

Freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior year: no matter where you are in high school, there are certain things you can and should be doing to make your (eventual) college search easier.

When you're in high school, especially as a freshman or sophomore, college seems like a long way off. But the bittersweet truth is that high school goes by faster than you realize, and soon you'll have to think about what you want to do with your future. It can be overwhelming, so it's important to lay out a plan for each year of your high school career so that by the time you're a senior, you're ready and confident about what's ahead.

Below are a few things you can do during each year of high school so you have an amazing time whether you're a freshman or a senior. Oh, and you'll also be super prepared for college and life after graduation!

Freshman year of high school

- **Get involved!** Colleges want to see students who are not only strong academically but who are passionate about extracurricular interests and give back to the community. If you haven't already, sign up for a few extracurricular activities at school and find ways to get involved in your community through your church, youth group, or other organization. But just remember: the quality of your involvement is more important than quantity. Join the clubs and activities you *really* care about. You'll find it much more fun and easy to invest your time and energy in them if you do.
- **Take your school work seriously.** Most colleges look at potential students' grades from freshman to senior year, so if you've slacked off a little (or more than a little) in the past, this is the time to make some changes. You'll also need more self-discipline as you go through each year of high school—and even more in college. So you'll be helping your future self out if you start developing good study habits now. Beyond that, trying your hardest in your high school classes is also really good preparation for any standardized college admission tests you might take in the future. But we'll get to those in a minute...
- **Start developing good time management skills.** As mentioned above, academic success takes a lot of self-discipline. Four years from now, when you arrive at college, you'll be responsible for your own schedule, meeting assignment deadlines, and fitting in all of your obligations. The more practice you get with **managing your time wisely**, the better.

- **Take advanced courses if you can.** Some high schools don't offer weighted classes before junior year, but if your school does, take advantage of them. Challenging yourself as a freshman (and beyond) is good!

Sophomore year of high school

- **Get a job.** If your schedule allows, try to get a part-time job after school, on weekends, or during the summer. It will teach you responsibility, all-important time management skills, and maybe even **valuable transferable skills**. Plus, it'll put a few bucks in your pocket.
- **Take the PSATs.** It's excellent practice for the SATs, and high scores on the **PSAT** might put you in the running for National Merit Scholarships. (You can learn more about what that means [here](#).)
- **Start researching college costs**, such as tuition, books, room, and board. Then look into financial aid options like **scholarships**, grants, and loans—some of which you *can* apply for as a sophomore in high school (maybe even as a freshman!). College financial aid can be complicated, so becoming familiar with the process early will make things easier when you're a senior, so it's not all coming at you at once. If you are eligible to apply for any financial assistance now, even better. And if not, looking at college costs might inspire you to save some of what you earn, if/when you get that job we mentioned...
- **Start thinking about your future.** You still have time to decide, but it's often helpful to start thinking about what makes you happy and what your future goals might be as a sophomore. What might you want to do with your life and what's the best way to get there? A traditional four-year college isn't for everyone. Perhaps a two-year trade school or community college is the **right choice for you**. Even though your choices may change (a lot) by the time you actually apply senior year of high school, thinking about these things now can help take some of the pressure off later. Again, it helps ease you into the **college search process**.

Junior year of high school

- **Attend college fairs**, where you can speak to representatives from all kinds of schools and learn more about their programs, gather reading material, and ask as many questions as you'd like. Just prepare for any college fairs in advance so you can **make the most of them!**
- **Take standardized tests (ACT/SAT).** There used to be a lot of emphasis on **SAT and ACT** scores in order to get into college. Luckily, today most colleges and universities

assess each applicant's high school career as a whole—grades, course rigor, and extracurricular activities as well as test scores. In fact, hundreds of colleges have made **standardized tests optional!** But as tempting as it may be to skip these pesky tests, it's still a good idea to take them, just in case you decide to apply to a college or university that isn't test optional. And if you take these tests sooner rather than later, you'll have more time for a retake, if you want to do that.

- **Plan to take AP courses as a junior** if your high school allows them. College admission folks really appreciate it when students take challenging classes like this. They'll show you're invested in your education, and they'll give you a taste of the workload you can expect in college. Since they're often weighted, they could also help boost your GPA, which is nice! Finally, and perhaps best of all, if you score high enough, you may be able to get college credit and/or test out of intro college classes—and that can save you time and money in the long run.
- **Start researching colleges in general.** There's really no such thing as knowing too much about a college before you apply—or commit several years and thousands of dollars to it. And starting your **college research** junior year gives you time to make a thoughtful, informed decision. (And if you need help, just use our **Ultimate Guide to the College Search!**)
- **Visit the colleges you like best.** Whether it's an open house with other students or a one-on-one campus tour and interview, it's important to visit any colleges you're considering so you can get a more accurate sense of the campus and if it's the right fit for you. You can even benefit from visiting colleges you're not interested in attending, just to deepen your understanding of what campus life is like! (You'll find *tons* of campus visit advice **right here**.)
- **Sign up for dual enrollment classes** with your local four-year school or community college if they're offered. This shows you're serious about your future, and it's a great way to earn credits (and save money!) before you even start college.

Senior year of high school

- **Narrow down your list of potential colleges** to a handful (five to 10) that meet your criteria *and* fill your need for **safety, match, and dream/reach schools**. Visit the ones you plan to apply to if it all possible (maybe even for a second time), just to make sure the fit is right. If you're making return visits, be more critical than you were the first time you were on campus. Ask more **questions**. See if you can sit in on a class or speak with faculty in the program you'd like to major in too.

- **Complete admission interviews if you have them.** Some colleges require them; others don't—but it's usually a good idea to participate in an admission interview if the opportunity is presented to you. (**Check out these helpful interview tips from an admission officer!**)
- **Fill out your applications.** Once you have your final college list, fill out your applications to the best of your ability. Follow the directions carefully and double-check all spelling, grammar, punctuation, and all of those other annoying details. Missing or typo-ridden information doesn't reflect well on you as a college applicant! Also make sure you meet your **application deadlines**—especially if you're **applying early**—and you have your necessary **letters of recommendation/reference, admission essays,** and any other materials you need. Once your applications are sent, the hardest part begins—waiting for those acceptance letters! Most colleges and universities send their responses approximately four to six weeks later. Don't be discouraged if you don't make it into your first choice school; you'll rock wherever you go! Speaking of which...
- **Come up with a Plan B.** As you get deeper in your college search and application process, you may have a certain school/major/job/location in mind. But try to remember that your opinions might change as you learn more about colleges and their programs. Even if your heart is set on Plan A, stay open-minded and consider alternatives if things don't exactly go the way you expected.
- **Make your final college decision.** All four years of high school have led to this. You've worked hard, and this is the sweet, sweet payoff. Take your time **making your final college choice**, including making sure you understand your financial aid letters when you get them with your acceptance package.

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