Junior/Senior Summer: Creating Your College Application

The Common Application, The Essay, and The Interview
Putting Your Best Foot Forward

Your completed application is an extension of yourself. You cannot afford to be sloppy or inattentive to details. Start by using the online Common Application, where you will fill out important background information about your educational experience. 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. Not all colleges use the Common Application, so make certain that you check the requirements for each school to which you apply.

The Common Application website (www.commonapp.org), provides links to useful downloadable forms which include PDF versions of all of the application parts, including a College Deadlines, Fees, and Requirements Grid, which offers 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. College Kickstart can also help figure out what is required at your colleges.

**The Common Application:** The Common Application is the recommended application form for more than approximately 750 colleges and universities. Students fill out one application online submit it to each school to which she or he is applying.
THE APPLICATION

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

Your Part: The Student’s 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 Reasoning, SAT Subject Tests, and / or ACT scores directly from the testing agency
- requesting your teacher recommenders

Our Part: The College Office’s Section, also called the Secondary School Report
We are responsible for submitting the following:

- Your transcript
- School Statement (Letter written by the college counselor that includes students progress and investment in BB&N.)
- BB&N Profile (as described in the last chapter “College Admission Criteria”)
- Uploaded teacher recommendations

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 items 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.

Some essays give you the option of writing about a topic of your own choice. Whatever you choose, bear in mind:

- No topic is inherently “right” or “wrong.” 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 report 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 about yourself 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 should be 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).

Writing the essay:

- Be yourself, and write for yourself; use your own voice. Generally, we are taught to write for a particular audience. 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 with which you are comfortable. 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 officers read so many essays that an imaginative opening will grab their attention.

• Do not allow too many cooks to become involved in the writing process, other than as proofreaders. It will be obvious if someone else wrote the essay for you or proofed the life out of it!

• Often, the best colleges essays are about the smallest moments. Rarely are essays that read like a laundry list of accomplishments compelling. The essay is meant to provide insight into who you are – the activities list on your resume

• 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.
THE COLLEGE INTERVIEW

It is the student’s responsibility to research interview requirements (use College Kickstart), make appointments, and write thank-you notes. There are a number of variations in the interview policies at colleges. They include one of the following four options: 1) no interview – group information sessions only; 2) alumni interviews only – off-campus; 3) interviews are optional and informational only; 4) interviews are encouraged and do become part of the student’s application file. If the college does offer an on-campus or alumni interview, we recommend that you take advantage of the opportunity. **Interviews are a crucial method at your disposal to demonstrate your interest in a particular college.**

What can you do to prepare?

- Read all available material on the college beforehand.

- Do not ask questions that are answered in the material or covered on your tour.

- Be prepared to comment on particular programs that combine your talents and interests.

- Be prepared for cryptic questions (e.g. “What would you like to talk about?”).

On the following pages, we have provided the kinds of questions you might be asked. Think about each one and try to practice your answer aloud either at the dinner table or in the car with a parent. If you have thought these through, you should be well prepared for any question.

- Please visit each college’s website and pay close attention to their interview policies, requirements, and deadlines.

- Be prompt. Call if you are going to be late.

- Try to be relaxed. Dress appropriately (at least neatly – no jeans).

- Turn off cell phones and don’t chew gum.

- Be prepared to engage in a conversation. You should talk about your strengths, what excites you intellectually and what your goals are. Without being arrogant, haughty or overbearing, you should be confident that you have a great deal to offer a college.

- Finally, take time to send your interviewer a **hand-written** thank-you note after the visit (so make sure you have his/her name written down). This gesture is appreciated and the note is often added to your file.
SAMPLE COLLEGE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How do you like BB&N? What has been the most positive experience you have had? The most negative? What would you like to change about BB&N?

2. What is your role in the school community? What would your teachers say about you?

3. What is the most significant contribution you have made to your school?

4. What are you looking for in a college?

5. What are some of your goals – personal and career – for the future?

6. Tell me about an assignment in which you found yourself stimulated intellectually.

7. What do you like best about participating in extra-curricular activities?

8. Since you are interested in science or math (where appropriate), why are you interested in a liberal arts college rather than a more technical institution?

9. How and in what ways do you expect, plan or hope to transfer your secondary school contributions, achievements, and/or activities to the college level?

10. What has been your favorite subject in high school? Why?

11. What might you study in college?

12. What books or authors have made a lasting impression on your way of thinking?

13. What events would you deem critical in your life thus far? Who has influenced you?

14. Describe ways in which you are different from others at your school.

15. How have you spent your summers?

16. What are your reactions to current events?

17. Describe something about which you have become outraged or inspired this year.

18. Have you ever thought of not going to college? What would you do?

19. How do you spend your free time?

20. Why do you think you are a good match for this college?

21. Many qualified students apply to our school. What makes you stand out?

22. Do you have any questions? (Have some in mind!)
QUESTIONS TO ASK AN INTERVIEWER

1. How would you describe the student body?

2. Is there a type of student who might not feel comfortable here?

3. Where do most of the students come from geographically?

4. What is the political climate on campus? Liberal? Conservative? Mixed? How can you tell?

5. What is the religious makeup of the student body? Would a (e.g. Jewish, Catholic) student feel isolated?

6. What percentage of students leaves campus for the weekend? (if >20%, ask why)

7. How much school spirit is there? What types of activities are well-attended?

8. What is the role of Greek life on campus?

9. How easy is it for freshmen to join activities?

10. Can you tell me more about the ____________? (e.g. newspaper, drama program)

11. Does the college guarantee housing all four years? What % live on campus? What alternatives are available, on or off-campus, for upperclassmen?

12. What have been the new additions/renovations on campus in recent years?

13. How safe is the campus? What security options are available?

14. What's distinctive about your academic program?

15. How many students are in a typical freshman class? Who teaches them? Do they break into smaller discussion groups? Are freshman seminars available?

16. How easy is it to get the classes one needs/wants?

17. Can a student change from one division or major to another without a lot of hassle?

18. Are there any new initiatives underway?

19. When does one declare a major? Are there many prerequisites? Are any majors selective? If so, how is one chosen? Can one double major?

20. What % of students return for sophomore year? What % graduate within five years? If especially high or low, what do you consider the reason?
21. What proportion of students study abroad? Where are the most common destinations? Do you offer any unique international programs?

22. What percentage of seniors go to graduate school? Do you have a list of the graduate schools they’ve attended in recent years? How many companies recruited on campus last year?

23. What is the calendar (e.g. 4-1-4)? If there is a "short" term, is it required? For how many years? What percentage of students choose an optional term? What are ways students typically use it?

24. Which colleges do you "overlap" with most in admissions? What makes your college distinctive among other similar colleges?

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**ALUMNI/AE INTERVIEWS**

Some colleges arrange local alumni/ae interviews. These alumni/ae interviews can often be arranged for colleges which are far away and hard for you to visit or who cannot accommodate your request for an on-campus interview. Sometimes, a member of the local alumni/ae interview team will contact you after the college admission office has received your application, but not always – check each college’s policies and procedures. More and more colleges outside New England also send staff members to Boston in December and January to interview applicants. The suggestions above apply to these interviews as well. Policies at individual colleges change year to year surrounding interviews, deadlines for requesting interviews, and availability. **It is the student’s responsibility to keep track of this information for the colleges to which he/she is applying. Use the worksheet at the back of this book to track this information and College Kickstart to help you gather it.**