

The College Application Deadlines You Need to Know

There are two kinds of students. Those who begin planning for their college applications as juniors, reviewing last year's applications and contemplating essay topics to let them percolate over time. And those who start their applications at 3 a.m. the night before they are due. This is one time where even if you are a natural-born procrastinator, you need to pay attention to the important college deadlines.

The worst thing that you can do is wait until the last minute. You'll make careless errors, and you won't present your best strengths to the colleges. The best college applications are done over time, allowing you to think about your responses and formulate your answers. To develop the strongest applications, here is an ideal timeline for keeping track of when you should tackle each step:

Birth – Fall of senior year: Research and select colleges to apply to. You should begin learning about the colleges as soon as possible in high school. Visit colleges close to you even if you don't think you will apply to them, and visit colleges while you are on vacation with your family. By seeing different campuses, you will get a better idea of what you like and don't like about a school.

Spring of junior year: Take the standardized tests. Get your #2 pencil ready because you'll want to take the required standardized tests, the SAT I or ACT, at least once during the spring of your junior year. Some colleges also require the SAT II Subject Tests.

Early fall of senior year: Narrow your college choices and request applications. Continue researching schools by reading about them, contacting their admission offices to ask questions and visiting. Select five to eight colleges to apply to. Request applications either through the colleges' websites, by telephone or by letter.

October – November: Take the standardized tests again. If you haven't already taken the SAT I or ACT, you'll need to do this in the fall. If you have taken the exams, you should try it again now that you know exactly what to expect. You also have the choice of which scores to submit to the schools so taking it twice will give you some flexibility.

Early November : Early admission deadlines. You'll need to decide if you want to apply early. You have two options: Early Action, which does not require that you attend the school if you are accepted, or Early Decision, which does require that you attend the school if accepted. If you want to apply early, the deadlines are typically in early November

Late December – early January: Regular admission deadlines. If you apply during the regular admission deadlines, you will have a couple of extra months to complete your applications. Use this time to actually work on and perfect your applications. Don't procrastinate.

Three to six weeks before your deadlines: Recommendations. For the strongest recommendations, give your teachers and counselors as much time as possible. Just as you need to develop your applications over time, your recommenders need time to gather their thoughts about you.

December – April: Wait by the mailbox for acceptance letters. If you apply regular decision, you will start hearing back from the colleges in the spring, typically at the beginning of April. The decision may be acceptance, denial or wait list. If you are placed on the wait list, you still have a chance of being accepted if other students do not choose to attend the college.

January – March: As soon after January 1 of your senior year as possible, you'll need to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The only way to get financial aid is to complete the form. You'll need to supply information about your parents' and your income and assets. By spending a few hours, you may receive thousands of dollars in aid.

April: Hold your breath for financial aid offers. Financial aid offers may include grants, work-study and loans. Don't look at the total amount of financial aid you receive. Instead, look at how much your family will need to contribute and how much you will need to borrow to figure out how much the college will actually cost to attend. Also, if you receive financial aid packages from several colleges, you may be able to negotiate with the schools. For example, you can ask one college if it can match or increase to be closer to a more generous package that you've received from another college.

May: Make your decision. You've done all the research and asked all the questions, now it's time to decide where you will spend the next four years of your life. Make last visits to your top choice colleges, and discuss with your parents which schools won't bust your family's bank.

Congratulations! You've made it through the college admission process and can look forward to four years of football games, new friends and parties, and of course, a little dose of studying as well.