

INTOTHEBEST

College

Guide

INTOTHEBEST

College

Guide

How Successful Parents Turn Top
High School Students into the
College Stars of Tomorrow

Steve Edwards, and Tim Van Hooser

INTOTHEBEST Press

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Cover design by Stan Swenson

To Danielle, my wife and the love of my life.

-Steve

To Mrs. Rauch for suggesting that I apply to Princeton,
to Al Nix, for being my youth leader and the first
Princetonian I met, and to all my teachers.

-Tim

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David Arluck for his encouragement.

Elizabeth B. and Ron Bystrom for keeping us focused on the big picture.

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We have a saying in rodeo that is “Cowgirl Up!”

This means to continue giving all you have no matter how hard you are hit with disappointments.

I would advise you to Cowgirl Up! Study harder on the practice test, find a way to memorize the information and take the test again. Though you didn't do well on the first test, you can still do well in college. You just need to find a way to improve your test taking skills.

Lindsay Bewley from Perryville High School

Introduction

GRADUATION DAY! Though several years away, you are probably thinking about what college is like and the avenues it will enable you to pursue. And you

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want graduation to be the fulfillment of a dream. You want challenge and personal growth, and you want to make it at the school that offers both. Let's start down the road together.

At [INTOTHEBEST, Inc.](#), we are committed to helping you achieve your college dreams. Though no one can guarantee acceptance into your first-choice college, we can help today's college applicants with practical advice and counseling [services](#).

Plus, we hope that you will take full advantage of the knowledge base that we have compiled through this book. In the [financing](#) section, we discuss setting up a financial plan for affording your or your child's college education. Please check out the [applications](#) (where

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you can unravel the application process), [essay](#) [answers](#) (where you can find wisdom on the infamous application essays), and [guidance](#) (where we counsel you about the college application process) sections contained within the site.

In short, we are here to expedite your college application journey. Let's work together to make your dreams a reality.

Recommended reading

- [*On Writing the College Application Essay*](#) by Harry Bauld
- [*How to Write a Winning College Application Essay*](#) (Revised 4th Edition) by Michael James Mason

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- [*Elements of Style*](#) (4th Edition) by William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White
- [*Writing that Works*](#) (3rd Edition) by Kenneth Roman and Joel Raphaelson
- [*On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*](#) (25th Anniversary Edition) by William K. Zinsser
- [*Language in Thought and Action*](#) by S. I. Hayawaka
- [*The Bible*](#) (New International Version)
- **Writers:** [E. B. White](#), [Barbara Tuchman](#), [Ernest Hemingway](#), [Mark Twain](#), [H. L. Mencken](#), and [William James](#)

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I am sorry to hear that your scores weren't as great as you expected. I have had many times where my test scores or homework scores weren't perfect. I just say OK and move on and try harder next time. I'm not giving my fifth grade homework scores to colleges, but I know the feeling. It's hard at first, but then I realize that I have a whole life ahead of me to try harder in! I am sure you will get into a good college and go into the career of your choice!

Sincerely, Peter

Peter Best-Hall from Leptondale Elementary
School

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Guidance

An old proverb tells us that "plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." We hope that you can use this information to facilitate your college decisions. If we can help you in even a small way, we will have succeeded.

At [INTOTHEBEST, Inc.](#), we are dedicated to your success. We realize that there is much more to the college decision process than writing great essays and presenting strong application materials.

In this section of the site, we hope to address some topics integral to the college application process that are not strictly related to your application materials.

Though we can [help you with your essays and applications](#), you are largely on your own during these

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portions of the college application process.

Here, we hope to present some time-tested wisdom concerning:

standardized tests

visits to the colleges and universities that interest

you

the choice whether or not to send in your application

according to the early decision plan

interviews with alumni or admissions officers and

how to select *your* school from the list of possibilities

In short, we are here to expedite your college application journey. Let's work together to make your dreams a reality.

Madison , I was just reading Scott Peck's Road Less

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Traveled, which explores the question of life's purpose. His answer wasn't good scores; it was growth. As long as you're growing mentally and personally, you're on the right path to success. Turn this into a positive situation—use your scores as a source of motivation to show others and yourself that no test can limit your potential. With your intelligence and perseverance, you dictate your own future and achievements. No test score can take that power away from you as long as you keep having faith in yourself.

Jennifer Allen from Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy

Standardized Tests

We remember too vividly the last-minute anxiety that accompanies an early-Saturday-morning standardized exam; somehow, the whole event reminds of a trip to the emergency room, in that your entire life seems to hang in the balance. Except you're the operating doctor! If your entire post-college life is flashing before your adolescent eyes, you've come to the right place. And we do hope that you will find consolation and a calming influence from our words.

Despite colleges' attempts to the contrary, the general public continues to believe widely that a student's standardized test scores are by and large the only distinguishing characteristic of their application materials. This claim, frankly, is false, as poor test-takers would be forever punished and many sneaky, yet

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lazy students would breeze into Ivy League schools.

The SAT, ACT, SAT II subject tests, and Advanced Placement (AP) exams are indeed important, but they are certainly not the only distinguishing mark of a competitive applicant.

As we discuss in this and other portions of the book, college admissions officers are trained to assess not only the academic credentials of their applicants, but also their personal (extracurricular) qualifications. They would love to build a well-rounded college environment, even in a highly technical environment such as MIT or CalTech! Just think about: Even if you are a computer-loving physicist, you wouldn't grow too much if you were surrounded completely by other computer-loving physicists, would you?

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Only one thing can keep you from succeeding: giving up on yourself. As a high school freshman, I wasn't doing very well on the track team. I was thinking of quitting the team. My brothers sat me down and said, "If you give up, you only hurt yourself." I decided to stay on the team. I practiced hard and by the outdoor season I was number one in the state, set the high school record as a freshman and went on to be ranked six in America. Great things lie ahead of you too; don't give up now.

Johnathan Winston

The SAT I

We recommend spending some quality time familiarizing yourself with the collegeboard.com site,

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if only for its overview of the College Board's services.

This behemoth company has a great monopoly on the standardized testing income that will come from college-bound high school juniors and seniors, so please pat yourself on the back for supporting this company's success!

Seriously, however, the site offers some great preparatory information and explanations of how to report your scores to the schools to which you intend to apply; see [this page](#)

<http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/about.html>) for more details. The colleges and universities to which you apply should include a checklist of to-dos, which will inevitably include reporting your SAT scores. Please refer to the College Board's site for the proper procedure.

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The best preparation for the exam is to familiarize yourself with the [types of questions](#) that will appear on the exam. Many test preparation books detail the subsets of questions that you will likely find within the broad categories of questions – analogies, sentence completions, and critical reading questions in the verbal sections and five-selection multiple-choice questions, quantitative comparison questions, and free-response questions in the math sections. After studying several sample tests, you will find that many multiple-choice math questions are looking for you to identify an angle's size based on the knowledge you have concerning the other angles in a given triangle. Many of the critical reading questions will ask you to identify the main ideas of the author's passage, for example. After taking a practice exam, you may find it helpful to

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categorize the questions contained within in order to feel more comfortable when you see similar kinds of questions on a real exam.

Another huge secret of champion test-takers lies in their approach to the problems at hand. Many frustrated individuals become easily flustered when stumbling upon a problem that troubles them. Even the best students will almost certainly see some questions that seem quite difficult; the SAT I is not supposed to be a complete walk in the park. The rub, however, is in how you handle this situation. Do you become angry with yourself for not having studied every Friday night for the past four years? Or do you realize that you can feasibly answer a great number of the questions and focus on the positive? Great test-takers remember that they can nail the "easy" questions, and they humbly

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accept the reality that they can't hammer all the questions presented to them. Yet, they confidently answer those "easy" questions first and become encouraged that there seemed to be so many of them!

What approach will you take?

Another important detail lies in the scoring of the exam. The College Board rewards you with one point for each correct answer, and a fraction of a point is deducted from your "raw" score for each incorrect response. The lesson here is that random guessing is to your disadvantage. As most test preparation books explain, however, if you can eliminate at least two of the choices, it is to your advantage to guess. If none of the choices look like "dead-wrong" answers, however, it behooves you to consider not guessing on the question.

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One telling qualifier from the collegeboard.com Web site should bring a smile to your face, if nothing else:

"The SAT I does not measure "Motivation", creativity, or special talents (even though these qualities will contribute to your success in college and throughout life)." But, if they could test them, they would!

A guest columnist for *The Weekly Standard* recently argued that [the SAT I had improved because of the changes implemented in June 2002](#). John W. Harper wrote: "[University of California President Richard] Atkinson also asserted that analysis of three decades of undergraduate data at the University of California had shown that the SAT II subject tests, in conjunction with high school grades, were actually a slightly better predictor of success in college than the SAT, and that adding the SAT to the mix improved the predictive

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power by only a trivial increment. (Interestingly, the same data also seem to show that the SAT II writing test is the best single predictor overall.)" The College Board has thus been working to re-solidify the SAT I's place in predicting the test-takers' college success.

We are defined, not by the labels others put on us, but on the labels we accept for ourselves.

Therefore, choose to accept the labels that allow you to grow and prosper, and reject those that hold you back. So, given a choice between "Did poorly on test" and "Does well in class," which is the better label? Which fits better with other labels such as, "Writes effectively," "Works well with others," and "Makes people smile"? The choice is obvious: You know what you can do, and no one can take that away from you.

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Dominick Riesland from University of

Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Raising your scores

The College Board provides an interesting section about ["Coaching" and students' success on the SAT](#)

[I](#) on their Web site. They reveal that:

"Short-term programs (about 20 hours) improve scores an average of about 10 points on verbal and about 15 points on math."

"Longer-term programs (about 40 hours) improve scores an average of 15 to 20 points on verbal and 20 to 30 points on math."

"Courses that teach math content rather than test-taking tips tend to result in greater score gains."

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"Longer programs produce somewhat larger score gains, but beyond the first 20 or 30 hours of coaching, typical score gains are minor."

The moral of this story is clear: Test preparation programs are helpful, but only to a degree. Suggestions that you can improve your score by hundreds of points are speculative at best. This, by no means, demonstrates that you should not enroll in a test preparation course in order to improve your test scores. Yet, we recommend prudence upon entering such a course. Imagine a sprinter arriving at the Olympics after only 20 hours of practice; it would be miraculous if he slashed his personal-best time by several seconds! True improvement on standardized tests comes through determined effort (akin to practice for the sprinter) and

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sheer knowledge accumulation (perhaps like weightlifting for the runner).

The College Board goes on to explain that "real academic growth" will improve your scores:

"Generally, you can expect an annual growth of about 15 to 20 points on verbal scores and about 15 to 20 points on math scores during your high school years. This is because you continue to develop your skills throughout high school." By supplementing your in-school work with out-of-school test practice and deep and broad reading (explained below), you can expedite that real academic growth to the advantage of your test scores.

Remember also that your best scores on the Math and Verbal sections are considered in the application

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procedure, so poor performances on one section of the exam might encourage you to re-take the SAT I.

One test score or an IQ score doesn't show a person's ability. Your motivation, your desire, or your work ethic is what counts. Don't let something deter you from your future endeavors. Adversity and disappointments can happen, but don't let them change your course. I have experience with adversity. When I was 15, I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease. I had goals of playing sports and being a normal teen, and I believe my positive attitude let me continue to play and be a 4.0 student even through chemo. Nothing like a test score should deter you either.

Nathan Atterholt

Verbal improvement

Despite stereotypes to the contrary, having a vocabulary rife with 20-letter words will not make you into a test-taking star on the verbal sections of standardized tests. Rather, we recommend reading broadly and deeply to improve your vocabulary *and* your verbal-logical reasoning. Great writers breed great thinkers, but only if you take the time to sit at their feet. One great means of blasting through vocabulary is to take note of newly encountered words and commit them to your memory; if you find an unknown word in a novel and later see it on a SAT, wouldn't you be excited to have committed to your vocabulary? What a blessing that would be! One great means of accomplishing a verbal deepening: reading a weekly newsmagazine. They are usually intended for a bright, well-read audience and will not

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insult your intelligence. And they will keep you fresh on world events! An [INTOTHEBEST, Inc.](#) winning suggestion: [Time.com](#). *Time* bills itself as the "world's most interesting magazine"; what do you think? Are you willing to try them out? Your vocabulary and logic will love you for it!

Another great magazine is [The New Yorker](#). Please check out its strong features writing and its essays.

I received your email today about your test scores and was surprised at how you did. But what shocked me more is the way you're handling them. You are an intelligent person who is capable of accomplishing anything that you set your mind to. You did poorly on your first attempt. So what? Try again! The good thing is that now you know what to expect on

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these tests and what to study for. Do not let one bad score determine the rest of your life; you must realize that NO TEST can determine a person's true potential.

Amber Schauf

Mathematical mastery

Unlike expanding your verbal horizons, becoming a master of standardized tests' math sections will not take you to exotic places or even outside your own room. In fact, those who do well on the math sections of standardized tests are either 1) extremely intelligent and mathematically inclined or 2) well-practiced in the arts of finding quick answers to question prototypes that commonly appear on these sections. A sure-fire combination would bring 1) and 2) together, but we are

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confident that even so-so mathematics students can excel on math sections on standardized exams. Why? Simply because the question archetypes repeat themselves so frequently!

When you have a couple hours, peruse a test preparation book and look for its breakdown of the commonly encountered mathematics question types. Learn these types; follow the reasoning that led to the answers. Read through the logic until it makes sense. If not, ask friends or your parents to explain the logic. We are confident, however, that anyone with basic computational skills and a knowledge of the logic that leads to the answers can shine on the math sections of standardized tests.

No test can measure the brilliance of a sunrise.

Sure, photometers may calculate the luminous

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flux of the morning sky; but, still, its brilliance cannot be measured. Intelligence is not an object to be possessed. It is mental clarity combined with the will to share your insight. Intelligence is a relationship with the world. A light reading at dawn will yield a weaker score than a light reading taken at noon . But who would be foolish enough to say the morning sun can't dazzle? Don't give up on your mind. Your real worth has yet to be measured.

Holly Lewis

The ACT

The ACT has never reached the level of importance given to the SAT, but success on it can prove helpful when applying to top colleges. You can request information about the exam from your guidance

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counselor or on the Web at the [ACT home](#). In many states, the ACT is not offered as frequently as the SAT I, so, if you are planning to take the exam, you may need to do some more advance planning that you might have done for the SAT I. The effort may prove incredibly worthwhile.

Like the SAT I, it is vital to know the set up of the exam. Check on the [ACT site's description](#) to enter the test center prepared. Your preparation for the SAT I should leave you confident about answering the questions that might be presented on the ACT, but please note the major disparity on the ACT vis-à-vis the SAT I: there is no penalty for guessing. That means that you should guess away, regardless of your comfort level and security in your choices.

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Please note that the ACT sub-divides what comprises the Verbal section of the SAT I into English and Reading sections. Also, the addition of the Science section allows the exam to present a broader portrait of your strength as a college applicant.

Hi Madison, I understand how you feel about your low test score. However, there are other factors that determine a person's successes or failures. There are two things that separate you from the rest. One is your determination and the other one is your positive attitude towards life. Now, Madison, think of yourself as a movie producer and your life is your movie. You are the director and executive producer. Think for a minute, what kind of movie would you like to produce? An inspirational movie with a happy

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ending? or a movie about failure? Once you define what kind of movie you want your life what kind of variables would you need to include in your movie to get the ending that you want? You are in charge of your movie. You are the executive director, and the producer. The movie is your life. You can do anything you want. You can design your own success. Cheer up kid! Your friend, Doc

Adriana Karch

Should I take the SAT or the ACT? Both?

We recommend that you check with colleges to which you would like to apply and investigate their SAT I-vs.-ACT policies. If they accept both scores, it can be to your great advantage to take the ACT. A strong

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showing on the ACT will only bolster your record.

Please keep in mind, however, that a good number of top schools require a combination of the SAT I and SAT II subject tests, so your ACT scores will likely be only supplemental materials for your application.

Napoleon Hill once stated, if you can dream it, you can achieve it. My parents were told during a sixth grade parent teacher conference that I was incapable of ever advancing to the eighth grade, let alone high school. I had a life long goal of becoming a fighter pilot and became determined to prove him wrong. I recently returned from Operation Iraqi Freedom where I flew combat missions as an F-15E pilot. Instead of looking at your test scores as a barrier,

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instead look at them as merely an obstacle to overcome. Develop your plan and conquer it!

James McGinn

The SAT II subject tests

The SAT II subject tests can be integral to your application at a top college. While success on the SAT I demonstrates logical clarity and intellectual maturity, the SAT II subject tests show that you've learned and retained a great deal from your high school coursework. Admissions officers at top colleges will almost certainly look at the SAT II subject tests with close scrutiny. The key is to choose the tests you take wisely. Most top schools recommend that you take three subject tests, and many require that you take the Writing subject test. If you are applying to an

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engineering or science program, the college or university may require you to take one of the Mathematics subject tests and/or one or several science subject tests. It behooves you to spend some time reviewing the admissions requirements for the schools that interest you in the middle of your junior year. Especially for the science subject tests, it makes sense to take the ones you will likely take at the end of your junior year, when the course material is still fresh in your mind. Trying to cram junior year's course information during the week preceding the subject test in the fall of your senior year would stink. If you're taking physics junior year and need to take a subject test in a science, reason dictates that you should take the Physics subject test at the end of your junior year,

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unless you are a closet genius in another science and could best your potential score on the Physics test.

Since the tests are each an hour in length, it might seem that you could take all three in a single testing day. We recommend not doing this, simply because of freshness.

You will be dragging by the third exam! If you can, try to take two exams -- perhaps a science exam and the writing exam -- during the spring of your junior year.

Then, take a Mathematics subject test and either the Writing exam again or another exam on which you might excel.

Also, do not hesitate to take four exams; high scores on multiple SAT II subject tests will demonstrate your strength as a student and will improve your chances at impressing college admissions officers.

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Madison, Whether you are getting a blood test or are taking the SAT's, tests only measure a narrow band, some small aspect of our physical, mental, emotional, or intellectual condition at the time we take the test. They provide a doctor, or an admissions board with a small window into a tiny room in a great mansion. They do not see all. They do not measure worth, character, or 'real world' ability. Tests are tools that you can learn to use. Prove the depth of your character.

John Heney

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Our recommendations for test preparation materials

[*1100 Words You Need to Know*](#) by Murray Bloomberg and Melvin Gordon of Barron's

[*Up Your Score: The Underground Guide to the SAT*](#) by Jason Alabuck et al.

[*10 Real SATs \(Second Edition\)*](#) by The College Board

[*Real SAT II: Subject Tests*](#) by The College Board

[*Cracking the SAT & PSAT/NMSQT 2002: With Sample Tests on CD-ROM*](#) by Adam Robinson et al.

[*How to Prepare for the SAT I*](#) by Sharon Weiner Green and Ira K. Wolf, Ph.D.

[*Kaplan SAT & PSAT 2002 with CD-ROM*](#) by the Staff of Kaplan Educational Centers

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Visits

In love, absence may make the heart grow fonder, but, in deciding where to attend college, seeing and experiencing the academic and extracurricular life at your potential choices is absolutely crucial to making an informed college decision. Your parents may have toured you around the colleges they intended you to visit as early as your stroller days or perhaps on family vacations. If you haven't noticed already, each college or university is blessed with its own culture and atmosphere, which is often reflected in the area surrounding it.

The first visit

We strongly recommend taking the official tours that nearly every college offers during your first visit; in fact, you should schedule your arrival and departure

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from the school around the tour schedule. The great challenge in this first visit is to identify the distinguishing factors that would make this college a *better* choice than others you are considering. How does this school fit well with your academic, social, athletic, and career interests? To answer these questions, it will be imperative to go above and beyond the tour guide's narrative. We suggest, therefore, that you engage the tour guide or one of school's students in a conversation. The more responses that you can receive to your "basic" questions, the fuller the picture of the school that you will have upon leaving.

One tragic feature of the human mind as it pertains to college visits is the frequency with which we lump together our various visiting experiences. Unless you have a steel-trap memory, you may find yourself

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scratching your head when asked to recall even basic

differences between schools you have visited,

especially those that you saw in a consecutive streak.

We have heard of many West Coast residents, for

example, who have planned specific trips to the East

Coast to visit five or more schools in one fell swoop.

We urge you to write down your observations regarding

the schools you visit immediately after completing your

visit; jot down five or eight positive points and as many

not-so-positive points about the college or university,

based on the information you've just received.

Questions to ask during the first visit

Are professors approachable for students interested in

forging relationships with them?

What are the opportunities like for independent study

and research?

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What programs and facilities set this school apart?

What is the social scene like? Which groups dominate?

What is the housing situation like? What percentage of students live on campus? Is there difficulty in finding housing?

What are the university daily-living facilities like – dining halls, laundry facilities, dormitories, and computer labs?

How do prospective students feel about the college or university?

What does the campus newspaper have to say about the current administration?

Are students excited about their futures during and after their time at the university?

What courses of study would appeal to you? Are they well-known and well-developed?

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What is the college or university's plan for allowing

students to study abroad? To pursue internships?

Is the academic calendar made up of semesters?

Trimesters? Quarters?

Where do current students come from? What types of

qualities do they exhibit?

What make the campus and surrounding area an

agreeable place to live?

Visiting again

An important ingredient for finding the right fit for you

is visiting your potential choices more than one time.

While we can clearly understand how this might pose a

financial burden to you and your family, we still urge

you to scout out your top three choices while school is

in session. It is common for students, we have found, to

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visit a great number of colleges during the summer; these visits are crucial. Yet, it is also vital to see the day-to-day lives of the students attending the university. College is much more than a nine-to-five life, and it is important to track the daily routines of the students that would become your schoolmates before officially matriculating.

We recommend that you look at the questions that we have listed on the **Pick your school** section in order to answer the difficult questions about the various schools. The second visit is a chance to be exacting and realistic; it is important to separate the aesthetic and dreamy impressions that you might have had from reality.

Decide Early?

Maybe you (or your college-hunting kid) are aces at the SAT, but here's a question that may be more important than all the SAT questions together:

Which is the best option to apply to your top-choice school?

- A) early action
- B) early decision
- C) regular decision

Though the choices may seem few, this decision is not a gimme. In fact, the question may be a gotcha, if you answer hastily. Here's a review sheet to guide you in answering this vital questions.

The majority of private colleges and universities and many state schools often do not offer rolling admissions

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– that is, you cannot simply send your application at any time that you'd like. Many regular-decision deadlines fall on or around January 1, sending some laggards into a winter-break frenzy. We hope to discuss here the dynamics of choosing under which system to submit your application – early action, early decision, or regular decision. The applications for most early plans are due November 1, but the promised answer by mid-December may mean a fantastic, relieving holiday present for admitted students. Before receiving that present, however, students will need to prepare their application materials more quickly than many of their peers and complete the required testing by November of their senior year.

Let's discuss each of these decision calendars before moving into a what's-best-for-you discussion. Harvard

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University has done an excellent job in explaining **the intricacies of early admission plans**, and we will offer their thoughts when appropriate.

Early action

If admitted to colleges and universities that offer early action plans, students stand to gain greatly. They receive a non-binding offer of admission; that means that students may consider offers of admission that come from other schools to which they have applied. The major stipulation is that students may not apply to other schools under any sort of "early" plan. The early action plan has long been popular at Harvard University. Harvard explains that "students do not increase their chances of admission by applying Early Action."

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Under this plan, students generally submit their application materials by November 1 in order to hear from the school to which they are applying by mid-December. They then may take until May 1, the national deadline, to opt to attend the school that has offered them admission through an early action plan or not. Students may also be rejected or have their application decision deferred until the regular decision return deadline, generally around the beginning of April.

Harvard argues that there are two major advantages to an early action plan when compared to an early decision plan:

- "Flexibility in choosing colleges": Students may weigh the decision of where to study for the

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entirety of their senior year, allowing them to make a potentially more informed decision.

Harvard claims that this flexibility may enable a higher percentage of students to graduate.

- "Multiple financial aid options": Students may weigh the various financial aid plans offered them before making a final decision on May 1.

Early decision

Unlike early action plans, which allow the student latitude to accept offers of admission from other colleges and universities, students offered admission under an early decision plan must attend the school offering them admission – if they wish to attend any college at all. The great advantage to early admission plans is the knowledge that you may have a better

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chance to gain acceptance than if you were to apply under the regular decision plan. In fact, some schools are more willing to offer admission to early decision students because they have indicated a strong desire to attend the school. By admitting students under the early decision plan, colleges also raise their yield figures, which is the ratio of number of students who enter the school versus the number of students who are accepted.

Since a student is obligated to attend a school that offers him or her admission under the early decision plan, the student will then have but one financial aid package from which to select. The results from financial aid offices can sometimes be shockingly positive and sometimes quite negative. As Harvard explains, "students admitted Early Decision who seek financial aid can be released from their commitment to

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enroll if their financial aid awards vary significantly from their ability to pay. [Yet,] very few students seek this release."

Students may also be rejected or have their application decision deferred until the regular decision return deadline, generally around the beginning of April.

Regular decision

Under this plan, students typically submit their application materials by January 1. They then receive a response from the college or university by April 1.

Students are either accepted, rejected, or placed on the waiting list. Those whose admission had been deferred during the early action or decision plan will also learn whether they have been finally accepted, rejected, or placed on the waiting list as well.

Should you apply through an early action or decision plan?

Having described the variety of admissions plans offered by top colleges and universities, let's discuss what might be best for you, the individual student.

Almost without fail, there is a higher acceptance rate for students who apply under an early plan. At many schools offering early decision programs, they guarantee a higher rate of admission to offset the opportunity cost of not being able to entertain other colleges' offers of admission. At Harvard, a university that employs an early action plan, there is still a higher rate of acceptance for early applicants, but they claim that it is the exceptionally strong academic and extracurricular records of these candidates that lead to

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their higher rate of acceptance. The Harvard admissions office explains:

"Higher Early Action acceptance rates reflect the remarkable strength of Early Action applicant pools – not less rigorous admissions standards. Since more of our top candidates now apply early, Harvard has, in effect, been admitting its students on a slightly different timetable in recent years. For any individual student, the final admission decision will be the same, whether the student applies early or regular. Early Action applicants have, on average, stronger admissions credentials than regular applicants. In each of the several recent years, Harvard has admitted between 2,000 and 2,100 applicants total. Of these, 900 to 1,200 were admitted in mid-December and – reflecting early candidates' strength – another 100 to 200-plus early

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applicants were admitted in the spring after having been deferred in mid-December. There is no incentive whatsoever for Early Action colleges to admit weaker candidates early and then have to reject stronger Regular Action candidates. Diminishing the quality of the student body would be antithetical to the goals of any institution."

We speculate that the "stronger" applicant pool that submits their application under early plans comes as a result of self-selection. Highly motivated and often academically well-qualified students will apply to college under an early plan with a greater frequency than your run-of-the-mill slacker. If you are even reading this book, we imagine that you fall into the former group.

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Let's examine the numerical effects of applying early.

We present here a table of recent (2000-2001)

admissions statistics from the eight Ivy League schools and several other selective schools:

School	Total acceptance rate	Early acceptance rate	Action or decision?
Brown	16%	21%	Action*
CalTech	13%	16%	Action
University of Chicago	44%	52%	Decision
Columbia	13%	35%	Decision
Cornell	31%	46%	Decision
Dartmouth	21%	38%	Decision
Duke	26%	38%	Decision
Harvard	11%	19%	Action

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MIT	16%	19%	Action
Northwestern	33%	50%	Decision
Penn	23%	38%	Decision
Princeton	12%	35%	Decision
Rice	23%	25%	Both
Stanford	13%	23%	Decision
Washington (St. Louis)	30%	34%	Decision
Yale	16%	37%	Decision

* Brown has since switched to an early decision policy.

As one may clearly see from even a quick glance at the table, there appears to be an advantage to applying early – a higher acceptance rate. Students who have decided that, if accepted, they would accept one given school should highly consider applying early to that school.

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The reward of knowing in early December would be great!

We must insert a caution notice, however, as many students may feel compelled to apply early to some school. Harvard notes that, since the advent of widespread early decision plans around 1996, the number of early applications has risen astronomically and perhaps too quickly. Opting to send your application under an early program, especially a binding early decision program, is not a decision to be taken lightly. Resist the temptation to match your classmates who are applying early to their dream school if you do not have your heart similarly set on your own dream school. Harvard's admissions office counsels: "Some observers have even used the word 'hysteria' to describe some students who, perhaps influenced by peer

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pressure, want to apply early 'somewhere' – without considering which colleges might be best for them. And with more students applying (and being admitted) early today, some students have concluded that it is a virtual necessity to apply early, whatever the circumstances, for fear of being left behind." We strongly echo Harvard's admonishment: apply early if you really like the school and believe that your aspirations fit well with the college's offerings, not merely to follow the pack of your perhaps too hasty peers.

One final message: Be careful to follow the directions of the colleges and universities to which you apply. If the school to which you are applying via early decisions mandates that you NOT apply to other schools early, DON'T! College admissions officers trade information about early applicants. If you slip up or willingly try to

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buck the system, you may have some detailed explaining to do. One student who ended up attending Princeton received a lengthy phone call from an admissions officer over Christmas break. Why had he also applied to another school early? What was he thinking? Please avoid these unnecessary conversations. They are awkward and trying.

There are real benefits to applying early to your top choice. Yet, if you intend to apply early merely to follow a seemingly better-prepared pack of friends, please remember that a binding offer of admission at a school you don't really like is no benefit at all.

Interviews

Interviews may be the least well-understood portion of the college admissions process, as it is always

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questionable how they factor into admission officers' final decisions. Some interviews may seem like a meeting with an old friend, while others seem to drag like a trip to the dentist. If you complete an interview, your interaction with your interviewer is clearly included in your application materials. Additionally, your interviewer can offer his or her perspective on the college or university to which you have applied and may help you to clarify your thoughts about attending the school. Our first and most important interview tip: Make the time interactive and seek to learn from your interviewer!

Should I even bother?

Yes. Definitely.

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Although the fall of your senior year may seem jam-packed, scheduling interviews for each college or university to which you have applied will certainly be worthwhile. First, you have the opportunity to connect with a local alum, whom you might contact for more information as you are making your college decision. Second, you may help yourself in rounding out your application materials; nearly every interview includes a "anything-more-I-should-know" question or an inquiry about updated activities. Furthermore, students with any charisma at all will bring real life to their application.

What can I expect in an interview?

The unfortunate reality is: There is no way to know. Some interviewers are certifiably strange, and the resulting interviews that they run may seem completely

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circuitous. The wandering interview, however, is not the norm.

Most interviewers will seek to engage you in discussion about your interests: Why do you love gymnastics?

How has writing for the school paper broadened your outlook on your school? How did you come to be a first-chair violinist? What would you like to pursue in college? How does your background make you excited about English literature? Do you plan to join the Greek system? Expect that the interviewers will include a spattering of their own experiences from the school; don't feel dull if you can't follow every story.

On occasion, interviewers will begin spouting their counsel on which schools might accept you and where you should attend. In many cases, the interviewers may

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have strong insights on which schools will admit you based on their experience. We suggest that you continue engaging the interviewer in order to learn why they have given their recommendations and what their past experience has taught them.

One interview in which Steve participated followed the history of a government agency for which the interviewer worked. Though Steve loves history, the interview seemed to screech to a halt when the interviewer talked about the New Deal's influence on this given agency and how changes over the past 60 years had impacted present-day policies. Steve left the interview without knowing what had transpired during the 90 minutes that had passed, as he was only able to slide in about three questions about the school.

How can I prepare for an interview?

The most effective preparation for an interview is the type of research that encouraged you to apply to the school in the first place: reading the college brochures and visiting the school's campus. You may want to refresh your memory in the days before the interview in order to stir final questions that you hadn't been able to answer before submitting your application. You might also want to think through a line of questions that would allow you to learn about the interviewer's college experience. For example, you might ask your Princeton interviewer:

- Why did you choose to attend Princeton?
- How did you find your fit with the university's offered programs?

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- Would you recommend Princeton to a person like me? Why?

If your interview falls significantly later than the date on which you submitted your application, you may want to jot down a list of changes that have happened. Perhaps you have begun practicing for an upcoming school play, scored a key basket in the most important game of the season, written a recent column for the school paper, or found that you really enjoy oil painting. Your interviewer should note your responses to "what's-changed" questions on their reports regarding your interview time.

Logistically, expect each interview to last up to two hours. Dress well and arrive well-rested. Smile and remember that the interviewer was once in your seat!

Pick Your School

As you are making such a monumental decision, you will be breezing through many details: Do I like the school's colors? Will the color of my potential dorms go well with the pink bedspread I plan on buying? Well, your thoughts are probably much deeper than this, but we hoped to show the breadth of questions that you must address (humorously).

We make no bones about it: Deciding where to attend college is frankly difficult. The blessing of receiving multiple acceptances brings the difficulty of deciding among some great choices. First of all, we encourage you to maintain a thankful attitude, remembering that you are blessed merely to have had the opportunity to apply to college. Please remember that only a small percentage of the world's population – well under 10

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percent of every man, woman, and child – will ever have the opportunity to study on the university level.

The grand question to answer is: Which school to which I've gained acceptance would prove the best fit?

There are certainly a number of avenues by which to approach this question. We offer some suggestions herein:

Financial

- Which school offers the most attractive financial aid package?
- At which school can I most reasonably obtain the type of employment that I would want to have?
- Which school appears to offer the best value for the fees that I would be paying?

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- Is the financial aid I am receiving primarily in the form of loans or grants?
- What will my estimated debt load be upon graduation?

Academic

- Does this school offer strong programs in what I intend to study?
- If I decide not to follow my original intended major, will there be other plans of study that I would like to follow? Will they also be high-quality?
- Are the professors approachable at this facility?
- Do the students seem committed to studying to the degree that I desire?

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- How well esteemed is a degree from this school?
- Is this school nationally known? Regionally known? Locally known?
- Do the students in my intended area of study recommend this college or university?

Geographic

- Is this school easily accessible from my house?
- Is this school too close to my house? Too far?
- Do I enjoy the environments surrounding the school?
- Especially if you are considering a state school as an out-of-stater, will I feel comfortable when others are much closer to home than I?

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Extracurricular

- Are there a variety of activities that might interest me?
- What seems to be the interest level of students in extracurricular activities?
- Will I find the support and challenge in extracurricular groups that I desire?

Social

- Do I strongly conflict with the social scene offered at the school?
- Do the students at the school appear open to receiving newcomers?
- Will I be able to enjoy myself on a limited budget?

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- Will I become involved in the school's Greek system?
- Are there culturally enriching opportunities around that students pursue, like plays, concerts, and clubs?

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Applications

You've probably waded in application forms since mid-August, and you're ready to attack them now. Since time is at a premium, you want to work efficiently. But you certainly don't want them to resemble your whipped-out 9th-grade English assignments.

At [INTOTHEBEST, Inc.](#), we are committed to helping you achieve your college dreams. Completing the pile of applications can appear like a daunting task, considering the seriousness of the goal you are seeking. Determination to complete your applications early will pay great dividends in the end.

In this section of the book, we will address your questions about [completing the application forms](#), [how college admissions officers evaluate your](#)

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[application materials](#), and [answers to common frustrations](#).

In the case that you are stumped, please consider seeking our help; we are dedicated to delivering practical advice and counseling [services](#).

Join with us in pushing toward the finish line with your applications!

Our Thoughts

When approaching a heaping load of application forms, you are bound to face a number of questions. We will offer some thoughts on completing these application forms that should aid you in approaching this step of the college decision process with more confidence.

Pen or typewritten?

This question may soon become moot, as more and more colleges are offering PDF versions of their applications that can be completed using the free Adobe Reader software. When possible, we advise completing your applications in this manner, simply for the neatness that it encourages. As suggested by the colleges offering this format, you should prepare your essays and personal statements ahead of time because your data cannot be saved between sessions unless you have purchased the complete Adobe Acrobat package. Be sure to review your responses before submitting the application forms completed in PDF format, as some spaces may be left unfilled.

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If you choose to print out the application forms to complete via pen or by typewriter, you can certainly stop and start when you'd like. We would recommend type-writing your applications, when possible, as it often shows a greater organization on the student's part. If you have phenomenal handwriting, you may choose to write in pen. The more legible your application, the happier admissions officers will be approaching it.

In addition, if you will word-process your personal statements and essays, we recommend typing or writing "Please see attached sheet" in the space provided and then stapling the appropriate essay to the application form. If you are unable to print additional copies of the application forms, a muffed print-out of your essay onto the actual form may prove especially stressful. Also, it is much easier to rectify an essay that begins "Teh

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gratest thing about... " when you have simply attached a copy of your essay to the application form.

To how many schools should I apply?

There is certainly a variety of theories on this question.

When applying to colleges and universities with competitive admissions processes, it is unlikely to receive a "Yes!" letter from everyone. Although we do not discourage you from pursuing your dreams, we also urge you to approach the process with a realistic perspective.

Having explained that, the best advice that we've received is this: Apply to three types of schools. The first type represents that caliber of university to which you expect to easily gain admission solely on your academic credentials; your SAT or ACT scores and

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high school record indicate that you would be highly qualified to succeed at a school within this category.

Your SAT or ACT score will most likely lie above the 75th percentile at schools within this category for you.

The second category includes those schools in which you would likely receive acceptance based solely on your academic credentials. In schools of this caliber, your SAT or ACT scores and high school record will be highly competitive with other applicants. For rough measures, your SAT or ACT scores should lie above the 50th percentile of the stated range for schools within this category.

The third and final category represents your "dream" schools. If you were to apply to schools of this category, you might possibly receive acceptance solely

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based on your academic criteria. To keep your dreams somewhat realistic, we recommend that you remember that students below the stated 25th percentile in the SAT or ACT range likely have some outstanding extracurricular talents that place them above the pack.

We suggest that you apply to at least one school in each of these categories and that you choose them wisely.

Don't select schools merely for name-dropping purposes later. Unless financial restrictions determine otherwise, we recommend that you apply to two schools from each category.

Timing of your applications?

We strongly urge you to complete your applications well ahead of the deadlines, at least a week before the stated deadline. A great method to make that happen is

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to review the application materials as soon as you receive the applications from the various schools. Any forms to be completed by guidance counselors and teachers should be distributed well ahead of the stated deadline times. We know of several friends whose hopes of attending individual schools were scuttled by a disorganized, overwhelmed, or misdirected teacher. Check on the status of your recommendations before the last minute. Also, make additional copies of whatever portions you plan to submit so that you may quickly re-send your application forms should they be somehow mutilated or lost. Dogs are hungry for application this year, we hear.

What if I apply early to my dream school?

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Even if you are almost certain that you will receive an offer of admission at your dream school, we encourage you to prepare your application forms for the other schools to which you might apply if rejected. We have heard some horror stories of overconfident seniors who had counted on an offer of admission from their top choice, only to learn that they had been rejected in mid-December. They were then hurried into applying to a number of other schools, making their winter break over packed and stressful. Please do not open yourself to this possibility.

How College Admissions Officers Evaluate Your Application

It would be impossible to track the application evaluation strategies of every top college and

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university. We do hope to shed light on one of the most common methods by which admissions officers evaluate applications. This method has been described in a number of high-quality books on higher education, including Ted Fiske's annual [*Guide to Colleges*](#) and [*Getting In*](#) that explained the admissions decision-making process at Princeton University.

At a number of state schools, given the sheer volume of applications they receive, they accept or reject students largely based on their academic credentials. For students who have excelled in high school and on standardized tests, these colleges and universities will be quick to offer admission. There are very real time constraints in making admissions decisions and students who appear academically well-qualified to succeed at

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these state schools will be more often than not be offered admission.

Private colleges and universities, especially those anticipating fewer applications, undergo a more comprehensive decision process that takes into greater account students' extracurricular activities and personal development. In one common method, admissions officers give students a rating between one and five both for their academic achievements and for their personal achievements. In these programs, students may be called "academic ones" or "personal twos" for short. As Princeton's campus paper *The Daily Princetonian* noted in 2001, the university's admissions office is always hoping to place academic ones and twos in the freshman class. In fact, there are simply too many academically qualified students for spots in the

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freshman class. Indeed, there are great numbers as well of talented students who may or may not be classroom stars. In each class at top schools, one may find Westinghouse Scholars, concert violinists, well-traveled dancers, superb athletes, award-winning photographers, painters, and a host of high school newspaper editors. How to choose from among such an exciting pool?

In order to come upon the one-through-five ratings, one admissions officer or perhaps a team reviews a student's application materials including his personal statements. During the final-decision process, the entire admissions team may meet to discuss each applicant. Generally, the "point people" – the initial reviewers of the student's application – will speak on the student's behalf to the team at large. In this manner, everyone may be caught up to speed on the student's merits. During these

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discussions, the admissions team hashes out how the student would benefit the university community and his or her ability to succeed in the school's environment.

After the deliberations have been completed, the team may cast votes in order to admit the students. The head admissions officer may have the final say over all decisions as well. Dean Fred Hargadon, Princeton's director of admission (retired in 2003, now Janet Lavin Rapelye), famously makes the final decision on all admissions questions, and he displays a steel-trap memory for students' backgrounds.

Athletics programs may also have the opportunity to recommend certain numbers of students each year to fill their rosters. These recommendations are by no means binding, however, and we discourage any athletes from

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accepting blindly coaches' guarantees of admission or anything of the sort.

Colleges and universities may have goals about establishing a diverse freshman class. In order to meet these marks, they may look favorably upon students from diverse ethnic, geographic, and educational backgrounds. As much of the learning in college takes place outside of the classroom, admissions officers would love to guarantee a great variety of sources for extracurricular learning.

Answers to Common Frustrations

As you are sure to find, many frustrations can scuttle even the most diligent students in completing college applications. You may perceive that your writing is not coming as quickly as you would like or that the

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applications seem to grow in length even as you are trying to complete them. Regardless of your frustration, there is no substitute for devoting quality time to your applications. For several weeks, work to complete all your schoolwork by Friday afternoon so that you may devote some weekend time to making your applications as strong as they can be. Although the rewards of working hard on the applications may seem far off, remember that, in a year or two, your hard work will appear completely worthwhile as you are reminded of the blessing of attending a school that attracts you.

Procrastination

There is a vicious cycle in all human endeavors: Frustration breeds procrastination, and procrastination breeds frustration. The circle continues until broken by

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the completion of the task at hand. Does this sound like your *modus operandi*? Would you like to avoid this circle?

Although not popular, we advise not to quit when you become frustrated. Persevere through the initial frustration. As you can see from the cycle, not yielding to the frustration will keep you from allowing procrastination to rear its ugly head. We are not suggesting that you sit until bleary-eyed, struggling over your personal statement for Yale. Exhausting yourself is counterproductive. Instead, we recommend setting small goals for yourself, such as: "During the next three hours, I would like to write the introduction for my Yale personal statement." Smaller goals in smaller time frames are achieved with much greater

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frequency; also, if you write down your goals, you will much more likely complete them.

Writer's block

If you often struggle with putting pen to paper and actually churning out what you'd like to say, you will benefit from outlining your material ahead of time.

Many individuals face great trepidation when forced to record their thoughts; outlines, informal as they are, allow even the most cautious writers to shorten the writing process by giving them freedom to put their thoughts into tentative words.

Also, you may want to make several drafts of your work. This approach takes a great deal of pressure off the initial effort. Most great novels have undergone significant revisions, many to the point that the original

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manuscript hardly resembles the final product. It is no secret that drafting is essential to taking raw thoughts and turning them into high-quality writing.

There is no substitute for having significant time to devote to completing your applications. Those who wait until the last minute – winter break – will pay dearly.

Apparently without time to draft or outline, many writers will flounder under the pressure. You also will suffer for a lack of confidence, knowing that your finished product will resemble only a best "quick" effort.

Why I am doing this again?

When you come to your sixth application, you may wonder what purpose your focus on the applications is serving. You may make some great decisions under

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these circumstances, as you realize that you would never want to attend the colleges whose applications are remaining. These enlightened thoughts sometimes spring from laziness, but, when you notice a complete lack of interest in applying to one school or another, you may be learning first-hand that you would never want to study there if given the chance.

If you do want to attend the schools corresponding to application six and beyond, however, you may have to "just bloody stretch." Perseverance is an inherent trait of all success, except for a few geniuses who can write brilliant concertos on the first draft or those who envision businesses with eBay-like success while sleep-walking. Your perseverance on your applications will be valuable not only during your college decision process, but it will serve as excellent training for the

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long nights that stand ahead of you during college.

When you have three pages more of a ten-pager to write at 3:23 a.m., you can either "bloody stretch" yourself to finish, or you can accept defeat and whimper into the department office with half-finished work.

Perseverance means lasting success, and we hope that you learn it soon, if you don't possess this quality already!

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Essay Advice

You're hoping to produce But the pressure is
some of the best writing of mounting, and you've
your life. You want to present got many deadlines to
yourself as the ideal applicant. meet. But we can help.
And you're sure that you have Take a deep breath, and
the evidence to prove the read on.
same.

At [INTOTHEBEST, Inc.](#), we want you to attend a
college or university that challenges you and will allow
you to fulfill your academic and extracurricular
aspirations. An integral part of your college
applications lies in your personal statements or essay,
where you have great latitude in presenting yourself to
college admissions officers. We are ready to make your

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essays strong and effective with our [essay and application services](#).

Contrary to popular opinion, application essays are not immediately sorted into piles of ["winners" and "losers."](#) You are an individual with specific passions, desires, and interests that set you apart from other individuals. The application essay is your opportunity to highlight that individuality.

Please check out some [example essays](#) to give you some guidelines on how to proceed.

We seek to examine these questions in this section of our site:

- [What will you say?](#)
- [How will you phrase your essays?](#)

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- [What should you avoid?](#)

Let's work together to put educated pens to paper and well-guided fingers to keyboard.

Winners and Losers

You're hoping to produce some of the best writing of your life. You want to present yourself as the ideal applicant. And you're sure that you have the evidence to prove the same.

But the pressure is mounting, and you've got many deadlines to meet. But we can help. Take a deep breath, and read on.

Some high school students applying to college might view their application essays something like an important speech. Each candidate is given the

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opportunity to address the admissions officers in turn. Steely eyes lock in on you as you ascend the stage and take your position behind the podium. You have practiced for this moment for years, every high school English class reaching its culmination in this brilliant moment. Yet, when you open your mouth, you are limited to only simple words and phrases. You sound like a third-grade version of yourself: "Let me get into your school. I want to go there. I want to help people. I am a big boy now." The monosyllabic drivel continues for six agonizing minutes until you slump off stage and begin crying uncontrollably when the eyes have disappeared. Except they haven't. They are following you. They are starting to laugh. Hysterically. And you are crying. Hysterically. Agh!

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Let us assure you, however, that writing your college application essays is not a giant speech competition that is prejudiced against the less charismatic and witty.

Certainly, charisma, wit, and verbal flair will aid you in writing application essays and personal statements, but there is no substitute for your own uniqueness and experiences. It is no coincidence that great writers have always relied on their everyday life experiences in order to craft memorable literature. William Faulkner wrote about his native Mississippi. John Steinbeck often featured characters out of his own migrant farming experiences in the Central Valley of California. Made-up or exaggerated accounts may work in comedy clubs, but they are worthless on college admissions essays.

Your experiences are the inspiration for a solid and descriptive personal statement. Can admissions officers

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tell from your SAT scores that you love safari photography? Can they guess from your 95 in English 11 that you love to tell the stories of war veterans? Can they surmise that you love to examine rocket flight patterns from your participation on the science bowl team? Can they divine that you learned humility in leadership from your captaincy of the soccer team from your laundry list of activities?

Be encouraged to know that you can write a great application essay. Please read the other sections of this "Essay answers" section to make that possibility a reality.

What to Say

Though you may be the most brilliant, witty, and charismatic individual we have never met, it is crucial

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to make wise selections about the content that will make up your college application essays. Imagine that you were asked to describe a significant incident in your life, and you opted to discuss the death of your goldfish Sandy. While Sandy's passing may have marked your passage into adulthood, it would be difficult for even the greatest writer to overcome such a morbid and seemingly juvenile topic. Pet fish are definitely noteworthy, but it is likely that more than one admissions officer would find this piece on the corny end of the spectrum.

In the great majority of application folders, you will find a specific list of application essay questions or prompts that the admissions staff hopes will reveal insights into your character and personality. While they are often faced with numbers to describe your high

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school and standardized test performance, the application essays are one area in which you have free reign – and words – to present yourself as an individual. Consider the application essay as something of a long-distance first conversation, yet you have been given the onus of making all the insights and doing all the talking – about yourself.

Some counselors suggest spending up to two weeks preparing to write your application essays, but we recognize that many readers will not want to devote such an extended period of time. By your reading this page, however, we can tell that you desire to present yourself well in your application essays. The following suggestions will help you to begin crafting your essays.

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Before doing anything else

Before beginning to write, it behooves you to weigh the topic choices that you have received. In some cases, universities will ask each applicant to react to the same topic. When you do have a choice, however, it is easy to become flustered at not feeling comfortable with any of the topics or finding more than one topic that you'd like to pursue. In the case that more than one topic exists, we encourage you to jot down a one-sentence summary of potential responses to each given topic. For example, in order to cover the prompt, "Describe an interest or activity that has been particularly meaningful to you," you might write: "Participating in the model rocketry competition through Science Bowl encouraged me to investigate jet propulsion on my own." These one-sentence summaries will help you to evaluate the

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potential essays that you might write without having to fret about the details of each possibility. If done well, you will already have established the makings of your thesis and introduction.

You should also select essay topics that will highlight your strengths as an individual and allow you to write essays with positive tone. People who sound like winners in honest writing are almost always winners in actuality, and college admissions officers want to accept winners. You are a winner and a great individual; just show that to the admissions officers!

After you have selected a topic

Tantamount to any strong essay presentation is a clear, logical train of thought. Without clear connections between the statements that you make, even an essay

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that reveals your individuality will seem both confusing and unhelpful.

We suggest that you construct an outline that answers:

- What you hope to highlight in the essay?
- What specific examples support your essay's main point?
- Which example is strongest? Weakest? As a note, the strongest examples should be reserved for the latter part of the essay, as readers will most remember what you have said last.
- What am I revealing about my personality to the reader?
- How am I presenting myself? Like I introduce myself to a respected adult?

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Show your outline to an unbiased source. From the outline and a small explanation from you, this source should be able to grasp the general flow of the essay that you hope to write. By clarifying this flow, you will avoid losing the reader on the way to making your points.

Putting fingers to keyboard

Having established a flow for the essay, follow the guidelines that you have established. Clarify and explain when possible, without wasting words along the way. Assume little and offer much. Please make use of our [style](#) references in order to polish what you'd like to say. Tie together your statements with strong transitions. Carefully read your introduction and conclusion and see that they support and clarify the

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body of your essay; an off-topic introduction or rogue conclusion can nullify all the good accomplished in the body.

Recommended reading

- [*On Writing the College Application Essay*](#) by Harry Bauld
- [*How to Write a Winning College Application Essay*](#)
(Revised 4th Edition) by Michael James Mason
- [*Elements of Style*](#) (4th Edition) by William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White
- [*Writing that Works*](#) (3rd Edition) by Kenneth Roman and Joel Raphaelson
- [*On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*](#)
(25th Anniversary Edition) by William K. Zinsser
- [*Language in Thought and Action*](#) by S. I. Hayawaka

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- [*The Bible*](#) (New International Version)
- **Writers:** E. B. White, Barbara Tuchman, Ernest Hemingway, Mark Twain, H. L. Mencken, and William James

Your Style

In addition to choosing your **content** wisely, you must also consider how you will package your writing.

Writers refer to the packaging and "feel" of their writing as their style. In this portion, we will examine the different elements of a writer's style and how you may employ these facets of your style to the benefit of your essays' readability.

Basic composition principles

We suggest even a passing glance at William Strunk's classic *Elements of Style*. In this 1918 classic, Strunk listed some pointers we will recycle here:

- **Use the active voice.** Sentences bogged down in "it can be seen"s and "it was hit by the batter"s can frustrate even the most dutiful readers.
- **Put statements in positive form.** By stating "He was not on time very often" as "He generally came late," you save both your words and your readers from having to convert your statements into more processable language.
- **Omit needless words.** When possible, shorten what you have written. It will almost always increase the piece's readability and clarity. In

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our pride, however, we are often reticent to see our hard-fought sentences pared down, but think of the reader first. He will later thank you with a "Yes!" letter.

- **In summaries, keep to one tense.** We recommend maintaining the same tense throughout your essays, if at all possible. It makes your writing clearer and more direct.

Introductions

Draw your readers into your words. We recommend considering a short introduction. Imagine if you were writing about a humbling soccer experience:

Arms outstretched and legs flexing, I leaped toward the fast-spiraling globe that seemed destined for the high

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right corner. As I heard the ripple of the net accepting the ball, I knew I had failed.

Though we do not wish this experience on anyone, the writer has successfully painted a detailed and active picture for the reader. Introductions that linger on clichéd phrases like "When I was seven," "During first grade," "Soccer was important... ," and other narrative reader-killers will make it harder to jump into your writing. Do not hurry the writing of your introduction; it is often better to craft it after you have thought out the body of the piece.

Sentence structure

Sentence structure refers to the manner in which you craft your sentence. As you likely learned in grammar studies in your English classes, there are four types of

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sentences: simple (one independent clause), complex (one dependent and one independent clause), compound (two or more independent clauses), and compound-complex sentences. An independent clause can function as a stand-alone sentence and features a subject and a verb, while a dependent clause must be attached to an independent clause in order to exist in a sentence. An essay, or really any piece of writing, gets bogged down in any one type of sentence.

Here are examples of the four types of sentences:

Simple:

The batter crushed the ball over the left field fence.

Complex:

After he struck out three times earlier in the game, the batter crushed the ball over the left field fence.

Compound:

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The batter crushed the ball over the left field fence, and his jubilant teammates stormed out of the dugout to greet him at home plate.

Compound-complex:

After he struck out three times earlier in the game, the batter crushed the ball over the left field fence, and his jubilant teammates stormed out of the dugout to greet him at home plate.

If your writing is loaded with 30-plus-word sentences, you may want to consider mixing in a number of simple sentences to give the reader a mental break. If you write many short, choppy sentences, you will want to consider linking them. Logic dictates that strong writing will have a number of complex and compound sentences. In fact, great writers will make mental connections for their readers.

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Here are two examples of improved sentence structures:

First effort: It was raining. I decided to avoid the quickly flooding streets and take the subway.

Improvement: Because it was raining, I decided to avoid the quickly flooding streets and take the subway.

We can connect these two thoughts together.

First effort: I missed forty-three school days my junior year because I contracted mononucleosis during October, and its effects lingered well into the second semester, which began in February, worrying everyone, and I was nervous that I could even complete my schoolwork, which seemed to pile up all over my living room. *There are too many ideas that the writer attempts to cover here. Let's break down this sentence into more manageable portions.*

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Improvement: During my junior year, a nasty bout with mononucleosis kept me out of school for 43 days. From October to February, I worried both my parents and myself, preoccupied that I would never reduce the piles of schoolwork that were growing in my living room.

By varying the structure of your sentences, you will both keep your reader drawn to your words and avoid the trap of placing a conceited "I" in front of each new sentence.

Transition phrases

Vital to linking your thoughts together is a variety of transition phrases. These utility players in the English language allow you to make logical connections for your readers. These words and phrases will come at the

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start of your sentences and often introduce dependent clauses. Example: When you add "if" to "the dogs left the house," it becomes an independent clause; it is a fragment and cannot exist on its own. Please consider using the following words or phrases when attempting to make these connections:

- **Similarities:** Likewise; similarly; just as; without a doubt; undoubtedly; as well; also; too
- **Contrasts:** Unlike; on the other hand; conversely; on the contrary; nonetheless; regardless; whereas; however [never to be used at the beginning of a sentence]; in contrast; despite; even though; although; though; while; instead; by contrast
- **Continuing a line of reasoning:** Furthermore; moreover; in addition; further; additionally; plus

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- **Chronologies:** first; second; then; afterwards;
after; before; even before; even after;
meanwhile; beforehand
- **Summaries:** above all; principally; chiefly;
most importantly; most significantly
- **Examples:** for example; for instance; similarly;
likewise
- **Results:** as a consequence; as a result;
consequently; following that; finally; therefore;
thus; hence
- **Sentence linkers (conjunctions):** yet; but;
while; whereas; although; despite; and

Be sure to make these logical connections between one sentence and another. Your readers will have to work much less and will be grateful that you make sense!

Lucidity

Although there could never be a checklist to guarantee lucid writing, it is vital to communicate with your reader, skipping confusion, obfuscation, and dangling ideas. One of the best means of checking the lucidity of your writing is to consult folks who seldom read your writing or those who will not allow their bias and love for you to color their commentary. Another method involves allowing your writing to sit for several days after completing it; when you have allowed the initial euphoria of completing the work to pass, you can be much more objective and can see unclear sentences more successfully. If your writing is beautiful but not clear, few writers will be able to appreciate it. Value clearness in writing your essays, and you will reach your readers' minds.

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Narration

In some way, you will be forced to narrate in your essays, as many of them will ask how a personal experience changed or revealed a personality trait, for example. When you are writing such an essay, remember that your reader has likely not met you and has not seen the incidents to which you refer. One helpful trick is to assume that your reader is an alien who has never experienced earth culture before.

Explain deeply enough to allow even the least-informed readers able to follow well. Make assumptions and make your readers your enemies; this is not a wise tact in writing a college application essay. Ask yourself: Can the reader determine the where, what, why, how, and who of each situation mentioned in this piece?

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Allow your reader to see your intelligence without overburdening them with your thesaurus-mined treasure. Your essay narratives should appear that they were first written and not told orally; as you can easily notice, stories told orally are almost always slang-laden and simplified. When you read your narratives aloud, they should flow, but they should not sound as basic as a David Letterman monologue.

Conclusions

We would recommend avoiding "In conclusion," "In short," and other sealant-variety phrases. Most narrative pieces should be wrapped up by the lasting effect that the event had on you.

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Recommended reading

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- [*Elements of Style*](#) (4th Edition) by William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White
- [*Writing that Works*](#) (3rd Edition) by Kenneth Roman and Joel Raphaelson
- [*On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*](#) (25th Anniversary Edition) by William K. Zinsser
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- **Writers:** E. B. White, Barbara Tuchman, Ernest Hemingway, Mark Twain, H. L. Mencken, and William James

Pitfalls

Although we do not like to linger on negative subjects, this portion of the book must. We do hope that our simple comments will help you to avoid application essay killers. Watch out for these monsters; they can plague even the most capable and driven students. Sometimes, they even emerge as a result of over-effort. Please be careful.

Absolute no-nos: On par with shooting yourself in the foot

- **Plagiarizing another writer's work.** While this may seem like the easy way out, it is disgraceful

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and unethical. Justice will eventually be served, and think of the grave humiliation at having to explain to your parents that you were rejected from college because you had cheated. Not cool.

- **Embellishing the facts.** Much like plagiarizing, embellishing or inventing your history is both unethical and unhealthy. Living a lie is too much work because you have to remember all the lies you have told. The truth is eminently memorable. Present it in your writing on college application essays.
- **Not answering the prompts.** Although you may have some fantastic things to say, keep your comments to the point. Think of yourself as your own press secretary during the application process. If the President's press

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secretary just decided to spout off about his favorite movies when reporters asked about the U. S.'s Middle East policy, he would appear both foolish and damaging to the administration. Keep your reporters happy and well-informed, not confused.

- **Wordiness.** If you write incredibly long sentences or paragraphs that become run-on sentence and bore the admissions officers, you may not hold the attention of your most important audience and that would not be good. No, it wouldn't. No. No. No. Keep the admissions officers from diving headfirst into their coffee cups.
- **The "SHIFT + F7" syndrome.** Also known as the "thesaurus tick," it involves students'

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proclivities to utilize polysyllabic dictums in order to manifest a latent brilliance that would never emerge without irreparably altering every third word that does not consist of three syllables. Admissions officers will be impressed to meet you, not your thesaurus.

Bad but salvageable: You missed your foot! Close call!

- **Self-contradictions.** It is vital to maintain consistency within your essay. You lose your trustworthiness in introducing yourself to admissions officers.
- **Talking glowingly about your boyfriend or girlfriend.** Dissing them in your application would not make sense either. College

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admissions officers generally have little interest in your love life and see such discussions as a sign of immaturity.

- **Overt criticism of your school or upbringing.**

Many individuals worldwide would feel blessed to have enjoyed the same opportunities you have had. Furthermore, tired and overloaded admissions officers don't want to join your pity party.

- **Name-dropping.** If you are concerned about world peace, that's great. We recommend that you not toss in ideas about which you are only marginally concerned in order to sound better rounded. Name-dropping should stay in the realm of cocktail parties.

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- **Clichés.** "I want to improve the condition of the Everyman... " You may be a willing future Peace Corps volunteer, but six other clowns wrote the exact same thing and don't really mean it. Who should the admissions officer heed? Make your words authentic and thus *yours*.

Examples

We have included a representative sample of application essays and personal statements. Please use these pieces for reference purposes only. Borrowing from these essays would be foolish and unethical. As *U. S. News and World Report* detailed, several students were rejected from Pomona College in 2001 because they had copied application essays off the Web.

Admissions officers will quickly notice the similarities

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between your essays and those of other students; plagiarizers quickly find company. And the entire group's chances go down in flames. Please don't sabotage your integrity and future opportunities over application essays. Besides, your own writing will provide a much better portrait of your character and personality!

MIT: Qualities of true friends

What qualities do you seek in your true friends, those who will support you in your thoughts, words, and deeds? Why have you sought these people as companions?

In enduring the maelstrom of adolescence, one must discover those values that one seeks in his friends and friendships. This struggle to define what one desires in

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one's friends allows one to define oneself. Through the agony and ecstasy of my youth, I have codified those beliefs I seek in my *true* friends: compassion, humility, and curiosity. As I have sought these qualities in others, I have begun demanding them from myself, pushing myself to accept the challenge of becoming a respectable citizen. Thus, I look to my friends as sculptors, chiseling my personality into a greater form.

Compassion includes not only the ability to accept others' faults and shortcomings, but also the courage to suggest solutions after examining the solution from all perspectives. I look for patient, kindred spirits who have the willingness to walk a mile in any man's moccasins; they have full knowledge of another's situation before questioning his judgment. My companions have shown me time and again those

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instances where I have failed in compassion. With their insight and guidance, these uncommon people have illuminated my own path toward self-betterment.

The honesty to admit defeat and accept victory necessarily carries a degree of humility with it. After beholding my own uneasiness in accomplishing these tasks, I peered into the pool of reflection and found that I failed to remain humble. Though I realized that he "who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted," I could not discover the courage to withhold my natural selfish tendencies. However, after studying the reactions of some venerable peers and friends, I saw that this quest for humility entails significant effort. Therefore, with the help of trusted supporters, I devoted my energies to the

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goal of accepting victory with the same humility with which I swallow defeat.

From my experience, I have observed that intellectual curiosity flows best through groups of people. When intellectuals gather to discuss controversial topics and seek definitions for obscure phenomena, they inherently gain from hearing other theories. In my short lifetime, I have discovered that my questioning of the world and my discussions with others have brought me more knowledge than classroom experiences. Though reading positively has no substitute, conversations with others certainly help to reinforce classroom topics. Thus, as I have matured into young-adulthood, I have searched for those people who might spark my intellectual curiosity simply because of their words.

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The company one keeps molds one's personality. As I view the positive deeds of others, I instinctually accept some of their behaviors in my quest to move upward.

The closest knit of my high school friendships have taught me the importance of treasured values and have created some rock-solid beliefs of my own. My friends have sometimes served as my greatest role models, forcing me to congratulate myself on discovering character-building individuals to expedite my growth.

Comments: This essay succeeds in answering the first part of the question, but it may tarry too long on impressive vocabulary. Less concern about the word choice and more time bolstering the supporting examples for seeking compassion, humility, and curiosity in one's friends would solidify this essay. The author also could more clearly express why he has

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sought these qualities in his friends; simply changing "I look to my friends as sculptors" to "I chose my friends to be my sculptors" would help.

Penn: Page 217 of your just-completed 300-page autobiography

*You have just completed your 300-page autobiography.
Please submit page 217.*

In September, *Time* magazine first appears in my mailbox. Though I had never expressed a keen interest in current events, I had a longing desire to keep abreast with the world around me, for I believed I would find myself more easily if I looked beyond suburban Philadelphia. As I read the magazine, I realized I had moved closer to the "real world" even though I continued to lope about East High School. This

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consciousness gave me inspiration to continue to build myself as a person, and I pined each week to recline and take in the world.

While *Time* brought me closer to the world, I recognized I still lay at a great distance from my first "real-world" experience. As the work from my demanding schedule piled up, I found myself entrenched within a rather unattractive adolescent rut. Each morning when I awoke, I remembered the relative unimportance of my day-to-day struggles as they pertained to my life as a whole. To accompany these rather pessimistic thoughts, I determined that I would rather find myself as a forty-year-old father slaving to feed his family. To this point, I had solely *prepared* – I had yet to add anything of great substance to the world. Thankfully, everyday excitement maintained my

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youthful exuberance well enough that I did not become forever engulfed by morbid imaginations.

As I had in previous school years, I strove for perfection through constant evaluation of my own status. Soon, in a daydream, I glanced upon a crystallization of my future existence and how ambition would lead me to my ultimate end. When a close confidante mentioned that I might become anything, even President of the United States of America, I dreamed of where I might head and what steps I ought to take. Although I could not pinpoint its cause, I perceived that I would succeed in pursuing any path that I might take in life. My head swirled, analyzing my possibilities of future greatness...

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Early in my junior year, I gathered that the college selection process had begun and that I did not really want to devote time to what appeared as such a far-off destination. With the help of the East guidance department and my parents, my blood pressure skyrocketed many times as I worried that I might never search out the "right college." When I found several individuals who had their futures painted brilliantly already, I panicked, for I knew my ambition would direct me somewhere I had not yet determined. After several months of needless panicking, I realized that I might best find where I ought to head by analyzing where I had been. Still, I saved myself from undue pressure by asserting that finding the future might not come within high school. My patience paid off as my blood pressure and stress levels receded.

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Eleventh grade brought companionship as I had never before imagined. Within East High School, I cherished the diversity and richness of my peers and sought to discover the variety of perspectives around me. I quickly realized that friends come in many packages and that I had failed to recognize that young ladies listened better than brutish young men wanting to exhibit their machismo. As I trotted into school each day, I anticipated the positive social interaction that had disappeared for some time. My soul smiled happily as I received a steady flow of emotional nourishment.

Comments: Despite the author's arrogance, the reader can quickly see that he is seeking to know himself and to explain what was happening internally during this period of change. The student might have removed one

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paragraph in order to make the page seem a bit more believable.

Princeton: A story that provides an insight into your personality

Tell one story about yourself that would best provide us, either directly or indirectly, with an insight into the kind of person you are. For example, the story can simply relate a personal experience, or a humorous anecdote; it can tell about an especially significant academic encounter or about an unusual test of character. The possibilities are unlimited (well, almost so). You choose. Just relax and write it. (Remember, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was only 272 words.)

Mrs. Birchette rejected my work.

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I thought I had fulfilled the requirements of the workbook assignment, but Mrs. Birchette informed me otherwise. The kid sitting behind me in the the third row had not performed as well as I had, and yet Mrs. Birchette lauded him for his accomplishments. I became puzzled at this seeming injustice.

"Why had she singled me out as not having done a good job?" I thought. The monotony of third-grade reading exercises certainly did not require my undivided attention and concentrated effort, or at least I believed.

I stormed rather angrily toward Mrs. Birchette's metal-framed teacher's desk. "What's the matter with my work? Didn't I do a good job? I did better than Pete, right?"

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"No, you didn't. You see, – let me throw in some *constructive* criticism – you didn't give your best effort. See, you shouldn't measure your efforts against those of someone else. The only person you should challenge is yourself," she instructed in her slow-moving Virginia drawl.

I smiled a little and determinedly decided to complete my workbook activities to the best of my ability. I returned slowly to my desk.

Grabbing the large block eraser that sat just inside my desk's storage compartment, I obliterated the previous, inferior responses on the glossy pages and began anew. I carefully reasoned out each one of the answers and selected my words meticulously. The finished product

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appeared after fifteen minutes of toil. I rose quickly and sprung toward Mrs. Birchette's desk.

"I finished! This is my best effort!" I exclaimed.

"Let me see... " She quickly analyzed my assignment.

With several sweeps of her Eberhard-Faber teacher's marking pen, she placed large Cs – signifying "Correct" – over the page in my workbook. I smiled in joy as I had discovered what would transform my intellect into results – plain hard work.

I vowed to give total effort to any project I pursued at that moment. Even though the gigantic Cs have subsequently disappeared over the last nine years, self-
"Motivation" has brought me plenty of satisfaction at the realization of determined effort.

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Comments: A helpful, character-bearing illustration.

Clear and concise.

Princeton: A story that provides an insight into your personality

Tell one story about yourself that would best provide us, either directly or indirectly, with an insight into the kind of person you are. For example, the story can simply relate a personal experience, or a humorous anecdote; it can tell about an especially significant academic encounter or about an unusual test of character. The possibilities are unlimited (well, almost so). You choose. Just relax and write it. (Remember, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was only 272 words.)

Cornell: Ask, and then answer, an important question

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Ask, and then answer, an important question you would have liked us to ask.

What do you feel you are doing now that will help you learn the most in college?

I feel that by taking Advanced Placement Pascal-independent study now, I will learn how to teach myself complex material without the help of a teacher.

Calculus and Physics are challenging and difficult, but the teacher is always there to explain the hardest problems, make sure I do my homework, and challenge me to learn in class. In Pascal, I have to constantly motivate myself to do the homework, set the pace of the class, and make sure that I will be prepared for the AP exam in May.

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Keeping a weekly log of what I have learned in class and how much time I spend doing homework every day is one way I motivate myself to do my homework. But I will not learn how to write worthwhile programs spending a certain amount of time everyday reading a Pascal book. I have to understand what I am doing.

After spending a week trying to write a program with multiple arrays and getting nowhere, I was extremely frustrated. Finally, after reading the chapter on arrays the fifth time, I was able to finish the program.

The next day I wrote a program to find the area under a curve using rectangles in half an hour. I was overwhelmed by the sense of accomplishment I felt as a result because I knew that I had not received help from anyone else. This was my work. Only four months ago I could not even declare a variable, and now I was

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programming a computer to do the same thing I was learning in calculus.

Unfortunately, I was only a third of the way into the textbook and halfway done with the year. With a calculator and a calendar, I realized that in order to finish in time to review, I needed to triple the amount of work I did every day and set dates for completion of certain topics.

Once I got myself scheduled and going, completing the work was possible, and I was able to make more of class time by working harder to make the deadlines.

Teaching myself new things from books is difficult and rewarding. In college, I will be able to read ahead in physics and calculus and understand more than other students do. I have heard that in college, some

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assignments are given at the beginning of the course and are collected at the end without any help from the teacher. From taking Pascal, I will be able to set up a schedule, get the work done on time, and teach myself the material. Pascal has also helped me think more clearly when doing math and physics problems. By learning how to program a computer to do math, I have learned how to do math faster and more efficiently. As a result, I have improved in Mathletes competition. In the past I would be lucky to get one question out of six right. Now, I usually get four or five right.

Comments: It worked.

Princeton: Opportunity to spend one year in service on behalf of others

If you were given the opportunity to spend one year in

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service on behalf of others, which area would you choose? Briefly explain why.

I will always remember the friendships I made doing Hurricane Andrew relief for two weeks in Homestead, Florida. Although most of this work has gone unrecognized, it was the most gratifying work I have ever done. I met a member of the men's Junior Olympic Volleyball team, a National Merit Scholar, a surfer, and many other interesting people.

Down in Florida, with people from all over the Eastern United States, I worked clearing debris from a state park, and clearing a path with machetes and chain-saws through the woods. I also helped out at the Salvation Army Distribution center, sorting goods, sweeping the parking lot and cleaning the offices. If I was given the

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opportunity to spend one year in service on behalf of others, I would go back down to Homestead to work with Project Serve and the Salvation Army.

Comments: I also met my first Princeton alumnus, Al Nix '76 and a Vassar girl who encouraged me to be valedictorian in high school.

Princeton: Engineering Statement, Question 1

Why are you interested in studying engineering?

Cornell: Tell us what you'd like to study at Cornell

From as far back as I can remember, I have found the products of engineering intriguing. Hearing my voice on a cassette recorder, checking out the construction of the latest basketball shoes, wondering how bridges stay together, learning how planes fly, and using Gore-Tex

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to stay warm and dry on my long winter runs, the products of engineering have been useful to me. During some runs I think about how many people die in car accidents. As an engineer I could design safer cars and save lives. I could design a recyclable material to make toys with so that our land-fills do not overflow with old toys. I would also be able to improve sports equipment to make skiing and mountain biking even more fun. Eventually, cassettes, CD's and mini discs will be replaced by something smaller which has better sound. Basketball shoes will weigh much less and enable the wearer to jump higher, and bridges in California will not collapse during earthquakes. Planes will fly in inclement weather. I am interested in making these dreams a reality.

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Comments: I was also interested in making a new material that is waterproof and more breathable than Gore-Tex.

Princeton: Engineering Statement, Question 2

Briefly describe any particular experiences you have had that are related to engineering or that led you to have an interest in one or another field of engineering.

Cornell: Most important extracurricular experience

What extracurricular experience has been most important to you? Why? What do you feel you have accomplished?

Studying the chemical reactions of HCl , H_2SO_4 , NaOH , NH_4OH , Al^{3+} , Ag^+ , Ba^{2+} , Bi^{3+} , Ca^{2+} , Cu^{2+} , Fe^{3+} , Sn^{4+} , and Zn^{2+} and making a flow chart to identify the solutes in ten numbered containers on the

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basis of their reactions with each other for Science Olympiad last year was challenging, rewarding, and interesting. After making the 13 solutions, doing research and constructing the flow chart, I competed with my senior teammate Lewis, against 35 other teams from Nassau County. Winning second place medals was satisfying and increased my determination to study qualitative analysis concepts regarding knowledge of cations and anions in the traditional Qualitative Analysis Groups, methods of identification and separation, flow charts and lab techniques, so that this year, I will be awarded first place.

Comments: I was applying for chemical engineering, so I guess it fit.

Princeton: Engineering Statement, Question 3

How do you think the program in engineering offered at Princeton might suit your particular interests?

Princeton's competitive atmosphere, hardworking students, and strong programs in chemical, civil, electrical, and materials engineering will enable me to make the best of my four years at college. I expect to round out my education by meeting people who are not studying engineering and learning from them. The interdepartmental program in materials science and engineering will enable me to take courses that interest me in Chemistry, Electrical Engineering, Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering, and Physics.

Comments: In retrospect, I wish I had taken more History, Art History, Economics, Philosophy, and

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Physics courses, but I guess I can study them now on my own or in the future.

Princeton: What do you expect to gain from college?

Of all the things you hope or expect to gain from your college experience, which two or three would you place at the top of your list if you had to make up such a list today? (Be as specific or as general as you'd like.)

I hope to gain a stronger foundation in chemical engineering, better thinking skills, and the ability to respond and adjust to the diversity of population I will meet at Princeton and throughout the world. Getting a strong foundation in chemical engineering will prepare me for graduate school while providing me with an opportunity to do challenging work in a competitive atmosphere which will improve my thinking skills for

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life. Gaining a better understanding of the diversity of population at Princeton will enable me to work better with people from all over the world.

Comments: Chemical engineering was challenging, Princeton was fun, and the people are amazing.

Princeton: What kind of person would be an ideal roommate?

What kind of person would you consider an ideal roommate for your freshman year in college?

I would consider a versatile person an ideal freshman roommate. He would be flexible and athletic, and would enjoy running, mountain-biking, playing Frisbee, and playing volleyball. We would have different talents so that we could learn new talents from each other. This person would not drink alcohol or use drugs and would

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have a good sense of humor. Someone studying Physics, Psychology, Cognitive Studies, or Materials Science and Engineering would probably be best because I could learn about Psychology, and Cognitive Studies from him or discuss Physics and Materials Science with him. With a roommate like this, we would have many opportunities for personal development and would get along well.

Comments: My freshman year roommates, and my other roommates at Princeton, are awesome people, and while they didn't match my description perfectly, they are so much better than I could have picked. Be yourself.

Financing

Financing your or your child's college education can put a real crunch in a pocketbook. Planning ahead and aggressively seeking financial aid can help to reduce the hurt. Let's get started!

At [**INTOTHEBEST, Inc.**](#), we realize that financing your college education can be a daunting task. We want to help you steer through the mazes of loan, scholarship, and college savings programs to enable you to pursue your college dreams without incurring excessive debt.

The next steps

- [**General financial aid advice**](#)
- [**Saving for college**](#)

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- [Loan advice](#)
- [Scholarship advice](#)
- [Military programs: Service academies and R.O.T.C.](#)
- [Search for over \\$1 BILLION in scholarships, for free](#)

Please note: We are not affiliated with any of the referenced external sites and are not responsible for their content. IRS tax policies, government grant and loan programs, and scholarships sometimes change. Though a reasonable effort has been made to verify information, we cannot guarantee the accuracy. Please consult your attorney, tax advisor, or financial planner before making any financial decisions.

General Financial Aid Advice

Starting early and organizing your financial records will greatly improve your financial aid process. Some scholarships have early deadlines, so you should check with your guidance counselor or online scholarship searches for details. Even while in your junior year in high school, you can begin searching for scholarships and preparing for financial aid application forms.

A key for applying for financial aid is completing a Free Application for Financial Student Aid (FAFSA) form.

Types of financial aid

- Scholarships and grants are the best type of awards because you do not have to pay them back.

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- Loans must eventually be paid back based on the stated terms, including the interest rate and when you start paying back.

Types of Scholarships

- There are general merit-based scholarships and need-based scholarships that can be used at any accredited college or university.
- Individual colleges also have merit-based scholarships (merit could be in academics, sports, or music, for example) as well as financial-need grants that can only be used if you attend that college.
- Government grants are available; examples include the Federal Pell Grant and other state grant programs.

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Please discover more [information on scholarships](#).

Types of loans

- Several federal loan programs exist to help students finance their college education.
- Colleges may also provide loans for students with various terms.
- Loans can be helpful and may have a subsidized interest rate or delayed payments that start after graduation.
- There are also private-sector companies such as banks and financial services companies that provide loans to students.

Parental and student contributions

"Parental and student contributions" to college payments are the parts that hurt.

Typically, a college calculates:

$$\begin{aligned} & (\text{tuition} + \text{room} + \text{board}) - \\ \text{financial need} = & (\text{expected parental contribution} \\ & + \text{student contribution}) \end{aligned}$$

The "sticker price" of (tuition + room + board) is set by each school and is probably somewhere between \$8,000 and \$15,000 for a public school (assuming in-state tuition) to between \$20,000 and \$35,000 for a private school. Many schools will meet your financial need with scholarships and/or loans. Princeton University

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guarantees that it will meet a student's financial need with all grants rather than loans.

Unfortunately, some schools are unable to meet your financial need and you may seek additional loans. In certain cases, you and your family may not be able to pay the "expected family contribution" – they expect you to pay a lot – so you may need to apply for additional loans.

The expected parental contribution is based on the assets and income of the student's parents, while the student contribution is based on the student's assets and income. While it would be unethical to hide assets or income, there are certain strategies you can use for how you can structure your college savings to decrease your overall expected contributions.

Saving

The key is start saving money for college as soon as possible. Some parents start saving immediately after their child's birth. This tact is not realistic for many families, however. If you are or your child is headed off to college this year, there may be little you can do at this point. Starting savings for younger siblings may be an option.

Methods of saving for college

There are several savings vehicles available for financing college. They each have different rules and restrictions as well as tax implications. The general benefit of savings vehicles is that they allow compounding tax-free. That is, you can earn dividends and capital gains and then reinvest the money without

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having to pay taxes on investment income/dividends each year.

- Educational IRA: You invest in mutual funds and pick the asset allocation
- 529 Savings Plan: You invest in mutual funds; in many plans, the asset allocation varies by student's age)
- 529 Savings Plan: Prepaid tuition, where you buy tuition units at today's prices

There are also conventional saving in the parents' name and savings in the child's name. Having savings in a parent's name or a child's name will impact both income taxes as well as expected family contributions.

Loans

Federal student loans

There are many federal loan programs:

- Stafford Loans can be subsidized or unsubsidized depending if you qualify.
- Perkins Loans are for students with exceptional financial need.
- PLUS Loans are for loans in a parent's name.

An excellent source of information on eligibility and details for the loans listed above and other programs is the [federal government's student aid](https://studentaid.ed.gov) site, www.studentaid.ed.gov.

Private student loans

Private loans also exist for students, but the interest rates and terms are generally not as good as government loan programs.

Scholarships

Research early, prioritize scholarships, apply early

The strategy is a three-step process:

1. Identify all of the scholarships for which you are eligible.
2. Select the scholarships that have the right combination of "probability of success" and "scholarship amount."

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3. Carefully complete applications to meet the submission deadlines and requirements (such as essays, transcripts and recommendations).

To begin step one, you can [search for scholarships](#) through IntotheBest.com's recommendations.

In step two, you must consider the scholarship amount for each scholarship uncovered as well as the probability of receiving it. While you probably will not know the number of applicants for a scholarship, the degree to which you fit the criteria is a good indication of how likely you are to win.

The table below shows the suggested priorities for scholarships for which you are eligible. The number in each square is the suggested "priority" to be placed on the category of scholarship, where "1" represents a

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scholarship of high amount and high probability of success for you.

Likelihood of receiving the scholarship

Scholarship amount	<u>Low</u>	<u>Medium</u>	<u>High</u>
Low	6	5	3
Medium	5	4	2
High	4	2	1

After choosing those scholarships to which you will apply, carefully complete the corresponding applications, keeping in mind the deadlines and work involved.

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For several scholarships, you can write a great essay once and then skillfully tailor it for other scholarship contests.

Military

If you are interested in the military, R.O.T.C. and service academies can be a great way to obtain an excellent education with little or no debt. There is a military service obligation for graduates of a service academy or R.O.T.C. Typically, the commitment is four or more years, but it can be longer for certain positions such as pilots and navigators.

It is important to start early in applications for service academies and R.O.T.C. Service academies require a nomination from a senator or congressman, which takes time for a selection process. It is best to apply for

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R.O.T.C scholarships at the end of junior year of high school.

The service academies

The United States Service Academies offer an excellent education in addition to rigorous military and physical training.

- [United States Military Academy](#) (West Point, NY) [Army]
- [United States Naval Academy](#) (Annapolis, MD) [Navy and Marine Corps]
- [United States Air Force Academy](#) (Colorado Springs, CO) [Air Force]
- [United States Coast Guard Academy](#) (New London, CT) [Coast Guard]

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A lesser known academy that offers opportunities to become an officer in several branches of military service is: The [United States Merchant Marine Academy](#) (Kings Point, NY) [U. S. Merchant Marine; also possible Marine Corps, Navy, Army, and Air Force].

Reserve Officers' Training Corps (R.O.T.C.)

R.O.T.C. allows you to attend a regular college and serve as a cadet going to an R.O.T.C. class and other weekly R.O.T.C. activities.

There are many scholarships available for the different services.

- [Air Force R.O.T.C.](#)
- [Army R.O.T.C.](#)

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- [Navy R.O.T.C.](#)

Graduate school

If you are interested in pursuing a career in law or medicine, there are opportunities to attend graduate school and then serve your country as a judge advocate general (JAG) or medical professional (doctor, dentist, or nurse, for example) in the military.

Seeking more assistance

Please [contact us](#) for additional information on financial planning services.

Search Now!

While many places charge up front fees for scholarship searches of questionable value, we seek to provide the best available financial information for free.

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The FastWeb site suggested below contains a free search for scholarships. You simply register with an e-mail address and date of birth and then answer a series of questions to determine your eligibility.

Visit [FastWeb](#) to begin your quest towards financing college through merit and need-based scholarships.

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Your Questions

We couldn't **pretend** to answer all your questions, but we'd love to provide this **forum** to facilitate your discovery. There are no stupid questions, and we will make sure that the responses are **intelligent**. If you have something that you're **itching** to ask, please let us know.

Your fellow students will be glad you did.

At **INTOTHEBEST, Inc.**, we understand that you have a great number of questions in approaching the college admissions process. This portion of our site is dedicated to answering common questions about the admissions process.

We seek to demystify topics concerning **visits** to the schools in which you are interested, **applications and essays**, **decisions** between universities – before

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applying and after receiving acceptance – and what it's like to [start college](#).

Visits

Q. Why are visits important?

A. Visits are the most efficient and helpful means of gauging your "fit" at the universities in which you might be interested. We believe confidently that there is no replacement for physically trying out the campus – seeing the layout of the buildings and the way people interact there and listening to the minds and hearts of the students, faculty, and staff. It is not uncommon to "feel" immediately that you would never want to attend a school that you visit; such a visit should be considered a great success!

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Q. How many schools should I visit?

A. You should visit all the schools to which you plan to apply. Understanding that time and money may be of the essence, we recommend your using any on-line materials to reduce the list of schools to which you might apply. Some forethought will help you to consolidate visiting several schools into one trip. We recommend, however, that you not visit more than three schools one day after another; the visits will have diminishing value, as the facts about the schools will meld together into an incoherent, inseparable mess.

Q. When should I visit schools?

A. We suggest that you visit each school to which you plan to apply before starting its application. As mentioned before, you may find that even a first glance at a school will elicit immediate warning signals and

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may cause you to rethink your decision to apply. After receiving your decision letters, you should also visit the front-running schools again when school is in session.

When it comes down to it, even the most beautiful campus in the world should not win over your heart; it is the academic, social, extracurricular, and spiritual environment of the university that you must evaluate.

Many universities will have special hosting weekends for pre-frosh; while these weekends may be great opportunities for meet-and-greet, they are not the best times to evaluate the university, as the university will have packaged itself perfectly for the occasion. We do not discourage you from enjoying these weekends, but we also urge you to make the all-important where-to-go decision outside of these idyllic weekends.

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Q. What should I do when I visit?

A. Take the official school tour. Spend time with students. Realize that the people who give the official tours answer the same questions over and over tour after tour, so they may be tired of answering questions. Their opinions are valuable, but you'll probably get more candid responses from friends at the school. Try to stay with friends who go to the school. If you don't know anyone at the school, call the admissions office and ask if they have a hosting program to match student hosts with prospective students.

Attend classes that interest you at a level that's right for you. I (Tim) sat in on a graduate-level electrical engineering class as a prospective. I should have visited an introductory economics, physics, chemistry, or Slavic literature course; these courses would have been

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more likely reflective of the academic environment that I'd encounter as a freshman.

Check out the dorms, where you'll be living; eat in the dining halls; go to the library; attend a sports practice; and go to some classes with your host. Try to get a sense of what it would be like for *you* to be a student at the school.

Q. What should I do when I visit the school after I've been accepted?

A. Celebrate with the other people that got in! But, more important for the long term, we encourage you to meet professors in your prospective department(s) and students who participate in activities that might interest you. If you are an athlete, you may likely have already visited with members of team and the coach. If you would like to write for the campus paper, for example,

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you might seek out one of the editors or a writer to learn how you can get involved once you become a student.

Applications and Essays

Q. To what number of schools should I apply?

A. There is certainly a variety of theories on this question. When applying to colleges and universities with competitive admissions processes, it is unlikely to receive a "Yes!" letter from everyone. Although we do not discourage you from pursuing your dreams, we also urge you to approach the process with a realistic perspective.

Having explained that, the best advice that we've received is this: Apply to three types of schools. The first type represents that caliber of university to which

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you expect to easily gain admission solely on your academic credentials; your SAT or ACT scores and high school record indicate that you would be highly qualified to succeed at a school within this category. Your SAT or ACT score will most likely lie above the 75th percentile at schools within this category for you.

The second category includes those schools in which you would likely receive acceptance based solely on your academic credentials. In schools of this caliber, your SAT or ACT scores and high school record will be highly competitive with other applicants. For rough measures, your SAT or ACT scores should lie above the 50th percentile of the stated range for schools within this category.

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The third and final category represents your "dream" schools. If you were to apply to schools of this category, you might possibly receive acceptance solely based on your academic criteria. To keep your dreams somewhat realistic, we recommend that you remember that students below the stated 25th percentile in the SAT or ACT range likely have some outstanding extracurricular talents that place them above the pack.

We suggest that you apply to at least one school in each of these categories and that you choose them wisely.

Don't select schools merely for name-dropping purposes later. Unless financial restrictions determine otherwise, we recommend that you apply to two schools from each category.

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Q. When should I fill out the applications?

A. We strongly urge you to complete your applications well ahead of the deadlines, at least a week before the stated deadline. A great method to make that happen is to review the application materials as soon as you receive the applications from the various schools. Any forms to be completed by guidance counselors and teachers should be distributed well ahead of the stated deadline times. We know of several friends whose hopes of attending individual schools were scuttled by a disorganized, overwhelmed, or misdirected teacher.

Q. What is the most important portion of the application?

A. From research that we have done, it appears that the personal statement or essay portions of the essay hold the greatest means of swaying the admissions officers

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in your favor. Charisma will shine through great essays.

This is not to claim, however, that an inadequate academic record can automatically be salvaged by fifty lines of winning prose. Your academic record will speak for itself, but your character cannot, unless you reveal it through your application essay.

Decisions

Q. How should I decide where to apply?

A. We recommend that you visit the schools to which you might likely apply – before filling out the applications. You may save yourself a ton of work, as a first glance at some universities may send you packing, ecstatic that you won't have to spend four years there. Please see our section on [applications and essays](#) for more details.

Q. How should I decide where to go?

A. Pick the school that's right for you academically,

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athletically, socially, and financially. Pick a school where you'll enjoy spending four years, with people you'll like, majors you're interested in, and extracurriculars for fun in your spare time. Try to meet with alumni from the schools you are considering to see if you want to be like them. What do the school's alumni do after graduation? Do they go into investment banking, consulting, engineering, graduate school in science, law, or medicine, seminary, or do they go to business school and start companies?

Be wary of accepting a huge debt load, but be aware that it is much easier to appeal the financial aid office's decisions once you have been accepted. If you are seriously considering attending a school with a sub-par financial aid package, make a point of visiting the financial aid office and investigating the possibility of

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their matching your best available package. It has happened before!

Starting at College

Congratulations on finishing high school and being accepted to college! We hope that we've helped you along the way.

Q. What should I do during the summer preceding the start of college?

A. We highly recommend that you carefully read the mail that your school sends you. Many important details regarding moving in, getting settled, and summer get-togethers will be discussed therein. Many universities now offer on-line community portals for students just accepted to their freshman classes; we encourage your taking advantage of these easy means

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of forging relationships in order to make the friend-making process seem a bit less daunting.

Q. What should I bring to school?

A. Simplicity is a virtue not often exalted in our society, but its application to your first away-from-home living arrangement would save you a lot of trouble. Students typically over-pack rather than under-pack, bringing about the dreaded overweight baggage charges and frequent headaches of transporting bulky items cross-country. Remember that many of the items that you so cherish may prove distracting in your acclimation to the school and your studies; having three video game systems won't guarantee that people will want to hang out with you. In fact, your overuse of those game systems might keep you from friendships that would have proven invaluable. With big-ticket items that you

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plan to purchase specifically for college, we recommend buying them in the vicinity of the university; then, there is no need to transport them cross-country, and it will be feasible to have them serviced in a reasonable amount of time. The local merchants will love you too!

Perspective

It is getting harder every year to get into the top schools in America. I am thankful I had the opportunity to go to Princeton because of the education, the beautiful campus, and most of all – for the incredible people I met who are now my friends. Had I not gone to Princeton, my other options were Cornell, possibly MIT (I was waitlisted and withdrew my application when I got into Princeton), SUNY Buffalo, and Polytechnic University in Farmingdale. I had a full scholarship to Polytechnic University to study engineering. Even though the school is small, the professors are funny, the students are friendly, and the alumni are successful. After graduation, maybe I could have worked for Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers, the venture capital firm that invested in Amazon.com, Sun Microsystems,

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Compaq, and AOL. Eugene Kleiner is a founder of Fairchild Semiconductor and an alumnus of Polytechnic University.

Wherever you go to school, you can probably get a good education if you study hard and focus on doing well. Granted, there is a prestige factor involved with going to a top school, and the people will be different, but many less selective colleges have honor colleges that provide a competitive, intellectual atmosphere to challenge their top students.

Now let us move to a 3 Dimensional Wealth view of the world. At FEPFV.com, Roey Diefendorf, Jr. showed me that wealth is 3 Dimensional – personal, social, and financial. We have value for who we are as

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people. We have value to influence others socially.

Finally, there is the value of our net worth. Bringing in a spiritual dimension, God created us in His image and thinks each of us is very special. Steve and I believe that God sent His son Jesus Christ to die for our sins and if we accept that, we become children of God.

My friend Elizabeth sent her comments about the stress related to the college application process many high school students face. Steve and I agree with her, and have included her letter.

Wherever you end up going to college, we wish you the best. Have fun, make friends, study hard, and try to find God's plan for your life.

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Hi Tim -

In looking over your website, I had a thought of something you might consider including in it.

As Christians we know that our ultimate worth and meaning come from outside ourselves. Our value and importance is not because of what we do but because of what Christ has done. We love because he first loved us.

What I see from the high school students that I know - Christian and otherwise - is the overwhelming sense that their entire value as a person is wrapped up in where they get into and where they go to college. For a lot of them basically the entire purpose of their lives (if not in reality, at least functionally) has been to get them into a good college. All of their academic and sports and all of that has the intention at least in part of impressing college admissions officers. They forget the truth of God loving them and not wanting performance to make them matter.

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By junior year the pressure really starts. It comes from their school (who wants to brag about where their graduates matriculate), their parents (who may sincerely want the best for their children or to feed their own sense of accomplishment), their peers (who put competitive pressure on them), and finally from themselves.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with getting into great colleges. I went to one. But I know that if I hadn't gotten in, I would have been devastated. Not just because I didn't get what I wanted, but because my sense of self and self worth was so closely tied to being able to say "I am going to Duke".

I guess what I think would be awesome to have on your site would be a page addressing the stress, anxiety and the lie that we only matter if we get into a certain type of school. That there is grace and that ultimately we are NOT in control of where we get into school and (if you want to be more explicit about the Gospel) that there is a loving God who IS in control and who wants the BEST for them, even if it wasn't what the student had in mind. It would

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address the pressure and anxiety that students are feeling as they go through the process. Think about the freedom that one could have, in contrast, being secure in themselves as they apply to schools rather than where they get in making or breaking them!

Those are my thoughts.

Take care

Elizabeth B.

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About Us

Founded in 2002, by Steve Edwards and Tim Van Hooser, our goal at **INTOTHEBEST, Inc.** is to help other students benefit from the counseling and resources we had that helped us get into and thrive at Princeton. We hope the book will help you improve your applications and make the process easier as well.

In order to serve you better, we are expanding our ranks of counselors to include alumni from schools other than Princeton. We will try to find alumni from the schools you are considering to give you the inside scoop on their school to help you make better decisions.

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Hopkins University, Carnegie Mellon University, Purdue University, Hofstra University, Stanford University, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business.

Stephen W. Edwards graduated *magna cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Princeton in 2001. Born and raised outside Philadelphia, Steve Edwards was blessed to learn from some great teachers both at West Chester East High School and Princeton University. Steve's test scores speak for themselves: SAT I: 790 Mathematics; 740 Verbal; SAT II: 750 Writing; 800 Mathematics IIC; 800 Physics; and 800 U. S. History and Social Studies; ACT: 33 Composite. At Princeton, he concentrated in colonial American history and focused his thesis on the

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lasting impact of Jonathan Edwards's "Treatise Concerning Religious Affections" in influencing history's view of the 1739-1746 Great Awakening.

After graduating from Princeton, he has served as a short-term missionary with Campus Crusade for Christ in Maracaibo, Venezuela. There, he taught English clubs and Bible studies to university students on several campuses and helped to create effective literature to explain the group's events to inquiring students.

From 2002 to 2004, Steve worked at Bridgewater Associates, a money management firm in Westport, Conn. At Bridgewater, he researched the financial markets and delivered solutions to client requests for market information and portfolio analysis.

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Steve now works at Spruce Private Investors as a portfolio management associate. It's a private wealth management boutique. Spruce has over \$1 billion under management.

Timothy P. Van Hooser, is Chief Executive Officer of INTOTHEBEST Corporation, one of the largest personalized college counseling companies in America.

In 2002, Van Hooser left Accenture to start INTOTHEBEST with his college friend Steve Edwards.

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Van Hooser is a member of the Alumni Schools Committee for Princeton University, where he interviews students applying to Princeton.