August Senior Checklist: Two Tracks, One Plan

A fridge-ready checklist for parents of rising seniors. Free to copy, print, and share.

The one-line rule for senior August: know the track before touching an application. Some colleges use essays to decide who gets *in*. Many others admit on GPA and test scores alone and save the essays for scholarship *money*. Which kind is on your list decides what this whole year looks like.

First, the Money Talk (20 Minutes Per School)

- ■ **Give every school a number, not a feeling.** Run each college's Net Price Calculator (search "[school name] net price calculator") and write the result next to the school's name. The list now has a money column, not just reach/match/safety.
- ■ **Keep one financial safety on the list:** a school where published automatic merit already makes the math work. No luck required.
- ■ **For the dream school, write the conditional yes:** "____ happens IF accepted AND IF at least $____ per year gets covered by scholarships and grants." Agreed to in August, checked in March.
- ■ **Say the family number out loud:** "Here's what we can put in per year: $____. The rest has to come from scholarships, grants, or loans in your name."

Your move: the "accepted but can't afford it" heartbreak every March is decided in August, by the families who skip this section.

Then, the Fork: One Question Per School

Will an essay decide whether your kid gets IN, or how much you PAY? Check each school's admissions page (about 20 minutes total):

- **Track A: the essay gets you in.** Essay, recommendations, and "holistic review" required to admit. The application is the project, and the fall is front-loaded.
- **Track B: the essay wins you money.** Published GPA/test standards and a direct application on the school's own website. Applying takes an evening; the essays come later, for honors colleges and scholarships. Back-loaded.

Your move: most real lists are mixed. Check each school, not the list, and run both columns below.

Everyone in August (Both Tracks)

- ■ **Money Talk and fork check** for every school on the list.
- ■ **Parent and student each create an FSA ID** at studentaid.gov. Accounts take days to verify, and the FAFSA opens October 1.
- ■ **Start the brag sheet:** every activity, award, job, and leadership role in one place. It feeds applications now and scholarship essays later.
- ■ **Start the recommender conversation, by track.** Track A asks formally now, before teachers are buried. Track B only *shortlists* 2 or 3 people (coach, club sponsor, favorite teacher) and gives a heads-up. The formal ask waits for October, when the scholarship portal reveals what each essay wants (leadership? civic service?) and you can match the person to the theme.
- ■ **Make the test-retake decision from the merit tables, not a hunch.** On Track B, one more ACT point can be worth thousands of dollars per year in automatic money.
- ■ **Pull tax documents from two years back** so FAFSA day is a 45-minute task, not a scramble.

Track A in August: The Essay Gets You In

- ■ **Create the Common App account** and fill in the basics. Know going in: it is a multi-day project, not a form.
- ■ **Write a real first draft of the main essay.** Real, not perfect.
- ■ **Map every supplemental essay** with word counts and deadlines, so October holds no surprises.
- ■ **Note the deadlines that control the money:** early action (most November 1) and any separate merit scholarship applications. At some selective schools these fall mid-November to December 1, with no second chance.

Track B in August: The Essay Wins You Money

- **Apply directly on each school's website.** Rolling admission rewards speed: earlier applications get earlier acceptances and first crack at scholarships, honors spots, and housing.
- **Request the transcript the moment school opens,** through the high school's system (Naviance, SCOIR, or Parchment). Nobody mails anything. Confirm arrival in the college's portal within a week; if it shows missing, ask the counselor.
- **Set up the applicant portal login and check it weekly.** It is mission control from here: missing items, the acceptance, scholarships, housing.
- **Parent: look up each school's priority scholarship deadline and honors college deadline today.** Many land December 1.

Your move: the acceptance may arrive before Labor Day. Celebrate it, then remember what it is: the starting gun for the money race, not the finish line. Nothing external will remind you about December 1.

The Year at a Glance: Two Tracks Side by Side

Month	Track A: Essay Gets You In	Track B: Essay Wins You Money
Aug	Money Talk. Start Common App + main essay. Map supplements.	Money Talk. Apply directly. Request transcript. Set up portal.
Sept	Revise essay. Draft supplements. FERPA release + recommendation requests.	**Acceptance arrives.** Learn the portal, build scholarship list, warm up recommender shortlist.
Oct	FAFSA + CSS Profile. Finalize essays for Nov 1. Separate merit scholarship apps at some schools.	FAFSA. Scholarship portal opens: accept automatic merit, match recommenders to essay themes, make the formal asks. Optional housing deposit.
Nov	Submit early applications (Nov 1). Merit scholarship deadlines at selective schools.	**Essay season.** Honors + scholarship essays in the portal. Enter recommender emails; the college contacts them.
Dec–Jan	Early decisions arrive. Regular apps due (most Jan 1–15).	Priority scholarship deadlines close (many Dec 1). Local scholarship season begins.
Feb	Waiting. Watch portals for missing-item flags.	Quiet from the college itself. Keep submitting local scholarships.
Mar	Decisions + aid offers arrive together. Compare to the August number. Appeal if short.	Award letters finalize. Compare to the August number. Appeal if short.
Apr–May	Decide by May 1. Deposit, housing, orientation.	Decide. Deposit, housing, orientation.

Four Traps in Senior August

- **Starting the Common App before checking whether any school on the list needs it.** Thirty minutes in is a bad time to find out none of them do.
- **Letting an early acceptance turn into a quiet fall.** Priority scholarship deadlines (often December 1) send no reminders. The calm is a trap.
- **Asking recommenders blind on Track B.** Wait for the portal to reveal each essay's theme, then match the person to it.
- **Skipping the Net Price Calculators until award letters arrive.** By then the money conversation is an ambush, not a plan.

Free Resources: No Account, No Cost, No Data Collection

The full two-track August guide	collegereadyparent.org/august-senior-checklist
Do you actually need the Common App?	collegereadyparent.org/common-app-guide
Automatic scholarships by GPA and test score	collegereadyparent.org/find-colleges
FAFSA 101 for parents	collegereadyparent.org/financial-aid-101
Essay toolkit + brag sheet builder	collegereadyparent.org/essay-toolkit