

How to ACE your College and Scholarship Applications...

College and scholarship selection committees review thousands of applications each year from qualified applicants. Below are some ways to ensure that your application stands out:

Academics

Obviously, academics are a critical part of college and scholarship selection processes. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Keep a strong academic record – Grades aren't everything, but they do matter.
- Follow a college preparatory curriculum in high school – AP, IB and Honors courses (if offered by your school) are a great way to prepare for your future goals. If your school does not offer these courses, take the most challenging ones available to you or seek opportunities to obtain credits through local colleges.
- Take four years of the core subjects – English, science, math and social studies.
- Select meaningful electives that reflect your interests and goals.
- Take the ACT & SAT – Plan ahead, study, practice and take them more than once to improve your score.

Community Service

Involvement in your community plays a crucial role in selection processes since it shows that you have a sense of responsibility, commitment and interest outside of the classroom. When describing your community service activities, remember to include:

- The depth of your participation – Explain your roles and responsibilities and describe their value and importance to the organization.
- The length of your commitment – Be clear when describing the time commitment associated with the activity. Was it a one-time event, or has it become a regular part of your schedule? How frequently do you participate and for how long each time?
- Leadership and initiative – Selection committees want to identify people who will be leaders on their campuses. Describe how you assumed leadership roles, initiated projects or led others through your volunteer efforts.
- Be specific and detailed in your descriptions to ensure selection committees understand EXACTLY what you did and how you contributed to the organization!

Extracurricular Activities

Describing your extracurricular activities allows you to tell the selection committees about all of the amazing things with which you have been involved. Other than academics and community service, extracurricular activities include nearly everything else you spend your time doing. You'll want to:

- Consider your involvement with the arts, athletics, school clubs and organizations, civic groups, work, internships, summer programs, hobbies and special interests.
- Select activities based on your true interests, talents and passion, not just because you think they'll look good on a resume.
- Describe the depth of your participation – What did you do? How did you contribute? Give details and paint a picture of your value to the organization.
- What was the length of your commitment? How much time did you spend each week with the activity? How many weeks per year were you involved?
- What leadership or initiative did you exhibit? Be SPECIFIC and DETAILED when describing your involvement on an application.

Tips for Writing a Successful Scholarship Application

Presentation Counts - Show You Care!

1) Adhere to Deadlines

- Is it a "Postmarked" or "Received by" deadline? Plan accordingly.
- Send in your application well before the deadline to leave time for follow-up, if necessary.
- If others are mailing information on your behalf, make sure they also know the deadline and follow up with them to make sure their materials are submitted on time.

2) Follow Directions

- Many applications will outline space and length requirements, tell you if they prefer/accept handwritten applications vs. typed applications, require you to use the application forms they provide, accept supplemental material like resumes, news clippings, etc. Read the instructions carefully and pay attention to these specifics when completing your application!

3) Be Neat and Complete

- Copy or print a blank application to practice rough drafts before you fill out the actual application.
- Write clearly and not too small (no smaller than 10-point font, if typing).
- Use correct grammar, spelling and punctuation.
- Indicate not applicable "N/A" rather than leaving any section completely blank.

4) Look Over Everything Again

- Did you explain how you fulfill the selection criteria and why you're a good candidate?
- Proofread! Have a few people read the application for clarity and mechanics.
- Keep a copy of everything for your records. Many interview questions come from the application, so keeping a copy to review before an interview can be helpful. As you fill out subsequent applications, it can also be helpful to refer to those you have already completed.

Content Counts!

5) Focus on Selection Criteria

- Since your application will be read and scored based on the stated criteria, make sure you have addressed them throughout the application.

6) Be Specific and Detailed About Your Past Achievements

- While every space does not need to be filled, make sure each entry is specific and detailed.
- Instead of writing "Prom committee," try "Designed 3-month advertising campaign for Prom."
- Instead of just "Volunteer," try "Organized yearly bingo night for over 100 senior citizens."
- Most importantly, BE HONEST! Don't invent or embellish your accomplishments.

7) Essays and Short Answers

- Answer the question/prompt and remember the selection criteria in your response.
- Be personal and descriptive. The readers want to get to know you and your experiences.
- Be organized and concise, demonstrating the critical thought you have given your application and your ability to articulate your thoughts clearly and effectively.

8) Recommendations

- Ask writers approximately four weeks before you need a letter.
- Provide a resume and encourage writers to focus on how you fulfill the selection criteria.
- Follow up to remind writers about the deadline and ask if they need any more information.
- Write a thank you note to the person for his/her time and help in the application process.

Tips for Writing an Exceptional Application Essay

A Great Essay Will:

- Provide insight into who you are and what you value.
- Be personal and unique in a way that highlights your identity and/or personality.
- Have a certain depth of purpose.
- Engage the reader.
- Leave an impression on the reader.
- Challenge the reader to consider a subject, topic or opinion in a different light.
- Speak to the scholarship's selection criteria (in our case, academic ability/curiosity, service, initiative/leadership and character).
- Have gone through several edits and revisions.
- Follow instructions and respond to the essay prompt.
- Make a reading committee want to meet you in person.

Some General Tips:

Length – You should ensure that the essay is an appropriate length (one paragraph is way too short for a question that requests a 1-page response). At the same time, students should not exceed the maximum page or word allowance.

Topic – Ensure that your essay topic is creative and relevant, and that it speaks to the question. The best topics are those about which you are innately passionate. It is easy to write with sincerity when a topic is chosen for your distinctive appreciation (or condemnation) of it.

Tone – Read your essay aloud to ensure that the tone you desire comes across in the final product. This can help you determine if your sarcasm or humor is likely to be misinterpreted, if your emphasis is unintentionally melodramatic, if your sincerity rings true, etc.

Format – Remember to use separate paragraphs to create distinctive sections in the essay and distinguish ideas from each other! An essay that is one long paragraph instead of being broken up into different points can be difficult to read, and readers may get lost. Follow instructions regarding point-size, font, etc. Not doing so is a sign of carelessness.

Some Specific Tips:

Essays About Other People – If writing about a special person (from your own experience or a famous or historical figure), you should relate this person to your own life, goals or aspirations. If you don't provide some information as to why you chose this person to write about, the essay becomes a biography of someone else without any insight into why you find your subject compelling or admirable.

Essays About Challenges – This type of essay is most effective when it provides insight into who you are by describing the challenge and illustrating why it was important to you to attempt to overcome it. Describe the actions taken to work towards your desired result and tell your reader what you learned from the experience or how the experience changed you.

Resources for Financial Aid Information

Free Application for Financial Aid (FAFSA)

All colleges and universities require their students to fill out the FAFSA to be considered for financial aid. You can complete an application at your own pace on the Internet and can easily check the status of it later. Follow these instructions to get started:

- Before completing the FAFSA online, you must obtain a PIN number at www.pin.ed.gov.
- With your PIN number, go to www.fafsa.ed.gov. The FAFSA website also has useful information about other financial aid programs offered by the government.
- Financial aid is distributed on a first come, first served basis. Fill out the application as soon as possible in January as you do your taxes. You can change the information later if necessary.
- To receive a paper FAFSA form, call (800) 4-FED-AID. You can also request other federal publications, such as "Funding Education Beyond High School" and receive help with many questions and concerns. Before having a form sent to you, check your local high school, college or public library for a FAFSA form.

Free Scholarship Searches and Internet Resources

While numerous companies offer scholarship search services for a fee, you can find all of the same information yourself with a little bit of work. The internet is a great place to start because it is free and up-to-date. Some good places to start searching are:

Scholarship Experts: www.scholarshipexperts.com
Princeton Review: www.princetonreview.com
Scholarships.com: www.scholarships.com

College Answer: www.collegeanswer.com
Fastweb: www.fastweb.com
Mach25: www.collegenet.com/mach25

Some other useful sites are:

- **www.finaid.org:** You can estimate your EFC (Estimated Family Contribution) now to plan ahead financially. Includes links to the scholarship searches listed above, links to colleges' financial aid pages, student loan information and much more.
- **www.nasfaa.org:** The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators web site gives general information on aid. Look under the tab "Parents & Students". The site also includes links to other information pages, including NCAA regulations.
- **www.studentaid.ed.gov:** The U.S. Department of Education site supplies information on Federal Student Aid programs, including maximum awards and eligibility.
- **www.collegeboard.com:** The College Board provides good general information, online registration and test dates for the SAT.
- **www.actstudent.org:** This site has information on the ACT exam, including dates, practice tests and financial aid.
- **www.salliemae.com:** Sallie Mae presents good general information, a general, step-by-step financial aid application process explanation and good information on student loans.
- **www.collegeincolorado.org:** Here, you will find information on student services for the colleges and universities in Colorado, test preparation, career options, higher education opportunities, college planning tools and more.
- **www.college-assist.com:** College Assist offers invaluable guidance about financing an education in Colorado.

Books

There are over 500 books printed about college scholarships. Here are some to get you started:

- Colorado Council on High School/College Relations, Colorado Collegiate Handbook – best for in-state information. Cost is about \$15. To order, see your counselor or visit www.coloradocouncil.org.
- The College Board Scholarship Handbook
- Peterson's College Money Handbook

Preparing for College: It's Never Too Soon

Freshman Year: Plan for the Future

- Introduce yourself to your guidance counselor.
- Register for courses in academic areas (English, math, science, social studies and foreign language) required for college entrance.
- Do well academically! Remember, ninth grade sets the stage for your academic performance in high school and is the first set of grades college admission's officers will see on your transcript.
- Explore your extracurricular opportunities and begin to get involved in activities that are meaningful to you. Join clubs, participate in school activities and volunteer for service organizations that match your interests.

Sophomore Year: Begin to Broaden your Experiences

- Become involved and committed to a community service organization or project.
- Deepen your involvement in several extracurricular activities to broaden your experience and help you build relationships with other students and with faculty.
- Meet with your guidance counselor and make sure you're on target with the right courses.
- Register for the PLAN test, which will help identify academic career interests. Take a practice SAT - Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT).

Junior Year: Test and Inquire

- Take on leadership roles in extracurricular and community service activities, or take the initiative to create your own organization or project.
- Enter the PSAT/NMSQT competition. Top scorers often qualify for college scholarships.
- Create a tentative list of colleges for consideration, and contact them to request information or get on their mailing lists to receive information about the schools.
- Attend college fairs and workshops and review college catalogs and guides.
- Take the ACT and SAT. Remember that you can take these exams more than once and many students improve their scores the second and even third time around.
- Take the SAT II tests if required by colleges on your list.
- Remember to request that your scores be sent to schools and scholarship providers that you are interested in.
- Visit college campuses and take campus tours during summer break (or sooner).
- Carefully consider various summer job and volunteer work opportunities.
- Search for and prepare to apply for scholarships (summer prior to senior year).

Senior Year: Apply, Visit and Confirm

- Continue involvement and leadership in extracurricular activities and community service.
- Take/retake ACT/SAT or SAT II tests if you would like to improve your scores.
- Narrow college choices to three-to-four colleges, including a "back-up" school in case top choices do not work out. (Attending college fairs/workshops can be helpful in this process).
- Send for admissions applications or download the necessary forms online, apply for admission and establish relationships with admissions counselors at the schools to which you apply. During the application process:
 - Prepare a personal essay.
 - Contact teachers/counselors about writing letters of recommendation.
 - Fill out a FAFSA form (January).
 - Apply for scholarships (each has its own deadline).
 - Consider admission offers, and confirm your intent to enroll.
 - Take Advanced Placement Tests.
 - Request that a final transcript be mailed to your college of choice and ensure that your college receives it.