



College Prep Guide: How to Create a Four-Year Plan for High School Freshmen

[Find the College Right for You! »](#)

Your last day of middle school is likely to come with a mix of emotions. At first, you probably won't be able to help but feel utterly enthusiastic to move on to high school—freshman year is a big step forward and a formative stage between childhood and adulthood. Now *that's* a reason to celebrate!

But then the reality sets in. Sure, getting older is exciting, but all that independence comes with a huge amount of responsibility. You're now only *four* years away from graduating high school and starting college, maybe even moving out to live on your own. Soon that preliminary excitement turns into fear, and that anticipation turns into uncertainty. There are a lot of decisions to make during high school to determine what you'll be doing as an adult, but you're still a teen—how can you possibly prepare?!

Let us be the first to assure you that it's completely normal to feel overwhelmed, but there's really nothing to fear. As a ninth grader, you can break down a frightening cloud of uncertainty into reasonable, conquerable chunks. You just need a little foresight.

Think about what success looks like for you, and you can create a four-year plan with tangible goals that will put you in a great position by the time you start applying for college. Here are our tips to help you make a clear path for yourself as you take on these next four years!

Guide to Creating Your Custom Four-Year Plan:

Step 1: Find Out Your High School’s Graduation Requirements

Every high school has a set, minimum curriculum that students must complete in order to earn their diploma. We recommend you set up an appointment with your school counselor as soon as possible so that you can get a better idea of what classes you need to take and when.

Here are the Top 5 questions to ask your school counselor:

1. How many credits in each subject do I need in order to graduate on time?
2. Am I in a good enough place to consider taking AP courses?
3. Are there any courses I can take for college credit?
 - o If so, what are the requirements, and how can I find out whether the credits will transfer?
4. What is a realistic goal for my cumulative GPA? Am I a good candidate to graduate with honors?
5. How often should I check in to make sure I’m on the right track?

Step 2: Ask Yourself the Right Questions & Perform a Self-Evaluation

While counselors know the practical steps someone would need to take toward graduation, you know yourself and your own interests better than anyone. Start asking yourself questions about who you are, what you want, and what you need to do.

Check in with yourself, and consider talking through your self-evaluation with your parents, coaches, teachers, mentors, or older siblings.

Here are the Top 10 Questions to Ask Yourself:

1. Where do I want to be eight years from now?
2. What type of lifestyle do I wish to live?
3. What are my strengths and weaknesses?
4. What is my dream career?
5. What’s my plan B?
 - o Second career choice
 - o Second major choice

6. What am I looking for in a college?
7. What type of student does my preferred college(s) tend to enroll, and how can I develop myself during high school so that I would be a good candidate?
8. What is my high school GPA goal?
9. Will I need scholarships for college? If so, what kinds should I be looking for, and what do I need to do in order to qualify?
10. How much support will I need if I attend any of my top 5 colleges?

The honest answers to these questions will push you to be realistic about your goals and help you determine the best path to take. Knowing the areas in which you excel and how they align with your interests will help you narrow down the choices to make, the electives to take, and the activities to focus on.

Step 3: Choose Electives that Interest You & Stand Out to Colleges

After you wrap your head around your graduation requirements, start to brainstorm which electives you might want to take. Electives help you explore areas of study that you might be interested in and dive more deeply into subjects that may only be introduced briefly in your core classes.

Use your elective options to learn what you like and dislike and where you excel. Your choices in elective courses show college admissions counselors what you are passionate about, the type of student you are, and how well you can manage a busy schedule. Taking interesting, well-planned electives shows that you take education seriously.

Taking interesting, well-planned electives shows that you take education seriously, so ask your school counselor and upperclassmen about any special electives that might be a good fit for you.

Free Resource: [Guide to Choosing the Best High School Extracurricular Activities & Electives](#)

Step 4: Extracurricular Activities & Community Service Plan

Not only are extracurriculars fun, but they also look pretty great on an [activity résumé!](#) Sports, clubs, and community service organizations help you get creative, build a network, and stay motivated both outside and inside the classroom. And although you are first and foremost a student, it's important to have other passions outside of academics.

Colleges want to see that you take initiative and are able to handle a full, well-rounded schedule—especially one that has you spending time with others and working in or leading a team.

Need some inspiration? Here are a few ways to get an idea of how to spend your free time:

- Listen to the morning announcements and read the bulletin boards on campus.
- Ask teachers and administrators about what's available.
- Talk to upperclassmen about the activities and sports they are involved in.

Think about what interests you, and consider the time commitments that come with each activity. If you're struggling to create a balanced but strong schedule work with your school counselor, parents or other mentors to help determine how much of a load you can take on each year. Don't overload yourself; do what you *enjoy*, and do what you *can*!

Bookmark for Later: [6 Tips for Presenting your Activity Resume](#)

Free Guide: [High School Checklist: Freshmen through Senior Year](#)

Step 5: Seek out Resources & Tools to Use

In order to stay organized and keep track of deadlines and due dates, it is important to create a system for yourself so that nothing gets lost or forgotten. From planners to calendars to assignment trackers—there are several options to help you keep track of all the different commitments you have. Keeping a log or record of your high school career is very important because you will use that information to create your activity resume, which you will submit to colleges during the application process.

Here are a few tools to try:

- [SchoolTraq](#)
- [Google Calendar](#)
- [Asana](#)
- [ClickUp](#)
- [Any.do](#)
- Planner ([Digital](#) or [Hardback](#))
- [myHomework App](#)

Step 6: Research SAT/ACT Testing & Scholarships



It's never too early to start thinking about the SAT/ACT. In fact, we recommend you start looking into the process, formats, and deadlines as a freshman. But don't panic! You have plenty of time to prepare!

As a sophomore, we suggest you take the [PSAT/NMSQT®](#) or [PSAT™ 10](#). This practice exam will help you get familiar with the testing format and time constraints before the real deal.

Although you may not take the SAT/ACT until your junior year, remember that you can give yourself as many chances as possible to get a score you are happy with. The more you take the test, the better your chance of improving your combined score. It is important to take these tests seriously and have an understanding of their significance. Most colleges place a huge emphasis on SAT/ACT scores, and how you perform can also factor into your likelihood of receiving some scholarships.

Speaking of scholarships, we urge you to carve out specific time to research your options (it is, after all, free money!). Scholarships are very competitive. You might be the most *qualified* candidate for a certain reward, but you might not be able to beat out other candidates without the right strategy and execution. Choose to start your search early in your junior year, begin writing scholarship essays and completing entry forms with enough time to make revisions and have others like your parents or school counselor provide feedback.

Finances don't have to limit your options for higher education if you're willing to work hard and search diligently for the rewards you qualify for. You might have to talk to your parents/guardians about the types of financial aid you will need and should pursue.

Guides for Finding and Applying to Scholarships:

- [How to Find—and Win—Scholarships: Your Complete Guide](#)
- [What Is a Merit Scholarship?](#)
- [The Mega List of Scholarships You Should Apply For | Class of 2022-2023](#)

Step 7: Keep Your Summers Productive

Everyone deserves a vacation, but there's a fine line between well-deserved self-care and falling into a three-month Netflix binge. Set some goals to help you spend your summers wisely because all that free time gives you the chance to reap great benefits for your future.

You can take SAT/ACT prep courses, get a summer job to save up for college, or attend sports/skills camps and workshops. And sure, slip in a *Stranger Things* marathon or two. If you're applying for scholarships on a July afternoon, you deserve it.



Step 8: Explore Careers

If you have an idea of the kind of careers that might interest you, take the time to explore them! Advisors can be great early career coaches, so never hesitate to investigate the resources that your school might offer. A counselor can also help you assess your strengths and connect you with summer internships and job-shadowing opportunities.

Putting It All Together

Tangible goals and clear timelines are key to preparing for life after high school. There's no "one size fits all" option for a path to a dream college or career, but the steps we provided here are just a few checkpoints that we know you'll find useful.

The earlier you start preparing, the easier it will be to do your research and set yourself up to face whatever challenges come your way. Your advisors, counselors, and parents can help you perfect your four-year plan and make any adjustments as you move through high school. There may be glitches along the way, but as long as you stay organized and motivated, you can stay on course toward a great education and a fruitful career!