

Getting Organized to Apply for College

Your step-by-step guide to college applications — no connections required, no experience assumed.

You belong in college.

Not because someone told you so. Because you have worked for it, dreamed about it, and earned the right to be there. This guide will help you get organized so the application process does not stand between you and where you are going.

PART 01

Start Here — Build Your Foundation

Before you fill out a single application, you need to get organized. The students who struggle most with applications are not the ones with the lowest grades — they are the ones who try to do everything at the last minute without a system.

Your College Application Master List

Create a document or spreadsheet (Google Sheets is free) with one row per college. Include these columns:

College Name	Application Deadline	Requirements	Status
My Safety School — [Name]			<i>Not started</i>
My Match School — [Name]			<i>Not started</i>
My Reach School — [Name]			<i>Not started</i>
My Dream School — [Name]			<i>Not started</i>

SAFETY, MATCH, REACH & DREAM — WHAT THEY MEAN

Safety School: A school you feel very confident you will be accepted to based on your GPA and test scores.

Match School: A school where your stats are right in the middle of their typical accepted student range.

Reach School: A school where your stats are below their average, but you are applying anyway because it is your goal.

Dream School: Sometimes the same as a reach — apply, because you never know.

Apply to at least 2 safety schools.

The Complete Application Checklist

Most college applications require the same core components. Use this master checklist to stay on track.

Academic Records

- Official high school transcript requested from your school counselor
- Mid-year transcript (some schools require this — check each school's requirements)
- SAT or ACT scores sent directly from College Board or ACT (many schools are now test-optional — check first)
- AP or IB exam scores sent if required

Applications & Forms

- Common App or Coalition App account created (most 4-year colleges use one of these)
- Each school's supplemental questions identified and added to your calendar
- FAFSA opened and parent/guardian information gathered — opens October 1 every year
- CSS Profile completed if required (mainly private colleges — check each school)
- Any school-specific scholarship applications identified

Letters of Recommendation

- Asked at least 2 teachers (junior year teachers preferred) at least 6 weeks before deadlines
- Asked school counselor for their recommendation
- Gave each recommender a "brag sheet" — a summary of your accomplishments, goals, and why you are applying to these schools
- Confirmed each recommender has submitted their letter before the deadline

★ FIRST-GEN STUDENT TIP — RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

If you do not have close relationships with teachers, it is okay to reach out and explain it: ***"I am applying to college and I am hoping you might be willing to write me a strong recommendation letter. I would be happy to share more about my goals and background to help you write it."*** Most teachers are honored to be asked. Give them as much time as possible.

Personal Statement & Essays

- Common App personal statement topic chosen (650 words maximum)
- First full draft of personal statement written
- Personal statement reviewed by at least one trusted adult
- Personal statement final draft complete
- All supplemental essays drafted for each school
- All supplemental essays reviewed and finalized

★ YOUR STORY IS YOUR STRENGTH

First-generation students, students from low-income families, and students from underrepresented backgrounds have stories that most applicants do not. Your challenges are not something to hide in your personal statement — they are often what makes your application stand out. **Write honestly.** Admissions readers want to know who you really are.

Financial Aid

- FAFSA submitted as early as possible after October 1 (earlier = better for some aid)
- FSA ID created for both student and parent/guardian (you need this to submit FAFSA)
- W-2s and tax returns gathered for FAFSA
- Each school's financial aid deadlines noted separately — some are much earlier than application deadlines
- Scholarship search started using free tools: Fastweb, Scholarships.com, your state's education agency
- Local scholarships researched through your school counselor, community organizations, and employers

Your Month-by-Month Timeline

This timeline assumes you are applying in your senior year. If you are a junior, you are ahead of the game — use this to plan.

SPRING

Junior Year

- ▶ Research colleges — create your list of safety, match, and reach schools
- ▶ Take SAT or ACT for the first time
- ▶ Start thinking about your personal statement topic
- ▶ Build relationships with teachers who might write recommendations

BEFORE SENIOR YEAR

Summer

- ▶ Draft your personal statement
- ▶ Finalize your college list
- ▶ Request letters of recommendation before school starts
- ▶ Gather financial documents for FAFSA

SENIOR YEAR

Sept - Oct

- ▶ Submit FAFSA as soon as it opens (October 1)
- ▶ Open Common App and complete your profile
- ▶ Ask recommenders formally — give them your brag sheet
- ▶ Check each school's Early Action / Early Decision deadlines

SENIOR YEAR

Nov - Dec

- ▶ Submit Early Action / Early Decision applications
- ▶ Finalize all remaining applications
- ▶ Follow up with recommenders to confirm submissions
- ▶ Continue scholarship search

SENIOR YEAR

Jan - Feb

- ▶ Submit all remaining Regular Decision applications
- ▶ Send mid-year transcripts if required
- ▶ File CSS Profile for any remaining schools
- ▶ Keep applying for scholarships — this never stops

SENIOR YEAR

Mar - May

- ▶ Review acceptance letters and financial aid packages
- ▶ Compare offers — the school that costs you least may be the best choice
- ▶ Commit to one school by May 1 (National Decision Day)
- ▶ Notify schools you are declining, and request final transcript to your chosen school

First-Generation Student Resources

If you are the first in your family to go to college, here are resources built specifically for you.

Free Tools & Resources

- **Common App** (commonapp.org) — free college application platform
- **FAFSA** (studentaid.gov) — free federal financial aid application
- **Fastweb & Scholarships.com** — free scholarship search engines
- **Khan Academy SAT Prep** — completely free, official SAT prep
- **College Board BigFuture** — free college search and planning tool
- **First-Generation College Bound** — resources specifically for first-gen students
- **Your state's higher education agency** — many have free advising programs

Questions to Ask Every College

- What percentage of students receive financial aid?
- What is the average financial aid package?
- Do you have a first-generation student support program?
- What is the 4-year graduation rate?
- What career and internship support do you offer?
- Is on-campus housing guaranteed for all four years?
- Do you have emergency funds for students facing financial hardship?

A NOTE FROM EVOLVE

You do not have to figure this out alone.

EVOLVE's **Navigating College** coaching sessions are designed exactly for students like you — students who are smart, driven, and ready, but who need someone in their corner who has been through the system and knows how it works. Book a session at evolvetoday.org.

— FALLON JONES-LEMMONS, PhD, RN • EVOLVE, LLC

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