



# The College Search Handbook

**Written by Mr. Jim Jump**

Director of College Counseling, St. Christopher's School  
(Richmond, VA) and President, National Association of  
College Admissions Counseling

## **GETTING IN - The Application Process**

The third step in selecting a college is the application process itself. Once you have determined the qualities you want in a college environment and researched possible college choices, it is time to focus on marketing yourself as a candidate for admission.

### **Some Comments about "Getting In"**

- The college application process is a good measure of your readiness for college itself. If you are mature enough to go to college, you should be independent and responsible enough to complete applications, register for SAT's, and do the other things required to apply to college. If the adults in your life have to do more than assist you, you may not be ready for college (and that's okay).
- Of all the things you will do during your senior year, applying to college is probably the most important. Long after you have forgotten about tests, athletic events, yearbook deadlines, and yes, even weekends, your college choice will be influencing your quality of life. Please keep this in mind and make sure you set aside time to do a good job on the application process.
- You will only go through this process once (and you will probably be glad of that by the time you finish). You owe it to yourself to do it right. If you have a school you've always wanted to attend, give it a shot. The worst that can happen is you don't get in, but you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you tried. The only way to guarantee that you won't be admitted to a college is not to apply.
- The application is an opportunity to show a college admissions committee what things make you special compared with the average high school student. This is not a time to be modest. If you don't know why you are special and deserving of admission, you can't expect the college to figure it out.
- In the college admissions process, there are some things you can control and others over which you have little or no control. You have control over the schools to which you choose to apply, and you control how much time and effort you spend on the application process. You have less control over whether or not you gain admission, as that is largely a product of the competition for places in the freshman class. The college admissions process represents the first time in your life you may face rejection, where you can do everything right and still not be successful. That's probably valuable preparation for being an adult, but it's not an easy lesson to learn. The best way to approach applying to college is to focus on the things you can control and not worry about those you can't control. There is no way of guaranteeing that you will be admitted to the college of your choice, but you can guarantee that you will end up with several good options by applying to a range of colleges, any of which you would be happy to attend.

## **How Colleges Select**

The college admissions process is no less stressful for colleges than it is for students. Most colleges are heavily dependent on enrollment for their existence, and they devote a great deal of time and money attempting to interest prospective students in enrolling.

How the admissions process works at a given college or university depends on the competition for admission. Most institutions are looking for a freshman class of a fixed size, and can't afford to under-enroll (due to budget reasons) or over-enroll (due to lack of residence hall space). The more applications a college receives, the more choosy it can afford to be, but 90% of the 3,000 colleges and universities in the United States will admit any student who meets minimum qualifications for admission.

There are, however, approximately 200 schools nationally that qualify as truly selective (they have more highly-qualified applicants than spaces). The competition at these schools can be difficult to believe. At Stanford, for instance, any applicant with no grade below "A" on his or her high school transcript has a 1 to 3 chance of being admitted. Harvard admits fewer than half of applicants with perfect SAT scores of 1600, and Princeton rejects 60% of the high school valedictorians who apply. At schools like these (substitute places like Brown, Georgetown, and Duke, if you wish), being qualified, even superbly qualified, is no guarantee of admission.

## **High School Record**

Your academic record in high school is the best predictor of the kind of student you'll be in college, so your daily performance is the single most important factor in the admission decision. Your record should show genuine effort, intellectual ability, and a real interest in learning. Your high school record includes:

- The courses you've taken - Even before most colleges will look at your grades, they will look at what you've taken. The more selective the college, the more likely it is to focus on strength of schedule. You should take as many courses in the five academic "food groups" (English, math, science, history, and foreign language) as possible. You should also take Honors and Advanced Placement courses where appropriate. As a rule of thumb, if you can make a B in an Honors course as opposed to an A in a regular course, you are probably better off in the Honors course. The choice between a C in an Honors course and a B in a regular course isn't as clear.
- Grades - Of course, colleges will look at your grades as well. When you apply to colleges, your high school sends a transcript with all of your high school work shown. It is important that you do your best work, regardless of whether that means A's or C's. You can recover from a bad freshman year, but maybe not not a junior-year slump, but you also can't wait until the junior year if you want to attend a selective college.
- The School - Your high school record will be judged in the context of the school you attend. College admissions officers want to see you challenge yourself relative to what is offered at your school. They want to see you push yourself academically to show that you are ready for the challenges of college-level work. And many will tell you that your senior year ought to be your most demanding year rather than a year to take a light load.

Unfortunately, there are exceptions. Some large public universities admit students based solely on a formula using SAT scores and high school GPA, and do not consider the strength of the high school. With every application, your high schools likely sends detailed information about its program and student profile in order to put a student's record into context.

## **Standardized Tests**

Colleges will look at the results of your standardized testing, particularly the SAT: Reasoning test. Colleges will see all of your scores, but will usually count the best Critical Reading score combined with the best Math score and best Writing score, even if taken on different dates.

Except at colleges and universities which use a formula to admit, SAT scores generally do no more than get a student “in the ballpark” for admission. If your high school record makes you competitive for admission, your scores need to be competitive as well, and once they are competitive, raising them will probably not significantly improve your chances for

## **Extracurricular Activities**

In addition to your academic credentials, colleges will be interested in what you do with the rest of your time. Your extracurricular interests tell colleges a lot about what you value and how you spend your time, and in addition a college campus needs students who will be actively involved in campus life. Extracurricular activities will not earn you admission by themselves unless you have won a Nobel Prize or star in your own sitcom, but they can tip the scales if your academic record makes you a marginal candidate.

With regard to activities, quality is more important than quantity. One or two activities (whether it be a school activity, sport, job, hobby, or community service) that demonstrate commitment, passion, and excellence are preferable to a bunch of superficial memberships in clubs that do

admission. Similarly, a huge increase in scores probably won't help you if your grades aren't competitive

How do you tell if your scores are competitive? If your scores are within the middle 50% range of scores (found in The College Handbook published by the College Board) or fall within 100 points of the mean score for a given college, you are “in the ballpark.”

You should also consider taking SAT Subject tests in any subject where you might score well. Strong SAT Subject test scores can give weight to your grades.

nothing. If being a tour guide is your most significant activity but you've never given a tour, you probably should come up with something else.

Every high school in the country has a student council president and a newspaper editor, and as a result those titles alone will not impress colleges – it's what you do with the position. If you are applying to highly-selective colleges, you should have earned distinction beyond the school (at the state, regional, or national level) to distinguish yourself from other candidates.

Don't pick activities just because you think they will impress admission officers, because anything you choose for that reason alone is likely to be a huge waste of time.

## **The Essay**

The essay is your best opportunity to improve your chances of admission on the application itself. At highly-competitive colleges application essays get careful consideration in the admissions process, and a good essay can bring to life the human being underneath the pieces of paper that make up an application folder. If the essay is an optional piece of the application, you ought to view it as an opportunity to separate your application for other students who choose not to submit an essay. It is an opportunity that could ultimately make a difference in college's decision making process. (For more information see the section on Essay Writing.)

## **Letters of Recommendation**

A letter of recommendation from a teacher or other person who knows you well can bring out information about you that doesn't show up in the rest of your application. Most colleges do not require recommendations other than the one written by your guidance counselor, a few colleges (Washington and Lee and Hampden-Sydney are examples) ask for one or two teacher recommendations, and some colleges will not read recommendations. Like extracurricular activities, quality is more important than quantity with regard to recommendations. (There is an old saying in college admissions that says, "The thicker the folder, the thicker the student.") You should send unsolicited recommendations if and only if they add information to your application. (For more information, see the section on recommendations.)

## **Special Categories**

Some other factors (most beyond your control) that may improve your chances for admission:

- Legacy status - Being the child of an alum will generally get you special consideration, and in some cases having a brother or sister who attended may work to your benefit. The more distant the relative, the less impact.
- Underrepresented minority status - If you are a member of an ethnic group traditionally underrepresented on a given campus, you may have an advantage in the admissions process. All colleges want a diverse student body.
- Athletic ability or other special talent - Every college and university that fields intercollegiate athletic teams, whether it be the University of Oklahoma or M.I.T., needs to recruit athletes who can successfully do the academic work. Being a recruited athlete may improve your chances of admission. This holds to a lesser extent for musical or other kinds of talent.
- Geographic diversity - If you are an applicant from a part of the country which sends few students to Death Valley State or the College of Hard Knocks, you may get special consideration. This almost never benefits students from Virginia, as nearly every college in the country draws students from Northern Virginia.
- Academic major - Your chances of admission may improve if you are interested in majoring in a discipline which attracts few majors at a given school. For example, Johns Hopkins has excellent programs in the humanities, but receives the great majority of applications from prospective pre-med majors, so anyone with a humanities bent will get careful consideration. If you love the Classics and your high

school record demonstrates that, you may be an appealing candidate at some schools, but you shouldn't choose a prospective major just to improve your chances of admission.

- There is some evidence that being male makes you a desirable applicant at some colleges, given that males make up only about 42% of the students in college nationally. This is most common at liberal-arts colleges.
- Colleges are interested in enrolling students who want to attend the institution, and many schools are attempting to gauge the level of a student's interest by tracking campus visits, attendance at school visits and receptions, and contacts by phone and e-mail. Make sure that you take advantage of various opportunities to demonstrate your sincere interest in the schools to which you are applying.

### **Deciding Where to Apply**

By the end of the middle of the first semester of your senior year, you should have decided the list of colleges to which you plan to apply. You do not need to know exactly where you would like to go (although many of you will), and in fact that may be counterproductive at this point. In selecting the schools to which you plan to apply, you should be seeking a range of schools (in terms of selectivity), all of which are good matches for your ability and your interests and any of which you would be happy to attend. You should never apply to a college you wouldn't gladly attend.

### **How Many Applications?**

There is no single number of applications that's right for everyone. Some students apply to only one college, while others may have good reasons for applying to 8 or 10 schools. (If you are planning to apply to 12 or 15, you probably haven't done a good job of narrowing down your preliminary list of choices.)

In general, it is recommended that you apply to 4-6 schools. At least one (and preferably more) of these should be places that you and your guidance counselor agree are safeties, schools where you are a sure bet for admission. Many schools don't want to be seen as safety schools, and some will even Wait List strong applicants they believe are not serious about enrolling. It is therefore essential that you think carefully about every school to which you choose to apply and that you are able to articulate through your application why you are a good fit for that school. The rest of your list is determined by where you think you would like to go and what other schools add to your list of options.

In deciding where to apply, try not to be guided by what you hope will happen. Take a good, hard look at your chances of admission and plan your list of applications accordingly. If your first and second choices don't work out, where would you want to go?

### **Types of Applications - Regular, Rolling**

There seems to be an increasing (and confusing) variety of admission plans and deadlines, but most fall into several categories. The plan used by the majority of colleges is what might be called Regular admission. In regular admission all applications received by a deadline (generally falling between January 1 and March 1) will receive equal consideration, with admission decisions sent out in late March or early April. If you are applying for regular decision, make sure you know the application deadline.

Rolling admission is a plan used by a number of large, public universities (as well as some smaller colleges). In rolling admission, applications are considered as they are complete on a first-come, first-served basis, with decisions sent out as they are made. Rolling admission does not operate the same way at every school. Some colleges will guarantee a decision within two weeks or a month after the application is complete, others are rolling admission if you meet certain standards, and places like the University of Georgia make decisions at several points during the year, deferring other candidates until the spring. If you are applying to a school which uses rolling admission, you should consider applying early in the fall.

### **Type of Application - Early Options**

Early Decision is a plan used by many colleges for students who have a clear-cut first choice. Under Early Decision, a student who applies by the college's Early Decision deadline (generally between November 1 and December 1, although a number of colleges now have a "second" Early Decision in January) will receive a decision before the winter holidays. In general, you are obligated to enroll if you are accepted Early Decision, and you will probably be asked to pay an enrollment deposit and withdraw your other applications. (Some colleges have a plan known as Early Action, where you will receive the decision by late December or early January but are not obligated to enroll until May 1.)

Early Decision programs have been a topic for discussion nationally, and no one is happy with the Early process as it currently exists. Media coverage of Early Decision suggests that applying E.D. is an advantage in the admissions process, and as a result Early Decision numbers have skyrocketed.

When should you consider Early Decision? There are two questions that determine if Early Decision is a good strategy. The first, and most important, is "Have you done a thorough job of researching your college options, and do you have a clear-cut first choice?" If you can't answer that question with a "yes," Early Decision is a mistake. The other question is, "Do you need your senior year to significantly improve your chances of admission?" If you are counting on senior-year grades or SAT scores to make you a viable candidate, you probably shouldn't think about Early Decision. Early Decision may be something to consider if you are a recruited athlete (at many highly-academic schools, coaches and admission offices attempt to get athletes to commit early) or a legacy. Every year there are students who apply Early Decision as a strategy knowing they are borderline candidates, but who are crushed when they get deferred. If you are not accepted Early Decision, you will most likely be deferred into the regular applicant pool, although some schools will reject students outright. How will you react if you are deferred or denied?

When shouldn't you consider Early Decision, other than being unable to answer the questions above correctly? Don't apply early to get the process over, and many colleges advise against applying early if you are applying for need-based financial aid.

### **Estimating Your Chances**

There are several tools you can use to estimate your chances of admission at a given institution. The guidance office at your school may keep detailed records for each college applied to by students over the previous few years, including GPA and SAT scores for each applicant as well as the decision plus any special circumstances. By comparing your credentials you can get an idea of how applicants with similar records have fared. (Of course past experience may not predict future results.) In addition, many colleges publish profiles of their entering freshman class which can be useful indicators, and you also might use The College Handbook (College Board), which publishes numbers of applications and acceptances along with middle 50% ranges for SAT scores.

### **If You Are Considering the Ivies**

Several years ago at a lunch meeting, the Director of Admissions at Williams College shared an interesting statistic. Of the students who enter Williams each fall, a group as talented as at any college in the country, 90% are rejected by at least one college they apply to. His point was that if you are a certain type of student, you have a reasonable chance of earning admission to at least one Ivy League-type institution, but you have no guarantee that it will be the one you want. Take this into account if you are serious about wanting to attend a highly-selective Northeastern school. Make sure you apply to several, including at least one not being considered by a number of your classmates. Diversify your list to improve your chances.

### **The "UVA Line"**

It is not unusual for students to want to stay in the Southeast to go to college. That makes sense, but for a certain type of student it poses a difficult dilemma. If you would like to attend a small, liberal-arts college, there are a relatively limited number of options (the states of Ohio and Pennsylvania alone contain as many strong liberal-arts colleges as the entire Southeast). Similarly, if you are the kind of student who is a borderline candidate for places like UVA and William & Mary, you will be a borderline candidate for the other prestigious Southern universities. In terms of admissions selectivity, the schools in the South tend to fall in clusters, with few in-between schools. If you want a certain type of college, you may need to consider options outside the Southeast. There is also a good argument to be made for going to a different part of the country to get a broader education.

## **College Application Guidelines**

- If you are submitting a paper application, the completed application should be mailed according to your guidance office's policies. Keep a copy for your files.
- If you are applying on-line, print a copy of the application and turn into your guidance counselor to indicate that the application has been sent. Be sure to download any forms to be filled out by your guidance counselor. It is recommended that you print out a copy to proof before submitting, and that you print out a copy of the completed application for your files.
- If you use the on-line Common Application, turn in to your guidance counselor a printed copy of the application form along with a Secondary School report form and a list of colleges to which you are submitting. Many colleges which accept the Common Application also require that you fill out a supplement. You can access the forms on-line by going to the Common Application website, [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org).
- It is your responsibility to request application forms from colleges, and it is recommended that you call, write, or go on-line by the end of September to get an application for any college to which you might apply.
- You are responsible for keeping track of deadlines.
- Read directions carefully.
- Make a copy of the blank application form. Use the copy as a rough draft before filling out the application form itself.
- Be sure that the application is neat and legible. (While neatness counts, it is not permissible to have someone else fill out the application for you.) Typing is recommended (if you have a typewriter, that is), and you can attach separate sheets with essays, lists of activities, etc., as long as you write your name and social security number (along with the number of the question you are answering).
- List activities in descending order of importance. Be sure to list honors won, offices held, and explain where necessary (college admissions officers may not know what SEA or Missionary Society are).
- You may attach separate sheets where necessary. If you do, make sure you put your name and birth date or social security number on each sheet and that you make clear what question or essay the separate sheet applies to.
- Don't feel obligated to fill in every single blank. If you don't have any honors or awards to list, don't worry about it. (When you apply to graduate school, there will be a huge space for you to list your "Publications." Most people don't have any, but if you do, they want to know.)

- The application is your opportunity to give colleges a picture of who you are and what makes you special. If there is something you think is important but the college hasn't asked, don't hesitate to write an additional essay. You may also send examples of creative work.
- Make a copy of the completed application for your files.
- Make sure you have included a check and completed all required signatures (these are the most common mistakes on most applications).
- See your guidance counselor if you have questions and inform them whenever you receive correspondence from a college.

If you receive a letter from a college stating that something is missing from your application, **don't panic**. Many college admission offices automatically send a letter upon receipt of an application listing things that need to be sent in, and especially around deadlines it can take them up to three weeks to open and file incoming mail. Usually they have it but have not logged it onto their system. Upon receiving any communication suggesting that something is missing, talk to your college counselor.

## TESTING

“THIS IS ONLY A TEST! ... If this had been an actual emergency, you would have been instructed to panic.” Few people think of the SAT or other college admission tests as “only a test.” No other part of the admission process causes as much anxiety or misunderstanding as testing.

### Types of Tests

There are three types of tests you need to take and one other test you might want to consider:

**SAT: Reasoning** - The primary test required by most colleges, the SAT is a four-and-a-half-hour test including three sections – Critical Reading, Mathematics, and Writing. The SAT is scored on a 200-800 scale. The SAT should be taken in the spring of the junior year and the fall of the senior year.

**PSAT** - The PSAT serves as a practice test for the SAT, and is given once each year, in October. For juniors the PSAT serves as the qualifying test for the National Merit Scholarship Competition. Results for each year's PSAT are available in late December or early January. The PSAT is an excellent diagnostic tool for use in preparing for the SAT.

**SAT: Subject Tests** - SAT subject tests are one hour long, subject specific tests offered in seventeen different subjects. They are scored on a 200-800 scale. Most colleges use subject test scores for placement purposes, a small number of competitive colleges require two of all applicants (Washington & Lee is an example), and many colleges “strongly recommend” that applicants take them (UVA defines “strongly recommend” this way: “If we strongly recommend that applicants learn to juggle, we’d expect most to try”).

**ACT (American College Test)** - The ACT is an alternative to the SAT, used primarily by colleges and universities in the Deep South, Midwest, and West. It has English, Math, Science, and Reading subsections and is scored on a 12-36 scale. Most colleges will accept ACT scores in lieu of SAT scores. See your guidance counselor if you have questions.

### SAT or ACT?

Do you need to take both the SAT and the ACT? For most students, the answer is no. We continue to believe that the SAT should be the primary college admissions test taken by many students. Nevertheless, we have seen an increase in the number of students taking the ACT in addition to the SAT. Quite frankly, some of this is due to the test preparation industry, which has figured out that if you take two different college admission tests, you can then be convinced to take two different test prep courses.

It is common for students who take the ACT to feel that it is an easier test, but we have been comparing the scores of St. Christopher’s students who took both tests for the past several years, and during that period there is only one student whose performance on the ACT might have been better. Guidance counselors at other schools where a larger number of students take both tests suggest that 25% score better on the ACT.

## **Tests: How Many and When**

- You may take only the SAT Reasoning or Subject test, not both, on any one test date.
- Every student should plan to take the SAT Reasoning test at least once in the spring of the junior year and once in the fall of the senior year. Depending on your scores, you may choose to take it a third time, but it is highly unlikely that taking the SAT more than three times will produce a score increase.
- There is generally no advantage in taking the SAT before January of the junior year. Taking the PSAT will give you sufficient practice for the SAT, students rarely score well before that point, and all of your previous scores will be reported every time you take the test.
- You may take up to three SAT Subject Tests on any one date. You are asked to designate which tests you plan to take when you register, but you don't have to decide how many or which ones until the day of the test.
- Colleges usually request two or three SAT Subject Test scores - Mathematics (either Level One or Level Two), and your choice from among foreign language, science, or history.
- The best time to take an SAT Subject Test is when you are finishing a course. Ninth graders, especially those in Honors Biology, may want to take the Biology subject test. Juniors who are finishing up a foreign language should take the subject-area test at that time. If you have a question about whether or not you should take an SAT subject test, see your guidance counselors or your teacher in that subject.

## **General Testing Calendar**

### **Junior Year**

SAT: Reasoning: at least once, preferably March or May (Question and Answer Service available in May).

SAT: Subject: as appropriate, May or June

### **Senior Year**

SAT: Reasoning - at least once

SAT: Subject - as needed.

### **Registering for the SAT**

There are two ways (three if you have previously taken a test) to register for SAT Reasoning or SAT Subject tests:

- **Online** – The simplest and quickest way to register is to go to [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com) and use a personal account (called a My Organizer account) to register. You must have a credit card for payment in order to register online.
- **Mail** – Pick up a Registration Bulletin from your guidance counselor. Announcements are made in chapel for two weeks prior to each deadline. You must register by mail if you are paying by check or money order or if you are applying for SSD (Services for Students with Disabilities) accommodations.
- **Phone** – You may re-register by phone if you have previously taken either the SAT or Subject Tests. Registering by phone costs extra.

### **Late Registration**

You may still register in the week or so following the registration deadline by paying a late registration fee.

### **Standby Registration**

If you miss the late registration deadline, you may be able to take the test on a standby basis provided the test center has space and materials available. You should arrive at the test center by 8:00 a.m. with a completed registration form and payment plus a standby fee.

If you intend to take the test as a standby, it is recommended that you call the test center (the guidance office at the school where you plan to take the test) the day before the test date to see if space is available.

### **SAT Questionnaire**

You do not need to fill out the SAT Questionnaire (pages 2-3 of the registration form) in order to register for the test. It is recommended, however, that you complete the questionnaire at least once.

### **Question-and-Answer Service**

For an additional fee, you may order the Question-and-Answer Service for some administrations of the SAT I. The Question-and-Answer Service provides you with a copy of the test questions for the SAT I you took plus your answers, the correct answers, and instructions for scoring.

In most years the Question-and-Answer Service will be available in October, January and May. It is recommended that juniors taking the SAT in May sign up for the Question-and-Answer Service. The materials will arrive approximately eight weeks after the test.

### **Testing for Students with Disabilities**

Students with documented visual, hearing, physical, or learning disabilities may request special editions of the SAT Reasoning, SAT Subject, and ACT or, in the case of learning disabilities, may arrange to take a regular administration of the tests with extended time. Receiving Extended Time requires submitting a College Board SSD Eligibility Form (available at your high school) with documentation and going through the SSD Appeal Process. Completed paperwork should be submitted at least seven weeks prior to the desired test date. See the appropriate official at your school for more information.

## **Sending Scores to Colleges**

- It is the student's responsibility to see that SAT/ACT scores are sent to colleges. Most colleges require that an official score report be sent from the College Board or ACT.
- Most scores are reported online 2-3 weeks after the test date, with a full score report mailed to you, your high school and colleges you have requested approximately 4 weeks after the test date. A score report includes scores from all previous test administrations.
- You may have up to four score reports sent free to colleges each time you take the test, provided you order before the test date. Additional score reports may be sent for an additional fee. Seniors should have score reports sent to any college to which they plan to apply. Juniors may want to have scores sent, but it is not necessary.
- **Rush Reporting** - You may have your scores mailed within two working days after they are scored (it takes three weeks to score the test) by paying a fee and requesting rush reporting. See the Registration Bulletin for details.

## **Score Choice**

Beginning in the Spring of 2009, the College Board is launching Score Choice, a new policy that allows a student to select which SAT Reasoning and Subject test scores will be reported to colleges. Prior to Score Choice, all previous SAT scores have appeared on a student's record, and that will continue to be the case unless a student elects to use the Score Choice option. It is too early to know how this policy will work, and there is some discussion that many colleges will require students to submit all their scores. Because the policy is new, we don't have a strong recommendation on whether or not to use Score Choice, but we don't believe it should change testing procedures for most students. Most colleges will count your best SAT section scores (Critical Reading, Math, Writing), regardless of when you take them. In no case should this lead students to take the SAT more than three times in hopes of pulling up scores.

## **How Do Colleges Look at Test Scores?**

It is probably fair to say that test scores are not nearly as important as most students and parents think they are, and more important than college admission officers admit. I remember hearing an admissions officer from an Ivy League school tell prospective students with a straight face that SAT scores weren't important and that her institution admitted students with scores below 1000. What she didn't say, of course, is that almost all of those students are either child actors with hit TV sitcoms or children of the rich and famous.

College admission officers are generally believers in the validity of standardized tests, but test scores are but one component in the evaluation of a student's credentials, with the student's high school performance being more important.

Almost all colleges and universities evaluate SAT scores in one of two ways. They will either take the best total score earned in one administration or else take the best score from each section from all of the times the student has taken the test. Regardless of how a college calculates your SAT score, though, it will see all of your scores. Thus if you were to take the SAT five times with totals of 900 and once with a total of 1200, the 900's may appear to an admissions officer to be the more reliable score.

As a rule of thumb, you are probably a reasonable candidate for a college if your scores fall within the middle 50% range of scores for accepted students at that college. (The middle 50% range for colleges can be found in The College Handbook). If your scores fall below the middle 50% range or more than 100 points below the college's mean score, you probably need strength in some other area to counterbalance low scores.

### **PREPARING FOR THE SAT**

“Should he take an SAT course?”  
“What SAT course do you recommend?”  
The best preparation for standardized testing is exposure to a challenging academic curriculum, and in addition one of the reasons we have all students take the PSAT in grades 9-11 is to give them plenty of practice in taking tests like the SAT before they start to count. In deciding whether to take an SAT prep class, you first need to decide what you hope to accomplish. Are you trying to improve your Critical Reading and/or math skills? Are you looking to increase your scores significantly? Or do you just need to become familiar with the test and develop a little confidence?

The real value of an SAT preparation or coaching course is that it will make you more knowledgeable about the test and therefore less anxious. The SAT is a very predictable test - it always has the same number of the same kinds of questions, the questions on any given section (with the exception of the critical reading passages) go from easy to hard, and you should only guess if you can eliminate one or more answers as clearly wrong. The SAT is also a test of time management. You will maximize your scores by knowing how the test is constructed and how to use your time efficiently.

What an SAT course can't do is produce a dramatic increase in scores. Reputable studies have shown that commercial courses raise scores only minimally. A study of independent school students published in Independent School magazine several years ago concluded that it would take 12 hours of verbal coaching (8 hours for math) to produce a 10 point score increase; 57 hours of verbal coaching (19 hours for math) to produce a 20 point score increase; and that 300 hours of SAT coaching would produce a 31 point verbal increase or a 53 point math increase. You should be skeptical of any course that promises an average increase of 150-200 points.

If you need significant help with your verbal and/or math skills, a six-week course is not going to be much help. Don't sign up for a commercial SAT course that will charge you \$600 and give you a lot of junk you don't want or need. And with a little self-discipline, you can accomplish by yourself everything a course can do for you. Go to a bookstore, buy a copy of 5 SAT's or 10 SAT's, two books of old tests, and commit yourself to spending 30 minutes a night two or three times a week working on test questions, then checking yourself to see if you understand what you missed and why.

Before you commit yourself to taking a coaching course, make sure that the time you invest in a course is not better spent in other ways. From a college admission standpoint, you should not give up time you would otherwise spend on schoolwork in order to take on an SAT prep class, and likewise you are probably better

off spending your time pursuing a worthwhile extracurricular commitment.

If you are going to take an SAT course, the ideal times are in your junior year after you have received your PSAT scores and before the SAT in the spring or in the summer before your senior year.

A few more reminders about standardized testing and the SAT:

- Several weeks prior to the test, get a copy of Taking the SAT from the Guidance Office. This booklet, produced by the College Board, gives tips on preparing for the test, sample questions, and a practice test. Read it carefully.
- There are several Internet sites you can use to prepare for the SAT:
  - WebWare ([www.testprep.com](http://www.testprep.com)) – A free service of Scholastic Testing Systems, WebWare offers a diagnostic SAT I, utilizing the practice SAT found in the previous year's Taking the SAT I. Take that test in the booklet and enter, and you will receive both scores and a diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses.
  - The College Board website ([www.collegeboard.org](http://www.collegeboard.org)) offers a new SAT Question of the Day every day with explanation. It also offers a “Skill Builders” tutorial utilizing real SAT questions.
- Check your admission ticket when it arrives to make sure that all the information on it is accurate. Make corrections on the correction form if needed. If you have not received your admission ticket one week before the test date, you should call the College Board at 609-771-7600.
- Make sure you get a decent night's sleep the night before the test. You can probably give up one night of social life as an investment in your future. Before you go to bed, gather the items you will need to take with you to the test: your Admission Ticket, a driver's license or other picture ID, a watch (one which doesn't have an audible alarm), several sharpened No.2 pencils, a non-programmable calculator, and a candy bar to eat during a break.
- On the morning of the test, it is very important that you eat a high-protein breakfast. Even a hamburger is preferable to eating nothing. Plan to arrive at the test center at least 15 minutes early.

## Tips on Essay Writing

- The essay is the one place on the application where you can personalize the admissions process and significantly improve your chances of admission. Not every college requires an essay, but the more competitive the school, the more important the essay.
- Take your time. You can't write a good college essay the night before the deadline. Brainstorm, write a rough draft, put it aside for several days, then edit and rewrite.
- No matter what the specific topic, every essay question is really asking the questions, “Who are you?” and “What makes you special?” Think about what you want to communicate to the admissions committee through the essay. And don't be too modest - this is not the place. If you don't know why an admissions committee should accept you, you can't expect them to figure it out.
- Write about what you care about. The choice of a topic is important in producing a good essay. Most students are capable of producing a technically-competent essay, but the average application essay is mediocre because it is about the same subject as 6,000 other essays or because the writer doesn't know how to sort through his or her experience to pick a topic that is significant. Your goal should be to write an essay that no one else could write.
- The biggest mistake made by most students is writing essays that describe an activity rather than interpret its significance for the writer. As one former college admissions officer advised, don't write about your science fair project, write about your passion for science that led you to do the project.
- Answer the question. This may seem so obvious that it's not worth mentioning, but it's amazing how many people answer questions about a book that's influenced them by writing about a movie. If you're asked to write about a significant academic experience or goals, don't write about being on a sports team or about career goals. It's okay to use the same basic essay for more than one application, but make sure you address the specific question being asked.
- Avoid the obvious. If UVA has an “influential person” essay, you can safely bet that lots of people will pick Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson may or may not be a good answer, depending on what you have to say, but choosing him as the subject won't by itself help (and may hurt).
- Write in your own voice. Don't use a thesaurus to pull out a lot of three-dollar words that aren't part of your everyday vocabulary. Write simply and directly. There's nothing wrong with getting help from a parent, English teacher, or guidance counselor, but don't let anyone else keep you from writing a personal essay that is yours.
- Show rather than tell. Good writing is specific. Use anecdotes and examples to show how your trip to Europe changed your thinking rather than just saying that your thinking changed.
- Edit, edit, and edit.

## **SOME SAMPLE ESSAY QUESTIONS**

### **The “Significant Experience” Essay**

- Evaluate a significant experience or achievement that has special meaning to you.  
(Common Application)
- Discuss briefly the one or two academic experiences which have meant the most to you during your secondary school years (book, project, paper, specific course or subject.)  
(Harvard)
- What has been your most personally satisfying experience and why? (William and Mary)
- What one class, teacher, book, or experience can you point to as having really changed the way you think? (Princeton)
- Write a one-page essay about an experience that changed your view of life in a deep and significant way. (Cornell)

### **The “Influential Person” Essay**

- If you could spend the day with anyone, real or fictional, with whom would it be, and how would you spend your time. (Stanford)
- What prominent person (past or present) do you particularly admire? Why? (Dartmouth)
- Imagine that the year is 1881. You may expect to live another 35 years. What person would you most want to know well during that time? For what reasons? (Swarthmore)
- You are a journalist with a rare opportunity to interview any living person, deceased, or fictional. Whom would you choose? What do you feel you could learn from this person? (University of Pennsylvania)

### **The “Important Issue” Essay**

- Discuss some issues of personal, local, or national concern and its importance to you.  
(Common Application)
- Given the authority to establish a holiday, what would you choose to Commemorate?  
(Stanford)
- What is the single invention the world would be better off without, and why? (University of Miami)
- What do you see as the most pressing social problem currently facing humanity?  
(William and Mary)

### **The “Place” Essay**

- Write about a place that has been important to you, focusing on its significance in your life. (Stanford)
- Try to capture the flavor of your school, particularly any academic and social environment, the things you like best and least, and how such a place has helped you grow as a person. (Hofstra)
- Diversity among people contributes to a unique blend of cultures and enriches the university community. Briefly describe the environment in which you grew up and how it has influenced your thinking about such issues as sexism, racism, and prejudice. (Tufts)
- Look out any window in your home. Given the opportunity, what would you change about what you see? (UVA)

### **The “Self Recommendation” Essay**

- You are delivering your college alma mater's commencement address in the year 2020. Write the script for the dignitary introducing you. (William and Mary)
- Write a letter to your new college roommate introducing yourself and describing your background. (Carleton)
- In each person's life there are some things that have a greater impact than others. How you manage challenges on a day-to-day basis is an important part of your life. Please write an essay on how you decide what is important in your life and what is trivial.
- Write a college recommendation in which you evaluate your strengths and weaknesses. Discuss the qualities that set you apart from other applicants and how those will enable you to contribute to the College community. (College of Wooster)

### **The “Open-Ended” Essay**

- Tell us anything you would like us to know about you. (University of Virginia)
- Help us to know you as an individual. We want to know what you are thinking, what is important to you and why: relationships, feelings, ideas, and values. You might also comment upon the people, places, or experiences that have significantly influenced your development. (Davidson)
- An original essay, on any topic of your choice, will make your application three-dimensional and personal. Write about your life, past or present. Share your opinions with us. Describe a significant experience or experiment with your artistic talent. Anything. Be creative, be witty, be serious, but most of all, be yourself. (Bowdoin)

- We would like to give you the opportunity to develop your own question. What question would you choose to ask, why would you choose it, and how would you respond? (Simmons)
- Write a brief essay on a historical event, a book, a work of art, a scientific advance, or a personal experience that caused you to think about or question your notions of honor. (UVA)

### **Warm-Ups for Writing College Essay**

Briefly complete each statement:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am most proud of ...</li> <li>• The most unusual thing about me is ...</li> <li>• My favorite way to “hang out” is ...</li> <li>• I am most passionate about ...</li> <li>• If I could choose where to spend the next hour it would be ...</li> <li>• My hero(ine) is ...</li> <li>• I am most afraid of ...</li> <li>• If I had \$1000 to spend, I would ...</li> <li>• The hardest thing I've had to do is ...</li> <li>• If I could have three wishes, my <u>first</u> would be ...</li> <li>• Living on an island by myself would be ...</li> <li>• If I could have only three books on that island, they would be ...</li> <li>• I am most comfortable with myself when ...</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If I could choose someone famous as a dinner companion, it would be ...</li> <li>• My ideal job would be ...</li> <li>• I consider my most positive characteristic to be ...</li> <li>• I consider my biggest weakness to be ...</li> <li>• Three things that I would put into a time capsule to tell my great great grandchildren about me would be ...</li> <li>• If I could become recognized as exceptional in some way, it would be<br/>My ultimate goal is ...</li> </ul> |
|--|--|



## Some Recommendations on Recommendations

Letters of recommendation provide a means of giving the admissions office a perspective on your strengths and talent and any special circumstances that explain your record written by someone who knows you well. As with extracurricular activities, recommendations will not earn you admission if you are not otherwise qualified, but they can tip the scales.

Not every college treats letters of recommendation the same way. Most colleges require a recommendation from a school official. Some will ask for an additional teacher recommendation (sometimes two), in which case they will usually include a teacher's recommendation form in the application packet. Some will not even read recommendations.

Here are some guidelines for obtaining and sending recommendations:

- At many high schools every senior will automatically receive an official school recommendation written by a guidance counselor. The school recommendation is often prepared after input from teachers and coaches, and attempts to highlight a student's strengths and put his record in context. It is the policy of many high schools that all recommendations are confidential.
- It is your responsibility to obtain other required or optional recommendations from teachers and other individuals.
- Quality is more important than quantity when it comes to recommendations. There is an old saying in college admissions to the effect that, "The thicker the folder, the thicker the student." You are better off with one or two strong recommendations than with lots of letters that essentially say nothing.
- Teachers can be excellent sources of recommendations because they can comment on your work in the classroom. If the college does not ask for a recommendation from a specific (such as English) teacher, choose a teacher who knows you well and for whom you've done good work (this is not the same thing as "a teacher who likes you"). Ask the teacher if he or she feels comfortable writing a recommendation on your behalf, and ask at least three weeks in advance of the deadline. Make sure you provide the teacher with written instructions of which schools you need recommendations for, whether there is a form to fill out in addition to a narrative letter, and the exact deadline. Provide a self-addressed, stamped envelope if the teacher wishes to mail the recommendation directly.
- In deciding whether or not to get additional recommendations, the rule of thumb is whether or not they contain information not otherwise found in the application. An employer, clergyman, or scoutmaster may be able to comment on you from a different perspective. A letter from an alumnus or famous person who does not know you well is generally worthless.
- If you are going to ask someone to write a recommendation to more than one college, they can write one generic letter (Recommendation for \_\_\_\_\_) on letterhead to be sent to all schools. The letter can be attached to a particular college's form (see below).

- If the college has a teacher recommendation form, be sure to fill out the information at the top before you give it to the person writing the recommendation. It is recommended that you waive your right to see the recommendation because colleges tend to believe that those recommendations are more honest.
- Be sure to thank anyone who wrote you a recommendation.

## **A Sample College Admissions Timetable**

### **Spring, Junior Year**

- Do your best work academically. After this year you will have only one more semester before colleges will evaluate your applications. Take a good, hard look at your academic record. Does it accurately reflect your abilities and ambitions?
- Do you have one or two extracurricular commitments that you care about and have developed fully? Are there things you can do to demonstrate and develop your interests?
- Before February 1, think about the type of college and college experience you want - size, location, degree of academic rigor, campus environment, other factors.
- Take part in any college admission workshop offered by your school, engage in self-evaluation, generate initial college list, and seek advice from your guidance counselor.
- Schedule individual meeting with your guidance counselor according to your school's policies Try to develop a preliminary list of 10-25 college choices.
- Research
  - Send away for information from any college in which you have interest.
  - Acquaint yourself with reference materials in Guidance Office and spend some time reading about colleges.
- Try to visit at least 4-5 colleges before the end of the summer. Spring break may be a good time.
- Testing
  - Go over your PSAT results and answers once you have received them.
  - What can you learn to help you prepare for SAT-I?
  - Take SAT-I at least once, preferably March or May. If you take it in May, be sure to order the Question-and-Answer Service.
  - It is strongly recommended that you take the SAT Subject Math test (either level) by the end of the junior year. If you plan to submit an Early Decision application or are completing courses such as Physics, U.S. History, or foreign language, you should consider additional SAT Subject tests.

- See your guidance counselor whenever you have a question or after you have visited colleges.

### **Senior Year Calendar**

Here are some things you should do during the senior year to prepare for admission to college:

- Do your best work (particularly important during the first trimester, but important throughout the year).
- Meet with your guidance counselor. All seniors should schedule a meeting during September (or according to your school's policies). Then schedule appointments as necessary.
- Request applications from any college to which you might apply (September).
- Check over a copy of your transcript (September).
- Complete the necessary standardized testing. It is recommended that all seniors take the SAT at least once during the fall.

#### Date:

October	SAT recommended for Seniors
November	SAT and Subject Tests Optional
December	SAT and Subject Tests Optional
January	SAT and Subject Tests Optional

- Visit campuses (throughout the year).
- Meet with college representatives visiting your school throughout the fall.
- Final list of colleges to which you will apply (by Thanksgiving).
- Make sure that SAT/ACT scores are sent to all colleges to which you plan to apply. Many colleges require an official copy of scores sent from the College Board or ACT. It is recommended that seniors send the results of senior year tests to all colleges to which they plan to apply.
- Make time in your schedule to work on college applications and essays. The fall can go by very quickly, and applying to colleges is the most important thing you will do all year. You should allow several weeks to write and rewrite college essays, and your first college application should be completed and turned in no later than two weeks before the application deadline. (October-January).

- Ask any teacher whom you wish to write a recommendation at least three weeks in advance. If there is a specific recommendation form to be filled out, make sure that you sign the waiver and give to the teacher, and work out with them whether they wish to mail it directly to the college (in which case you should provide a stamped, addressed envelope) or give it to the Guidance Office to mail.
- If you plan to apply for financial aid, pick up a copy of the PROFILE form (used by about 250 colleges, mostly private) and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) from the Guidance Office. The PROFILE should be available in September and should be sent to the College Scholarship Service as soon as possible (because only a limited number of colleges use the PROFILE, check to make sure you need to fill it out). The FAFSA is not available until December and should be completed as soon as end-of-year tax information is available.
- Complete all college applications (by February 1).
- Inform your guidance counselor of all college decisions (as soon as you receive them).
- After you have made a decision from among your acceptances, make one and only one enrollment deposit. It is unethical to send a deposit to more than one college (you may deposit at a second college if you are admitted off a Wait List). (No later than May 1).
- Notify all colleges from which you have received acceptances but will not be attending. (No later than May 1).
- Meet with your guidance counselor to discuss strategy if you are on a Wait List. (Late April-early May).
- Final transcripts are automatically sent in Mid-June.