



**TOPTIER**  
ADMISSIONS

# College Admissions 101

**Dr. Michele Hernández & Mimi Doe**

# TTA College Admissions 101

## Your Quick Guide to What You Need to Know About College Admissions

### PART 1: COLLEGE SELECTION

#### **Q: How do I begin my college search?**

**A:** Start by doing your [research](#). Make sure the schools you're targeting are schools you have a genuine interest in and where you are in range academically. When creating a college list, we encourage students to begin college visits early so they can get a feel for what they like: urban campus, rural campus, single sex school, large university, etc. We also encourage students to visit specific academic department(s) of interest and to speak to current students and professors. Some schools track level of interest and will notice if you're posting photos of their main quad on social media or signing up for their mailing list. [Here are some more ways to discern the right school for you.](#)

**TTA TIP:** Always sign in at the admissions office so they have a record of your visit. Your email address (pick 1 personal email not a school email for the entire admissions process!) is now often tracked and that data is monitored as part of "demonstrated interest" at many colleges now.

#### **Q: Are college fairs important?**

**A:** We tell all of our students to take advantage of college fairs at their high school and within their town or local area. Often colleges send alumni rather than admissions officers and the atmosphere can be pretty chaotic. Nonetheless, it's a good way to get a quick overview of many schools at once. These fairs provide an open, direct and FREE line to colleges and allow you to learn some of the basics BEFORE committing to a campus visit and all that entails. But first, as in most everything, do your homework and decide which schools interest you most and which are in range, (if you are a C student with low SAT scores, why waste a visit to Harvard's booth) then research what each school offers in your main area of academic interest. Print up labels with your information including name, address, and email and rather than write this information at every sign up sheet for every college, you can just stick it on their sign-up sheet!

Click the following link for our [step-by-step guide to college fairs](#).

**TTA TIP:** Create a spreadsheet in advance to track everyone you meet, email, or talk to who is connected with your targeted colleges. When you visit colleges keep notes on this spreadsheet such as information on application options, admissions rep you might have met, testing requirements, etc.

#### **Q: What is the Academic Index and how can I calculate mine?**

**A:** Although the Ivy League schools spent many years denying they used any kind of formula, they in fact have been using a ranking formula since the 1950's called the Academic Index, or AI. In her book [A is for Admission](#), [Dr. Michele Hernandez](#), Co-Founder of [Top Tier Admissions](#), was the first to reveal this formula to the public. This raw score takes into account your SAT scores, top three SAT Subject Test scores, class rank, and GPA. [Click here](#) to use our College Admissions Calculator.

**MICHELE'S TIP (TTA CO-FOUNDER):** *Though the AI is not the ONLY metric you will need to assess if a college is in range or not, it can give you a quick guideline and of where you rank in the Ivy pool – it should be used in concert with other factors like leadership, extracurricular activities, scholarship, etc.*

**Q: What is the college interview and how do I prepare for it?**

**A:** There are different types of [college interviews](#) (alumni, informational and required). Most schools have eliminated on campus interviews in favor of alumni interviews so as not to waste time interviewing thousands of applicants who never end up applying. As a result, offices cut back dramatically on these interviews and instead let alumni interview students once the students' applications are submitted in the early round. Read more about [sample college interview questions](#) and practice 'live' with a friend!

**MARIA'S TIP (TTA SENIOR PRIVATE COUNSELOR):** *A strong interview is like icing on the cake. Typically, they are read after the entire Common App has been read. At that stage, admissions readers have a pretty good sense of your academic achievement and your impact and contributions in school and the community. When I read interviews, I looked to see how you came alive for your interviewer. This was the chance for someone who probably just met you share those all-important first impressions. Did the interviewer find you both knowledgeable and passionate about classics or neuroscience or public policy? Was it clear that you had done your homework on the college or university and could articulate why you loved the school? A good interviewer would also help me discern fit and what kind of roommate, lab partner, teammate, etc., you would be.*

**Q: My child's college counselor has asked me to write a statement about my child. What information should I include?**

**A:** The Student/Parent Form gives parents the chance to fill in details so the counselor has something to write about. Keep it concise – a page or two – and try to be as honest as possible with specific examples. Show (by example), don't just tell (listing out). Be super specific. Don't overstate and think carefully before using words like "brilliant" and "gifted." Avoid excessive use of the all-too-common tag of "[leader](#)." Finally, emphasize love of learning where you can and explain how and why. For more tips, see our key tips for the parent statement [here](#).



**Q: What summer activities would benefit my college application?**

**A:** A big mistake students often make is forgetting to [maximize their summers, instead focusing on family vacations to exotic places or expensive academic programs that are not selective or don't fit within an academic niche](#). Even if you don't have time to enroll in a college-level course or pursue summer research, you should commit to a high-level [reading list](#) to improve your vocabulary and add depth to your academic interests. You might also consider the Top Tier Admissions [Academic Writing Program](#) for guided writing instruction. Here are our [top tips for leveraging your summer months](#).

**MIMI'S TIP (TTA CO-FOUNDER):** *"The students I have worked with over the past 16+ years who have leveraged their summers to further define their academic focus and continue high impact civic initiatives have definitely added not only to their college applications, but to their eventual careers."*



## PART 2: TESTING STRATEGIES

### **Q: Where can I take a practice ACT OR SAT test?**

**A:** Whatever tutoring you choose, be sure you are using one-on-one tutoring, as this is most effective and allows you to identify your specific weaknesses. Our tutors and diagnostic testing do just this! Are you a current client of ours interested in TTA [tutoring services](#)? The earlier you can get started, the better!

### **Q: Should I take the ACT or the SAT?**

**A:** Since there are a number of differences between these two tests, we encourage students to figure out their stronger test and then focus only on prep for that one. For students who are strong in math and science, often the ACT can neutralize a lower reading score. By the spring of 10th grade, you should look at your PSAT score, practice SAT score, and practice ACT score to determine which is your stronger test. [Click here for our comprehensive overview of the differences between the SAT and ACT.](#)

### **Q: What are SAT Subject Tests, and why do they matter?**

**A:** SAT subject tests (formerly called SAT IIs) are very important at top colleges since they serve as true equalizers for students coming from disparate high schools. In many ways subject tests can be a great way for students at lesser-known high schools to prove themselves. By the same token, they can deflate a valedictorian with high grades but lower subject tests. When you read about all the #1 kids rejected from Harvard, Yale and the like, they're almost always kids whose testing didn't match their grades.

### **Q: How do I know which SAT subject tests to take and when?**

**A:** What's great about these tests is they're just 60 min. long so you can get practice scores fast and assess if taking the 'real' test is a good choice. Sign up to take the subject tests in May or June that align with school courses in which you are doing well, i.e. AP, honors, or rigorous Biology, Chemistry, Physics, US History, World History, etc. A year of Pre-Calculus is necessary for a good score on the Math II. SAT Literature and Foreign Languages are less connected to a particular academic course. It's always a good idea to ask your teacher if your class will cover all the material on an SAT subject test (frequently school courses do not).

**EMILY'S TIP (TTA TEST TUTOR):** *"Subject tests can contain up to 95 questions for you to tackle in just one hour. Make the best use of time by answering easy questions first (each question is worth just one point) and not allowing yourself to get bogged down with any particular question for more than a minute or two."*

**Q: I'm an IB student; do I still need to take AP exams or SAT subject tests?**

**A:** Students in the IB curriculum are generally not encouraged by their schools to take SAT subject tests or AP exams. However, Ivy League and other top-tier schools will want to see subjects test scores to supplement your courses and validate your grades, so we urge you to self-study for subject tests and AP exams that correspond with your current courses. These scores are a critical data point for all applicants, but especially international applicants.

**GEOFF'S TIP (TTA TEST TUTOR):** *"For APs generally, aim to excel on the multiple choice - it is much more predictable than the essays. A high multiple choice score is your insurance policy against a really tough and unexpected essay topic."*

**Q: How do I prepare for test day?**

**A:** DON'T try to cram the night before. DO plan your prep in advance so you can simply review some notes and [get a good night's rest](#). DON'T forget to pack your admission ticket, photo ID, an acceptable calculator, and backup pencils. DO double-check our [Test Day Check List](#) before you leave!

**GEOFF'S TIP (TTA TEST TUTOR):** *"If you are prepping for a history SAT II or AP, make sure to know your periods and trends. Many questions won't expect you to know the particular details, but rather to choose the "most reasonable" answer on the basis of the big picture."*



**Q: When should I fill out my Common App?**

**A:** You can begin your Common App whenever you want! Applicants can see the essay prompts on the Common App's blog. Although the new Common App is released every year in early August, your answers should roll over if you start filling it out ahead of time.

**Q: Where should I list academic awards on the Common App? What if I don't have any?**

**A:** The Honors section appears in the Education section of the Common App. First, it will ask you how many honors you wish to list--don't leave this blank! We are always on the lookout for terrific (and new) high school competitions for our students so they can show off their achievement beyond the usual awards (honor societies etc.). Consider these [essay contests](#), which often provide opportunities to get your writing published and sometimes include cash prizes!

**Q: What should I do if I'm having problems with the Common App?**

**A:** The Common App offers video tutorials throughout the application, year-round technical support, and a place to submit questions in their Applicant Solutions Center. For one-on-one guidance, consider our [Common Application 911 Program](#), a 2-hour virtual program that will guide you through it step-by-step. And do NOT wait until a day or two before applications are due to fill out and send your Common Application as every year it crashes sometime in the days and nights leading up to send off.

**KRISTEN'S TIP (TTA SENIOR PRIVATE COUNSELOR):** *There's a section in the Common App's Education category called "Future plans." Pay attention to this section –it matters! Under 'Career Interest'–state something and be specific. No one will hold you to it, so look interested –and be interesting! Under 'Highest Degree You Intend to Earn'–state the highest degree you think you MIGHT like to someday earn. No one will track you down once you're in college and force you to tell them why you're an Anthropology major when you stated you'd like to one day obtain a PhD in Astronomy on the Common App. Don't check 'Undecided' –pick the area that aligns with your academic and extracurricular experiences to date.*

**Q: Who should I choose to write my letters of recommendation & when should I ask them?**

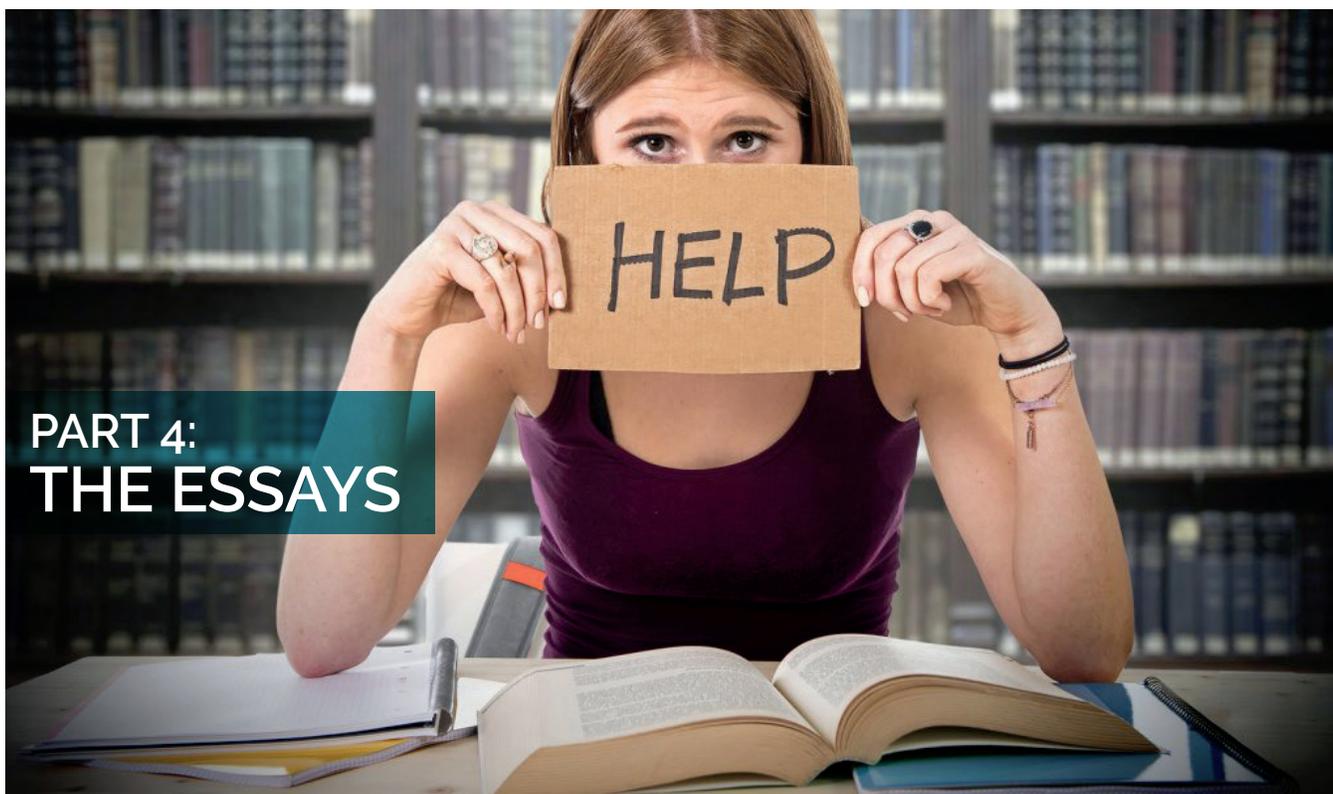
**A:** We encourage our students to ask two junior year teachers to write their recs before leaving for summer vacation. That way, they'll have time to write a high quality rec and draw on recent anecdotes to personalize their letter. But note — a single comment about being grade focused can ruin your reputation with teachers — it's all about love of learning.

**TTA TIP:** *If you happen to read an article about the subject you're studying, share it with your teacher — show him/her that you follow subjects OUTSIDE of class. For example, if you read an article in National Geographic that relates to your biology unit, mention it to your teacher to show that you care! Google News Alert is a great tool for automating this.*

**Q: Do the courses I take senior year matter? I have to list them on the Common App.**

**A:** Did you know colleges rate the rigor of your course load? Every year. They rely upon guidance counselors to rate your course load on a 1 to 4 scale with 4 being the most rigorous. You are judged by the standard at your school, so make sure if the "norm" is three AP classes senior year, that you at least meet that or go beyond. Remember, an A average or top rank in class is undermined by a weak course load. Rank is always looked at with course rigor. Senior year you definitely want to take a rigorous course load and if you are aiming for very top colleges, why not take a college level course in your area of interest. Plenty of top candidates are dual enrolling by senior year.

**TTA TIP:** *If a class requires reading a book, read some essays or criticism about the book. Do extra work on a research paper, read beyond what's required in class, bring in outside material as a resource. Show your teacher that you're pushing yourself and the limits of your intellectual explorations. Don't settle for your second best effort. Share books you've loved with your teachers, articles from the newspaper, or any "outside" information that is relevant to your class. While you don't want to brownnose, you do want to show your teacher that you can relate outside materials to what you are studying in class. –From Don't Worry: You'll Get In by Dr. Michele Hernandez and Mimi Doe.*



## PART 4: THE ESSAYS

### **Q: How much do the essays actually matter?**

**A:** Regardless of your grades, scores, or extracurriculars, essays give you the flexibility to show who you are and what you care about. An original, thoughtful, genuine essay can delight and impress admissions officers. In an applicant pool full of students with great — but identical — grades and test scores, the essay could even be the one element that sets you apart from your fellow applicants. College is about academics, so make this essay about your scholarly focus and offer the reader a sense of what you're going to bring to their classroom. Try our five-hour or ten-hour [Essay Guidance Package](#) for individual guidance, brainstorming, and editing.

### **Q: How do I start my main essay?**

**A:** Know your audience. We encourage you to think about [a compelling hook](#) that will grab your reader's attention right away!

**MIMI & MICHELE'S TIP (TTA CO-FOUNDERS):** *The best essays take a small "slice" of life and expand that into your story. You may want to choose a specific moment or incident in your life that changed the way you think or the way you operate and explain the mental change that took place.*

### **Q: Is there anything I shouldn't write about?**

**A:** Stay away from clichés, no one really cares about your winning football game unless you are recruited and in that case, they already know about it. Avoid things like your life changing Outward Bound trip or how your stuffed animal or your room décor represent you. These kinds of things are death to the applicant in terms of impressing admissions officers. Focus on your academic interest and SHOW, DON'T TELL how you pursued the topic and how it relates to your life.

### **ELIZA'S TIP (DIRECTOR, TTA WRITING PROGRAM and SENIOR PRIVATE COUNSELOR):**

*Are you passionate about a complex academic subject that's hard to explain to a layperson? Try telling your reader about the things you learned by completing a project or carrying out research in that field, allowing your reader to discover the subject along with you.*

**Q: The Common App essay feels overwhelming, is it the same as the 'personal essay' I've heard about?**

**A:** That is what the Common App main essay used to be called, but admissions officers don't really want to hear about your "personal life." They'd rather know how you think, if you have a love of learning, and what it is you will bring to one of their many majors.

**ELIZA'S TIP (DIRECTOR, TTA WRITING PROGRAM and SENIOR PRIVATE COUNSELOR):**

*If you're having trouble writing about your scholarly interest, try imagining yourself as the hero of a movie chronicling your work in that field. What's the narrative arc of your film? Is it a triumphant story about how your zeal and hard work produced great success? Is it, instead, about how you failed in your work, but ultimately learned from your mistakes? Is it a story about how you had to overcome challenges to pursue your goals? Consciously framing your scholarly experiences as a story will make it easier for you to turn your interests and achievements into a personal narrative.*



**Q: I applied ED to my top choice school and was deferred. What do I do now?**

**A:** For those who are deferred, don't take it personally—admissions is not personal and it's not always fair. Recruited athletes, for instance, don't have the same academic standards as a non-hooked student. Don't let a deferral notice be the final kiss of death for your dream school. It doesn't have to be. While it's clearly not the result you were hoping for, we have a proven action plan to increase your odds of [getting OFF the deferral list](#) and INTO your top college. You can also follow our [Deferral Action Plan](#) here and work with a senior counselor on your deferral plan in our Deferral Program. Lastly, while we want you to advocate for yourself, don't become an annoyance. You don't want to stalk the admissions office, so be mindful of your contact (keep it to one initial call, one letter, and one follow-up call).

**Q: What should I do if I'm waitlisted at my top choice school?**

**A:** If you were waitlisted, take a breath and plan a response! It's not the end of the world. Take heart and take action. We offer a [Waitlist Analysis Program](#) that includes a thorough analysis of your submitted essays and application, a personalized student report, and customized input and advice on how to get accepted from the waitlist.

**Q: I'm worried about the cost of tuition. Where can I find scholarships and learn more about financial aid?**

**A:** Do your research and be sure you have a plan in place on saving before college and of course, during college. This isn't only valuable advice in terms of paying for college; it's an overarching life lesson. There are many available grants and scholarships that are need-blind to help alleviate costs but you need to take the time to research and find ones appropriate to you. Examples and tips [here](#).

**Q: I was accepted Early Decision to my top choice school. What do I do now?**

**A:** Congratulations! Much of the hard work is behind you, but you aren't done just yet. First, remember to contact the other colleges to which you applied and withdraw your application, as per the binding agreement you made when you applied [ED](#) (remember, this differs from early action, which is non-binding). The remainder of your senior year remains a pivotal time for seniors because [colleges CAN change their minds](#). Now that you're IN you need to ensure that you stay IN by maintaining your grades and avoiding disciplinary action.

**MARIA'S TIP (TTA SENIOR PRIVATE COUNSELOR):** *Unfortunately, it really does happen; students whose grades drop precipitously from the records they presented at the time of admissions acceptance can see their admission rescinded. Students who get into serious disciplinary trouble (in or out of school) or cheat on a test or homework assignment will see their acceptance revoked. The admissions office will look at carefully at your final senior transcript and school report and disciplinary infractions (academic or conduct) will be reported.*

**Best of luck in the admissions process! Questions for us? [Please ask!](#)**