

Early Action vs. Early Decision: What's the difference . . . and should you bother?

Essays, recommendations, SATs, transcripts—getting all of these college application materials together by mid-December is no easy task. So why in the world would you want to aim for extra-early “early action” (EA) or “early decision” (ED) deadlines?

The short answer is that, for the right type of student, there are benefits to applying early. For one thing, you get your acceptance (or rejection) early! This means that you don't have to spend months and months waiting for (and stressing over) letters of admission. You also may save time and money by submitting fewer applications; however, this only holds true if you are accepted (because otherwise, you'll still need to send applications elsewhere). Finally, applying early *could* increase your chances of being accepted . . . but this is not a given.

Applying early (especially early decision) shows admissions officers that you're serious about attending their college. This can give you a leg up, since schools like to admit applicants who are likely to accept their offer. In fact, according to a *U.S. News* survey, the average early acceptance rate for fall 2016 freshmen was over 16% higher than the average regular acceptance rate among colleges that reported both their early and regular acceptance rates. However, averages are not the rule, which is why, on its website, the College Board writes the following:

Many students believe applying early means competing with fewer applicants and increasing their chances for acceptance. This is not always true. Colleges vary in the proportion of the class admitted early and in the percentage of early applicants they admit.

So, in summary, there are compelling reasons to apply early. However, even despite these advantages, not every student should submit an early application. If you're still deciding between a number of different colleges, for example, you should skip early applications and apply with the regular decision cohort. If, on the other hand, your school preference is ironclad, you'll then need to make sure that the institution actually offers early action and/or early decision plans, because not all schools do. Last but not least, your application needs to be strong, even without your senior fall grades on your transcript.

If you've gone through this line of questioning, and (a) you have a strong, singular college preference, (b) that college accepts early action/decision applications, and (c) your application is strong, then applying early is probably for you. But which early application should you use: early action or early decision?

Understanding Early Action and Early Decision

Before you decide between these two tricky options, it's important to get them straight. So to do that, let's use a mnemonic device.

Action = "A" for "Answer."

In **early action**, you took the **action** to apply early, and so, as your "reward," you will get colleges' **answers** (admission decisions) early. All this means is that you will have information about acceptance/rejection earlier than you would if you applied normally; you are under no obligation to attend a school that accepts you.

There is one caveat to this claim, and that is that some schools (e.g., Harvard, Yale, Stanford) use a variation of the early action program called *Single-Choice Early Action (SCEA)*. Also known as "restrictive early action," this option—like regular early action—is nonbinding. However, with SCEA, you are prohibited from applying early to any other private schools until you receive a decision from the school where you applied SCEA. (You are still allowed to apply early to any public institution you want.)

Decision = "D" for "Definite."

If you apply to a college **early decision**, then you've decided, with total certainty, that you want to attend that school. If the college admits you, this decision is binding, meaning that you must withdraw all other applications; you are **definitely** going to this school.

As with early action, there is one nuance to early decision. Most schools offering early decision have one deadline, in early November (typically the 1st or the 15th); however, some schools have *two* early decision deadlines, one in November (ED I) and one in December (ED II). The purpose of ED II is essentially to give students who want to apply early decision to their top-choice school more time to put together their application. Again, whether you apply ED I or ED II, the decision is binding.

The Early Decision Warning

One important thing to understand is that if you apply early decision, you will not be able to compare financial aid packages from various schools. Upon acceptance, you will receive your financial aid offer from that school, and you are stuck with whatever they give you. If you have no need of financial aid, then this is a non-issue. However, if financial aid is an important factor in your school decision, it is a better idea to apply early action, instead.

Early Action vs. Early Decision—How to Decide

If you're debating between a few top-choice schools, with no clear front-runner, then early action is your best bet. Also, if financial aid is a key deciding factor, then you again will want to stick to early action. However, if you are dead-set on going to a specific college, the best way to indicate that is by applying early decision. Just remember: applying early isn't a guarantee of admission, so make sure you have backups ready for the regular December 15th application deadline!