



7 Tips to Jump-Start the College Application Process

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The calendar may say August, but it is not too early to begin thinking about—and working on—college applications. The applications are unavoidable, so what better way to occupy yourself during the waning days of summer than by getting a head start in the college application marathon!

Happily, doing so is easy. The more you are able to accomplish now, the less stress you are likely to feel as the school year begins to unfold and you have to deal with competing agendas. The following steps will make it easier to manage the application process later in the school year without taking too much of a bite out of your summer regimen.

[Learn more about [starting your college applications](#).]

1. Develop a timeline: One of the greatest points of frustration for you in the coming months will be the overwhelming sense that everything is happening at the same time. Take advantage of the opportunity you have now to create order out of the impending chaos.

Using a wall-calendar on which you can map out the next six months, list all of the important dates that relate to the application process as well as those that relate to your school and personal life (such as special events, homecoming, school holidays, and exam schedules). The former should include deadlines for college applications, scholarship and/or financial aid applications, and materials to be submitted to your college adviser, as well as testing dates and any other self-imposed deadlines for completing your applications.

In addition, make note of dates you would like to target for campus visits. You will be amazed at how having such a timeline or calendar gives you a much better sense of control going forward!

[Get more tips from the *U.S. News* [college timeline guide](#).]

2. Create a college spreadsheet: This should reference key information for each of the colleges to which you are likely to apply. The spreadsheet should show requirements, fees, deadlines, and any other descriptive information (size, location, cost, etc.) you think is important. Having all of this information on one form can prove to be a powerful visual aid as you manage information and, ultimately, make critical distinctions between schools.

3. Establish a filing system for application materials: While you are organizing information electronically, it also makes sense to keep a hard copy file for each college. Include in this file any notes you made from visits to the college as well as photos of the campus. The latter will help to keep the visual images of each campus sharper in your mind.

4. Collect applications from colleges likely to be on your short list: It's never too early to begin reviewing the forms themselves and becoming familiar with the requirements. While most applications will eventually be submitted online, print out hard copies that can be used as working documents as you assemble and record information. Keep the hard copies in the aforementioned files.

Identify the colleges on your developing short list that use either the Common Application or the Universal Application. Each application is used by "member" colleges as its own. As a result, you could find yourself completing the Common App or the UA once and submitting it to multiple schools. Make sure you are familiar with the member lists for each application group as well as any additional filing requirements that might be articulated by the member colleges themselves.

[Learn more about [narrowing your choices](#).]

5. List the essay topics required by each school: Even if you are not ready to start writing essay drafts, it is important to become familiar with the questions you will need to address. Look for common themes. Begin imagining how you could address them. Make notes about the possibilities.

6. Think about the key messages that you want to convey: Theme development in the application is important. One of the biggest mistakes students make as they apply for admission is they allow their credentials to appear as a set of randomly assembled documents. Your job is to eliminate the randomness that might be associated with your application. Focus on what you want it to say about you. How might these messages set you apart from the competition?

7. Develop a résumé: One of the best ways to get your arms around themes and key messages is to write a résumé. Don't worry about making it look professional. Do make it complete, though, and, as you do so, give priority to activities and events that have been most meaningful to you. The important take-away will be the exercise itself, as it will help you develop a broader sense of the talking points that need to be addressed in your application.

Oprah Winfrey graduated from Tennessee State University. [Check out U.S. News College Compass for more!](#)