

How to Apply for College in the US as an International Student

According to the [Institute of International Education](#), almost 975,000 international students studied at colleges in the United States last year. If you're hoping to be one of those students, then this guide is for you.

To help you through the college application process, this guide will go over all the steps you need to take, from translating your transcript to taking the TOEFL. Before jumping into the process of international student admissions, let's review how your application process is the same as a U.S. student's and how it's different.

Applying to College: International vs. Domestic Students

As an international student, you'll largely **take the same [steps to apply to U.S. colleges](#) as students from the U.S.** You'll just need to add a few extra steps to account for differences in languages, school curriculum, and grading systems. Below, you'll find an overview of the main similarities and differences between applying for college as an international student in the U.S. and applying as a domestic student.

How Applying Is the Same

Many of the steps you'll take to apply to college in the U.S. are the same ones that domestic students take. You should **apply to several schools** to increase your chances of getting accepted. [Eight to nine](#) is a good number, but some students apply to even more.

You'll apply by an [early deadline](#), usually in November of senior year, or a [regular deadline](#), usually in January or February of senior. Some schools have [even later deadlines](#) that fall in the spring or summer. You might use the Common Application or Universal Application, both of which can just be **filled out once and sent to several schools**. If any of your prospective colleges don't accept those applications, then you'll fill out a separate one.

Your application will contain your personal information, like your name and date of birth, as well as any extracurricular activities, jobs, or internships. You'll also send a personal essay, one or more letters of recommendation, a **transcript with your high school grades**, and, for most colleges, SAT or ACT scores. A few colleges also ask you to answer supplemental essay questions, which call for shorter responses than your main personal essay.

The bulk of the application process is the same for international and domestic students, but international college students do have to take **some additional steps**. Read on to find out what these steps are.

How Applying Is Different

There are a few extra steps if you're applying as an international student. First, you might have to take the TOEFL if you're from a country where the official language is something other than English. The TOEFL (or its alternative, the IELTS) is a test that demonstrates your English language proficiency.

Second, you may need to get your transcript and any other academic credentials evaluated by an approved organization. This evaluation puts your courses and grades into U.S. terms so that admissions officers can understand them.

If financial aid is important to you, then you'll have to figure out whether you can obtain aid directly from colleges. [Federal financial aid](#) is only available to U.S. citizens. You might also apply for [outside scholarships](#).

Finally, you'll need to sort out the legal requirements of living in the U.S. by applying for a student visa. Usually, you apply for your student visa after gaining admission to a college and accepting a place in the next class.

Now that you have a sense of the unique requirements for international student admission, let's dive into the application process, step by step.

How to Apply to College as an International Student

Many colleges are seeking to make their campuses more globalized and welcome international applicants. At the same time, there aren't as many spots available for international students in the USA as there are for domestic applicants, so you should make sure you understand the college process and can send off the strongest application possible. Colleges vary in their individual policies and requirements, but for the most part, they all ask for the same materials.

Most colleges ask for the following:

- Application
- High school transcript
- SAT or ACT scores
- TOEFL scores
- Personal essay (and any supplemental essays)
- Letters of recommendation

Many of these components take months or even years to prepare, so **college planning should start early in high school**. Let's talk about each of these application components in detail, along with tips for preparing each.

The Application

You can think of your application - the actual forms that contain your personal information - as the umbrella that covers all the other documents you'll send. Each school has its own

application, but many accept the [Common Application](#) and/or the [Universal Application](#). These are both free services that allow you to fill out just one application and send it to several schools.

Colleges that don't accept these applications, such as state schools in California and Texas, have their own application systems. Regardless of whether you use the Common Application or a school-specific application, you'll find that both look pretty similar.

Applications will ask for your personal information, like your name, address, schools attended, and any [extracurricular activities](#). If your school requires an essay, then you'll usually paste your essay into your application. You may also invite recommenders via email to upload their reference letters.

While creating an account and filling out your application is free, submitting it requires a fee. Some schools have no application fee while others cost as much as \$80 or \$90. The average application fee is around \$35 to \$40. If the fees are burdensome, you may be able to obtain a [college application fee waiver](#) from the colleges that you're interested in.

Below you'll find a few more tips to help you prepare your college applications.

Tips for Your College Application

Preparing to apply to college is a process that can start at the beginning of high school. Colleges will look at all four years of your classes, grades, and extracurricular involvements, so it helps to consider your college goals as you make choices throughout 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grade.

Most students apply to several colleges; typically, eight or nine is a good number. That way they can maximize their chances of getting accepted. Students usually apply to [two to three safety schools](#), or ones where their credentials are well above that of the average accepted student. They also apply to schools to which getting accepted is more challenging - usually [two to three match schools](#) and [two to three reach schools](#).

The application forms themselves are not all that time-intensive. You should give yourself at least a month before your deadlines to fill them out and proofread for any errors. As an international student, you might be in a good position to emphasize any language skills or unique multicultural experiences that you have.

The aspects of your application that require months, if not years, of planning, are your SAT/ACT scores, TOEFL scores, essay, and letters of recommendation, as you'll learn more about below. First, let's consider another piece of your college application, your high school transcript.

High School Transcript

To determine admission, colleges look closely at [high school grades](#). To show schools this important information, you'll send an official transcript. Usually, your school must send your transcript in a sealed envelope.

For some schools, you can [send your transcript](#) directly. Others will ask you to get it translated and certified by an official credential service. If your school uses a different grading system than the 4.0 scale used in the U.S., then you may have to send off your transcript for evaluation.

This transcript service may cost around \$100. The company should be a member of NACES, the [National Association of Credential Evaluation Services](#), like [World Education Services, Inc.](#)

Some colleges will allow you to use unofficial translators. Tufts, for example, says "Acceptable translators include English teachers or other school officials, professional translators, or a local Education USA office. Students do not need to utilize credential evaluation companies of any sort."

Read on for a few tips for sending your high school transcript to U.S. colleges.

Tips for Your High School Transcript

Colleges look at your grades throughout high school, as well as [your course selection](#). They consider your commitment to your academics, your progress in particular subjects, and the extent to which you challenged yourself with higher level courses.

Each college sets its own admissions policies, so make sure to research each school on your list about what it wants you to do with your transcript. You should be able to find this on the international admissions page on its website. If you can't find this information online, you should email or call the admissions office directly.

If you need to use an evaluation service, then you'll have to plan especially early. These services typically take about seven business days after receiving your documents. You might start the process about a month before your deadlines to make sure everything arrives in time.

In addition to your grades, your SAT or ACT scores are another important part of your college application. Below we'll take a closer look at the standardized testing part of your college applications.

Schools may be very different from one another; so standardized tests, like the SAT and ACT, are used to bridge the gap.

SAT or ACT Scores

For most four-year U.S. colleges, your SAT or ACT scores are **an important part of your candidacy**. Colleges consider both tests equally, so it's up to you to decide which one you'd rather take. Some colleges additionally require [SAT Subject Tests](#), though they usually waive this requirement if you send ACT scores.

While you can self-report your scores on your application, you'll need to [send official score reports](#) via your College Board (for the SAT) or ACT, Inc. (for the ACT) accounts. If you send multiple score reports, many colleges will ["superscore" your results](#), or **take your highest scores by section** and recombine them into the highest possible composite score.

The SAT and ACT require lots of prep and planning, and we have [tons of resources](#) to help you **achieve your target scores**. For now, let's go over a few of the most important tips for planning for these important tests.

Tips for the SAT and ACT

The SAT and ACT are challenging tests, and both require a lot of prep to do well. To start your planning, you first need to decide which test to take. Familiarize yourself with their [similarities and differences](#), and **choose the one on which you can gain the higher score**.

Then, you can set a goal for yourself. Determine [your target scores](#) based on personal goals and your colleges' expectations. Most colleges publicize the [average SAT or ACT scores of accepted students](#). Once you know the average, you can aim for an even stronger score to be a competitive candidate.

You might start your prep with a timed practice test to gauge your current scoring level and [diagnose your strengths and weaknesses](#). Depending on how much you seek to improve, you can figure out [how long you need to study](#). A score improvement of only 30 points on the SAT may just call for about 20 hours of studying, for example, while a score improvement of a few hundred points could require over 150 hours.

Lots of students take the SAT or ACT more than once to achieve their target scores. As mentioned above, many colleges **superscore your results**, so you don't have to worry about increasing your score in one section but decreasing in another. If [retaking the SAT or ACT](#) is in your plans, then you'll need to leave yourself enough opportunities to retest.

You might take the SAT or ACT for the first time in your sophomore year. That way, you can take it again as a junior, and even in the fall of senior year if you seek improvement. Your SAT and ACT scores show that you have the **academic skills to succeed at the college level**. If you're a non-native English speaker, then you may also have to take the TOEFL to demonstrate that you have college-ready English language skills.

TOEFL Scores

If your native language is something other than English, then you may have to take the TOEFL (or its counterpart, the IELTS) to **demonstrate your English language proficiency**. Unlike the SAT or ACT, the TOEFL is computer-based in most countries. Its scoring scale ranges from 0 to 120, and it tests your Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing skills.

Many schools **require a minimum TOEFL score**. If you don't have the requisite TOEFL scores, then the rest of your application doesn't matter! The TOEFL is definitely a test to be taken seriously if you want to study at a U.S. college. Like the SAT or ACT, you could take the TOEFL more than once to achieve your target scores.

Here are just a few examples of colleges with a TOEFL requirement. The TOEFL iBT is the internet-based test; the less common TOEFL PBT is the paper-based test, and its scoring scale ranges from 310 to 677.

College	TOEFL iBT	TOEFL PBT
American University	100	600
Boston University	95	550-600
Harvard	100	600
Northeastern	79-80	550
Penn State	90	550
UCLA	87	560

A few schools will **waive the TOEFL requirement** if you achieve a minimum score on the verbal sections of the SAT or ACT. Because these sections require strong English skills, they can sometimes act as a stand-in for the TOEFL. As with every other part of your application, you'll need to [research each college of interest](#) to learn about its stance and plan accordingly. Below you'll find a few more tips for planning for the TOEFL.

Tips for the TOEFL

As an international student, you may have the double challenge of **prepping for the both the SAT or ACT and the TOEFL**. You'll have to set aside time to study for both tests and arrange a testing schedule that works for you.

Like the SAT or ACT, you may want to start studying **at least three months before your first test date**. Set aside several hours each week to review with [high-quality practice materials](#) and take practice tests. The earlier you start, the more available test dates you'll have to retake the TOEFL if need be.

If you have strong language skills early in high school, then you might consider taking the TOEFL in 9th or 10th grade. Then you can devote even more time to other tests and application components. If you wait until later in your high school career, then you should take the time to devise a study plan that **balances your time between both the TOEFL and the SAT (or ACT)**.

In addition to your grades and test scores, admissions officers are also interested in **learning more about you as a person**. One way that they accomplish this is by reading your personal essay.

College Essays

Many 4-year colleges claim to use a **holistic admissions process**, in which they consider not just your grades and test scores, but also your personal qualities and motivations. One way that they get to know you as a person is through your personal essay.

In [your personal essay](#), you'll typically be asked to **reflect on a meaningful experience in your life and how it shaped your identity**. What you choose to write about should reveal something significant about your values, and your essay as a whole will show your writing style and thought process.

If you use the Common Application to apply to colleges, then you'll [choose one of five prompts](#) for your essay. Here are just **three examples of Common Application essay prompts**:

- 1. The lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience*
- 2. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?*
- 3. Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.*

As you can see, the essay prompts ask you to **share something personal and meaningful**. Schools that don't use the Common Application will likely have their own essay prompt. They might look similar to the ones above or simply ask why you want to attend the college and to describe some of your future goals.

Some colleges, especially the more selective ones, will ask **additional supplemental essay questions**. These are shorter in length, perhaps a few paragraphs or less, and vary by school. They might ask why you want to attend the school or to talk about a favorite book or artist. Some are abstract, like Tufts' question, "What makes you happy?" Others are kind of random, like the University of Virginia's recent prompt, "To tweet or not to tweet?"

Whatever the supplemental questions, they **vary by college** and should not be overlooked. Below you'll find a few tips for writing your college essays.

Tips for Your College Essays

The college essay is a unique piece of writing. It requires you to be introspective and to share something that's **meaningful to you on a personal level**. The best essays tend to zero in on a particular experience that reveals something significant about the writer's identity.

The personal essay's a challenging assignment, so you should **give yourself several months** to work on it. You might take several weeks to [brainstorm the right topic](#). Once you come up with a draft, you might share with teachers, friends, and families for feedback. Ultimately, though, the essay should be in your voice and stay true to who you are.

As an international student, you may be able to bring **unique multicultural experiences or language skills** to campus. Your essay's a great opportunity to share your perspective and show admissions officers why it should be represented on campus.

Supplemental essays, while not as lengthy as the personal essay, are also an important part of your application. Probably the [most common mistake](#) that students make with supplemental essays is rushing through them and producing generic answers. Your supplemental essays should be **specific and customized to each school**. They're typically an opportunity for you to show what you know about the college and your particular reasons for wanting to attend.

While admissions officers learn about you from your personal essays, they also **get to know you through your recommendation letters**. Rather than hearing your voice, they hear what your teachers and/or counselor have to say about you.

Letters of Recommendation

The final important piece of your college applications is your [letters of recommendation](#). Requirements for reference letters vary; some colleges don't ask for any, while others ask for one, two, or even three.

Usually, colleges want to see **one or two recommendations from teachers and one from your school counselor**. If you don't have a counselor, then you might get one from a principal or other administrator.

You'll choose your recommenders and ask them if they'd be willing to provide you with a recommendation. Then you'll **invite them to submit their letters through your online application**.

Your recommendation letters should speak to both your academic and personal qualities. Like your essays and the rest of your application, they should give admissions officers **insight into your strengths and skills as a student, as well as your personality and character**. In addition to our [in-depth guides on recommendation letters](#) for college, you'll find a few tips below.

Tips for Your Letters of Recommendation

Just as you should give yourself plenty of time to write your college essay, you should give your recommenders sufficient time to [write your letters](#). You should **ask your recommenders at least one month before your deadlines**. You might also ask at the end of junior year.

It's best to ask teachers who had you recently and for a whole year; junior year teachers tend to be a good bet. If your teachers write in another language, then you'll have to **get your letters translated**.

The best letters come from educators who know you well, so [you should ask teachers](#) with whom you have a strong connection. You might also **share your own thoughts and ideas** via conversation and a "brag sheet," a document you can prepare to help your teachers. You could talk about your favorite classes, significant experiences, and academic and personal goals for college.

For many colleges, [your recommendation letters](#) are a very important part of your college application. Admissions officers are sifting through many strong applicants and **trying to gain a clearer idea of who you are as a person**. Your recommendation letters are a great opportunity to showcase your positive relationships with your teachers and successes in school.

Now that we've gone over the main parts of your college application - the application itself, transcript, standardized testing scores, essays, and letters of recommendation - let's consider **some final tips** for applying to college as an international student.

Applying to College as an International Student: 3 Final Tips

Applying to college is a complex process, and it becomes even more complicated for international college students due to additional steps, like taking the TOEFL and having your materials translated and certified.

By **familiarizing yourself with the entire process**, you can make sure that you have enough time to prepare all your materials by the deadline. With this knowledge, you can [produce a competitive application](#) that will secure you a spot at a U.S. college. As you work your way through the steps, remember these three key tips.

1. Don't Underestimate the SAT/ACT or TOEFL

Doing well on standardized tests is important for all college applicants, and it becomes even more significant for international students in the USA. The TOEFL shows admissions officers that you have the reading, writing, speaking, and listening **skills to succeed in college-level classes**. The SAT and ACT, furthermore, show your academic skills and college readiness.

These tests are meant to measure students on a level playing field, regardless of differences in individual high schools and curriculum (though of course, how well they do this is [a matter of debate](#)). Admissions officers may be unfamiliar with your school abroad, so they especially **rely on these test scores to make sure you have college-ready skills**.

As discussed above, you should set aside several months to prep for each test and **leave yourself additional test dates** if you want to retest and achieve your target scores. If your sights are set on a U.S. college, then make sure you have the SAT or ACT and TOEFL scores to compete with other applicants.

2. Remember that Many Colleges Use a Holistic Process

While test scores are important, remember that they're not the only part of your application. Many colleges **use a holistic process** to admit students, in which they consider your personal qualities and impact in your school community.

Admissions officers want to learn about your interests and pursuits in and out of school. They're interested in your **extracurricular involvements and any leadership positions**. They want to see if you've done community service, volunteered, or worked a part-time or summer job. They also gain a sense of your role in your school community through your letters of recommendation.

Admissions officers tend to be more impressed by **deep involvement in a few areas** than scattered participation in many areas. You might keep this in mind as you move through high school and choose your activities, as well as when you [describe your involvements on your application](#).

Ultimately, applying to college requires a lot of **self-reflection about your identity and goals for the future**. Think about what's important to you and what you hope to achieve. Then, reflect this self-awareness through your essays and application as a whole.

3. Plan Early!

Finally, the importance of planning early cannot be emphasized enough! There are a lot of moving parts that go into a college application, and none of them can be completed in a short time frame.

Admissions officers are interested in all four years of high school, so planning early will help you make informed choices about your courses and involvements. For instance, you should try to challenge yourself in one or more upper-level classes and stick with an activity or two throughout your time in high school. Follow your interests and you may have a sense of what subject you'd like to choose as your major once you arrive at college.

In the end, your college application will tell a story to admissions officers about your high school experience and identity. By planning early, you can make the most of these years with a goal-oriented, proactive mindset. All of your hard work will pay off when you send off a great college application that gets you accepted into your dream school!