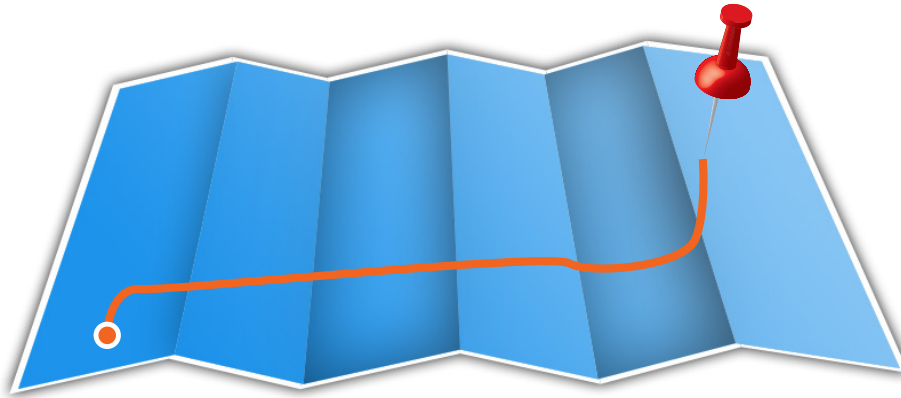


THE ULTIMATE

**COLLEGE
APPLICATION**

Road Map





The college application process can be exciting, confusing, and let's face it, a bit overwhelming. However, in the last decade, universities and colleges have made great strides towards creating a more user-friendly experience for students and parents.

Students no longer have to wait by the mailbox just to take a look at a pamphlet to see what a school has to offer. They also don't have to stress over perfect penmanship with paper applications. Now a student can access any school website to explore what they have to offer.

Additionally, students can enter all of their information into the Common Application, which now reaches close to 500 institutions. Furthermore, students can access a myriad of online resources to help them through the process.

Last, but not least, there are many experts who can assist high school students through the process such as high school counselors, independent college counselors and private tutoring companies like Chicago Academic.

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WHERE TO START?



The first thing to do when preparing for applying to college is to research! This may sound self explanatory, but never underestimate the power of research when starting this process. When deciding on a list of schools, research will help make that list come into focus.

Remember, colleges aren't just about the look of a pretty tree lined quad or the size of the crowd cheering on the football team. As a student you are there to learn, and knowing which schools will best fit your needs and benefit your future the most will help you to make the right choice.

Starting from scratch can make the selection process a bit intimidating. With approximately 4,000 college options in the United States alone, it's hard to know where to begin. Here are a few things to consider when making your list of schools you intend to apply to. Once you have thought about these, [College Search](#) and [College Data](#) are great resources for narrowing down your search.



What do I want to study?

For many incoming college freshmen, the answer to this question is unclear. It is not uncommon to select "Undecided" for one's intended major on college applications. However, having even a vague idea of what interests you could have a big impact on which college you choose to attend.

For instance, if a student is interested in engineering, it would be best to make sure that the colleges they apply to have a strong engineering department. You might find that some schools have a strong Political Science or English department, but they don't have Nursing or Education programs. In the larger schools you will find a wider variety of available majors, but in smaller colleges and universities, it is essential to do the research to see if they offer the programs that interest you.

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Also, when it comes to selecting a major on your application and you aren't quite sure, please remember that it isn't binding. Students will likely change their major at least once while in college. In the first year you will be taking basic requirements anyway, so it's usually not necessary to have your major solidified until your second or third year .



Define your campus

Are you more comfortable staying closer to home, or are you interested in studying far away from home? Both of these decisions come with advantages and disadvantages.

Near – You have the capability of coming home to visit more often. This also factors into finances. If you are closer to home, you can most likely afford the trip more frequently. Also, if you attend a school that is in your state of residence,

you will be eligible for in state tuition for public universities and state financial aid if you meet the qualifications. Lastly, for students who select a school that is very close, you could choose to live at home and commute, saving you the costs of room and board. The disadvantages of this are that you might miss out on the opportunity to both assert your independence and become a more intimate member of the school community.

Far – One advantage of studying farther from home is that you might enjoy a little change of scenery. Studying in the sunshine of California or the snow of the Rocky Mountains might be a great way to explore a different part of the country for a few years. The disadvantages come with the cost of traveling home and the infrequency in which you might get to see your family. Yet, in today's technological world, video chat and cell phones could make this less of an issue. Another disadvantage of going far away is that you will have to pay out of state tuition and won't be eligible for state financial aid at the public universities for at least the first year.

Large cities offer more access to shopping, cultural attractions, diverse populations

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and public transportation. It may also be easier to find a job there while in school or after you have graduated. So what are the downsides? The cost of living is typically higher, and congestion, as with any city, can be problematic. Additionally, the bigger the city, the more likely some students will be to commute to the school rather than live close to or on campus. This can, in turn, give the school less of a “college campus” feel.

WHAT SIZE SCHOOL DO I WANT?

A mid-sized town might offer more access to retail and cultural opportunities than small towns, but without all of the big city congestion. Towns like Ann Arbor, MI, Madison, WI or Boulder, CO would be great examples of this. The cost of living can range drastically in these communities once a student decides to live out of the dorms.

In a small town, the university is typically the center of activity. This can be favorable for students who want a college campus atmosphere. Additionally, the significantly lower cost of living is a major advantage of small town schools. On the other hand, shopping access, public transportation and other conveniences might be limited.

Size – Considering the size of the school you want to attend can be a tough decision. There is, in fact, much debate about what is best for the student.

A big school generally offers a wider variety of robust departments. That means more majors, minors and classes to choose from.

While the school population might seem overwhelming, there are definitely ways to find small communities within these larger institutions. These include clubs, fraternities, extra curricular sports and organizations associated with one’s major.

For most students, the biggest fear is the thought of those large auditorium classes. Typically, these classes are reserved for the General Education Requirement courses, or Gen Eds. These courses have labs or discussions that accompany these lectures that have class sizes of approximately 20-30 students. As students progress into their specific

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major, they will find that their class size will decrease dramatically.

Mid-sized colleges and universities offer much of what a big university will, but will typically have a few robust departments.

There will still be some big lecture classes, but there will most likely be more small classes. Much like the bigger universities, there will be a plethora of clubs and activities to join within and outside of the university.

Additionally, most mid-sized schools still have the benefit of plus-sized school athletics. You can still enjoy the perks of having a Division I or II team, without all of the hoopla.

Small schools offer intimacy. The number of students is not unlike the numbers found at most suburban high schools. Therefore, it is not uncommon to become familiar with most of the student population. Additionally, one's access to the professors and advisors is certainly an advantage. For students who need that personal attention to succeed in school, definitely consider some small schools.

The disadvantages of a small school have to do with academic as well as social opportunities. In terms of academics, departments and course offerings will be significantly smaller than both large and mid-sized schools. If you are considering a smaller school, be sure to check their programs to make sure that they have enough offerings to match your interests and talents. Similarly, the social scene at a small school may feel a bit limiting, especially for students who attended large high schools. Each small school has a strength and knowing what that strength is before you apply is quite important.

For more resources on school/class size:

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/commentary/universities-get-an-f-for-failing-undergrads/article4351096/>

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/economy/economy-lab/university-class-sizes-smaller-isnt-always-better/article620700/>

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NARROWING YOUR LIST

Once you have narrowed down a list of 5-10 schools you are interested in applying to, it is a good idea to figure out which of these schools fall into the Safety, Target or Reach categories. Each school has a different admission policy and, therefore, certain schools will be more difficult to get into than others.



Be Strategic

Safety schools are the ones that a student is sure to get into based on the college's application requirements. If a student's GPA and test scores are better than the school's minimum requirements, then it can be considered a safety. Safety schools can and should also refer to the price tag. In today's economy, it is important for students to have an affordable postsecondary option.

Target schools are those schools in which the student's GPA and test scores fall into the requirements, and the student feels that the school would be a good fit.

Reach schools are often the top choice for a student, but they also represent the higher risk. Either the student doesn't meet the qualifications, or the competition is steep. A college counselor can be a great resource as to whether or not a school falls into this category for a student.

I HAVE MY LIST OF
5-10
SCHOOLS
NOW WHAT ?

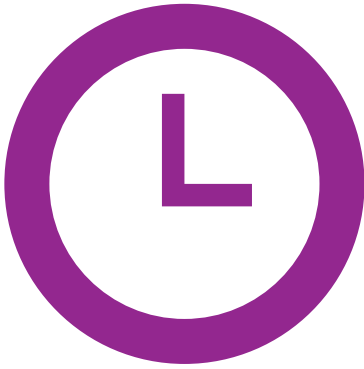
The good people at [College Board](#) explain this well. Additionally, the college counselor at your school should be a good resource for determining which of the schools on your list fall into which categories. Several high schools have access to [Naviance](#), which is a resource that aggregates student data from their school. This data shows where other students with similar scores were accepted and where they ended up attending. Ask your school if they have access to this information. Also, any student can access

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[College Search](#) and input test score information under the Applying tab.

Should you apply early?



As the saying goes, the early bird catches the worm! That being said, there is a lot to consider when applying to colleges early. Some schools have Early Decision (ED) plans, while other schools have Early Action (EA) plans or Priority deadlines. It is very important to know how these plans are similar and how they are different before you send in your applications.

With all of these options, you will receive an admissions decision earlier than students who apply by the regular decision deadline. Applying early can give students a leg up when it comes to getting accepted, obtaining financial aid and securing housing.

The major difference between ED and either EA or Priority is that **Early Decision is BINDING**. Students are only allowed to apply to one school ED, and, if accepted, must attend that school. On the other hand, **EA and Priority are NONBINDING**, meaning students can decline if accepted through those programs.

If you are considering applying early, especially ED, here are some questions to ask yourself. Have you thoroughly researched the college or university? Is this your first choice? Does this school match all of your needs? Do you meet or exceed the admissions profile? Have you talked to a financial aid officer at the school yet? Your answers to these questions should help guide you in making a decision about whether or not applying early is right for you.

For more information regarding early application plans, read the following articles.

[The Case For Early Decision, New York Times](#)

[Early Decision & Early Action, CollegeBoard](#)

[Colleges Where Applying Early Action Helps. U.S. News & World Report](#)

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**SHOULD I USE THE
COMMON APPLICATION?**

The [Common Application](#) is a relatively new addition to the college application process. At present, close to 500 undergraduate schools use the program. In addition to providing the application for these schools, the Common App website is a thorough aggregate of application information. [Complete charts](#) with due dates, costs per application and necessary requirements per school are organized for you on their site. A student's access to the Common App begins in August each year. A [preview](#) of the application can be accessed at this time as well.

The Common App saves students from having to engage in the time consuming process of filling in personal information by only having to do it once. Although you can save and complete the Common App at your own pace, it is a good idea to have a few things ready before you begin. All necessary forms can be found [here](#).

Here is a list of popular schools that can be found on Common App, and a few that are not:



Common Application Members:

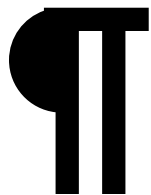
Boston College	Miami University (of Ohio)
University of Michigan	Princeton University
Yale University	Colgate University
University of Notre Dame	Emory University
University of Miami	Stanford University
University of Illinois at Chicago	Drake University
University of Chicago	University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill
Northwestern University	Vanderbilt University
Ohio State University	Wake Forest University
Washington University of St. Louis	DePaul University

Examples of Non- Members:

University of Wisconsin – Madison	Virginia Tech University
University of Iowa	University of Texas
University of Illinois	Indiana University
Northeastern Illinois University	Michigan State University
Illinois State University	Loyola University Chicago
Purdue University	Florida State University
University of Minnesota	Auburn University
Penn State University	Western Illinois University

Each year the Common App will release its essay choices. Typically, these don't change much from year to year, but this is what you can expect. The complete listing will be on the preview each year.

2012-2013 sample:



Please write an essay of 250-500 words on a topic of your choice or on one of the options listed below, and attach it to your application before submission. Please indicate your topic by checking the appropriate box. This personal essay helps us become acquainted with you as a person and student, apart from courses,

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grades, test scores, and other objective data. It will also demonstrate your ability to organize your thoughts and express yourself. NOTE: Your Common Application essay should be the same for all colleges. Do not customize it in any way for individual colleges. Colleges that want customized essay responses will ask for them on a supplement form.

* Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.

* Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.

* Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.

* Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music or science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.

* A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.

* Topic of your choice.

Schools with Supplemental Essays are listed on the Common App website as well. Several schools opt to add 250-500 word additional essays for student applicants. Searching for these ahead of time is essential for adequate preparedness.

When it comes to recommendations, a teacher evaluation form exists on the Common App site for students to download and give to their teacher, but make sure to check with each university you intend to apply to in the event they have their own form.

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**SO MANY TESTS,
SO LITTLE TIME**

Once a student has reached junior year, deciding on and preparing for the college entrance exams is critical. It is the fastest way to improve or bring down a college application. Students who have less than stellar grades will improve their chances of being admitted to colleges considerably with impressive test scores. Similarly, students who have impeccable academic records can drastically decrease their chances of getting into their dream schools if they perform poorly on standardized tests. In short, a lot is riding on these tests. There are several ways to prepare for these types of tests including independent practice, test prep classes and private tutoring. We have found at Chicago Academic that private tutoring yields the best results because it is completely customized for the individual student.

The decision of which exam to take, the SAT or ACT, may be determined simply by the admission criteria of the schools to which you are applying. Generally, both exams are ubiquitously accepted in the United States.

Although there is no hard science that proves that the ACT or SAT is easier, you probably want to determine which test format is better suited to your strengths. Each test has different emphases and familiarity with their individual structures may help you sort out which is better suited to you.

WHICH TEST?

ACT OR SAT?

THE ACT

The ACT sports four multiple-choice subject tests covering English, Math, Reading Comprehension, and Science Reasoning. These are designed to evaluate your overall educational development and your ability to complete college-level work.

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As far as scoring goes, your subject test scores (ranging from 1 to 36) are determined after throwing out any incorrect answers. There is no penalty for guessing on the ACT. The four areas are then averaged together to come up with your overall, or composite, score.

The ACT also includes an optional 30-minute writing test designed to measure your skill in planning and writing a short essay. This segment is your chance to show off your writing skills! If you opt to take it, the additional scores will be reported. These scores are reported separately.

So, if writing is a weak area, you might want to take the ACT and skip the writing section, since it's currently optional (although some schools require it).

THE SAT

When looking at the SAT in comparison to the ACT, a clear difference is that the SAT is designed to evaluate your general thinking and problem-solving abilities. It starts with a required 25-minute essay. This is the start to the Writing section, which you'll complete in addition to the Critical Reading and Math sections. The SAT differs from the ACT in terms of the amount of time you'll have to complete it (3 hours and 5 minutes) and the format in which you provide your answers. Similar to the ACT, the SAT has multiple-choice areas, but it also has a part in the Math section where you'll be required to produce your answers. And unlike the ACT, the SAT does penalize for wrong answers on the multiple-choice questions (but not on the student-produced ones).

When considering the ACT vs. the SAT, keep in mind that both tests allot ample time for completion, but the SAT has fewer questions — 140 compared to the 215 on the ACT. The SAT also focuses heavily on vocabulary, while the ACT hones in on grammar and punctuation.



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ACT vs. SAT

In spite of their differences, neither test is more likely than the other to produce a better score. In fact, when viewing a comparison of the ACT and SAT, the vast majority of students perform comparably on both tests.

You may not even need to think in terms of ACT vs. SAT. If the colleges you're interested in accept scores from either test, you may want to consider taking both admissions tests. Each one tests you in a different way, so you might opt to take both to see which one you perform better on.

However, if you're short on time and money and want to put your efforts towards test prep for only one of the tests, your best bet is to take a practice exam for each. Chicago Academic, like many tutoring and test prep companies, offers complimentary diagnostic exams.

If you are starting early and considering the tests as a sophomore, you may still have time to take the PLAN, which is similar to a practice ACT, or the PSAT, which is similar to a practice SAT.

IMPRESSIVE TEST SCORES
IMPROVE YOUR CHANCES
OF GETTING INTO YOUR COLLEGE CHOICE!

Generally, students in the Midwest region of the U.S. predominantly take the ACT exam. In fact, in Illinois every junior is required to take an ACT as part of the two day Prairies State Achievement Examination (PSAE) in April.

While foreign schools tend to require the SAT, we have yet to interact with a university in the U.S. that does not accept both. Make sure to check and see if

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the school you are applying to requires both [ACT](#) and [SAT](#) or just one.

SAT SUBJECT TESTS

The SAT also provides you with the chance to take Subject Tests. A few schools may require you to take some of these tests as additional requirements to your admission application. It's possible you won't need to take any, but you may want to consider it if you have strengths in particular subjects. All of your scores from these additional tests will be reported, whether they were required or not. If you're concerned that your scores on the required SAT sections may be less than stellar, consider registering for — and getting test prep in — additional Subject Tests in areas that can demonstrate your skills in specific subjects like English, history, mathematics, science, and various languages.

AP EXAMS

If your high school offers AP classes, and you feel academically qualified, you should take advantage of the opportunity. The successful completion of Advanced Placement classes benefits students during both the college application process and while in college.

Your academic record is the most important part of your college application. Admissions counselors consider class rigor to be a critical component of a high school transcript. Succeeding in rigorous courses is the best sign of a student's preparedness for college. The most challenging courses in any high school are the college-level Advanced Placement classes.

AP classes require the type of high-level calculating and critical thinking that students encounter in their first year of college. This is why admission counselors pay such close attention to AP credits. The scores on the AP exams taken senior year are not as important to the application process, being at the end of the school year. But the credits earned by scoring well on those exams can save money and time in college by eliminating certain required courses.

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THE POWER OF THE ESSAY

Logistics

Refer to each school website's application for essay requirements since they are different for every school. Some schools require that a student complete one of the provided topics from the Common Application. Some schools have supplemental essays. For those schools that aren't a part of the Common Application, their essay questions are typically provided on their website around July or August before a student begins to apply. In other words, if you are researching schools, be sure to check their application requirements page towards the end of the summer before the start of senior year. Essay questions and supplemental essay questions can change from year to year.



STAND OUT!

Writing Your Essay

To be completely frank, the college essay dilemma doesn't come with a perfect recipe for success. Essentially, colleges use essays to establish who you are, why you want to go to their school and whether or not you can write in a clear and logical fashion. Martha C. Merrill, the dean of admission at Connecticut College summed it up well when she [wrote](#), "The truth is that while no essay will make an unqualified student acceptable, a good essay can help a qualified applicant stand out from the competition." In other words, don't think of your essay as a Hail Mary attempt to get into a college. Instead, think of the essay as supporting what you can offer to a university.

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The most important things to remember when it comes to college essays are Preparation, Revision, and Honesty.

Preparation can mean the difference between a solid and well-written essay and a haphazard mess. Start by considering the given topics and jot down some notes. An essay should never be a reporting of your resume. Instead it should be a focused concept that both reveals who you are and how you think. For instance, instead of listing everything you have done, focus on and explore one topic that illustrates who you are. Describe one experience and its relevance to who you are and how that experience reveals your academic goals, life goals or your determination to be successful in life. A tip for topics you shouldn't use: your parents' divorce, wanting to save the world, the death of a grandparent, your spring break trip, or any other cliché that admissions people are used to reading about. Be unique, but don't be afraid to use a relatively ordinary topic.

Revise your essay more than once. Have a teacher, parent or trusted friend look it over. Read it out loud – more than once. You might be the next Ernest Hemingway, but in this case, with a limit of only 500 words, you will want to make sure you are saying a lot with less words. Sentence structure needs to make sense, and your thoughts need to be in a logical order. It is always good to have fresh eyes on your essay before you send it in. Also, keeping your essay to 500 words can be difficult. If you are short of 500, that is okay, just as long as you address the essay question. But what about going over the limit? Well, revision will help here. Work on being concise with whatever point you are trying to make. You don't need to over explain things. Admissions counselors are smart people, and their time is precious!

Honesty in essays has to do with keeping the bragging to a minimum. Admissions counselors aren't impressed by how awesome you are at something. Thousands of students might be just as awesome at that same something. Instead, they want to hear an honest account of how you think, feel about and engage the topics that are most important to you. A college is, after all, an academic institution that wants students to learn and contribute to the collective campus life. They want an environment at their

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school where students offer creative and innovative thinking with an openness and willingness to learn from others. If you won a trophy for an athletic competition, that information should be listed under your accomplishments elsewhere. If that particular trophy win enlightened your way of looking at the world in any way, then certainly write about that. The people reading your essays will be impressed with what you learned from the experience – not the trophy. Also, don't embellish an experience or create an experience just to sound more interesting. Honesty, when it comes to college essays, is the best policy.



College Application
coaching can
HELP YOU
through this process

Whatever you do, DO NOT plagiarize any part of your essay. Most schools use systems like turnitin.com now for their applications. Failure to abide by what is known as the academic code before you even enter college is a big no-no. Cheating is not worth the risk – ever. While plagiarizing is a crime, getting assistance with your essays is not. Whether it's help with brainstorming, organizing your ideas, making it the required length or editing a final draft, you should utilize the resources available to you. Teachers, counselors and parents can be a great source of help with this process. Or if you are looking for an expert who may be more objective, Chicago Academic has tutors who have extensive experience with college application coaching.

For additional resources on essay writing:

<http://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/23/tip-sheet-essay/>

<http://professionals.collegeboard.com/guidance/applications/essay>

<http://collegeapps.about.com/od/essays/a/college-essay-length-limit.htm>

<http://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/professors-guide/2010/09/15/10-tips-for-writing-the-college-application-essay>

<http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Parenting/college-application-tips-perfecting-college-personal-essay/story?id=11537356>



LAST, BUT NOT LEAST

College applications can be time consuming and confusing. Some schools require essays and/or a personal statement, while others do not. Some schools will require letters of recommendation. Every school will need a transcript. With each school requiring different elements, it is important to keep it all organized. Using this [College Board](#) checklist will be a big help in getting through the process.

Transcripts

KEEP EVERYTHING ORGANIZED

Don't save this step until the very end. Your high school will be juggling transcript requests from almost every student in your grade. Each student will have several requests. Be sure to know the proper process your school takes, so that you can make it easy for you and them. Some schools have electronic

systems that can send transcripts with just the use of the university or college's unique school code. Some high schools use paper transcript requests, which means you need to provide the proper and accurate addresses for each of the schools you intend on applying to. Either way, keep track of transcript deadlines because very few schools will send out transcripts at the last minute.

Recommendations

When it comes to college recommendations, it is important to familiarize yourself with proper etiquette:

Ask people who know you well – teachers, mentors, bosses and coaches are a great resource for your recommendations. Consider someone who can offer some insight into what you can bring to a university.



Make sure to ask respectfully. Demanding a letter certainly won't get you very far. Expressing gratitude can go a long way in life, and in this instance it can go very far.

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Be sure to let your recommender know how thankful you are. Also, consider that a recommender can refuse your request. Therefore, it's a good idea to have back ups. If they deny your request, then simply ask someone else.

Get them as early as possible. Whether you are asking a teacher or a member of your community, remember that people have responsibilities and various obligations. If you want a thoughtful letter of recommendation, then give them plenty of notice. Allowing for a few weeks is common practice.

Provide all of the needed information for your recommender. Some schools have specific recommendation forms, due dates or practices. Make sure you are aware of the necessary steps to make the process easier. It might also be a good idea to provide them with a resume, list of goals, and accomplishments to better help them prepare. Provide pre-addressed envelopes and stamps for your recommenders as well. For online recommendations, make sure your recommender is given the correct links or email invitations (many schools vary in their acquisition of these letters).



It isn't uncommon for a recommender to require a much-needed nudge to get the recommendation done. If some time has passed, try thanking them again in order to give them a gentle reminder. Asking them outright can seem pushy.

Always say thank you! Thank you notes can go a long way in this world. Not only will your recommenders appreciate the gesture, but you never know when you might need a recommendation again.

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IS YOUR CHILD STRESSED OUT ABOUT THE COLLEGE APPLICATION PROCESS? **WE CAN HELP YOU.**

At Chicago Academic, our main focus is ensuring that your child's goals and dreams come to fruition.

Whether your child needs assistance with test prep, college essay coaching or academic tutoring, our team is dedicated to transforming your child's learning experience to ensure they're in the best possible position to excel.

In a learning environment that's both supportive and productive, Chicago Academic is available to help you!

CONTACT US

www.chicagoacademic.com
