

# *College Prep Basics:* **THE TOP TEN**

By Denise Boiko

**A**s a homeschooling family, chances are, the biggest question you hear (right after “What about socialization?”) is “How will you prepare your student for college?” With our two students now in college and medical school, I can use the clarity of hindsight to look back on our own journey and highlight the top ten principles that worked for us. Though every family is unique, these basics form a useful foundation for most homeschoolers traversing the college prep path.





## 1 Start Early!

You will thank yourself repeatedly if you don't wait until your student's junior or senior year to begin thinking about college. This is because "thinking about college" is not just about campus visits but also about assembling a strong, sensible lineup of college prep courses. While this may sound intimidating, lots of help is available. As you "shop" for a high school course of study, glean ideas from local high schools, from your state education standards, and from the requirements for a few colleges of interest. Clearly, you're not looking to copy these courses of study, as this defeats the purpose of homeschooling: fitting the education to your student's needs. But knowing what courses colleges will be looking for—everything from lab science to foreign language—will help you design a program of study that is standard enough to be acceptable for colleges, individualized enough to meet your student's needs, and creative enough to attract additional interest from admissions staff.

For especially capable students, consider honors and **Advanced Placement (AP)\*** courses, since these demonstrate your student's willingness to take on a challenge. AP courses have the added advantage of helping your student earn college credit upon passing the exams given each May.

## 2 Develop a Record Keeping System That Works for You

Few people love paperwork, but a certain amount of it will keep you from going insane—and it will provide credibility at application time. The trick is to make your record keeping system work for you, not to become a slave to it. For each course your student takes, you'll need a brief course description (a few sentences long); a longer, more detailed description sometimes called a syllabus or course standard (a page or two); and a method of evaluating your student. From these building blocks you'll later construct a transcript, which is simply a record of all your student's courses, along with grades earned and credits received. In addition to submitting the transcript at application time, you may need to include course descriptions to give the college a full picture of your student's work. Summers are an ideal time to write course descriptions, plan

assignments, and construct log sheets to record scores.

## 3 Seek Out Classes

Although we call it homeschooling, being out and about is more often the norm—making our days more fun and stimulating. Particularly as your student enters high school, you'll want to consider a few outside classes. Advantages include "outsourcing" subjects you feel weak in, providing opportunities for friendships, and helping your student adjust to a classroom atmosphere before experiencing the rigors of college. Where can you find these courses? Many communities have formal or informal homeschool co-ops that meet once or twice a week. If you have no homeschool group classes in your area, consider starting one with a few other families. Your student may also be able to take a class at a local Christian high school or may be ready for some community college courses, earning credits toward a degree. (Always check college policies before enrolling.)

## 4 Develop Respectable Writing Skills

Since homeschoolers differ in their abilities, interests, and goals, no two can be squeezed into the same mold. Still, strong writing skills are always well worth developing. The ability to write a coherent essay with a thoughtful thesis, orderly organization, smooth style, and meticulous mechanics will take your student far in life. Later, he may use these skills for business letters, research proposals, presentations, or other vital forms of communication. Like it or not, we are often judged on the basis of our written English; thus, students with crisp, clean writing skills may get the nod in college acceptances or job offers over students with less polished skills.

## 5 Keep Going in Math

Similarly, ultimate math goals will differ for each student. One may conquer calculus by his junior year and keep on calculating; another may declare victory upon completing algebra and geometry by her senior year. Your goal is to maximize your student's options. If your student is capable in mathematics, don't stop with the minimum. With higher math courses, a student will enjoy more choices of college majors and careers, since engineering, science,

medicine, and business all require solid mathematics courses. If your student struggles in math, focus your energies on helping him complete the required high school math, and then consider a consumer math program for the remainder of high school. With this, your student can learn about budgeting, investing, and other practical applications of math.

## 6 In Areas of Your Student's Strength, Go Full Speed Ahead

Not surprisingly, all homeschooling families display some stronger areas and some weaker areas. In our home, math, science, and writing skills were fairly strong, but we hit our low points in foreign languages and fine arts. Your mission is to find your student's passions and fortes and then serve up every bit of instructional "gusto" you can muster. If your student loves creative writing, find some excellent instructors to augment your own program, look into some writing-based extracurriculars (such as newsletters or writers' critique groups), and seek out writing contests. The flip side of this strategy is that some subjects will need to take a back seat. Don't neglect any basic requirements, but do help your student zoom ahead in areas of delight. Chances are, a college major or a career choice will spring from this pursuit.

## 7 Ease into SAT\* or ACT® Test Prep

Most freshman university applicants will need to take the SAT or ACT exams. Thus, one reality of high school, even for homeschoolers, is studying for these exams. While preparation methods abound—many of them outrageously expensive—a wise approach involves easing into preparation throughout the high school years. Find a few good prep books in your local bookstore and integrate the study tasks into your student's curriculum a bit at a time, starting in ninth grade. You can include vocabulary lists in your English curriculum or have your student read classic literature, which automatically builds vocabulary in context. You can practice multiple-choice math questions a few at a time as you cover these concepts in your math program. You can even introduce the timed essay during tenth or eleventh grade. With steady work, college entrance exams will be less mysterious and intimidating by the time your student needs to take them.

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## 8 Communicate Closely With Colleges of Interest

Homeschoolers have to do a little more “homework” when it comes to searching out colleges, since no guidance counselor down the hall will dispense the appropriate information. What’s more, requirements and procedures often differ for homeschooled students. Get in the habit of perusing websites for colleges of interest and even visiting if they are nearby. Most importantly, find out what a homeschooler should do differently in the application process. Colleges may require course descriptions, additional **SAT Subject Tests**\*, or recommendation letters written by a non-family member. Knowing the “pieces” of the application process early in the game will reduce the stress of assembling these items when the student’s senior year arrives. Typically, colleges want the application itself, recommendation letters (outside classes will come in handy), a transcript, an application essay, and SAT or ACT scores. Private colleges are frequently quite open to homeschoolers; larger, more bureaucratic state universities may present some hitches while processing your student’s application. But be persistent, professional, and patient. Ask lots of questions, and again, start early!

## 9 Remember the Magic Word: Passion

From our experiences with fourteen different college applications, one “magic” word stands out over and over again: *passion*. Colleges are not necessarily looking for perfect GPAs and perfect entrance exam scores. What they want are students filled with passion for a particular area: an academic subject, music, a sport, community service, or a political cause. They don’t want students who are so well rounded that they are predictable—they want students with a definite “angle” to them to showcase their personal strengths and passions. Guiding your student toward extracurricular activities (particularly leadership positions) that encourage growth in these favorite pursuits is a key step in preparing your student for college.

## 10 Pray!

Inevitably, the journey from homeschool to college will feel daunting at best, and sometimes even impossible. Especially during these

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tough times, but throughout the entire journey, keep praying for your student and for your own wisdom, stamina, and guidance. Prayer is the pinnacle of these top ten basics that every homeschool needs for the harrowing but adventurous trip through “uncharted territory.” Recruit a few prayer warriors to help you call upon the Lord for wisdom and guidance, and keep your mind on the ultimate goal: a college-bound student with a Godly focus.

Though college preparation may seem intimidating, your student’s path from homeschool to college can be the most stimulating leg of your homeschooling journey—and a most satisfying culmination of your student’s individualized education. 🙏

*Denise Boiko*

*Denise Boiko and her husband Ron homeschooled their children from K–12, with their daughter, a graduate of **Stanford University**, now in medical school at the **University of Pittsburgh** and their son attending the **University of Southern California**. Passionate about helping homeschoolers navigate the path to college, Denise has written a comprehensive college preparation manual titled **Homeschooled & Headed for College: Your Road Map for a Successful Journey**, which is available at **Homeschool RoadMap.com**.*

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