

It's important to *know* the big picture, it's important to *sketch* the right picture

Usman Bhatti

It's been a fairly long journey if I look back and ponder, but life these days is pretty fast paced, so you don't feel the years go by. In the few paragraphs below, I wish to address a certain feeling which exists in many students early, and a lot of times even later on, in their academic careers. It's the feeling of not being too sure about what your career direction or even major interest is. To people who have had lots of advice from parents, family, qualified personnel and students already studying abroad, they might find this thought rather strange, but as far as my personal experiences go, it's a thought which exists in a lot of young minds.

Let me start by saying that it is pretty normal to be confused early on in your freshman or sophomore year at university; and being unsure about what direction your career is going to take. But actually the problem starts a little before this. I have met students who are applying in universities for, let's say, an engineering degree. The obvious initial question is: Do they know what it means to be an engineer? Do they know what kind of a career an engineer has? Do they know what the lifestyle of an engineer would be as compared to, say a businessman? Do they have answers to such, and similar questions? And most importantly, do they even have these questions in their mind or is their mind like an empty whiteboard, ready to be used as events and times deem fit?

But just like many other things in life, this issue is not all that simple. I believe that there are, at times, some reality checks that one needs to do. For example, I know that if I wanted to go into hotel management as a profession, well, my family wouldn't have liked it. Thus there was a barrier to entry. By the way, it's not coincidental that I took hotel management as an example. I met a really nice German lady some time back, in China. She was into hotel management. After a little chat with her I realized that given my friendly and explorative nature, I would have made a pretty nice seven-star hotel manager, but there was that barrier to entry for me. Where am I going with all this?

Well, this is what I've learnt: understand your available options. Let's say you can go for a career in medicine, engineering, economics or math. If you have no clue what you would like to do, then choose something which you enjoy doing. If you have clues and you can't find them in the aforementioned, choose the nearest bet. For molecular biology, maybe medicine makes more sense than economics. For telecommunication, probably engineering (preferably electrical and ideally telecommunication engineering) is the right call. These are the planned decisions you have to make.

For people who have a pretty clear insight into what they want to do and who understand their barriers to entry, I believe other articles in this section will be of help. But before I go, let me tell you another thing. There are individuals like me, as well. I applied in local institutions only and got admitted to Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) from where I completed a Computer Engineering degree. Now I'm working in Ericsson. Careers are not static, they change. I still haven't found what I've been looking for as a life time career! So I'm still looking while having a sound footing on something which I am already doing; which is working in and learning about the telecommunication sector. I hope Steve Jobs forgives me for copyright infringement, but for some people, "staying hungry and staying foolish" is the way ☺ Till next time.

(Usman Bhatti was a participant of NPTC-6, did his graduation from LUMS and now working in Erickson. He is also the National Coordinator of NSTC Alumni Association)

Admissions Abroad: A Comprehensive Guide...

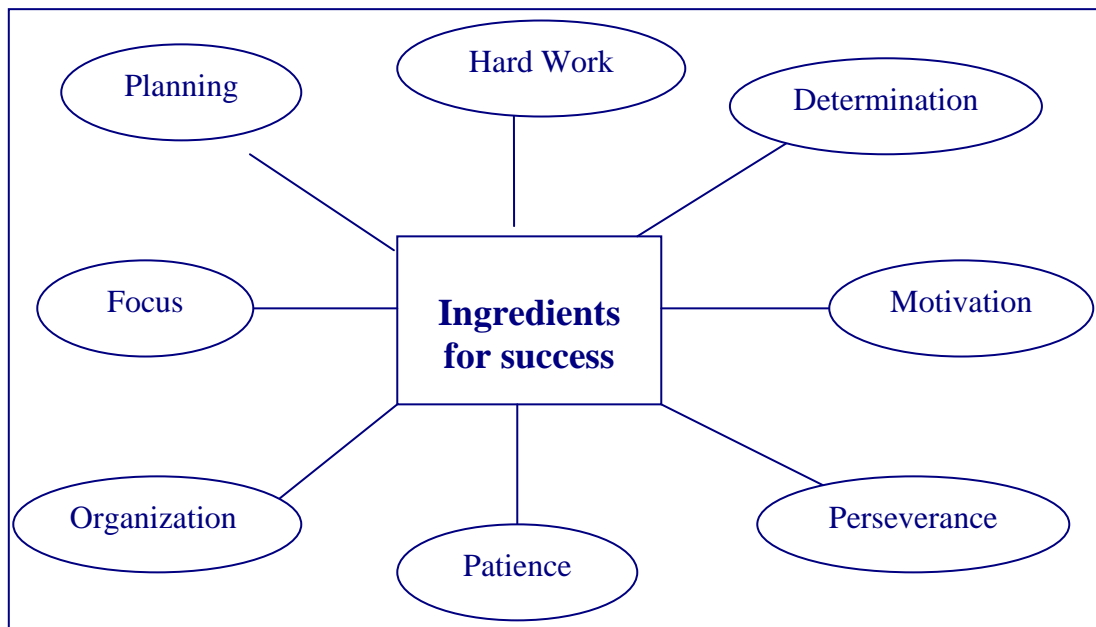
Maham Siddiqi

Hmmm...I think I can read your mind: you're dreaming about getting into a good college, but you don't know what your chances are, and as the clock ticks away, each passing second begins to make you believe that this dream is, in fact, impossible to achieve...

Well, if I have read your mind correctly, first I appreciate your setting such high aims for yourself. But the same time, I want to let you know that your dream is not unachievable; it just requires a bit of effort, determination and perseverance from your side, coupled with guidance on how to succeed along this path. And this is precisely what I have set out to do– to guide you through this process, so that you can eventually reach your destination, in the same way as I reached mine.

Relating my own personal example in this regard, from the very beginning of my O-Levels, I had my heart set on a dream- to get into one of the top colleges in the United States. I knew that it was a huge challenge that I had taken on, one that seemed almost insurmountable at the time. Yet from deep within, I knew that the path I had chosen was the right one. Brimming with ambition and motivation, I struggled through my challenge. It was no doubt full of ups and downs, yet despite the occasional setbacks, I never once gave up my challenge and continued going on. Then eventually, with faith and inspiration guiding me throughout, it took four and a half years of struggle before I finally reached my destination, and I was accepted at MIT, Harvard, Princeton and Yale. My lifelong dream had finally come true; one that would change my life forever. And from those days onwards, I decided to head along a new mission: to guide the students after me, so that they too can get admission into the college of their choice and have their dreams also come true.

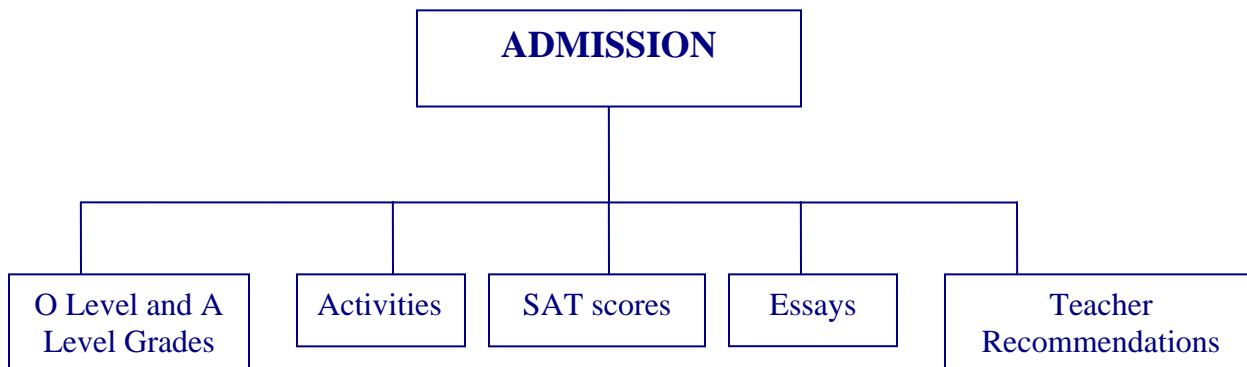
Now in order to succeed along this path, you must first possess the basic ingredients required for success in this admission process. These are illustrated in the diagram below:



It is obvious that hard work is mandatory. What is not so obvious, however, is the fact that it is essential

to plan ahead of time, making both short-term and long-term targets, and to remain focused throughout.

The entire admissions procedure can be categorized into the following main stages:

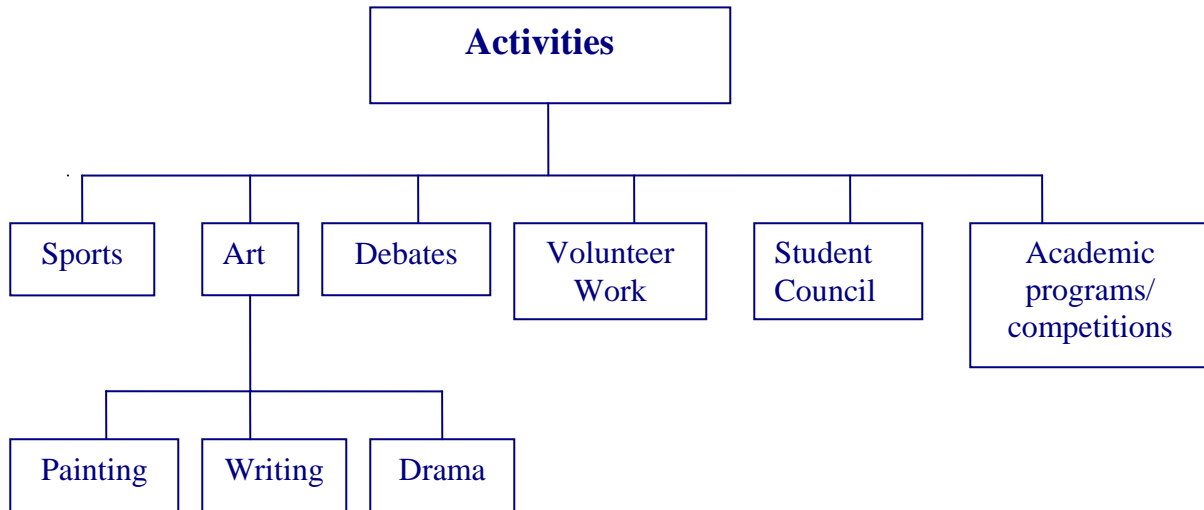


From among all these, I would rate your O Level and A Level grades the most important part of your application. You must target to achieve all A grades, and not merely A's, but also high A's. Figures like 98%, 99% and 100% stand out in your application as highly impressive, and they make a really good impact on the admissions officers. In addition, such scores can earn you distinctions at the regional, national or international level, which serve to enrich the list of academic honors in your application. Also, colleges really appreciate it if you take more than the compulsory number of subjects. This shows your versatility, your willingness to take challenges and your ability to excel in all fields. Colleges indeed value these qualities highly.

Although I have emphasized upon the importance of good grades, there is nonetheless no absolute formula for success in admissions. Getting all A's does not ensure your admission just the same as getting average grades does not mean that you do not have chances of getting accepted. There is thus no absolute formula. Colleges do not have a set criterion for judging each part of your application. They, therefore, do not view each application component separately; instead, they judge the entire application all together. This inevitably means that relatively weaker parts of the application may be compensated by other relatively stronger areas. Colleges essentially judge how well your match is with the college: in terms of your interests, your personality and your beliefs. Each college has its own personality and philosophies, and if yours matches theirs, then your chances of admission into that college are really high!

SAT scores are also very important for admission. Colleges, however, do not have a cutoff score range as their criterion for admission. Just as is the case for O Level and A Level grades, high scores do not necessarily ensure acceptance, neither do low scores reduce your chances of admission completely. Generally, a score above 2000 is acceptable for SAT I, while for SAT II, a score above 2300 is good and is relatively easier to attain. Low SAT scores, if balanced by high O Level and A Level grades, do not affect your chances of admission in a negative way.

Colleges abroad place great emphasis on activities. No matter how good your grades are, activities are essential to prove that you have maintained a balance between academics and extra-curricular activities; that you are not just a bookworm and that you have the potential to succeed in practical life. In the figure below, I have categorized activities as follows:



It is preferable to have at least five different kinds of activities. This shows versatility and flexibility. It is also a good idea to have at least one sport and one form of art, whether painting, writing or drama. However, merely participating in an activity or simply signing up for it is not sufficient. Colleges want to see that you have devoted your time to the activity and have excelled in it. The evidence for this comes from holding important positions of authority in such activities e.g. being the Head Girl of your school or Captain of your school basketball team, or maybe Chief Editor of your school magazine. Winning awards in extra-curricular competitions also proves your ability to excel in activities.

Moving ahead, your admission essay is an extremely important stage of the admission process. The admissions committee uses the essay to judge your personality and to understand who you really are as a person. According to the book “How to get into the top colleges” colleges rate personality as one of the most important factors in deciding whether or not to accept an applicant. MIT, for example, likes students who are willing to face challenges and take risks, and appreciates the qualities of perseverance and determination. Harvard, on the other hand, likes to see leadership abilities in its applicants, including the ability to think about issues of concern on a national or global scale and the ability to express genuine concern for such issues. In general, most colleges want to see that there is something the applicant is really passionate about, and that such passion is so powerful that it would drive the student to bring about some kind of positive change to the world in the future.

Now the essay holds enormous power in your application. A powerful essay can convince the admissions committee to accept you, even if the rest of your application may not be that strong. At the same time, a weak essay can compel them to deny your admission, even if the rest of your application is perfect. Therefore, under all circumstances, it is mandatory to write a powerful essay. But how exactly do we define a powerful essay? A powerful essay is one which captures the attention of the reader from the very first line to the very last, and once read, has a lasting impact on the reader.

The following points highlight the main features of a powerful essay:

- 1) Good use of language
- 2) Thoughtful and expressive
- 3) Poetic and inspirational
- 4) Conveying a good meaning
- 5) Having a strong impact on the reader

- 6) Revealing something unique about you that makes you stand out from the rest of the applicants.

Colleges generally want you to write about life experiences or events that brought about a turning point in your life or that significantly affected you in a positive way. They want you to write about the challenges you faced, how you overcame them and what you eventually learnt from them. They want to know how you think and reason, and want to see how well you express your thoughts. They want to judge your ability to think on a national/international scale and want to see that you are genuinely concerned about problems of such scale.

Regarding essays, you must make sure to write about something unique, and not write on common topics e.g. Einstein, about whom many applicants tend to write. Unique topics will serve to distinguish you from the rest of the applicant pool. You should make your essay poetic and inspirational, with a lot of depth of meaning, such essays tend to win the hearts of the admissions officers. You should try your best to perfect your essay, so spend a lot of time on it, keep editing and improving it. Show your essay to many people, including parents, teachers and senior students, as they will undoubtedly provide you with valuable advice on how to improve your essay.

Teacher recommendations are the final step in the process. Strong recommendation letters are undoubtedly crucial for admission. Teachers must not only describe your academic achievements and your level of intellect, but more importantly, they must elaborate on your personal characteristics, including your ability to work hard, your willingness to take challenges and go beyond the normal classroom curriculum, your dedication, determination and your motivation. A description of these personal qualities should be supplemented by anecdotes to illustrate these more clearly. At the end, it is worthwhile if they explain why they think you are a special student and why they think the college should accept you, in terms of how the college would benefit from your presence.

I have now finally completed my description of the admissions process, and would like to conclude with a few last words of advice: no matter what happens, you must always keep striving, with the realization that hard work always pays; never give up and understand that perseverance rewards beyond measure; and most of all, believe in yourself and never once lose faith. Finally, I can guarantee that if you truly understood the message that this article meant to convey to you, and follow the advice it contains, your dream will eventually come true and soon, your destination will appear before your very eyes!

With my heartiest prayers, I wish all of you the best of luck for your college admissions!

(The author, Maham Siddiqi, was in the top five in NPTC-11, and represented Pakistan in the 38th IPhO held in Iran 2007. While at The City School Islamabad, she received 12 A's in her O Levels, along with 3 distinctions, including a 'Top in the World' award in O Level Mathematics. During the course of her A Levels, she was selected on merit to attend a month long Mathematics Camp at Stanford University (SUMaC 2006). It was also during her A Levels that she applied to several universities in the US, and was accepted at MIT, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Williams and Duke. She is now pursuing her undergraduate studies at Harvard University, concentrating on the subjects of Physics and Mathematics)