

Advice for Applying to Colleges

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Abstract

Some collected advice from my experience applying to colleges in the fall of 2021. I can't tell you *what* will get you in, or *how* to get in, but I can explain what allowed me to be most productive, and what I learned throughout the process. Good luck. I believe in you!

—
Typeset in L^AT_EX because I need to learn how to make my psets look swaggy.

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3 How to Treat this Document

I am not an admissions officer or a guidance counselor. I do not know the ins and outs of the college admissions process. I believe the value of my perspective comes from actually going through the process recently.

This document is mostly about how to approach the process and work efficiently. The reason for this is I do not know *why* specifically I got into the colleges I got into. Therefore, I cannot say “do this to get in”.

Your experience will surely be different from mine. My hope is that you take the lessons I’ve learned and apply them, but only if it benefits you.

Another difficult part of the college application experience is the uncertainty. You might not know what things are like, for example, what is an interview actually like? What does “researching colleges” mean? I hope to clarify aspects of application experience so that you know what you’re getting into.

This is a massive document, so don’t feel compelled to read the whole thing at once. I do recommend reading the whole thing early on though.

Without any further ado, let’s get started!

4 Research

You’ll often hear things like “start your college research early”. What does this mean though? I think people started talking to me about research during my summer after eleventh grade. I had no idea what they were talking about.

In my experience, research turned out to consist of three major questions:

1. What specific departments, offices, classes, professors, and research groups interest you?
2. What specific programs, majors, and minors interest you?
3. How does the campus culture suit you?

The distinction between (1) and (2) is that (1) refers to more specific things like a research group, whereas (2) refers to more school-wide things, like an Honors College.

4.1 Doing Research

The main way I conducted research was through the web. Most research groups, departments, and schools within the college will have a website. Additionally, many clubs have websites, and there are often listings of all the student organizations at a university.

The interview is another way to discern information about a school. Of course, take everything with not just a grain of salt, but a Himalayan salt mine worth of salt. More on this in the [interview](#) section.

4.2 My Experience

I didn't actually end up doing much research to decide where to apply to. I basically applied to my state school, a bunch of big name schools (MIT, Harvard, etc.) and other schools with good computer science programs (UW-Madison, University of Michigan, etc.).

The research actually came up when I had to write supplementals describing why I wanted to attend certain schools, known as the "Why us?" essays.

Takeaway

Research is about finding schools that fit your needs, academically and socially. It is part of a directed search for schools to apply to.

5 SAT

I think the primary determining factor of my SAT score was just my education in general; I was fortunate enough to have classes that prepared me well. What I do have to share is a weird sense I got when I was practicing. For about a month leading up to taking the test, I practiced for around thirty minutes to an hour a day (this was in the spring of my junior year). My math was solid so I didn't spend much time on it. Each day, I did one or two passages of reading. That was it, the same thing, every day, for a month.

After a while, maybe a couple weeks in, I got this weird sense of clarity. Like a neural network that had finally been trained enough, I started to see

patterns in the questions in the ELA sections. Every section had an “identify the main message” question, a “the usage of **{word}** is most similar to which word”, a “which passage supports the claim made in some other passage”, etc.

It wasn’t just that I realized that the questions followed a formula, I started to sense what types of answers the CollegeBoard *wanted*. A lot of the time, especially for the reading section, there are two answers that fit reasonably well. I started to be able to distinguish which answer was correct by intuition. I personally didn’t actually have a preference for either.

I realize that this recollection isn’t that useful, so I’m going to try to explain how I think one could go about building an intuition. I think a primary factor is your mindset towards the test. The test is not a test of your literary skills, but of your ability to take the test. As you’re testing, pay careful attention to the questions that come up, the similarities in passages, and the general themes that keep appearing. Remember, the test can’t change much year over year.

Another factor that I believe helped me develop an intuition towards the test was practicing consistently and seeing many, many questions. It basically got to the point where nothing could surprise me. Through exposure, you’ll naturally sense patterns in the test and hopefully that will reflect itself in your score.

Takeaway

Remember, tests are a measure of your ability to test, not necessarily your aptitude for the material. Use features of the test to maximize your score.

6 Main Essay

6.1 Content

There’s not much that I can say about the main essay that your ELA teacher can’t tell you. One thing I would like to talk about (that your ELA teacher will mention) is the concept of “*show, don’t tell*”.

What does this actually mean though? I struggled with this for a long time. In other words, “*show, don’t tell*” means “*actions speak louder than*

words.” By telling a story, you can *show* something, instead of explicitly *telling* the message you want to communicate.

Another way I like to think about “*show, don’t tell*” is in the context of fables. The fable never directly states its message, but it’s generally very clear what the moral is at the end.

From both a writer’s and reader’s perspective, I’ve found that being indirect (although not unclear) can help bring out more layers in a story. It’s just easier to convey more when you don’t need to mention everything explicitly. The best writers provide material for their readers to dig deep into and discover secondary messages and emotions, like fruity notes of a fine wine. Umm. Don’t really know where I’m going with this . . . might have had one too many glasses ².

6.2 Writing it

Your main essay is a statement piece; you want it to be polished, cohesive, powerful, and unique. This is a high bar. The greatest piece of advice I can give is to start early, and let your thoughts develop and shift. As you reflect on your life, your essay will take on depth and maturity, like a fine wine aging in a walnut barrel. I hope (and believe), that this depth is what sets exemplary essays apart from good ones.

I was lucky enough to write my first draft in my ELA 11 class. If you don’t have such an opportunity, start at the beginning of summer or as soon as possible. My essay went through four or five drafts, and took about 10 months to write from start to finish. Granted, most of that time wasn’t spent writing, but remember, it’s all about the aging in a walnut barrel. Those 10 months really allowed me to reflect on my life, myself, and why my topic meant so much to me.

If you give yourself time, you’ll not only end up with a great essay, but a deeper understanding of yourself.

6.3 Review

Ask everyone to read your essay: your family, friends, teachers, guidance counselor, your cashier at CVS, I don’t care. *We cannot look objectively at our own work.* Each person will give you feedback; and *you don’t need to*

²Just kidding, don’t drink, kids. I’ve never experienced a “peachy oaky finish”.

use it. Just be aware that that is another way someone could interpret your essay. Without changing your content, there are ways that you can make your essay more cohesive and readable; you might reorder paragraphs, or go longer on one section and shorten another.

Takeaway

Show, don't tell. Give your essay time to mature and deepen. Share it with people to get feedback.

7 Supplementals

7.1 Work

People always say that applying to college is a lot of work. My experience corroborates this, and the bulk of my time was spent working on supplementals. Don't underestimate the amount of work these can be, and pace yourself.

7.2 Writing

The backbone of good writing is good ideas¹. Before putting pen to paper (or fingers to keys), think about what you want to communicate in your essay. What do you want to *show* about yourself, and how does that fit in with the general picture of your application? Reflect on the big questions:

- What do I want to do in life?
- What do I want to get out of college?
- What are my interests? And *why* am I interested in them?
- What motivates me?

Give it time, let your ideas mature and develop (insert wine metaphor of your choosing). When you start writing, it'll just be a matter of packaging your ideas nicely.

¹Don't quote me on that.

I found supplementals hard in general, so I started practicing on old questions during the summer. Because supplementals from different schools tend to cover similar questions, I was able to convert my practice answers into real answers. Not only that, many schools don't change their questions year over year, and I accidentally got a well needed head start.

Also, don't hesitate to reuse responses across applications. Many schools will ask about a time you overcame a challenge of what majors interests you. Why rewrite things when one answer is good enough?

7.3 Mindset

When I began writing my applications, I resented having to write so many essays. I often joke that I wouldn't wish it upon my worst enemy. Sadly, my seething rage wasn't doing anything to alleviate the situation, so I calmed down a bit. I treated the supplementals as opportunities for personal reflection, and tried to think of the actual writing as just a small side effect to account for.

It didn't change the actual amount of work I had to do, but I feel like I really learned about myself throughout the whole process. When life gives you lemons, make lemonade, or lemon cake, or lemon sorbet, or really anything tasty. Making something is always better than letting your lemons go bad.

7.4 Other Common Essays

Two other common essays are the "Why this major?" essay and the "Why this school?" essay. You can reuse your "Why this major?" essay across multiple schools. For the "Why this school?", you want to show your interest and that you've really looked into the school. You can talk about departments, research groups, services, student groups, programs, etc. There are good examples online you can look at. Actually, there were example supplemental responses for every school I applied to. They are a great resource.

Takeaway

Work consistently on supplementals, reflect before you write, and try to make the most of the situation.

8 Interviews

8.1 The Nature of the Interview

Going into the interview, it's easy to view it as a one-sided thing. In all of my interviews, I found that it worked more like a conversation, and once I relaxed, was quite enjoyable. I spoke to an oncologist, a backend developer, a medical device lawyer, and a UX researcher. They were immensely interesting people who genuinely seemed like they wanted to help me. I learned something new from each and every one of them; I hadn't even *known* about the field of UX research before my Stanford interview!

I even confided in one interviewer my anxiety about being deferred and interviewing. He reassured me that it would all turn out right and that I was doing fine. I felt much better after that exchange. Remember, the interviewers are people too.

Treat the interview as a conversation, relax, and let it be a natural interaction between two multifaceted humans. Show your true colors, and your interviewer will appreciate the radiant palette inside.

Naturally, the interview consists of questions. Here are my thoughts on answering and **asking** questions.

8.2 Answering Questions

In every one of my interviews, I was asked: "How would you describe yourself?" It's a hard question. There's so much you want to say, and with the pressure of wanting to impress the interviewer, it's difficult to produce a coherent answer. Prepare. Reflect on you who are, what you want, what makes you happy. This reflection will help you answer questions, as you'll already have thought about your responses. It will also lend a depth to your responses that will hopefully distinguish you from other students.

Here are some common questions:

- What are your interests?
- What motivates you?
- What was a hardship you overcame?

You don't need to have an answer memorized for these questions, but having an idea of a response in my head was helpful for me. Once you have

your thread, you can start spinning it into silk. But you need to find that thread first.

8.3 Asking questions

In all four of my interviews, I felt that my interviewers really wanted me to ask questions, so I did. Not only did I learn about the schools I was interviewing for, all four of my interviewers complimented my questions. I hope my curiosity caused them to write more favorably about me in their reports.

Here are the questions I went into interviews prepared with:

- What do you do for your job; what do you like, dislike about it? How did your **{school}** education help you get to where you are?
- What type of people dropped out or didn't succeed at **{school}**?
- What do you feel is an experience that only could have happened at **{school}**, and what was something that was missing?
- Going in, what made you choose **{top school}**, and leaving, what made you happy with your decision?
- In what way has your **{school}** education served you the most?
- Going in, what were your career aspirations, and leaving, how did **{school}** change them?
- What was the worst aspect of going to **{school}**? Doesn't need to be something dramatic, but surely it wasn't perfect . . .
- What makes **{top school}** different from other top schools? They all also have brilliant professors, accessible research opportunities, corporate sponsorships an amazing student body . . .

Remember, take everything with a Himalayan salt mine of salt!

Takeaway

Treat the interview like a conversation. Reflect on common questions. Ask questions; you will learn a lot and hopefully impress the interviewer.

9 General Advice & Miscellaneous Tips

9.1 STAY ORGANIZED

I cannot stress this enough. Firstly, this will help prevent you from forgetting things. When all the things you need to do are in one place, it's easier to take a good sober look at what you need to do, and plan.

Additionally, organization had an immense psychological benefit for me. I'm someone who has trouble taking my mind off things for fear of missing something. When I wrote down everything I had to do, I stopped stressing about forgetting tasks because I knew they were all written down somewhere.

Now, I know screaming at you to stay organized isn't very helpful. Here are some specific tips:

- Make a dedicated Google Drive folder for the process
- Keep a spreadsheet of colleges with due dates, fees, and notes
- Make a sheet for passwords and logins, consider a password manager
- Keep lists; lists of extracurricular activities, things to note in your application, opportunities that seem interesting, etc. *By writing things down, you allow yourself to forget about them.*

Some of the other tips in this section are actually just organization tips in disguise.

9.2 Distribute the work over time

Undoubtedly, there is a massive amount of work associated with applying to college, especially if you are applying to a large number of schools. It's not an impossible amount of work, it just needs to be distributed. If you make sure to work on it consistently every week, putting in a couple hours on the

weekends, you'll be ok. Not only that, you'll be less likely to burn out, and working on applications will likely affect other areas of your life less.

Applications are not something you can pull an "all nighter" on. One application, maybe, 10 to 20, no.

I can say with almost certainty that the worst week of my senior year was the week before the Early Admission deadline. I had supplementals to write, I had forgotten to do my FAFSA, and midterms were in a week. I was stressed and running on too little sleep. If I had distributed my work better in the weeks prior, I wouldn't have had such a hellish week, and I think my applications would have been measurably better.

9.3 Get the main essay done over the summer

The main essay takes time, and it's hard to rush. Therefore, I recommend having a good working draft done by the end of the summer, perhaps even something you'd be ready to submit. Going into the school year, it'll be an enormous weight off your back to have a strong essay. I go into the process of writing the main essay more in [this](#) section.

9.4 Start supplementals over the summer

Just like the main essay, supplementals are hard to rush. But unlike the essay, you need to produce a much greater quantity of writing. It simply takes time to produce that much writing, so getting started early and pacing yourself will lighten the load a little. More on supplementals in [this](#) section.

9.5 Look out for hidden supplementals

Colleges are devious. We know this. When I was filling out the Commonapp for Princeton. I was asked to select which major I was interested in. I hit "AB", and boom!, a window popped up asking for a 250 word response about why that major interested me. Luckily I found the question with some time to spare, but if I hadn't, my application would have suffered severely. I suggest going through all your Commonapp applications early and making sure there are no hidden supplementals.

9.6 Have a dedicated organization system for supplementals

If you are applying to a large number of schools, you'll have a lot of supplementals to write. Looking back at my records, I wrote at least 34 supplementals of varying lengths, from 50 word babies to 600 word expositions.

It's very difficult to keep track of, and being aware of how much work you have left to do is important for pacing yourself throughout the whole process. This is why I believe it's very important to keep track of your supplementals meticulously.

My system was a big Google document that contained every essay I needed to write. It looked like this:

- Carnally Melon University
 1. Which is better: the cantaloupe or the honeydew?
 - COMPLETE
 2. Describe the melon's reproductive cycle.
 - INCOMPLETE
- Northsouth University (Done)
 1. Come up with an original university name.
 - COMPLETE
 2. How do you feel about contradictions?
 - COMPLETE
- and more . . .

This system allowed me to see at a glance how much work I had to do on the supplemental front. I just did a quick scroll and compared the amount of red to green. Additionally, because all the prompts were in one place, I could reuse work quite easily. I also had a folder that contained a document for each school, with the prompts and my responses.

9.7 Send SAT/ACT scores once you have your list

SAT scores take two weeks to arrive once sent. Why? I have no idea. With all the money the CollegeBoard extorts out of us, you'd think could figure out how to send an elaborate email in a timely manner. But no,

apparently that is not the case. For this reason, once you make your list of colleges, figure out which schools require your official scores and which schools allow self-reporting and an official send if you enroll. Then, send the scores you need to send. You'll save a lot of money by only sending the scores you need to send, and your scores will arrive on time.

I forgot to do this, and was frantically emailing admissions offices when I sent my scores the day before applications were due. It's probably not a mistake that will irreparably damage your application, but having your scores pre-sent gives you one less thing to stress about.

10 Results

When it all finally comes out, your results may not be what you expected; they might be disappointing, they might be better than you expected them to be. Regardless, my advice is to not take it too much to heart.

Of course you should celebrate your acceptances, and it's normal to be sad about your rejections. At the end of the day though, so much comes down to the luck of the draw. If you got in, remember that many other people may have been just as qualified. And if you were rejected, remember you might have been one of those people who was just as qualified. The cards just fell wrong.

I know people who didn't expect to get into schools they got into (myself included), and people who expected to get into schools, but didn't (myself included). Always remember that there is some luck of the draw.

Takeaway

Your successes aren't completely yours, and neither are your failures.

11 Closing Thoughts

Throughout the entire process, try to use your work as an excuse to introspect. That way the process will be valuable no matter what happens.

Good luck, and may the force be equal to mass times acceleration.