

Tips for Applying to College

You can apply to colleges online or through the mail. Online applications can be processed quickly and may have built-in checks to ensure all materials are included. Mailed applications are easier to proofread.

Start early. Set deadlines for completing essays, collecting recommendations and filling out forms a few weeks before they're actually required. Mark these earlier deadlines on your calendar and don't miss them. College websites are the best place to find accurate deadline information.

Be consistent. Using the exact same name on all your forms makes things easier for admission officers. Decide if you want to use a shortened version of your legal name or your middle name, and then always use the same version. Switching names — going from Bill to Billy, for example — increases the odds that your materials will get misfiled.

Be careful. Careless mistakes on your application can hurt your chances of getting accepted. After you finish an application, put it aside for a day and then check it over for errors. If you can, have a teacher or parent proofread it as well. Save and review online applications before you submit them.

Alert your school. You need to let school officials know which colleges you're applying to so they can send along your transcripts. The people you ask to write recommendation letters also need to know where you're applying if they're mailing the letters themselves.

Once you've completed your application, follow these tips to make sure all the parts get where they're going.

Don't wait. Anything that needs to be mailed, including your application itself, should be sent in several weeks before it is due. This allows time for delivery and processing. Online materials should be sent weeks before the deadline as well.

Submit once. When you apply online, you'll usually get an automated response saying your materials have been received. If you don't, contact the college's admission office. Don't apply online again or mail in another application.

Keep copies. Make a copy of each piece of each application. Save personal identification numbers, passwords, canceled checks and notes or emails from admission officers. This documentation can save you if a problem arises.

Get confirmation. If you mail applications, put a stamped postcard addressed to your house in each package so admission officers can let you know that your materials arrived. The U.S. Post Office also offers a similar "return receipt" service. It may take a few weeks for confirmation cards to reach you.

If you get a notice saying something is missing, don't panic. Just call the admission office and calmly ask what steps you can take. This is why you saved copies of everything and sent in your application early!