

**Getting Ahead of the**  
**COVID Curve:**  
**SAT and ACT Changes and College Planning**  
**in Light of COVID-19**

*Webinar Presented by Julia Ross,  
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April 20, 2020



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# Goal:

To provide calm to parents and students in the always frenetic college admissions process, especially as we suffer a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic.

## Definitions

### TESTING:

- **ACT Exam:** The ACT Exam is a three-hour long multiple-choice standardized test divided in to four sections (English, math, reading, and science). There is an optional essay as well. Currently a paper-only test, the ACT is planning to offer tests on computer starting in September.
- **SAT Exam:** The SAT Exam is a three-hour long standardized test divided into four sections (critical reading, writing, math without calculator, and math with calculator). There is an optional essay as well.
- **SAT Subject Tests:** Formerly called SAT IIs, SAT Subject Tests are specialized tests that allow students to display mastery of a specific discipline (such as math, physics, history, or a foreign language). Once popular with competitive schools, there are now no schools in the country that require them of every applicant. However, there are still a few competitive colleges that do recommended them.
- **AP Exams:** Due to Covid-19, AP exams will be offered online by the College Board in May. Each subject's exam will be taken on the same day at the same time, worldwide. The Exams will be 45 minutes long, with separately timed free-response sections. They will also be open-book and open-note. The tests will not include non-covered material that the students' will have missed due to school closures.
- **IB Exams:** While the International Baccalaureate would usually hold exams like the AP exams, they have been cancelled this year. IB students can expect to receive a score based on the work they had already completed for the class.

### COLLEGE ADMISSIONS:

- **Score-Optional:** A score-optional school does not require all its applicants to submit SAT or ACT scores. The school will still consider the scores if submitted and may require students that fall under a certain criteria to submit scores, such as if their class rank or GPA is too low or if they have been homeschooled.
- **Score-Blind:** A score-blind school does not require SAT or ACT scores and will not consider them if submitted.

- **Test-Flexible:** A test flexible school may allow students to submit different test scores (such as from AP tests or SAT Subject Tests) instead of the SAT or ACT.
- **Early Decision:** You apply early (mid-October to November deadline) and receive an admission decision in December. Early Decision (ED) is binding, however, which means you, your parents, and your school counselor sign a contract, which says if admitted you will attend that institution and withdraw all other applications to other schools. Because of this binding contract, you can only apply ED to one school at a time.
- **Early Action:** This deadline is earlier than Regular Decision, usually in November, and receives an admission decision around January. Some colleges have an Early Action (EA) option called EA II, which has a later application deadline than their regular EA plan. EA is non-binding, which means that if you are admitted, you are under no obligation to attend the institution. Many schools use the EA application/deadline for merit aid awards.
- **Regular Decision:** The vast majority of students apply under the Regular Decision (RD) round of admission, with the deadline usually occurring in mid-winter, between December and February; an admissions decision is generally received by April 1, and if admitted, students usually have until May 1, to respond to the offer.
- **Equity:** In the world of college admissions, equity refers to the ability for applicants to be judged on as equal a playing field as possible. The often means accounting for any advantages or disadvantages a student may have in their learning environment, such as the availability of advanced classes at their high school or their general socio-economic status.
- **College Board Landscape Tool:** The College Board Landscape Tool provides information about a student's high school and neighborhood to help admissions officers accurately judge a student from an equity point of view.

## Score-Optional Caveats

While several schools were already starting to move towards score-optional admissions before Covid-19, we are currently seeing even more schools turn towards being score-optional. For some schools, Virginia Tech for instance, this change is a temporary one done to relieve stress on the students during the pandemic. For others, this will be a permanent change. There are many misconceptions students and parents have about what score optional admissions mean.

First, and most importantly, score-optional does NOT mean score-blind. A score-optional school will still accept SAT and ACT scores from students and will consider those scores during the admissions process. Strong test scores will still make a difference in admissions at a score-optional school. Score-optional schools can also be more competitive. Because it is easier to apply to a score-optional school, those schools have had a spike in applicants, and many have become more selective. A score-optional school is not easier to get in to; it is simply easier to apply to.

Most score-optional schools come with caveats which require the student to submit their scores anyway. A few examples follow.

- SAT/ACT may be used for placement.
  - If SAT/ACT is not submitted, students may have to travel to the university or make other arrangements to take placement exams. If this is not possible, students will be placed in lower-level courses, including remedial courses with no credits earned.
- SAT/ACT may be required for out-of-state students and/or home-schooled students.
- SAT/ACT submission required for students below a specific GPA (usually 3.5 unweighted) or class rank (generally top 10%)
- SAT/ACT required for some programs such as engineering, pre-medicine, honors.

As we mentioned above, some schools may be score-optional for the class of 2020 or 2021 but not for future classes. Colleges may also change their policies later in the admissions cycle.

**REMEMBER: Score-optional DOES NOT EQUAL SCORE-BLIND.** Score-optional students WILL be competing with equally qualified students who choose to submit SAT/ACT scores. Score-optional students' transcripts and resumes MUST SURPASS those of students who submit scores. Remember score-optional students are submitting fewer data points. Our research has found that even when schools are score-optional most students still submit test scores. For example, the first year that the University of Chicago offered score-optional admissions, 85-90% of applicants still admitted test scores. The average test score of admitted students actually rose and the school admitted a smaller percentage of applicants, ultimately making the school more selective than it already was.

# SAT/ACT TESTING DATES

These dates may change given the pandemic

	<b>June</b>	<b>July</b>	<b>August</b>	<b>September</b>	<b>October</b>	<b>November</b>	<b>December</b>
<b>ACT</b>	6/13/2020	7/18/2020		9/12/2020	10/24/2020		12/12/2020
<b>SAT</b>			8/29/2020	TBD	10/3/2020	11/7/2020	12/5/2020
<b>SAT Subject Test</b>			8/29/2020		10/3/2020	11/2/2020	12/7/2020

# **Virginia Public School Admissions 2020-2021 due to Covid-19**

## **(Updated 4/20/20)**

ED = Early Decision

EA = Early Action

RD = Regular Decision

### **Christopher Newport University**

- Score-Optional- GPA 3.5+ or top 10 percent of class
- ED – Nov 15, EA – Dec 1, RD – Feb 1
- No changes to admissions yet

### **College of William And Mary**

- ED – Nov 1, RD – Jan 1
- Planning to accept altered AP and IB scores for placement purposes

### **George Mason University**

- Score-Optional – no specific requirements but student must be very strong
- EA – Nov 1, RD –Jan 15
- Math SAT requirements for the school of engineering waived through Fall 2021 admissions
- Admissions Office has transitioned to “Virtual Service”

### **James Madison University**

- Score-Optional
- EA – Nov 1, RD – Jan 15
- No changes to admissions yet

### **Longwood University**

- EA – Dec 1, RD – Rolling
- Waiving SAT and ACT score requirements for students entering Fall 2020
- Accepting unofficial high school transcripts for Fall 2020

### **Old Dominion University**

- Score-Optional – Requires a GPA of 3.3+ in a rigorous high school program
- EA – Dec 1, RD – Jan 15
- No changes to admissions yet

### **Radford University**

- Score-Optional – GPA of 3.0+ in a rigorous high school program
- EA – Dec 1, RD – Jan 15

- No changes to admissions yet

### **University of Mary Washington**

- Score-Optional – GPA of 3.5+ in a challenging High school course of study
- ED – Nov 1, EA – Nov 15, RD – Feb 1
- No changes to 2021 admissions
- Will accept unofficial transcripts for now
- UMW *intends* to be on campus in the Fall

### **University of Virginia**

- ED – Oct 15, EA – Nov 1, RD – Jan 6
- Days on the Lawn will be virtual, Summer Orientation will proceed as planned for now
- 2021 Admissions continuing as planned

### **UVA at Wise**

- EA – Dec 1, RD – Aug 15
- Deposit deadline extended to June 15
- Test requirements lifted for all incoming freshmen (Fall 2020)
- Continuing to accept applicants for Fall 2020
  - Still awarding financial aid for new students

### **Virginia Commonwealth University**

- Score-Optional – GPA 3.3+
- RD – Jan 15
- Freshman response deadline moved to June 1

### **Virginia Military Institute**

- ED – Nov 15, RD – Feb 1
- No changes to admissions yet

### **Virginia Tech**

- ED – Nov 1, RD – Jan 15
- Admissions process “test-optional” for 2020-2021 cycle.
  - “There will be no advantage or special consideration for students who choose to take the tests, and no penalty for those who choose to not take the tests.”
- Will accept “modified scores” for AP tests

# College Essay Prompts

## Common Application Essay Prompts (2020-21)

### **Word limit: 650**

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience? \*
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others. \*
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design. \*

\*The most popular essay prompts in previous application seasons were, in order: #7, #5 & #2

## Coalition Application Essay Prompts (2020-21)

### **Recommended length: 500-550 words**

1. Tell a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it.

2. Describe a time when you made a meaningful contribution to others in which the greater good was your focus. Discuss the challenges and rewards of making your contribution.
3. Has there been a time when you've had a long-cherished or accepted belief challenged? How did you respond? How did the challenge affect your beliefs?
4. What is the hardest part of being a teenager now? What's the best part? What advice would you give a younger sibling or friend (assuming they would listen to you)?
5. Submit an essay on a topic of your choice.

## Getting ahead of the “COVID Curve” by Class

### Class of 2020:

1. Rejoice in your successes including your college admissions!
2. Research deposit dates for your choice colleges.
3. Research your choice colleges’ refund policies and residential vs. virtual learning policies for fall of 2020.
4. Research your choice colleges’ deferral policies (to January 2021 or Fall 2021).
5. Consider a stay-at-home option for Fall 2021.

### Class of 2021:

1. Take a deep breath.
2. Use our list of SAT/ACT Exam dates and keep up with registration-register as soon as possible online (registration for the upcoming SATs will open in May). Check at least WEEKLY for changes as exam sittings will fill quickly. Watch for August and September SAT Exam announcements: March, May, and June registrants will have priority in registering for August and September Exams.
3. Study, study, and study some more for the SAT and ACT Exams. Consider tutoring or SAT/ACT classroom instruction, be it in person or virtual. Professional Tutoring is offering programs now through the fall for rising seniors.
4. Take school very seriously right now! Teachers have a lot of grade discretion – you can boost your GPA by as much as one letter grade at some high schools.
5. Verify your senior class schedule on-line and, if necessary, with your high school.
6. Register for free summer classes being offered to rising high school seniors at NVCC.
7. Get ahead on your college admissions – see page 15
8. PLEASE consider college admissions coaching – this is a year unlike any we have seen in our career!

### Class of 2022:

1. Take school very seriously right now! Teachers have a lot of grade discretion – you can boost your GPA by as much as one letter grade at some high schools.
2. Verify junior class schedule on-line and, if necessary, with your high school.
3. Look into test preparation options for the coming year. Professional Tutoring offers two programs for sophomores and juniors.
4. Consider summer enrichment and volunteer programs including self-study or tutoring to prepare for the 2020-21 academic year.
5. Lay out your student resume. How can you fill your gaps?
6. Consider college admissions coaching with Professional Tutoring to get a jump on your coming year.

### Class of 2023:

1. Take school very seriously right now! Teachers have a lot of grade discretion – you can boost your GPA by as much as one letter grade at some high schools.

2. Verify sophomore class schedule on-line and, if necessary, with your high school.
3. Look into test preparation options for the coming year. Professional Tutoring offers two programs for sophomores and juniors.
4. Consider summer enrichment and volunteer programs including self-study or tutoring to prepare for the 2020-21 academic year. Professional Tutoring offers programs.
5. Lay out your student resume. How can you fill your gaps?
6. Consider college admissions coaching with Professional Tutoring to get a jump on your coming years.

### **Class of 2024:**

1. Take school very seriously right now! Teachers have a lot of grade discretion – you can boost your GPA by as much as one letter grade at some high schools. This applies especially to students taking high school credits in middle school!!
2. Verify freshman class schedule on-line and, if necessary, with your high school. Begin planning all four years of classes.
3. Consider summer enrichment and volunteer programs including self-study or tutoring to prepare for the 2020-21 academic year.
4. Lay out your student resume. How can you fill your gaps?
5. Consider admissions coaching with Professional Tutoring to get a jump on your high school career.

*\* More detailed lists follow*

## Getting Ahead on your College Applications – 11<sup>th</sup> grade

Tasks you can do to get ahead:

- Finalize any summer work, volunteer, sports, or study plans.
- If applicable, register on NCAA.com
- Get copies of your Unofficial Transcript with semester grades – keep a copy for your own files.
- Buy college admissions books – shameless plug for *The Official Julia Ross College Admissions Handbook* available soon on Amazon. This book includes all worksheets discussed on this call.
- Fill out the Professional Tutoring College Selection Survey – available in book or from us.
- Make plan for both parents and student to discuss college priorities including major of study, distance, and costs.
- Make a list of all the colleges that interest you. From this list, create a spreadsheet of the requirements for each college including SAT/ACT, GPA, letters of recommendation, transcripts, SAT/ACT Exam scores, SAT Subject Tests, due dates. College Board is a good place to start.
- Research colleges and majors.
- Start your college files.
- Start Student Resume.
- Decide on whom you will ask for letters of recommendation (some colleges will require specific recommenders).
- Write the letter of recommendation requests and confirm delivery and acceptance. Remember that good letter of recommendation requests are detailed. Parent and student will both want to proofread the work carefully.
- Send SAT/ACT scores to safety and attainable schools now if available. Hold off on reach schools until we have final SAT/ACT results.
- Request and pay for an Official Transcript and Secondary School Report from high school for ALL colleges on your application. *Check your high school's transcript submission requirements and dates.*
- Prepare a folder for college visits, keep it with you in your portfolio.
- Plan your college visits now through November. Remember colleges often have long Thanksgiving and winter breaks when NO TOURS are given.
- Demonstrate interest by visiting colleges, set up a portal, get online and go deep.
- Make a list of all separate applications in the colleges' portals (honors, special programs, scholarship).
- Make a list of all short answer questions and essay prompts.
- Complete the Essay Worksheet or other outline method.

- See if there are common themes in the essays in order to re-use ideas and essays (Common and Coalition Applications have released their essay prompts).
- Open application portals.
- After opening their application portals, the student can demonstrate interest by reviewing the college websites and researching deeply into programs and classes.
- Write any thank you notes following college visits, if applicable.
- Work through the Professional Tutoring College Coaching Checklist (in the book).
- Open your Common Application portal and begin its tedium.
- Open your Coalition Application portal and begin its version of tedium.

## Getting Ahead on your College Applications – 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade

What 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders can do now:

- Keep up with your schoolwork online! Continuing your learning now is essential to doing well in your classes next year.
- Make up ALL missing assignments and improve this year's grades as much as possible. College admissions is more of a numbers game than you think.
- Keep in touch with your teachers and cultivate relationships – you may need to ask at least one of your teachers from this year for a letter of recommendation when you apply to college.
- Find a topic you are interested in and read a book on it. This is a great time to find new hobbies and interests, which can turn into great college essays later on.
- Study for the PSAT/NMSQT.
- Take a PSAT practice test, available online from the [College Board](#).
- Pick a harder book to read, preferably classic literature, like something you would read in your English class. Nineteenth century British literature is great practice for the SAT reading passages. [Project Gutenberg](#) is a great place to start, with over 60,000 free eBooks to choose from.
- If you normally volunteer after school or through school clubs or programs, continue your volunteer work virtually. If you don't normally volunteer, consider starting now! There are some great virtual volunteer opportunities listed on [idealist.org](#).
- Finalize any summer work, volunteer, sports, or study plans.
- Get copies of your Unofficial Transcript with semester grades - keep a copy for your own files.
- Buy college admissions books – shameless plug for *The Official Julia Ross College Admissions Handbook* available on Amazon, April 15 (approximately). This book includes all worksheets discussed on this call.
- Fill out the Professional Tutoring College Selection Survey – available in book or from us.
- Make plan for both parents and student to discuss college priorities including major of study, distance and costs.
- Make a list of all the colleges that interest you. From this list, create a spreadsheet of the requirements for each college including SAT/ACT, GPA, letters of recommendation, transcripts, SAT/ACT Exam scores, SAT Subject Tests, due dates. College Board is a good place to start.
- Research colleges and majors.
- Once you have a list of your potential colleges, go on their websites and research how many math, science, English, foreign language, AP/IB courses they recommend. Compare this with your transcript and course selection for next year.
- Start your college files.
- Start Student Resume.