

~College Planning Tips~



Source: *The Princeton Review*
<http://www.princetonreview.com/>

4 SAT Myths

MYTH #1: The SAT is a test of intelligence and my scores are a good indication of how I will do in college.

FACT: Your SAT scores reflect how good you are at taking the SAT (as well as how much time you spent preparing)—and that's about it. Nevertheless, admissions officers continue to place great weight on this test. So it's important to do well.

MYTH #2: The SAT tests complex math concepts.

FACT: SAT math can seem challenging because of the way the concepts are tested, not because of the concepts themselves. The math sections include concepts you learned in the seventh or eighth grade, like arithmetic, basic geometry, basic algebra and algebra II. You won't see any calculus or trigonometry on the SAT.

MYTH #3: You can't really improve your Critical Reading score.

FACT: You can improve your Critical Reading score by expanding your vocabulary. Reading comprehension and sentence completions all rely upon your understanding of the words in the questions and answer choices. So read books, newspapers and anything else you can get your hands on, and check out our SAT prep for additional vocabulary-building tools.

MYTH #4: It's better to leave a question blank than to guess.

FACT: Not necessarily. You receive one point for every correct answer, zero points for every question you leave unanswered and minus one-quarter of a point for every incorrect answer. If you can eliminate even one of the answer choices, guess! From a purely statistical standpoint, this approach will gain you more points over the whole test than you'll get by playing it safe and leaving the questions blank.

Extracurriculars

You won't impress an admissions committee by asking for a tour of the all-night study lounge. Yes, colleges want bright students. But even more, they want bright, *well-rounded* students.

Grades and test scores are very important, but so is what you choose to pursue outside of the classroom. Admissions officers are looking to create a class made up of students with diverse interests and backgrounds. They'll look closely at your extracurriculars to get a sense of who you are and what you're passionate about.

How much you do isn't as important as *being committed to what you do*. An application with scattered interest and involvement over four years looks flakey. A student that runs track and sings in the choir throughout four years of high school shows passion and commitment. Find out early on what sparks your interest and stick with it.

Demonstrate leadership. If you have the opportunity and drive to be the captain of a sports team, president of a club or editor of the school newspaper, seize the opportunity. Colleges like responsible leaders who earn the respect of their peers.

An after-school job shows maturity. Don't fret if an after-school job prevents you from participating in extracurriculars. If you have to work so that your family can make ends meet, be sure the colleges you apply to understand that. Helping to support a family is a serious responsibility that demonstrates character. And just as with extracurriculars, it's impressive if you retain a job for an extended period and rise to a position of responsibility.

Extracurriculars can be valuable experience. If you have a career or study interest that you can pursue outside the classroom, take advantage. Think you might be interested in medicine? Try volunteering at a local hospital. Are you destined to be a writer? Join your school's newspaper or literary magazine. These activities can help give you a strong foundation should you decide to pursue them further, academically or professionally.



Choosing a Major

There are two reasons to choose a major: to prepare for a specific field or job, or to immerse yourself in a subject that fascinates you.

Some students choose a major because it will prepare them for a specific career path. Career-focused majors include engineering, business, education or nursing. If you are committed to a vocation, majoring in it will give you specific, practical skills that will be directly applicable to your post-graduation career.

Other students choose a major simply because they love the subject matter. If you choose this path, you may pursue a career that has little to do with what you studied in college. That doesn't mean you'll graduate without skills, however. For example, most history majors don't become historians, but they do graduate with critical thinking and writing abilities that are highly valued by employers.

Here are some ideas on how to start your search for the right major:

Forget high school. College is a whole new ball game. Subjects you hated as a high school student might turn out to be completely different in a new educational setting. In other words, don't automatically rule anything out, even if you don't think it's for you. Give everything at least a small chance. You never know.

Make the most of the general education courses you're required to take. Don't just pick whatever's easiest; choose ones that appeal to you, even if they are upper-level courses. You don't yet know what will really compel you. Have your radar on for clues that might be pointing you in new directions.

Talk to your advisors. They know what it takes to tackle certain academic disciplines. Tell them your strengths and your interests. They'll be able to highlight courses that might excite you as well as classes that are popular with other students. A great class on nihilism may be the thing that gets you to declare a philosophy major.

Check the syllabus. What are the assignments? The books? The requirements? Does the material seem compelling to you? If you start nodding off while reading the course catalogue, perhaps it's best to cross that field off your list.

Ask upperclassmen. They are the real experts at your college, and they have faced the daunting task of declaring a major themselves. Older students can tell you the questions they considered and how they went about finding the answers.

Engage professionals in fields you find interesting. Ask them exactly what their jobs entail and how their careers do (or don't) relate to their majors. Learning about the paths others took to get where they are is often valuable and enlightening, and even more often, surprising.

The bottom line is that your major does not determine your life. You should choose a subject that interests you and that has some connection to the post-collegiate life you want to build for yourself. But keep the decision in perspective; you can always change careers or go back to school.



Match, Reach and Safety Schools

There is no rule that dictates how many colleges you may apply to. If you're willing to pay the application fees, you can apply to dozens. But that's a poor strategy. Take the time to research and you'll be able to whittle your initial list down to a manageable number of schools.

Once you know what you're looking for, you can start crafting a list of colleges that fit your specifications. Don't include a school on your list that you wouldn't be willing to attend. As your list takes shape, include schools that fall into one of the following three categories: match, reach and safety.

- ⇒ A *match* school is one where your academic credentials fall well within (or even exceed) the school's range for the average freshman. There are no guarantees, but it's not unreasonable to be accepted to several of your match schools.
- ⇒ A *reach* school is one where your academic credentials fall below the school's range for the average freshman. Reach schools are long-shots, but they should still be possible. If you have a 2.0 GPA, Harvard is not a reach school—it's a dream.
- ⇒ A *safety* school is one where your academic credentials fall above the school's range for the average freshman. You can be reasonably certain that you will be admitted to your safety schools.

Apply to a few schools from each category (many applicants apply to around three reach schools, three match schools and two safety schools). Separating them will help you manage your expectations throughout the admissions process. And it will ensure that you set ambitious goals *and* give yourself some back-up options.

Safety Schools: Your Plan B

- Unfortunate scenario #1: You are not accepted to any of your favorite schools (*cue violins*).
- Unfortunate scenario #2: You are accepted to one of your favorite schools, but the financial aid package does not sufficiently cover your need (*cue entire orchestra*).

Every applicant, regardless of the strength of their candidacy, faces these possibilities. And it's for this very reason that you should apply to some safety schools.

A *safety school* is a school that (1) you can be reasonably confident will admit you and (2) you are willing to attend. That means that your safety schools will necessarily be unique to you.

A safety school is *not* a school that you desperately hope you *won't* have to attend. Enrolling in your safety school should not feel like a prison sentence. It should offer all or most of the things you are looking for from your higher education. Ask yourself, "Would I be happy there?" If the answer is not "yes!" find another candidate. Many state schools provide an excellent education and offer admission to the majority of in-state residents who meet certain basic academic requirements. Remember that further down the road, you can take a second shot at your first-choice school with a transfer application.

Financial Safety Schools

If your school list is made up of expensive, selective schools, consider a *financial safety school* too. Again, this is a school you can be reasonably confident will accept your application, and it's a school whose tuition will be affordable even if your aid package is less than stellar.

~The College Application~

When you apply to a college, you'll submit several things: an application, high school transcript, SAT or ACT score report, letters of recommendation and one or more personal statements or essays.

An important heads-up: [applying for financial aid](#) is a separate process that requires you to fill out a separate set of forms.

Application

You can fill out a paper application or apply online. Most schools require you to list basic information about you and your family, as well as your GPA, standardized test scores, and any extracurriculars or awards you earned in high school.

Over three hundred colleges and universities now accept the [Common Application](#), a single form that you can fill out and submit to multiple schools. The Common Application is meant to simplify the admissions process for you. Using it means you don't have to fill out individual application forms for each school you apply to.

There is no penalty for using it: Colleges are required to give equal consideration to students who use the Common Application and those who use the school's own application. If you do use the Common App, however, be advised that schools may have supplementary forms you'll need to fill out (including additional essays!).

Transcript

Some colleges require that your high school send your transcript directly, others allow you to send it. In the latter case, your high school will give you a sealed envelope. Do not break the seal on the envelope or your transcripts will not be accepted!

SAT or ACT Score Report

When you take the SAT or ACT, you can request that a score report be sent to your prospective colleges. Make sure you leave plenty of time for your scores to be processed and sent.

Beginning in March 2009, students will be able to choose whether colleges see one, some or all of their scores for the SAT and [SAT Subject Tests](#). You must opt into this program online or via telephone; otherwise schools will see all your scores. Be advised that you cannot mix and match sections (you can't send in your great Math score from June and your great Verbal from January).

Letters of Recommendation

Colleges usually require two or three letters of recommendation from high school teachers or guidance counselors.

When requesting a letter of recommendation, pick someone who knows you well and can speak to your strengths. Approach your potential letter-writers about two months prior to the actual due date. Teachers and guidance counselors are usually swamped with term papers and other college application requests toward the end of the fall semester.

Personal Statement or Essay

This is by far the most time-consuming and difficult part of any application. The personal statement or essay is usually about 300 to 500 words in length, occasionally longer, depending on the college. The prompt or question will be provided in the application. Be sure to write in your own voice about a topic unique to you. We recommend writing several drafts. Proofread carefully, and ask a teacher to edit your work.

The College Essay

Most selective colleges require you to submit an essay or personal statement. (*Pause for moaning and groaning.*)

It may sound like a chore, and it will certainly take a substantial amount of work. But it's also a unique opportunity that can make a difference at decision time.

Admissions committees put the most weight on your high school grades and your test scores. However, selective colleges receive applications from many worthy students with similar scores and grades—too many to admit. So they use your essay (along with your letters of recommendation and extracurricular activities) to find out what sets you apart from the other talented candidates.

Telling Your Story

-  So what does set you apart? You have a unique background, interests and personality. This is your chance to tell your story (or at least part of it).
-  The best way to tell your story is to write a personal, thoughtful essay about something that has meaning for you. Be honest and genuine, and your unique qualities will shine through.
-  Admissions officers have to read an unbelievable number of essays, most of which are banal and forgettable. Many students try to sound smart rather than sounding like themselves. Others write about a subject that they don't care about, but that they think will impress admissions officers.
-  You don't need to have started a company or discovered a lost Mayan temple. Colleges are simply looking for thoughtful, motivated students who will add something to the freshman class.

The Mechanics of a College Essay

-  Write about something that's important to you. It could be an experience, a person, a book—anything that has had an impact on your life.
-  Don't just recount—reflect! Anyone can write about how they won the big game or the time they spent in Rome. When recalling these events, you need to give more than the play-by-play or itinerary. Describe what you learned from the experience and how it changed you.
-  Being funny is tough. A student who can make an admissions officer laugh never gets lost in the shuffle. But beware. What you think is funny and what an adult working in a college thinks is funny are probably different. We caution against one-liners, limericks and anything off-color.
-  Start early and write several drafts. Set it aside for a few days and read it again. Put yourself in the shoes of an admissions officer: Is the essay interesting? Do the ideas flow logically? Does it reveal something about the applicant? Is it written in the applicants' own voice?
-  What you write in your application essay or personal statement should not contradict any other part of your application—nor should it repeat it. This isn't the place to list your awards or discuss your grades or test scores.
-  Answer the question being asked. Don't reuse an answer to a similar question from another application.
-  Have at least one other person edit your essay—a teacher or college counselor is best. And before you send it off, check, check again, and then triple check to make sure your essay is free of spelling or grammar errors.



Tackling Common Essay Questions

- The college application essay is your chance to show what makes you unique. Admission officers read hundreds of these every year.
- Don't write about the same subjects as every other applicant.



Write about someone you admire.

- Many people write an ode to Gandhi, Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King, Jr. These leaders are admirable and heroic, but you shouldn't write about them unless you have a strong, genuine and very personal reason to do so.
- Otherwise, ask yourself what individual has actually had the greatest influence over your life. Describe the impact they've had on you. The more specific details you include, the better.



Write about something you have read.

- This question is not asking for a book report! Don't just summarize the plot; detail why you liked this particular selection and what it meant to you.
- Your book choice should make it clear that you read outside of class—stay away from high school mainstays like *The Catcher in the Rye*.



Why do you want to attend this school?

- Unless your real reason is something better left unsaid (hint: avoid mentioning keg parties), you should be truthful in responding to this question.
- Steer clear of generalities (e.g. "to get a good liberal arts education," "to broaden my knowledge") and stay specific (e.g. "I'm a future doctor and your science department has a terrific reputation").



What will you be doing ten years from now?

- It's okay to be creative and ambitious, but don't be silly. And don't feel that you need to talk about the ways in which your college education will help you snag a dream job.



Write about a meaningful activity.

- Careful—it's easy for this response to read as clichéd and uninspired. Don't just say that your service on student council was significant because it taught you the importance of effective leadership. Push yourself to really examine what experiences have been valuable to you. Maybe you learned more from your after-school job at a burger joint than you did as president of the student council. Admissions officers can tell when you're being genuine and when you're just saying what you think they want to hear.

What Does Your High School Transcript Say About You?

You're probably (painfully) aware that your high school transcript is a record of every grade you earned in high school—and that all of those grades are averaged to produce a single number, your cumulative GPA.

But admissions officers have their eyes on more than the bottom line. There are other things they examine to get a sense of what kind of college student you'll be.

Freshman Grades: In case you were thinking they weren't important, now you know otherwise. Your freshman grades make up (approximately) one-quarter of your cumulative high school GPA. If you tank freshman year, it will follow you for the next three years. (That includes art class, gym class, music class or anything for which you receive a grade.)

Pass / Fail: Don't elect to take a pass / fail. To colleges, a "P" might as well be a "D".

Trends: Colleges expect your grades to be consistent or improve. If you received As in sophomore year, and Cs in senior year, they will conclude that you are a capable student who became lazy.

Coursework: [High school graduation requirements](#) vary from school to school. Most students have the opportunity to take more classes (or credits) than are required to graduate. If you take only the minimum, colleges will conclude that you are doing the least you must do to get by. If you take extra classes (or credits) but they are soft-ball classes (like basket-weaving or calisthenics), this looks just as bad.

The best high school transcript will show consistent grades in a challenging course load with challenging classes. [AP classes](#) or advanced classes impress colleges and tell them that you are ready for college-level work.

What's a Good SAT Score or ACT Score?

So, you just received your SAT or ACT scores and you're not sure whether you should crack open that '72 sparkling cider or immediately register for the next test date. Well, it all depends on the colleges you are considering. A 23 on the ACT or a 1800 on the SAT may be above average at one university but below average at another. The higher your score, the more options are open to you.

The Higher, the Better

The national average for the new SAT is 1500. For the ACT, it's between 20 and 21. If you are close to these averages you will likely be accepted into a considerable number of colleges and universities (as long as you have decent grades), but may not be considered at more selective schools. Above average SAT/ACT scores will improve your chances of getting into a more selective school.

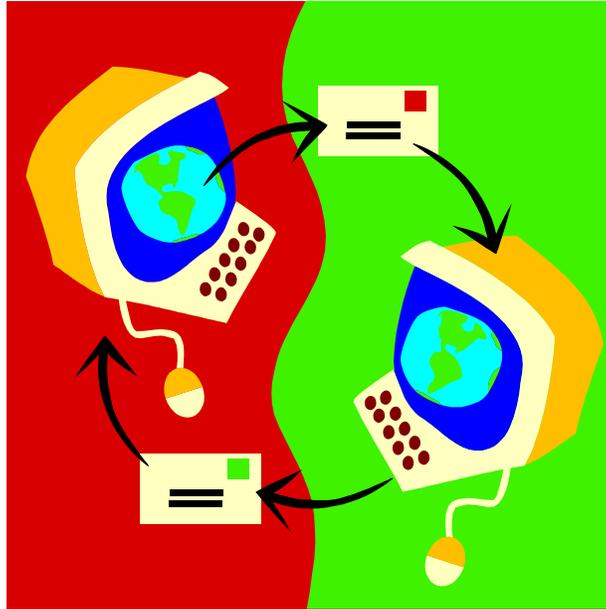
Scores below an 1100 on the SAT or a 15 on ACT are considered low at just about any four-year college. You can overcome low scores with good grades or an outstanding application. But even if you're accepted by a four-year college, the school may advise or require you to take some remedial courses as a freshman.

Not sure where you stand? Most colleges publish admission data regarding the previous year's freshman class. Check out the range of scores.

Room for Improvement

Unless you pulled in a perfect 2400 or 36, you can always improve your score. Some students are confident that their numbers are high enough to get them into the college of their choice. But unless you're an honorary member of the admissions committee, you never know.

A good SAT score or ACT score can also help you snag additional scholarship money. Even if you have already been accepted to a college, you may want to consider taking the test again (say, in December or January of senior year) for that reason.



E-mailing Colleges

Any contact you have with the admissions office of a school will leave an impression. You do not want to be remembered as the student who misspelled the name of the college!

Follow these suggestions and you won't raise red flags:

- Keep it short! Focus on your questions, not on yourself. There will be plenty of time for you to concentrate on personal attributes when you complete the application.
- Minimize the number of questions you ask. You can always make a few more inquiries later, after you've built a relationship with the admissions office.
- Give your name and high school graduation year.
- Give the name and city of your high school.
- Be sure to include your home address.
- Make sure you have no spelling or grammatical errors. First impressions matter.
- Make sure your email address is not juvenile or offensive (i.e. thug_killa@review.com or fly_girl@review.net). You may need to create a new e-mail for college correspondence.

Whenever you contact a college, they will respond according to your graduation year. If you are a freshman or sophomore, don't be surprised if you don't hear back right away. You may not receive any material until you are a junior or senior. Don't forget that admissions requirements and scholarship criteria can change over time, so make sure all the information you have is current.



College Application Requirements

There's More Than Just a Form

Applications vary from college to college, but most require some or all of the following parts:

Application Form

In the old days (well, a few years ago), you had one application option—a handwritten or typed form. Today you can often apply online directly to an individual school or use the Common Application, entering your information just once.

Application Fee

The average college application fee is around \$25. (Some colleges charge up to \$60, while others don't have an application fee at all.) The fee is usually nonrefundable, even if you're not offered admission. Many colleges offer fee waivers for applicants from low-income families. If you need a fee waiver, call the college's admission office for more information.

High School Transcript

This form is filled out by an official of your high school. If it comes with your admission materials, you should give it to the guidance office to complete as early as possible. Some colleges send this form directly to your school after receiving your application.

Admission Test Scores

At many colleges, you have to submit SAT[®], SAT Subject Test[™], or ACT test scores. Test scores are a standard way of measuring a student's ability to do college-level work.

Letters of Recommendation

Your entire application should create a consistent portrait of who you are. Many private colleges ask you to submit one or more letters of recommendation from a teacher, counselor, or other adult who knows you well. When asking someone to write such a letter, be sure to do so well before the college's deadline.

Essay

If you're applying to private colleges, your essay often plays a very important role. Whether you're writing an autobiographical statement or an essay on a specific theme, take the opportunity to express your individuality in a way that sets you apart from other applicants.

Interview

This is required or recommended by some colleges. Even if it's not required, it's a good idea to set up an interview because it gives you a chance to make a personal connection with someone who will have a voice in deciding whether or not you'll be offered admission. If you're too far away for an on-campus interview, try to arrange to meet with an alumnus in your community.

Audition/Portfolio

If you're applying for a program such as music, art, or design, you may have to document prior work by auditioning on campus or submitting an audiotape, slides, or some other sample of your work to demonstrate your ability.

The Sum of the Parts

Your entire application should create a consistent portrait of who you are and what you'll bring to the college. The more the pieces of the puzzle support one impression, the more confident the admission committee will be in admitting you. If the essay or interview contradicts information you gave on other forms, you may cause them to have doubts about accepting you.

If all the parts of your application are filled out honestly and carefully, with an attention to your conviction that each school is a good match for you, you will come across in the best light possible.