

College: Where Do You Start?

Thinking about college can bring up a huge range of emotions, responses and ideas.

It seems like everyone has some wise advice, but what are you really supposed to do with all of it? If we listened to what everyone said, we'd start taking SATs in middle school, apply to only the schools we've heard of and probably have no time for anything else!

When I started the whole process, it seemed like there was just so much information out there. One of the most important things is **organization**. It's essential to keep track of deadlines, e-mail addresses, requirements and supplements, and keep interview information all in one place. To keep myself organized, I made an Excel spreadsheet, but there are plenty of other ways to stay on top of things. Find what works for you, whether it's a print-out calendar or binders for each school to which you apply.

CollegeBoard is the company that administers SATs and sends out your scores. At Collegeboard's Web site, you can register and sign up to take the SATs. Talk with your parents about the best testing location, which is usually a local school, and how you want to pay to take the test. It's about \$25 each time you take it.

10th Grade

The whole process starts pretty early. In 10th grade, some people start to take SAT subject tests. SAT used to stand for "Standard Aptitude Test," but then test officials decided that the test doesn't really measure aptitude, but they didn't want to change the name.

If you have taken a class like chemistry or a language, and you want to try the subject test, 10th grade is a good time because you can get an idea of what the tests are like. If you don't want to take them that's perfectly fine, too. Sometimes it's good to take them early because then you know what to study for the future, and the next time you take them it's less intimidating. Some schools also give 10th graders the opportunity take the PSATs.

11th Grade

In October of eleventh grade, the PSATs are given to 11th graders. The PSAT is like a mini-SAT that also includes the possibility of a National Merit Scholarship if you score high enough. In 11th grade many students also take the SATs and SAT Subject tests, along with AP exams if they're in AP classes. As you've probably heard, the SAT has three parts: math, critical reading and writing.

The writing section was introduced recently and includes an essay, and there are lots of books that have tips for both the essay and the rest of the test. You can also take practice tests; Collegeboard releases old tests so that you can get an idea of what they're like. Once you take a practice test, you can look at what you need to work on, whether it's geometry formulas or vocabulary words.

Check your local bookstore or online for these types of books. In 11th grade you can also consider visiting schools, but this is entirely up to you. Some people live near lots of schools so they've seen many campuses, but it's always good to be able to talk with current students and see what they really think. I didn't visit schools until 12th grade, which is also pretty common.

Summer after 11th Grade

This is a great time to get a head start with writing essays (many schools post their fall applications in July). When you're figuring out where you want to apply, you can start with talking with parents, teachers, college counselors, looking at books or visiting the schools' Web sites. There are lots of books that tell you basic facts about a school, like the average SAT scores of admitted students, location and tuition cost. If you're applying for scholarships, summer is a good time to look at the requirements. It's also a good idea talk to the teachers, mentors or coaches who are writing your recommendation letters so they can have a heads-up and start thinking about it.

Remember to relax, too, since it is summer, and the beginning of 12th grade can be stressful!

12th Grade

Besides writing essays and submitting your applications (no small task!), you can also take the SATs and SAT subject test in fall or winter—just make sure the scores are out before your schools' application deadline. If you're applying early, you have to submit your application earlier than other schools (hence the "early" designation), but you also find out if you're admitted earlier.

"Early Action" means you're not bound to attend if you get in while "Early Decision" means that if they admit you, you have to attend. Make sure you think it through if you really know where you want to go if you're applying early. It can be a stressful time, but if you stay organized and know when to ask for help if you need it, you should be able to manage. Make sure you have a reasonable list of schools you want to apply to that you would be happy to attend and where you would be successful.

Keep an open mind, and try to find out as much as you can so that you can make informed decisions. Many schools schedule interviews after your application is submitted, but if you visit a school, you can sometimes have an interview on campus. You can also complete the FAFSA (the Free Application for Federal Student Aid) form sometime early in your senior year.

Once your applications are in, you can relax, have some great interviews and focus on your schoolwork. Decision time in spring will be both difficult and exciting, but pay attention to your options, and thoroughly think through your final decision. Some people have an easy time deciding where to go to school while others take a long time to decide and change their mind many times. Either way, remember that you will be the one attending college—not your teachers or even parents.

Listen to others' advice, and go with what you think is the best fit for you.