Lee Binz, The HomeScholar
"Helping Parents Homeschool High School"

HOMESCHOOLING HIGH SCHOOL
Month By Month

3rd Annual Collection
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Bright Future Ahead
Homeschooling High School Month by Month
The HomeScholar 3rd Annual Collection by Lee Binz

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Finding the Faith to Homeschool High School

Remember the Gift, Forget the Pain

How do we find the faith to homeschool high school? When the laundry is piling up, the baby is crying, or a teen is having a fit over their math lesson, it's easy to forget the reasons we love to homeschool, or that it is our calling. Not every homeschool day feels like a gift! It can be challenging to "stay in the game," feel motivated, and keep going during certain times of the year, when things get tough. It's during these times that we need a reminder that homeschooling is truly a gift.

Even though our children aren’t perfect, our families aren’t perfect, and our homes aren’t perfect - even with all these imperfections - homeschooling can still be a gift. My husband and I struggled with homeschooling at times. Now, years later, we have forgotten many of the horrible days of homeschooling. What is left is the gift part.
I do remember the times when our children refused to do their work, and I had to call my husband at work to intervene. I remember some of the attitude problems we faced. I remember the assignment one of my sons wrote in yellow pencil on white paper! I remember our two sons holding a competition on who could use the smallest printing for their essays.

There were times I would turn my back on my children for a moment and they would disappear. Usually I found them distracted by the dog or playing with Legos. We had comic books such as *Calvin and Hobbes* and *Garfield* strewn all over the house, and sometimes I found one or both children with their noses buried in them.

I remember that my home wasn’t perfect - I tried, and my friends thought I was tidy because I picked up before people visited. Nine days out of ten, there were stacks of laundry everywhere! There were days we couldn’t sit on the couch because there was so much laundry.

My homeschool wasn’t perfect, but homeschooling was still a gift. Now that I am older, I look back and remember the gift but forget much of the pain. When we’re having a bad homeschool day, we can think about how it was with childbirth. We can look at homeschooling this way: we’re going through labor and at the end of the day, we will remember the gift, not the pain.

**Weekly Devotions to Help You Find the Faith to Homeschool this Month**

Here are weekly devotions to help you through the month of January. I’m not a pastor or theologian, and I didn’t go to a Bible college. I’m not qualified to preach – I’m not a pastor’s wife! My qualifications for encouraging you with scripture are humble. I love my Bible. I love my quiet time. I love to meditate on God’s Word. I’m a Bible-reading mom with underlined verses to share and meditate on. I want to help you gain a refreshing perspective on homeschooling that will support and encourage you along the way.

**Week 1 - Reason for Confidence**

“How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.” Psalm 36:7

The numbers are growing. More than 2.1 million children are now being homeschooled in the United States. Studies have shown that homeschoolers have consistently higher test scores than their public and privately schooled counterparts. Homeschoolers score higher on tests regardless of gender, race, parental education, or state regulation. These studies can be a confidence booster, but there is a reason for you to be confident beyond statistics.

You have more than statistics - you have God’s promises. You can be confident because of God’s unfailing love.
My favorite phrase in the whole Bible is “loving kindness,” but I love it more when those words are combined into one big concept in one long word, “lovingkindness.” I was not raised by Christian parents, and that phrase stuck out for me in my first exposure to the Bible, as a description of what God is like, the perfect Father – perfectly loving, perfectly kind.

Loving kindness speaks volumes about how the Lord feels about you. He loves you, cares for you, protects you, and will see you through these years of homeschooling. He is kind and gentle with you, helping you to become better people, parents, and educators.

Take the phrase “loving kindness” and think about your children taking refuge under God’s wing with His loving kindness. That’s why you can be confident. He will see you through all these years of homeschooling.

Hug your children often. Give them your own loving kindness. At the same time, know that God loves them more. You can take refuge in the love He has for your child.

**Week 2 - Your Child is Given to You**

“For You created my inmost being, You knit me together in my mother’s womb, I praise You because I’m fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful.” Psalm 139:13-14

Psalm 139 is often used in pro-life circles to talk about the sanctity of life. God created your child, and whether you gave birth to your child or not, God put that child in your family - not randomly, but because you were chosen. Your child was made for your family and God knows exactly what He’s doing. There’s nothing you can do to mess up God’s plan.

It’s easy to worry about messing up your children’s lives by using the wrong math curriculum or by choosing to homeschool. Whatever you choose, you simply can’t ruin your child forever. You can’t cause them to fail if they’re meant for greatness. Sometimes you can become overwhelmed and unsure. God knows about those times in advance. He knows you will be the best one to answer the challenge. Your anxiety encourages you to find answers to each new challenge.

Before your child was born, their entire life was written in the Lord’s book and you can’t change it – you don’t have that kind of power. God already knows what your child will be doing twenty years from now. God is in control.

Don’t feel bad about making mistakes – human beings make mistakes. No mistake will change what God has planned for your child. Don’t worry that you’ve ruined your child’s life with the wrong curriculum, simply change your curriculum and move on.

**Week 3 - One Step at a Time**
“Jesus said to the servants, ‘Fill the jars with water’; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, ‘Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.’ They did so.” John 2:7-8

If God asked you to carry out a miracle, would he step back to watch you fail? No. He would give you small, reasonable, doable steps. Taking it one step at a time is important. You can see an example of this in Jesus’ first miracle in the book of John, when He changes the water into wine.

Jesus told the servants to do three things: fill the jars with water, draw some out, and take it to the master. He did not command the end result. He simply provided the steps for His servants.

He is like that with you. If God told you to change water into wine, you would not know how. Sometimes as you’re homeschooling through high school, you’ll feel as if you’re being asked to change water into wine. Instead of thinking about the end result – the scholarships, college admission, graduation, or success in calculus – think about the step that’s right in front of you.

Sometimes your task is to simply fill jars with water. Take that one step in reading, writing, or math, and work on the next step later. You don’t have to know what all the steps are in advance. All you need to know is the step right in front of you – just take one step at a time.

Week 4 - Love Covers Missteps

“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.” 1 Peter 4:8

What about gaps? You may worry that if you aren’t perfect homeschool parents, your children may have gaps in their education. The truth is that nobody is perfect, and everybody is lacking something in their education.

In 1 Peter 4:8, the Bible says that love will cover any missteps. This is the scripture you can hold onto when you worry about gaps in your child’s education, because your love for your child will cover your “sins;” the love for your kids will cover the mistakes in your curriculum.

Beyond that, God’s love for you will also cover the mistakes you make as you homeschool, and the love your child has for learning will cover missteps as well. God reassures you that your love for your child will cover any missteps that occur as you homeschool through high school. It’s going to be okay.

Even when you don’t know much about homeschooling high school, you can figure out what you need to know in order to get it done, because of your love for your child. Sometimes this means seeking help and finding the answer somewhere else, but it’s love that motivates you to do a good job.
One of the reasons homeschooling is so effective is because you have an inward control valve – you seek what will help launch your child successfully into the world. You see what needs to happen, the education your child needs in order to be a successful adult.

You see things in your own child that other people don’t. Even when I’m giving parents advice, I believe that parents know more about their child than I do. You will make decisions that I wouldn’t make myself, because you know your children best. Much of what you teach your children is how to learn and how to find the answers. Even if you’ve forgotten to teach them cursive writing, for example, you’ve taught them how to find out how to do it themselves.

Your love for your child covers any missteps that occur. God’s love for you will cover your sins. Your child’s love of learning can cover small issues along the way. Years from now, small problems will be imperceptible.

An excerpt from my book,

*Finding the Faith to Homeschool High School: Weekly Reflections for Weary Parents*

Available on Amazon
Balanced Technology in Home Education

**Set Logical Technology Boundaries to Increase Learning**

Have you struggled with a technology balance in your homeschool? The recent shift of child experiences from physical to digital has turned child development upside down. Is there too much technology in education? The research shows problems with excess technology in education, while schools continue to ask for more and more funding for technology, and homeschoolers use increasingly more online courses.

Excessive technology in education may create a child who can’t learn. This is the learning paradox. The more digital media they use, the less likely children are to learn. There is no research that shows...
educational technology does anything other than entertain children, yet an educational shift is happening without evidence. The more schools invest in technology, the less likely kids will pay attention and learn.

Technology in education is not evidence-based. Multi-tasking on a laptop or digital device distracts both the user and fellow students. Print reading is superior to screen reading.

Technology Guidelines

Technology use guidelines recommend no more than two hours of screen time daily for high school age students. With the amount of technology being used in education, children can easily end up spending several hours per day with digital devices overall. This much technology must demonstrate positive outcomes or the efforts to include technology in the classroom results in wasted money.

Technology can make it more difficult to learn and retain information. Balance is the key. Banning helpful tools is not the goal, after all. Instead, education means ensuring that children can read, write, and do math, even when not supported by technological devices. Technology is at its most useful when it is thoughtfully added to the curriculum in a meaningful way. If it does not enhance the learning experience then it is a distraction.

Online Learning

Supervision is necessary in combination with firewalls to filter online sites such as video games and porn sites. The parent of a child in an online school could have no idea what the child is doing online unless sitting right next to them. Firewalls offer some protection when the parent is not sitting alongside, but they are not a foolproof, teen-proof solution.

These programs and applications can allow you to pre-approve websites your child can visit. However, teachers have inadvertently referenced inappropriate websites, sometimes porn, and a simple click from a lesson plan can steal a child’s innocence in any unsuspecting family. Families with bright, well-rounded children can benefit from online courses, but you need to balance them carefully with parental supervision and involvement, to make sure your children gain quality educational value from the program and don’t fall off the tracks.

Avoid choosing online education due to social phobias. Leaning on technology can make matters worse. Choosing online school to withdraw your child from society avoids the problem, will not be a solution, and cannot be healthy. Your child may think, “I don’t get along with kids. I don’t have any friends, so I’m doing online learning.”

This avoidance can affect their future. If they can’t connect with other kids now, when they’re in school, they will have much less chance of forming meaningful relationships when they get older. Instead, you may want to provide the safety and security of interpersonal interaction through homeschooling your
children, with the option of eliminating reliance on technology, and accentuating positive social interactions.

Carefully consider the age of your child before choosing education through technology. Age and maturity are important factors to consider, as suggested technology guidelines make clear. While some online learning may be appropriate for a teenager, it would be completely wrong for a six-year-old. Younger children need more movement, touch, connection, and nature. Older children need less. Children who are developmentally delayed or cognitively delayed also need more movement, touch, connection, and nature, and less “tech.”

Cris Rowan uses a balance beam metaphor to describe appropriate technology use. On one side of the balance beam are those four critical factors: movement, touch, connection, and nature. On the other side is technology. For young children, you want to load the balance beam so the four critical factors get much more emphasis. As your child gets older, it might level out so they get equal amounts.

Consider your child’s age, ability, and maturity. One hour of online class time balanced with one hour of face time might be appropriate for older children in middle school or high school. But for elementary age children, this would still be too much technology. Children of all ages, particularly elementary age children, need to go outside and be with people. They need to be hugged. They need interaction. The research strongly suggests they need to go out and play!

This should not be news to anyone. People are in danger of forgetting key truths that have long been considered common sense. Recess has always been a key part of elementary education. It is a critical part of children’s overall development; it isn’t only to get the kids out of the teacher’s hair for a while.

Studies show that children who move a lot are better able to pay attention and learn. They become measurably smarter. One high school improved test scores by adding physical movement, with the addition of an hour a day on treadmills. They observed huge differences, after only four months. This is more evidence that kids need exercise.

Excessive hours of digital technology use can occur among homeschoolers as well. Homeschoolers may rely on many online classes and supplemental activities involving technology, sometimes exclusively. Kim McDaniel recommends that your child get one hour of face-to-face time for every hour of online class time.

Try to find a balance of technology, print, and hands-on learning. If your child takes many technology-based classes, consider ensuring they read print books. Carefully restrict other technology use each day. Limiting non-educational digital media could provide balance. If you're a homeschooler, you need to be intentional about your children's friendships and other face-to-face interactions. You need to ensure there is adequate quality time with peers, with neighborhood friends, in co-ops, or in church groups. Adding exposure to digital technology through online classes may make the balance even harder to achieve.
Giftedness in Technology

Balancing technology becomes more complicated when children have special talents in computers, programming, and digital technology. These technologically gifted students can easily overuse digital technology and develop a serious problem. Their gifts and passions can lead to parents being permissive about screen time without restrictions. However, the developmental needs of gifted children are no different from regular kids. Even gifted children need movement, touch, connection, and nature.

If you are the parent of a gifted child, you must conscientiously focus on the big picture and development of your child as a whole person with a balanced life. Excessive screen time can sabotage career objectives and discourage long-term success. A broad education will allow giftedness to come out in a variety of different ways, and ensures your child has the diversified education needed in order to achieve greater success.

What do you want for your child? Most parents want them to be happy. Parents want children to be successful in whatever they do. This goal will be achieved through balance, and teaching children how to achieve balance with technology. The recipe for building such a child doesn’t change with shifting technology. Children still need the same ingredients to be happy and healthy: movement, touch, connection, and nature.

Autism Spectrum Disorder and Technology

Kim McDaniel says that children with autism spectrum disorders are more likely to have difficulty managing screen time. They are more vulnerable to developing problems with digital addiction. There are several reasons, with biological and psychological roots. From a child development perspective, any child who has difficulty with real life social interactions is more prone to turning to the computer to satisfy their social needs. The basis of empathy development, emotional resiliency, self-esteem, and overall good mental health comes from relationships with others. For those on the autism spectrum, their difficulty recognizing the undertones of language – subtle humor, sarcasm, contempt, flirting, and persuasion – also make them more vulnerable to bullying, peer pressure, and manipulation.

Research shows another side of the story. Overuse of technology can cause symptoms that mimic autism. Children can display the behaviors of someone with autism; they have been so disconnected from people they lose some of their social skills. Perhaps symptoms of autism may improve for some children when they increase social contact while at the same time decreasing technology use.

Key Consideration in Education

Children need the maximum amount of face-to-face learning and physical activity. Education should include technological, digital, and online learning only as a supplement, not as a primary source of
instruction. Technology in education is like adding salt to your food. Don’t overdo it or you might end up with some serious health problems!

This article is a brief excerpt from my new book,

TechnoLogic: How to Set Logical Technology Boundaries and Stop the Zombie Apocalypse.

Look for it on Amazon!
Keep it Simple!

It can be overwhelming. After years of happily homeschooling young children, parents see high school looming ahead and suddenly panic. Record keeping, transcripts, courses, credits, and tests! They’re challenging, but they aren’t a matter of life and death. They are merely manageable tasks you can complete one at a time. When you strip away all the fluff and meringue, you are left with one major goal each year. There are only four key goals in the four years of high school.

Freshman Year: Think about College

During freshman year, all you have to do is think about college. College seems like a long way off! But when you begin high school thinking about college, then life for the next four years will be much easier.
College preparation allows for maximum flexibility. Teens often change their minds. No matter how many times your child changes career plans, you will be ready for anything. Thinking about college can help if your child goes to college, of course. However, if your child does not go to college, no harm is done. You simply end up with a well educated adult, ready to take on the world.

Think about college by learning how to homeschool high school. Take classes and read books to help you learn about course selection and record keeping. Begin to talk about college preparation with your child.

Focus on core subjects such as reading, writing, math, history, and science. Teach your child at their level and they will be well prepared in four years. Don’t worry about the past or the future, simply keep doing what works today. Seek help and guidance if you need it.

**Sophomore Year: Prepare for College**

Sophomore year is the time to prepare for college. Your homeschool should remain the same warm and loving learning environment it has always been. Preparing does not mean transforming your happy homeschool into a military academy or Socratic classroom. Instead, the best preparation will occur when you continue to use what has worked for you in the past. Move forward with the curriculum that has been working, and make adjustments when you identify problems. Keep your forward momentum with confidence.

Within the context of your family school, prepare for college by taking two specific steps in sophomore year. First, begin a foreign language if you haven’t already. For homeschoolers, it may be a source of great fear, and you may want to put it off. But colleges like to see two or three years of a single foreign language in high school.

Second, prepare for college by taking the PSAT for fun. This is the first college admission assessment test your child will take. The PSAT will put your student’s name in front of colleges that want homeschoolers! It’s a thrill to receive mail from a college, and can encourage parent and student alike.

**Junior Year: Find a College**

The focal point of junior year is finding colleges where you and your child want to apply. Although you could choose by throwing darts on a map or only looking at colleges close by, it's not advisable. Sure, you've chosen a college, but it could be unsuitable. A mismatch with your family values is a very expensive mistake. Instead, choose colleges using a step-by-step approach.

To achieve your goal of finding a handful of appropriate colleges, the first step is to go to a college fair. Similar to a homeschool convention, it’s a quick and easy way to learn a lot about many colleges in a short amount of time. Step two is having your child take the PSAT in October of junior year. Step three is
taking time to visit individual colleges so you can eliminate poor choices from your list. The fourth step is having your child take the SAT or ACT in the spring, which can help you determine the right college fit, both academically and financially.

By the end of the year, choose four to eight colleges where it is appropriate for your child to apply. Make sure you include a mix of public and private universities, some that might be a challenge to enter, and others where your child exceeds the minimum requirements.

**Senior Year: Apply for College**

During senior year, the main goal is completing college applications. Scholarships are first-come, first-served, so make sure you have completed applications well before the deadlines. Applying early for college can improve your child’s chances of earning admission and financial aid. Like Tax Day in April, college application deadlines are immovable, inflexible, and have financial consequences. In addition, applying for college is not at all like applying for a job at Starbucks! It takes a lot of time, and there is a lot of work involved.

Applying for college will require long and thoughtful essays that are self-reflective and technically perfect. That’s a tough assignment for a normal teenager, I know! Letters of recommendation will take time to acquire, even from willing and helpful writers. The application itself is quite complex and takes a while to complete. Each application must include your homeschool records: a complete transcript, possibly a reading list, and most likely course descriptions as well. To eliminate panic, make sure your records are always up to date.

For best results with maximum financial aid, apply early and often. Apply for a handful of acceptable colleges, carefully watching deadlines and following the fine print. Applying for college doesn’t end with admission. It continues with additional correspondence regarding financial aid. It’s a prolonged task, but worth the effort.

**Expect Dramatic Changes**

Each year of high school, your child will mature by leaps and bounds. As a newborn is dramatically different from a four year old, it is also true that a freshman will barely resemble a high school senior. Children grow up so fast, and mature quickly over the four years of high school. Be prepared for anything so your child can attend a college that will meet their family and career goals.

Focus on one goal for each year of high school. Don’t get lost in the details, and don’t worry about the future, simply focus on the task at hand. Freshmen think about college, sophomores plan for college, juniors find a college, and seniors apply to college. Have a great year this year. Next year, you can work on the next goal. For now, focus on the one step before you.
High School Record Keeping

Tubbies, Cubbies, & Binder Queens

Regardless of whether you are a perfectly organized homeschool mom or not, you've probably given some thought to high school records. Whether you feel the panic, want to stick your head in the sand, or are confident about planning and your ability to carry it out, it’s important for every homeschool parent to consider record keeping in high school.

Perhaps it’s only a vague thought, and you say to yourself, “I’ll get to that someday.” But time has a way of sneaking up on you. Even if you are convinced your student will never go to college, chances are high that at some point in the future you will need to provide records of your student’s high school experience. You may need records for your child to become a camp counselor, or to get a “good student discount.” After high school, these records might be needed for a job application, graduate school, or as an employment requirement for a job they desire, even 10 years from now. Homeschool record keeping will ensure you’ll always be prepared.
Forgetting Large Chunks of Information

Record keeping is so important because it’s completely possible for a normal homeschool parent to accidentally forget large chunks of information. A few years ago, I was working on a transcript with a mom named Paula. She thought her transcript would be easy because she had been keeping records. In truth, her record keeping book was completely empty. We had to work through old receipts and curriculum records to create her transcript. We didn’t worry though, we simply discussed every subject area in detail, from algebra to American Sign Language.

Once the records were complete, she was so happy! As I was leaving, I asked, "What are you doing this weekend?" Paula didn't hesitate for a moment, explaining they were going to a Latin competition.

"Latin competition?" I said. "You never mentioned Latin!" That was how I discovered that her high school junior had already completed four years of high school Latin, and her mother had completely forgotten about it. A very large and important part of her homeschool was completely missing from her transcript, and would have stayed that way if I hadn’t asked about her weekend plans. Now it's not as if the four years of Latin was a repressed memory of something horribly traumatic. It was obvious the student enjoyed Latin - that's why she was still competing, and why they were both looking forward to the weekend.

This is why we need to keep high school records. Keeping records will help us remember our homeschool experiences so we can create great transcripts and course descriptions. Record keeping is important so we don't forget broad swaths of learning, such as four years of Latin.

Keep high school records so you can make a transcript that reflects the courses you taught and so you don't short-change your student. Paula is a gifted home educator, loving mother, and she had done an exceptional job homeschooling her children, yet even she forgot four years of Latin. Never underestimate the human ability to forget, because it can happen to anyone!

You can avoid a record keeping crisis of your own. Learn how to keep high school records, so this doesn't happen to you.

Choose a Record Keeping Style

There are four basic methods of homeschool record keeping.

Tubbies

Some parents keep all their homeschool records in a giant plastic tub in the school room. I call these parents "tubbies." They keep all their children’s records in one single tub. All tests, assignments and papers are lovingly tossed inside, awaiting that blessed someday when they magically become
organized. Tubbies keep a lot of homeschool stuff but lack organization. Still, you can create some high school records even if you are keeping records like a tubby.

Cubbies

Slightly more organized are “cubbies.” As in a Kindergarten class, where each student has their own cubby, these moms use the same strategy for record keeping. They keep records in an enclosed cupboard, cabinet, or drawer. Slightly more organized than tubbies, cubbies usually have one drawer for each child and sometimes for each year as well. Cubbies keep many records with minimal organization, but at least they can tell which child did the work on each paper, since each child’s records have their own designated place.

Binder Queens

Even more organized are “binder queens.” They are the parents who keep notebooks filled with records - one child per notebook. These parents keep track of student work in highly organized, divider-filled spiral notebooks, binders, computer programs, or spreadsheets. Some fancier binder queens have a designer file folder with a carry handle. Binder queens keep information on every class, which can help them easily create records for all classes. At homeschool conventions, I can spot these parents from a mile away, with their business-like notebook and list of questions in hand. They tend to be the most organized people I meet. True confession, I was a binder queen.

Question Marks

The final type of homeschool parents are the ones I affectionately refer to as “question marks.” When this type of parent hears about record keeping, an invisible question mark appears over their ever-so-slightly-cocked head as they think to themselves, “Records? Were we supposed to keep records?” This is the one method of record keeping that I simply can’t condone. It’s just a bad idea to stick your head in the sand, hoping that record keeping isn’t important. You can easily lose something significant, such as four years of Latin, Eagle Scout experiences, or other key ingredients needed to create your transcript and course descriptions.

Each homeschool parent will decide which method is best for them. And of course, no record keeping method will work unless you use the record keeping method you choose. I usually recommend that parents try to get more organized each year. If you are a tubby the first year, try to graduate to a cubby the next year. Move up the food chain!

Become a Binder Queen

Being a binder queen requires a minimal investment. A few dollars will get you everything you need: a 3-ring binder, a set of dividers, and some notebook paper. All it requires is a few minutes each week, making sure the binder is prepared and used instead of ignored. Using a binder system is a convenient
way to keep work samples and graded work from every class. If colleges ever want to see something from Latin or Macroeconomics class, simply reach into the binder for a work sample.

Simple is better. My binders were 3-inch, 3-ring binders, each with a simple label such as "Kevin 2015-2016." At the beginning of the year, label each divider in the binder. In the front of the binder, label a section for the transcript. Then arrange a section for everything required by your state law. You might include a divider for your Declaration of Intent to Homeschool, immunization records, or annual testing records.

Next, label a divider for each class you intend to teach. This includes English, math, social studies, science, foreign language, P.E., fine art, and electives for the year. You can record test scores or grades for each lab or report on a simple piece of notebook paper. Store significant papers behind each divider to keep as work samples.

You don’t need to keep everything, but it can be helpful to keep papers that you evaluated. Later in the year, perhaps in the spring, go back over what you learned and develop a course description for each class. If you started a class but didn’t finish, just throw that divider away; there’s no reason to record what was not done.

Keeping a place for my records helped me to keep my records up to date. Every month I gathered all the papers my kids produced and gradually filled up each 3 ring binder. As the year progressed, I was able to see which sections were filling up and which sections were blank. Once the blank sections were identified, I could concentrate on developing records for those sections. When the art divider was empty, I assigned my children a one page paper on an artist. When the music section was blank, I had them list their performance-ready piano pieces and added their Christmas Recital Program to it.

**Keep Homeschool Records**

Keep high school level academic records. Record keeping is different from scrapbooking – it’s not an artistic endeavor. There are three big high school record keeping categories.

1. Keep anything required by your state homeschool law. This may include a declaration of intent to homeschool or an immunization record.
2. Keep what you will need for college admission. Be prepared, because you don’t always know what the future will hold.
3. Keep records needed to create course descriptions and a high school transcript. You are the high school, so you are in charge of these records.

It’s relatively simple for many classes. Keep any tests or papers your child has written, and you're done! For other classes you may want to keep lab reports, tests, research papers, or short essays. Some classes don't include paper assignments, and record keeping will require some creativity. The credit value of
courses such as P.E., fine arts, and other electives may be hard to quantify unless you keep track of
hours. You can also make a list of the activities completed or resources used in each class.

One mother asked what records she should keep for her child learning how to cook at home. Think
outside the box, and consider what your child does to learn. This child created a menu, went grocery
shopping, and cooked using recipes. Those are all great homeschool records! Save the menu, the
shopping list, and photocopy recipes for culinary arts class records.

There are many other ways to keep records. Keep a printout of the curriculum you purchase. List every
book your child buys, uses, or reads for pleasure. Track hours spent on subjects, projects, or activities
that aren't bookish. Keep online descriptions from internet or co-op classes. Photocopy textbook covers
and table of contents. Keep any assignment sheets or schedules you create.

Instead of writing down what you want your child to do in the future, you can write down what your
child did after the work is completed. (This will help parents who are conscientious, but not good at
planning ahead.) Have your child keep a journal of school work, including books, assignments, and
experiences. Most students do some of their work on the computer, so be careful to save it in a school
file on the computer or printed out in your filing box, or both.

Create High School Documents

Once every spring, create and update the important high school documents you will need to
demonstrate your child’s awesome home education.

1. Transcript

Plan to create an Official Transcript. This is a simple Word document, created on your home computer,
with the words “Official Transcript” in the title.

2. Course descriptions

Each class description should have three main ingredients. First, write a descriptive paragraph about
what you did. This is a simple fifth grade writing assignment, not a college thesis, so don’t over-think it.
Second, include a list of what you used, from textbooks to supplements or experiences. Third, describe
how you graded or evaluated, remembering that there should be more than merely tests to influence
your final grade.

3. Reading and award lists

Make a list of the books read each year. This is easier when you keep all your library and curriculum
purchase receipts each year. Keep a list of the activities your child is involved in and the awards or
volunteer hours they earned in each activity.
When to Keep Records

Keep records early. Record keeping is not a switch that you can suddenly turn on; it can help to practice. I started training myself to keep records when my children were in seventh grade so I would be competent by the time they were in high school. If your child is in seventh or eighth grade, practice keeping your homeschool records as if they were already in high school, to be prepared for anything as you move forward. It’s common for homeschoolers to do some high school level work in middle school.

Keep records often. It’s a rare person who updates homeschool records every day, but every parent can manage keeping up with records every month or two. As you train yourself to keep records, strive to keep something to document every subject your child learns.

Keep records in high school. Homeschool records become critical once a student begins high school as they are part of the transcript that will be shared with colleges. Begin your transcript as soon as your child is in ninth grade, or at age 14. Update the transcript and course descriptions every spring from ninth through twelfth grade, until high school is complete.

Start Today

Right now, it’s time for a decision. Decide whether you will be a tubby, cubby, or binder queen (or king) this year. At a minimum, grab a big box and put it in your schoolroom to collect everything. Or buy a cubby system with drawers, with one drawer per child per year. Or invest the big bucks and get a three ring binder at the dollar store, with dividers for each subject area.

Prepare throughout the school year and spend some concentrated time collecting records for your homeschooled high schooler. Create documents that will impress a college or employer. Try to move up the record keeping food chain, improving over the years so that by the time your student is a senior, your transcripts and course descriptions are organized and prepared. Start small, but start somewhere!

Today is the day to begin! Ready? Go!
How to Make a Homeschool Transcript

If you ask a typical homeschool parent what the scariest thing about homeschooling high school was, I bet you’d find transcripts somewhere near the top of their list. I want to remove your fear of transcripts! Cue the “Mission Impossible” theme music now!

Translate Your Homeschool Experience

First, you need to know that grades and credits are the love languages of colleges. Colleges need to understand your child’s homeschool experience, and they need words and numbers. Your job as a homeschool parent is to take your normal and natural homeschool experience and translate it into words and numbers colleges understand. Don’t change the way you homeschool as long as it’s working. Instead, translate what you’re already doing into the language of college grades and credits, so they will understand and appreciate what you’ve done.
Second, recognize that all schools calculate grades and credits differently. This can help you feel more freedom, and less stress. If you believe there’s only one universal method used by all schools to define what makes an academic credit, here’s a little-known secret: even the experts don’t agree! In reality, there aren’t any hard and fast rules! Throughout my fairly exhaustive research into this topic, I found few things that all of the experts and books agreed upon when determining credit.

It’s clear there’s a lot of leeway for evaluating your student’s work. Of course, this is not an invitation to be unscrupulous: your student’s grades will ultimately be either confirmed or questioned by their college entrance test results. But don’t let fear keep you from homeschooling through high school! You are competent and capable of evaluating your child, and providing them with a superior education through homeschooling!

For this reason, I want to give you general, easy-to-follow guidelines. Let me explain this in the simplest terms, to take away your fear.

**How to Calculate Credits**

No need for a scary-sounding boot camp involving sweat and tremendous effort while the Drill Sergeant is screaming at you. Instead, calculating homeschool credits is more like getting a massage or eating chocolate. It feels like “Ahhhhhh! That’s better!” Let me take away that worry for you. You’ll feel more confident about homeschooling once you figure out the little trick to doing it easily!

You can measure credits by the book or curriculum. One textbook is one credit. One semester class is a half credit. If you don’t use pre-measured curriculum, you can measure credits by estimating hours. One credit equals 120 to 180 hours, or about one hour a day. One half credit equals 60 to 90 hours, or about half an hour per day.

You can give high school credits for high school level work at any age. This means your middle schooler could earn credit in Algebra 1 or higher, high school level Biology or higher, and foreign language if you use a high school curriculum.

You can give high school credit for work completed at high school age, even if your child is behind in a subject area. In public school, they would be given credit for any class they attend, even remedial classes, and you can, too.

You can give high school credit for advanced work, too. Children can earn high school credit if they do college level work at any age. And they can get credit based on demonstrated expertise – for instance if they are published or perform in an adult orchestra.
How to Give Grades

Some homeschoolers think it’s tons of fun to go back through four years of high school records and try to find or recreate every possible test, quiz, and assignment. I was not one of those people! Don’t focus on tests, focus on learning. When you give grades on your transcript, think beyond tests, and consider every way you have evaluated. Your grade should include what your child has done, what they know, and what they have produced.

Because not all homeschoolers use tests, I have created a quick grading estimate for homeschoo parents.

- Grade A or 4.0 means mastery, and the child meets high expectations, has high test scores, the child loves the subject, or the parent is not annoyed with what the child has done.
- Grade B or 3.0 is good, but certainly not worth an A, or the parent is somewhat annoyed.
- Grade C or 2.0 is not good at all, the parent is both annoyed and disappointed, but kept going onto the next level in the subject.

How to Calculate GPA

Here is a brief review of how to calculate homeschool GPA:

- Assign each class a credit value, for example one credit.
- Assign each class a numerical grade, for example 4.0.
- Multiply each class credit by the class numerical grade. This gives you the grade point for the class.
- Add all the grade points for all completed classes.
- Divide the total grade points by the number of credits completed.
- The answer is the current grade point average.

I don’t recommend weighting grades. It makes it harder for colleges, and colleges will like you more if you make their job easier. Here is the problem: every high school has a different policy on weighting grades. There are so many possible variations, and colleges need to compare students from different schools and school districts. For this reason, the first thing they do is un-weight any weighted grades. Colleges have asked me to tell parents not to weight grades, so I don’t recommend weighting grades unless your first choice college prefers weighted grades. Read more about Why I Do Not Recommend Weighting Grades.

Official Homeschool Transcript

Is a homeschool transcript official? Yes! Can a homeschool parent name courses, award credits, and assign grades to their student? Yes! Your homeschool records are official, because your homeschool is official. You do not have to be a “professional educator” to determine what counts and what doesn’t on
your child’s homeschool transcript. As the parent, you know best what your child has learned and what credits they have earned.

As the homeschool parent, you are responsible to create the homeschool records your child needs for college and career. You are the one who gets to make the official homeschool transcript.

**Making a transcript is your job, but it’s also your joy!**

There are so many advantages to making a homeschool transcript! You can let the personality and giftedness of your child shine through. The information you include on a homeschool transcript can help make your student very attractive to colleges and scholarship committees. If your child loves one subject, such as music or art, you can highlight their gift on the transcript. Homeschoolers can highlight the strengths and gifts of their students, demonstrated in their unique coursework and activities. Of course, you should also include the courses your child didn’t excel in, but you have the freedom to highlight your child’s individuality and make them shine.

You can create courses based on your child’s unique and passionate interests, describe those courses to colleges on your child’s transcript and course descriptions, and show your child for the special and wonderful person they are. In the competitive world of college admission and scholarships, homeschool records are one of the biggest advantages a student can have. Make sure your homeschool records do your student justice!
Options after High School

Ack! Homeschool Graduation! What’s Next?

Whether you're homeschooling your child in senior year or haven't even begun high school yet, you need to prepare for what comes next! There are a lot of options and I don’t want you to be overwhelmed. Let me help you make sure your child is ready for whatever they decide to do after graduation.

Which way will your child go? There are many good options available! While in the midst of homeschooling high school, it’s a good idea to take a step back once in a while. Consider what is more important than the four years of high school. What’s next?
Don’t rush through high school like it’s a race, hoping to get to the finish before anyone else. Instead, remember that it is just the first act in the play. Graduation is not the end of something – it’s the beginning of something else. Graduating high school means your child should be prepared to become an independent young adult.

Don’t be in a huge rush to graduate your child because early graduation means the next steps toward independence must come sooner. Your job is to educate completely (academically, spiritually, and socially) and then encourage your child to take the steps toward independent living. Yes, they may end up with too many credits and you may sometimes feel frustrated. Remember, your goal is to produce a happy, independent adult. No one ever said it would be easy!

There are decisions to be made and many options available. All these options are valid and each family is unique, as every child is unique. You have tremendous freedom when homeschooling high school, but at the same time, there is tremendous responsibility to make wise decisions. They may not be perfect and you may make some missteps, but there are real advantages of carefully considering and praying about your options. Discuss these options with your teen and talk about what will be best for them and for the family.

**Transition Options between High School and Independence**

**Community College Dual Enrollment in High School**

Due to the expense of college, it's important to consider alternatives, particularly alternatives that can save money on the cost of college. One such option is community college. It is vital for parents to consider more than simply the cost in terms of dollars, however. Community college can be an R-rated environment. Are you ready to send your teen to an R-rated movie? There may or may not ever be a time when this will be okay with you.

If you have ever said public university is not an option for your family because it does not conform to your family values, then you may not be happy with community college. As much as many public universities are liberal, radical, and sometimes offensive, a community college can be even worse. It often surprises parents to know that registered offenders attend community college without anyone’s knowledge, because it's not intended to be a children's environment but a facility for adults.

Spend time researching the dual enrollment option before deciding it's a good fit. There is, of course, much variation in the quality and personality of each community college. Make sure this is a choice you make with your eyes wide open. A community college is not necessarily less of a risk because it has “community” in its name.

One thing to keep in mind about community college is that the grades are permanent and failure is a possibility. When you consider community college as a way of getting outside documentation of your homeschool grades, you need to be confident about your student’s ability to succeed. Any poor or
failing grade your child earns at community college is permanent and will be reported to any university where your child applies, so community college may not be a benefit.

**Distance Learning**

Your child can work toward a college degree through distance learning, earning college credits while studying at home independently. This involves taking tests such as CLEP, DSST, or AP. College policies vary widely so make sure the exam you choose will meet your child’s needs. CLEP exams can provide outside documentation of your homeschool and possibly earn your child college credit in order to save money.

There are two different ways to prepare for an exam. One is to follow behind your student and scoop up what they know. Give a sample test at home to see which tests they can pass. Then have your child take the test in the particular subject when you’re positive they can pass it. This will allow your child to accumulate college credits with minimal effort, and shorten the time needed in a university to achieve a degree.

The other way of handling distance learning is to plan ahead for specific tests. Choose the test your child needs to take. Have your child learn the subject like any other homeschool subject, then fill in learning gaps through a study guide. Have your child dedicate time to study the material for a CLEP exam in that particular college subject.

It’s possible to accumulate a large number of credits through various tests, and have them sent to a college that will award a degree. It can sound trendy to say your child is attending college online, but it’s not a new phenomenon. Years ago, homeschoolers engaged in distance learning as well. They mailed in their tests and papers instead of sending by email or fax, but it was the exact same thing. Resources for distance learning have been around for a long time.

**Gap Year between High School and College**

Taking a gap year typically means the student is taking a year off between high school and college. Always popular overseas, taking a gap year is becoming more common among students in the U.S. During a gap year, the student engages in meaningful, but not exclusively academic, activities. During the gap year, a teen can volunteer, work as a missionary, take a full time job, or travel the world. This allows the child to mature and gain life experience before entering college.

Taking a gap year is favored by some highly selective colleges to provide a break between the high school experience and the intense Ivy League experience. Most colleges prefer more mature students on campus and are happy for the year-long maturity break. A gap year can help to avoid first year burn-out or excessive partying on campus.
During the college search process, ask each college about their gap year policy. The process often involves applying to college first, to retain scholarships. They may require a signed agreement to reserve the scholarships for your child the following year, when they finally attend. Some colleges are easy-going and happy to have your child no matter what. Other colleges may require the student to submit a plan for the gap year and give regular updates on their progress. At some colleges, your child may apply after the gap year is complete, with the hope their experiences will enhance college admission essays. Find out what each college’s policy is during junior year, if you are considering this option.

Do not take a single college credit during a gap year without doing some research first. College policies on gap years vary widely. Speak directly to colleges where your child wants to attend. Often the gap year process begins with the college search and application process first. Some colleges remove scholarships if the student takes even a single college class after high school. Don't assume your child can take community college classes during a gap year unless you have confirmed your university’s policy in writing.

**Launch Options after High School and into Adulthood**

**Community College and Technical College After High School**

If you've graduated your child from your homeschool and they are 18 years old, should you send them to community college? When a student attends community college as an adult, it is a little different. It remains an adult environment, but now your child is an adult and community college may have important, tangible benefits.

If your child earns the financial aid package at the university and you still can’t make the numbers add up, sometimes community college is a more affordable option. Classes are open to all abilities; if your child has already graduated from high school and is struggling with basic reading, writing, or math, community college can be a way for them to take a class at their ability level. This can be helpful if your child is behind and has to catch up quickly.

Homeschoolers have been able to catch up on math or foreign language in community college and go to their first choice university later on. It can be particularly helpful for a student who had to be dragged kicking and screaming through their homeschool graduation, and as an adult suddenly becomes willing to learn. An adult learner who is motivated to learn can easily transition into community college and they may also earn an AA degree.

Finally, vocational school or technical college is a wonderful way for adult students to transition into independence. The path to vocational school often grows out of the passionate interests that develop when a child reaches the teen years. Far from being less than college, a vocational school graduate is well on their way to meaningful employment and an honorable career in a field they care deeply about.
Attend Christian College or University

Some people wonder if Christians should go to college. After all, college is filled with faulty humans. While some homeschool leaders vociferously disapprove of homeschoolers attending college of any kind, I disagree. For many people and for many reasons, college is the next step after high school. There are risks inherent in every life choice, and attending a Christian college is not uniquely risky. For Christian families choosing between post-graduation options, I have some encouragement.

Letting your child go to college is like letting your child ride their bike without training wheels for the first time. It can be terrifying for both parent and child. Even with a helmet, a child could get seriously hurt. Similarly, even with careful college selection, it is still possible for a child to get hurt through a college experience. Still, it’s not necessarily more scary or hazardous than riding a bike without training wheels.

Consider 1 Corinthians 13:11: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child; I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.” You probably spend much time during your homeschool years explaining the reasons you keep your child safe at home. Those reasons don’t change when your child grows up. It’s your child who changes; your child becomes an adult. Adults must interact with a fallen world on a regular basis. Firm in their faith, adult Christians need to negotiate contrasting world views with their own beliefs intact.

At some point your child will be ready to become a man or woman and move on into adult life – and that life may include college. Train up your child in the way they should go and when they become an adult, allow them to enter the world as a force for good. Because Jesus said, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” in Mark 16:15. It’s a command. Jesus said it. That verse screams for your attention. He doesn’t say, “Go into all the world, except for college.” If college is in your child’s future, prepare them to face it as a mature adult.

Of course, you don’t have to throw your children into the lion’s den, either. Choose your child’s college carefully, weighing the options. Don’t be afraid of college in general. If college is the next natural step after high school, then prepare your student to step boldly into adulthood. Allow them to engage the culture so they may change the world. College is the time for parents to complete the transition from sheltering their children from harm and letting them become independent. In college, a student can experience independence but still have a network of supportive and caring professionals and peers.

Attend Public or Private University

Many families work toward college admission after high school. If this is the option for your family, be sure to plan ahead, and understand the process of admission. Preparing to enter college takes a lot of time. Begin college applications approximately one year before your child wants to attend college. The application is a long process, not a short moment. The keys to college admission and scholarships begin with junior year.
During junior year, search for colleges where you want to apply. Attend a college fair, and carefully research colleges you and your child are interested in. Then have your child study for the SAT or ACT, so they have the best possible chance of earning admission. Visit colleges so you know if each one will be a good fit. By the end of junior year, choose four to eight colleges where your child will apply. Make sure you include Reach, Fit, and Safety schools, with a variety of public and private universities.

Begin senior year applying for colleges. There are application forms, financial aid forms, and letters of recommendation to coordinate. The student must write multiple essays that are self-reflective and technically perfect. Professional-looking homeschool records must be sent to each college during the application process.

It’s not as if your child can claim they’re going to university one day and show up for class the next day. It’s a long process. The application process requires so much time and effort that it’s almost impossible to get it all done during senior year. When university is your goal, you need to apply on the first day of senior year. I know this can surprise parents because it’s a year in advance, but your child can get the best scholarships available by applying early.

**Meaningful Work and Career**

Eventually, children need to become self-supporting. Instead of college, some children enter the work world directly. Although it is tempting to believe that any job is a successful launch into society, it’s important to remember that your goal is not for them to simply work. Your goal is for your children to grow up and become independent, which means working and making a living wage. While meaningful work is important, they will need to make enough money to pay for rent and car expenses, buy groceries, and eventually raise a family of their own. Careers begin in many ways, from entrepreneurship to military service, to special gifts and talents or hard work and a strong work ethic.

Internships are a popular option for homeschool graduates to test drive a vocation or profession. Whether they are paid or unpaid, internships can be valuable, if only for the insights they provide. A student who successfully completes an internship may eventually land a full time position at the same company. But even if they don't, internships can yield valuable letters of recommendation which can be used to find paying jobs.

Adults change careers fairly frequently, and that may happen to your child as well. They may begin adulthood with a satisfying job, and then their focus may shift to career advancement. For example, they may begin working at a restaurant, and then enjoy it so much they want to advance in the company. Often this will mean a college degree is necessary.

Your job is to prepare your child for anything, so no matter where they go in life, and how their plans change, they still have the high school education to help them achieve their goals.
Couch Potato or Failure to Launch

Some teenagers look at the options after high school and choose “none of the above.” Unable to make a decision, they choose nothing after high school. It’s incredibly important for your child to recognize that being a couch potato is not the same as taking a gap year. Your goal is to graduate a grown up. You don’t want your child to sit on a couch playing video games for the rest of their lives; you want them to do something meaningful and find their place in the world. Your job as a parent is to avoid enabling their dependence on you.

Encourage your child to become an independent adult. If they have trouble making a decision, you can make suggestions. One idea is to attend a small liberal arts college, where they can try a variety of classes and topics to find a career interest they enjoy. Another idea is to set clear boundaries around living at home. Explain to your child that they can receive support and live at home if they have a full time job or attend college full time. With clear expectations they will receive no spending money, phone privileges, or gas for their car, they may become more motivated to make a positive life choice.

It’s possible to do everything in your power to ensure independence and still end up with a couch potato adult. If you have trouble with failure to launch, these resources may help.

- Engaging Today's Prodigal: Clear Thinking, New Approaches, and Reasons for Hope by Carol Barnier
- Parenting Your Adult Child: How You Can Help Them Achieve Their Full Potential by Chapman and Campbell
- Setting Boundaries with Your Adult Children: Six Steps to Hope and Healing for Struggling Parents by Allison Bottke - is geared primarily toward parents dealing with delinquent behavior: drugs, alcohol, and felonious behaviors
- When Our Grown Kids Disappoint Us: Letting Go of Their Problems, Loving Them Anyway, and Getting on with Our Lives by Jane Adams - provides warmth, empathy, and perspective
- The Power of Praying for Your Adult Children by Stormie Omartian

Be Prepared for Changing Choices

Remember that kids change their minds. You don’t know what the future will hold. The next thing you know, they want to own a business of their own and need a degree, or they decide to switch careers as an adult and enter college later in life. As the parent, you can help your child be prepared for any future endeavor by providing a college prep education in high school.
Homeschool parents must be prepared too, with complete and accurate homeschool records. Commit to completing all homeschool documentation before your child graduates. I can’t stress enough how important this is! Every year, parents and students reach out to me for help with record keeping. Some of these parents have children in their mid-twenties.

Last month I received an email from a 26 year old man, homeschooled for second through twelfth grade. His parents didn’t keep records, and he never intended to go to college so he felt it didn’t matter. But at the age of 26, he changed his mind. He was trying to attend online college and said it would be easy enough to start, except they required a high school transcript. Now almost 10 years after graduation, this man and his mother had to work together to create a transcript from memory alone. Please make your homeschool records every year – no exceptions. No one can see the future. You don’t want to be the weakest link, holding your child back.

In high school, plan for the best possible education for your child. Provide life skills, work skills, and job skills so they can succeed at any career in the future. Update your transcripts and course descriptions every year, so you are ready for anything – even if college isn’t part of the immediate plan. Be prepared for anything and provide your child with a college prep education.
Anxiety and feelings of insecurity can come and go. When you are faced with feelings of inadequacy, you may start wondering how to become a better homeschool parent. How do you become successful? Let me explain what will and will not make you a better homeschool parent.

A degree in teaching will NOT make you a better home educator

You don’t need to be a certified teacher or have credentials to homeschool your children. Teachers learn to teach groups. You learn to teach your child.
My friends who are certified teachers tell me that their teaching degrees gave them training in crowd control, educational philosophies, grading criteria, and classroom strategies. On the other hand, homeschooling is about parents strongly motivated by the love they have for their children to educate them. No crowd control, educational philosophies, or classroom strategies are needed. If you want to become a better homeschool parent, then love your child more. Become a student of your student. Better homeschool parents learn about homeschooling, not teaching.

I’m a trained nurse, and I know too much about the human body. My husband teases me about it all the time. When someone gets sick, I worry too much. My husband always says, “What is it this time? Spinal meningitis?” But I worry too much because I know too much. There have been times when family members have been in the hospital, and I knew far too much about exactly how seriously ill they were, and how close to death. It can be terrifying. Even immobilizing.

In the same way, when you are a certified teacher and homeschooling, you may also have the problem of “knowing too much.” You would be amazed how many certified teachers with public and private school backgrounds contact me for support. Some feel inadequate because they are not specially trained for high school. Others have seen so many uneducated children they are terrified of making mistakes. It’s hard to let go of four years of educational training. It’s hard to remember that the love of your child is the most important factor in teaching. In high school, the problem of “knowing too much” becomes more acute as you start to think about high school grades.

**Certified teachers often struggle to let go of teaching and testing**

I know it’s difficult to separate homeschooling from being a teacher. Many of my clients are certified teachers and they tell me it’s one of their biggest areas of struggle. They are often gifted teachers but struggle to let go of the classroom strategies they were taught in college. Homeschooling isn’t about teaching at all, it’s about learning. Homeschooling means trying to encourage the love of learning.

For example, one area where certified teachers often struggle is in testing their children. Try to remember that tests in school are given because you need tests to assess large groups of children. When you are homeschooling, you can assess in other ways. Ask yourself how you are assessing them already. Perhaps this mindset will help. Nancy explains it this way.

“Lee, I was a classroom teacher for several years. I have just completed my 11th year of homeschooling and we have graduated our oldest student. If anything, my classroom experience has handicapped our homeschool efforts. The goal in homeschooling our children is NOT to keep up with what is being taught and how it is being taught in the government school setting. I am learning to be more creative, flexible, and to think out of the box than ever before. Thank you for your encouragement!” ~ Nancy
**Parent Partnerships will NOT make you a better home educator**

Parent partnerships and alternative education programs are conditional on giving up some of your homeschool freedom. Parent partnerships are love with strings attached.

As a homeschooler, you are probably getting quite a few emails from organizations that want you to stop homeschooling independently. These emails from schools, parent partnerships, and alternative education programs make many promises. They benefit financially when they make you feel inadequate and incapable.

If you feel less than adequate when you read an advertisement, steer clear. You are capable of homeschooling, even at the high school level. You have what it takes. You have what you need. You can do this!

Parent partnership and alternative education programs see homeschoolers as a source of income. When you use their programs, they get money. Whether they receive money from the government or money directly from homeschoolers, these programs benefit financially when they make you feel inadequate and incapable. Once you sign up, they can exert control over your homeschool. They love you but there are strings attached. Don’t let them make you feel less than qualified!

Any time you accept public money, you give up some control in exchange. If you use a parent partnership homeschool program through a public school, the school may exert control over your child’s education. These programs may claim to love homeschoolers, and promise they will not exert control over a homeschool, but they can.

They often require that your child be evaluated by a teacher, maintain a certain number of hours in a digital classroom, or submit work to be graded. Programs may require you to choose a curriculum from an approved list and refuse to approve of your choice of curriculum. Many will not allow you to teach using your worldview, a religious curriculum, or religious instruction. More concerning than what they require is the attitude these programs convey.

Alternative education programs can change their policies at any time. I have seen this happen. Families start with a program and feel satisfied with it, and then the following year the rules change.

**Homeschool parents are the REAL teachers**

Advertisements for parent partnerships and school systems are trying to make you feel inadequate. Look at what these advertisements imply. Some ads offer “real” teachers. This implies you aren’t a real teacher. You are a home educator and that’s a real teacher. They also may advertise they use "approved curriculum" but your homeschool curriculum is approved, too; it’s approved by you, the homeschool parent who knows their child best.
Programs may advertise earning a “real diploma” yet a homeschool diploma is real as well. In fact, my children's high school diplomas were real enough to earn college admission and scholarships. They may offer "accredited transcripts" when some public schools aren’t accredited any more than homeschoolers are.

Most colleges request an “official transcript” which home educators can create with a simple document titled “Official Homeschool Transcript.” Colleges understand that a homemade, homeschool transcript is valid without accreditation.

**School-at-home will NOT make you a better home educator**

School-at-home advertisements can seem impressive, but read carefully and look over the details. Here are a few interesting advertising phrases:

- "Curriculum is individualized." A close look reveals the program only uses textbook, workbook, school-at-home style learning. That doesn't sound individualized. What could be more individualized than you finding curriculum for each specific child in your homeschool?

- "Outstanding curriculum choices coupled with the expertise of your advisor." The best guidance counselor is you, the parent, who knows and loves your child. An advisor should be encouraging you to follow your heart and your intimate knowledge of your child anyway. Remember that so-called outstanding curriculum choices may only include limited options.

- "Courses range from vocational to advanced placement." Your independent homeschool can offer anything from AP courses to remedial education, as needed. You are not limited by curriculum choices and can put together any class your student needs, at any level, no matter how strange or unusual your child’s interests.

- "Record keeping options for courses on their own or through a co-op." Homeschoolers can include any educational experiences on the official homeschool transcript. You can include a public school calculus or band class, a co-op class, a distance-learning class, and a community college class all on one official homeschool transcript. Record keeping is often less difficult when you homeschool independently, because you can do it your own way.

- "Tuition is only..." Homeschooling does not have to include tuition payments. You can spend as little or as much as you need or want to in order to create a suitable education for your child. Without giving up your freedom, you can educate without tuition payments.

Most importantly, school-at-home and public school supplemental programs are not a good fit if you are homeschooling in order to avoid the trappings of the school system.
Homeschooling WILL make you a better home educator

As you begin to homeschool, you will recognize quickly that part of your job is to shape and mold your child’s behavior. You immediately reap the rewards of a closer relationship with your child, too! Homeschooling can make your child more pleasant to be around. At the same time, it will increase your love for your child and your awareness of their academic needs, so you will become a better home educator over time. So you can see that homeschooling will make you a better home educator as time goes by.

Continuing education WILL make you a better home educator

Nurses, doctors, and other professionals are required to take continuing education courses each year in many states. They need to stay up-to-date on the latest research and trends. Homeschooling parents have a similar need of continuing education. Invest in yourself and your vocation as a homeschool educator.

A huge determining factor in your success as a homeschooler depends not on how much money you spend, but where you spend the money you have. In fact, statistics from the National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI.org) show that homeschool achievement is not related to a teaching degree, the amount of state control or regulation, or family income.

Invest in yourself as a home educator. Especially as high school and college are approaching, don't be afraid – be assertive. This is your job, after all, and you need to have what it takes to succeed. Not everyone has support groups available and some support groups rarely discuss high school issues and concerns. Don't ignore the problem of high school, because it won't simply go away.

There are four ways to invest in yourself: buy a book, take a class, attend a convention, or get individual help. Some homeschoolers have a support group with a great lending library. Support groups may offer classes on homeschooling high school. You may be able to find a convention nearby. Some parents have older, successful homeschool friends to lean on. However, my job is to make sure that everyone has these resources, no matter where they live, so they are available to everyone.

Investing in your vocation WILL make you a better home educator

Learn more about the next step in your homeschool journey, and more about the areas that are challenging for you, before you become afraid or anxious. Part of my job is removing homeschool parents’ fears and insecurities. It is part reality-based reflection on the state of the general population of public school children, part cheerleader, encouraging with positive affirmations, (“Go team go!” and “You can do it!”) and part hand-holding, from one friend to another, as we work out issues that arise.

In case you are wondering how I can help, here are four ways to invest in yourself as a home educator from my website.
Questions to ask before enrolling in an educational system

Accredited distance learning programs advertise for you to join them. They want you! But look closely at the messages, think carefully, and weigh the pros and cons before choosing. You have no need to be afraid of homeschooling! Before you decide to give alternative education or parent partnership programs a try, ask yourself some questions:

- What will I have to give to receive what they promise?
- Do I feel inadequate when I read the advertisement or talk to the organization?
- Do they stand to gain financially by making me feel inadequate?
- Will they be able to exert influence on what I teach my children?

When you are evaluating these programs, check out their attitude toward homeschooling. You may find programs bring up the old, familiar complaint about homeschooling – lack of socialization. Even rookie homeschoolers usually know that socialization in the real world is the highest quality socialization a child can get. Raising socialization as a concern is a red flag; it signals that the program is not as homeschool friendly as it claims.

Sometimes advertisements urge parents to sign up by citing how difficult the teenage years can be. Teenagers can be difficult as any age group can be difficult, like parenting in general is difficult. Yes, it's true, managing teens can be like trying to nail Jello to the wall at times. I'm not convinced programs can do a better job of educating teens, though. Some teens are simply difficult no matter which method you choose. Certain children are more difficult than other children. Putting your child into a school system is not going to change their nature.

Homeschooling is individualized and runs at a pace that fits your child. Consider the learning pace of public or private school affiliations, which often have written in stone requirements for the rate of instruction. The pace may be too fast or too slow for your child. Since children usually learn in fits and spurts, a system requiring a constant rate of learning can be either frustrating because it's too fast, or boring because it's too slow.

When I think about the steady rate of classroom teaching, I am always reminded of the I Love Lucy episode with Lucille Ball in the candy factory. She tries so hard to keep up, to the point of shoving candy into her hat, mouth, and blouse just to show she isn't falling behind! When she works quickly, the conveyor belt moves more quickly too, and she is never able to keep up. Homeschooling does not have
to be this way. You can give work at a comfortable pace for your individual child, making sure the work is challenging but not overwhelming.

Make choices based on what's right for your own child. You know your child best. Try not to make decisions based on a fear of homeschooling. Fear is not a good reason for making choices about schooling options.

Beware of anything that tries to sell you something by playing on your fears or making you feel incompetent. This strategy is a dead giveaway that their motives are not pure and they don't have your best interests at heart. Instead, listen to those who have homeschooled successfully before you, those who can encourage and support you, and help you make your homeschool as good as it can be.

Independent home education is flexible, individualized, supportive, and official. You don't have to work within artificial boundaries or limited curriculum choices. You can be official by following state law. Recognize that "accredited" is not a panacea or Holy Grail. You are a homeschool advisor, a mother or father who truly loves your child and wants what is best for them. You can choose curriculum to match your student's learning style and your own teaching style, and teach courses that mean something to your child.

**You can become a GREAT home educator**

You need look no further than your own home for the great education your child deserves. You can homeschool independently through high school! Thousands of families before you have experienced incredible rewards. Your family will be blessed by your decision. Don't settle for a love that isn't true - love should have no strings attached! You love your child and want what is best for them in the long run. You want them to be literate, responsible, employable adults – I know you do! Your love for your child will ensure success.
How to Get a Great Letter of Recommendation

A letter of recommendation is a formal introduction letter. The letter recommends your child for a college or job, and is the first formal introduction of your child in writing. A letter of recommendation is often required during the college admission process, which you should start working on in the first month of senior year.

The character qualities and abilities of your child are described in a letter of recommendation, demonstrating their fitness for the college or job. It should describe the great attributes the student will bring to campus or the workplace, explaining how they will function at the next level.

The best letter of recommendation will be written by an adult who knows your child well and can write competently. They might be written by community college instructors, or employers or supervisors from apprenticeships, internships, and job experiences. Each letter writer should be eager and willing to write a glowing recommendation without hesitation. A glowing recommendation is more likely from someone who knows the student by name, and can comment on their work ethic. A letter of recommendation can
be great outside documentation of exactly what your child is about, and how they are qualified to attend that college or get that job offer.

Letters of recommendation are usually written by people outside the family. Letters need to be timely, written within a few months of when they are needed so the content is seen as current. They must be confidential, so you won’t see the letter because it is usually mailed directly to the organization and not given to the student. Letters of recommendation must be personal, from someone who knows the child well. They must be well-written, by someone with strong writing skills. Letters must also be authoritative, from someone who fits the role requested.

There are times when a parent will need to write a letter of recommendation, or the recommender is confused about how to start writing a letter. You may be called upon to write a letter of recommendation for a homeschooler you know.

Let me explain how to think through letters of recommendation, and how to plan ahead for them. Then I’ll give you a thorough explanation and outline in case you need to write a letter of recommendation for your child or another homeschooler.

**Step 1. Think and Plan**

Ask for a letter of recommendation one or two months prior to each deadline, because it takes quite a bit of time to complete the job. Plan to ask for letters of recommendation during the first month of senior year, but before senior year, there are things you can do to plan ahead for great recommendations.

Plan ahead and encourage high school activities that can lead to glowing recommendations. Finding activities and experiences your child loves is the first step. Find activities that fit your child’s interests and encourage them to develop close relationships with professors or adults in leadership positions.

Great recommendations come from two sources. The first is an expert, such as a teacher, tutor, or college professor who can talk about the student’s educational preparation. Experiences with ranching could lead to an expert ranch owner talking about the student’s expertise with animals. If you are planning to use community college classes to replace or supplement junior and senior year, college teachers may be a great source of recommendations. Plan ahead, and tell your child to get to know their professors. They can sit in the front row, ask questions, visit during office hours, and participate in class so professors know who they are by name.

The second is a character recommendation, from someone who can speak to the content of the student’s character, someone who knows their heart, such as a pastor or team leader. This person may or may not know anything about your child’s home education, but can speak about their personal characteristics.
In a public school setting, students request a recommendation from their guidance counselor, who probably doesn’t know them unless they have been in trouble. The counselor will look at their academic record and request a resume or interest list, so they can say something specific about the student. This is not the best kind of recommendation. In a homeschool setting, the student requests a letter of recommendation from an adult they know well. You can plan ahead by providing the recommender with a copy of the homeschool transcript, plus an activity list or resume, so they have a fuller view of the student’s abilities.

**Step 2. Assess and Investigate**

Ask for a letter of recommendation from someone who knows your child well and writes well. Think of it this way, the letter is an expert witness written report on the character and abilities of the person being recommended. This person must be an expert in your child and their abilities. And they have to act like an expert by possessing the ability to write well.

How do you know that someone writes well? Most teachers, pastors, professors, and professionals are used to writing recommendations. Others may struggle with the task, or may not write in a well-organized fashion. Look at their casual written interactions by email, on Facebook posts, and in Christmas letters. Do you notice typos, grammar issues, or other problems?

**Step 3. Ask and Inform**

The teenager should request the recommendation politely, in person, and provide additional details the recommender may not already know. This is the important part. It should definitely be the teenager who requests the recommendation, not the parent. The student does all the requesting, the student does all the follow-up, and the student is the one who sends a thank you note. This request should be done in person, if possible, not by email.

When requesting a letter of recommendation, it’s best to ask an open-ended question, allowing them the opportunity to decline without giving an explanation. “Would you be able to write a positive recommendation for my college application this month?” The request should be made at least five or six weeks before the due date. The more time you give, the better. A great recommendation is not easy to write, and the process can take a significant amount of time for a busy professional. On the other hand, once they have written a letter, it’s easy to modify it to send to multiple colleges or scholarship organizations.

Be considerate of the person’s time. It’s extremely important to request the recommendation early in the application process. Even if your child sees this person regularly and makes the initial request in person, make sure they send a formal, written follow-up request via email, with all the details. Your child should give their full name and explain why they need the recommendation.
Once the person has agreed to write, the student can provide more details about their interests and experiences. I suggest giving the recommender their transcript and activity list. After all, the writer may only be familiar with one aspect of the child’s education, and providing this material can give them the opportunity to get to know the student better.

Include the instructions for completing the recommendation. Usually the recommender will have to physically sign the letter and mail it directly to the college or organization. Parents and students don’t usually see the letter that is mailed. For this reason, you want to be certain the recommender will give a glowing recommendation, so allowing them to decline the request easily is important.

When letters of recommendation are required, look carefully at the details of the request. A college may have specific requirements for a letter of recommendation, such as “in a sealed, signed envelope” or “mail separately.” The student should follow up right away after a recommender agrees to write a letter, providing an addressed stamped envelope, or login information with clear instructions on how to submit the letter online.

The student should personally follow up on the process and check with the college or employer to be sure the letter of recommendation was received. If necessary, the student may need to speak to the recommender again, and gently remind them about the letter. Follow up after two weeks is important, so they still have time to ask someone else if necessary. Once the letter has arrived, be sure to have your child send a formal, hand-written thank you note to the recommender.

It is preferable for all recommendations to come from non-relatives. On the other hand, some colleges require a letter of recommendation from the school counselor – and that’s you! If they ask for a letter of recommendation from a parent, then give it to them without complaint. They often want it so they can check off a box on the application. Don’t over-think it, simply provide one.

Here is the key to recommending your own child: compliment, don’t critique. This is one time it’s OK to brag about your child. You should say good things, not any bad stuff, about your teen. Parents may also be asked to write a recommendation for a student outside their home.

**Step 4. How to Write a Recommendation**

Follow these clear, how-to instructions for parents and others who are new to the art of writing a recommendation.

A letter of recommendation is a letter of introduction, but it also should have a clear recommendation at the end – not unlike giving a grade. If you can’t give a good recommendation, you may want to decline the offer of writing one for the student.
Here is the key to what specific recommendations mean:

1. “I strongly recommend” means the recommender is extremely confident of the student’s ability to be successful.

2. “I recommend” means the recommender is reasonably confident in the student.

3. “I recommend with reservations” means the recommender isn’t sure of the student, or has specific hesitations. Avoid writing a letter if you must use this level of recommendation.

4. “I do not recommend” means the recommender believes the student would not be a good match for the school, and will not likely succeed. Avoid writing this one as well.

Beyond this clear statement of recommendation at the end, a letter of recommendation has some key ingredients. Include strong words that describe the student. Write vivid examples demonstrating the student’s qualities. It should be a well-written essay with professional structure.

**Prewriting and Brainstorming**

Begin the letter by brainstorming your ideas and concepts, so you have specific words and examples to include.

1. Brainstorm character qualities of the student

2. Brainstorm specific examples of those character qualities

3. Consider and collect key phrases

4. Brainstorm strong words for the conclusion

**Strong Words and Phrases**

Look over the following list to get you started, and think about what might fit the student you are describing, highlighting what is useful. Strong words indicate the likelihood of success in that college or job. Concrete examples of these qualities are proof of authenticity.
Follow a Formal Format

A formal letter will not talk about elementary school or junior high experiences. It will not mention grade levels before ninth grade, and will reference only high school years. Don’t include personal matters that are not related to the purpose of the letter, such as a divorce or other family experience. The letter should only be about the student, not the writer of the letter or the student’s family situation.
When a parent is writing a letter, it’s important not to sound like a mommy or daddy. Don’t talk about your child’s annoying habits or their weaknesses, and brainstorm enough strengths to fill the letter. Don’t talk about your other children, or how overwhelming or difficult it was to homeschool. This is not a letter about you or your family history. It is a letter about your child who is nearly an adult.

The Benefits of Letters of Recommendation

A well-written letter of recommendation is amazing outside documentation of your student’s preparation. Written by someone who knows your child well and writes competently, this letter can have a huge payoff. Plan ahead for success!
Take the PSAT for Fun and Profit

High School Testing: Knowledge that Saves Money

Like the SAT, the PSAT is a college admission test overseen by the College Board. It meets most state homeschool testing requirements and covers reading, writing, and math, but doesn't include an essay. The PSAT is a fairly inexpensive test compared to most annual assessments. In addition to being practice for the SAT, the PSAT can help you find a college, indicate career options your student might not have considered, and can lead to scholarships.

The complete name for the test is PSAT/NMSQT, which stands for Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test. The name can help you decipher the two functions of the PSAT. The first part, PSAT, means it's a practice test your child can take "for fun" to learn about the SAT. The second
part, NMSQT, stands for National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test, which means your child can take the test "for profit" as a junior. Either way can benefit your student.

**Taking the PSAT for Fun**

The name PSAT means the test is preliminary, practice, or pre-SAT. Your child can take the test for practice in tenth or eleventh grade. I call this taking the test “for fun” because scores don’t matter. The results are only for you, with no negative repercussions at all. You can use it as a starting point, before your child studies for the SAT and provide firsthand practice for the SAT. It is also used to estimate your child's SAT scores.

The PSAT measures math and evidence-based reading and writing. Each section is given a score of 160 to 760, with a total possible score between 320 and 1520 (prior to 2015, there were three sections with each scoring 20 to 80). Math makes up half the total score, and reading and writing make up the other half. The results are a good predictor of your child's future score on the SAT, even though the total possible score is lower than for the SAT. Knowing what score range your child is likely to attain on the SAT can help you find a college that will match your child's academic rigor.

The PSAT also provides practice taking standardized tests in a rotten environment. In a sea of contagious diseases, surrounded by tattoos, body piercings, and smelly teenagers, my sons sat in alphabetical order in a public school cafeteria. Certainly not a perfect situation for a test, but it was definitely good to see the setting of the SAT before the test score counted! Taking a timed test around strangers is difficult. It's more difficult when you haven't practiced first. The PSAT can provide practice taking a test in less than perfect, non-homeschooling conditions.

**Comparative Function**

Taking the test for fun gives you a percentile score, which compares your student against other bright, college-bound students of the same age. One of the few drawbacks of homeschooling is that you can lack a sense of where your child fits in the norm. You know perfectly well your student's foibles and weak areas, but often don't realize exactly how smart they are compared to the rest of the gene pool. This test can be a startling reminder of how efficient and effective homeschooling can be! Even struggling learners in a homeschool environment will often test average or above in standardized tests that compare them to other high school students.

The comparative function will also give you a helpful "data point" for your student if they simply do not test well. Nobody is perfect, and of course, there are students who won't test well, even though they are quite bright. Taking the PSAT for fun, without the risk of negative repercussions, can help you determine whether to use standardized test scores at all when applying to college. If your student does very poorly on the test, you can decide to use other methods to document your homeschool achievement.
Based on the "for fun" score, you can submit a portfolio instead of a test score. You might also decide to enroll your child in community college courses to prove college readiness. More options will be available when you have this information.

The test is good for comparison because it's standardized, which means that states requiring a test from homeschoolers will often accept the PSAT. Better still, it is an inexpensive test, so you can save money by using it. As far as tests go, the PSAT is a cheap way to meet your state's requirement for annual testing. In Washington State, for example, it's the best value for testing in tenth and eleventh grades.

**College Search Function**

If you check "yes" on the Student Search Service section on the PSAT to allow colleges to see information about your student, you'll be well on your way to starting your college search. This is a good thing, because colleges will start marketing to your student. You can find out about great colleges this way - perfect fit colleges you otherwise may not have considered. Yours could be the student they want!

They may be looking for a homeschooled student in Oregon who wants to be a doctor, or may be willing to take any student from North Dakota, merely to get another state represented at their school. The Student Search can tell you which colleges want your child. By the end of junior year, you should know where your child wants to apply, and it can help to request that interested colleges mail you information.

Make sure your student fills out the student information section as well. They will be asked questions about what classes they have taken in high school. Since homeschoolers rarely talk about that sort of thing, sometimes kids don't have a clue what courses they have taken, or what grades moms intend to give them.

**PSAT 10 for More Practice**

The PSAT 10 is the same test as the PSAT. The purpose of this test is to provide more practice. It’s strictly optional and not helpful for all children. For more practice, the PSAT 10 is offered in February or March of tenth grade only (the "10" part of the test). Like the PSAT, your child will receive score reports, which can help direct further study on Khan Academy and help steer your child toward appropriate AP tests if you desire.

Since students already take the PSAT twice, once in tenth grade and once in eleventh grade, I do not suggest taking an additional practice test with the PSAT 10. Over-testing in a real situation can increase children’s stress levels, as we sometimes hear about from our public school counterparts. I don't believe it's necessary to add a third time in the form of the PSAT 10. However, if you believe your child needs more practice or would like more practice in a real test situation, then do what's best for your child.
Taking the PSAT for Profit

The second part of the name of this test is NMSQT. Although people rarely refer to the test this way, it indicates that the test is "for profit." This acronym stands for National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test. If you have heard of a student becoming a "National Merit Scholar" or "National Merit Commended Student," this is the test they took.

It's national because everyone can take it, even homeschoolers. It measures academic merit, meaning that a good score and quality academics will get your child considered for the scholarship. Students who earn the National Merit Scholarship are awarded financial aid for college. It's a qualifying test because it's the beginning of the scholarship process; first your child takes the test and then there are other hoops to jump through. The test can lead to other scholarships.

Only juniors can take the test for profit. Although younger students can take the test for fun, only juniors' scores count for the NMSQT function of the test. Otherwise, the test is simply for fun. The sophomore year test does not count toward the National Merit Scholarship.

Since the PSAT is a practice test for the SAT, it can be for profit even if your child doesn't win the scholarship. College financial aid is often tied to SAT scores and anything you do to raise the score can save you thousands of dollars. Raising your child's score can be as easy as practice, practice, practice. Taking the PSAT is the best way to mimic the SAT test experience. It has the same environment, the same kids, the same noises, sights, and smells as the real test. Using it as a practice test can save you money on college.

National Merit Scholarship

The National Merit Scholarship is the best known high school scholarship in the nation, and the only way to win is to start with the PSAT test. Therefore, the single most important thing you can do to win this scholarship is to make sure your children take the PSAT in October of 11th grade.

Students are invited to participate in the competition based on their Selection Index from the PSAT, compared to other students within each state. The Selection Index is used to compare high school juniors within each state. Because each state is different, it's impossible to predict exactly how your child will compare. However, if your student's scores are above the 98th percentile on the PSAT, there is a possibility they may qualify for the National Merit Scholarship.

The National Merit Scholarship is a non-renewable, one-time award of up to $2500. Not everyone gets the whole prize amount, and some will get far less. When you compare the award to the cost of colleges, it doesn't seem like much. But the National Merit Scholarship can be a stepping stone to other scholarships.
Corporate-sponsored merit scholarship awards can provide additional money for some students. College-sponsored merit scholarship awards usually provide the most money. Colleges love to publicize how many National Merit Scholars they have on campus.

College-sponsored merit scholarships can be very large, even full scholarships. Some colleges will only give their largest monetary award to a student who names the college as their first choice university, and will provide lesser scholarships to other National Merit Scholars. On the other end of the spectrum are colleges that provide special scholarships to any National Merit participants, not only the winners, including Commended Students and Semifinalists.

National Merit Scholarship Process

The National Merit Scholarship competition is a long, drawn-out process, lasting over a year. PSAT scores are available a month or two after the child takes the test. The competition is based on the Selection Index score of high school juniors. The Selection Index is the sum of all three sections of the test: reading, writing, and math. Although you can clearly see the Selection Index on the PSAT score report, you can’t tell how your student did in comparison to the other students across your state, so you won’t immediately know whether they will advance in the scholarship competition. Scholarship participants are chosen by state, so students are only compared to other high school juniors.

Although you receive PSAT test scores during junior year, it’s not until the following August or September of senior year that Commended Students are notified, and for them the competition has ended. Later, some students will be notified they are Semifinalists, and for them the competition continues.

Semifinalists must complete a detailed scholarship application demonstrating the academic rigor of their education. They must take the SAT test, which will confirm the validity of their PSAT performance, and their SAT score must be reported to the National Merit Scholarship Corporation. Homeschoolers have become National Merit Scholars, and parents must play the role of school administrator, providing documentation of a rigorous education through well-documented record keeping.

Fine print details abound. The PSAT only counts toward the National Merit Scholarship Competition during the third year of a four-year high school, which is usually junior year. However, the administrators do understand that bright and gifted kids sometimes graduate early.

Planning for Success

If your child tends to score in the 90th percentile or higher on standardized tests, there is the possibility of winning these awards. There are also things you can do to increase your child’s chances of winning.

Have your child take the PSAT in tenth grade for practice, so they are comfortable with the test-taking environment. During tenth grade, have your child study for the PSAT regularly, teaching the skills of
reading, writing, and math in the context of test preparation. Familiarity with the test can increase test scores. Plan to complete geometry before sophomore year or earlier, if possible, to maximize the score on the math section. Carefully note the testing site deadlines to register for the PSAT, so you don't miss it. Make sure your homeschool records and course descriptions are up to date, so you can demonstrate academic rigor if your child advances to the Semifinalist stage.

The complete process of winning a National Merit Scholarship can be a bit complicated, and the information here can only provide an overview. If you are notified that your child is a Semifinalist, immediately spend time doing research. For general information on the PSAT, go to www.collegeboard.org. For detailed information on the PSAT, search professionals.collegeboard.org and read the PSAT/NMSQT Supervisor's Manual. For general information on the National Merit Scholarship, go to their website, www.nationalmerit.org and read their information about entering the competitions.

**National Merit Scholarship Planning Timeline**

- **October** tenth grade – take the PSAT for fun and practice
- **May** of tenth grade to **September** eleventh grade – register for the PSAT
- **October** eleventh grade – take the PSAT for the National Merit Scholarship
- **December** eleventh grade – scores available
- **Spring** eleventh grade – take the SAT
- **September** twelfth grade – Commended and Semifinalists are notified
- **October** twelfth grade – parents must complete the application
- **December** twelfth grade – SAT scores must be submitted
- **February** twelfth grade – finalists notified
- **March** twelfth grade – National Merit Scholarship
- **April** twelfth grade - corporate-sponsored scholarships awarded
- **May** twelfth grade – National Merit Scholars are notified
- **Summer** after twelfth grade – scholarship awards announced to the media

**If a Student Misses the PSAT/NMSQT**

Sometimes in her heart of hearts, a mom will know that her child could qualify for the National Merit Scholarship. If this describes you, what do you do when your child misses the PSAT? At this time, there is a way to apply for the National Merit Scholarship even if your child has missed the test.

A student who does not take the PSAT/NMSQT because of illness, an emergency, or other extenuating circumstance, but meets all other requirements for National Merit Scholarship program participation, may still be able to enter the competition. The student or a school official must write to the National Merit Scholarship Corporation (NMSC) as soon as possible after PSAT/NMSQT administration to request information about procedures for entry to the competition by alternate testing. The earlier NMSC receives the written request, the greater the student’s opportunities for meeting alternate entry requirements. To be considered, a request must be postmarked no later than March 1 following the
PSAT/NMSQT administration that was missed. NMSC will provide alternate entry materials, including an entry form that requires the signature of a school official.

This can only work in cases of serious emergency, though. Simply missing the test is not enough to enter the competition. If you plan to request an alternate entry this way, follow their directions carefully, and be exceptionally clear and concise. Good luck!

**Register for the Test**

Schools sometimes register kids in June, before classes end for the summer. Other schools register for the test during the first week of school. It's easy to access as a homeschooler, but you must be mindful of the registration deadline, as it is early in the school year. On the College Board web page for homeschooled students, you can search for a school offering the test.

Find a school first, but then call them right away. The test is only offered once each year, and it's easy to miss if you put off the call. Simply say, “I am a homeschool parent. How can I register my student for the PSAT at your school?” The person answering the phone may not be familiar with homeschool parents, so ask to speak to the principal or guidance counselor first. The College Board says: "If you are a homeschooled student, contact a principal or counselor at a local public or independent high school to make arrangements to take the PSAT/NMSQT at their school. Be sure to do so well in advance of the mid-October test dates, preferably during the previous June."

**Study for the Test**

I rarely suggest that your child study for the PSAT. Instead, I like to think of taking it as the starting point for studying for the SAT. But for some students, it makes sense to study for this test. If your child has a good chance of earning the National Merit Scholarship, for example, then studying for the PSAT might be that little extra they need. For an anxious student, practice may help them feel comfortable with the "process" of testing.

If you want your child to study for the test, you can also find PSAT and SAT test prep books. I suggest one of these books:

- [Cracking the PSAT/NMSQT with 2 Practice Tests, 2016 Edition](#)

When you register for the test, you will also receive one free official student guide to the PSAT, which includes a sample test. Make sure you read the guide, because it offers a lot of helpful information. For PSAT printable tips, check out the article [2 Weeks to the PSAT](#) and place one tip on the breakfast plate each morning!

Look for it on Amazon!
Quick Essay Skills Earn Thanks

“Thanks, Mom!”

What would you give to hear these words? Wouldn’t you just love to get some recognition and thankfulness years from now, when your child is all grown up? It can happen! With a little time and distance, your hard work can pay off and your child may come home and thank you.

Earn Thanks

During Alex’s first week at college, he came home and thanked me for a specific skill he learned when we were homeschooling. Believe it or not, he thanked me for teaching him to write a quick essay.

A week into his transition to the university, his professor gave an essay test. Alex said the other students were somewhat freaked out by the all-essay format of the two hour test. Suddenly our test preparation
for the SAT and ACT paid off in a real-life situation. Because we had so carefully prepared our students to write short essays under high pressure situations, Alex wasn’t bothered by the test at all. He recognized that this was only because we had worked on the skill in our homeschool.

Learning to write a quick, 40 to 50 minute essay is an important part of college preparation for two reasons. Alex picked up on reason number one – colleges often include essay tests. The second reason for practicing quick essay skills is a little more immediate for homeschoolers. Kids need the skill to score well on SAT and ACT tests. Both tests contain optional short essays but some colleges require the essay section of the test for admission.

Many colleges rely on SAT and ACT test scores to indicate college readiness. The essay section of these tests can demonstrate your child’s ability to write as well as provide outside documentation from a third party. Test scores can determine the quality of college that will accept a student. The SAT and ACT essay sections are 40 to 50 minutes long. They provide a writing prompt and the student has to read it, outline their thoughts, and write an essay in the time allowed. The essay is handwritten in the exam booklet, scanned into a computer, and any college where you submit scores can choose to view the essay online.

Handwriting is important, but not because of penmanship. The essay simply needs to be legible even though it is written quickly. There is no particular style of penmanship required. By the time children reach high school, they have usually developed their own penmanship style, which is fine as long as it’s legible.

**Earn Credits**

Your child can earn high school credit for learning how to write a quick essay. A high school English credit can be awarded when your child has completed about 120 to 180 hours of work. You don’t have to painstakingly count up every single hour though, you can easily estimate hours. If your student works at least an hour a day on a subject, it will typically add up to one high school credit. If they work half an hour a day, they will earn a half credit.

Your English class could include teaching your child to write a quick essay as the cornerstone of their composition studies. Get your child to work for about one hour a day on writing skills. This can include writing quick essays, learning about writing essays, and brainstorming essays. You can include other learn-to-write activities such as worksheets, vocabulary workbooks, journaling, spelling, grammar, or watching videos about how to write an essay.

For a full high school English credit, include both writing and reading. Assign real books to read for about half an hour to an hour per day. It doesn’t matter how many books your child reads – 6 to 600 is all within the range of normal. Don’t worry about literary analysis, because not every English class needs to include analysis. You have the freedom to focus on reading for enjoyment. Try to choose books from a [College Bound Reading List](#), and mix in some popular literature for teens.
Earn Scholarships

Your child can earn scholarships by writing application essays. This can happen in three ways. First, your child will need to write a college admission essay when they apply to college. These must be self-reflective (so the college knows who your child is) and technically perfect (so the college knows how well your child can write) descriptive essays. Written well, these essays can help your child earn scholarships from individual colleges.

Second, your child may earn scholarships from a college with great test scores on the SAT or ACT. Universities frequently tie financial aid to test scores, giving an additional financial incentive to study. Studying for these college admission tests, and learning how to write the essay required, can improve your child’s chances of earning college admission and scholarships. Additional tests, such as AP exams, can provide additional incentives for colleges to provide more scholarships. All AP exams are essay tests, so knowing how to write an essay is closely tied to success in these tests.

Third, many private scholarships are awarded as a result of essay contests. Because a high school English credit can include any kind of writing, you can have your child write for college scholarship competitions all year as the basis of your English curriculum. Considering the cost of college today, it’s definitely an idea worth pursuing.

The process for finding private scholarships is not easy, and it can take a lot of time. Of course, after you find them, you also need to filter them down to those that fit your child. Did you come across a scholarship especially for tall people? Don’t laugh, they’re out there! It won’t work for your child if they’re only 5’1“. After filtering, it’s helpful to record the ones you want your child to apply to, so you can keep track of due dates and requirements.

Perhaps the most difficult part is to help your student follow through with the whole scholarship application process. As the parent, you can do a lot of the legwork for scholarship applications, but your student must ultimately write the paper or produce the product. It’s hard work, which is why they get high school credit. Hopefully they will also earn college scholarships!

Learn How

It can take some time to learn short essay writing skills, and it takes a lot of practice. I would love to be able to tell you that I taught my children to write short essays, but I didn’t teach them. I made sure they learned the skill but I didn’t do the teaching. I felt incompetent and unable to teach such a subjective skill as writing. How ironic, since I write for a living now! I didn’t teach writing because I didn’t feel qualified.

I have heard from other parents who felt they couldn’t teach writing because their child was resistant to parental instruction. Instead of worrying about who will teach what, focus on how to encourage your child to learn the necessary skill.
I delegated the instruction to a video lesson. Once your child can write reasonably well, delegating to a self-teaching method of instruction can prepare your children. I purchased a video tutorial that explained what was required so I didn’t have to teach. I bought a book with writing prompts so I didn’t have to hold discussions about appropriate writing prompts. I paid for a visual example of corrected essays so I could see for myself what a quality essay looked like.

With my family, I used the Institute for Excellence in Writing product called the Advanced Communication Series. This product is a tutorial for the student, not for the parent. I didn’t have to do anything with it other than make sure my children watched the video. The Advanced Communication Series teaches three distinct skills: taking notes from a college lecture, writing a long and short essay, and public speaking. Each section was wonderful, but the one I relied on most was the instruction in writing a short essay. After watching the video, my children were ready to try their new skills.

501 Writing Prompts by Learning Express is an inexpensive book filled with perfect prompts for short essays. Not surprisingly, the book contains 501 of these prompts! Beyond prompts, it provides some guidance for evaluating essays. It includes a scoring guide; the fancy word for this is “rubric.”

To be honest, I hate the word “rubric.” When I pulled my children out of public school, the teacher said, “You don’t even know what a rubric is!” Ever since then I’ve hated the word! If you’re like me, then this book includes the perfect help for you. 501 Writing Prompts also includes model essays for all of the bold-faced prompts throughout the book (once every 25 prompts or so). The samples show you a top scoring essay, a middle-of-the road essay, and a low scoring essay. You can look over these sample essays to see how your student’s writing compares. No rubric needed.

Look through the writing prompts book to find an appropriate essay. Because this book was intended for the general population, it includes some edgy prompts related to public school attendance that may not be appropriate for some homeschool families. Be sure to read each prompt first.

If you prefer a book that is more similar to the specific prompts on the SAT or ACT Test, look for a study guide for the AP English Language and Composition exam. This exam is very similar to the verbal portion of the SAT, and the reading portion of the ACT. Using prompts from a test preparation guide specific to these exams will help you prepare for the specific essay prompts. I prefer using Princeton Review books, as I find it easiest to understand their instructions. Consider this study guide, Cracking the AP English Language & Composition Exam by Princeton Review.

When I said that my son came back to say “Thank you!” I don’t mean to imply that our homeschool was a bed of roses. I struggled to teach writing like many other parents! It was difficult for me to find the time to grade these essays when I compared them to the samples, and I got bogged down. Thankfully, my husband offered to step in and do the English grading for me. I felt terrible about having him do this because I thought it was my job and I knew I was capable. Still, when he took over the grading, it was an enormous relief for me.
It wasn’t all fun and games with my children, either. I remember how difficult the concept of being timed was for them. Kevin started the year by spending his first few minutes of each essay talking about how it wasn’t possible to write an essay in so little time. “I understand it’s challenging, but you have 39 minutes left,” I replied. After about three or four minutes of complaining, he figured out the clock was still ticking and would get busy.

We worked aggressively on essay writing using this strategy for both sophomore and junior years. I wanted to prepare my children for college and I was concerned about the SAT and ACT essay.

**Practice Writing**

Once you have identified instruction that works, and found writing prompts that will help you apply the instruction, you are halfway there. The most important key to a short essay is practice. We practiced timed essay writing three times a week in preparation for the SAT handwritten essay. When you think about it, three times a week isn’t a huge time commitment. And from a parent’s point of view it’s a great time of day – the kids are quietly scribbling away on paper while you can get the dishes or laundry done! It’s a win-win for everyone!

Their writing practice was helpful in other high school classes as well. I used quick essays to document many of our other courses, creating my own prompt from other homeschool subjects. At times I used essay topics from the history curriculum or other subjects. If a topic from the writing prompts book reminded me of another subject, I tweaked it a bit to obtain an essay that fit what we were studying.

When my children were finished the essay, it provided written material for these classes. I could include those essays in course descriptions. It was a way for me to evaluate my children in different subjects when I didn’t use tests and provided great documentation for hard-to-document subjects.

Real success in writing a quick essay comes with practice. Once your child learns how to write reasonably well, additional writing skill will come through practice. Practice leads to success, which can help them get great grades in college and succeed in life. If nothing else, they will become a good writer and can use these communication skills in any future calling or career.
9 Secrets to Effortlessly Finish the FAFSA

Step-by-Step Guide to Finding Need-Based Financial Aid

What's more fun than completing your taxes? Filling out the FAFSA, of course! The FAFSA is a source of college scholarships, and it must be completed by college-bound seniors and their parents. So, if your child is headed to college, complete the FAFSA during October of senior year.

With the new changes made to the FAFSA this year, some may find it easier to complete than in years past, but certainly not more fun. There are two key changes to the FAFSA, and nine simple steps for getting it done.

There are three things you need to know about the process before you get started.
1. Start the FAFSA October 1st

October should now be known as the month you have to fill out the FAFSA. Don't delay! In order to get the best financial aid available to you, fill out this form as soon as possible after October 1. Plan to fill it out every year from senior year in high school until your student is finished with college.

2. Use Last Year’s Tax Return

Instead of estimating taxes, you will use last year’s tax returns. The tax return you use to fill out the FAFSA is the most recent federal tax return you filed. For example, in October of 2016, use your tax returns from 2015.

3. Collect Your Documents

In order to fill out the FAFSA, you will need:

- Your Social Security Number
- Your most recent federal income tax returns, W-2s, and any other records of money earned
- Bank statements and records of investments (if applicable)
- Records of untaxed income (if applicable)
- An FSA ID to sign the form electronically. If you don't have an ID, you will be given the option to register for one at the end of the process, before you are able to sign electronically. (NOTE: Your student needs one too). You can register for an FSA ID prior to beginning at https://fsaid.ed.gov/npas/index.htm.

Ready? Let's dig in and finish that FAFSA!

Step 1 - The Process

Go to www.fafsa.ed.gov to get started. You will have the option to start a new FAFSA or to login as a returning user. If you have already filled out or started your FAFSA form this year, but haven't submitted it yet, you can login to pick up where you left off. You can start and save the FAFSA for up to 45 days.

For the purposes of this article, we will assume you are starting a new FAFSA. If you are filling out the FAFSA for your student, choose the "Enter Student's Information" option on the login page. Once you click this button, boxes will show up asking for the student's name, social security number, and the student's date of birth. When all is said and done, this application should take you about an hour to fill out.

You will be asked to verify that you entered your student's information correctly. If you have, simply click the “Next” arrow.
Step 2 - Getting Started

Once you have confirmed the information is correct, you will be taken to a page that asks which year you are applying for aid. Click the year you are applying for. You will be asked to "Create a Save Key." This is a numeric password used in case you need to come back to finish, or to log back in if you leave your screen for 10 minutes or more. Click the “Next” arrow.

The next page is an introduction page with FAQs. There is helpful information here, so spend a second or two reading it over. Each blue link is clickable. After you finish reading, click the “Next” arrow to move on.

Step 3 - Student Demographic Section

Now, here’s where we get into the nitty-gritty of the FAFSA. First is the student section. (Don't worry parents ... your turn is coming!) The first page of this section is fairly straightforward, asking for mailing address, phone number, email, etc. After you have filled this out, click the “Next” arrow. Student Eligibility comes next. Still nothing too difficult here. Fairly straightforward.

There are two sections in Student Eligibility. The second section asks for the name of your student’s high school. No need to be formal or fancy here, simply type “homeschool,” fill in the city and state, and confirm. After hitting the “confirm” button, a list of high school choices will pop up at the bottom. Homeschool will not be listed, simply click the “Next” arrow.

Step 4 - School Selection

On this screen, you will see a couple of boxes at the top alerting you that your student may be eligible for student aid and that the application was successfully saved (hopefully!). That's good! If you don't see these boxes, you will have to go back and fix whatever didn't go quite right the first time. Here, you'll add the schools where you want to direct your financial aid. You can list up to 10, either by searching their state, city, or school name. Alternatively, if you know the school's federal school code, you can enter it.

Once you search for a school, a list of colleges (only one if you entered a code or a specific name) will come up. Click on the box to the left of the school you want to receive your information and click “Add.” The school information will be automatically entered in the box on the right of the screen. When you see it there, click the “Next” arrow.

The next page allows you the opportunity to view the selected school information, but is mostly a confirmation that you are happy with the school(s) you have chosen. Don’t forget to select the housing option in the drop down box. You still have the option to add more schools to your list if you haven't already used all 10 spaces allotted for school choices. Click the “Next” arrow.
Step 5 - Dependency Status

You've reached a new section! Again, you should see a box come up at the top stating your application was successfully saved. If you don't see this statement, you'll need to go fix what went wrong. More straightforward questions ... however, this is one of two pages where more questions will continue to come up as you answer questions, depending upon your answers. Hang in there, and keep answering.

If your student is determined to be a dependent student, you will have to provide parental information through filling out the first part of this form. There are two options on this screen: to provide parental information or not provide parental information. If you choose to provide information, you'll be taken to the Parent Demographics section. If you choose not to provide parental information, you will see a page that explores the "why," with three options to choose from.

Step 6 - Parent Demographics Information

"Application was successfully saved" should be displayed at the top of the page! If it is, proceed to filling out the requested information. This is a tricky page because the page changes depending on the option you choose for your marital status. For some options, it only asks for single parent information, for other options, it asks for information on both parents.

And, just when you were getting comfortable and thinking this was a breeze, it gets tricky. The next section is the dreaded tax forms.

Step 7 - Parent Tax Information

Although some will resist it, there is an option for most people to connect to the IRS site and pull your tax information directly from it. It is much easier to do it this way, but it is understandable if you choose not to. I say, “for most people,” because if you have filed a Form 1040X amended tax return or filed in Puerto Rico in 2015, you cannot link to the IRS.

You do need your FSA ID in order to link to the IRS site. If you choose to link to the IRS site, you'll be asked to fill in your address in order to pull information. It pulls up your name, social security number, date of birth, and filing status automatically, (depending on if you use parent one or parent two’s FSA ID). You will also need to click the "Transfer" button at the bottom of the tax information. If you get this far and panic, there is a button for not transferring information as well.

This section can get sticky if you don't link because some of the numbers they want are unclear, especially if you are filling in information for two parents. It can be done, but is the more difficult option. This is the second page that continues to add questions as you answer the previous one. If you have chosen to transfer your tax information, you will see another box at the top of the screen (once you are transferred back to the FAFSA website) saying you have successfully done so. For this page and the next, you have to trust you can do it!
Step 8 - Student Tax Information

This section is much like the previous section on parent taxes. If your child has worked and received W-2s, then this will definitely apply. If they haven't, you'll be entering many zeroes. Unfortunately, you still have to fill it out.

Much like the parent tax information, you will likely have the option to connect to the IRS site and transfer data from their site. Again, it is the easier option, but if you choose not to for the child, it is easier to fill out the tax information manually in this section.

Fill in the financial information over the next two pages for your student. Hang in there; you're getting close to the end!

Step 9 - Sign & Submit

This is the last section you will need to fill out, and it is the easiest. Remember that FSA ID you made at the beginning? Now you need to pull it out. In order to electronically sign the form and submit it, you'll need this ID. You are encouraged not to sign for your child. They will need to help you make their FSA ID to use as their own electronic signature.

There are two other options for submitting the FAFSA. You can print and mail the signature page or submit it without signatures. The printing and mailing option obviously takes a little longer. Submitting without signatures allows you to submit it if your student isn't around at the time, but you will still have to return later to sign it before it is officially submitted.

Answer the few questions there, read the “Read before proceeding” box, "sign" your name and have your student "sign" their name. After the signatures are complete, click the "Submit my FAFSA now" button. That's it! Now wasn't that easy??

In the end...

After you submit your FAFSA, you will have the option to print the document on the ending page. It is helpful to print a copy and save a copy on your computer. You will also get an email confirming you have submitted your FAFSA form successfully. If you're curious, about halfway down the email you will find estimated eligibility criteria and, if you have qualified, the amount the government expects you will receive in financial aid. This isn't a definitive answer on your qualification, only an estimate.

After you click the “Exit” button in the bottom right, you will see the final screen. Here are a couple of tips before I leave you to your computer and FAFSA form.
1. If there is a problem throughout the process, the program will tell you. If you click the “Next” button and there is an error, it will not allow you to continue until the error is fixed.

2. If you have questions, there is a help box on the right side of each page. You won't always find the answer you're looking for, but there are answers to general questions.

3. There is a "Save" button at the bottom of each page. If you are in the middle of filling out your FAFSA and life happens, don't panic! Save it and come back to it later.

Congratulations! You are now an experienced FAFSA enthusiast! Well, ok, maybe not. But next year when you come back, you'll know exactly what to expect having experienced the process before.
Coalition App, Common App, and College App

Three Kinds of College Applications

If you have a child in high school and are beginning to look at colleges, you will soon discover there are three different options for applying. The first is the good old fashioned way – applying directly to each college using their college application form. Second is using the Common Application. Third, which is relatively new, is using the Coalition Application. Each application has its own strengths and weaknesses, and may or may not be accepted by your chosen colleges.

Traditional college applications have been around since the dawn of time. They are the standard way for colleges to determine whether a student is right for, and ready to attend, their school. In 1975,
the Common App was introduced to bring a level of standardization to the college application process and provide a way for students not to have to replicate the massive amount of work required to apply to each college individually.

Over the last few years, deans from some top colleges and universities decided to offer an alternative, through the Coalition for Access, Affordability, and Success, the Coalition App. The Common App has almost 700 colleges and universities that accept it, and the Coalition App currently has 49 colleges and universities, with just under 100 expected to join before the end of 2018.

Some colleges will accept only one of the three types of applications. For example, there are three colleges – University of Florida, University of Maryland-College Park, and University of Washington-Seattle – that will only accept the Coalition App. Other colleges will accept two of the three. The rest will accept all three, although some, such as the University of Chicago, add on a university-specific supplement. You need to find out which application is preferred or allowed by each of the colleges where you are planning to apply.

Mom to mom, I know this feels overwhelming, but I promise it is not as hard as it seems right now. In the normal process of finding a college, you’ll go to a college fair or visit a campus. When you speak to a college representative, simply ask “What is your application process?” This is a particularly helpful question, because some colleges will even waive their college application fee on the spot, perhaps saving you $100. Not bad, right? You get your questions answered and save some money at the same time!

So, I don’t want you to panic about these three kinds of college applications at all. I just want to provide an overview of each one, so you are prepared.

Now let me help you through the specific features of each of these application types.

The College App

Each college is unique, and their application process may also be unique. Some universities have their own application forms that are often short and manageable to complete, and are personally tailored to each college. These college applications may be old-fashioned paper and pen forms, although almost all have an online option. Traditional features include information on the student’s background, including an academic profile, essays, and extracurricular activities, as well as a brief personal statement.

You will often be asked to submit other documents and information such as transcripts, records, and letters of recommendation. Some colleges have very simple applications. For example, Evergreen State College in Washington State requests only basic information plus an optional personal statement. Most colleges require more than this and some require much more.
The Common App

The Common Application is used by over 600 colleges and universities. This one application attempts to fit the needs of all students and colleges. For that reason, it’s a perfect fit for almost nobody. Not all colleges require the Common Application, because as I mentioned, some universities have their own application forms tailored to their own college. On the other hand, using the Common Application can allow your child to apply to many colleges at once.

How does the Common Application work? Colleges request a large amount of information from applicants, and the Common App simplifies the process by collecting most of this information all in one place. This prevents students from repeating the details of their background, education, activities, and testing over and over again for every school on their list. It also enables students to stay on top of deadlines and manage school-specific tasks, without leaving the Common App system. It provides resources for parents and counselors to access.

Although the Common App isn’t easy to fill out, especially for homeschoolers, it is simple. You create an account with your basic profile information, add schools to your list, and start your application. It is best if you can gather general information before you begin, such as your transcript(s), lists of extracurricular activities, test scores and test dates from entrance exams, and parent/legal guardian information.

The Common Application limits the size of each file you upload. Your comprehensive homeschool record may be 2 MB, but it will only allow you to upload documents in 500 KB chunks. To upload very large files, you can simply divide your records into different chunks to upload. For example, upload one document that includes only course descriptions, and another document that includes the transcript, activity list, and reading list.

The Coalition App

The Coalition App is an alternative to the Common Application. A group of deans at top colleges and universities started the Coalition App. After looking at research, they found that students who started thinking about college earlier in high school had higher application rates. Those developing the new application believed they could “leverage technology to level the playing field in college preparation” by allowing college planners and, possibly admissions staff, to interact with high school students as early as their freshman year. Many of these schools are private colleges and universities. Coalition members must have a six-year graduation rate of at least 70% and meet students’ full financial needs or, if public, offer affordable in-state tuition.

The Coalition (of colleges) is committed to improve the admission process and provide ongoing innovation and improvement to the site. They believe that working with students and counselors throughout high school will improve the acceptance rate for students. The goal of champions of the Coalition App is to get to know the student better and make applications more reflective of the student.
The Coalition App is a technology platform designed in conjunction with CollegeNET. It is free for students, families, counselors, and high schools. The Coalition App concentrates on students who are disadvantaged and have a low income background to ensure college success, including affordability. Colleges in the Coalition are the ones who pay for this platform.

The Coalition App has three distinct pieces:

The Locker: A tool that is to be used throughout high school as a storage place for organizing materials - as a place to provide thoughts on college options, store class work or personal writings, maintain records of interests and activities, collect letters of support from instructors, coaches, and supervisors, and upload videos. Students have to invite others (counselors, mentors, etc.) to edit or provide feedback on items in the locker.

The Collaboration Space: A space the student can gather feedback and editing of the application process. School counselors, teachers, and mentors, or CBOs (community-based organizations) can all access this space when given permission by the student. Colleges will not have access to student contact information unless they are invited by the student to interact.

The Application Portal: The space where students apply to colleges. Students are still required to follow the admission processes of each school, including application fees or approved waivers. Low income students will have fees waived by Coalition schools.

Individual schools still have unique application requirements, so students are encouraged to check schools of interest for their individual requirements. However, if the school is in the Coalition, there are pieces of information that can be obtained through the Coalition App: information that is auto-filled from your profile, a Coalition essay prompt response, institutional questions specific to an individual college or university, and any additional expressions of your candidacy and interest to a college or university through sharing an item from your Locker. Colleges will not have access to student contact information unless they are invited by the student to interact.

In addition to sections for students in the Coalition App, there are sections for counselors, CBOs (community-based organizations), and mentors, as well as a newsletter that’s available.

The Similarities

In addition to both apps being free, there are other basic similarities between the Common Application and the Coalition App. Both applications request the same basic profile and demographic information. Both ask for a similar number of activities; the Common App allows you to provide up to ten and the Coalition App asks for your top two, with the option to provide eight more.

Essay prompts seem to be a key concern for students. Both apps contain prompts, with a couple of the prompts being almost identical, asking applicants to discuss a time when they were challenged by a
belief or idea. If you are undecided about which app to go with, this could be your deciding factor. The Coalition App gives students the option to write on a topic of choice.

Wrap Up

After reading all of the information about both apps, you may not be any clearer on which application option to choose than you were before. Choose the one that fits your family best.

Do you have a senior and are going through the process now? It’s probably best to go with the more well known application that is designed to be used when you are ready to apply. Do you have a freshman? Maybe you could start exploring the newer app. There will be changes made to it as it develops and it may be something that changes completely by the time your child gets ready to apply. However, neither application seems to give you an advantage in the short term.
Online Resources for Homeschool Solutions

Total Transcript Solution: everything you need to solve transcript worries

www.Total Transcript Solution.com

Comprehensive Record Solution: create records for college admission and scholarships

www.Comprehensive Record Solution

High School Solution: everything you need know to homeschool through high school

www.High School Solution.com

College Launch Solution: successfully coach your fully-prepared young adult into college and life

www.College Launch Solution.com

Gold Care Club: support and encouragement with personal coaching

www.Gold Care Club.com

Books Available in Paperback and Kindle

Reference Books

“The HomeScholar Guide to College Admission and Scholarships”

“Setting the Records Straight: How to Craft Homeschool Transcripts and Course Descriptions”

Coffee Break Books

“High School Testing: Knowledge That Saves Money”

Encouragement

“Finding the Faith to Homeschool High School: Weekly Reflections for Weary Parents”

“TechnoLogic: How to Set Logical Technology Boundaries and Stop the Zombie Apocalypse”

More books on Lee’s Author Page www.Amazon.com/author/leebinz