



You Know it's a Reach, So What Can You Do?

Whether it's been the school of your dreams for as long as you can remember or you've fallen in love with the place only recently, the most important thing to keep in mind is that admissions officers are searching for students they deem a "good fit" for their particular schools. Your job is not just to convince whoever reads your applications of how wonderful you are, but rather to show them in as many ways as you can how well you understand their particular school and know that you can be as wonderful for it as it can be for you. Here are a few do's and don'ts to guide you through this process.

DO

- Learn about the college's mission and ethos in order to ensure that it's on your list for the right reasons, and explain those reasons in your application and interview. How focused is it on career preparation versus providing a broad education and encouraging exploration? To what extent are students required to take core courses or fulfill distribution requirements, and to what extent are they free to determine their own academic program? How competitive is the learning environment? How intellectual is the student body? How political is the campus, and how diverse not just ethnically but in terms of attitudes? Are all points of view equally welcome?
- Learn about the academic departments you are most interested in. If you think you might like to study Economics or Political Science, find out if the course offerings are primarily on American economic and political issues or on more global ones. If you're interested in Computer Science, find out if the focus is more theoretical or more practical. If it's Engineering you're applying for, are they preparing students primarily to enter industry or doctoral programs? If you love playing music or participating in theater but don't want to be a music or theater major, what kinds of opportunities will there be for you?
- Once you're sure the college would be a good fit for you even though you know the numbers make it a reach, think about what you have to offer that could benefit the college community. Admissions people know that the best predictor of what you will be like in college is what you are like now in high

school. So once you figure out what you have to offer, be sure to offer it as much as possible where you are now. A strong and deep commitment to whatever it is that turns you on is the mark of an individual who is likely to inspire others and leave a mark wherever he or she goes in the future.

- Be aware that admissions officers are crafting a class, so they need individuals to fill particular roles. It could be that they're looking for Physics or French majors, or perhaps they feel a need to revitalize their Debate Team. Letting them know that you can fill one of these roles can work in your favor, but only if they have reason to believe you. So if you loved biology and physics equally well and can imagine majoring in either one, sure, saying you're interested in physics will probably give you an advantage because fewer applicants say that, and no one will hold it against you if you change your mind.
- Make sure that all the pieces of your application fit together like a puzzle. Your activities list, letters of recommendation, and application essays, all of which are extremely important at the most selective schools, should work together to present a complete picture of you both as a student and a person.

DON'T:

- confuse "fit" with how much you want to go to a school. Writing that you've been visiting the school and picturing yourself on the campus for many years or that you want it because of its excellent reputation will not do you any good. Instead, demonstrate that you've figured out which classes, activities, and research or internship opportunities you envision yourself in and explain why.
- pretend to be something you're not just because you think that's what the school will want. If you say you plan to major in French, whoever reads your application will look to see if you were in your school's French club, worked on its French language magazine, or took advantage of any kind of French immersion experience. If you never did any of these, they will wonder how serious you are and how well you know yourself.
- apply to lots of "reach" schools with the idea that this will give you the best chance of getting into one of them. For one thing, if you spread your efforts too thin, it will be difficult to devote sufficient time to each and every application, and you really need to do that when applying to the most selective schools. Secondly, applying to lots of "reach" schools means setting yourself up for lots of rejections. Keep in mind that even if your statistics match those in the top quarter of the class admitted to a particular school last year, your chances can never be considered "good" if the school admits only 8% of its applicants. If your statistics place you anywhere lower, your

application will be taken seriously only if there is something very, very special about you. Rejection is hard. Getting lots of them at once can be devastating.

- assume the best schools for you are the ones with the highest rankings on some list. Being at the bottom of your class academically will not just be unpleasant while you're there but in some cases will put you at a disadvantage when you graduate. Watch Malcolm Gladwell's Ted Talk to learn about research demonstrating the greater subsequent success of people who were at the top of their class at somewhat less selective schools compared with those who were at the bottom at the most prestigious ones: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzWwZ9C5gzE>.