
Your Planning Checklist

Grade 9

Let your teachers know that you plan to go to college.

Are your courses considered “college prep”? If you don’t know, ask your guidance counselor to make sure they are.

TIP Colleges like to see challenging courses on your record, even if you get lower grades in them.

TIP If you want to play sports in college, you should know that college athletic teams have requirements about what high school courses you take.

Let your teachers get to know you better. For a start, write down the names of the ones you trust or admire most:

1. _____ 2. _____

3. _____ 4. _____

Do you know other students like you who are planning to go to college? It helps to share your ideas and plans with them. Write down the names of the ones you trust or admire most:

1. _____ 2. _____

3. _____ 4. _____

Read as much as you can this year. It will give you new ideas, make you a better thinker, and build your vocabulary. Start a list of things you enjoy reading:

1. _____ 2. _____

3. _____ 4. _____

Get involved in activities you care about—at school and after school (including sports, clubs, community service, church group, jobs, etc.). List the ones that most appeal to you:

1. _____ 2. _____

3. _____ 4. _____

Think about your current interests. What career fields might match up with them? As you get new ideas, write them here:

YOUR INTEREST

CAREER FIELDS CONNECTED WITH IT

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

- Start to look for information about colleges that fit with your interests. The guidance office will have books, catalogs, and posters, or you can check out colleges on the Internet. (Just type “college search” into Google or any search engine.) If you find any that appeal to you, write their names on this list, using extra space if you need it:

NAME OF COLLEGE

CAREER FIELDS CONNECTED WITH IT

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

- Make a folder or large envelope marked “Grade 9 Portfolio” and save your best work in it, so it won’t get lost. This should include class assignments, but don’t forget to include poems, artwork, or evidence of other things you do outside of school.
- Use your summer to have fun while you learn. Ask your guidance office about enrichment programs (camps, summer courses) that help students like you prepare for college.

- Keep taking the most challenging courses you can.
- If you are having trouble with your schoolwork, ask for help. If the teacher doesn't have time for you, ask another adult or a student who is doing well in that class.

Which teachers do you connect with best this year? Write their names here:

1. _____ 2. _____

Stay involved in the activities you most care about—at school, after school, and in the summer. Which ones do you most care about this year? List them here:

1. _____ 2. _____

3. _____ 4. _____

TIP The more you care about your extra activities, the more they matter to college admissions. Don't do things just to make a longer list—better to do a few things well.

Go to www.collegeboard.com and sign up for a free student account. Once you do this, go to “My Organizer” and it will help you get through your “to-do” list for tests and applications. Take it step by step—it's easier than it looks!

Early in September, ask your guidance counselor to help you sign up for preliminary college admissions tests like the PSAT. Your scores on these will not count when you apply to college, and they are good practice for later.

TIP Many college entrance tests like these charge a fee. If you cannot afford the fee, ask your counselor to help you apply for a waiver, so you can take the test anyway.

TIP When you get your test results, ask your guidance counselor or a teacher to explain how to make sense of the scores. If you hope to do better next time, ask about what kind of extra preparation you will need.

In April, ask your guidance counselor to help you register for the SAT Subject Tests, given in June. These one-hour exams test you on academic subjects such as biology, chemistry, math, physics, and foreign languages. Take SAT Subject Tests soon after you complete a course in that subject. (Select the “score choice” option. This way, you can take more Subject Tests in eleventh and twelfth grades, and then send colleges only your best results.)

TIP Many colleges require three SAT Subject Tests. Some colleges recommend or require Math Level 1 or Math Level 2. Not all SAT Subject Tests are given on every test date. Check the calendar carefully to determine when the Subject Tests you want are offered, and plan using “My Organizer” on www.collegeboard.com.

- Keep making notes about how your interests and passions might connect to college or careers later.

YOUR INTEREST	RELATED CAREER FIELDS	POSSIBLE COLLEGES
1. _____		
2. _____		
3. _____		

- Ask your counselor about summer enrichment opportunities like Upward Bound. If you can't find one in your area, go to www.google.com and search for "youth college readiness summer programs." (Add the word "minority" if it applies to you.)

- Look at this list and check any other summer activities you could explore:

- Volunteer at a workplace that interests you (like a library, a radio station, a YMCA)
- Sign up for a career exploration course or program at a local community college
- Participate in music, art, theatre, or dance offerings in your community
- Take a course that will help you do better on college admissions tests
- Practice computer skills at your public library
- Write your own ideas here:

- Get together with several classmates and talk about what you have been doing to explore your college plans.
- Keep reading as much as you can. Make a list of all the books you read this year. Put a star next to the ones you liked the best, and make a note as to why.

1. _____	2. _____
3. _____	4. _____
5. _____	6. _____

- Make a folder or large envelope marked "Grade 10 Portfolio" and save your best work in it, so it won't get lost. This should include class assignments, but don't forget to include poems, artwork, or evidence of other things you do outside of school.

At the start of the year, make a special folder marked “College.” Keep everything connected to your college planning here—information, schedules, forms, and anything else.

Check test schedules for PSAT, SAT or ACT, and register yourself for tests on “My Organizer” at www.collegeboard.com.

TIP Many college entrance tests like these charge a fee. If you cannot afford the fee, ask your counselor to help you apply for a waiver, so you can take the test anyway.

Find out where “test prep” courses are given, and sign up for them.

TIP The more familiar you are with college admission tests, the better you will do on them. Take practice tests as often as you can.

Attend a college fair to get more information about colleges. You can also write, telephone, or use the Internet to ask colleges to send you materials.

Don't delay college planning because your family cannot afford to pay for college. Low-income students receive funding—from the government and sometimes the college—to help meet college costs.

Colleges want to see demanding courses on your grade 11 schedule. Use this space to list the most challenging courses that you can take this year:

1. _____ 2. _____
3. _____ 4. _____
5. _____ 6. _____

Junior year grades are very important in college admissions. If you are having trouble with your schoolwork, ask for help. If the teacher does not have time for you, ask another adult or a student who is doing well in that class.

At the end of your junior year, you will need to ask two teachers to write you a letter of recommendation to go in your school file. Choose the teachers who know you the best (even if you didn't have them this year), and write their names here:

1. _____ 2. _____

TIP Don't be shy about asking for a recommendation. Just say, “You were an important teacher for me, and I wonder if you would consider writing me a college recommendation and giving it to my guidance counselor.” (Only the college and the guidance office, not you, are allowed to see the recommendation.)

Stay involved in the activities you most care about—at school, after school, and in the summer. Which ones do you most care about this year? List them here, along with any leadership role you have in them:

1. _____ 2. _____
3. _____ 4. _____

TIP Colleges also will look at recommendations from adults who know you through your job or other out-of-school activities.

If you know someone like this, write his or her name here. Ask that person to send a letter to your guidance office, too.

1. _____

- Keep reading as much as you can. Make a list of all the books you read this year. Put a star next to the ones you liked the best, and make a note as to why.

1. _____ 2. _____

3. _____ 4. _____

5. _____ 6. _____

- Narrow down your list of colleges to six—two “safety schools” that you think will probably accept you, two “top choices,” and two in between. If possible, talk over your choices with your parents at this point.

TOP CHOICES

IN BETWEEN

SAFETY

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

- Look for summer opportunities that give you a taste of the college experience. One of the colleges on your list might have a program for high school students—call and ask! (Don’t forget to tell them that you will be the first in your family to go to college.)
- Ask your school if they arrange a “college visit” trip for juniors and seniors. If they don’t, plan your own with family or friends over the summer.
- Make a folder or large envelope marked “Grade 11 Portfolio” and save your best work in it, so it won’t get lost. This should include class assignments, but don’t forget to include poems, artwork, or evidence of other things you do outside of school.

Your Planning Checklist

Grade 12

- Your “College” folder will become quite large this year, so keep it organized! If you want, turn it into a file box, containing separate folders for testing documents and score reports, applications for admission, applications for financial aid or scholarships, copies of your income tax forms, notes for your application essay, completed planning checklists from grades 9 through 11, and so forth.
- Choose challenging courses this year, and work hard in them. Your performance senior year shows admissions people that you can go on to succeed in college.
- Register for the SAT Reasoning Test, SAT Subject Tests, or ACT tests given in the fall or early winter. Don’t forget to ask for your scores to be sent to the colleges on your list.
- In fall of senior year, attend another college fair to gather information about colleges and talk to their representatives. If you find new ones that interest you, use the chart below to revise the list you made on your Grade 11 planning checklist:

TOP CHOICES

IN BETWEEN

SAFETY

1. _____	2. _____	3. _____
1. _____	2. _____	3. _____
1. _____	2. _____	3. _____

- Take every chance to actually visit the colleges that interest you. Call the admissions office and see if you can arrange an interview—colleges do not require them, but it can help your chance of getting in.
- Find out your Social Security number (and/or your green card number, if you are a legal immigrant), which you must have for your college applications. If you do not have a Social Security number, but you qualify for one, contact the closest Social Security office (www.ssa.gov) as soon as possible to obtain a number. Write your number here:

1. _____

- Decide six colleges you are actually going to apply to. Write their names in the chart below, and check whether you will apply online, use the Common Application (www.commonapp.org), or send in a paper application. Then write the deadline for each college—not all colleges have the same deadline!

COLLEGE NAME	Apply online?	Mail in paper application?	Use common application?	DEADLINE
1. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
2. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
3. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
4. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
5. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
6. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____

TIP Most colleges charge you an application fee, but some colleges waive that fee if you apply online using the Common Application. If you cannot afford the fee, ask your guidance counselor for a fee waiver, or call the college admissions office yourself and explain the situation.

- For each college on your list, make sure you complete all applications for financial aid. Every college requires the FAFSA (www.fafsa.ed.gov), and some colleges also require a form called CSS PROFILE (find it at www.collegeboard.com). Many colleges even have another form of their own to fill out. Use the chart below to keep everything straight, including the deadline for each different application.

COLLEGE NAME	FAFSA		CSS PROFILE		College fin. aid app	
	Deadline	Completed	Deadline	Completed	Deadline	Completed
1. _____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. _____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. _____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. _____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. _____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. _____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>

TIP In January, you and your parents should file your income taxes, because you will need them in order to fill out the FAFSA and other financial aid forms. If your family does not file taxes because its income is too low, indicate that when you complete the FAFSA application. Then telephone each college's financial aid office to request a waiver form, which you can send them instead of your income tax forms.

TIP Financial aid applications always ask for your parent's signature. If your situation does not permit this for any reason, call the college financial aid office to explain, and they will tell you what to do.

- Apply for as many scholarships as you can find. (Use www.fastweb.com, and ask your guidance counselor for local scholarships from businesses or organizations.) On the chart below, write down the names and deadlines for the ones you qualify for, and keep track of deadlines:

ORGANIZATION THAT GIVES THE SCHOLARSHIP	DEADLINE	COMPLETED
_____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>

- Meet with your guidance counselor to go over your grades and other information you will need to fill out the college applications. Ask your counselor to check if the teachers who said they would write recommendations have done it yet. (If not, go back and ask them again—they probably just forgot.)

TIP Write thank-you notes to those who write recommendations and keep them informed of your decisions.

- Get together with a friend who is also applying to college, and spend a day filling out application forms. If possible, meet in a place with access to a copy machine. Bring fine-tipped black pens, white-out to cover up any mistakes, and extra paper for making drafts and notes. Use your best printing when you fill out the forms. You should complete the "personal essay" section on another day—it is a project in itself. (See next page.)

TIP From your “College” folder, pull out the lists you made in grades 9, 10, and 11 about your activities, reading lists, etc. They will help you as you fill out your applications.

- Take a few hours to prepare for writing the personal essay you will need on your college applications. Think back on your whole life up to this point, and make a list of moments that you remember especially well. Whether they were happy or difficult times for you, write down notes about each of them here. (Use extra space if you need it.)

1. _____ 2. _____
 3. _____ 4. _____
 5. _____ 6. _____

- Take another hour or two to yourself, and pick just one moment from the list you made of life memories. Then write down everything about it—what it felt like, what it looked like and sounded like, who was there, what felt important about it. Write freely, not stopping to worry about grammar or form, as if you were writing in your private journal. Then save those pages. Later, they will help you write the actual essay.

- Set aside a day or two to write the personal essay for your applications. (You can use the same essay for most applications.) Using some of the free writing you did about your life memories, describe one important moment to you in essay form. Use as many concrete details as you can—the college really wants to see how you notice and think about things. After you have something written, show it to your English teacher, your mentor, or anyone else you trust, and ask for feedback. Then revise, revise, revise through many drafts.

TIP Some colleges ask for more than one essay. Usually one of them is more personal, and the other asks about your reading, your activities, or why you want to go to that college. For the second essay, look back at your list of memories, but also look through your Portfolios for grades 9, 10, and 11.

TIP Somewhere in one of your application essays, let the reader know that you will be the first in your family to go to college. If it doesn't fit anywhere else, put it at the end, connecting the experience you describe to your hopes for college.

- Once you start getting letters accepting you to college or putting you on a waiting list, you do not need to decide right away. Use this chart to compare the offers you receive:

COLLEGE NAME	Accepted or waitlisted?	Total costs for the year	Total financial aid offered (grants + loans)	Subtract your financial aid from the total costs, to get your actual costs for the year	College notified of your decision (by May 1)
1. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	_____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	_____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	_____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	_____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	_____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>

TIP If your first-choice college puts you on its waiting list, write another letter to the admissions office, making clear that they are your first choice and that you would attend if they accept you. If you have any new activities or accomplishments since you sent in your application, describe them, too.

- By May 1, make your decision about what college you will go to, and let that college know. Also notify other colleges whose offers you are turning down.

Celebrate! You are going to be the first in your family to go on to college!