



Creating Your College Application

Putting Your Best Foot Forward

Your completed application is an extension of yourself. You cannot afford to be sloppy and inattentive to details. Start by using the Common Application online. Remember: many schools on the Common Application also require their own supplement, such as a set of specific shorter essays, another long essay, or a graded paper with teacher comments. Make certain that you check the requirements for each school to which you apply. If one of your schools is not on the Common Application list, photocopy the school's specific application, and use that as your rough draft before you begin to fill out the final form, online if possible.

On the Common Application website (www.commonapp.org), there is a link for downloadable forms where you can find Adobe pdf copies of all of the common application forms, including a *College Deadlines, Fees, and Requirements Grid*, which will provide you with all of the specific application process information for every common application college. We highly recommend that you download this document, print it out, and use it as your guide.

The Common Application: The Common Application is the recommended application form of nearly 300 selective colleges and universities (see below). Students fill out one application either online or on paper and send a copy to each school to which she or he submits an application.

THE APPLICATION

Applications have two parts: “yours” and “ours.” You have your responsibilities to fulfill, and the College Office has its own for each school to which you apply.

Student section

You are responsible for sending the following parts of your application:

- your personal information (the application)
- one or more essays (the personal statement)
- various types of supplements (a college’s own essay question, a graded paper, a peer reference) if required
- the application fee
- your SAT I, SAT II, and / or ACT scores directly from the testing agency
- securing your teacher recommenders

College Office section

We are responsible for mailing the following:

- Your transcript
- School Statement (This takes the place of the Guidance Counselor’s Report form in most applications.)
- BB&N Profile (as described in the last chapter “College Admission Criteria”)

THE ESSAY

Why an essay?

Most colleges and universities require students to write an essay as part of the application (not all—many state institutions do not have this requirement). Why? Because they want to see: a) how well you write, b) as one admissions officer puts it, “how students can wrap their brains around broadly-based questions” and c) who you are, in your own words and from your own point of view.

Along with the interview, the essay affords your best chance to share your thoughts, insights, and opinions; to highlight your accomplishments; and to convey your maturity and outlook on life. Look at the essay, then, as an opportunity to tell the admission committee something about yourself that isn’t in the rest of your application. College essays are therefore different from those you write for English, history or other classes. You try to write well and to “wrap your brain around questions” for those teachers, but usually you do not write about yourself. Some students find it hard, when applying to college, to shift gears and write about a topic that may be close to them personally. The task need not be difficult, however. Here are a few tips, many gathered from admissions officers:

Choosing a topic:

Some colleges simply assign a topic, such as:

- Describe a person or an event that has been important in your life.
- If you had to choose four things to put into a time capsule to be opened in a thousand years, what would they be and why?
- Write about an issue of local, national or global importance.

Many applications, in particular the Common Application, give you the option of writing about a topic of your own choice. Whatever you choose, bear in mind:

- No topic is inherently a “good” or “bad” one. Admissions people want to discover something about you that they cannot learn from your transcript or test scores, so write about something that matters to *you*, not what you think they want to hear.
- While no topics are “wrong”, there are wrong approaches. In general, do not dwell on specific experiences, but on your perception of or reaction to those experiences. For example, writing a travelogue about your summer trip to France is trite. (“The view from the Eiffel Tower was the most breathtaking thing I’ve ever seen!!!”) Instead, write about something you learned or that truly moved you while you were there. If you cannot do that, find another subject.
- Some topics do need to be treated with great care, and avoided if you cannot do so. It is very difficult, for example, to write about personal tragedies or those that affect your community or the world. If you choose one of these subjects, be sure to focus less on the events than on how they affected you—and never focus on just the negatives, be sure to note how you’ve overcome this adversity. If you are asserting a strong opinion on a sensitive political, social, or religious issue, we recommend also pointing out that you are open to the opinions of others (if true).
- Try to avoid writing about privilege in your essay.

Writing the essay:

- Be yourself, and write for yourself; use your own voice. Generally, we are taught to write for a particular group. The college essay has no audience *per se* except a group of strangers known as the admission committee. With no specific audience, students may compose an essay that attempts to convey an “educated” writer. This approach can result in stilted diction, posturing, and labored prose, rather than writing that reflects energy and spontaneity. If you write from the heart about a topic that is meaningful to you, you will be writing for yourself, and, as a result, your essay will be much more memorable to that group of strangers.
- Use words you are comfortable with. Do not use a thesaurus. You do not *ratiocinate* or *cogitate*, for example. You *think*.
- Do not try to be funny unless humor comes naturally to you and you are experienced—and good—at humorous writing.
- Good writing, as one admission officer put it, is lean, progressive, imaginative, grounded in specifics, energized by apt verbs, and respectful of the reader’s intelligence. Tell your story in a way that *shows*, rather than merely *claims*, that you have learned or matured through the situation or experience you are describing.

- Your opening sentence needs to “grab” the reader. Admissions people read so many essays that an imaginative opening will grab their attention.
- *Do not allow others to become involved in the writing process, other than as proofreaders.* It will be obvious if someone else wrote the essay for you!
- Spelling, punctuation, grammar, clarity, and neatness all matter, and they can sabotage an otherwise competent and compelling essay.
- Allow plenty of time to write your essay(s). *Edit, re-edit and proofread again and again!* If you wait until the last minute, it will show.

OPTIONS AND DEADLINES

For every application you complete and intend to send there will be deadlines to which you must adhere in order to become a candidate for admission. They are defined as follows:

“Regular” Admissions

Under a regular admission schedule, the student applies by a certain deadline, usually between January 1 and March 1, and is notified of a decision on or shortly after a specific date, most often between March 15 and April 15.

Early Decision (and Early Decision 2)



The Early Decision (ED) deadline, often November 1, is much earlier than the regular one and the student is usually notified of the college’s decision one month later. One of three decisions is possible: Accept, Defer, or Deny. An accepted student is bound to attend the college and must withdraw any other active applications. Students who are deferred are simply put back in the pile and looked at again with the regular pool of applicants. If deferred, they are no longer committed to attending the college should they be accepted later in the year. Some colleges have a policy of denying Early Decision applicants they deem unqualified. While an outright denial can hurt, it does relieve the anxiety of having to wait another four or five months for a decision. A student may submit only one Early Decision application at a time. However, several institutions have ED1 and Early Decision 2 (ED2) deadlines; the latter are designed to attract students who were not ready to apply in November and applicants who may have been rejected or deferred from another college earlier in the year. Other institutions have Early Decision deadlines that are relatively late—for example, January 1—which serve the same purpose as ED2. Early Decision candidates must be ready to apply to other colleges immediately in the event that they do not receive an acceptance of their ED application.

Unfortunately, many colleges now use Early Decision as a marketing tool, designed to make them look more selective. In a nutshell, the result of this practice is that some institutions are easier to get into when one applies early. It is essential to ask admissions offices about their ED policies in this regard. If you do not get a satisfactory answer—which sometimes you will not—speak with your counselor before making any commitment.

In the BB&N College Counseling Office we do not advocate submitting an Early Decision application unless you are absolutely sure that the college is your top choice. Every year we hear students say “I know I am applying early somewhere, I just don’t know where yet.”

Using an early decision application as a strategic maneuver to get into a college earlier without really knowing that it is your top choice is an inappropriate use of the Early Decision program. When you use ED as a strategic maneuver, it can lead to matriculating at a school that you later find is a bad fit and ultimately to a transfer process that is stressful for you and your family. We want you to find a place where you will be happy, and if it takes until the regular decision deadline for you to figure out which school is best, we want you to take that time.

Early Action

This plan (also known as “EA”) is similar to Early Decision except that there is no commitment on the part of the student to attend if accepted. A few schools in the United States have adopted an Early Action program that they have named “Single Choice” or “Restricted Early Action.” The Early Action-Single Choice program stipulates that if a student applies EA to any of these schools, they cannot apply under any ED or REA program at any other school. As with any other EA program, if the student is admitted, they are not required to attend and have until May 1 (see “Candidates Reply Date” below) to make their final college decision.

“Rolling” Admissions

Colleges that use rolling admission will review a candidate’s credentials shortly after they are received (usually not before the end of the first high school marking period of the senior year), and will notify the candidate of its decision within a few weeks. The student generally does not have to tell the college whether he or she will be attending until May 1. As a rule, the stronger the student, the earlier he or she may receive a letter of acceptance. *Note that in these competitive times, many rolling admissions institutions become more selective as the year goes on.* It may be best, therefore, to apply early in the year. Always check with your counselor about timing. Submitting a Rolling Admission application *does not* conflict with Early Decision or Early Action-Single Choice programs at other schools.

The Candidate’s Reply Date

The candidate’s reply date is the date by which a student must say either yes or no to a single college, and beyond which no extensions are possible. Most colleges have agreed on May 1 as the Candidate’s Reply Date unless the student has applied and been accepted under the Early Decision plan. However, some do not observe it and will ask the student to send a confirming deposit within two or three weeks. If this happens to you, and you do not want to send your money to one college until you have heard from others, you can almost always call or write the college and get an extension, usually until May 1. They may tell you they still want the deposit, but that it is refundable until that time. When in doubt, speak to one of the college counselors. Students should not, however, expect to be allowed to put off their decision until sometime after May 1. Colleges need and have the right to expect a commitment from an accepted applicant at some point, and a May 1 deadline should give most people enough time to make up their minds. Usually, “making up one’s mind” involves sending a substantial deposit--several hundred dollars--to the college one has decided to attend. *UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES may deposits ever be sent to more than one college!* “Double-depositing” is unethical. We will only send one final transcript to a college at the end of the year.

Waiting List

The waiting list is a form of “insurance policy” used by many colleges as a hedge against the possibility of unfilled places in an entering class. There is no way to predict a student’s

chances of admission from the waiting list, as circumstances and conditions vary each year. Usually, wait lists are not ranked; rather, all wait-list students are reevaluated shortly after May 1. The number of wait-list candidates offered acceptance depends upon the number of places still to be filled. Students should choose to remain on a college's waitlist only if they are seriously interested in attending that institution. If they are accepted off of a waitlist, students are asked to submit a deposit and at that point the deposit at the other school is lost. If interest is not strong, students should remove their names to give their place to someone else.

A Note About Deadlines:

In general, a deadline is the date by which an application must be postmarked. However, for a number of colleges, the deadline is the date by which the application must be received. If in doubt, call the admission office well ahead of the deadline and ask. *As a general rule, you should treat all deadlines as if they were the receipt date.*

MYTHS ABOUT EARLY DECISION

Myth #1: Students should apply early to a “reach” school because it is their best shot at admission.

Fact: There are many factors to consider when making the decision to apply early and *where* the student applies early matters as much as simply applying early. Applying to a “possible” school (where a student's chances in the regular pool are about 50%) usually offers the most advantage. With all the media attention focused on early admission, many colleges experienced increases in their early application numbers last fall and subsequently have become more selective. Thus, students should work closely with their counselor to determine the right plan for them.

Myth #2: Even if a student doesn't have a clear first choice, s/he should still apply early.

Fact: If a student doesn't have a clear first choice, s/he may consider applying to a rolling or non-binding program rather than a binding Early Decision program. Sometimes, there are “likely” or “possible” schools on a student's list that offer rolling or early action programs and it may help ease the stress of the application process to get an offer of admission before April.

Myth #3: Students applying for financial aid should always apply early.

Fact: Students applying for financial aid may want to consider non-binding programs so that they will have the option to compare financial aid packages.