

**HOW TO:**

# STUDY IN 'MURICA — ~~THE GREATEST A~~ COUNTRY

**A Blind Mice Guide to US University Application**

**BY**



**Disclaimer:**

TA is a polytechnic graduate and government scholar who is currently studying Liberal Arts in the US.

She would like to add that the information presented is solely based on her personal experience and research. All advice given is in no way representative of the views of any institutions.

# CONTENTS

---

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
Application Platforms	6
Different Rounds of Application	6
<b>Common Application Components</b>	<b>7</b>
Essay	7
Letters of Recommendation	7
Other Requirements	7
Conclusion	8
<b>The SATs</b>	<b>9</b>
Overview	9
Registration	11
When The SATs Are Held	11
Preparing for Exam Day	11
My Own Experience Taking the SATs in Singapore	11

# INTRODUCTION

There are thousands of universities in the US. Unlike in the UK, Singaporean institutes are less recognised, polytechnics less so. While JC and IB students have it easier, few schools in the US understand the polytechnic system, and when applying you will have to “translate” your years of poly education to fit into their framework. More on that later.

Among other things, US higher education institutes are known for their liberal arts education. Schools encourage students to take modules outside their intended major, and many have mandatory modules to encourage building a well-rounded foundation. For most universities, you only have to take a certain number of courses to finish your major (in my school the average is 9), giving you extra time to try other disciplines.

There are many different types of universities in the US, as found below:

School Type	Explanation	Examples
Community colleges  2 years	Community colleges offer 2-year associate degree programmes, after which you can transfer to a 4-year university programme (to attain a bachelor’s degree).  For example, a lot of students in California do this before transferring to one of the UCs (Universities of California) or Stanford if they don’t get in directly, as the success rates are much higher.  This category includes technical colleges, which are similar to polytechnics for the US.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• CUNY Stella &amp; Charles Guttman Community College</li><li>• University of South Carolina - Lancaster</li><li>• Fox Valley Technical College</li></ul>
Public colleges & universities  Generally 3-4 years	These schools usually receive funding from taxpayers and thus have cheaper fees than private colleges & universities (for e.g., state schools).  However, they can set their own fees, so fees may drastically differ between institutions.  <i>(Colleges are generally smaller while universities are bigger, in terms of campus size, student population, and resources.)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• University of Michigan</li><li>• The University of California schools (e.g., UCLA, UCB)</li><li>• University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill</li><li>• College of William &amp; Mary</li></ul>

<p>Private colleges &amp; universities</p> <p>Generally 4 years</p>	<p>These schools don't receive taxpayer money and thus usually have higher fees. They have more liberty to design their academic curricula as they wish.</p> <p>Private schools include: all 8 Ivy League schools, liberal arts colleges, and all church-affiliated colleges. Church-affiliated colleges have to be private as they get their funding from their sponsoring organisation, and because no public funding can be used for religious education institutions.</p>	<p>Private Universities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UPenn</li> <li>• Stanford</li> <li>• NYU</li> <li>• John Hopkins</li> <li>• Rice</li> <li>• Duke</li> </ul> <p>Liberal Arts Colleges:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Williams</li> <li>• Harvey Mudd</li> <li>• Amherst</li> </ul> <p>Church-affiliated Colleges:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pepperdine University</li> <li>• Abilene Christian University</li> </ul>
<p>Minority colleges</p> <p>Generally 4 years</p>	<p>These kinds of schools are for those interested in a university experience surrounded by those of similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds.</p> <p>These institutions often have a large percentage of one minority, including Native American, African-American, Hispanic, or Asian. They also usually have a larger percentage of minority faculty than other schools.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Howard University</li> <li>• Florida A&amp;M University</li> </ul>
<p>Single-gendered colleges</p> <p>Generally 4 years</p>	<p>Up to a few decades ago, only men could attend college. Thus, colleges for only women were set up to provide a space for women to attend college without these restrictions.</p> <p>While most male-only universities eventually became co-ed, some also remained male-only (mostly Christian and Jewish religious schools).</p>	<p>Colleges for Women:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smith</li> <li>• Bryn Mawr</li> <li>• Barnard</li> <li>• Scripps</li> <li>• Wellesley</li> </ul>

## Application Platforms

There are several different applications depending on the university you're applying to.

1. The Common Application - applies to over 800 colleges & universities
2. The Coalition Application - applies to over 90 schools
3. The Universal College Application - applies to 23 schools

College-specific applications - Many of the large public universities and state systems use their own applications exclusively. For example, The University of California System has its own application for its 10 campuses.

## Different Rounds of Application

1. Early Decision (ED): You are only allowed to apply to one school - basically your top choice. If you are accepted the decision is binding and you must attend the school, so only go for ED if you're very sure. Deadline is usually in November and you hear back by December. Three things can happen: 1) You're accepted - then you have to go to that school no matter what, and withdraw other college applications that you applied to later.. 2) You're outright rejected - then you cannot reapply to that school in later rounds. 3) Your application is deferred to the Regular Decision round - you will hear a definite decision from the school in March/April instead, and you are not bound to that school if they accept you. Some schools have ED I and ED II, to allow a longer period for applicants, but they're the same thing.
2. Early Action (EA): This is the same as ED except you are not bound to the school if they accept you. If you want to attend the school, you only have to give your deposit the same time as you would for RD - May 1st. This is recommended for students who really love the school still but want to apply to other schools during RD to compare the financial aid packages offered by different schools.
  - Applying for ED and EA is recommended for students who have done extensive research on various schools, are absolutely sure of their first choice, meets the academic expectations of the college they're applying to and has a consistently solid academic record.
  - ED and EA applicants must take the October SAT or SAT Subject Tests (or earlier) in order for these scores to make it to the college in time.
3. Regular Decision (RD): When you apply to most schools. The deadline is usually in January and you receive results in March/April.
4. Rolling Admissions: Some schools may also have rolling admissions - for those, it's better to apply sooner than later.

# COMMON APPLICATION COMPONENTS

---

## Essay

The general essay is roughly the same every year, with about 6-7 prompts to get you to talk about yourself (even if it's a question about your role model, you ultimately have to talk about yourself as that's the objective). There should be a 650 word limit. During my year, the general theme was about how we had changed, and the things that changed us. They like hearing stories rather than explanations, so try to follow the rule of 'show, don't tell.'

Things to take note:

1. Copy the prompts from the website out onto another word processor (e.g., Word/Evernote/Notes) in case the website crashes / doesn't autosave as you're typing.
2. Start working on the prompts ASAP, cause you'll have to go through a lot of drafts (or cut out a lot of words if you're wordy) to get the best possible version of your essays.

## Letters of Recommendation

Get your recommendations from your teachers / employers / etc. as early as possible. It is not sufficient to upload a PDF letter from them - they will have to log into the site and answer questions. They might be busy or not know how to navigate the site, so it's good to start on this as early as possible.

They might face technical hurdles as they have to input their recommendations directly into the Common App platform. Read up here: <https://www.commonapp.org/apply/first-time-students>

## Other Requirements

Besides the essay and recommendations, different schools vary in their submission requirements, and you'll be able to view all of them after you add them to your list.

Take note of these requirements:

- Deadlines
- Application Fees
- Personal Essay
- Courses & Grades
- Test Policy
- Portfolio
- Writing Supplements
- Recommendations (no. required)

## Conclusion

A lot of the US uni admissions process ultimately comes down to luck: who is reading your essays, how they feel, what kind of people the university is looking for that year. Sometimes many equally capable people can be vying for the same last spot in a particular university. And it's important to remember this, because it's easy to get caught up in the college application process, and tying your sense of self worth to the results you get.

Watch the video below to see how arbitrary the selection process is like in a leading US liberal arts college (try to spot the recurring theme that influences the panel's decision).





# THE SATS

## Overview

If you're applying to a US university with a polytechnic diploma, chances are that you'll need to take the SATs and submit your results as required by the university.

However, there are several universities that are test-optional (you may choose to submit or not submit your SAT scores) and you are advised to check each university's requirements carefully. If you're applying to a test-optional school, submitting your SAT results may work in your favour provided you get a high score.

GENERAL SAT (USD \$105)			
Test	Duration	Content	Learn More
Reading	1 hour 5 mins	52 questions (75 seconds per question)	<a href="https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/inside-the-test/reading">https:// collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/ inside-the-test/reading</a>
Writing & language	35 mins	44 questions (about 48 seconds per question)	<a href="https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/inside-the-test/writing-language">https:// collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/ inside-the-test/writing-language</a>
Math (no calculator)	25 mins	20 questions (75 seconds per question)	<a href="https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/inside-the-test/math">https:// collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/ inside-the-test/math</a>
Math (with calculator)	55 mins	38 questions (about 87 seconds per question)	
Essay (optional)  Additional USD\$16	50 mins	1 essay	<a href="https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/inside-the-test/essay">https:// collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/ inside-the-test/essay</a>

**SAT SUBJECT TESTS (USD \$26 registration fee)**

Read More: <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/pdf/sat-subject-tests-student-guide.pdf>

<b>Subjects Offered</b>	<b>Fee</b>
Literature US History World History Math Level 1 Math Level 2 Biology-E (ecology, evolution, and diversity)* Biology-M (biochemistry, cellular structure, and processes such as respiration and photosynthesis)* Chemistry Physics French German Modern Hebrew Italian Latin Spanish	USD \$22 / subject
Chinese w/ Listening French w/ Listening German w/ Listening Japanese w/ Listening Korean w/ Listening Spanish w/ Listening	USD \$26 / subject

*\*The biology exam is 1 paper, with 60 mandatory questions and 20 specialized questions where you choose to answer either E or M questions. You must indicate your selection on the answer sheet. You can take both but must take them on different days.*

Source: <https://blog.collegeboard.org/how-long-does-the-sat-take>

While there are many SAT prep companies and assessment books on the market, websites like Khan Academy offer free assessments you can use to prepare. The official SAT website also offers a limited number of example questions.

## Registration

You have to register for a CollegeBoard account to register for the SATs. Try to do it as early as possible as the process takes a while and seats are limited for each test date.

## When The SATs Are Held

The general SATs are held six times a year in Singapore: March, May, and once a month from August to November. To take the subject tests, you have to make sure they're available for the date you're registering for.

Do check if you need to take them for your uni application, as they cost extra, but they can boost your application if you do well. Register as early as possible since spots fill up fast, and people from outside Singapore fly in to take them as well.

Learn more tips on their official website.

## Preparing for Exam Day

Check if you have an acceptable calculator: <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/taking-the-test/calculator-policy>

Checklist of things to bring on exam day: <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/taking-the-test/test-day-checklist>

## My Own Experience Taking the SATs in Singapore

I took my SATs twice. The first test was to get a better understanding of the SAT questions, and the second to improve on my previous score and take three subject tests.

There will usually be a big crowd of anxious students, and that's how you identify where to report (especially if your test centre is unfamiliar to you). Your name will be posted on a noticeboard/whiteboard, usually arranged by last name, to tell you which room to report to for your test (it might also take place in a large hall). You might have to swat away a bunch of sweating kids to find your way in front of the board. You may or may not be assigned your seat - it depends on the test centre.

Remember to bring everything you need so you don't panic; refer to the checklist above. However, if you do forget something, ask the invigilator if it's something big (e.g., calculator, ID) or other test takers if it's something small (like an eraser or pencil). Invigilators may carry extra stationery or calculators.

Usually the general SAT is administered and the essay follows after. Those not taking the essay will leave right after the general test. If your date has subject tests, there will usually be a longer break in between the general test and the subject tests.

If you're sitting for a language test with a listening component, you'll be asked to bring your own CD player and earphones. Do try and source a CD player as early as possible if you need it as they're harder to find nowadays..

When I took my test at ACJC, it was in a giant hall, but at AJC, we were split into classrooms. Ultimately it depends on the test centre and its available facilities. It's always more chaotic with more people, and you might have to wait longer, but try not to let the nerves get to you.