

The Complete Grade-by-Grade College Planning Checklist

A calm, honest roadmap from freshman year through college decision day — written for parents who want their teen on track without the panic.

01**9TH GRADE**

Build the Foundation

Freshman year is about exploration and building strong habits. You do not need to have your entire future figured out — you just need to start well. Focus on your GPA from day one, because it is cumulative and much harder to raise later than to maintain.

FRESHMAN YEAR CHECKLIST

- ☐ Set up a study routine and track your grades from the first week
- ☐ Join 2–4 extracurricular activities you genuinely enjoy
- ☐ Start a simple spreadsheet or folder to save awards, certificates, and activity records
- ☐ Attend your school's college and career information sessions
- ☐ Take a personality or major–fit quiz for early direction
- ☐ Read at least one book or article each month outside of school assignments
- ☐ Talk to your school counselor about four-year course planning

02**10TH GRADE**

Deepen Your Interests

Sophomore year is when exploration turns into focus. You should be narrowing your activity list, stepping into leadership roles, and starting to think more seriously about the intersection of your interests, skills, and potential career paths.

SOPHOMORE YEAR CHECKLIST

- ☐ Take the PSAT and review your score report
- ☐ Enroll in at least one AP, IB, honors, or dual-enrollment course
- ☐ Take on a leadership role in one extracurricular activity
- ☐ Begin light SAT or ACT prep (15–20 minutes daily)
- ☐ Attend a college fair or campus visit if possible
- ☐ Research 5–10 colleges you find interesting and start a comparison spreadsheet
- ☐ Shadow a professional or explore a summer internship
- ☐ Retake the MajorMatch quiz to see how your interests have evolved
- ☐ Read about whether your major matters for your career goals

03**11TH GRADE**

The Most Important Year

Junior year is when everything accelerates. This is the year colleges look at most closely — your grades, course rigor, test scores, and extracurricular depth all matter enormously. It is also when you will make critical decisions about where to apply and what to study.

JUNIOR YEAR CHECKLIST

- ☐ Take the SAT or ACT (register by late fall for a spring test date)
- ☐ Take the PSAT/NMSQT in October for National Merit Scholarship consideration
- ☐ Finalize your college list: 3–4 reach, 3–4 target, 2–3 safety schools
- ☐ Visit or virtually tour your top 5 colleges
- ☐ Ask two teachers and one counselor for letters of recommendation before summer
- ☐ Take the MajorMatch quiz and research your top 3 major results in depth
- ☐ Start brainstorming your Common App personal essay over the summer
- ☐ Research scholarships with low competition
- ☐ Apply for summer programs, internships, or research opportunities
- ☐ Begin drafting your activities list with descriptions and hours



Execute and Decide

Senior year is about execution. The exploring is done — now you need to write excellent essays, submit polished applications, apply for every scholarship you qualify for, and make the biggest financial decision of your young life with clear eyes.

SENIOR YEAR CHECKLIST

- ☐ Run a Net Present Value calculation on your final school-and-major combination before sending the deposit (use the worksheet in the 2026 Major ROI Report)
- ☐ Finalize and submit all college applications before their deadlines
- ☐ Submit the FAFSA on October 1 and the CSS Profile if required
- ☐ Apply to at least 10–15 scholarships (local, national, and niche)
- ☐ Retake the SAT or ACT in the fall if you want to improve your score
- ☐ Maintain your grades — colleges can rescind offers for a senior slide
- ☐ Compare financial aid offers using net cost, not sticker price
- ☐ Visit or revisit your top 2–3 schools during admitted student days
- ☐ Submit your enrollment deposit by May 1
- ☐ Send final transcripts to your chosen school
- ☐ Research your intended major's curriculum at your chosen college
- ☐ Connect with your future roommate and join incoming class groups

Full checklist with details for each year: majormatch.us/checklist/

When it is time to pick a major, take the MajorMatch assessment: majormatch.us/quiz/

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