

A grayscale background image showing a hand holding a black pen, writing on a document. The document is a "Symptom Checklist" with a grid and various text fields. The hand is positioned over the grid area, and the pen is pointing towards the bottom left of the page. The overall image is dimly lit, with the hand and pen being the primary focus.

COLLEGE PLANNING CHECKLIST FOR EVERY YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL

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While many students begin seriously thinking about college during junior year, it's important that you begin preparing as early as freshman year. After all, colleges will be reviewing your entire high school transcript, activities, and accomplishments – starting from 9th grade! Use the checklist below to make sure you aren't missing anything along the way.

Freshman Year

Explore – High school is a time to explore your interests and determine what you like. Use your freshman year to actively figure out your [niche to pursue](#) with intention in the coming years.

Get Involved – Enroll in [extracurriculars](#) at school and in your community. Keep in mind that many of your freshman year activities should ideally continue all four years if possible, since commitment matters. However, feel free to explore and try things in order to figure out which activities will become your “thing” later on. If your school doesn't offer an activity you're looking for, consider starting your own. Bottom line – get out there!

Meet Your College Counselor – It is important to build a strong relationship with your [guidance](#) counselor throughout high school. Guidance counselors are a great source for helping you select rigorous courses, take advantage of school resources, and make the most of your time in high school, not to mention they will be writing a letter of recommendation for your college applications one day! Work to get to know them and establish regular check-ins early on.

Create a Master Resumé – Create a running list of activities, accomplishments, awards, recognitions, and achievements to add to throughout high school. This is great preparation for creating a resumé and a nice starting point for college applications! It can also be helpful for summer program applications and internships along the way.

Establish a Reading Habit – [Find books](#) you enjoy reading and establish a habit that allows you to explore your passions while working to improve your reading comprehension, speed, and vocabulary. Reading cannot be emphasized enough! This will help you excel in the classroom and with standardized tests throughout the next four years.

Create Good Study Habits and Pick Your Classes Wisely - Planning your courses early and developing good study habits can help you navigate the rest of your time in high school. Choose classes that can set you up for success in fields of your academic interests. Colleges take note of students who have challenged themselves with their courses, and freshman year can be a good time to start mapping out what kind of classes you want to prioritize. And of course, organization is key. Use a calendar app and to-do lists to work on your time management skills to help you stay on top of it all.

Sophomore Year

Increase Your Level of Involvement – Work to show growth and development through your extracurricular activities. If you were a member of a club in 9th grade, work to get a leadership position in 10th grade. Switch from passive involvement to active engagement – take charge of what you’re doing and work to make an impact in the things you care about.

Browse College Information – While you don’t need to be doing intense college research yet, it doesn’t hurt to begin exploring your options. Use this year to attend [college fairs](#), listen to information sessions, or consider going on [campus visits](#) over spring break. Begin to get accustomed to the different “types” of colleges that exist (i.e. public, private, research institutions, liberal arts colleges, etc.) and start to figure out your preferences and priorities as you explore.

Create a Standardized Test Plan – Map out when you will take your standardized tests. End of 10th grade (May or June) is a great time to start taking [SAT Subject Tests](#) in classes you took during the academic year. For instance, if you just took chemistry, consider taking the Chemistry exam. Set up a study plan for your [SAT or ACT](#) and begin preparing over the summer before your junior year.

Enroll in Challenging Courses – Work with your counselor to determine your course selection. It is important to enroll in the rigorous classes your school offers to show that you push yourself academically. If your school has an AP, honors, or IB curriculum, take advantage of this opportunity to challenge yourself. College admissions offices will see: a) what your school offers and b) what you chose to take. Don’t take the easy route!

Explore Summer Opportunities - You might have gone on holiday the summer after your freshman year, but now it’s time to start thinking about how to make use of your summers as a way to stand out in your college applications. You can attend a summer program at a prestigious college, find a job or an internship that is relevant to your field of interest, volunteer in your community, the possibilities are endless! Whatever you choose, make sure you’re also pursuing something you’re excited about. Colleges will know if you do something just for the sake of it!



Junior Year

Build Relationships with Your Teachers – While you should work on this throughout high school, this is especially important for junior year. Many of your junior year [teachers](#) will be the ones you ask for [letters of recommendation](#) for college applications. Take a proactive approach to getting to know your teachers – participate in class, ask questions, stop by after class, and ask for additional opportunities to learn or get advice along the way.

Take Standardized Tests – Take the SAT or ACT during junior year. Remember that colleges will see how many times you’ve taken it, so try not to exceed three attempts total. Space them out and study hard in between so you can see improvement!

Plan Campus Visits – Use your spring break or summer after junior year to visit college campuses and become more focused on your future. Attend information sessions while you’re there, introduce yourself to admissions officers, and ask good questions. This exploration can also be meaningful demonstrated interest in colleges!

Begin Forming a Preliminary College List – Use your junior year to conduct more focused research about colleges. Take your standardized test score and current school standing to determine schools that are a good fit for you academically. Ask your guidance counselor where students from your high school typically attend college, and how many get admitted each year. Ask if you can get data on these students’ academic standing, course schedule, or testing data to see if you are in a similar situation. If your school uses Naviance, take advantage of the available information! You need to ensure that your [list](#) includes a good balance of reach, fit, and safety schools, so take a look at a variety of options.

Create a Common Application Account - Once you have an idea of which colleges you’d like to apply to, register for the [Common App](#)! Start typing in your personal information so you don’t have to worry about it when senior year stress starts knocking on the door. Add the colleges you’d like to apply to and check out their supplemental essay questions. Jot down what you love about each school, and start brainstorming ideas for supplemental essay topics.

Start Brainstorming Your Personal Statement - Along with your grades, test scores, and extracurriculars, your personal statement acts as a key component of your college application. This is the chance to show admissions officers what makes you a candidate to watch out for. Telling a story that is unique to you takes time. The earlier you start brainstorming, the more time you will have for editing, proofreading, and crafting an excellent final version.



Senior Year

Continue Taking a Challenging Course load – Colleges will see which courses you enroll in during senior year. Don't take an easy schedule thinking it doesn't matter. Study hard to excel in these classes. The better your marks in these tough courses, the better your chances of admission at a top college. Continue to challenge yourself till the end.

Don't Slack Off! – Remember, your senior year grades still matter! Colleges will receive a mid-year report that provides an update on how you're doing. Some colleges may even rescind offers if you really let yourself go. Study hard for any upcoming exams you have. Be sure to stay focused on your academics and avoid getting "senioritis!"

This Is It - Apply for College – Of course, this is the moment you've been working toward! Be sure to give yourself plenty of time to work on applications, starting in the summer. You will be juggling applications along with your regular school work and extracurricular activities, so make sure to schedule it out so you don't get overwhelmed. Avoid submitting applications the day of the deadline, as many systems get overloaded and experience technical difficulties. Trust us – you do not want to be stuck watching the loading screen at 11:59 PM and panicking!

Follow Up on College Applications – Continue checking your college portal to make sure colleges have received all pieces of your application (your test scores, transcripts, letters of recommendation, etc.). If anything is missing, be sure to address it quickly. Check your email regularly in case the admissions office emails you.

Make an Informed Decision - If you've been accepted at multiple colleges and aren't sure which one to choose, visit the campuses if possible. If you've been waitlisted at a school you really want to attend, send a [letter of continued interest](#). Whichever college you choose, make sure your decision is based on your interest and how you the school suits you. Send in your acceptance letter, and let any other schools waiting to hear back from you know of your decision. Congratulations! You've made it!

