



# THE U.S. COLLEGE APPLICATION PROCESS



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# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to WES Student Advisor's e-guide on the admissions process for U.S. colleges and universities. This e-guide breaks down how to gather and submit application materials, prepare for exams, and fund your U.S. education. We've also included the information you need to create the perfect résumé/CV, write an outstanding personal essay, and score top-notch recommendation letters from your teachers. With more than 4,000 colleges and universities across the nation to choose from, applying can be a challenging process. But don't worry! This guide is designed to help any international student applying to study in the U.S. at the undergraduate or graduate level.

## APPLICATION REQUIREMENT CHECKLIST

People often find that filling out college applications can be a stressful and timeconsuming task. There are many components to a college application, so use this list as you prepare your application – it could make your life a little easier!

- Application Forms:** The most obvious item on our checklist. It never hurts to double check that you've filled out and submitted all the basic application forms for each college to which you're applying. Whether you're using the common application or completing a separate form for each school, having these forms submitted on time is absolutely crucial.
- Recommendation Letters:** The recommendation letters submitted with your application give you the chance to exhibit personal characteristics and strengths that may not be obvious from reading your transcript or essay. When asking people to write letters of recommendation for you, be up front about the deadlines. Don't hesitate to follow up and remind them as the deadlines get closer. Similar to transcripts, this is a part of the application package that is not entirely within your control, so you want to cross it off your checklist as soon as possible.
- Test Scores:** Whether you're taking the SAT, GRE or TOEFL, you want to make sure your scores are submitted to colleges by their required deadlines. Many schools have score submission deadlines separate from their college application deadlines, so check with each school you are applying to for verification. Remember, you spent a great deal of time and money to take these tests, and they are rendered useless if the scores aren't submitted on time. Most admissions committees won't review your application without them.
- Financial Aid Documents:** Make sure you complete and submit all the required forms and documentation for financial aid and scholarships (if they're an option). These deadlines often differ from final application deadlines, so check with each school individually; you don't want to miss out on available sources of funding simply because you weren't aware of the deadlines.
- High School or College Transcripts:** College applications are not complete without a record of your grades from high school, or from previous higher learning institutions if you're applying to graduate school. (If your records are not in English, you must get a certified transcript translation.) Be sure to track your transcripts until they reach the admissions office; the registrar could delay or misplace your transcripts, so keep following up in case you need to make any last-minute arrangements. However, you don't want to come off as a pest, so always remember to be polite.

- ❑ **Personal Essays and Statements of Purpose:** Schools tend to have their own requirements when it comes to personal essays, so make sure you know what is needed for each one to which you are applying. It's common for a college to require additional supplemental essays. Just make sure that before submitting your essays and crossing this item off your checklist, you have proofread them carefully. Bad grammar and careless mistakes will not impress admissions counselors! We recommend having your essay critically reviewed by a professor or peer; a fresh pair of eyes can do wonders to perfect your essay.

This checklist covers the most important things you will need to do for your college applications, but there may be more, depending on what schools and programs you're applying to. Check with each school individually and, if anything is missing, add it to this checklist to ensure you comply with all the application requirements and get everything in by the correct deadlines.



*ADMIT TIP*

**In your essay, don't simply rewrite what you have already said in other parts of the application. Highlight what makes you unique or share a particularly meaningful life experience.**

# COMPOSING YOUR RÉSUMÉ/CV

Once you've gathered all of your materials, it's time to get started on your résumé, which will help show admissions officers your talents and abilities beyond your transcript and test scores.

A résumé for a college application is slightly different from an internship or job résumé, but the main idea is still to summarize and highlight your experiences, skills, and accomplishments. You want U.S. college admissions counselors to quickly see that you are a best-fit student. Instead of focusing on your work experience in the way you would in a professional résumé, focus on your academic achievements and extracurricular activities. Your college application résumé is like a “brag sheet” that helps you think about who you are and what makes you special. Résumés don't all look alike, and they should be personalized, but check out these 10 general guidelines and review the basic résumé template below for ideas about how to build yours.



## 10 Golden Résumé Writing Tips

1. First and foremost: Be honest!
2. Make your résumé concise and keep it to ONE page.
3. List activities in chronological order beginning with the most recent in each section.
4. List detailed descriptions by order of importance under each activity.
5. Use action verbs in short statements when describing activities.
6. Avoid personal pronouns and vague descriptions.
7. Quantify your successes and achievements if possible.
8. Adapt your résumé to showcase your accomplishments that are a good match for each school.
9. Stay consistent in font and style to make it professional and easy to read.
10. Last but not least: Proofread!

## SAMPLE RÉSUMÉ

### FULL NAME

Address  
Phone Number  
Email

#### EDUCATION

High School Name

City, State (Country, if outside of the U.S.)

GPA: \_\_\_\_\_ Class Rank: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

SAT/ACT: \_\_\_\_\_ TOEFL/IELTS: \_\_\_\_\_

Coursework: [specialized or out of the ordinary work only – e.g., college – level courses]

#### HORNORS & AWARDS

Scholarships

Honor Society

#### WORK & VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

Company/Organization

City, State (Country, if outside of the U.S.)

Job Title

Dates or time involved in activity; e.g., hours/week, weeks/year

- Responsibilities
- Activities and Skills
- Accomplishments

#### EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Organization

City, State (Country, if outside of the U.S.)

Title/Role

Dates or time involved in activity; e.g., hours/week, weeks/year

- Description of Involvement
- Awards and Achievements

#### SKILLS

Languages

Hobbies and Interests (optional)

# WRITING THE ESSAY OR PERSONAL STATEMENT

In addition to a résumé/CV, the essay or personal statement is another opportunity to really show a college who you are as a person beyond academics.

Although essay writing is a time-consuming task, it's an opportunity to show that you can write well in English, and also to help you to stand out among many qualified applicants. It gives you a chance to tell your story and is one of the few pieces of the application that you have full control over. The essay is especially important for selective institutions, where most applicants fall within the school's academic profile.



ADMIT TIP

It's essential to thoroughly proofread your personal essay or statement of purpose, or have somebody look it over for you. Careless errors won't sit well with admissions counselors.

## Common Mistakes to Avoid

1. **Repeating what you've provided elsewhere in the application.** The essay is the space to highlight other things about yourself, or to elaborate on something important to you.
2. **Writing what you think an admissions officer wants to hear.** This can be obvious to professionals and results in an essay that doesn't feel genuine.
3. **Getting off topic or going on tangents.** Be concise and choose your words wisely. This will help you to get your point across while staying within the word limit.
4. **Procrastinating.** This leads to rushed essays. Leave time to brainstorm topics, write drafts, edit, and get a second or third opinion.
5. **Making up false information or plagiarizing.** This is very apparent to readers, and will disqualify you from admission.



## What Makes a Great College Essay?

Outstanding essays not only portray passion and authenticity, but are well organized, concise, creative, and sometimes throw the reader for a loop. Some of the best essays reveal something personal and unexpected; e.g., a student applying to an engineering college who writes about a deep passion for poetry. Other students write touching essays about influential people in their lives or coping with a tragic loss. When writing an essay like that, be sure to show why the experience or person was important for you personally. What did you learn? How did you grow?

**Table 1: Difference Between A Personal Statement, Statement of Purpose, and Essay**

TYPE	LENGTH (WORDS)	REQUIRED BY?	PURPOSE	HIGHLIGHT
Personal Statement	500 - 1,000	Graduate	Give the reader a good sense of why you are an excellent candidate for their particular institution/program.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Related skills, past experience, and education</li> <li>• What you are presently doing to prepare for chosen field</li> </ul>
Statement of Purpose	500 - 1,000	Graduate	Explain to the reader why you want to be at a particular university or study a certain topic at the institution.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future plans for the chosen field of study</li> <li>• Short- and long-term career goals</li> <li>• How the institution matches up with your plans and goals</li> </ul>
Essays	100 - 1,000	Undergraduate	Show your character and personality by telling a story that goes beyond an overview of life accomplishments and goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What makes you unique and stand out among others</li> <li>• Experience that has helped define you as a person, the way you approach situations, or cope with adversity</li> </ul>

# REQUESTING RECOMMENDATION LETTERS



Another important part of your college application is the recommendation letters submitted by a teacher or somebody else who knows you well and will speak highly of you.

U.S. colleges and universities typically ask for between one and three letters of recommendation as part of a college admissions packet. At least one of these letters should be written by someone who taught you in a core academic discipline – math, science, history, writing or language. Depending on specific program requirements and individual

situations, other recommenders could be mentors, coaches, employers, family members, peers, or clergy. As a rule of thumb, recommenders should be people who are familiar with your studies, work, or extracurricular activities.

So, how does one request a recommendation letter?

Don't hesitate to ask! The following guidelines will provide you with the information you'll need to efficiently and effectively request letters of recommendation.

## 1. Choose Your Recommenders Wisely

Before making your requests, check a school's website or contact its admission office to see if there are specific requirements for letters. People who know you well can provide credible highlights from your education or speak knowledgeably about your other skills. It's probably not wise to select a teacher who has given you poor grades.



ADMIT TIP

When asking for recommendation letters, choose a teacher who knows you well and will speak highly of you.

## 2. Give Them Ample Time

Don't underestimate the time and work needed to compose a well-crafted recommendation letter. Make appointments with your ideal recommenders to ask for permission and get on their calendar. Though you may not have come up with your college list yet, this is a good time to let the recommenders know your interests and goals. Last-minute requests are inconsiderate and may lead to weak or superficial letters.

### 3. Provide All Supporting Materials and Relevant Information

Make sure your recommenders have everything they need to write your letters and submit them on time. The following information will make it easy for your recommenders to write outstanding and thoughtful letters:

1. An updated résumé or CV
2. Transcript(s)
3. Personal statement and supplemental essay (if relevant)
4. A college list
5. Application deadlines and delivery instructions



Since you will probably submit letters from multiple recommenders, it's OK to give your writers some direction by suggesting what you'd like them to emphasize (e.g., a particular set of skills, a specific subject area). For example, a letter from a teacher may focus on your academic achievements, while a letter from a coach may attest to your leadership skills.

### 4. Waive Your Rights of Access

Recommendation letters are typically submitted electronically through school application systems or the Common Application. Under the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), you have the right to review letters of recommendation and accompanying forms. However, it is strongly recommended that you waive your rights of access to your letters of recommendation and authorize your recommenders to release records and recommendations directly to U.S. schools. Waiving your rights will reassure colleges that your recommenders have provided candid and truthful information.

### 5. Send Reminders (If Necessary) and Thank-You Letters



In most cases, you will be informed by email when a registered recommender submits an online recommendation on your behalf. If your recommenders have not submitted the letter a few days before the deadline, you can send them a polite reminder email. Busy faculty and professionals tend to appreciate the reminder; just be courteous and ask if they have any questions or need additional information from you. Finally, after they've submitted their letters, send them thank-you notes; email is OK, but

handwritten notes are even better. A positive and lasting impression will help the recommender say "yes" again in the future if you need another letter!

# ENGLISH PROFICIENCY EXAMS: TOEFL VS. IELTS

If you grew up in a non-English speaking country, you will probably need to take an English proficiency exam. The most common ones are the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and the IELTS (International English Language Testing Service). So which one should you take?

## TOEFL

The TOEFL is administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), a U.S. non-profit organization. Therefore, the exam is based on American English. The test can be administered via paper or online, depending on where you take it. The Internet-based test is commonly called TOEFL iBT and is accepted by more than 8,500 institutions worldwide. The TOEFL is offered more than 50 times a year and students can retake it as many times as they want. However, you're only allowed to take it once every 12 days. Keep in mind that the cost of the test ranges anywhere from U.S. \$160 to U.S. \$250, depending on where you take it.

The TOEFL is broken into four sections that examine students' reading, listening, speaking, and writing abilities. The entire test takes four and a half hours, with scores ranging from 0-120 points.

## IELTS

The IELTS is administered by three companies: the British Council, the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, and IDP Education Australia. The test uses U.K. English, so take that into account when deciding between TOEFL and IELTS. Like the TOEFL, you can take the exam on paper or a computer. The IELTS is accepted by more than 8,000 organizations worldwide. One of the IELTS' differences is that you can take an Academic exam or General Training exam. The Academic exam is geared toward students, while the General Training exam is for individuals planning to immigrate to English-speaking countries; if you're reading this, you probably want to take the Academic version!

The IELTS is offered up to four times a month worldwide and costs around U.S. \$205; the exact cost is determined by your local currency. The IELTS is broken into four sections: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. The speaking portion of the exam is administered face-to-face by a native speaker. The entire exam takes about two hours and 45 minutes and test scores range between 0-9 with half scores.

These two exams are administered by two different companies so you may be wondering what would be the best for you. We will help you understand some of the differences and which exam may be better for you.

**Table 2: TOEFL vs. IELTS: Which exam should you take?**

These two exams are administered by two different companies so you may be wondering what would be the best for you. We will help you understand some of the differences and which exam may be better for you.

TOEFL	vs.	IELTS
<p><b>Administered By:</b> Educational Testing Service (ETS)</p>		<p><b>Administered By:</b> British Council, The University of Cambridge ESOL Examination and IDP Education Australia</p>
<p><b>Uses:</b> U.S. English</p>		<p><b>Uses:</b> U.K. English</p>
<p><b>Sections:</b> 1. Reading 2. Listening 3. Speaking 4. Writing</p>		<p><b>Sections:</b> 1. Reading 2. Listening 3. Speaking (in-person) 4. Writing</p>
<p><b>Scores:</b> Total 0 - 120 points</p>		<p><b>Scores:</b> Between 0-9 with half scores</p>
<p><b>Cost:</b> U.S. \$160 - U.S. \$250 Depending on location</p>		<p><b>Cost:</b> U.S. \$205 Depending on location</p>

# FUNDING YOUR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Though the majority of international students pay tuition with their own money, some students find that they still need help covering the total cost of attendance and personal expenses. In those cases, students look to other sources of funding such as grants, financial aid, and scholarships to help pay for their education. Although federal funding from the U.S. government is limited to U.S. citizens and permanent residents, international students may find that they can procure funding from other sources if they do their homework well in advance. Here are a few alternate funding sources to consider.



## Institutional Aid

Some public and private universities in the U.S. offer financial incentives for students to attend their institution. Most of the institutional aid available to international students is reserved for graduate study in the form of assistantships and fellowships. Since it isn't common for U.S. institutions to offer financial aid to undergraduate international students, such scholarships are often quite competitive. Remember that schools may waive application fees in some situations; be sure to consult with your university in advance to take advantage of any waivers they may offer.

Certain academic departments within the university may allocate funds to assist international students with exceptional need and/or talent. Check with universities and individual academic departments to inquire about any special funding opportunities they may offer. You can also check with academic departments to search for on-campus jobs that can act as additional sources of funding.

## Scholarships and Grants

Merit-based scholarships are granted on the basis of special skills, talents, or abilities. Your university may have scholarships based on TOEFL/GRE/GMAT scores, academic records, artistic ability, musical ability, or athletic ability. Merit-based scholarships are typically very competitive. To be considered, you will need to demonstrate exceptional skills in a given area.

Need-based scholarships are awarded based on financial need. Those students who can establish need at a certain level are eligible for this type of aid.

Many scholarships for graduate and undergraduate study are available only to U.S. citizens and permanent residents. However, there are free scholarship databases as well as private, corporate, nonprofit, and government scholarship funds that cater to international students. There are even a few websites dedicated to helping international students secure funding for their studies in America. You can find them in the Resources section at the end of this e-guide.

**Table 3: Advice from International Admissions Experts**

 <b>EXPERT INSIGHTS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Free Webinars with University Admissions Directors</li><li>• Expert Blogs with Advice from Professionals</li></ul>
 <b>STUDENT AMBASSADORS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Admissions Tips and Personal Stories from International Students</li><li>• Submit Articles for Publication and Earn Amazon Gift Cards</li></ul>
 <b>ADMISSIONS DATA</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Facts and Figures on Financial Aid, Acceptance Rates and More</li><li>• Infographics that Break Down the Numbers</li></ul>
 <b>E-GUIDES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explore More Free Guides Like This One</li><li>• Topics Include Arriving in the U.S., College Essays and More</li></ul>

Visit [wesstudentadvisor.org](https://www.wesstudentadvisor.org) for free resources on studying abroad in the U.S. and Canada.

## CONCLUSION

We hope you've enjoyed WES Student Advisor's e-guide on the application process. After you submit your applications, remember to thank any teacher who wrote you a letter of recommendation, submit your test scores, and check in with schools to see where you stand in terms of financial aid. Following are additional resources that will help you through the college application process. If there's a topic that you'd like to see covered in a future e-guide, let us know! Drop us a line at [advisor@wes.org](mailto:advisor@wes.org). Now good luck with your applications. And thanks for reading!

# RESOURCES

## Essay Writing

[Essay Tips from Big Future \(The College Board\)](#)

[More Essay Advice from NACAC \(National Association for College Admission Counseling\)](#)

## Requesting Recommendation Letters

[Family Education Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#)

[Waiving Access: Why You Should Do It](#)

## Scholarships

[Financial Aid for Study Abroad: An Undergraduate Student's Resource \(NAFSA\)](#)

[IEFA \(The International Education Financial Aid Website\)](#)

[International Scholarships.com](#)

[Foundation Grants to Individuals Online](#)



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**We provide advice and resources for international students and skilled immigrants to help them make informed decisions about education, employment, immigration, and integration opportunities in the U.S. and Canada.**

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