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U.S. University Application Rules

Updated October 2026. Specific dates are for students entering college in Fall 2027.

U.S. universities and colleges do not all use a single application deadline. Instead, each school offers one or more **admission rules**, and each plan carries its own deadline, notification date, and set of obligations. The single most important distinction among them is whether the plan is **binding** — that is, whether an offer of admission commits you to enroll.

Early Decision (ED)

Early Decision is a **binding** commitment to a single first-choice college. Applications are typically due **November 1 or November 15**, with decisions released in **mid-December**.

The core rules:

- You may apply Early Decision to **only one college**. Applying ED to two schools breaks both agreements and can cost you both offers.
- If admitted, you must **enroll, submit your deposit, and promptly withdraw all other applications**, including any still pending elsewhere. The deposit is due by the date the college sets for Early Decision admits, usually a few weeks after the decision and often in early January.
- The agreement is signed by the **student, a parent or guardian, and the school counselor**. The counselor signs to confirm that the family understands the commitment, and many high schools send a final transcript only to the ED school once a student is admitted.
- You may still apply **Early Action or Regular Decision elsewhere** at the same time — you simply must withdraw those applications if your ED school admits you.

ED outcomes come in three forms. **Admitted** triggers the binding commitment. **Denied** ends the process at that school for the year. **Deferred** moves your application into the Regular Decision pool and **releases you from the binding commitment**.

The financial aid exception. Under the National Association for College Admission Counseling's guidance on ethical practice, a college using Early Decision should deliver a financial aid offer at or near the time of admission and before requiring a deposit. If the aid package makes attendance financially impossible, the student may decline the offer and be **released from the ED commitment**. This is a genuine escape valve, not a loophole — but it exists for families who cannot afford the school, not for families who simply hoped for more. If comparing aid packages is essential to your decision, do not apply ED.

Early Decision II (ED II)

Many colleges offer a second binding round, usually due **January 1 to January 15**, with decisions in **February**. Every ED I rule applies identically. ED II suits two groups: students who need a strong fall semester or additional testing before applying, and students who were denied or deferred in ED I and

have settled on a new first choice. You may apply ED II only if you are not already bound by an ED I acceptance.

Early Action (EA)

Early Action is **non-binding**. Deadlines typically fall between **October 15 and mid-November**, with decisions in **December through February**. Several large public universities, among them UNC-Chapel Hill and Georgia Tech (for Georgia residents), use October 15.

- You may apply Early Action to **as many colleges as you like**, unless a particular school restricts it (see below).
- An EA acceptance is simply an early offer. You have until **May 1** to reply, and you may compare admission and financial aid offers freely.
- EA can be combined with one Early Decision application at a different school.

Restrictive Early Action / Single-Choice Early Action (REA or SCEA)

A small number of highly selective private universities use a hybrid plan. It is **non-binding** like Early Action, but it **restricts where else you may apply early**. The restrictions come in two strengths.

Stricter plans: Harvard, Yale, and Princeton (Single-Choice Early Action); Stanford and Caltech (Restrictive Early Action). You may not apply Early Decision or Early Action to any other private U.S. college. You generally **may** still apply early to:

- Public universities, including their early action rounds;
- Colleges outside the United States;
- Programs with non-binding rolling admission;
- Early deadlines required for a scholarship or special program, provided the decision is not binding;
- At several of these schools, another college's Early Decision II round, once you have their early decision in hand.

Looser plans: Notre Dame and Georgetown (Restrictive Early Action). You may apply Early Action anywhere, public or private. What these plans bar is a binding Early Decision I application to another college. Notre Dame also allows Early Decision II elsewhere; if you are admitted ED II, you must withdraw your Notre Dame application at once.

The specific carve-outs vary from school to school and change from year to year. Read the exact policy on the college's own admission website before you file anything early.

Regular Decision (RD)

Regular Decision is the standard, **non-binding** plan. Deadlines cluster between **January 1 and January 15**, decisions arrive from **mid-March to early April**, and students reply by **May 1**. You may apply RD to any number of colleges and compare all offers before choosing. Some colleges also publish a **priority deadline** — an earlier, non-binding date that improves consideration for scholarships, honors programs, or housing.

Rolling Admission

Colleges with rolling admission review applications **as they arrive** rather than at a fixed date, and release decisions continuously — often within four to eight weeks of submission. Decisions are **non-binding**, and admitted students normally have until May 1 to reply. Because seats and aid are awarded until the class is full, applying early in the cycle is a real advantage even though there is no formal deadline.

Open Admission

Open-admission institutions — most community colleges and some public four-year schools — admit any applicant who meets basic requirements, typically a high school diploma or equivalent. There is no competitive review, though individual programs within the school may still be selective and financial aid deadlines still apply.

University of California

The nine University of California undergraduate campuses share one application, with no early round and no Common App. For Fall 2027 entry, the application opens August 1, 2026, the filing period runs **October 1 to November 30, 2026**, decisions arrive by late March, and admitted students reply by May 1, 2027. In place of the Common App essay, the UC application asks for four short Personal Insight Questions.

Applying Outside the United States

Universities in the United Kingdom use UCAS, a single application for up to five courses. For 2027 entry, the deadline is **October 15, 2026** (6 p.m. UK time) for Oxford, Cambridge, and most courses in medicine, dentistry, and veterinary science, and **January 13, 2027** for equal consideration everywhere else. You may apply to Oxford or Cambridge, but not both, in the same year. Canadian universities run their own systems (in Ontario, through OUAC), with deadlines set by each province and university.

Comparison of Admission Plans

Plan	Binding?	How many?	Typical deadline	Decision released	You must reply by
Early Action	No	Unlimited	October 15 to mid-November	December – February	May 1
Restrictive / Single-Choice Early Action	No	Limits other early applications (see above)	November 1	Mid-December	May 1
Early Decision I	**Yes**	One only	November 1–15	Mid-December	ED deposit deadline, often early January
University of California	No	One application for all nine campuses	November 30 (filing opens October 1)	By late March	May 1

Plan	Binding?	How many?	Typical deadline	Decision released	You must reply by
Early Decision II	**Yes**	One only	January 1–15	February	ED deposit deadline, often a few weeks after the decision
Regular Decision	No	Unlimited	January 1–15 (some later)	Mid-March – early April	May 1
Rolling Admission	No	Unlimited	Continuous	4 – 8 weeks after applying	Usually May 1
Open Admission	No	Unlimited	Varies; often very late	Shortly after applying	Varies by school

Rules That Apply Across Every Plan

- **May 1 is National College Decision Day.** Non-binding offers must be held open until then, and students should submit an enrollment deposit to **one college only**. Holding multiple deposits ("double depositing") is considered a breach of good faith and can cost you your offers.
- **Admission is conditional.** Every offer depends on your finishing senior year in good standing. A sharp drop in grades or a disciplinary incident can lead a college to rescind admission.
- **Deferral is not denial.** A deferred application is re-read with the Regular Decision pool. A waitlist offer, by contrast, comes after decisions are released and may not resolve until well after May 1.
- **Financial aid has its own calendar.** The FAFSA and, where required, the CSS Profile carry deadlines that are separate from admission deadlines, and they are frequently earlier for early applicants. For Fall 2027 entry, the 2027–28 FAFSA opened in late September 2026, and the CSS Profile opened September 15, 2026. My companion guide, Financial Aid Requirements (General), covers both forms and their timing.
- **Test dates matter for early rounds.** For November deadlines, the October SAT or ACT is usually the last sitting a college will accept, and a few accept November scores. Plan your final test date around your earliest deadline.
- **Verify with the college itself.** Deadlines, restrictions, and even which plans a school offers change from year to year. The college's own admission website is the only authoritative source.

Choosing Among the Plans

Apply **Early Decision** only when one college is unambiguously your first choice, you have visited or otherwise know it well, your application is at full strength by November, and your family has used the school's net price calculator and is comfortable committing without comparing aid offers. Apply **Early Action** when you want an early answer and the reassurance of an acceptance in hand, with nothing to lose. Choose **Regular Decision** when a strong fall semester, additional testing, or more time to write will meaningfully improve your application — or when comparing financial aid offers side by side is the deciding factor.

When to Begin

The ideal time to begin is **October of junior year, about a year before the November 1 early deadlines**. The timeline below assumes we meet **once every two weeks**, from October of junior year until every application goes in by November 1 of senior year.

A Full-Year Timeline, Beginning in Junior Year

When	What happens
October, junior year	• Student profile and strategy: transcript, testing history, activities, and interests • Testing plan • Honors & Activities inventory, with suggestions to strengthen your profile this year • Summer program search; a few programs close as early as October • Majors and minors: exploration begins
November	• Summer program shortlist; essays for the earliest deadlines • Major and minor path, first version • PSAT results reviewed
December	• Summer program essays and applications for December and January deadlines • First, broad university list • In-depth faculty and research lab profiles for your intended major
January	• Last summer program applications go out • Special project chosen, to develop over spring and summer • Club profiles at the universities on your list
February	• Personal Statement: topics brainstormed • AP selection and timeline: senior-year courses chosen before your school's registration deadline (usually February or March) • Faculty outreach guidance • Coach outreach for recruited athletes
March	• Personal Statement drafted; I edit it • Spring SAT or ACT (March to June) • Recommendation letter strategy: which two junior-year teachers to ask, and what to give them • Campus visits over spring break
April	• Personal Statement revised • You ask your teachers for recommendations before junior year ends • Major and minor path, second version, informed by the faculty and lab profiles • University list narrows • Summer research topic and plan set
May	• Personal Statement finished • AP exams (first two weeks of May) • Honors & Activities lists drafted

When	What happens
June	• Independent research begins, with me as your research mentor • Summer program or special project under way • Ranked university list set • Supplemental Essay planning: what each school is likely to ask • UCAS Personal Statement (United Kingdom applicants)
July	• Independent research continues • Advanced preparation in your major • Early plan decided: ED, EA, or REA, and where • University application schedule built • Supplemental Essays begin as schools release their prompts
August, senior year	• August 1: the Common App and the UC application open; most Supplemental Essay prompts are out by now • Main sections completed; Honors & Activities lists entered • Supplemental Essays drafted for every school on your list • Research written up for your applications • August SAT or ACT, if a retake is needed
September	• Supplemental Essays finished for early schools and well along for the rest • Major and minor path, final version, checked against each application • Recommenders confirmed; transcripts requested • ED agreement signed, if you are applying binding • FAFSA and, where required, the CSS Profile filed as soon as they open • Mock interview and debrief
October	• October 15: UCAS deadline for Oxford, Cambridge, and medicine; Early Action deadlines at several public universities • UC application can be submitted from October 1 • Remaining Supplemental Essays finished • Major and minor choices confirmed one last time before you submit • Applications submitted, including those to Regular Decision schools, which accept them early
November 1	• ED I, EA, and REA/SCEA deadlines • Every application is in • Most financial aid priority deadlines for early applicants: November 1–15
After November 1	• Early decisions arrive in December • Admitted ED: deposit by the college's deadline and withdraw all other applications • Deferred: a letter of continued interest • Any later rounds: November 30 (University of California); January 1–15 (ED II and Regular Decision)
February–April	• ED II decisions in February; mid-year grade reports go to colleges • Regular Decision and UC results and financial aid packages, mid-March to early April • Offers compared; waitlist letters where useful
May 1	• National College Decision Day: deposit at one college and decline the rest