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Most admissions processes at non-profit colleges and universities are “need blind.” That means that how much money you and your parents make won’t make a difference in whether or not you are admitted. It is true that if you come from a background of poverty or just above (and each state measures that differently), that information may be taken into account as meaningful; it’s a challenge you’ve had to face to get a good high school education and shows your persistence and resilience to get to college.

The BIG Three of the College Application

Once you’ve filled in the blanks and realize that yes, you *are* actually filling out a college application, it’s time to tackle The BIG Three requirements of most applications:

- The personal statement or essay;
- The activities and awards list;
- The letter(s) of recommendation.

THE MOST IMPORTANT advice I can give you for every application is. . . (drum roll, please) . . . **READ AND FOLLOW THE DIRECTIONS!**

This seems obvious, but if you don’t do this for each and every application you complete, you could start off on the wrong foot and not create a good impression.

Let’s get started with...

Chapter Three:

The Required Personal Statement: An Introduction

Colleges ask you to write about yourself to get beyond your GPA and SAT/ACT scores and to get to more information about who you are. In admissions, they want to know about your goals, dreams, passions (the NON-romantic kind!), and experiences, especially as those topics relate to what you've learned about yourself. What you share in your personal statement is an opportunity to showcase that which makes you unique from other applicants. For universities that don't interview prospective students, this is your chance to share something special about yourself. You and I know you are unique; the challenge for you is to write about it!

Colleges ask the questions they do to learn about you. Here are just three of the thousands of questions colleges use.

“Tell us a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it.” (University of Washington, Seattle, 2009 freshman application)

Note how broad this question is. You can choose almost anything to write about.

“Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in music, art, science, etc.) that had an influence on you, and explain that influence.” (From the Common Application, accepted at Harvard, Yale, and my own alma mater, Muhlenberg College.)

The character or the type of creative work you choose isn't as important as how you explain what your chosen work means to you and how it influenced you.

to other cultures. Go beyond the obvious, like food differences or clichés (“my friends eat burritos and I eat Phad Thai so we’re different”, or “some of my best friends are...”) to tell them how your culture has shaped you.

Delve deeply into your cultures and traditions or others you are interested in and talk about what they mean to you. The most powerful examples students share usually tell a story of how they felt different from others, were treated differently because of some cultural difference, or had an “a-ha!” moment when they noticed that the world does not treat everyone the same way (based on beliefs, clothes, ethnicity, religion, etc.). If admissions counselors can learn something from your essay, then you’ve done a good job talking about your culture and your cultural awareness.

When to Apply

It’s best to get your application in before the due date. Hopefully, you wrote down all of your official application due dates in AppHQ when you first got started. Try to mail or submit your online application at least one week before the actual due date. This will give you a little extra time should something go wrong in spite of your careful planning.

I recommend applying to all colleges by December 15th, but only if this means you don’t have to rush your way through the writing components of the application. If you can apply before the holidays, it will make your break time more fun for you, and you can have January to concentrate on completing your Free Application for Federal Student Aid, more commonly known as the FAFSA, your financial aid application. (For more information on that, visit www.fafsa.ed.gov. Check out the FAFSA4Caster to get an early jump on the application and figuring out the information you need to get from your parents.) And don’t forget to apply for scholarships. There are whole books and website devoted to that, so I’ll say

- Never pay for a scholarship search. There are excellent free searches available such as www.fastweb.com.
- Ask your high school guidance office or college and career center if they have a local scholarship lists or books on scholarships. Check at the local library as well.
- Use all these essay-writing tips to write a great scholarship application.
- Apply for lots of scholarship money!
- If you need help with your scholarship applications, you can hire me to review them, and you can go to www.scholarshipjunkies.com to see what my colleague Sam Lim has to say.

Be sure you know the deadlines for the colleges you are applying to and be certain to hit those deadlines. Not only will meeting this deadline help you get your application in on time, it will also get you ready for meeting all the deadlines for papers and projects you will have in college. Being on time with papers is a great habit to get into in high school.

One last note on deadlines: some colleges have what is called “rolling admissions.” This means students can apply and be accepted until the freshman or transfer class is filled. There is still a review process, but there is no hard deadline for applying as long as there are spots available and classes haven’t started. I recommend that even for rolling admissions schools, you pick a late fall/early winter deadline and don’t wait until the last minute to apply.

Special Admissions Considerations

Before talking about special admissions, such as early admission, early decision, and priority deadlines, let me tell you about “regular” admission. No one calls their application deadline “regular” admission; it’s just known as the application due date. You don’t want to get your application in after this date or even just get it postmarked by that date. To save yourself from the worries and headaches of “did it get there on time?” send your application in at least a week before the due date. If you choose to go the route of applying for one of the special admissions deadline, send your application in a week before those deadlines as well. Don’t let a late application take you out of the running for acceptance at the colleges you want to attend!

Early Admission, Early Action, Early Decision, Priority Deadline

Applications will clearly spell out what these mean to each individual college in the application packet and/or in their printed or website material. Read these explanations carefully so you understand the pros and cons of each one.

In a nutshell...

Early Admission and Early Action: Colleges tell you that if you apply by a certain date, they will let you know if you’ve been admitted by a certain date, usually an earlier date than if you apply by the regular application deadline.

Example: Marcus applies by the early admissions deadline of November 1st and indicates he’s interested in early admission. Since Marcus applied by November 1st, the college promises to let Marcus know if he’s been admitted by no later than January 1st, one full month before the regular