

# Getting into the Top Liberal Arts Colleges

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**LEARN HOW THE  
ADMISSIONS PROCESS  
REALLY WORKS**

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## Intro

If you want to get into a top liberal arts college, you'll want to begin planning the summer before you go into ninth grade. Why?

Because liberal arts colleges will consider your entire high school career when they evaluate you as an applicant in the fall of your senior year.

What can you do to maximize your chances of getting into a top liberal arts college? Without question, the most important factors top liberal arts colleges consider are as follows:

- Your GPA (Grade Point Average).
- Your college entrance exam scores.
- Your class rank.
- Your application essay.
- Letters of recommendation.

These factors are not stand alone issues. That's why you need to learn how to strategically build an outstanding high school resume that will impress even the pickiest of college admission advisors.

That means you need to learn how to select the right number of weighted and unweighted classes, and how to spend your spare time (because not all activities are equal.) You need to figure out who will give you the best recommendations and how to hone your writing skills.

The following chapters will equip you with the how-to knowledge necessary to craft a slam-dunk high school resume that will get you into the college of your choice.

## Chapter 1: Academics

Everyone knows that you should graduate with the highest GPA as is possible. However, what a lot of high school students miss is that accomplishing this goal requires a lot more than just hard work and brains. It requires strategy and planning, starting with your freshman year of high school.

### Setting Yourself Up for the Highest Possible GPA

As you plan out your high school career, you need to take the following factors into consideration:

- What classes does my high school require for graduation?
- What classes do my colleges of choice require for admission?
- Does my high school offer both weighted and unweighted classes?
- Does my high school offer AP ([Advanced Placement](#)) classes?
- Does my high school offer an IB ([International Baccalaureate](#)) program?

As you determine exactly what courses you need to take to graduate (for example, do you need to take one, two or even three foreign language courses?), you'll want to figure out which courses you should take in order to maximize your GPA.

There are several ways to set yourself up for a higher GPA.

#### *Take Weighted Classes*

Most high schools now offer weighted classes, meaning you can earn higher than a 4.0 GPA. This is because the courses are weighted like this:

*AP or IB Classes:* A=6.0, B=5.0, C=4.0, D=3.0

This grade reflects your class work and tests, regardless of whether you pass or fail the AP exam, which may qualify you for college credit, but is separate from the grade you receive for the class.

*Honors Classes:* A=5.0, B=4.0, C=3.0, D=2.0

*Standard Classes:* Normal scale of A=4.0, B=3.0, C=2.0, D=1.0

Not all schools use a 6.0 scale, but you get the idea. You'll have to look into your school's system to find out if AP or IB classes are weighted, and if so, on what scale.

If your school uses a weighted system like this, you can earn higher than a 4.0. That's why colleges are interested in seeing both your weighted and unweighted GPA.

### ***Plan Carefully so You Can Handle the Workload***

Your first reaction to this information might be to decide you will only sign up for honors and AP classes. This might sound appealing, but you need to think through if this will really work in your favor. For example:

- You might be able to get As in AP math or science courses, but might get Cs in AP English and history classes (if your writing skills are not so great.). Naturally, the converse applies if you are a writing whiz but are not naturally gifted in math or science.
- You might not be able to keep up with the workload of all honors and AP classes, and therefore might perform (and score) better if you balance your workload with some AP and some standard or honors classes.
- You might miss out on valuable experiences (that could strengthen a gift or talent that would also be valued by a liberal arts school) if you don't take any electives. For example, if you are a star violinist, you will probably want to take orchestra, even if it only counts as a standard-level course. The same is true of foreign languages, which may not be offered as AP or honors classes, but will set you up for a major in linguistics or languages.

You will want to take the classes that will best preserve and enhance your GPA without overwhelming you.

### **Understanding IB Programs**

Your high school might not offer AP classes, but it might offer an IB program, in which you will take advanced classes in pursuit of an IB diploma. This diploma is recognized internationally as an advanced high school diploma.

IB programs offer rigorous classes with high expectations. They are known for teaching study skills, enhancing critical thinking skills and honing writing skills. Most liberal arts colleges recognize that participation in an IB program will prepare you for college in an exceptional manner. This means most liberal arts colleges will give special attention to a student who is on the way to earning his or her IB diploma.

However, this will not be to your advantage if:

- You can't keep up with the workload and your GPA suffers
- You are too overwhelmed by school and cannot participate or excel in extracurricular activities, which liberal arts colleges expect to see on your resume

Participating in an IB program demonstrates initiative, but it will not earn you college credit (unless you test out of college classes through [CLEP](#)) and can actually hurt your chances of getting into a good liberal arts school if you do not perform well in the program.

### **How Much Does Class Rank Matter?**

Class rank matters a lot. While college admissions officials do recognize that not all high schools are equal (especially not when it comes to comparing private prep schools and public schools), your class rank is going to matter, even if you go to the most competitive school in the nation. This is because college admissions officials only adjust expectations a certain amount when comparing schools and class rankings.

What does this mean? If you go to a crummy school and are easily the valedictorian, you will have an advantage over a student who goes to a highly competitive school and ranks in the bottom half of the student population. Does that mean you should switch out of a private prep school or a challenging IB program?

It depends on what your goals are. If you are most concerned about getting into a top liberal arts school and your grades are abysmal, you might benefit from switching to a public school where you won't have much competition. However, in most cases, you are best off staying where you are and simply getting help to improve your grades.

Why? You'll want to get help because:

- You can't assume all public schools are easier than your private prep school. You might switch just to find out you're still not in the top ten percent of the class. In this case, just plain going to the private prep school may be your biggest advantage when it comes to perceived ability.
- You will probably learn valuable study skills at a private prep school or IB program that you might not learn at a public high school.
- You may get help in the areas of writing and college entrance exam preparation that will outweigh your poor GPA and class rank. If you get a good education at a competitive school, there's a good chance you'll learn how to write a compelling essay and will perform well on the ACT or SAT, which can outweigh a substandard GPA or class rank.

In other words, do your best, and try not to blame your circumstances for your shortcomings. Instead, get help so you can perform well on the exams and application.

### **Getting Extra Help**

Now that you understand how important your GPA and class rank are, you may realize you are going to need extra help. You will want to try all of the following:

- Ask your teacher if you can do test corrections or get after-school tutoring if you perform poorly on a test.
- Ask about extra credit.
- Find out if your school or region offers tutoring services.
- Go online for assistance. You'll find there are online tutorials and class notes available for just about every class imaginable.
- Start a study group with friends who are performing well in class.
- Go to supplemental summer school or online classes to get a deeper understanding of difficult subjects.

If you express your desire to learn and put in the extra time, you'll perform to your best ability and will get the grades to show for it. This will give you a significant advantage when you submit your college admission application.

## Chapter 2: Writing and Speaking Skills

As you apply for admission, you'll be judged on essays, long answers (written), and interviews. This means you will need to learn how to write and speak well. If you keep this in mind as you are laboring through language arts and communication classes, you'll pick up valuable skills that many other students will not absorb or master.

### General Writing Skills

It's tempting to think of high school classes as experiences you just need to "get through," but you'll need to take your language arts classes seriously if you hope to get into a liberal arts college. You will be expected to possess excellent writing skills if you are to get admitted to a top liberal arts college. This means you will need to pay attention to grammar, style, spelling and overall composition guidelines.

Pay attention to your writing classes, not just for the grade, but as preparation for admission and success once accepted to a liberal arts college.

### Mastering the Essay

You will be expected to write a compelling essay if you want to get into a top college. This means you will need to demonstrate:

- An exceptional vocabulary (without being excessive or showy)
- Understanding of structure
- The ability to persuade a reader
- Readability of a piece

When writing your essay, you will want to make sure you:

- Cover all the aspects of the question (you may want to break the question down into a checklist to make sure you don't miss anything).
- Follow a structure (introduction, middle, conclusion).
- Break the essay into short paragraphs, each of which intrigues and compels the reader.
- Eliminate extra words (go through your essay and look for ways to make sentences smoother, more concise, and more direct).
- Have a parent or teacher edit it for you.
- Polish it until you are sure you cannot improve it any more.

If writing is not a natural strength of yours, you will want to get extra help in this area.

## **Mastering the Short and Long Answer Questions**

You will also have to answer both short and long answer questions on some applications. This means you will need to learn how to:

- Answer a question concisely and clearly.
- Eliminate fluff.
- Use power verbs and descriptive adjectives.

When answering questions on an application, make sure you answer the entire question. You'll notice that most of the questions have two or three parts. A sample question might be: "What is a challenge or difficulty you have faced? How did you handle the challenge? What did you learn from this experience?"

It's tempting to talk about the first two components of the question, which is about what happened and how you handled it, but many students will forget to answer the third component, which is what you learned. Make sure you stay within the guidelines (many applications will say you must keep the answers to a certain word count) without leaving out any components of the question.

## **Interview Skills**

You may also need to go to an in-person interview with a representative from the college. This can be rather intimidating if you have not been trained in interview skills. You will perform well on your interview if you:

- Choose a professional outfit to wear (a suit or dress is a good idea).
- Practice answering interview questions with a parent or authority figure (the more intimidating, the better, as this will better prepare you for overcoming anxiety when in the actual situation).
- Write out a list of possible answers to potential interview questions (such as "Why do you want to attend this particular college?" or "What strengths do you bring to this college?").
- Practice describing your weaknesses as strengths. For example, if asked what your weaknesses are, you can say you are a diligent student who sometimes takes her studies too seriously, and that you have to remind yourself to relax and enjoy life sometimes.
- Educate yourself about the college. You will need to be prepared to convince the college representative that you know a lot about the college and have good reasons for wanting to be accepted.
- Make sure you portray yourself as clean cut, respectable, eager to attend this particular college, and ready to contribute to the student body.

If you need help with interview skills, ask a favorite teacher to help you prepare for the interview. Most teachers will be happy to assist you in this area.

## Chapter 3: Extracurricular Activities

If you've always thought of extracurricular activities as mere fluff or a waste of time, you need to think again. Liberal arts colleges consider extracurricular activities to be extremely important, and they will expect you to have a rich and involved life outside of academics.

That doesn't mean you should rush out and sign up for six clubs and two sports. Most liberal arts colleges are looking for you to be deeply involved in two to three clubs or organizations, but they are looking for exceptional involvement or demonstration of extraordinary talent or devotion. That means it is better to lead, hold an office, or win awards in two extracurricular activities than to be a member of eight clubs.

Not sure what extracurricular activities are worth pursuing? Consider the following list:

- Music – Especially if you can join an orchestra or professional performing group (or even be part of an award-winning choir or high school band).
- Art – Look for ways to participate in art shows, art internships, art therapy community service projects or ways to develop an online art presence or portfolio.
- Theater – If you choose theater, you'll want to hit this on multiple fronts. Take acting and singing classes, participate in theater projects that benefit youth and hone your skill. Volunteer to work behind the scenes, too, on set design and construction, so you show yourself as team member who contributes on various levels.
- Debate and Speech – Participate in debate meets and strive to make it to regional competitions, if not to state or national competitions. If you haven't won any awards yet by the beginning of your senior year, offer to mentor incoming freshmen and to assist the debate coach so as to show leadership skills.
- Technology – You can find all kinds of technology clubs these days, including robotics, graphic design, drafting and computer programming. Participate in competitions and compete to hold an office in a technology club.
- Writing – Check into your school newspaper and/or yearbook staff to see if you can get involved in writing, layout, design and editing. If you can work your way up to editor-in-chief, all the better.
- Athletics – Many college admissions advisors like to see that you are well rounded, can work as a team player and understand the connection between physical activity and character. Demonstrate your ability to work hard, play hard and persevere through physical pain by participating in a sport or on a team.
- Community Service – You will be astonished at how many colleges and scholarship programs expect you to have devoted a significant portion of your free time to community service. Sign up for a service group in your

- freshman year of high school and devote time (recorded and documented) with a recognized organization such as Key Club, the Humane Society, the National Honors Society or a school group devoted exclusively to service.
- Academic Clubs – Join the National Honors Society and other academic clubs that compete with other schools such as Math Olympiad, Philosophy competitions and Technology challenges. Get involved and see if you can get elected to an office.
  - Student Government – Show you care about contributing to the student population by running for and leading in student government. Once in office, take the initiative to work with the school leadership to promote change, achieve goals and actually make a difference. Be sure to document what projects you tackled and how you solved problems and brought about tangible change.

### **Finding the Right Fit**

If you have joined a couple clubs or organizations, but you haven't been elected to office or found a way to contribute in a significant way that can be documented and demonstrated on a resume, you may wish to go a step further. You can do this by starting a new club (under the supervision of a teacher or school counselor) or organizing a group of students for a cause. This way you can show initiative and drive, plus tout the impressive title of "club founder" on your resume.

## Chapter 4: College Entrance Exams

One of the most important pieces of your application is your college entrance exam score. Most liberal arts colleges will accept either the SAT or the ACT, but some colleges will specify which exam they prefer. Check into the preferences of all colleges you are considering, and be sure that you prepare accordingly. You will see that some top liberal arts colleges not only prefer the SAT, but also prefer (and some even require) that you take the SAT II subject tests, which drill down into specific subjects. If a college says they “prefer” you take the SAT II subject tests, don’t consider it a “nice-to-have,” but rather as an imperative segment of your admission application.

It’s advisable to prepare for and take both the ACT (with the writing portion) and SAT (including the SAT II subject tests) so you will keep all your options open. However, if you have limited funds and time, you may wish to narrow your selection down to the tests required by your top five colleges-of-choice.

Admissions officers take these scores very seriously, so you will need to begin preparing for these exams during your junior year of high school. The following information will help you determine which test (or tests) to take, how to best prepare for these exams and when to take the actual tests.

### **Which Exam Should I Take – The ACT or the SAT?**

If your colleges of choice accept both ACT and SAT scores, you will want to invest time preparing for the test you feel will maximize your potential. The tests truly are different and measure college-readiness in unique ways.

### ***How do the ACT and SAT Compare?***

Studies show that boys tend to perform slightly better on the SAT than girls, and that girls tend to perform slightly better than boys on the ACT. However, there’s a lot more to performing well on the test than gender (just ask the boys who ace the ACT or girls who ace the SAT). In general, the following is true of the tests:

- The ACT tends to favor those who have taken higher math and sciences courses.
- The SAT tends to favor those who love critical thinking problems and “out of the box” questions.
- The ACT questions tend to be more direct and simple.
- The SAT questions tend to be more convoluted.
- The SAT is longer than the ACT.
- The SAT tends to favor those who have exceptional vocabulary skills.
- The ACT requires you to take a science section test (although you may need to take an SAT II subject test in science anyway, so this may not be a significant difference).
- The ACT contains some trigonometry questions (although very few) while the SAT does not.

- The SAT includes a writing portion; the writing portion of the ACT is optional (although required by most liberal arts colleges anyway, so perhaps this is not a significant difference).
- You will be penalized if you guess on the SAT, but you will not be penalized if you guess on the ACT.

### ***How Can You Tell Which Test is Right for You?***

To maximize your exam performance, you'll want to take both the PSAT and PLAN during your sophomore year to see which test you performed best upon. These are predictive tests, which will give you an idea how you can expect to perform on the SAT and ACT in your junior or senior year.

Better yet, take [full-length sample tests](#) online. You can do this at no cost. This will really help you determine which test is best suited to your strengths.

### **Exam Preparation Strategies**

No matter how stellar of a student you are, you won't want to walk into these exams unprepared. The best strategy is to get to know the test and then to study to the test, meaning you'll learn about:

- How the questions are phrased.
- What types of answers are expected.
- What material will be covered.
- How to identify misleading (wrong) answers that will look like the right answers.

You can do this in any of the following ways:

- Take a college exam prep course.
- Study online.
- Use college exam prep books to study on your own.
- Join a study group.

All the resources you need are available online and in bookstores, and chances are your high schools offers in school or after school exam prep classes or services.

Choose the method of preparation that will best suit your tendencies. If you are a disciplined student who has no problems with procrastination or motivation, you may find a book or online resource to be best. You won't waste valuable time waiting for other students, getting to and from a class, or wading through unnecessary portions of a prep course (that other students might find valuable, but are not important to you). You'll get to hone in on the areas you want to improve upon without wasting time.

However, if you tend to procrastinate, lack motivation or find yourself overwhelmed with your schedule, you'll want to enroll in either an online or in-person exam prep course or study group. Make sure you get the motivation, instruction and accountability you need to stay on track and complete the exam preparation process. Many students find that online and in-person exam prep courses offer test-taking tips that they never would have discovered on their own. They also find that committing to a class or course helps them remain on task.

### **When to Take College Entrance Exams**

You will want to take your exams your junior year of high school so you will have plenty of time to restudy and retake the exams if you don't score as well as you hope to. Most colleges want you to apply by January of your senior year (and early decision/early action applications are due in the fall of your senior year), so you'll want to leave time for retesting to get the best score possible.

It's best not to take an exam more than three times, though. What's the best strategy? Take sample exams until you are ready. Then take the exam formally during the winter of your junior year. If you aren't happy with your score, study all spring and then take the exam one last time in the late spring of your junior year (or early fall of your senior year). Most colleges will "super score" your scores, which means they will take the highest scores from each section to use as your final score.

## Chapter 5: Applying to Top Liberal Arts Colleges

As you approach decision-time, you may feel like the waters get muddier and muddier. While many teachers, parents and students have been brainwashed to think only of Ivy League schools as the best options, post-graduate studies show that many of the top liberal arts colleges rival the Ivy League schools when it comes to comparing salary, job options and performance.

### Ivy League Schools and the “Little Ivies”

If you’ve been told you need to apply to an Ivy League college (Harvard, Yale, Brown, Columbia, Dartmouth, Cornell, University of Pennsylvania or Princeton), you should really reconsider that advice. Recent studies ([check out this Forbes study for example](#)) show that you may benefit as much or even more from a top liberal arts college education than from an Ivy League college education, especially if you compare what you get for your dollar.

To be specific, graduates from private liberal arts college Williams College have outperformed Ivy League graduates when it comes to salary, job opportunities and graduating with low levels of student loan debt.

You’ve probably also been steered towards the “Little Ivies,” such as MIT, University of Chicago, Duke and Stanford. While these are undoubtedly fantastic colleges, you will want to compare their graduation salaries, job opportunities and level of student loan debt with [top liberal arts colleges](#) such as Carleton, Amherst, Wesleyan, Swarthmore and Grinnell.

As you check out these lesser-known options, look into the following:

- Graduation salaries.
- What jobs graduates tend to land upon graduation.
- Amount of student loan debt graduates carry (and how much financial aid is offered).
- Percentage of students who go on to get masters and doctorates.

### Choices, Choices

As you [do your research](#), you will quickly discover that the competition to get into top liberal arts colleges, while still steep, is not nearly as intense as the competition to get into the famous colleges – the Ivy Leagues and the Little Ivies. However, you’ll also realize that the pay off associated with going to a [top liberal arts college](#) is not significantly less (and in some cases, is not less at all)!

What you’ll discover is:

- The top liberal arts colleges actually offer more attention to their students than Ivy League colleges because they have small campuses, small class sizes, low professor-to-student ratios and plenty of resources to devote to the student population.

- The top liberal arts colleges offer more opportunities, better financial aid packages and more personalized attention, which means you will get more help from professors as you seek guidance and opportunities.
- The top liberal arts colleges offer beautiful campuses, state-of-the-art facilities and intimate campus settings, all of which set you up for a beautiful, memorable college experience.

### **Demonstrating Initiative When You Apply**

This doesn't mean the top liberal arts colleges are easy to get into. On the contrary, they are quite selective, and only the best students get in. That's why you'll need to demonstrate initiative when applying to these colleges. The following are ways to show a college you're truly interested and motivated.

#### ***Initiate***

Request a brochure, schedule a campus tour, ask for an interview with a college representative and complete online surveys. Mention your interest in the college of your choice when asked on scholarship and college preparation sites. Sign up for more information if you find a college-specific booth at a college fair and be sure to chat up the representative at the booth. If you show interest in a college, this will increase your chances of admission and scholarship opportunities.

When interviewing with (or even just chatting with) college representatives, be sure to show off your:

- Knowledge of the college (be sure to do your research ahead of time)!
- Desire to attend this particular college (this is the time for unabashed enthusiasm).
- Intent to contribute to the student community.
- Ambition for success after graduation.

Always dress nicely and present yourself with professionalism. Speak properly, ask intelligent questions, express confidence and ask the college to follow up with you. Smile as you let them know how much you want to attend this college and make a difference, both while you are in school and after you graduate.

#### ***Collect Glowing Recommendations***

You will also want to develop close relationships with your coaches, teachers, school counselors and club supervisors so you can collect glowing recommendations when it comes time to apply for college admission and complete scholarship applications.

Choose adults who know you well, think highly of you and are articulate. Don't ask for recommendations from teachers and coaches who may think well of you but are inarticulate or irresponsible. Likewise, avoid asking for references from adults who don't know you well. You need a personal, detailed, and enthusiastic recommendation from an adult who thinks you are the best.

### ***Apply for Early Decision or Early Action***

One last way to demonstrate initiative is to apply for early decision or early action admission. This clearly communicates to the college that you want to get in, and you're ready to make a commitment early on.

### **Clean Up Your Web Profile**

As you begin your college application process, you'll want to make sure your online presence is squeaky clean. Delete anything inappropriate from your Internet profiles and be sure to use proper English and respectable language online. Make sure you don't make any online references (even in jest) to drug use, alcohol consumption, cheating or sex. Don't badmouth your job, boss, teachers, friends or even politicians online. College admissions officials will definitely Google your name and look up whatever information they can find on you, so you'll want to keep your private life private.

### **Show Off a Little**

As you clean up your online presence you'll also want to brag a little. Post pictures of those goals you made during the spring soccer season or of you accepting that scholarship award for that amazing essay you wrote. If you can win some early scholarships (you'll find plenty for high school students if you just look for them), you can show how serious you are about achieving and saving for college.

### **Tell Them You Can Offer What They Need**

A lot of students think colleges only look at their test scores, GPA and essay, but the truth is this: colleges build classes, not simply admit individual students. This means colleges are looking for diversity and/or specific types of students to admit each year.

For example, if a college has a top notch political science program, they will look for students who have been active in Student Government and are stellar debaters and speakers. If the school has too many Caucasian females enrolled, they'll be looking for male minority students to fill in the diversity gap. Take advantage of this by showcasing what makes you unique and valuable. In many cases, what you thought was a disadvantage (coming from a low-income household, coming from an obscure part of the country) can actually be an advantage because it lets you meet the college's need for diversity.

### **Let Them Know You're Family**

If you have relatives who have attended this college, make sure this is made known. Many liberal arts colleges give preference to legacy students, meaning they give preference to relatives of alumni.

### **Get Help With Your Resume**

Most colleges (and scholarship applications) require you to submit a resume along with the form application. If you don't know how to format or word a resume, get help from a teacher, study group, resume-writing book or an online class. Find out if

a particular resume format is expected and be sure to follow the format and content requirements to the letter.

After you've drafted a resume, have an adult review and critique it. Polish it until it shines.

### **Tailor Your Essay Answers to the College of Your Choice**

You will be expected to submit an essay or answer questions in essay format. Be sure to research the college and tailor your answers such that you demonstrate your knowledge. For example, if the school has a nationally recognized English program and a respected newspaper, you will want to mention this in your essay (perhaps saying you'd like to contribute to the newspaper or get into this program.) By mentioning specifics, you will show the college you are serious about getting admitted.

## **Conclusion**

While it's not easy to get into a top liberal arts college, it will definitely be easier if you follow the advice provided here. Once you learn what colleges are looking for, you'll know what to focus on.

Be sure to keep your grades up, prepare for those college entrance exams, polish that essay until it shines and show you're truly interested in attending the college of your choice. It may feel like a lot of work now, but it'll pay off once you're on campus!