

# HOW TO MAKE COLLEGES WANT YOU

Insider Secrets for Tipping the  
Admissions Odds in Your Favor

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## Chapter 3

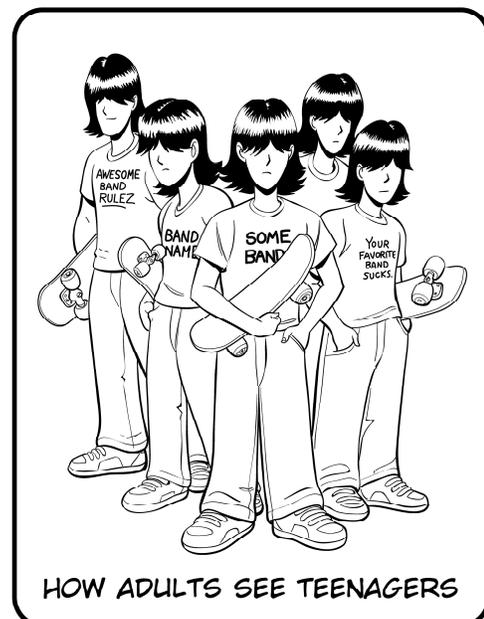
# SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASE YOUR CHANCES OF GETTING IN

Unless you are certain you're in the 100 percent chance of getting in group then you probably run the risk of falling into the Maybe stack. The following technique is the most important thing you can do to "write your own ticket" to the front of the line. First, you must realize that you have a problem. The problem is that you are a teenager and most adults can't tell one teenager from another unless they already know you well. Most admissions professionals are adults. So, you need to do something to break away from the pack.

### Adults vs. Teenagers

For the purposes of this discussion, a teenager is a person who is thirteen to twenty-two[ft15] years old and is either on their way to college or is already in college. An adult is someone who has 1) completed puberty and 2) pays their own bills. The difference has nothing to do with maturity level.

Here is why adults can't tell one teenager from another. Unlike other demographic groups, teenagers are far more influenced by their peers than they are by those who are older or younger than them.[ft16] Peer influence is so powerful at this age that teenage consumption habits are even consistent across cultures. This means teenagers buy almost the same clothing, games, music, food, entertainment, and just about anything else they can think of whether they are from the United States, Japan, England, France, China—you name it. From an adult's perspective, every teenager looks identical to the next. Adults, on the other hand, are just as likely to be influenced by someone outside their peer group as those inside it. Adults are influenced by co-workers (who may be older or younger, married or un-married, ugly or hot), parents, kids (even teenage kids), or just about anyone else with some seemingly good advice.



From a college admissions perspective, this is a nightmare. The college admissions professional is an adult and to the adult, most teenagers look the same. If you are a teenager, I'm sorry to tell you this, but I speak the truth. I'm sure it's no surprise to learn that you live in a world where nobody outside your peer group understands you! So how in the world do college admissions counselors tell the difference between you and every other teenage college applicant? The first thing they do is look at your GPA. Next they will look at your test scores.[ft17] In fact, in some cases they won't look past the cold, hard numbers on your transcript unless they absolutely have to. Never assume that they will read your essays or even glance at your letters of reference; most will, but don't count on it. Hopefully your grades and test scores are not so bad that they toss your application, laughing, into the 100 percent reject pile. Or, better yet, maybe you are so good that they can toss you into the 100 percent get-in pile. A quick gut-check on the rest of your application can seal your fate. If your GPA and test scores don't give them the quick-sort, they will be faced with the task of trying to discern one teenager from another—a task for which they, like any other adult, are ill equipped.

I'm sure this message is disconcerting. After all, most teenagers would like to think of themselves as individuals. In fact, most of them spend most of their time trying to be individuals. Unfortunately, when viewed from outside the teenage world, you are in lockstep with every other teenager.

There is, however, a very powerful way to differentiate yourself from other teenagers. It is simple, it works, and it is your biggest opportunity when it comes to college admissions.

## Non-Teenager Activities-NTAs

Here it is: do something that most teenagers don't do. If you want a *serious* edge when applying to college, engage in an activity that only an adult would do. I call this a Non-Teenager Activity or NTA. If you can do this, can do it early, and can do it even sort of well, you will *always* beat the odds. NTAs can include just about anything you or your peer group does not currently do. Take quilting, for example; I'll bet most teenagers don't quilt, nor do they know other teenagers who quilt. If you learn to quilt (sort of well) and send your college admissions counselor a picture of you donating your quilts to needy families, you will shine in their eyes.

## NTAs-Making Them Work

Doing an NTA is probably the quickest, most effective thing you can do to differentiate yourself from other teenagers.[ft18] When it comes to college admissions, if you engage in an NTA, it will separate you and allow you to relate better to adults, which is what you are ultimately trying to do—convince an adult to let you into their college. And it is much easier than it sounds (even if your grades are weak)—just pick something that you wouldn't normally consider doing.

Engaging in an NTA is best for students who start a few years before their application is due. It would be hard to cram a meaningful NTA in a month before the deadline, but if you think you can, go for it.

I was a pretty bad student who stumbled upon several things that gave me an admissions edge. One of these things was engaging in an NTA. When I was in high school, I raised homing

pigeons. This may sound like a silly way to spend your time as a teenager (and it may have been), but it really got me noticed by colleges. If it weren't for those silly birds, I would have been a *nothing* in the college admissions process. I had terrible grades in high school and mediocre test scores. I didn't even realize that my school offered AP classes, and I pretty much sucked at sports (keep this in mind for a later story).



But, unlike most other teenagers, I raised and trained homing pigeons. When I actually brought a homing pigeon to a college interview and released it with a note attached, I was impossible to forget. The admissions counselor would look past my lousy application and look in amazement as he or she watched the bird fly off into the heavens only to arrive safely at my home several hours or days later. It was a sight to see and, as a result, I had a *serious* edge over applicants who were much more academically qualified than I was. My friends (and yes, I did have friends), thought my birds were sort of cool, but nobody was interested enough to raise pigeons with me.

I started raising homing pigeons in grade school at the encouragement of a friend's father who thought my friend and I could send messages back and forth because we live several towns apart. I liked the idea and found a guy (an adult) who had some birds. He showed me what to do, and in no time I had converted our shed into a pigeon coop. My friend never did it, but I raised a small flock and I took care of them for five or six years until I went to college, when my dad took over.[ft19] They are called homing pigeons because they don't leave! I was actually *forced* to take care of these critters through high school whether I liked it or not.

I also did many teenager things like surfing, skateboarding, yearbook, school magazine, and sports, which are all great things. But to an admissions counselor they sound a lot like "blah, blah, blah, and blah." This is not to say that there is anything wrong with surfing, skateboarding, yearbook, school magazine, and sports, and I encourage you to do whatever it is you enjoy, but they will not help you stand out among your peers. I accidentally stumbled upon this little gem—but you can proactively engage in such an activity, and I promise it will give you an edge.

I, the terrible, boring student, got a serious edge in the college admissions process because I was actively engaged in an NTA. The moral of the story is that admissions counselors don't need another mediocre student who does sports and helps on the yearbook. What they do need is a quirky kid who releases homing pigeons during their college interviews.

## Spotting an NTA

NTAs aren't your run-of-the-mill activity. Participating on your school's yearbook staff, for instance, is not an NTA. In fact, teenagers put every high school yearbook in the world together. It's a good learning experience, and I encourage you to do it, but it won't necessarily help you stand out—regardless of what your parents, teachers, or guidance counselors tell you. Do the yearbook, but also do an NTA.

*Managing* the yearbook staff, on the other hand, is more of an NTA. Because many adults tend to view teenagers as wild animals who travel in packs, a leader seems less like a teenager. Thus, leadership experience means a whole lot more than simply being part of the pack. This applies to everything, so be a leader or at least act like a leader (adults can't tell the difference between an actual leader and someone who merely acts like a leader). To take it one step further, *running* a yearbook business is a very non-teenager thing to do and will easily help you stand out from the crowd. Few teenagers, if any, own yearbook production companies. We'll explore some other examples in the next chapter, but let's take a moment to show how your NTA can get you noticed.

## Getting Noticed

Once you get an NTA, you will be able to promote yourself to colleges in variety of ways. First, it will be the topic of at least one of your essays (the optional essay). If your grades and test scores are weak, your application essays may not be read very carefully or possibly not at all, so you will need to make sure your guidance counselor and references are well-informed so they can make contact with the admissions department on your behalf and highlight your NTA (more later on this).

However, you must understand that your goal is not to simply get noticed. Just because you get noticed doesn't make it right. In the spring of 2007, the Wall Street Journal ran an article about college admissions.<sup>[ft20]</sup> The article was about how colleges are rejecting students in record numbers. The article mentioned a guy who camped out in front of the admissions department because he wanted to be noticed. He was, indeed, noticed, but it did not help him stand out among his peers. Why? Simple—it was not an NTA. In fact, nobody who isn't a teenager would consider such a stunt. The teenager thought it would be a great way to show his interest in the school. But remember, college admissions counselors (adults) don't understand teenage behavior and thus don't understand why someone would camp out in front of their office. We discussed this topic with Scott Friedhoff, VP for Enrollment at Allegheny College. Scott did not recommend doing this. Scott, like many adults, thought this was foolish behavior.<sup>[ft21]</sup> A better idea would have been for the guy to start an admissions road trip club with fifty students traveling from college to college to see their campuses. Camping out is a teenager activity; creating an organization that promotes the importance of visiting colleges is an NTA. Scott would have been impressed.

Engaging in an NTA isn't about padding your resume. Anyone in college admissions can tell the difference between a real NTA and a resume-builder. NTAs are about exploring activities outside your immediate comfort zone and embracing them. One good NTA will outshine a list of resume-building teenager activities any day of the week.

## Leadership

The idea that teenagers run in packs is a common sentiment among adults. We can hardly tell one from the other. Some of us consider teenagers downright dangerous and we avoid them at all costs. (Not me. I love you guys!) So, like I mentioned before, leadership is important.

There are three types of leadership. The first type is being appointed or elected to be a leader. An appointed or elected leader would be class president, team captain, or store manager. The next type of leader is a talent leader. Talent leaders are All-American goalies, the winner of the state championship in debate,[ft22] or a wonderful musician. The last type of leader is a passion leader. This is a person who stands out because of their dedication or passion for a particular activity. I know a girl who played piano and studied ballet every day from the time she was three years old. She had passion and dedication.[ft23] Most teenagers don't show these kinds of traits, and hence it is an NTA. She also had talent leadership. She often took the lead spot in annual ballet recitals. This is another NTA. Her grades were marginal, but because of her NTA, she was accepted to a Big Ten university.

The problem with leadership is that it is difficult to put yourself in a position of leadership.[ft24] Being a basketball player is an unimpressive, teenager activity. Being a kick-butt, leading player, however, is a cool NTA. Most teenagers are not world-class athletes. Colleges snatch these people up as fast as they can. The same goes for the top musicians, actors, artists, writers, science geeks, etc. It's hard to be at the top, and you probably aren't there. The good news is that you can choose quilting or homing pigeons to have a similar impact. Yes, you read that right, choosing the right NTA can improve your chances of being admitted in the same way as being a great athlete. You may think you aren't in the same ballpark as the top baseball player in your school. But, your NTA may show just as much passion and commitment as they do. Just because you can hit a ball doesn't mean you can train a homing pigeon!

## Finding NTAs

Most of us think that a top athlete is a shoo-in to most colleges. This is true; colleges actively recruit these people because they understand the activity (top performance) as an NTA. (Again, I'm not suggesting that teenager activities are bad; I'm simply suggesting that it is nearly *impossible* for the adult to see the difference between teenagers unless they are engaged in an NTA.) The good news for you is that if you forgot to even exercise for three years of high school, you can still up your odds of being accepted to the college of your choice; you need to engage in an NTA that will put you in the same league. There are many.

First, ask yourself, what do adults do? And, what do teenagers *not* do? This may be trickier than it sounds. Most teenagers are so immersed in teenager activities that they are oblivious to the world around them. (Note: not being oblivious to the world around you is, in itself, an NTA and it will help you stand out!) You can spot an NTA based on the number of non-teenagers engaged in the activity. Earlier I used the example of quilting. Very few teenagers know how to quilt. Thus, it's an NTA. Quilting per-se is not going to give you as much of an edge as being the top basketball player in the country, but it will give you a huge edge over the other teenagers with track records comparable to yours. Other activities include:

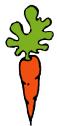
- Build a sailboat from scratch
- Restore antique instruments
- Climb Mount Everest or Mount Everest, Jr.
- Discover and name a new star or planet
- Volunteer at a medical clinic in Africa and deliver babies[ft25]
- Breed a special strain of flower and name it after your dead grandmother
- Make a real movie and distribute it to real movie theaters
- Invent something
- Underwater basket weaving
- Become a TV or radio personality (*everybody* loves TV)
- Write articles for a local newspaper
- Help run a political campaign

These examples may seem like overly challenging engagements, but they may not be. Breeding plants may not be that hard. You may be able to buy some nice plans and instructions for building a boat. There are an infinite number of stars in the sky—how hard can it be to find one? You don't have to be an astronomer to look through a telescope and take notes. The fact that most people perceive these things as difficult will work to your advantage. Raising homing pigeons is pretty easy, but it seems complicated and time-consuming.

It's important to show that you are committed to your interests. A student with a single, powerful NTA is much more likely to stand out than the student with a bunch of typical, teenager interests. During the admissions committee review they will say, "Mike is that guy who brought a homing pigeon with him to the interview and let me write a note to send on its leg. It was great; the guy really knew what he was doing. He raises them and trains them to fly back. Mike called a few hours later and let me know that the pigeon had beat him home. Mike's an interesting guy. His grades were a little lower than most of our students, but what passion!"

If you have a bunch of typical teenager activities they will say, "I don't remember speaking to that kid—did he come in for an interview? Yearbook? What?" There are over twenty-three thousand high schools in the United States. That means there are twenty-three thousand football captains, twenty-three thousand prom queens, and twenty-three thousand valedictorians. Admissions counselors simply can't tell one class president from another.

Get the picture?



**CARROT:**

For a list of additional NTA ideas, visit [www.CollegePeas.com](http://www.CollegePeas.com) and enter NTA in the CARROT Box

## Being Impressive

When you pick your NTA, make sure it looks hard, like breeding a special strain of flower. Read a few articles about genetics and be prepared to quote some of the concepts. Bring a flower to your interview, put a packet of seeds in your application envelope, and make it impressive. If you are really into it, then it will shine.

I recently heard a story of a student who collected cups of ice from fast food restaurants. She simply went in the door and asked for a cup of ice. She then went home, let the ice melt, and tested it for bacteria. She found lots of bacteria. So, she wrote up her findings and presented them to her city's health inspector, who ran it up the flagpole and some new laws got passed as a result. What a great NTA story!

## Starting a Business

One of the easiest ways to engage in an impressive NTA is to start a business and make some money. Everybody loves money. You can give it away to charity or you can blow it on junk if you want, but be sure to put a little aside so the admissions counselor knows you're saving for college. Most teenagers don't start businesses, so it's ideal. Make sure it's a real business that has customers and if possible at least one real, non-teenager employee. Businesses are great because they show leadership skills (which comes in handy if you weren't popular enough to be elected class president), and they make you look like a responsible person.

If you start a business and are lucky enough to run into some problems, you can go to an adult for help, work through the problem, and have some real conversation starters during your interview. Successfully overcoming obstacles is the quickest way to being an impressive applicant. Make sure you write about your business in your essays and make sure your guidance counselor knows about it too so he or she can make a few calls on your behalf (don't assume colleges will read your essays). If you make something or sell something, you can bring a sample to your interview or mail a sample with your application—big points. Tip: products are generally more impactful than services because they are tangible. I applied to a highly competitive business school after college—a top twenty program. Like high school, I had lousy grades, but I had started several businesses, one of which manufactured outdoor clothing. I plopped one of the jackets that I designed and my company manufactured down on the interviewer's desk. Think I got in?

Visuals are always great. Another great visual I had was a three-inch thick file folder filled with thank-you notes from happy customers. This is all good stuff. Run your business so you get thank-you notes, save them, photocopy them, and staple the copies to your optional essay about your NTA and providing good customer service.

Here are some examples of great businesses that you can start with fairly low upfront investments:

- [Justaboutanything].com
- Local services (painting, lawn mowing)
- Local newspaper

- Manufacture custom grill covers
- Printed sportswear
- Selling quilts, candles, or baskets

All of these things are real businesses that a teenager can start and thus be engaged in an NTA. It is important, however, that the business is a business and not just a part-time job. If you mow lawns, you don't have a lawn-mowing business. If you have ten people that you hire and pay to mow your customers' lawns and you own all the equipment because you saved last summer's lawn-mowing money to buy it, you have a business.

Starting a newspaper is easy. I started a local paper when I was still in grade school. I asked my classmates to write articles, and I sold ads to local businesses. The paper itself was actually pretty lame, and it only lasted a few issues, but I was lucky enough to run into a real problem: I didn't generate enough revenue from subscriptions and advertising to cover printing costs. I had to negotiate a deal with the school to use their copiers. Instead of bailing out, I solved the problem. Problems in your business are a gift; solve them and you will shine! If I had kept my newspaper going through high school, it would have been a *great* NTA.

## Charities

A good, hard-hitting NTA doesn't have to be a hobby or business. A good, viable alternative to starting a business is to organize a charity. Charities are nice because they often require less structure, can be shorter term, and show that you have a great, big heart (remember, most adults fear teenagers).

Keep in mind, however, that *participating* in a charity is a teenager activity. Many, many teenagers participate in charities. Charities are good; charities teach you important lessons about life and help people, animals, or plants in need. Join them, love them, and support them. However, participating in a charity will not give you a big, fat, unfair advantage when it comes to getting into college.

*Organizing* a charity, however, will, especially if the charity raises money and is organized outside of any other formal organization. In other words, talking your Boy Scout troop into cleaning up the highway isn't the same thing as establishing a charity to clean up the highways with independent volunteers. For bonus points, make sure at least some of your volunteers aren't teenagers.

## Turning a Teenager Activity into an NTA

Sometimes you can take a typical teenager activity and turn it into an NTA. Taking it to the next level is a good way. I know a girl who joined “Best Buddies” and became a friend to another girl who had terminal cancer. This is a teenager activity but not an NTA; it is great, but it may go largely unnoticed by admissions counselors who are used to seeing applicants participate in these types of programs all the time. (Again, don’t get me wrong; Best Buddies is a great program, but I’m talking about NTAs that will give you a serious, unfair advantage over other applicants.)

The girl I know, however, created an NTA shortly after the friend she met through Best Buddies died. She started a charity in her friend’s name selling stuffed kittens. She convinced a major toy company to donate the kittens and enlisted an army of volunteers to sell them all over town. The charity was a big hit, and she raised hundreds (maybe thousands) of dollars to fight cancer in her friend’s name. Luckily for her, she ran into a major obstacle: she ran out of kittens! That didn’t stop her—she is now actively soliciting local businesses to donate the cash for more kittens in exchange for some positive PR. Admissions counselors and deans will eat this up when she is ready to apply to college. This activity will give her an enormous advantage over other applicants with a similar or even better academic record. This is a great example of turning a teenager activity into an NTA. (Note: the army of volunteers she enlisted will not be engaged in an NTA. It’s only an NTA for the founder and her partners. Many teenagers participate in charities; very few of them start charities.)

Charities are often easier to start than businesses because it can be easier to assemble a team of volunteers and convince people to donate. Hiring employees, paying taxes, selling products, etc., can be harder. However, they are not always easier to start and often require a much higher emotional commitment than most people are willing to make. You need to really care about your cause to dedicate the time and energy to following through. You don’t really have to care that much about grass to mow lawns—earning money is the motivation. So, there are pros and cons for each. If you have a cause, start a charity; if you don’t, start a business.

## Keep it Real

Just because you have an NTA on your application doesn’t mean it’s going to help (even if it gets you noticed). Your NTA has to be real and substantiated. When you describe your NTA, make sure you are straightforward and honest. If you want your NTA to sound impressive, make sure it *is* impressive. Admissions counselors don’t have time for people who puff up their accomplishments to look better than they really are. While it’s not uncommon for people to get overly excited about their projects, you should be able to back up your claims with reality.

I ran into this trouble inadvertently when I applied to college. I nipped it in the bud before it got out of hand, but it could have quickly made me appear to be dishonest (even though I wasn’t). On paper, I appeared to have a great NTA—sports. I told the truth on my application, but the facts didn’t reflect reality, and it could have come back to bite me.

When I was in fourth grade, my school had a lacrosse team. I was a newly imported transplant from Kansas to the East coast, and I had never even heard of lacrosse. I went out for the team, and I was instantly proven to be a disgrace to the game! Luckily for me, my school had a policy that *all* kids had to play a sport, and thus, I couldn’t get cut from the team. I loved lacrosse

and when I went to high school, I wound up on the varsity team all four years. I had nine years of experience playing lacrosse with four years on varsity. This was pretty impressive. Most colleges were lucky if they could find a student with a couple of years of varsity play.

This was all true. I did play lacrosse for nine years, and I did play varsity for four years in high school. However, this is not the whole story. My high school started the lacrosse team the year I arrived. Any student who tried out was put on the team, even beginners. In spite of my long lacrosse career, I never actually got good at lacrosse. I just felt like playing. In all nine years, I only scored one goal. One goal in nine years!

About a week after my application was mailed out, I began to get excited calls from coaches. One, from a competitive school in Ohio, wanted to fly me out to meet the team. He gave me verbal acceptance to the school over the phone and promised a four-year scholarship that would have covered more than half my tuition. I thanked him and then politely declined his offer. He was pretty upset that I wasn't even willing to visit, but I explained to him that I only looked good on paper and I wasn't interested in pursuing the sport in college. Even after I explained the situation, he was still interested in meeting me, but I knew I wouldn't be able to live up to his expectations.

I told the truth on my application, and it was misinterpreted as an NTA. Sports leadership like this is rare. However, because the facts didn't shine through, I actually alienated some good colleges because I couldn't back up the claims. It was an accident; I didn't know better. Don't put yourself in this position. Make sure you are clear about your accomplishments. I got accepted, but for the wrong reasons.

At the end of the day, colleges want students who are passionate. They want students who have real interests and go out of their way to pursue their interests. Choosing to pursue an NTA shows passion because it demonstrates that you are pursuing an interest because the topic itself is intriguing to you, not just because your friends are doing it. If you are engaged in an activity in which teenagers don't typically engage, you are someone who will bring a new point of view to a college classroom and a person who will inspire others to follow their dreams and interests. Colleges love this more than anything!

Many teenagers feel passionate about their relationship with their peers. They fight to protect time with their friends and for their "right" to hang out and do things with their friends. This kind of passion, although real, gets lost because it isn't an NTA, and it does nothing to help an adult tell you from another teenager. If you break the mold by passionately pursuing an NTA, you will stand out.

Lack of passion was the root of my problem with lacrosse. I looked good on paper, but I simply didn't have the passion in the sport that would allow me to excel. I looked like a passionate lacrosse player, but I wasn't. If you have an NTA that you care about, your passion will show through.

## NTA Recap

Unless you're a shoo-in for a college, you should figure out an easy way for the admissions counselor to distinguish you from every other teenager who submits an application. Making this distinction is especially difficult for adults because we have little or no understanding of what goes on inside your head. To us, all teenagers are the same unless we know them personally. So, unless the admissions counselor knows you personally, your best bet is to break the teenager mold by actively engaging in an NTA. The NTA will instantly separate you from all the other teenagers who apply and give you a big, fat, greasy, hairy advantage over all of them. Even a student with a questionable academic history (like me) can stand out with the right NTA.

When people tell you to "stand out," they are talking about an NTA. NTAs make kids stand out—period. If you don't have an NTA, you won't stand out. The rest of the tactics in this book will improve your chances whether you have an NTA or not, but they work a lot better if you do.

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*Insider Secrets to Tipping the Admissions Odds in Your Favor*

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