

5 Key Steps for College and Scholarship Applications

By: Nolan Hergert

This e-book is a collation of the tips and tricks that I learned when I was preparing and going through my senior year of high school. Please do not try and execute everything (*you will go mad trying*), but try to take some of the ideas into account as you approach your senior year. I encourage you to talk with your school counselor and check out the links at the end of the e-book for some more reading, as they provided a basis for this presentation.

A Few Facts:

- The baby boomer generation reached its height in 1990, marking 2008 as the peak of the number of high school seniors, crowding the college playing field for acceptances and financial aid. That's partially why the college and scholarship success game is getting so crazy, but some of these tips will help alleviate the process.
- Thanks to the internet, a typical student applies to more colleges than ever before. **1/5** of all college-bound seniors apply for **seven schools!**

Key Step #1: Find Your Passion

One of the key necessities for winning scholarships and garnering support from admissions officers is to **find your passion** and give key examples of it on display. Do you like to write? Consider taking up a leadership position on the newspaper staff or write an article on an issue affecting society and submit it to the local newspaper. Are you a sports or music guru that has some free time? Volunteer with local youth organizations (such as your local youth sports league, youth music group, etc.) and watch the future grow up right in front of you! Are you the next budding scientist or engineer? Create a science fair project, develop some code, or even volunteer with a middle school or elementary school program once a week. These should be personal goals for yourself to grow in reaching out to your community, but they do help show the depth of your extracurricular side and start to really add up.

If you're not totally sure yet, that's okay too. One method that helped me try out some different fields was to take as many **job shadows** as I could fit into my schedule. High school is one of the best times that you can try out different jobs and careers with no strings attached. For those of you in the Portland area, the Business Education Compact puts out a **Career Experience Database**¹ that lists every job shadow that they know of in the Portland area. Take a minute and just peruse what is available and then ask your counselor about any that you're interested in!

Also, don't be afraid to create your own job shadow. Dream of working at Microsoft? Does the morning news at KEX or KPTV pique your curiosity? The trick with arranging your own job shadow is to be tactfully **persistent**. Phone calls and voicemails are the best ways to start conversations, as you're not just another email address in someone's overflowing inbox. When you've established a relationship, then ask for the morning or afternoon that works best for your job shadow mentor. Remember, your mentor is giving up some of their time, so come with some ideas of what you'd like to

¹<http://www.businesseducationlinks.org/pls/pdxlinksp/login.html> Login with (High School) + (High School + 1) ex. (Century) + (Century1)

see (see how they program the Zune at Microsoft, watch a morning broadcast at KPTV, etc.) Really find out what makes the employees “tick” inside and see if it’s something you would like to do when you’ve grown up. When you’re persistent and courteous, you can get some of the coolest job shadows ever!

Key Step #2: Develop An Action Plan

“If you don’t know where you’re going, every road will get you nowhere.” –Henry Kissinger

Get a Good Education:

If you want to do well in college, try to take as many college-level courses in high school as possible. AP classes have the added benefit of a test at the end of the year that (provided you get a 4 or 5) will usually grant you credit at most universities. More selective colleges tend to favor only accepting 5's on AP tests, so be sure to check the requirements at each school you are considering. Running out of classes at school? Another option is to take further coursework at a Community College if your schedule allows it. Often there is a program set up so that the tuition is FREE (your tax dollars hard at work) and paid by your high school or school district, so **please** ask your counselor about it.

About the Tests:

AP's: Already mentioned, equivalent to college finals in high school; taken in May, ~\$80.

SAT's: The most popular admissions test. Figure on taking it a few times and check your prospective schools at CollegeBoard for average ranges of admitted students.

ACT's: Also a popular admissions test that adds a science component and splits up the sections.

Always take the Writing section, as most colleges request it.

SAT II's: Required for admission to many selective colleges, but not for many state schools (so you often don't hear about it). Usually need one science and one math and sometimes a writing course as well. What works well is taking a subject test in early May, particularly if the subject corresponds to an AP test that you have been preparing for. If this means taking the U.S. History Subject Test in May of your sophomore year, then go for it! It is much, much easier to do it this way.

Preparation: Take a few practice tests online to see where your weaknesses are. Then, buy the books that you feel are necessary and combine taking practice tests, analyzing your weaknesses, and studying those sections in order to get a better score. If you want to improve a particular score in a certain area, the summer is a great stress-free time to study on the bus or in the car.

Filling in Your Resume:

Extracurriculars:

The prevailing thought for high school students is that they must be involved in many activities in order to appeal to a college. Quite the opposite, colleges look for **depth, not breadth**, and would rather see you passionately involved in one activity than passively involved in many.

Develop Your Theme:

To this end, develop a central theme that conveys your talents, passions, and potential. Convey who you **are**, not just what you’ve done. Look up previous scholarship winners and analyze their winning entries for their activities and essays. The best way to learn how to apply for scholarships is to find out from the people who actually won them!

Utilize The Summer (Where “Free Time” is Overrated):

Don't get bored playing video games all summer! Get out and pursue a hobby, join a camp, or even volunteer. You'll get great ideas for essays and have some cool activities to put down on your application. In relative importance (ordered lowest to highest) for college applications, here are some ideas that I've come up with:

Organized Summer Camps and Courses:

- Boys/Girls State
- Oregon State SESEY Program
- Saturday Academy
- Portland Community College
- Self-Directed Learning

Volunteering:

- Technology—Free Geek (recycle and rebuild old computers for non-profits)
- Music—Teach private lessons, either paid or unpaid;
- Search for opportunities by keyword in your area: <http://www.allforgood.org/>

Pursuing Hobbies:

- Technology—Learn a new programming language or finish those cool projects that you've been waiting to try out. If you can apply them to a specific project or client, all the better!
- Science & Math—The summer is a great time to get started on a science fair project for the fall. If you want to place well in districts and even state, most students end up partnering up with a **mentor** in their area of study. Ask the science head at your high school to see if they can pair you up with someone, or even ask family friends. Also, if you need access to **scientific journals**, most high schools have access via school computers, although you might have to hunt to find the right link.

If you need some funding for your creative interests, just inform your parents that it could pay off in thousands down the road!

Jobs:

Getting a job throughout the summer is a big motivator for keeping yourself on task and pursuing your interests. Earning spending/college money is nice too!

Internships/Study Abroad:

The deadlines for these programs are usually in early spring, but they are well worth the application!

- [Saturday Academy's Apprenticeships in Science and Engineering](#)—Excellent program for high school sophomores and juniors interested in math, science, and engineering. It jump starts your relationships with professionals in your field and gives you the potential of landing the same or other research positions the summer after. I had a blast with this program, not just from the actual apprenticeship, but from meeting the other apprentices at the Mid-Summer Conference and the Symposium. Of all the Oregonians that I know at Carnegie Mellon (6), 3 of them I knew beforehand from ASE!
- [Bank of America Student Leaders](#)—A friend of mine went through this program, so this is another option that I know of for high school students.

- Other Sources: Google search for “high school <keyword> internship”; [Business Education Compact's high school internships page](#); Friend/Family contacts

Research:

Colleges:

Start looking at different colleges as soon as you can. This can usually be done online for free at CollegeBoard.com or PrincetonReview.com, and books can be found for free or cheap in your high school's counselor's office, the city library, or at a bookstore. If you want to buy a book, I recommend buying only books that give a written overview of a school, such as the Fiske Guide to Colleges, College Prowler, or Princeton Review.

Scholarships:

There is so much information on the web as far as finding scholarships that it makes my head spin! Here's the quick and dirty:

- Fastweb and other national search websites are usually **not** the place to search for scholarships unless you are above ordinary in a certain area, have a specific disability, or qualify for minority or disadvantaged scholarships. They typically only search through popular national scholarships, which have a much larger applicant pool and tend to have significant advertising budgets as well.
- Instead, you should focus your time on applying to as many **niche scholarships** as you can. One excellent place to start is in your local city and state, where the applicant pool is small and smaller scholarships can begin to add up.
- **Research the scholarship listings of other high schools in your area for any scholarships your high school might have missed.** No one school will have all of the information!
- Newsletters aggregate every piece of useful scholarship and college information and advice into one easy read. A few good ones:
 - [UCLA Scholarship Resource Center](#)—Has lots of information on databases for scholarships and releases a quarterly newsletter filled with tips
 - [Financial Aid Podcast](#)—An independent scholarship consultant releases a daily podcast with a transcript that talks about scholarship news plus other advice
 - [SAT Question of the Day](#)—Of course you want to know how many other college-bound students you beat out on that hard writing problem
 - Fastweb and CollegeBoard “Help” Sections—While their databases might be lacking, they do have a big archive of tips and tricks for scholarship and college applications

TAKE A BREAK!

You deserve it :)

***When your brain has sufficiently cooled
down, we've got the last half to go!***

Key Action Step #3: Write Those Applications (and do it well!)

Resume:

You'll probably end up using two different types of resumes:

Static “Laundry List”:

- This is the document that you brainstorm everything worth mentioning from your years in K-12, including:
 - High School, Current GPA, Honors/AP/IB Courses, and any pertinent test scores such as SAT, ACT, or the AP or IB tests
 - Extracurricular Activities
 - Community Service Activities (no matter how short)
 - Potential references
 - Personal interests and hobbies
 - Awards and Recognition
- List out the years you've been involved, an overview of the activity, and any leadership or significant roles you had a part in
- Whenever you have an application that asks for your participation in activities, you'll have a portfolio ready to go. Also use this to drive your scholarship search process, and use the various titles and keywords as search terms on search engines
- Secondly, you'll want to develop a solid one-page resume that you can easily email to any job shadow or college supervisor that is short and to the point (if you haven't already)

Media Resume:

- Making a media resume is an increasingly appealing option as a method of showing the extent of your involvement in an activity and adds a personal touch to your application. Two methods:
 - **Personal website or blog**—Use Google Pages, Blogger.com, etc.
 - **Hosted Website**—Nothing beats Zinch.com. It has a great interface for uploading your own recordings, paintings, pictures, and videos, and can present it all in a Facebook-like format. Additionally, it has tools for finding and getting recruitment from colleges and has its own scholarship search program.

Essays:

The evil “E” word that makes every senior's hair stand up on end! Eventually, you **will** have to do them for college and scholarship applications. Many essays are similar, so your preparation work will not be in vain. Here's a quick action plan:

- **Start Early.** Believe me, you will not want to attack any essay you have to write two nights before it is due. Masterpieces take time to develop. On the bus ride to your summer job, consider whipping out an essay prompt and brainstorming ideas.
- **Write an outline.** Don't expect the all the details to come out once your pen hits the page! Chunk out the main points that you want the selection committee to know about yourself, and then work from there. Essay introductions are also key, so consider using a unique beginning in order to distinguish yourself from other applicants right away.
- **Fill in the details.** Craft the details on each activity or idea towards the audience you are writing to. If you're writing towards a volunteering scholarship, the committee will not want to

know the lesson plans that you used or the days of the week that you met. Instead, write about the effect on the community and any ways in which the activity changed you personally. On the other hand, a science or engineering scholarship would be very interested in the specifics of your work, and an external website or exhibit would help to give them more information into your work.

- **Check for redundancy.** If there are two or three essays required for one application, try to avoid redundancy in your essays and focus on different activities for each essay. “outstanding accomplishment” and “obstacle overcome” **do not** mean the same thing, and try not to write about the same activity. Don’t have enough room to fit all of your information? Utilize teacher recommendations to focus on portions of your “package”, and then explain the other parts.
- **Edit early and often!**
 - English Teachers—Approach the one that you think will give you an honest critique of your work, usually this is an AP English teacher.
 - The NELA Center—A center in downtown Portland that offers free essay editing along with college help from some college counselors that were once admissions officers.
 - Parents—Besides for emotional support, your parents are your best ally in applying for colleges. **They know you the best!** If you’re having a difficult time with some essays, it’s perfectly fine to ask your parents for some brainstorming help.
 - Books—Read about how to write scholarship and college essays effectively. I used the Fiske guide to writing essays, but others might help too. They also give examples of good essays that you can learn from.

Key Action Step #4: Closing the Deal

Stay Updated:

Most students underestimate the usefulness of a college's admissions department. These people are paid to get you to want to come to their school, so you should convince them of that and use their resources:

- **Find Students Similar to You:** Email the admissions departments of the colleges you’re interested in and ask to strike up a conversation with one of the students. Provide an overview of your interests and where you’re from (especially for opposite coast schools), and the admissions department usually try their best to hook you up with someone. Once you have a contact, use this inside knowledge to your advantage in learning about the quirks of the school, their scholarship or financial aid programs, and any other information you might be curious about. Also, if you end up visiting the school (I highly recommend it...it gives you something fun to do when AP tests loom), get in contact with the person when you’re there and shoot the breeze over lunch, you’ll feel like you already know them!
- **Send Updates When Necessary:** Write a letter to the admissions department expressing your continued interest in their school and any recent accolades that you've received. While you may not see any immediate feedback, it can help to further distinguish you from other applicants.

The Ins and Outs of Financial Aid:

Grant/Scholarship Money at Different Schools (per year):

	Public In-State	Public Out-Of-State	Private College	Highly Selective College
High Income	\$0	\$0	\$15,000 merit	70+% of need
Middle Income	\$1-2,000	\$0	\$15-25,000 merit	70+% of need
Low Income	Varies greatly...depends on need and merit			70+% of need

- **Calculate your EFC**---Get an idea of how much college is going to cost your parents and how much loans you will end up taking. Highly selective colleges base their financial aid on your family need, which is the difference between the cost of the school and your Expected Family Contribution. College Board has an excellent EFC Estimator for this purpose. Start the money talks early. Do NOT sign yourself up for more debt than you can handle, no matter what schools you are accepted to.
- **Determine your eligibility for need-based grants and merit-based scholarships**—If you are a family with higher need, then shooting for a higher-level school (with a big endowment) that will help with college costs isn't such a bad idea. If you want to shoot for merit scholarships, then maybe a school where you are in the top percentage of students will want to give you more money than an elite college. If you are not low-income or a minority student, do not count on receiving much grant aid from a state school. This is, of course, subject to much variation, so make sure you cover your bases and know what to expect.
- **Search for Departmental Scholarship Programs**—Thanks to some advice from a student at the University of Washington, I found out that the Honors Program gives out \$15,000 Mary Gates scholarships to the top incoming students (but for only those that apply). Unfortunately, I didn't get the scholarship, but the information was valuable. Do your research on Google, maybe using terms “carnegie mellon engineering scholarship” or “george fox literature scholarship” to focus in on the department's web page. Often these have separate applications to fill out, but once you've completed it, you're that much closer to an obscure scholarship that few people will apply for.
- **Key Misconceptions**---
 - **\$40,000! That's my yearly income!**
 - If you make \$40,000 a year, then you actually have a pretty good chance of a private college being able to foot most of the bill for you. This varies for different situations, but this is true for most families.
 - **Public Out-Of-State Colleges Don't Give Aid**
 - In most cases, yes. However, there are some ways that you can get around this.
 - Research for college and departmental scholarships for out-of-state students using Google. Often, these applications aren't as well-publicized as some of their other programs, but they can help somewhat (if you get them). Don't depend on them, however...always have a backup or two!
 - Another option is region-wide programs that allow students to go to schools in another region at a significantly reduced cost. In the Western Undergraduate Exchange Program (WUE), out-of-state students pay 150% of the normal in-state

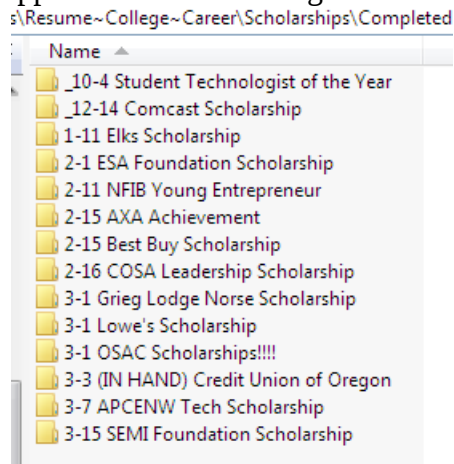
price, which is a significant discount if your heart is on an out-of-state school.

Key Tip #5: Stay Efficient and Organized

The Top 5:

1) Have a Filing System

- Keep a Digital File on a Flash Drive
 - **Buy One**—Your flash drive will become your digital, quickly-searchable, and quite compact “second brain”, remembering everything you look at and keeping copious notes of whatever you think of. It’s a very cheap \$20 investment for keeping your deadlines and applications organized.
 - **Organize It**—Your flash drive should stay organized. The less time you spend searching for applications is more time you get to spend actually working on them. Attempt to put every file inside a folder, don’t leave any orphans without a place to go. For scholarship and college applications, name the folder based on the date that it is due. This allows you to see what applications are due without opening every single application and checking the date.



- **Back it Up**—Backing up the thousands of dollars worth of scholarships you’ll eventually find will be a necessity---you will not be happy camper later if you happen to leave your flash drive in a computer and someone takes it. The manual Copy+Paste method works for most people but takes really long (i.e. Do you want to overwrite ALL of your files??) , so I prefer to use an automated backup software that quickly scans your folders and saves off only the updated files, such as Microsoft’s SyncToy 2.0, or an online service such as Dropbox.
 - Keep Hard Copies in a File Cabinet
 - Other than for school assignments and important tests, I used a file cabinet mainly for keeping copies of sent scholarship applications and my main college applications.
- #### 2) Keep Copies of Everything
- **Print out PDF's**—When you find a scholarship page or an article you want to keep, saving the page to your computer will be much easier than printing out every article and hoping you’ll be able to find it again thumbing through your file cabinet. This can be in a variety of ways, but one way that I used was to print out the scholarship page or college information page using free PDF “printing” software, such as CutePDF. This way, you can check on your applications even when you aren’t online and you can easily print them out once

deadlines arrive. Each of these printouts go into a corresponding folder on your flash drive.

3) Get A Calendar

- A weekly notebook-type calendar works great for week-to-week to-do lists. Many high schools have school-customized ones available for purchase or even for free. Take advantage of the offer and get your school-related dates pre-entered in your notebook.
- A computer-based calendar will be invaluable for reminder emails and long-term planning. Say you have a deadline in three weeks for a scholarship but you want to make sure that you have a rough draft of the essay done next week. Set your calendar client to remind you in a week of the date as another line of defense (along with having it in your notebook). Many calendar services are built into your online email service (Google Calendar even sends you a text message), or the calendar software in Outlook for Windows or iCal for Mac work great also.

4) Clean Up Your Profile

- Get an email such as (FirstName.LastName@Webserver.com) solely for scholarship and college correspondence. There are many free email services out there, including Google, Yahoo, MSN, and others. Offending names such as SexyMama666 tend not to bode well with scholarship or college reviewing committees.
- Remove any inappropriate content from your “web presence”. Search your name on Google and see what conversations or pictures come up for **you**. You never know whether a program administrator will double-check and see how you present yourself online.

5) Apply For As Many Scholarships As Possible

- Don't put all your work into just one or two scholarships. Instead, try to apply for as many as you can in order to improve your odds. It will take a lot of work to get the first few down, but after that they get easier and easier.
- Consider each application possible of getting money—If you spend two hours on one scholarship that's worth \$1,000 and you win it, then you will have worked for \$500 per hour. That's a lot better than minimum wage!

Once you start following these steps, you're going to start **developing a rhythm**. The tools and skills that you develop with producing one application will carry on to the next application, and the next, and so on. Applications become easier and easier to complete after you've finished the first few. After a while it becomes a game—you eagerly await the next scholarship ready for the chance to win some more college cash!

Thanks for Reading!

Further Sources of Information:

- Fiske Guides—Fiske’s Guide To Colleges, Guide To Getting Into The Right College
- Ben Kaplan’s Book—How to Go To College (Almost) For Free
- [ScholarGator](#)—a pet project of mine that scrapes local high school scholarship databases and aggregates them onto one website. Want to help or add new information? *Email me!*

Key Blogs That I Recommend:

Chris Penn ([The Financial Aid Podcast](#)): Excellent resource for up-to-date scholarship and financial aid information. I also highly recommend his [e-books](#) as well.

Cal Newport ([Study Hacks Blog](#)): Great tips for managing your first few years in college. Posts new articles a few times a week.

Most of these books (and lots of others) can be found for **free** at your school’s counseling center. The people are nice, there’s a ton of books, and it’s often pretty quiet in there too. A lot more books are likely at the public library, and the library system has an online database that lets you get books from all over the your region delivered to your home library. If they don’t have it, Barnes and Noble has an awesome bookshelf of college material along with comfy chairs. Enjoy!

Glaring Errors? Unanswered questions? Success Stories?

Send me feedback at [nolan\[at\]nolanhergert.com](mailto:nolan[at]nolanhergert.com)

*Help me use
my old books!
If you want to
borrow one,
shoot me an
email*

