

A Blueprint for the College Application Process

By Diane Schaefer

Editor's Note: Diane Schaefer is an educational consultant, who made an extremely informative presentation to us last spring on "Strategies for College Admission." She will speak to us again in November on the topic of college financial aid. Diane has graciously agreed to write a regular column for us this year on a variety of topics related to college admissions.

The fall can be one of the busiest seasons for high school seniors who can find their time committed to a blur of school and family activities; the college application process can add stress to even the strongest. To get to the finish line you can maximize your efforts if you do the following: 1) Organize 2) Intensify Research 3) Implement a Writing Strategy

Organize

To get organized, set up a calendar using your earliest application deadline and then push that deadline up by 2-3 weeks. Having your applications completed that far in advance gives you plenty of time to focus on the other components you will need to track, such as sending test scores, fees, and letters of recommendation. You will burden the very people who are trying to write positive things for you if you show up as a last minute person who needs something fast, so plan ahead.

The colleges use the following three categories of deadlines. Check with each college to see their specific dates.

a) Early Decision (ED) and Restrictive Early Action (REA) These are the earliest of the deadlines and are meant specifically for a single choice school. You may only apply to one of these in the early stage. Typically, students that have made a thorough investigation and matched their needs and interests to those offered at one particular college, as well as recruited athletes, are using the ED deadlines. ED is a binding agreement that you'll attend that school if accepted.

b) Early Action (EA) The second type of "early" is Early Action, a non-binding application that gives a student the chance to apply without the promise to attend. One advantage to using an early application approach is it positions the applicant in front of admissions with a serious intent to attend there if admitted. Also colleges that are trying to attract the best students through merit awards often use the early pools to target these applicants.

c) Rolling and Regular Decision: Rolling means they admit on a first come, first served basis and roll out acceptances until the class fills. In some cases you should apply to rolling admission schools with your earlier deadlines. Regular pool is the largest group of applications and most of Colorado's Colleges and Universities utilize rolling and regular deadlines. (Colorado College is the only ED school; Regis University, CC and DU all offer EA.)

Your timeline and calendar need to include deadlines, time to work and develop your essays and retaking tests. *Remember, deadlines were created to eliminate people, so try not to become part of that statistic.*

Intensify Research

The second task of the fall is to deepen your research into the colleges you are considering. This research becomes the cornerstone of your applications because it helps you justify the reasons for wanting to attend. Schools are looking for students that will bring their interests to their campuses and engage their faculties. They want people who will be invested in the college beyond the classroom by tying together activities with the resources offered there.

Your research should address more than just the most immediate aspects of the college; get past the buildings and setting and figure out what is happening behind those walls. Showing admissions you are genuinely excited about the potential for growth because of how the college will deliver a program designed to fit your needs makes a convincing argument. That is ultimately what your research should lead you to understand.

Lastly, add to your understanding by utilizing the remaining ways to interface with admissions by a visit to campus, a talk with representatives and alumni, or by attending a class. In today's college market, with so many qualified applicants, you must be able to demonstrate to admissions that you understand what is available to you there and how you intend to use that.

Implement a Writing Strategy

Implementing a writing strategy for essays is the third way to finish strong. Deciding beforehand on two to three themes to write about, ones that best exemplify who you are and what you want from the college, will help you represent a strong view. Your own self-assessment should help the admission officer see beyond the numbers. Themes can be about your background and your interests, and should also step the reader through the progression of your academic growth. To begin the writing process, first think of the essay as an intellectual autobiography, one where you delineate the most important experiences that have contributed to growth and awareness.

Many of the prompts used for essays in applications are purposely meant to be broad in scope, directive and are not the topic and thesis statement of the essay. These you design based on your self-knowledge and autobiographical stance. Within the framework of the topic and thesis, you are writing about the college fit as it relates to you and your vision for yourself (*see example below*). Good writing requires many revisions and a feedback mechanism. Set up readers that have no bias about you and are adept at understanding the age group. Present the reader with a series of questions to answer and proof for content, saving mechanics and spelling as the very last. Be sure you do not send essays with errors, as this will hurt your chance of a good first impression.

Example of a theme taken from prompt to topic to thesis:

Prompt: Evaluate a significant experience you have taken and the impact on you.

Topic: My passion for the arts and the demands of IB

Thesis: Choosing the challenge of an IB program while continuing with my interests in drama has helped me develop a strong work ethic and an appreciation for the arts. By learning how to balance the demanding schedule as the lead in the play, I learned how I could continue to add to my artistic sensibilities while maintaining the highest standards for my education. My goal throughout college and most likely into my adulthood is to enrich my life through a blend of these two pursuits.

Diane Schaefer, MA, LPC, is a licensed professional counselor who works independently as an educational consultant for families and students as they make their way through the college admission process. She has assisted hundreds of families with successful results with her process. In her next column, she will address issues of financial aid. Ms. Schaefer may be reached at (720) 291-5915.