

Year 1: Get Going



Targets

Academics: straight A's

Extracurriculars: try 2-4

Tasks

Academics

- choose subjects of interest
- cultivate strong work habits and time management
- solidify fundamentals

Extracurriculars

- chose 1-2 ECs to commit to
- build up volunteering hours

GPA

GPA

Colleges may not strongly consider freshman-year grades, but academic rigor early on prepares your child for an honors track and gives them practice for the increased difficulty of high-school classes.

Major

Many students find the transition from middle school to high school difficult. The low stakes of a freshman-year report card mean that this is the best time for trial and error. Some students need a push from parents, guardians, or teachers, while others need space to navigate the social and emotional difficulties of their new environment—and understanding when things don't work out on the first try.

Work Habits

Freshman year is many students' first experience with a particular letter grade: first B, first C, etc. This is a critical make-or-break moment: it can either incentivize students to work hard or *disincentivize* students who interpret it to mean that they either are not smart enough to succeed in general or lack aptitude for the specific subject in question. If your child has the latter reaction, be sure to encourage, not just discipline.

Fundamentals

Depending on the school, some sophomore-year honors courses (or even extracurriculars) have grade prerequisites or require a freshman-year teacher's recommendation or approval. In these cases, strong grades are especially important.

Major

GPA

Freshman year is the best time to choose 1–2 favorite academic subjects—or at least decide between humanities and STEM. This establishes long-term priorities and goals.

Major

With the increased difficulty of high-school coursework comes increased engagement. Students—like all of us—do not appreciate their time being wasted. Many students say that the newfound challenge of high school (in the form of more interesting material) is preferable to the busywork they bore in middle school.

Work Habits

On a concrete level, choosing a major means you and your child can research future **competitions, internships, summer camps**, etc. to showcase [meaningful engagement](#) in this field.

Fundamentals

On an abstract level, commitment to a subject is a major predictor in a student's success. Studies* measuring growth show that commitment to a field outweighs even time spent by a factor of 400%. In this case, “commitment” means the student's belief that they will have a lifelong engagement with this field.

The long-term goal is to demonstrate proficiency in this field: for STEM, this means direct experience, often in the form of research; for humanities, this means recognition and/or a portfolio of work.

*in particular, Gary McPherson's study (which I encountered in *The Talent Code*, pg. 104)

Work Habits

GPA

Many students get straight A's in middle school without ever studying. Freshman year is an important time to experiment with different time-management and study methods.

Major

There are many productivity methods and “hacks.” Ultimately, strong work habits are about proactivity and accountability. I like this quote from James Clear (*Atomic Habits*):

“You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.”

Work Habits

Each student must develop their own “system,” or strategy for handling their heavy workload, through iterative evaluation. This, more than choosing any perfect strategy, will create the self-awareness necessary for success. Have your child use the SWOT method—or even just talk with them about their time-management strategies.

Sleep is critical to long-term success (and health). Pulling an all-nighter means the time-management system *failed*. Don't let (or encourage) your child sacrifice sleep for a short-term boost in GPA that will be outweighed by an eventual GPA crash.

Instead, use these crises as opportunities to improve your child's time-management strategies. It's trite to say that failure leads to success. But this only holds true if you can, as Coyle says, “capture failure and turn it into skill.”

Fundamentals

Planner



Task Planner



If you're not sure where to start, here's a task planner based on a modified version of the Eisenhower Matrix. Feel free to adjust or use it as inspiration for building your own time-management strategy.

Fundamentals

GPA

No one can be perfect in all subjects, but freshman year is a critical time to address weaknesses in fundamental areas, especially math, reading, and writing.

Major

Choosing a major is a double-edged sword: though it increases motivation for one subject, it often decreases motivation for others. Many students, after deciding to pursue—for example—engineering, will claim that they do not have aptitude for English. (Barring genuine language impairments, this is almost never true.)

Work Habits

However, while colleges do seek [meaningful engagement](#), students must contend with historical and modern pressures to be well-rounded: the liberal-arts tradition and increasing trend of interdisciplinary studies, respectively. Weakness in *any* fundamental area, regardless of performance in others, will compromise acceptance to top colleges.

Fundamentals

Simply looking at your child's report card is insufficient to determine strengths and weaknesses. While freshman-year coursework may seem difficult compared to middle-school coursework, it is not predictive of performance in rigorous APs.

Consider having your child taking the PSAT or SAT, or schedule a meeting with your child's subject teachers to discuss aptitude. But make sure to be clear that you want honest feedback; some parents can be sensitive!

Start Early

Start Early

Starting early doesn't just mean more time to improve. It also proves (as well as cultivates) commitment and the ability to follow through.

Passion

In many ways, time devoted to extracurricular is similar to experience listed on a résumé: just as employers often ask for three to five years of relevant experience, so too do colleges expect three to five years of dedicated pursuit of a primary extracurricular. There are three reasons for this.

First, **a college is a community**. A student's [meaningful engagement](#) with an extracurricular in high school implies that they will continue to engage with this extracurricular in college. Indirectly, this means that they will actively participate in group activities.

Second, **top students get good at getting good at things**. Don't buy into the myth of aptitude: getting good at things is itself a skill worth improving—one that takes time. Most of the students I met at or from top schools were neither one-field specialists nor well-rounded: they were impressively good in several unrelated fields.

Finally, **long-term engagement makes an application more believable**. Though some students *can* rapidly grow in an area, many students lacking three to five years of experience with a single extracurricular exaggerate their accomplishments to try to appear more competitive.

Collaboration

Volunteering

Passion

Start Early

The college-admissions process involves humans evaluating other humans. Genuine passion is one of the best ways to stand out to admissions officers.

Passion

As I mentioned [earlier](#), a student's potential for success is largely (but not exclusively) determined by their expectations. It is equally true that a student's expectations influence others' (such as admissions officers or alumni interviewers) perception of that student's potential.

Collaboration

It would be depressingly cynical of me to advise a student to pretend to be passionate about an extracurricular. Luckily, I can tell you from five years of experience as an academic counselor that this strategy doesn't even work.*

Volunteering

Context and contrast help students determine what they might like to pursue. Trying a variety of extracurriculars (sports, debate, music, etc.) highlights elements of an extracurricular that a student may not have originally considered: individual vs. team, indoor vs. outdoor, creative vs. procedural, etc.

Still cynical—but less so—is the observation that a student's passion in one area creates motivation to work in another. Consider the classic example: GPA requirements for varsity teams.

*I have never told a student to fake passion. The students I've encountered who do this tried it on their own in mock interviews.

Collaboration

Start Early

Most ECs involve some form of collaboration. This is another critical skill to cultivate for success in college admissions and the workplace.

Passion

A college is a community. This means admissions officers seek students with strong collaborative skills. In the lab, on the field, or at the discussion table, students must collaborate with each other for a productive college experience. Expert faculty can only do so much to facilitate harmony and hard work.*

Most students (myself included) learn collaboration the hard way: through trial and error. It requires a careful balance of proactivity (initiative, confidence, engagement, leadership) and reactivity (empathy, compromise, patience, open-mindedness.) I call these families of skills **“give”** and **“take,”** respectively.

Give and take skills are so important that the majority of Common Application, University of California, and supplemental essays focus on them. A transcript and Activities & Honors sheet can show expertise (and even passion if the student achieves impressive recognition), but the interview and personal essays are the only places that show character.

*Often, the greater the professor’s expertise, the *less* willing they will be to work with unwilling students.

Collaboration

Volunteering

Volunteering

Start Early

Volunteering, by definition, cannot be mandatory. However, it is usually expected and helps characterize students positively.

Passion

Since junior and senior year are busy for most students applying to competitive colleges, freshman and sophomore year are excellent times to acquire volunteering hours.

Collaboration

Ideally, a student should **connect volunteering to an extracurricular or their intended major**. For example, playing music at a retirement home or tutoring middle-school students in computer science.

50–100 hours is a typical “impressive” amount—as long as the activity is meaningful and the hours don’t feel inflated. “Volunteering” at a parents’ company doesn’t count. Fundraising for your soccer team doesn’t count (it benefits *you*).

Finally, **avoid voluntourism**: expensive travel abroad to do a job you are vastly underqualified for.*

*like building a house. Would *you* feel comfortable living in a house you’d built?

Volunteering

Year 2: Ramping Up



Targets

Academics: honors track

Extracurriculars: 1 elected or leadership position

College Prep: plan for junior year

Tasks

Academics

- 1 AP + honors courses in core subjects (English & STEM)
- solidify intended major

Extracurriculars

- go all-in with 1-2 main ECs
- gain recognition beyond school

College Prep

- head start on SAT prep

First APs

First APs

Most students take their first AP as a sophomore. Since these APs are less daunting than upperclassmen APs, they are good for acquainting a student with the AP process.

Major

The most popular lowerclassmen APs are **AP Human Geography** and **AP World History**. While these courses are less demanding conceptually than AP science courses, they feature more demanding workloads than freshman-level courses. This makes either option an effective introduction to the AP process.

Tracks

As you likely already know, an AP course has an official AP test administered outside of a normal class setting in addition to a normal final exam. The first AP test a student takes may be far more stressful than a regular midterm or final.

Early preparation can mitigate this stress. There are many AP-prep resources available (free or paid). Taking practice tests is particularly useful to assess how much preparation is required.

Aim for a score of **4 or 5**, but a 3 on a lowerclassmen AP test does not pose an existential threat to a college application, especially if the subject isn't related to the applicant's intended major.

One final consideration is **opportunity cost**: some lowerclassmen who are highly invested in an extracurricular (such as music or sports) may be better off dedicating time to honing their skills.

Major

First APs

While upperclassman can't take every available advanced course, sophomores usually can. This exposure to honors courses can help students determine a potential major.

Major

Sophomore honors courses challenge many students to confront the question: Do I like this *subject* because of the material, or do I like this *class* because of the teacher/workload?

Tracks

Most freshman-year honors courses are designed to create a smooth transition from middle school. They are still more difficult than middle-school courses, but they are also more accommodating of the well-meaning but counterproductive impulse to take every possible honors course.

After sophomore year, this will no longer be possible.

This makes it vital for students to narrow down possible majors now. This choice has real-world consequences: it is tied to a tangible, concrete decision students must make next year about their coursework.

Tracks

First APs

While upperclassman can't take every available advanced course, sophomores usually can. This exposure to honors courses can help students determine a potential major.

Major

Because of AP World History's intimidating workload, sophomore year is often a tipping point for students. Broadly speaking, there are two honors tracks students can go down:

Tracks

Track 1: Overall Academic Rigor

These students are unsure about their intended major. To compensate for this, they elect to take the most difficult courses available to them. These students typically do not receive (or pursue) recognition in a particular field and simply hope that their overall academic rigor will sufficiently bolster their college applications.

Track 2: Targeting Major or EC

These students commit to one or two main academic interests or extracurriculars. They pursue excellence and seek recognition in these areas and/or advanced coursework beyond what their high school offers. They still take rigorous courses but may avoid difficult APs that have no relevance to their primary interests.

In my experience, **track-two students** tend to be more competitive for admission to top colleges.

EC Quality

EC Quality

Sophomore year is the time to commit to 1–2 ECs. Though some are, unfortunately, more beneficial than others—taking an overly cynical approach is counterproductive.

Recognition

If you're looking for a bullet-point list of the "best" extracurriculars to pursue, your approach is wrong. In light of the perpetual arms race of college admissions, it may be tempting to take a cynical approach to extracurriculars. Admittedly, the admissions officers I've talked to say that this approach *does* have a tangible benefit to a student's application—it gives the admissions department a good laugh and an easy rejection.

In college, I knew a harpist who—sad to say—felt the need to acknowledge the perceived advantages of playing an uncommon instrument. But there's a key difference between her and students who, say, take crew to make themselves "ivy bait" (appealing to Ivy League schools) and plan to drop it first semester: she was genuinely good at what she did—and compellingly expressed her passion for it.

The application interview and essays *will* reveal whether a student is genuinely engaged with an extracurricular. Ultimately, this is the true measure of an extracurricular's "quality."

Leadership

Recognition

EC Quality

Recognition is one of the strongest ways of demonstrating meaningful engagement.

Recognition

Recognition improves the quality of your extracurricular by demonstrating that you are deeply engaged. Level of recognition vastly outweighs all other factors in determining benefit to your application.

Getting national or international recognition requires long-term planning. Research competitions and/or honor groups in your field! Our [public database](#) can also help you.

Levels of recognition:

Level	Example	Benefit
School (S)	Most-improved violinist: HS orchestra	minimal
State/Regional (S/R)	2nd-chair violin: all-state orchestra	moderate
National (N)	2nd place: national soloist competition	great
International (I)	honorable mention: global soloist competition	maximum

Leadership

Leadership

EC Quality

“Leadership” doesn’t have to involve being president or VP a club. Any position of responsibility presents the opportunity to cultivate leadership.

Recognition

A sophomore is unlikely to be elected to or chosen for a top leadership position (president or VP). But any named role—such as treasurer or head of publicity/outreach—provides valuable early experience with responsibility and insight into the organization in question’s structure.

Because of these benefits, an elected position serves as an effective gateway to a top leadership position junior or senior year.

Within established groups, elected roles will likely be competitive. If you fail to gain an elected position, don’t quit! That means starting over with a new group. Instead, aim for a mid-level elected position junior year.

Leadership

Don’t form your own group just to boost your resume with a fancy-sounding position.

The value of a position within an organization is that it requires responsibility and collaboration. The founder of a group that only lasts six months and fails to produce meaningful results does not demonstrate any of these.

Year 3: The Big Push



Targets

Academics: score 4 or 5 on all APs

Extracurriculars: impactful recognition & leadership

College Prep: National Merit Scholar

Tasks

Academics

- take rigorous APs
- pursue intended major beyond high school
- develop relationship w/ teachers

Extracurriculars

- pursue national/international competitions or honor groups
- gain elected leadership position

College Prep

- PSAT & SAT
- Research colleges

AP Push

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AP Push

Junior year is the most important part of a transcript: it portrays a student's academic rigor.

Go Beyond

Junior year is the most important—and most difficult—year. Aim to take around five APs. These will most likely include:

- AP Language
- AP US History
- At least one primary AP STEM course:
 - AP Bio
 - AP Chem
 - AP Physics 1, 2, or C (C is recommended)

The other courses are up to your discretion and your school's offerings. College board releases a list of pass and perfect-score rates each year.

Be proactive: take practice tests and seek tutoring if needed!

If possible, take the course most related to your intended major junior year.

Letter of Rec

Go Beyond

AP Push

Experience in your intended major beyond normal high-school courses shows commitment and expertise.

Go Beyond

Doing well on an AP course related to your intended major is helpful—but not everything. Beyond high-school courses, the line between “academics” and “extracurriculars” begins to blur. For example, participating in robotics club demonstrates both interpersonal skills and readiness for an engineering degree.

Letter of Rec

What this activity will look like depends greatly upon your intended major. It could be research, an internship, an honor group, etc. Ask a trusted teacher, mentor, or academic counselor for advice about what to pursue.

However, if you aren't already aware of the opportunities available to advanced students in this field, you may not be advanced enough to benefit from pursuing them.

In general, seek the highest level of [recognition](#) that is reasonable for **your** circumstances and ability. Not every student can win AMC.

Letter of Rec

AP Push

Strong relationships with junior-year teachers mean strong letters of recommendation.

Go Beyond

Generally, **junior-year teachers write the strongest letters**. Senior-year teachers have known their students for less than one semester, and sophomore- and freshman-year teachers cannot meaningfully speak to a student's current maturity or capacity to handle academic rigor.

Letter of Rec

A letter of rec is more about character than academic performance.

Make an effort to cultivate positive in-class relationships with your junior-year teachers—especially teachers related to your intended major.

However, you don't *have* to get a letter from the subject-teacher corresponding to your intended major if you don't have a strong relationship with this teacher. Specific anecdotes about your positive in-class behavior that focus on the [give & take](#) traits are always better than generic content.

Resume

Resume

Junior year is your last (and most important) chance to add impactful EC-related activities to your resume.

Leadership

College applications are, broadly speaking, due senior year from October to January.

Colleges will not see most of your senior-year activities.

This means you must pursue standout extracurricular achievements as a junior. As with academics, this means [going beyond](#) school to **seek recognition at a state, regional, national, or international level.**

Too many students plan to achieve competitive proficiency at their extracurricular by senior year—only to panic when they realize that this timeline prevents them from, at best, applying EA/ED or, at worst, including their achievements in their application at all. Classic examples of this include varsity and honor bands/orchestras.

Leadership

Resume

If you didn't achieve a named or elected position as a sophomore, now is a critical time to be more involved with a club or organization.

Leadership

You don't have to be president of a club to get into a great school. As I mentioned in [sophomore-year leadership](#), any elected position in a *quality* organization is better than a top position in a new (or self-formed) one.

Your first goal is to show your peers enough responsibility and collaboration to be trusted with a meaningful position.

Your second goal is to **achieve measurable results** in this elected position. You can blame the McNamara fallacy or measurability bias for this, but “measurable” in this case unfortunately means concrete—especially numerical. Compare these profiles:

Student 1: ASB treasurer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> went above & beyond fundraising for cultural events fought tooth & nail w/ admin to make student voices heard and improve senior prom for everyone
Student 2: ASB treasurer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> raised \$4.2k for cultural events (compared to \$1.2k avg. over past 5yrs) drafted & passed proposal for ASB-subsidized Ubers at senior prom to mitigate risk of drunk driving

The first profile is much weaker because it focuses too much on subjective considerations.

PSAT & SAT

PSAT & SAT

Colleges

Internships

Take PSAT in October and SAT either spring semester or the summer after junior year.

National Merit Scholarship is only available for top PSAT juniors. This prestigious award boosts admissions chances. Because of this, it is in your best interest to not take the PSAT as a sophomore unless you plan to take it twice.

The SAT is becoming mandatory again for an increasing number of schools. Even for test-optional schools, a score of **1500+** will generally boost your admissions. (Top schools may be less impressed with a flat 1500.)

The new digital SAT is quite different from the old test: less grammar, more vocab, adaptive difficulty. Here's the structure for the PSAT and SAT:

Component	Time	# of Qs
Reading & Writing	64 minutes (two 32-minute modules)	54
Math	70 minutes (two 35-minute modules)	44

I recommend taking the **SAT over the ACT**. The PSAT prepares you for the SAT, and the new digital format is more convenient.

Colleges

PSAT & SAT

Colleges

Internships

Most colleges ask **WHY** you want to attend. You need to find a good answer.

A **specific, personal reason** is at the heart of a good “why this college” reason. Compare these reasons:

- **Passive reason:** “I like [college] because it’s good at [subject].”
- **Active reason:** “I want to do/learn [career / specialized topic], and [college] is one of the best schools to do this because of [resources/opportunities].”

If you are advanced enough in your intended major, you will know enough about the subject to understand what specific resources make a department and program in this subject strong.

Reputation is not a strong enough reason to want to go to a college.

For an in-depth guide on college research, check out my [online guide](#).

Internships

Summer after junior year is the time for your showstopper activity related to your intended major or extracurricular.

Most competitive summer programs have deadlines around February. (Yale Young Global Scholars is due in early January!) Many students are so focused on preparing for fall semester finals that they are blindsided by these applications.

Our [public database](#) has a list of common summer camps. However, you should ideally know enough about your intended major to know what internships, shadowing, camps, or competitions are most relevant to you.

In particular, look out for these elements of an application:

- **Letter of rec:** give your teacher at least one month's notice, and check whether the program allows for a general letter or requires teachers to fill out a program-specific recommendation form.
- **Official transcript:** some programs require an official transcript, which must be sent by your school's academic counselor. This can also take up to one month to process.
- **Essays:** these can be about your character, interest in the program, and/or relevant experience. Give yourself one month to write these. (It usually won't take that long, but it's better to be conservative and proactive.)

PSAT & SAT

Colleges

Internships

SAT Wiki

SAT Wiki



SAT Wiki

This Wikipedia-style document lists every grammar question on the digital SAT along with everything you need to know to solve it. The document also includes the link to my YouTube walkthrough of this information!

Summer 3: Starting Apps



Tasks

College Prep

Applications

- continue researching colleges
- decide your college list (reach/target/safety)
- choose an application type for each school (RD/EA/ED/REA)
- make an organized document or spreadsheet with all tentative deadlines
- finish your Common App main essay

Misc.

- retake the SAT if necessary

Academics/Extracurriculars

- if possible, form a connection with a mentor, employer, or advisor at your standout summer activity so they can write you a strong letter of rec

College list

College list

Choosing your college list requires managing opportunity cost and risk appetite.

Main essay

- **Opportunity cost:** the loss of potential value that comes from choosing one option over another. For example, applying to one top college that takes twenty hours of effort means those twenty hours cannot be used for any other application (particularly applications to target schools that take only two to four hours).
- **Risk appetite:** how much risk you are willing to accept with your overall set of college applications. For example, someone with a higher risk appetite might apply to more reach schools and less safety schools.
- This is similar to **risk tolerance**, which is your ability to manage the bad outcome of any given risk. For example, applying to safety schools is a form of risk tolerance: it allows you to go to college even if you are not accepted to any of your reach or target schools.

While there's no foolproof formula to tell you if a given school is reach/target/safety, you can make an educated guess using last year's admissions rates, average test scores and GPA, and how impacted your intended major is. ("Impacted" means that more people want to major in a subject than the school can accommodate.)

It's always a good idea to ask your admissions counselor for advice!

Decision types

Main Essay

College list

The Common App main essay is about your personality, not your accomplishments.

Main essay

The main essay is one of the most important elements of your application. Expect to spend most of summer brainstorming, trying out different topics, revising, and finalizing. Ask for feedback, read your essay aloud to someone you trust, and be prepared to deeply reflect on your life, interests, growth, and goals.

The more you do over summer, the less you need to do during a challenging senior year.

The majority of my guides on our website are about this essay. But here are of the most important pieces of advice:

- This essay is not a resume.
- Focus on one anecdote that showcases a key point of growth.
- Don't use an event that happened before high school.
- Don't speak negatively about teacher or other students.
- Don't spend too much time on an extended metaphor. The actual events are more important.

Decision types

S|A EA/ED Guide

This comprehensive guide covers everything you need to know about application-decision types (EA/ED/RD/REA). There's also a follow-up post about the benefits and drawbacks of these application types.

Year 4: The Final Stretch



Targets

Academics: do well in rigorous courses

Extracurriculars: 1 big win fall semester

College Prep: finish all apps and interviews

Tasks

Academics

- take rigorous APs—and don't get senioritis!
- specialize in subfield of intended major

Extracurriculars

- pursue national/international competitions or honor groups
- gain/maintain leadership position

College Prep

- supplemental essays
- send out all other materials

Specialize

Specialize

Senioritis

The more you know about your intended major, the more desirable of a candidate you will be.

Some students think that applying to an obscure or low-demand major will boost their admissions chances. But I've done practice interviews with enough seniors to tell you that an admissions officer can tell in less than five minutes if you actually know about and like your intended major. While most schools encourage students to explore and consider switching majors, they are also wary of (and will **reject**) students applying for, say, anthropology with the intent to immediately switch to a more impacted major like economics or CS.

Specializing in a subfield of your intended major broadcasts the extent of your progress and overall knowledge of that field's advanced tracks. For example, if you intend to be a math major, you should consider whether you're interested in pure math or applied math—even if you haven't gotten far enough to choose, yet.

Finally, you should be honest and realistic about where you're at with your intended major. A high-school senior can't have experience with pediatric oncology. In cases like that, you should specify areas of potential interest while acknowledging that you would still like the opportunity to explore.

Senioritis

Specialize

Senioritis

Senior-year course rigor and grades matter. But so does having enough time to work on applications.

In case you didn't know, "senioritis" describes seniors losing motivation (usually after an incredibly taxing junior year).

When planning your senior schedule, expect applying to colleges fall semester to be similar to the workload of an AP course.

Both maintaining a strong fall-semester GPA and spending adequate time on your college applications are critical. Make sure to take APs related to your intended major (if you haven't already) and the core subjects (especially math and English).

However, senior year is not the time to frivolously sign up for as many APs as possible. Too many students fail to allot enough time to the college-application process and must navigate the lose-lose opportunity cost between a lower GPA and rushed applications.

Last chance

Last chance

Fall semester is your last chance for an impressive extracurricular achievement.

Here's the **worst position** you could be in:

You want the admissions boost of applying early decision (ED) to your top school, but a extracurricular activity that's critical to your application profile won't be done in time.

Do you apply ED with a weaker profile or RD with a stronger one?

One answer is: It depends on how strong your overall profile and the activity in question are relative to the school. Extreme cases aside, it's almost impossible to come up with a definitive answer to this question.

A better answer is: Proactively *avoid* this situation. It is consistently one of the most stressful decisions a student makes in the application process.

If you're working on a self-guided project, make sure to finish before October (when most ED1s are due). If you're considering an official competition or program, it may not be worth your time if it happens or finishes after October.

Supp. essays

These essays fall into a few categories. Only some can be recycled.

Essay	Description	Style	Recycle
Why this college	Explain your interest in the college and department.	Argumentative	✗
Why this major	Explain your current engagement & future goals	Argumentative	⚠
Leadership / collaboration	Give an example of your strong interpersonal skills	Narrative	✓
Challenge	Give an example of overcoming a challenge	Narrative	✓
Meaningful EC / major	Give an example of a meaningful moment w/ an EC or intended major	Narrative	✓

Supp. essays

Letter of rec

Essay guides

Letter of Rec

Supp. Essays

Letter of Rec

Essay guides

Choose good teachers. Don't put off asking them.

Here's what you need to know:

- Choose teachers who know you well.
- Choose at least one teacher related to your intended major.
- Prioritize junior-year teachers.
- Give each teacher at least one month's notice.
- Make a good brag sheet (a list of your accomplishments).
- Your academic counselor needs to write you a letter as well.
- Check if each college accepts a general letter of rec (such as through Common App or a dossier service like Interfolio) or requires a specific form.

You should also be proactive about **official transcripts**, which can take up to one month to send.

Essay guides

S/A Guides

For in-depth guides on the major supplemental essays, check out my free guides on our website.

Public Database



Database

This database contains key information about **colleges, competitions, and summer camps.**

Closing Thoughts

Managing Stress

The college-app process *is* stressful. It's okay to acknowledge that. Most advice I see online, like how you'll be happy no matter where you end up and you don't need to get into [top college] to be happy or successful, really only seems believable after the fact.

I wish I had something better to add to those truisms, but there's nothing I can type in this orange text box that will magically help you here.

I will say that I still remember how stressful this time was for me. I was lucky to have a lot of support from friends and loved ones, and I sincerely hope that you do, too. But even if your situation isn't ideal, I still believe in you, and I'm rooting for your success!

Who wrote this?



I'm Aaron Blumenthal. I've been helping students with admissions for a decade. I graduated from Harvard in 2015 with a BA in English. You can find out more about me [online](#).

I didn't use AI for any part of this document. That means text, formatting, or icons. This took 30+ hours of work wrangling with Canva and thinking back on my counseling experiences. Good luck with your apps!