

DISSECTING THE COLLEGE APPLICATION



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HOW TO POLISH YOUR COLLEGE APPLICATION

Applying to college is one of the most daunting and important processes in a young adult's life. The caliber of education, the networks you build, the opportunities you have access to in college can be a major determining factor in your future success.

This guide will walk you through the process in a simple and step-by-step way. We will dissect four of the main sections of the application.

Applying to a top university means intense competition from the highest caliber students from all over the world. There is no set formula or list of checkboxes that guarantee successful admission, and there is no way to practice or rehearse or learn from your past mistakes. You only get one shot to make a first impression.

So it's crucial to do it right the first time--that means taking a mindful approach to your time in high school from the courses you take to the activities you participate in. Then it's your job to structure your college application to highlight those achievements in a way that showcases your uniqueness, strengths, and potential.

That's what we're here for. The Get Into Ivy team is developing a comprehensive guide for getting the most out of your high school experience to help you get into your dream college. The guide draws on the experiences of our founder, an Ivy League graduate from Wharton at the University of Pennsylvania, and her associates and fellow Ivy League graduates both as student applicants and later as Alumni interviewers for college admissions.

The complete guide will include exercises and guidance for different stages of your high school career:

- 18+ months before application time (freshman to sophomore year)
- 12-18 months before application time (junior year)
- 6 months leading up to application deadline (1st semester of senior year)

The guide will walk you through your development into a well-rounded student and a strong candidate for acceptance into a top university. It will also teach you how to think through and compile your application to put your best foot forward.

This free version of the guide sheds light on the nuances of a standard college application and, critically, **what college admissions officers are really looking for.**

If you have any questions you'd like to see answered in the complete guide, please reach out to us at support@getintoivy.com. Due to the volume of inquiries, we cannot guarantee inclusion in our guide or a direct response, but our team will do our best to get back to you. In the meantime, check out this free guide and we will notify you via

EDUCATION

What it is: The Education section generally includes information on coursework at your high school, other supplemental courses you have taken at a college/university, your grades, and any academic honors and awards you've received.

What top colleges are looking for:

Bare minimum: Good grades – this is a given. Colleges are looking for strong performance in your classes. Good universities are looking for B+ or higher averages, and top universities are looking for A, A+ averages. However, most applicants for top universities will have extremely strong grade point averages, so *strong grades are just a starting point for a successful application.*

Subtext: Aside from good grades, colleges, especially top universities, are looking for indications that you have challenged yourself in your coursework and gone beyond the academic pursuits of the average student. Strong grades in AP or IB classes, university level classes, and academic awards, especially at the state or national level, all indicate to a top university that you can handle coursework at a higher level and are ready for the challenges they have to offer.

It is important to note: The Future Plans section under Education is a bonus opportunity to show a university that you have been thoughtful about your future. Showing cohesiveness throughout your application indicates to universities you have been mindful about potential majors or career paths and have taken the time to explore and learn more about them. Consider tying together common themes from your extracurricular activities, your essays, and any professional development events or pursuits. We'll talk more about how to showcase cohesion in our full guide.

Key Takeaway: Get good grades, but don't just play it safe. Challenge yourself academically.

ACTIVITIES

What it is: The Activities section covers clubs, sports, musical pursuits, volunteer work you participate in, as well as your leadership roles and impact in these activities.

What top colleges are looking for:

Bare minimum: Colleges are looking for well-rounded students who do more than just excel academically. Participation and excellence in other activities such as sports, music, or student clubs show that you have varied interests and have the discipline, curiosity, and skills to achieve success in other areas.

Subtext: Colleges are not just looking for the number of activities or hours you spend on each. Colleges also evaluate your length of involvement, leadership roles, achievements, type of activity, scale and scope of club or group, etc. For example, length of involvement (how many years in a club) shows consistency and commitment. Just as importantly, your measurable impact in a particular club or group shows your ability to contribute in a meaningful way. In your Freshman to Sophomore years of high school (and even earlier), you should think about how to uncover your interests and passions and later focus on developing them further.

It is important to note: The Activities section is one of the core pieces of your application that helps you tie together your narrative to show colleges who you are. College admissions officers are bombarded by tens of thousands of applications per year. Students often make the mistake of quantity over quality – loading their schedules and application with as many activities as possible. This makes it more difficult for admissions officers to understand who you are and what matters to you. The easier you can make it for them identify the key themes and highlights of your application through a cohesive narrative, the more likely you are to have a strong advocate for you when admissions officers are deciding between your application and another.

Key Takeaway: Quality matters more than quantity. Focus on creating impact.

VOLUNTEER WORK

What it is: Volunteer work usually falls under the Activities section discussed above. However, this section is so important, we are breaking it out to discuss further.

What top colleges are looking for:

Bare minimum: While there is no hard or fast rule or formula for college acceptances, top institutions care about the caliber of people joining their incoming classes. It's important to demonstrate a certain level of social awareness and compassion for others and your community. Doing volunteer work shows colleges that you care about the environment and community around you.

Subtext: Similar to their approach to the general Activities section, top universities are looking for candidates that strive for more in all of their pursuits. Again, they're looking for candidates who were not just satisfied with the status quo and in mere participation in a volunteer organization, but who are driven to make the organization and their community better. It is important to show quantitative impact and measurable ways in which you were able to help give back to an organization or cause that you believe in.

It is important to note:

Think about what causes are important to you – why do you feel especially connected to a cause? How can you relate? Colleges are looking for unique, passionate individuals. Working with a cause that is meaningful to you will naturally help you feel more inspired to make an impact; understanding your connection to a cause will allow your passion to come through in your application and help admissions officers feel connected to you.

Key Takeaway: Colleges want to admit good people, not just good students.

YOUR ESSAYS

What it is: Common App and other universally accepted applications will include writing prompts as a part of your application. Top colleges will also often have their own supplemental prompts.

What top colleges are looking for:

Bare minimum: Colleges are looking for intelligent, articulate students who can express ideas clearly and in an organized way. Strong writing skills are a starting point – make sure your essay is well organized with clear points and that there are no spelling or grammatical errors.

Subtext: What colleges are really looking for here is your voice and what makes you unique. While the Activities section can add color to your application and shed light on who you are, the Essay section is where you have the most flexibility to truly showcase your personality and values. Top universities receive thousands of applications from students who are at the top of their class with high SAT scores and a long list of activities and awards. The essay portion is the human element. It can help admissions officers connect with you as a person.

It is important to note: Don't fake it. Admissions officers go through thousands of applications a year. Disingenuous essays are easy to spot. What they want to know is – how did you become the person you are? What experiences or people in your life have helped shape you? What do you care about? What would it be like to have a conversation or sit down for a coffee with you? What makes you likable or memorable? It's ok to be vulnerable and share what makes you uniquely human, including struggles or challenges you've faced. Take the time to reflect on your journey and on yourself – this will help provide a genuine and thoughtful response to your essay prompts.

Key Takeaway: Don't just try to write what you think admissions officers want to hear. Take the time to be introspective and genuine. Also, proofread.