application.

Most of the time, colleges don’t have the resources to fact check every application. What some colleges do, however, is run a random verification process. This means they choose random students to verify everything on that application. I read about a story in the Wall Street Journal, for example, about a high school counselor who was falsifying a bunch of clubs and activities to make his students look better. But then one of his student’s applications got verified, and that college counselor got fired.

In the end, beefing up your application is not worth risking a rejection. Thus, if you spent ten hours per week on your school’s yearbook, you probably don’t want to say that you spent thirty.

**68. Is it better to be well-rounded or passionate about one thing?**

It depends.

Each college has a different type of student that they're looking for, and a lot of them have different procedures they use in the evaluation process. So, instead of trying to do things to *look good* for college, my general advice is to do activities that you're *interested in* and then find ways of building on those interests.

If you're taking photography in school and you really like it, maybe you can take pictures for the yearbook or submit your photos to a local newspaper or online publication and see if they might want to use them. You could also take outside photography classes or an online course on how to use Photoshop.

If, on the other hand, you hate an activity, you don't have to keep doing it simply because it "looks good" on college applications. (See answer #35 for more on this.)

There are students, myself included, that didn't find a cure for some disease. I had lots of different interests, so I played sports, competed in mock trial, and was on student council. You don't have to do all or any of these things, but for students who are well rounded, you don't have to worry. However, try to stay away from being a student who does all kinds of clubs in which you don't actually do anything other than meet once a week and eat pizza.

If you have something you like, build on it and be consistent, but don't stress too much about what's going to look better than something else. Do things you enjoy.

**69. Do teachers submit recommendations on paper or online?**

Three to four years ago, most recommendations written by teachers, counselors, and other people were usually submitted on paper. Now most colleges have systems where they can be submitted online.

If you have a teacher that only wants to submit a paper recommendation, this means that you will have to make a packet, which will include all the different recommendation forms for the schools you are applying to. Not all colleges have recommendation forms, but most of them do. (For those that don't, your teacher just needs to send a letter.) Your packet will also include envelopes that are addressed to each of your colleges, have stamps in the upper right hand corner, and have your high school's return address in the upper left hand corner.

You will give the forms and the envelopes to the teacher, who will then fill out the forms, write the letters, stick them in the envelopes, and mail it all for you.

If you are using the Common Application, you can typically invite your recommenders through the Common App so that they can submit electronically. For high schools that use Naviance Family Connection, you will simply invite your teachers on the "Colleges I am applying to" section. Know, however, that not all colleges accept electronic submissions from Naviance (sigh), so make sure you check with your counselor that all the schools on your list are being handled correctly. You can also go to this link to see which colleges accept recs/transcripts from Naviance: [http://exchange.parchment.com/hp2/general/edocs\\_destinations.jsps](http://exchange.parchment.com/hp2/general/edocs_destinations.jsps)

**70. What is the CEEB code?**

You'll see applications ask for your school's CEEB (or College Board) code a lot of the time. Sometimes the apps will have a search button to allow you to find this code, but sometimes you have to put it in yourself.

The CEEB code is a 5-digit code that's created by our friends at The College Board, the same people who make the SAT. They have a code for each high school in the country. If you need your CEEB code, you can either ask your high school counselor or go to this link:

**<http://sat.collegeboard.org/register/sat-code-search>**

Then select "High Schools" from the drop down menu, and put in your city and state.

### **71. What if students can't afford the application fees?**

College applications can be expensive. Some are free, while others can cost between \$35–90 *each*.

If your family needs financial help in order to pay for the application fees, there are two options:

1. Apply for a NACAC fee waiver. This organization has a form to fill out to determine eligibility, but if you qualify you will get a fee waiver you can enter into applications that will let you apply for free. For more information, go to this link:

**<http://www.nacacnet.org/studentinfo/feewaiver/Pages/default.aspx>**

2. The College Board also has a fee waiver program that is good for up to 4 college applications. For more information on this program, go to this link:

**<http://professionals.collegeboard.com/guidance/applications/fee-waivers>**

The waivers will be based on annual family income guidelines that will depend on family size. Most of the time, colleges will also verify the family income when a family applies for financial aid using the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid).

You can also talk to your high school counselor for additional options.

**72. What should students put in the “Additional Information” section of a college application?**

Many college applications have an “Additional Information” section where you can provide explanations and extra details to help admissions officers understand more about the context of your application.

Typically this means that you can explain things such as why your grades suddenly went up or down (say you discovered a learning disability, there was death in your family, you got mono, etc.) or any other important contextual information that will give a college insight into your application.

Most colleges don’t want you to use this space to include additional essays or have your mom write a recommendation about how wonderful you are. Most students won’t put anything in this box, and that’s okay too.

Some applications also allow you to put in additional activities and awards that you might not have been able to fit in the rest of the application. This does not mean you should start listing everything you have done since you were 3 years old; it is just an overflow box for students that have done a lot of extracurricular activities during high school.

The important thing is to pay attention to the instructions. If a college states: DO NOT put in additional activities, then please do not do so; it makes admissions officers upset.

If you have any questions about what you can and cannot put in a specific college’s application box, call the admissions department and ask, especially if you have unique circumstances. They are truly there to help.

**73. How do students let colleges know about special circumstances?**

This answer is related to the last answer.

Let's say that you got the chicken pox your sophomore year and you missed 6 weeks of school. (I missed three weeks of school in tenth grade, by the way, and getting the chicken pox sucks.) Where can you describe something like this? Or how can you explain why you got that C- in your biology class even though all your other grades are A's and B's?

Or how do you explain that you got diagnosed with a learning disability only halfway through high school, and you have since improved your grades because you learned to how to study better?

Like I mentioned in the last answer, many applications have a special section designed for you to explain yourself, but other colleges do not have this option. For those schools, I suggest you write a letter directly to a college's admissions office and explain your situation.

The reason I wrote this additional answer is because I really want to advocate for you to communicate with the colleges on your list. Many families are not aware that admissions offices have full-time staff members who not only review applications but also answer questions. These are typically nice people who want to help you.

This doesn't mean that you should call the offices everyday with a different question or simply call and ask, "Will my son get in?" But asking how to describe a circumstance or how to complete a part of an application is fine.

**74. What happens if a student realizes he or she has made a mistake after the application has been submitted?**

Did you just hit submit on the application and realize you made a mistake? Did you forget to fill out half the application?! Did you *spelled* your name wrong? What do you do?

Don't panic.

It's just going to take a little work. You need to immediately contact that college's admission office. I mean, actually pick up the phone and give them a call rather than just send an email (although you should do this too). Ask the admissions office what you should do.

They will probably have you do one of the following: start a new application and re-send it, have you tell them on phone what the change is, or send an email/letter documenting the exact changes you need to make.

Admissions offices also understand that people make mistakes. You'd be amazed at the number of mistakes students make on their apps each year. So, if it's a typo, I wouldn't worry about calling; if you pasted in the wrong version of an essay or forgot to put in your classes, contact them immediately.

With the Common Application, it's trickier, but it depends on how you used it. The new Common App (as of 2013) makes you send the application to each college individually (as opposed to the previous version where you could send it to all the colleges at once). This means that if you made a mistake in sending the app to one college, you can fix the error before you send it to the next.

If, however, you realized after you submitted the



Common App to all your schools that you accidentally forgot 8 of your activities, then you will have to contact each school individually and ask them how to fix the problem.

I also suggest TRIPLE-CHECKING your apps BEFORE you hit SUBMIT. We all make mistakes when we're editing our own work, so have one of your parents or somebody else look at the application beforehand so he or she can catch the mistakes you might have missed.

As a final VERY IMPORTANT NOTE: many colleges ask the "Why do you want to attend our school?" question in an essay prompt. Many students write one "why" essay and then recycle or reuse it as a template for their other colleges that ask a similar question. Please make sure that if you write a "Why Tufts" essay, you change all the mentions of the word "Tufts" to the names of the other schools for which you are preparing another why essay. Also make sure that each why essay is relevant. Emory University always tells the story of how they got a "why" essay answer that stated, "I can't wait to watch football games." Emory doesn't have a football team, so they will pretty much automatically reject you if they see that mistake. So please make sure somebody looks at all your stuff before you send it.

**75. What is a mid-year report?**

You might see something on a college application called a mid-year report, or a mid-year school report.

This is a form that some colleges want you to give to your high school counselor that he or she will use to send in your first semester senior grades.

**Yes, most colleges want to see your 1<sup>st</sup> semester senior grades.** Other colleges don't have this form, and your high school counselor should know how all of this works. Some high schools use Naviance Family Connection or another system to submit transcripts electronically, but other high schools still send in paper transcripts, while some colleges require paper transcripts.

Ask your high school counselor and check all of your colleges' requirements to make sure that you are doing everything properly.

**76. Should students include information from elementary school or middle school?**

Remember that ribbon you won for swimming in 5<sup>th</sup> grade? What about that arts and crafts fair where you won 2<sup>nd</sup> place? Sorry moms—you don't have to whip out that ol' shoebox at this point. Colleges only want to see a student's activities and awards from high school.

There are some exceptions to this rule. If you won a major science prize in 8<sup>th</sup> grade (like a national award), you can put that down in the additional information section (or have one of your recommenders mention it). If you've been playing violin since you were 4 and you've played all through high school, then on your activities list where you write "violin," you can write that you've been playing since you were 4.

But the fact that you were 8<sup>th</sup> grade president? Sorry. Colleges only want to see what you did in 9<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> grade.

**77. Do students need to create a resume?**

A resume is simply a list of activities and the time commitments that you spent doing those activities. It is sometimes also called a “brag sheet” or an “activities list.”

These terms can get confusing because a college resume usually doesn’t look like a resume you would create for a job, and some high schools call their junior/senior questionnaire a “brag sheet,” even though they still want an additional “activities list.”

The bottom line is that I have my students make a single document where they list all their activities and awards. It is formatted like this:

Bass, Piano, Harmonica, Drums

Grades 9, 10, 11, 12

10 hours per week, 40 weeks per year

Been playing guitar from age 6; took lessons in piano, drums, and guitar; learned other instruments on own

The reason you should format each activity like the example above is because it mirrors the way most applications want you to put in your activities. In other words, there will typically be check boxes for the grades in which you participated, a blank for number of hours per week and weeks per year, and a long box for a short description of the activity.

I suggest that both parents and students sit down together and go through all of the student’s activities from high school.

**Students**—I know you may not want to do this, but your mom or dad can probably remember things that you

can't.

**Parents**—you can start off erring on the side of putting every single thing down, but realize that most college applications limit the activities to 5–10 and do not allow more than a short description. Therefore, you and your student may have to prioritize the activities and be succinct in the descriptions.

For awards, you should know that most students do not have any awards to list. If you won the National Merit Scholarship, or you made the Commendation or Semi-Final status, or if you were part of your school's honor society, or even if you made the Dean's list, you can put it down. You can put down any art awards you won or any competitions you did well in. If your school does not give any awards, you can also make a note of this on the application in the appropriate box if it will let you. Regardless, don't worry if you don't have any awards.

I stated this in a previous answer but it is worth repeating. Know that a typical school year is 33 weeks long. This means that if you're participating in a sport, your season is usually 10–13 weeks long.

Also, if you're doing something all year (playing an instrument, for example), you're probably not doing it every single week of the year for 52 weeks; maybe you just want to list 45 weeks or whatever time period is accurate.

In terms of the hours that you spend, do your best to estimate. If you sing in the choir, for example, then you might be singing every day as part of the school program, you might have concerts, and you might have caroling in the winter—how do you estimate how much time you spend overall? Let's say that you sing for an hour a school day and you have half-day concerts once every month.

That's five hours per week plus a 4 hour concert every 4 weeks or 1 extra hour per week for a total of 6 hours per week. Does that make sense?

Just do your best to estimate.

The only thing you want to watch out for is rounding your hours up so much that it would be physically impossible in a 24-hour day to complete them all. Just be honest, and do your best to estimate.

By making a document with all your activities, you will have a template from which you can copy and paste the details into multiple applications, and you can print out a hard copy to give to a recommender if he or she requests it.

**ESSAYS****78. How important are the essays?**

Most my students' least favorite part of the application process is writing the essays.

Why?

The essays can be very important in an application because they allow students to show a more personal side of themselves apart from the rest of the application. Admissions officers don't know your personality, your values, or your passions. The essays, therefore, allow you to add some of what truly makes you *you*.

This is a really good thing, but it also means that students feel a lot of pressure to have "amazing" essays, so they put them off, not wanting to deal with the stress. And some students start writing an essay but erase the first sentence over and over again, thinking that everything they write down is a stupid idea.

The reality is this: college admissions essays are actually easy to write. No, seriously. In the next few answers, I will give you simple strategies that I guarantee will help your essays stand out from the rest (and by "rest" I mean the majority of students, who do not know what I am about to suggest). But even more importantly, you should understand that a college admissions essay doesn't need to make an admissions officer cry. It doesn't need to be a great work of art. And it doesn't need to describe *everything* about you. As you will soon see, a great college admissions essay simply needs to discuss one personal thing about you that the admissions officers wouldn't know otherwise. And the way to do this is...

Well, you'll just need to keep reading won't you?

**79. What does the typical college admissions essay question ask? (And what is the first key to answering it?)**

There are several different types of college admissions essays, but at the end of the day, they're all asking generally the same thing:

Who are you?

Like I mentioned in the last answer, admissions officers want to know something about you that they do not know from the rest of your application. It's not about trying to make a list of everything you've ever done. It's not trying to present the greatest student in the world in your essay. It's about showing a side of yourself that everyone may not know about you, the side of you that is *authentic*. Being honest is one of the best things you can do in a college admissions essay, because most students don't write honestly; instead they write to impress.

The key to writing authentically and making your essay truly unique is to **tell a story**.

If you just got back from Africa and I asked, "Dude, how was the trip?" (That is, if I were still in high school in 1989.) You might say something like:

"Well, I learned a bunch of stuff, and I saw some animals and that was really cool, and I learned a lot about myself because it was a rugged environment and I had to overcome some stuff, and the people were really amazing,"

This answer would not be nearly as interesting as something like:



“The second day we were in Kenya, all my family members were riding in this yellow beat-up Range Rover type vehicle. We were driving down this dirt path when it started to rain, which means the road got really muddy, and we started sliding around. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, a rhino comes and hits the side of our SUV! We flipped upside-down and everyone’s screaming...”

My point is that people like stories. You obviously don’t need a story like the one above, but an anecdote hooks a reader into your essay because you end up ***showing not telling*** what you want to say (yes, I know—you have heard this from every English teacher you’ve ever had).

Once you have written an anecdote, then you can share why the story was important to you or how is it an example of why you are passionate about a particular subject or how you overcame the obstacle that you mentioned in the anecdote or how you have grown since the story happened.

Another thing that you can do is take a series of little stories and link them together around a common theme to show different sides of yourself.

I will show you an example of this in the next answer. Just know that if you take nothing else but this advice about starting with a story or a series of stories, your essay will already be off to an amazing start because most students write their college admissions essays like analytical papers they are used to writing in English. *Trust me on this*, I have read thousands and thousands of admissions essays from students all over the country. You. Will. Be. Okay.

**80. What is the most important thing that admissions people look for in the essay?**

Let me start this answer by describing your audience. An admissions officer is typically between 23–35 years old. They are given between 1000–2000 applications to read each year, which means they hunker down and start reading essay after essay for weeks on end.

Understand then, that the people are young, they understand what teenagers go through, and they often have to read the same types of essays over and over and over again. You can see then why writing a unique true story about yourself/your life can help you stand out because no one else is going to tell a story exactly like you would.

Thus, when I sit down to help a student brainstorm ideas, I often ask him or her a list of questions that are designed to get that student to tell me a series of stories from which I will simply choose one and make him or her start writing.

Several years ago, I had a student who came to me and said, “My life is boring; I have nothing to write about. I can’t come up with anything that will stand out.”

Everybody says this.

So, as one brainstorming activity, I had her make a list of activities—things she simply liked to do, not something she thought was impressive.

She made a list of activities.

I then said, “Can you tell me a story about any one of them?”

She said, “No.”

I said, "Ok, I'm just going to pick one then. Let's pick.... softball. Can you choose a time in your life where something happened to you while playing softball."

"No," she said again.

"Try." I replied.

She thought for a few seconds and said, "Well, there was the time that I fell on the ball."

I'm like, "Sorry? What?"

She said, "Yeah, so when I was 5 or 6, my dad took me to my first softball game. And I knew that I was in trouble because he had bought me a red Fisher-Price plastic glove and red Fisher-Price plastic shoes, and when I got there, all the other girls had leather gloves and scuffed-up leather shoes. My coach put me in the outfield in the first inning, and I had no idea what I was doing." (Now understand that this girl was about 5'2 when she was 17, so at age 5, she was pretty small.)

She continued, "So I am standing in the outfield, and the second batter comes up. The girl hits a line drive right in my direction. As I am freaking out, all I can think of is what my coach said to me, "Don't let the ball get past you!" Not knowing what to do, I just sort of fell down on top of the ball and lay there."

"Great!" I responded and laughed at the same time. "That's a good story. Tell me another one."

She thought again and replied, "So there was the time when I came home with a black eye."

"Tell me." I said smiling, wondering what she was going to say next.

"All right, well I used to love to play catch with my dad, so we would go to the park in the afternoons after school to play catch. But it would get dark, and I would

insist on staying because I just loved playing catch so much. Well, a couple of times, I missed the ball altogether, and it hit me right in the face. So when I went home one night, my mom took one look at me and yelled, 'What happened to you?!' But I didn't even care because I just liked spending time with my dad."

At that point I said, "Ok, wait a minute, hold on. You told me last week that you're not playing softball this year. Why?"

She's sad, "Oh it's stupid; I don't want to tell you."

I just looked at her.

Finally, she went on, "All right, it was one of those situations where I was the co-captain, and it was the 9<sup>th</sup> inning. If my team won, we would go to the playoffs. If we lost, our season would be over. There was a girl from my team on 2<sup>nd</sup> base, but there were also two outs. If I could drive home the run, we would win and go to the playoffs. I also knew that the girl behind me couldn't hit very well, so I knew I couldn't walk. I was standing at the plate saying to myself, 'I've got to get a hit, I've got to get a hit.' I struck out. We lost the game. We didn't go to playoffs. Afterwards I thought about it, and I realized that I wasn't playing softball because I loved it anymore; I was playing only because I was supposed to—because it looked good. Honestly, I would much rather practice cello because that's what I really want to do, so I decided to quit softball."

I said, "You just wrote the majority of your personal statement" (AKA – the main college admissions essay).

"What do you mean?" she questioned.

"Just write down those 3 anecdotes," I replied, "They tell me everything I need to know about you in a personal statement, and they are totally memorable."

They're also true, and no one else is going to write an essay with stories like those. The stories show different aspects of your personality, they show that you have a sense of humor, they hint at the relationship with your dad, they give visual images, and they show that when you have a passion for something, you're going to do it because you love it, not because you have to do it. And it explains why you don't list softball in your activities for your senior year."

Now was this essay the greatest college admissions essay I have ever seen. Probably not. But it did all the things I mentioned, and the girl went to Tufts. It is just one example of how to write a personal statement using a series of anecdotes.

I see essays every year that start off something like this: "I like baseball because it's fun and because I have good camaraderie with my other teammates." It's not that this is not all true; it's just written thousands of times by different students.

What's that you say? You want another example of how to use a single anecdote to write a college admissions essay? I guess the easiest example I could give would be to tell what I wrote about for my own personal statement.

Do any of you play sports out there? Is your coach nice to you and your teammates? Yeah, mine wasn't either.

To make a longer story short, here's the gist:

It was May of my junior year, and AP tests were right around the corner. I had just finished swimming in league finals so the sports year was essentially over. My water polo coach, however, decided we would start practicing for the following year.

One day before practice, I asked him if I could get

out of practice early to go study for the upcoming AP U.S. History exam, since I didn't have a car at the time, and I needed to get a ride home. We obviously weren't going to be playing any games soon, so this didn't seem like a totally unreasonable request.

My coach said he would think about it.

I went to go get changed. (Yes, I had to wear a speedo—no jokes please.) My coach then brought the whole team onto the pool deck and proceeded to insult me in front of them for a good 20 minutes straight. He said I was a loser; no one should be friends with me; I shouldn't have recently won Senior Class President; and I was basically a huge piece of crap (except he didn't say crap). It was really much worse than I am writing here. Then he made us swim an insane amount of laps.

As soon as we were done, he pointed at me and said, "Ruderman! Get your crap (he didn't say crap) and get out of here. You're off the team."

Everyone knew my coach had a temper—after all, he did break dozens of Ray Ban sunglasses during a season by throwing them on the ground. So even though I was pretty upset, I let it go, instead choosing to show up the next day to see what would happen. I got in the water without any word from him, but then my girlfriend walked out of the gym, and the coach shouted at her to stop for a minute. He then spent several minutes yelling to her about what a loser I was, at which point he pointed to me again and told me to get the hell out of there.

That night, I told my dad what had happened. My dad was big guy (with a serious moustache), and he didn't take guff from anyone. He was ready to go down to the school right then. I told him no. One, I knew my dad and

coach would probably get into a fistfight. Two, I realized that this wouldn't solve anything—I had to deal with it personally. And while I considered just taking a baseball bat to school the next day, I decided instead that I would be the mature one and not lower myself to yelling insults at my coach.

I met him at the beginning of practice and asked him if he had a couple of minutes. We sat down at the orange lunch tables, and I first thanked him for what he had done for me over the years, but then said I thought it would be best if I didn't play for him my senior year. He calmly said he understood my decision, shook my hand, and we parted ways. I was done right?

Wrong.

My coach gave me an F in water polo. He then went around to all my teachers and tried to convince them that I was a bad kid. My college counselor called me into her office and asked me, "Why is your coach talking about you behind your back, when the faculty just voted you the top junior in your class?"

I had no idea.

Then, a couple of days later, during an initial student government meeting, I asked a question to my new ASB teacher.

"You have an attitude problem," he scolded, as I sat there dumbstruck. I had barely even said anything!

I then realized that this teacher was a good friend of my water polo coach. It took me 3 months of my senior year to convince this teacher that I could be relied upon, and he eventually wrote me one of my letters of recommendation.

At the end of my writing this story, I explained what

I learned, which included the sentence: “Just because a person is an adult doesn’t make him right.”

If you look at this anecdote again, you might be able to learn some things about me. I will let you figure out what. The point is that simply through the telling of the story, you were hopefully able to see how I handled a challenging situation and discovered some traits I possessed. You don’t learn everything about me and my interests, but that’s okay—because the story shows enough to make an impression. .

I actually used this story as the basis of my personal statement for Stanford, so perhaps I should thank my coach for helping me out.

But I’m not going to.



**81. How do students come up with ideas for their essays?**

One exercise I use in my workshops is to have students create a list of activities and tell me a story about something that happened with one of those.

Another is to describe any failures that you might have had in your life. A failure can be described as a traditional “failure”—something you tried to accomplish but did not succeed in the way you thought OR it can be an expectation you had that changed. For example, you thought a person would behave one way but he behaved differently, or you expected a situation would turn out a certain way, but it ended up being very different.

If you look at the 5 new Common Application essay questions, for example, you will notice something similar:

1. Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?
3. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?
4. Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?
5. Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from

childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

☑All of these questions are basically asking you to tell a story about something that happened to you and 3 questions are basically asking you to describe some kind of conflict you had to face. Many of the best personal statements have conflict in them because it is through having to deal with conflicts that our character is revealed. Watch just about any movie or TV show and you will notice that the main character always has to face some sort of conflict.

So, when thinking about what kind of story you want to tell, it does not need to be something huge or absolutely life changing; sometimes everyday conflicts or challenges teach a lot about ourselves.

One of the best things I can recommend is to *start writing*. Forget about grammar or if you think something is “good” or if you have an idea completely planned out. I often give my students a piece of paper, ask them a broad question, such as “Who are you?” and make them write for 10 minutes. They hate it, but you would be amazed how many essays I have pulled out of this brainstorming activity.

Finally, I always have my students make 2 lists. The first is a list of qualities they value in their friends. Do you like your friends to be adventurous, caring, trustworthy, funny, smart?

The second is a list of qualities they think they possess. I would argue that the second list will be very similar to the first. You often value in others what you like about yourself. Students often have a much easier time describing their friends than describing themselves.

Once you have a list of traits or characteristics, you'll want to think about which ones you want an admissions officer to know about you. If you wrote down trustworthy, for example, could you tell a story that illustrates this trait? Or would any of the stories you brainstormed allow you to show this side of yourself? By keeping your qualities in mind when you write, you will be able to convey a true picture of who you really are in your essay or essays.

Okay, this is the last thing. I promise. Please make sure that when you are telling a story, *be as specific as possible*. I mean two things by this:

1. Instead of trying to describe an entire year, month, week, or even day—try describing 5 minutes. For example, if you wanted to tell a story about your experience at camp or on your sports team or being a part of technical theater, do not try to describe everything you do. Instead, pick one instance (the time that everything went wrong at the end of Act 1 of *Grease*, for example), and describe those few minutes about what happened and how you responded.

2. Use concrete details. Instead of writing, "I love cereal," it is more engaging to write how you love seven day old Frosted Flakes that have been sitting open in the sun on your kitchen counter. Details simply make an essay more visual and thus more relatable to the reader.

And if you truly can't come up with anything, ask your parents or friends for examples of stories you could tell. You might be surprised what they come up with.

**82. How long do essays need to be?**

Typically, most colleges ask for the main personal statement to be 500–650 words long. The other common length of supplement or short answers is 250 words, although colleges do ask for different lengths on occasion.

A 650-word essay that is formatted single-spaced, 12-point, Times New Roman, with 1-inch margins should take up one single page.

However, just because a school gives you 650 words (which, by the way, is the new maximum word count for the Common App essay questions) doesn't mean you have to use all 650 words. Some of the best essays are the most concise; in fact, one of my favorites of all time was 420 words.

What I suggest you do is gather all of your essay questions on one Word or Pages document with all of your word limits next to each question so you know exactly what you have to do before you start writing.

### 83. Can students go over the word limit?

Never!

Kidding.

Sometimes you can and sometimes you can't. Some applications have a box into which you have to copy and paste an essay. Typically those boxes will cut the essay off, so if it says 1,000 characters or 50 words, it won't let you go past that.

There are other applications that say "maximum: 500 words," but they allow you to upload the essay as a document. Now, if you go 510 or 520, there's not going to be somebody counting every word, and it's going to be fine. That doesn't mean, however, that you should send them 700 or 750 or even 600 or 650 words. Practice getting your essay down to fit in the requirements; otherwise, you run the risk of annoying them.

There are some applications that list an *approximate* word count. Does that mean that you can go over? You probably can, but only if you absolutely need to squeeze something important in. Good writing can often be cut down to the essence of what you want to say. A good editor can help you do this.

The bottom line is that you shouldn't worry about going over a word limit too much, but never send a college a 6-page essay no matter how amazing you think your writing is; it will only hurt your chances.

**84. How many essays do students need for the Common Application?**

With the new Common Application that was released in August of 2013, there is only one essay question required. You have 5 prompts that you can choose from (see answer #81).

BUT what you have to understand about the Common Application is that many colleges will **also require a supplement**. Some schools only want extra personal information such as whether your parents went to that college, etc., but others want additional essays.

This is also true for colleges that do not take the Common App. The University of Wisconsin app, for example, has 3 essays—the main personal statement, a short paragraph about how you chose your most meaningful activity, and an essay asking you to write about the programs at Wisconsin you are interested in pursuing. If you only look under the “essay” section of Wisconsin’s app, you might think there was only one question, but as you go through the entire thing, the two other questions show up. The point is that when you are gathering all your essay questions together, make sure you look at the entire application so you do not get surprised at the last moment.

**85. Is there a maximum length for the Common Application main essay?**

The new Common App instructions say the essay should be over 250 words, but a maximum of 650 words.

The Common App no longer allows you to upload your personal statement; you now have to paste it into a text box. This means that you cannot squeeze in more than 650 words no matter how hard you try.

**86. Can students use the same essay for multiple schools?**

Let's talk about every student's favorite concept of **recycling**. Recycling is when you take an essay for one college, and you make it work for another college. Yes, this means less work. Yes, you can absolutely do this. **BUT** you have to be careful.

Let's say you wrote about the time you lost the ASB election for your personal statement, and you want to make it work for another question that asks you to describe a time you faced an ethical dilemma. Well, this isn't going to work, because an ethical dilemma means that you actually had to make a moral choice and decide one way or the other—so your story about the election probably does not answer the question.

You have to be honest with yourself. I know that during your senior year, you've got a ton of work and extracurriculars; at some point in the application process, you won't want to write any more essays, so you'll try to take shortcuts. Just make sure that the essay you're using actually answers the question.

The good news is that sometimes you don't have to write a whole new essay. Sometimes you can tweak one to make it work for a certain question; this usually involves changing the introduction or the conclusion. For example, let's say that you've written an essay about student council for a question that asked you to describe an extracurricular activity. Then you come across a different essay question that says, "Describe the world that you come from."

A lot of students think "the world that I come" means your family, but you can be creative with a lot of



these questions. In this example, you could talk about the world of ASB and how you've been in it for X number of years and how that's influenced you. You would just need to make sure that you use the word "world" somewhere in the essay, usually in the introduction or the conclusion, so you make sure you are addressing the question.

**WARNING:** Again, I am repeating something I wrote about already because it is so important. There is another type of essay for which you have to be really careful. This is the "why" or "why do you want to go to X college" essay that students often recycle. In a "why" essay you state what you're interested in (say business), why you're interested in it (you had an internship that introduced you to the business world), and what this college specifically offers that matches up to this interest (business courses, clubs, etc.)

You may be tempted to take that essay and recycle it for other colleges. This is fine, but you **need to make sure you change the name of the college throughout the essay**. Secondly, you have to make sure you change all the courses and programs so that they actually exist at the new school. If a school catches that you're using a recycled "why" essay (let's say you write that you can't wait to see a be in the band when the school doesn't have a band), a lot of admissions officers will automatically reject you.

**87. Who should students ask to edit their essays?**

Ok, so there's a saying that "too many cooks in the kitchen spoil the broth."

That means that if you give your essay to 4 different people, you'll get 4 different opinions on it. Thus, it is up to you to decide which suggestions you will use and which ones you won't.

Typically, I like students to get at least 2 people to read the essays, one of whom should be good at proofreading and grammar.

That's grammar.

I like English teachers for editing the grammar part, but you should know that some English teachers are so used to reading analytical essays about literature, they might not appreciate your storytelling as much as an admissions officer. If your English teacher doesn't like your essay, but your mom and your guidance counselor do, you will again need to make the decision on which way you want to go.

On the other hand, if you give your essay to 4 different people, and they all think a certain part doesn't work, then it's probably something you want to pay attention to.

If you have a really good friend, he or she can peer-edit your essay, but make sure your friend is willing to be honest with you.

A note for parents: if you remember how stressful these essays were when you wrote them, you will understand why I suggest 2 things:

1. Try to find positives in your child's essay no matter how few there might be. Of course you can be

critical; I have just seen too many parents start ripping up an essay right out of the gate, and it crushes a student to the point that nothing he or she writes after that will seem any good to him or her.

2. Please don't try to re-write the essay yourselves, because any admissions rep can very clearly see when a 17-year-old has written an essay and when a 45-year-old has written an essay. The language is just simply different. Yes, you can edit. Yes, you can fix sentences, but please refrain from re-writing the whole thing unless you're really good at writing as a 17-year-old. Actually, don't even do that, because it should really come from your child.

Like always, I would never tell a parent how to parent; these are just suggestions based on what I have seen over the years.

**88. How do students write what is known as the “Activity Essay”?**

There is an essay question on many applications that asks you to write about an activity you enjoy or one that is meaningful. Typically, the word count ranges from 100–250 words.

Like you might suspect, I’m going to suggest that you start off with a story that puts the reader inside your world. Write 2 or 3 sentences showing what it’s like to participate in that sport, be an actor, or volunteer at camp, etc. And like I wrote before, the best way to tell a story—especially for short essay like this—is to focus on a very specific event: a 30-second to 5-minute snippet or interaction you had with someone. Remember that time when you went on a 20-mile hike and had that crazy conversation with the strange guy about comic book characters? No? I’d bet you want to read more though, huh?

Once you write the little anecdote, you can then write why that activity is important to you, or what the activity does for you. Does it give you an opportunity to express yourself? Does it allow you to see the world in a new way?

The trick is that you’ve only got around 3–4 sentences of the story part and 3–4 sentences for the meaning part. What I normally have students do is write something longer and then cut it down. This way you don’t have to worry about word count initially, and then you can work with a good editor to get it down to the one paragraph of really good material.

**89. How do students write a “Why do you want to go to this college?” essay?**

What I’m going to write here is going to significantly increase your chances of getting into college.

I’ve said it before in this book: *The key to getting into college and writing a great “why” essay is to research the schools on your list.* You can stand out by being really specific.

Look at the majors; look at the academic opportunities; look at the study abroad programs; look at the clubs; look at the research opportunities. Copy and paste anything you find interesting online into a Word or Pages document.

Then, when you write the “why” essay, you should break it up into 2 parts:

1. Write about an interest (it could be academic or extracurricular). State how you came to be interested in it and what about it interests you specifically.
2. State what a college has that matches that interest and what you would like to potentially do with it down the road.

Here are 2 example paragraphs to illustrate:

**Part 1**

My dad runs an advertising agency, and he often discusses the deals he makes with his clients and the negotiations he has with them on a daily basis. These stories initially got me intrigued about the business world, but it was not until I became an intern at Radical Media in New York City during the summer between tenth and eleventh grade that I truly realized that I was

interested in pursuing business as a career. As an intern, I got to work on and witness many aspects of documentary filmmaking and marketing, including seeing the interaction among the producers, directors and distribution companies. Then, this last summer, I had the incredible experience of interning at IDEO, a premier product design firm in Palo Alto. For a week, I took part in a real-world exercise in which four other students and I had to work in a group to create, design, and pitch a product that could be brought to market. I was fortunate to discover talents in leadership and creativity that I had never even known I had, and this experience further solidified my desire to study business as an undergraduate.

**Part 2**

As a result, I began to research business programs all over the country. Not so surprisingly, Michigan's program in the Ross School stood out as a perfect match for my interests, specifically because of the available opportunities for undergraduate students. For example, courses such as "Leading People and Organizations" and "Pricing Strategy and Tactics" are very appealing to me because I am very interested in how products come to be viewed a certain way and how companies such as Apple can generate such a cult-like following. I have also read how the different management styles at companies such as Apple and Google influence their product creation and business models, so I want to also learn about how companies are run. Additionally, I love the fact that Michigan offers specific classes in entrepreneurial studies such as "Entrepreneurial Management" and

“Entrepreneurship via Acquisitions” because I can envision myself possibly starting my own company in the future.

You don’t necessarily have to know exactly what you want to do or what you want to major in—you just need to talk about your interests. You may not have as much background as the example above, but this is totally okay. You simply want to show that you have some interests and relate them to what a college has to offer. This will demonstrate that you took the time to learn about a college and that you have a significant reason for wanting to attend.

**90. How do students write the University of CA System essays and other college essays?**

Even though there are over three thousand colleges in the U.S., I do want to address the University of California essays since I'm in Los Angeles and so many students apply to the system.

There are now 4 essays required for the UC system—that's Berkeley, UCLA, Irvine, San Diego, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, Merced, and Riverside. There is one application for all the schools so the essays are the same.

You will have 8 questions to choose from. You must respond to only 4 of the 8 questions. Each response is limited to a maximum of 350 words.

Here are the questions, with the suggestions from the UCs themselves, directly from the website:

1. Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes or contributed to group efforts over time.

Things to consider: A leadership role can mean more than just a title. It can mean being a mentor to others, acting as the person in charge of a specific task, or taking the lead role in organizing an event or project. Think about what you accomplished and what you learned from the experience. What were your responsibilities?



Did you lead a team? How did your experience change your perspective on leading others? Did you help to resolve an important dispute at your school, church, in your community or an organization? And your leadership role doesn't necessarily have to be limited to school activities. For example, do you help out or take care of your family?

2. Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.

Things to consider: What does creativity mean to you? Do you have a creative skill that is important to you? What have you been able to do with that skill? If you used creativity to solve a problem, what was your solution? What are the steps you took to solve the problem?

How does your creativity influence your decisions inside or outside the classroom? Does your creativity relate to your major or a future career?

3. What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?

Things to consider: If there's a talent or skill that you're proud of, this is the time to share it. You don't necessarily have to be recognized or have received awards for your talent (although if you did and you want to talk about it, feel free to do so). Why is this talent or skill meaningful to you?

Does the talent come naturally or have you worked hard to develop this skill or talent? Does your talent or skill allow you opportunities in or outside the classroom? If so, what are they and how do they fit into your schedule?

4. Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.

Things to consider: An educational opportunity can be anything that has added value to your educational experience and better prepared you for college. For example, participation in an honors or academic enrichment program, or enrollment in an academy that's geared toward an occupation or a major, or taking advanced courses that interest you — just to name a few.

If you choose to write about educational barriers you've faced, how did you overcome or strive to overcome them? What personal characteristics or skills did you call on to overcome this challenge? How did overcoming this barrier help shape who are you today?

5. Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?

Things to consider: A challenge could be personal, or something you have faced in your community or school. Why was the challenge significant to you? This is a good opportunity to talk about any obstacles you've faced and what you've learned from the experience. Did you have support from someone else or did you handle it alone?

If you're currently working your way through a challenge, what are you doing now, and does that affect different aspects of your life? For example, ask yourself, "How has my life changed at home, at my school, with my friends or with my family?"

6. Describe your favorite academic subject and explain how it has influenced you.

Things to consider: Discuss how your interest in the subject developed and describe any experience you have had inside and outside the classroom — such as volunteer work, summer programs, participation in student organizations and/or activities — and what you have gained from your involvement.

Has your interest in the subject influenced you in choosing a major and/or career? Have you been able to pursue coursework at a higher level in this subject (honors, AP, IB, college or university work)?

7. What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?

Things to consider: Think of community as a term that can encompass a group, team or a place — like your high school, hometown or home. You can define community as you see fit, just make sure you talk about your role in that community. Was there a problem that you wanted to fix in your community?

Why were you inspired to act? What did you learn from your effort? How did your actions benefit others, the wider community or both? Did you work alone or with others to initiate change in your community?

8. What is the one thing that you think sets you apart from other candidates applying to the University of California?

Things to consider: Don't be afraid to brag a little. Even if you don't think you're unique, you are — remember, there's only one of you in the world. From your point of view, what do you feel makes you belong on one of UC's campuses? When looking at your life, what does a stranger need to understand in order to know you?

What have you not shared with us that will highlight a skill, talent, challenge or opportunity that you think will help us know you better? We're not necessarily looking for what makes you unique compared to others, but what makes you, YOU.

The principles of essay writing are the same no matter what the essay is. You might have to write different ideas and different drafts for each of the four UC essays, but after your initial brainstorming, ask people close to you

what they think so that you can use their input and questions to help you decide the best way to show different sides of yourself.

**FINANCIAL AID/SCHOLARSHIPS****91. What is the difference between Financial Aid and Scholarships?**

Financial **aid** is exactly what it sounds like: when a family needs money to pay for college because their income and assets will not cover the full amount.

Scholarships, on the other hand, don't necessarily have to do with need. A student can win a scholarship regardless of whether his or her family can pay for college.

There are several different types of aid offered by colleges:

1. Grants. This is basically free money that a college is going to give you that you never have to pay back. We like that.

2. Loans. This is obviously money that you have to pay back; there are student loans and there are parent loans, which vary in terms of interest rates.

3. Work-study. This is when the student works during college, and the school applies that money towards tuition. Every college calculates its financial aid package differently based on the resources that it has. Some of the wealthiest schools have policies that state if your family makes less than, say, \$100,000 per year, you can potentially get all four years paid for free. Other colleges do not have the endowment to make this kind of offer.

When dealing with financial aid, the most important thing you can do is ask, ask, ask. Parents—if you have a list of colleges that your son or daughter is interested in, call the financial aid office and tell them your situation. Ask how much money they have to give. Ask them what the average accepted aid package is so that you can start

understanding how one college is different than another.

The general rule, however, is don't rule out a college initially because you think you can't afford it—make sure you gather all the information first.

**92. How does a family determine if they are eligible for aid?**

Let's start simply. On **www.collegeboard.com** or on **www.finaid.org**, they have financial aid calculators. You put in your family's financial information (and they're going to ask for quite a bit of information about your income and assets) and it will work the calculations to see about your eligibility.

Here's where it gets a bit tricky. There are 2 financial aid forms—the FAFSA and the CSS PROFILE. Some colleges even have their own additional form.

**The FAFSA** (Free Application for Federal Student Aid—**www.fafsa.ed.gov**) is the form that everyone who wants to apply for financial aid must fill out.

**The CSS PROFILE** (made by the Collegeboard—**http://student.collegeboard.org/css-financial-aid-profile**) is only required by certain colleges (mostly private).

Each form uses a different methodology in determining the amount of aid you might receive. The way it works is that you fill out each form and designate which colleges you want them sent to. The federal government and the College Board will use a formula to send to each college you designate that will then use those calculations to come up with its aid package. This means you do not typically have to fill out an aid application for every school, but just because you fill out 1 or 2 forms does not mean that each school will give you the same amount of money. If the PROFILE, for example, determines your "EFC," or estimate family contribution is \$10,000 for freshman year, one college might give you \$10,000 in grants, while another



college might give you \$5000 in grants and \$5000 in loans.

This means that when you use the financial aid calculators, you might have to find out which form each college uses and then potentially use the calculator for both the FAFSA (aka Federal Methodology) and for the CSS PROFILE (aka Institutional Methodology) to determine the amount of aid you can potentially qualify for.

This whole confusing system also means that just because a college is more expensive doesn't mean it will cost you more, because that school may have more money to give. Again, I encourage parents and students to call up the financial aid office and ask specific questions about their average amount of aid packages and to explain your particular situation so you can figure out which school is going to be the most affordable.

Finally, here's a good link that hints of how to maximize your eligibility:

**<http://www.finaid.org/fafsa/maximize.phtml>**

**93. What are the deadlines to apply for aid?**

You can start filling out the FAFSA and CSS PROFILE on October 1, the year prior to when you will be paying for college.

**But**—you want to fill out each form as soon as possible, because they start giving the money away as soon as the applications start coming in. This means you will need to be prepared early in order to fill out these forms.

**Note:** Students now report earlier income information. Beginning with the 2017–18 FAFSA, students are required to report income information from an earlier tax year. For example, on the 2017–18 FAFSA, students (and parents, as appropriate) must report their 2015 income information, rather than their 2016 income information.

If you want to know which colleges require the CSS PROFILE, you can call the college directly, look on the school's financial aid page, or look on the homepage of the PROFILE for their list of member colleges. You will also want to double check if each of your colleges has different deadlines for receiving your aid form or forms.

**94. Do families have to apply each year for aid? What if a family's situation changes?**

Families must apply for financial aid each year they want to receive it. In other words, you will have to fill out either the FAFSA or the FAFSA *and* the CSS PROFILE four times to cover freshman–senior year.

This allows you to document changes to your family's financial situation each year. It also means that the amount of aid can vary from year to year, depending on your circumstances. Most of the time, aid packages generally remain consistent each year but if, for example, a parent loses a job, the aid package can change accordingly for that year.

**95. How do students find scholarships?**

First, remember that scholarships aren't necessarily based on need. Second, there are two categories of scholarships: local scholarships and what I call national scholarships.

The first thing that I suggest to families is to look for local scholarships. You can start by asking your high school if it offers any scholarships or if it has forms to fill out that make you eligible for any local scholarships in your area. These can be scholarships of \$500, \$1000, or more offered by community organizations such as the Rotary Club or by individuals who endow scholarships for graduates of your high school.

You can also call your city's Chamber of Commerce and ask if they know of any organizations that offer scholarships locally. Getting a scholarship from Kiwanis club or the American Legion are typically less competitive than regional or national scholarships and who can't use an extra few thousand dollars?

The next way thing to look for is what I call national scholarships, although this really refers to any scholarship outside of your local city. There are a lot of these out there. The joke is often made that unless you're a one-legged student from Montana who plays the oboe, you're not going to win any scholarships—but this is simply not true.

While a lot of money does go unclaimed each year because some scholarships are so specific that no one qualifies for them, another reason is that parents and students simply don't fill out the application forms. Why? It's time-consuming and many students don't want to do it. Especially after a student has gone through the entire college application process, they often don't want to spend

more time writing essays and filling out applications.

Therefore, based on what I've seen with other families, the parent should take charge of the scholarship search. There are generally two ways to do it:

1. Go to the bookstore and get a book like *The Scholarship Book*, where you can flip through it and earmark scholarships that your child qualifies for.

2. Register for one of the online scholarship searches. **www.fastweb.com** is one example where you fill out a profile for your son or daughter, and they will email you scholarships that match your child's profile. The issue with this method is that you can potentially get hundreds of scholarships to sort through, so if you don't mind screening the ones that really fit, printing them out, and keeping them organized, then the online method is the way to go.

My personal preferred method is to use a book, simply because I find it easier to keep everything organized.

Regardless of which method you choose, you will need to prioritize the scholarships based on amount, ease of winning, and deadline. In other words, you might prioritize a \$5000 scholarship for students from Los Angeles who want to study law that only requires an interview over a \$5000 national scholarship that requires 3 different essays. The first will require less work and will most likely have less competition due to its specificity. Of course, your child could apply to both, but there is only so much time, so I suggest you spend the time where it will be the most effective. The good news is that there is money out there.

Finally, the more work that you put into finding

scholarships, the more successful you will be.

## 96. What documents are needed to apply for aid?

Here's a list of documents that you'll need to gather before filling out any financial aid form.

1. Social security numbers of both the parents and the student.
2. Driver's license numbers for the parents and student.
3. W2 forms; this also counts for both the parents and the student, depending on who has been employed.
4. Your federal tax return or at least estimates of what you will file because the aid forms are going to reference specific lines in the return.
5. Any untaxed income records: social security benefits, veteran's benefits, welfare benefits.
6. Bank statements are a good idea too.
7. Business and investment mortgage information, business and farm statements, and other investment records for the student or the parent, especially 529 savings plans.

I also want to make a special note here: if you're putting money aside for college savings (I'm not necessarily talking about 529 saving plans, just money in bank accounts), please put it in the parents' names rather than the student's name. As part of the financial aid calculations, colleges expect families to contribute a much greater percentage of money that is stored in the student's bank account than the parents' bank account. Here's a link to more ways to maximize your eligibility:

**<http://www.finaid.org/fafsa/maximize.phtml>**

**97. What if a college doesn't provide enough aid?**

If you do not get enough financial aid from a particular college, you might be able to appeal. Here are the steps:

1. Find out the policy of the school. If it has procedures for appealing, go ahead and follow them. These procedures may be published on its website. Of course, you can always call the financial aid office.

2. Write a letter explaining your case.

- State any new information. Make sure to send any supporting data like bills, tax forms, and receipts.
- If you do not have any new information, consider discussing a piece of information you might have left off the application.
- Mention any upcoming expense, such as a new child on the way. Additional information can include health-care expense, child-care expense, death in the family, job change, unemployment, parental separation, and insurance fees.
- Use better aid packages from other schools (preferably schools that are similar or have a better academic reputation) to negotiate more aid. If you can point out why another school came up with more money, you may persuade the school to reevaluate its position.

3. Be persistent, but as always, be courteous and nonthreatening. Instead of complaining about a school's package, point out information for the school to reevaluate its offer, and then negotiate using other offers.



**98. What other options are there to help pay for college?**

Here's a list of things that you might want to consider.

**1. Decide if applying Early Decision is a good idea.** If you're going to apply for financial aid, you may want to reconsider applying for early decision because at certain colleges, when you apply ED to a school, they will give you less aid than if you apply regular decision. Having said this, if you apply early decision, and you get accepted, but they don't give you enough money, you can get out of the commitment.

**2. Do research to find out what the average aid package is at a given school.** As I've discussed, some colleges give more aid than others, and you should know what these are.

**3. Consider state schools.** State colleges are typically less expensive for in-state residents.

**4. Remember the military.** Military academies like the Naval Academy or West Point offer a free education, providing you spend what is typically five years in the military after you graduate.

You also can go into a ROTC program at colleges that offer it. ROTC stands for Reserve Officer Training Corps. While you're going to college, you participate in military exercises and spend some weekends in training in exchange for scholarship money. After graduation, you are also required to serve in the military but time commitments vary depending on the program.

**5. If one of your parents is a veteran, there are many scholarships available,** so you definitely want to look at scholarship books and ask around.

**6. Study in an overseas program.** Sometimes you can take a semester abroad or a year abroad at a reduced rate and still have it count towards graduation.

**7. Consider programs like AmeriCorps** where you do community service in exchange for some student loan forgiveness.

**8. Look into payment programs.** Most colleges have relationships with companies that will split your tuition into payments over the course of the year without any interest.

**9. Look into parent loans, such as Plus Loans—**these are loans specifically for parents, but still keep the interest rate relatively low. Each college's financial aid office should have more information on these loans.

**99. What is a 529 savings plan and how does it impact financial aid?**

A Section 529 plan, also known as a Qualified Tuition Programs (QTP), is a way for you to put money aside for college and not have it taxed. There are 2 types:

**Prepaid tuition plans**—these let you lock in future tuition rates at in-state public colleges at current prices.

**College savings plans**—these have more flexibility, but do not offer a guarantee of rates like the prepaid plans.

The other nice thing about a 529 savings plan is that if you use the money for college, it will not be considered as income that reduces financial aid eligibility.

As of 2010, a 529 savings plan in a student's name will be treated the same as if it were in a parent's name, so my previous suggestion about putting savings in a parent's name does not apply to funds put in a 529 account.

As you can imagine, there is a ton of specific information on these plans, so instead of including it all here, I will give you a link to a good summary:

**<http://www.finaid.org/savings/529plans.phtml>**

**100. What are five “secrets” to paying for college that you may not have heard about?**

In answer 97, I gave a tip about putting savings in a parent’s name instead of a student’s name to get more aid, and I also provided a link to the **www.finaid.org** website for more tips. To wrap up, I want to provide an additional 5 strategies for paying for college that are often overlooked.

**1. Apply to colleges that offer merit scholarships, especially those schools where your numbers will place you at the top of their incoming class.**

In other words, if you had the GPA and test scores to get into an Ivy League university, there are many other good colleges that will probably give you a lot of money to go their schools instead in order to try to “steal you away” from the Ivy. This does not mean you must have Ivy-caliber numbers; it just means that some colleges like to incentivize good students to enroll by offering merit scholarships for academics. To find out if a college offers merit scholarships, simply go onto a college’s financial aid/scholarship webpage or call the admissions office directly.

**2. Consider community college or junior college first.**

By attending a local community college or junior college for a year or two and then transferring to the 4-year college of your choice, you can save a tremendous amount of money, while still getting the degree from the four-year school.

Just make sure you get good enough grades to transfer to your desired institution, and also make sure your desired four-year school accepts transfer students

from your community or junior college.

### **3. Find colleges that use the consensus formula and pay down your mortgage.**

There is a small list of colleges (below) that use something called the consensus formula (aka the 568 formula) when calculating financial aid.

At these schools, the home equity that goes into calculating your net worth is capped at 120% of your income.

This means, for example, if you had an income that normally wouldn't qualify for aid, you could still get aid by using your savings to pay off the mortgage on your house.

Here is the list of colleges that utilize the consensus formula:

- Amherst College
- Boston College
- Claremont McKenna College
- College of the Holy Cross
- Columbia University
- Cornell University
- Dartmouth College
- Davidson College
- Duke University
- Georgetown University
- Grinnell College
- Haverford College
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- Middlebury College
- Northwestern University
- Pomona College
- St. John's College
- Swarthmore College

- University of Chicago
- University of Notre Dame
- University of Pennsylvania
- Vanderbilt University
- Wellesley College
- Wesleyan University
- Williams College

#### **4. Stockpile college units.**

By taking as many AP courses as possible (and passing the AP exams), as well as taking community college courses over the summer, it is quite possible to earn enough units before college to start with sophomore standing and graduate college in 3 years. Not every college will allow you to “fast track,” but many will, so if you fit this category, you definitely want to do your research.

#### **5. Have your grandparents wait until after you graduate high school to give you all that money for college.**

As I have mentioned, colleges expect a much bigger contribution from funds reported in a student’s name. Thus, in addition to using a 529 Savings Plans and saving money in a parent’s name, any distant relative who wants to give you money for college should wait and send it after you’ve gotten your financial aid package and the bill from the school.

**And that's it—100 Answers to Your College Admission Questions!**

I truly hope these have been helpful, and I thank you for trusting in me to read this book.

I also know that you may have other questions surrounding this process, and as I mentioned throughout this book, I have created many free resources that you can access on my website, **[www.dannyruderman.com](http://www.dannyruderman.com)**

My goal is to provide you with even more timely information and details on how to keep sane and how to help your children get into colleges where they can really thrive.

Thanks again and good luck,

Danny

**For Notes:**

[illegible]









## **Danny's Bio**

Danny Ruderman is a nationally recognized college counselor and all around good guy. He is also the author of *The Ultimate College Acceptance System* and creator of college counseling programs used by school districts across the U.S. and by Fortune 500 companies. He is a graduate of Fontana High (go Steelers!) and Stanford University (go Cardinal!)

Danny was named a Merit Teacher for his work at Campbell Hall School in Los Angeles, and he ran a successful SAT/ACT prep company for many years. Danny has been featured on and interviewed in a variety of media, including NPR, Fox News, The Los Angeles Times, and PBS. He is also a regular contributor to Money 101 on KFWB in Los Angeles.

For even more resources, please visit  
**[www.dannyruderman.com](http://www.dannyruderman.com)**