

COLLEGE TO-DO LIST-----9TH THRU SENIOR YEAR

Freshman Year

Get set for a great **high school** career. It's important to remember that what lies ahead is not just a four-year audition for **college**. Still, it will help later to think now about what admissions staffers will be looking for.

- **Seek advice and teacher feedback:** Ask someone you trust to help you map out your classes. Grades are important in ninth grade. But rigor is really key, too, so don't just go for easy A's. If you get a bad grade, accept it as constructive criticism, really read (or listen) to your teacher's comments and figure out how to do better. Check in with older students or, if you have one, your peer mentor to get advice from upperclassmen.
- **Read voraciously:** Books, newspapers, magazines, blogs – choose what engages you and remember to look up unfamiliar words.
- **Get involved:** Not only are you developing talents and interests that will catch a college's eye, but also school is more fun when you have activities to look forward to.
- **Use social media wisely:** Be responsible. What you post will follow you – which could be a good or bad thing.

Sophomore Year

- **Refine your route:** Look ahead to which 11th and 12th grade courses you might be interested in taking and plan to work in any prerequisites.
- **Challenge yourself, but wisely:** Create a balanced schedule. You want to strive for the best possible grades, but overtaxing yourself is bound to be counterproductive. Stressed-out brains don't work well.
- **Get some practice:** Will you take the PSAT this year? You'll get a better sense of where you stand if you know what is on the test before you take it.

Also, consider whether an SAT subject test makes sense in the spring. If you're enrolled in an AP or honors course now, the timing may be good. The College Board makes practice versions. Take at least one.

- **Put together a resume:** Note your hobbies, jobs and extracurricular activities. The resume is a living document and should evolve as your experience does.
- **Make the most of your summer:** Work, volunteer, play sports or take a class. Find an activity that builds on a favorite subject or extracurricular interest. And keep in contact with your mentors, advisers, counselors, etc. They are all a part of your support system.

Junior Year

Your grades, test scores and activities constitute a big chunk of what colleges consider for admission. Do your best in class and truly prepare for tests you take.

Junior year can also be a time to step forward as a leader in the world outside academics. Explore pursuits that interest you, not just because the exercise will look good on an application, but also because it allows you to flourish as a person.

- **Ask for help:** As Einstein allegedly put it, insanity is "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." If you feel stuck in your studies and in need of a breakthrough, ask teachers, parents or friends for help in finding a new approach.
- **Speak up in class:** You will need to ask two junior-year teachers to write recommendations. They can't know you without hearing your thoughts, so make sure to contribute in class. In addition, your counselor will write a letter of recommendation, so visit the counseling office and make him or her a part of your growing network.
- **Plan your testing calendar:** Grades come first. But test scores matter, too. [Talk with your parents](#) and guidance counselor about which tests to take, when to take them and how to prepare for them.

First up, the [PSAT](#). If your 10th-grade scores put you in reach of a national merit scholarship, it might be wise to spend concentrated time prepping. Then take the [SAT or ACT](#) in winter or early spring.

Don't worry if you don't get your ideal score; you can try again. The SAT subject tests are also an option for May or June in areas where you shine or in subjects you covered junior year.

- **Get involved:** It's great to be able to show you've worked hard, are dedicated to an activity, play well with others – and can lead them. Start an arts discussion group that goes to museum openings, or be voted team captain.
- **Start building your list:** Once you have a handle on your test scores, talk to a counselor and start your [list of target schools](#), reaches and safeties. Make use of new technology and apps to aid your research. Explore college websites and resources like [ed.gov/finaid](#) and [U.S. News' Best Colleges](#). Again, be mindful of your online presence and be sure to clean up your Facebook and Twitter accounts. They might get a look.
- **Make some college visits:** Spring break and summer vacation are ideal times to [check out a few campuses](#). Also try to attend college fairs and talk with the folks behind the tables. They can give you a feel for their school and some good future contacts.
- **Write:** Procrastination doesn't make for a good college essay. Aim to have first drafts done by Labor Day. Share them with an English teacher or counselor.

Senior Year

You made it. Let's party! Well, not quite yet. This will also be a year of hard work and continued preparation. Colleges do consider senior-year transcripts. They can and will rescind offers to students who slack off, so stay focused.

- **Check requirements:** You're in the final stretch, so don't veer off track. Make sure you're completing all of the requirements for graduation as well as course requirements of the colleges on your list.

- **Finish testing and check the boxes:** You're in the final stretch. If necessary, retake the SAT, ACT or subject tests if needed. The early fall test dates will give you time to **apply early**.

Also, make sure you're completing all graduation requirements as well as course requirements for your target colleges.

- **Ask for recommendations and polish your resume:** Early in the school year, **ask two teachers** who can offer different perspectives on your performance if they are willing to write a letter on your behalf. Choose teachers with whom you have a good relationship and who will effectively communicate your academic and personal qualities.

- **Apply:** Select a core group of schools to which you will apply and consider which deadlines (e.g., early decision, early action) are most appropriate. Fill out each application carefully, and ask someone to look over your essays with a critical eye.

Check that your colleges have received records and recs from your high school, and have your SAT or ACT scores officially sent in. A month from the date you submit your application, call the college and confirm that it is complete.

- **Follow the money:** Many colleges require that your financial aid application forms be turned in by February. But the earlier the better. Apply for the CSS Profile (College Board) in October and the FAFSA (<https://fafsa.ed.gov/>) beginning January 1st.

- **Make the choice:** Explore the colleges where you've been accepted. Visit their campuses again, talk with alumni, attend an accepted student reception. Then confidently make your college choice official by sending in your deposit.

Resource: <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/2013/09/23/create-a-to-do-list-for-your-college-search?page=2>