

## Avoid These Big College Application Mistakes

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Applying to college can be a stressful process, but being aware of what mistakes to avoid can help ease the burden for students.

What are some mistakes that drive [college](#) admissions staffers crazy – and sometimes send an application to the rejection pile? U.S. News asked pros from around the country to weigh in on what they'd prefer applicants not do. Here are some of the highlights.

### Don't Forget to Read Directions

Experts say students should pay close attention to what schools are asking for on the application. Simply put, read and heed the directions.

"In some instances, students aren't filling out all the data on the application. They're leaving blanks, so they're not necessarily answering all the questions," says Mike Perry, director of undergraduate admission at [Florida Institute of Technology](#).

Those blanks make for an incomplete application, Perry says, leaving colleges with only a partial picture of the applicant. He also urges students to fill out information that may be listed as optional because if a college asks for that information, it's considered helpful.

"Most colleges and universities put it on there because they want the information to help them make an informed decision. It's important to pay attention to detail and fill out all the stuff that's being requested from the college or university," Perry says.

### Don't Let Parents Take the Lead

Admissions officials say [parents should be actively engaged](#) in the college application process, but that comes with limits. Parents shouldn't be filling out the application, writing the student's essay or taking control of communication with school officials.

"I think being an advocate for the student is the right role for the parent to play," says Sarah Richardson, assistant vice provost for enrollment management and director of admissions and scholarships at [Creighton University](#) in Nebraska.

She suggests parents provide guidance and support, and help students keep track of application deadlines and [look for scholarships](#).

And while parental advocacy is beneficial, schools also want to see students campaign for themselves.

"If a student really wants to stand out in the process, they should advocate for themselves rather than having mom or dad call or email on their behalf," Eric Nichols, vice president for enrollment management at [Loyola University Maryland](#), wrote in an email.

## **Don't Turn in a Lengthy Resume**

This rule even rings true for professionals, who are advised to keep a resume to two pages or less.

"Respectfully, a 17-year-old student should not have or submit a three-page resume," Leigh Weisenburger, dean of admission and financial aid at [Bates College](#) in Maine, wrote in an email.

She adds that while guidance counselors encourage students to write a resume as an organizational step, "admission officers first need and want students to fill out the application correctly and completely."

Regardless of the extracurricular activities a student racked up in high school, experts advise applicants keep their [resume](#) to one page.

"As we're processing all of these applications, I am reminded how far ahead the students are who simply give us what we ask for – nothing less and definitely nothing more," Thyra Briggs, vice president for admission and financial aid at [Harvey Mudd College](#) in California, wrote in an email.

## **Don't Submit Applications or Essays Without Proofreading**

Spellcheck can be a valuable tool, but it's no substitute for thoroughly proofreading application materials.

"We still see far too many applications where the student has not necessarily taken the time to do a sufficient job of proofreading and sort of relied upon spellcheck," says Walter Caffey, vice president for enrollment and dean of admission and student aid at [Wheaton College](#) in Massachusetts.

Students should proofread application materials and apply the same rigor as they would to academic work.

"While a typo here or there won't necessarily eliminate a student from consideration, it certainly won't help," says Kelly A. Walter, associate vice president for enrollment and dean of admissions at [Boston University](#).

But don't forget the big picture, says Ethan Sawyer, also known as the College Essay Guy.

"I encourage students to focus on the WHAT (i.e. the content) first... then think about the HOW (i.e. the structure)... the details (i.e. proofreading and grammar) are important, but should come later in the process," Sawyer wrote in an email.

## **Don't Wait Until the Last Minute to Apply**

About half of the applications to Boston University come in the last 48 hours of the deadline, Walter says.

Other admissions officials noted similar trends. For some, that is cause for concern and makes them question the [student's interest](#).

"You have to stop and think to yourself, just how interested is the student in your institution if the application arrives on your doorstep right at the deadline?" Caffey says.

Students should also know the deadlines for various application plans, such as early action, [early decision](#) and regular decision.

Nichols notes that it's now common for schools to have multiple options with varying deadlines.

"This all leads to an increasing need to pay attention to the individual deadlines of the schools students are interested in," he says.

## **Don't Repeat Information Throughout the Application**

Sawyer suggests that students check for repetition by conducting a "values scan."

That means reading through application materials to see which values, or themes, come up often. This will help applicants identify what they've emphasized, what's missing and what can be worked in.

"If one value (say, hard work) is coming up in every single part of the application ([transcript](#), personal statement, supplemental essays), it could be a sign that there's room for more variety (i.e. opportunities to show other values like humor, love of the environment, etc.)," Sawyer says.

"The personal statement should demonstrate a range of values rather than repeat information" found elsewhere, he adds.

## **Don't Give Colleges Cookie-Cutter Application Materials**

A seasoned college admissions official will have read thousands of essays and can tell when a student is using a canned topic.

"We want students to be original. We want them to be themselves. They don't need to take an idea from someone else to write their [application essay](#)," Walter says.

"It's hard to know what colleges want ... it's like trying to wear something to the party that everyone will like," Sawyer says.

He urges students to self-reflect. "Instead of starting from 'them' (outside focus) I encourage students to start from 'you' (inside focus)."

That self-reflection can help students [present themselves](#) more fully and authentically to colleges.

"When students take the time to articulate some self-reflection, which can highlight growth and maturity, I'm assuming most colleges find that appealing," Caffey says. "And it helps to paint a more accurate picture of what that student's individual journey has been."

## **Don't Overdo Extracurricular Activities to Impress Colleges**

College admissions officials like to see engaged students, but that doesn't mean joining clubs just to pad a high school resume.

Briggs notes that recent efforts in the admissions world have encouraged professionals to focus less "on students racking up accomplishments, activities or [AP classes](#) and more on how they impact their community and their own mental wellness."

Students also shouldn't exaggerate their activities or misrepresent themselves.

"If something is discovered that the student, or whoever submitted the application, is purposely falsifying that information, that absolutely puts an application on the bottom of the pile or may instantly render a denied admission decision," Perry says.

The "[Varsity Blues admissions scandal](#)" of 2019 represented the extreme end of such behavior with college consultants, coaches, parents and even some students

conspiring to cheat and lie about student activities to enhance the odds of admission. The legal fallout is ongoing and has resulted in arrests and convictions for some involved in the scheme – and expulsions for some students caught up in the highly publicized ordeal.

## **Don't Forget to Check Curriculum Requirements**

All students should check curriculum requirements and take the corresponding high school classes to help get into their preferred program. For example, students seeking admission to [engineering programs](#) are probably going to need to take physics and calculus in high school.

"Many students are frankly undecided when they're applying to college," Walter says. "So trying to match what the requirements are in high school with the requirements and expectations at colleges is actually quite a challenge."

Students can find program requirements on college websites, which vary somewhat by institution. If that information is not readily available on the school's website, students should consider directing curriculum questions to admissions officers.

## **Don't Overthink the Admissions Process**

Admissions pros say that many families think getting into a good school requires some type of insider knowledge, but that's not so.

"I think that there's a lot of attention paid to how to get into [highly selective institutions](#), and those schools are pretty small in number in comparison to the opportunities available to students out there," Richardson says.

Some schools have single-digit acceptance rates. For example, [Stanford University](#) in California accepted only 4% of applicants in fall 2018.

But that's not the norm.

The national average acceptance rate at the 1,363 ranked schools that provided acceptance rate data to U.S. News was 67% in fall 2018. Considering two-thirds of students were accepted to schools they applied to, that means plenty of colleges are open for business.

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