

College Readiness Curriculum

Lesson 7

College Applications and Admissions Essays

Lesson Overview:

Students will continue the College Readiness Curriculum
by completing the following steps:

- 1) Research how to apply to each school or program in their personal lists
- 2) Organize their college application materials and information into a folder
- 3) Write and receive feedback on an admissions essay (optional)

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College Readiness

Lesson 7 – College Applications

Lesson Overview:

During this lesson you will guide students to research and organize information about how to apply to each school on their personal lists. You will also offer guidance and feedback to students who choose to write a sample admissions essay.

Core Concepts:

- The steps of the application process may vary from one school to another.
- Organizing your college application materials and information will help ensure that you do not miss any steps.
- Writing and getting feedback on a sample admissions essay will help you to write the best and most appropriate essays you can.

Lesson Objectives:

In this lesson, students will:

- Determine what steps they must complete in order to fully apply to each university, college, or academic program on their final lists.
- Create a folder (digital or otherwise) with a cover sheet and checklist to organize their college application materials and process.
- *Optional* - Write and receive feedback on an admissions essay.

Materials Needed:

- [College Application Slideshow \(with optional Admissions Essay Slideshow\)](#)
- Worksheet 1: Application Coversheets
- Worksheet 2: College Admissions Checklists
- Worksheet 3: Essay/Personal Statement Outline

Supplemental Videos:

- [Admissions Essays and Personal essays](#)
- [Overview of College Applications](#)

Step 1: Activate Background Knowledge

Ask whether anyone in class has already completed a college application, or has older siblings or friends who have done so. Invite volunteers to share what they know about the process. How many steps can they identify? What kind of information did the application form ask for? Which aspects of the process did they or their family and friends find particularly challenging? You might also share your own experiences applying to post-secondary school.

Step 2: Present the College Application Slideshow

As always, you may want to add, delete, or edit slides according to what your students need to know.

[Slide1]

Applying to Post-secondary Schools

Applying to post-secondary schools can take a bit of time and planning, so it is important to get organized early in your final year of high school. If you are considering applying early decision* or to a university outside of your home country, you may need to get started even earlier. In fact, if you are considering schools outside of your home country, give yourself lots of time to familiarize yourself with the application process in the other country. Your admissions process may be completely different from the process that your classmates will complete.

If you are not in your final year of high school, it may be helpful to look ahead and begin reviewing application forms and requirements so that you know what to expect. However, be aware that application requirements can change from year to year.

[Sidebar] *Early Decision versus Early Action: Pay close attention to the details about early application options, especially in the US. Generally early decision applicants must agree to attend the school if they are accepted. Early action applications, however, are non-binding. The benefit of both early options is that students may know that they have been accepted into their first choice school early and may not need to apply to additional schools.

Pause to Ask: Is everyone familiar with "Early Decision" and "Early Action"? Clarify as necessary. If some students have already completed Early Decision or Early Action applications, invite them to briefly share their experiences.

[Slide 2]

Understand Application Requirements

Even within one country, application forms, procedures, and deadlines can vary from school to school. It is important to familiarize yourself with the application requirements for each school to

which you plan to apply. Visit the Admissions section of the school's website. If you are researching a university or other large school, make sure that you are looking at information relevant to the specific college or program that interests you. Undergraduate applications can be different from graduate applications at the same university. Some programs or courses may have specific requirements, as well. Students applying from other countries may have additional requirements such as language testing.

Pause to Discuss: If your students are very new to this process, you may want to display the website of a college or university and guide them through the process of locating the Admissions section and examining the requirements.

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Application Deadlines

When you research application requirements for post-secondary schools, here are some of the details you will need to determine important deadlines:

- Pay attention to deadlines for different parts of the application and whether there is also a deadline for registering for an admissions exam.
- In some countries, such as China and India, students may need to focus on registration deadlines for entrance exams and then note the deadline for presenting their preferred universities/programs once the exam results have been released.
- In some countries, applications are accepted over several months, but spaces may be limited to applicants who apply later in the process.
- Some US universities may offer early action or early decision application deadlines that are earlier than the regular admissions deadlines.

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How to Apply

As with so many other aspects of the post-secondary school application process, the steps and details can vary tremendously. As you research your options and organize your application process, consider the following:

- Online or paper? Can some portions of the application be submitted online, while other portions should be submitted on paper? If you will need to mail applications, consider how long it will take for your application to arrive at the school, and note when you will need to mail it for it to arrive by the application deadline.
- Directly or through a centralized service? UK universities require that students apply through a centralized service called the UCAS, whereas schools in Mexico and the US require students to submit applications directly to the individual university or college. In

Australia, whether you apply through a centralized service may depend upon the kind of degree or program for which you are applying.

- Where to find the application? Will you need to request an application or download it from the school website? Can you use a common application? More than 600 colleges and universities in the US and even some from other countries accept what is now known as the [Common Application](http://www.commonapp.org/). In the UK you can complete the UCAS application once to apply to 5 different universities or 5 different courses at one university.

*Pause to Discuss: The Common Application has become so ... well ...common that some of your students surely will use it. You may want to display the application and briefly walk students through it, answering any questions they have: <http://www.commonapp.org/>
[You will need to sign up for an account to open the application itself.]*

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Additional Admissions Requirements and Options

Even if the university accepts a common application, you may need to provide additional information or requirements.

- Admissions Exams – In some countries universities go entirely by exam scores to determine admissions. In other countries and schools, exam scores may play a very large role in determining admissions or in calculating entry scores that determine admissions. Make sure that you understand which exams you need to take, how and when to register for the exams, when to take the exams, and how the exam scores will reach the universities. In some cases, you may need to identify the universities where you wish for official scores to be sent.

If you have not already done so, add the dates associated with any admissions exams you must take to your Lesson 1 Timeline.

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Additional Admissions Requirements and Options

Even if the university accepts a common application, you may need to provide additional information or requirements.

- Transcripts – While you may need to include your grades or other secondary school records in an application, you are also likely to need to include an official secondary school transcript. Make sure that you know how long it will take for your secondary school to process your request, whether they will send the transcript directly to the school or to you, and whether there will be a cost associated with the request.

Pause to Ask: Has anyone requested a transcript from our school? Invite a student who has done so to share details of the process with the class.

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Additional Admissions Requirements and Options

Even if the university accepts a common application, you may need to provide additional information or requirements.

- Essays/Personal Statement – Some universities – especially those in the US, Canada, and the UK – request a personal statement and/or one or more essays as part of the application. If you will need to write a personal statement or essay, you are encouraged to complete the second part of this lesson and submit your draft essay for review to your teacher and/or other advisors and members of your College Readiness Team. Essays and personal statements can be very important, especially when applying to competitive US universities that receive many more qualified applicants than they can admit.

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Additional Admissions Requirements and Options

Even if the university accepts a common application, you may need to provide additional information or requirements.

- Interviews – Admissions interviews are most common in the US, and are encouraged by many US universities, but required by only a few. If an interview is required or recommended, you will want to determine its purpose. Some interviews are meant to provide information to the student, while others are used to evaluate the student as part of the admissions decision. Optional interviews are an excellent opportunity for you to show sincere interest in attending a school and to explain why you would make a great addition to their campus. If you have a weakness in another part of your application, an interview is a great way to show your strengths.

Pause to Discuss: Interviews are nerve-wracking experiences for many students (and adults, too!). To help students begin informal preparation for college interviews, encourage several volunteers to supply the following:

- a question you would want to ask interviewers about the school
- a piece of information about yourself that you would want to share with interviewers

Also share interview ideas and tips from your own experiences, and invite any students who have already participated in college interviews to share theirs.

If time permits, you might even have partners do a quick roleplay, taking turns asking and answering one or two interview questions per partner.

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Additional Admissions Requirements and Options

Even if the university accepts a common application, you may need to provide additional information or requirements.

- Letters of Recommendation – It is common in the US (though not elsewhere) for undergraduate programs to require letters of recommendation. If you need letters of recommendation, make sure that you know whom to ask (teachers, coaches, guidance counselors, etc.). Try to choose people who know you well and can speak to your strengths as a student and as a person. Some letter writers may ask you to provide a list of the strengths and accomplishments you'd like them to write about. Be sure to ask for recommendations well in advance of deadlines so that letter writers have plenty of time to fit you into their schedule and write you a truly great letter. Chat with your teacher or a guidance counselor if you need additional tips on requesting letters of recommendation.

Step 3: Create a College Admissions Checklist (30 minutes)

When students have familiarized themselves with the college applications processes they need to complete, distribute the College Admissions Checklist and ask students to complete it during class or as homework. Point out that students may need to delete or add items to customize the checklist for the specific schools to which they are applying. Students may want to create an individual checklist for each school, or one master checklist that includes all of their to-do items for the entire process of applying to schools.

Step 4: Create College Admissions Folders

Explain to students that keeping track of college applications requires organization, especially if they are applying to several schools. To help students stay organized, distribute the College Application coversheet and suggest that students set up a digital or paper folder for each school. Post the following list of items for students to include in each folder:

- A coversheet listing the school's name, its application deadline, and other basic requirements

- A copy of the checklist from Step 3
- An application form (if the application will be submitted by mail)
- A completed essay/personal statement (if required)
- Copies of letters of recommendation (if required and if the letter writer is comfortable with the student reading the letter)
- A copy of the student's transcript

You may want to guide students through the process of completing their first folders, then have them complete their remaining folders outside of class.

As students complete their checklists and folders, set aside a few minutes to meet with each student to review his or her materials. Respond to questions and concerns, and use the following points to guide discussion:

- Do you recommend that students add any steps to their checklists?
- Can you share tips—perhaps from personal experience—about completing the college applications process efficiently and successfully?
- Do students need assistance organizing their materials in a logical, orderly way?

Step 5 (optional): Activate Background Knowledge about College Essays and Personal Statements

Ask whether anyone in class has written a college admissions essay/personal statement or a similar piece of writing, or has read someone else's essay. Ask, *What (if there was one) was the writing prompt? What did you/your friend or family member write about?*

If your students are new to the concept of the college essay, you may want to look up sample prompts online and share a few with students, so they have an idea of what to expect.

Step 6 (optional): Begin the College Admissions Essays Slideshow

As always, you may want to add, delete, or edit slides according to your students' needs.

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Admissions Essays (or Personal Statements)

Not all schools and programs require an admissions essay or personal statement. But don't be upset if your choices do! Writing an essay or personal statement is an opportunity for you to expand on the unique contributions you can make if admitted.

When applying directly to a specific course or program within a university (as is common in the UK and Australia, for example) the personal statement allows you to expand upon your interests and experience related to the course material. When applying to the university or college itself (as is common in the US), the personal statement or essay lets you share your personality, point of

view, and what you might add to a diverse and thriving campus culture. In both cases, the essay/statement is a way to highlight your writing skills.

With a few pointers and some practice, writing your essay can become less intimidating. So even if you have not yet begun applying to schools, you may find it helpful to start working on an essay.

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What to Write About

Some schools provide very specific writing prompts, others provide more general prompts, and some provide no prompt at all. Depending upon the prompt, you may know exactly what you want or need to write about or you might need to brainstorm. Even writing a personal statement requires deciding what – exactly – about yourself you will share.

If you are applying to a specific course/program, rather than a general university, you will want to connect your personal statement very closely to the course materials. It is highly likely that your personal statement will be read by faculty members looking for students who will excel in their subject matter.

If you are applying to a university or college, particularly in the US, the primary audience for your admissions essays will be admissions officers who are looking for a wide variety of qualified students to build a diverse and interesting student body. You will want to consider how you can contribute.

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Tips for choosing a Personal Statement topic for most US college applications

If a specific prompt is not provided, and you are not sure what to write about, try asking yourself exploratory questions such as:

- What do I want in my life?
- What adjectives best describe me, and why?
- What are my greatest achievements?
- What are my biggest failures?
- How do I expect post-secondary school to change me?
- What fascinates me?
- What are the greatest challenges I have faced?
- Which two or three experiences in my life are the most memorable?

From your lists of ideas, choose a topic that conveys who you are and what your personality is like. Be sure to choose something that you can write meaningfully about within the word limit specified in the admissions requirements.

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Preventing Mistakes

Regardless of where you are applying, there are a few mistakes you will want to avoid in writing admissions essays and personal statements. Try to avoid:

- Choosing a topic that is too broad. Keep your essay focused and concise. Avoid general topics that might require you to cover too much information. Stay within the word limits.
- Writing about controversial topics. Your essay is generally not a great place to promote political views, religious beliefs, or other controversial agendas. Nor is it advisable to write about something illegal or potentially unethical.
- Using gimmicks. Unless you are very sure of your abilities (and people such as your mentors and guidance counselors agree with you), it is probably not a good idea to write a joke essay or one that is outside of the essay genre, such as a rhyming couplet or free verse.
- Lying. Do not invent a fictional event or experience to write about. Stick to the truth!

Pause to Discuss: Invite a few volunteers to generate their own self-questions and topic ideas for essay topics. Briefly discuss why each idea is (or is not) appropriate.

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Optional Activity–Planning Your Essay (30 minutes)

While there are some exceptions to the rule, it usually works well to structure your essay as follows:

- Begin with an engaging first paragraph that introduces your topic and states your thesis, main point, or key idea.
- Follow the first paragraph with at least three body paragraphs that support and/or elaborate upon the topic or thesis.
- Finally, finish with a strong concluding paragraph that refers back to your introduction and restates your thesis.

Step 7 (optional): Students Outline Their College Essays

Before students begin writing essays, ask them organize their ideas, information, and examples into an outline that briefly notes what they will cover in each paragraph.

When students have completed their outlines, meet briefly with each student to review and provide feedback on the outline. They may also wish to discuss the outlines with members of their College Readiness Teams. Have students revise their outlines according to the feedback they receive.

Step 8: Continue the College Admissions Essay Slideshow

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Essay Writing Pointers

When you are satisfied with your outline, write your first draft. Let your ideas flow. Get everything you want to say down on paper first, and worry about revising and polishing the essay later. Most experts agree that you should write at least three drafts of your essay to perfect it, so you'll have plenty of opportunities to revise and refine.

DO

- Stay focused. Stick to the outline you created.
- Keep it personal. Don't just state that climbing Mount Everest is a valuable learning experience. Explain why it was a valuable learning experience for *you*.
- Show instead of tell. Reveal your personality through examples and anecdotes rather than simply through statements. A story about the volunteer work you do at a local nursing home will be more persuasive than just stating that you're compassionate and caring.
- Use vivid verbs. Describe actions precisely. For example, *stroll, amble, waddle, rush, bolt, barrel, and dash*, create more vivid mental pictures than *walk* or *run*.
- Write in your own voice. Your essay should sound like you wrote it. Avoid clichés, jargon, and overly formal language.

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Essay Writing Pointers

DO NOT

- Get off topic. Exclude ideas and information that do not support your thesis.
- Ramble or use more words than necessary to express your ideas.
- Embellish your vocabulary. There is no need to use big words, when shorter, simpler words will suffice.
- Make excuses. Your essay is not the place to apologize for or explain poor grades or test scores, or other possible obstacles to admission.
- Be afraid to start over. If your idea is not working, try again!

- Use specific university names, if you are submitting the same essay to several universities through a centralized service.
- Use the wrong university name. If you are using the same basic essay for several applications, be sure to check for university-specific references and change them to suit the specific application.
- Worry about bragging. A personal statement or essay may feel like you are telling someone how wonderful or great you are. If you are a person who tends to feel like talking about yourself is bragging, or if you come from a culture that places great value on humility, you may feel uncomfortable writing too much about yourself. Do it anyway. Admissions officers and program officers do not know you, and your essay/statement is one of the few ways they have to learn about you and why they should choose *you* over another candidate. Make sure they know why to choose *you*!

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A Note on Accepting Feedback and Constructive Criticism

Receiving criticism isn't always easy. If you have spent a lot of time on your essay, criticism can feel hurtful – even if it actually would make your essay better. Before reading receiving feedback from your teacher, guidance counselor, school writing center, or other advisors, keep a few things in mind:

- Assume that the reviewer's intentions are good. You may not like the feedback, but the other person gave it because they thought it would be helpful and would make your essay even better. They are on your side!
- Considering outside points of view can help us to get to the best and highest version of our work. If a comment surprises you, try to think about your essay from the viewpoint of someone who does not know you well. *Do they just need more information or a better explanation? Or have they brought up something that you hadn't thought about because of your own unique point of view?*
- You do not have to take every piece of advice. If the advice concerns your spelling or grammar, you probably want to take it. On the other hand, if you feel that the way you have said something or the information that you have included is the best way to say something and the best information to include, you can stick with your original version.
- If you don't understand the feedback, you can ask questions.

Step 9 (optional): Draft an Essay
(30-90 minutes)

Remind students to refer to their outlines, outline feedback, and the slideshow as they write first drafts of their essays. Most likely, you will want students to complete all or most of this assignment outside class, especially if only some students are participating.

When students have submitted their drafts, meet briefly with each student to discuss the draft. Use the following points to guide discussion.

- Is the essay interesting? Will it grab the attention of the intended audience (admissions officer or faculty)?
- Does it reveal the student's unique personality and experiences?
- Does the essay sound like the students wrote it? Is her/his personal voice evident?
- Is the personal statement complete? Are there other experiences the student could highlight to show your strength in the course subject?

RESOURCES

Share these resources for further information about the college application process.

General Resources

- [University Admissions Centre](#) (Australia)
- [UCAS](#) (UK)
- [Common Application](#) (US)
- [Tips for Preparing Your College Application](#) (US focus)
- [How to Get a Great Letter of Recommendation](#)
- [Early Decision and Early Action](#) (US focus)

Interviews

- [College Interviews: Practice Questions and Strategies](#)
- [5 TED Talks to Watch Before Your Next Interview](#)

Essays and Personal Statements

- [Crafting an Unforgettable College Essay](#)
- [College Application Essays](#)
- [10 Tips for Writing the College Application Essay](#)
- [Answer 3 Questions to Write Your Personal Essay for a US College](#) – especially helpful for students outside of the US
- [Application Essay Writing: Structure and Outline](#)
- [Writing a UCAS Undergraduate Personal Statement.](#)
- [Preparing Your Personal Statement](#) (mind map)
- [Personal Statement Worksheet](#)
- [6 Tips for Writing Great Personal Statements](#)