As part of the Aga Khan Education Board’s pursuit to recognize excellence in our Ismaili community, the I-STAR team has developed the following document to aid middle and high school students in their educational development. This document contains valuable information that both parents and students should know about the US education system. It is not meant to be a complete guide; rather, it is meant to create a baseline of knowledge in the jamat. You should recognize that this document covers a general overview of the entire US education system. If you have particular questions about your particular city’s education requirements, please see your local Aga Khan Education Board representative for details.

As you page through this document, you will notice that it is organized as a list of frequently asked questions under 4 general topics that match the I-STAR 2002 application. This will allow you to use this document as a reference guide – indexed and fully cross-referenced by particular questions you may have. As you continue to pursue excellence in your education, we recommend that you become increasingly familiar with all the information contained here.

As a final word, you should be aware that this document is not focused on college preparation. Instead, this document was developed to encourage students to focus on their personal development and enrichment as a person and as a contributing member in society. From this perspective, it is highly recommended that students experience as many new and different aspects of life as they can (while continuing to maintain the Ismaili ethical standard). For instance, traveling to different parts of the world is a key component to educational development. Students should be encouraged to travel with their parents and friends as often as opportunities present themselves. The more a student experiences, the more significant school and education becomes in that student’s life. We wish you great luck in your own personal development and in your ability to help others succeed with you.

Sincerely,
The I-STAR Team
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A. ACADEMICS / GRADES

A-1. My parents are always harassing me about my grades. What do I do?

Parents speak from experience when they tell you how important grades are. Yes, we hear about exceptional students who don’t make good grades in high school and still go on to become very successful, but the truth is that these cases are rare. Ninety-nine percent (99%) of students who don’t make good grades in school end up at low-tier colleges with very few opportunities for advancement. Why take your chances?

Your best bet is to become a partner with your parents. Harvard research shows that students who talk with their parents about school at the dinner table tend to do better in school. So Our Advice To You is to sit down with your parents one day at the dinner table and say “Mom, Dad, let’s talk about my educational goals. We all know I need to make good grades, and here are my issues that I need your help and understanding on….” From that point on, talk to your parents about everything that happens to you in and out of school. The more openly you communicate to them what is happening in your life, the more they will be sympathetic and helpful. Say goodbye to the nagging…

To get things started, both you and your parents should listen to, understand, and talk about the information your I-STAR Advisor has to offer. This will keep you from having to explain everything over and over to them, and it will help your parents better understand your needs.

A-2. How important are my middle school grades?

Although middle school grades don’t get reported to colleges, they are extremely important in laying the foundation for a successful academic career. Here are a few reasons why:

- Grades in middle school are important in determining what level of high school classes (see A-7) you will take. The higher your grades, the better the chances of you being put in advanced high school classes.
- Higher grades qualify you for “Outstanding Student” certificates from your teachers and school principals. Students who receive these certificates tend to become more motivated about learning and excelling throughout their life.
- High achieving students get the first opportunities to participate in special overnight fieldtrips and in school organizations. For instance, being a Safety Patrol is a high honor in most middle schools around the country. This position is only given to students who have high achievement standards for themselves.
- Eligibility for gifted programs is determined by your grades, too. Many middle schools offer Gifted and Talented Programs (Discovery, I.D.E.A.L., Probe, etc…) to challenge qualified students with new learning opportunities. Once a student enters a gifted program, he/she will automatically qualify for top-level classes. You will soon find that there are a lot of other hidden benefits for being enrolled as a gifted student.
A-3. How important are my high school grades to colleges and employers?

Very important! Once you’re in high school, every grade that you bring home on your report card gets recorded on your Permanent Record. Your middle school grades are usually erased from the school’s files a few years after you move on to high school, but in high school, your grades are available in the school files forever. That means that 200 hundred years from now if someone wants to see your high school grades, they can easily check your public record to see how you did. So why does that make them important?

Well the answer is that your Permanent Record is what colleges and future employers use to see if you’re a student worthy of their admissions. They can look at the kinds of courses you took and the grades you made to determine if you are a hard-working and intelligent student. In essence, that means that colleges and employers are actually watching everything you do from 9th grade onwards. You should definitely be on your best behavior. (By the way, in case you’re ever caught for a crime, your Permanent Record can be used against you in court…just so you know)

Now, you should also know that grades by themselves don’t really tell the whole story about you. It’s easy to take all easy classes and get great grades, but it’s a lot harder to make good grades in advanced level classes. To make up for this, colleges and employers have learned to look at a combination of your class difficulty (see A-7) and your grades. In fact, when you submit a college or employment application, your high school sends a little brochure alongside your application that outlines all the difficult courses you could have taken at the school. The college or employer can then compare that brochure with your Permanent Record to see how well you really took advantage of the opportunities your school had to offer.

So remember, it’s not just about what grades you make, but it’s also about which classes you make them in. Here’s an example that might help clear up any confusion: A college would prefer a student who got a B in an AP class (see A-8) than a student who got an A in a regular honors level class. Why? Because AP classes are very challenging and reading-intensive, they force students to think deeper and more critically about the subject. [Having said that though, you should also know that a college prefers a student who got an A in a regular honors class than a D in an AP class. Why? Because getting a D in an AP class means that you didn’t really learn anything, whereas you probably did learn something to get an A in the honors class.] And you thought this was going to be easy, didn’t you… ☺

A-4. What are Core Area courses?

Core Area courses are very specific types of courses that you take in middle and high school that form the anchors of your education. Although your school might combine some of these Core Area courses together into a single course, the basic list of Core Area courses are as follows:

- Science
- Math
- Social Studies
- English / Language Arts
- Foreign Language
Almost all high schools around the U.S. require their students to earn a certain number of Carnegie Units (credits) \(\text{(see A-6)}\) in each of these subjects to graduate. Many times colleges will look only at Core Area course grades when determining admissions. Therefore, it is important that you make sure you keep your grades up in Core Area courses.

Each of these general Core Areas can be broken down into further topic areas (for example, science can be broken down into biology, chemistry, physics, etc…) that are easier for the school to teach in a year. However, as a student, you should not look at each Core Area as a subject independent of another. In fact, a student who is looking to succeed should always be looking for connecting ideas between the Core Areas. For example, Math is important not just for mathematicians; it is also important for physicists (Science) who calculate the motion of objects and for economists (Social Studies) who use linear equations to create supply and demand models. Students who actively look for multi-disciplinary connections are sure to succeed.

NOTE: Some high schools do not require a foreign language course for you to graduate. However, the Aga Khan Education Board strongly recommends you take 3 years (2 years is bare minimum) of a foreign language in school. Not only do top colleges prefer students with foreign language backgrounds, but studies have also shown that foreign language skills improve native vocabulary, cognitive abilities, and social confidence.

**A-5. What are free electives?**

In contrast to the required Core Area courses \(\text{(see A-4)}\), many middle and high schools offer time for students to explore different academic and non-academic disciplines through other non-required classes at the school. These courses are referred to as free electives. Middle schools will usually either give students the option of taking only one elective per semester or assign a student to a pre-arranged exploratory rotation. High schools, on the other hand, will usually give students the option to take their free elective classes at any time they wish during their four years.

You should note that elective classes are not just restricted to non-Core Area subjects. For instance, if you finish your 3 required Carnegie Units \(\text{(see A-6)}\) of Science to graduate, you may still take another Science class during your 12\(^{\text{th}}\) grade year (like AP Chemistry) and consider it as one of your electives.

Your aim as an achiever is to best use your free electives time to **both** deepen your understanding of a subject very dear to you **and** broaden your skill base with subjects that evoke your creative energy. Many of the best students will use their free elective time to do extra research in a field of interest while simultaneously taking art or music classes to develop their aesthetic qualities.
A-6. What is a Carnegie Unit (credit)?

Carnegie Units, or what are usually referred to as course credits, are points given to a student after he/she successfully passes a high school course. Graduation requirements for most high schools are usually given in terms of Carnegie Units. For instance, in order for a student to graduate, he/she may need to finish 24 year-long courses over 4 years of high school for a total of 24 Carnegie Units. Check with your high school to find out the exact number of Carnegie Units you will need to graduate.

It may actually surprise you to know that Carnegie Units began at Harvard in the late 1800’s as a way for its admissions committee to dictate what high schools should teach their students before sending them to college. Since then, almost all colleges and universities in the country have adopted the Carnegie Units as a way to control what high schools teach. Therefore, next time you want to complain about high school graduation requirements, don’t go to your principal…Now you know his/her hands are tied by the colleges you so badly want to attend.

A-7. What is the difference between academic, honors, pre-AP, college prep, and gifted courses?

Each school system across the country has a different system of tracking students. Tracking allows schools to place students in classrooms with other students who learn material at the same pace and who are at the same level of critical thought. For instance, students who are stronger or weaker in math are placed in classrooms with other students with strengths or weaknesses in math, respectively. This allows the teacher to conduct the class at a slower or faster pace and spend more or less time on the fundamentals. Terms such as academic, honors, college prep, and pre-AP are usual designations for these different levels of coursework. You should check with your particular school system to determine the order of advancement used in that system. The term “gifted” is generally considered the fastest pace of learning. Many middle school systems require students to pass a Gifted Proficiency Exam before enrolling in either gifted courses or in specialized Gifted and Talented programs (such as Discovery, Probe, etc…).

A-7-1. When should I move to the next level of courses?

The best opportunities for education in the US public school system are found at the most advanced level of coursework. Your goal should always be to enroll in the most advanced level of classes; however, be aware that the number of hours of study and writing will dramatically increase as you take more and more advanced level classes. You should move to the next level of courses only when you are ready for this challenge. If you move too fast, your grades may suffer. You should set a minimum goal of enrolling in at least honors level classes before your 11th grade year; this will help you gain admissions into your top college choice.

You are not required to advance in your classes in all your subjects at the same time. You may enroll in advanced classes for only the classes where you feel you can handle the challenge of extra study and deeper critical thought. For instance, you may choose to take an honors level math class and a gifted level English class at the same time.
A-7-2. What if my school doesn’t track students?

Some educators feel that tracking students into advanced and remedial classes creates unnecessary and discriminatory social classes. These educators have created schools that mix students of all learning levels into one class. If you are enrolled in such a school, there is no need to worry. These schools have specially designed curriculums that create community-learning groups for learning at all levels.

There is no need to worry about college admissions, either. Colleges take into account school designs when making admissions decisions. However, just do your best to be at the top of your class and constantly help others to reach the top also.

A-8. What is an AP (Advanced Placement) class?

For many of the classes taught in high school, the curriculum is created by the individual school system. AP class curriculums, however, are designed by a national organization known as The College Board. These standardized curriculums are designed to create college-level courses within a high school environment. They generally require intense readings, numerous essays, and difficult problem-solving. Every May, the College Board administers an exam for each AP subject. These exams are scored on a scale of 1-5, and receiving a 4 or 5 on the exam is usually worth college credit at most US colleges.

A-8-1. How are grades calculated for AP classes?

Due to the greater intensity and difficulty of AP classes as compared to other high school classes, many school systems (though not all) offer academic compensations to students enrolled in AP classes. Traditionally, school systems have either added an additional 10 points to the student’s final grade or scaled the student’s GPA (see A-10) by 1 additional point. You should check with your individual school system to find out what academic compensations are available to you.

A-8-2. How can I join an AP class?

Not all high schools in the country have the teachers or resources necessary to offer AP classes. If you are fortunate to attend a high school that offers AP classes, ask your individual high school about enrollment requirements. Some high schools have open enrollment for AP classes, whereas some may require certain GPA or SAT score requirements.
A-9. What is IB (International Baccalaureate)?

The IB curriculum is an alternative curriculum to the ones created by local school systems and The College Board. An organization known as the IBO in Geneva, Switzerland developed a three-tier curriculum program for ages 3-18 that focuses student learning on critical thought and exposure to many different points of views. This curriculum is standardized and is taught in schools around the globe. Currently, there are almost 1,400 IB schools in 114 countries. Students who complete the IB program and pass the difficult IB exam earn a “Baccalaureate” instead of a regular high school diploma. Colleges and universities across the world, especially European and Asian schools, recognize this Baccalaureate. Top tier universities in the US also recognize the Baccalaureate. The IB program is growing in popularity due to its high academic standards; however, only students with a strong determination to achieve excellence can survive its intensity. The IB program is available in select schools around the US. You can check with the IBO’s official homepage (www.ibo.org) to help you track down a local IB school.

A-10. What is a GPA (Grade Point Average)?

The GPA was developed as a way to normalize a student’s overall class performance into a convenient and easily comparable numerical scale. The GPA is calculated by converting all of a student’s individual class grades according to the table below and dividing by the total number of classes taken. The GPA is a cumulative measure of all classes taken from 9th-12th grade.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>GPA Points</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>4.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>0</td>
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GPAs are often used (incorrectly, however) to compare student performance. Many high schools across the country may even use the GPA to determine class ranks. Regardless what the GPA is used for, you should know that most of it (though not all) is meaningless. Colleges will only care for two things: 1) the difficulty of your class (see A-7) and 2) your grade in the class. The actual numerical GPA is not considered.

A-11. What is a portfolio?

Many schools around the country are discovering an alternative method of determining graduation eligibility. Instead of relying on graduation exams or passing class grades, these innovative schools require graduating seniors to create a portfolio, or a compilation of a student’s total high school work. Portfolios contain the many reports, research papers, science projects, and term papers that a student has created throughout his/her high school career. A graduation committee evaluates these portfolio requirements to determine whether a student’s work demonstrates an expected level of writing, knowledge, and critical thought. These portfolios can also be submitted as part of the supporting documents of a college application. Many of the best high schools around the country are adopting this portfolio method of evaluation.
A-12. What if my school does not give grades?

Innovative schools across the country are looking for evaluation methods that do not focus on using the traditional A-F or 60-100 grading system. Some educators feel that grades have been over-inflated and have become meaningless. As an alternative, these educators are using teacher comments and documented standards to evaluate performance. These evaluations have the benefit of providing constructive feedback and measurable goals for improvement.

If your school does not give grades, there is no need to worry. Many colleges are becoming more and more accepting of such schools, especially if the school requires a graduation portfolio (see A-11). In fact, many colleges prefer students who have graduated from such schools because of these schools’ commitment to education.

A-13. I can’t keep up with all my homework. What do I do?

Push yourself but don’t burn yourself out. Homework provides the necessary practice to excel on tests and quizzes. If you feel that you can’t keep up with your homework, try to cut back on some of your extra-curricular commitments. If you find the homework difficult, you should arrange time with your teacher or friends for extra help. Homework help-lines are also available to guide you on your work. As a last resort, you might choose to reduce the number of honors classes in your schedule. This is a last resort because most students who reduce their honors workload generally tend to fall far behind and never move back up to an honors class later.

A-14. If my grades are low, where can I get help?

There is probably a lot more help available to you than you think. Everybody needs a little help from time to time. Do not be ashamed to ask for it. There are people out there whose sole job is to help students succeed in school, and they do it in complete confidentiality. A few sources of help are listed below. Some cost money and others are free and fun. Choose options that best fit your budget and also meet your needs.

A-14-1. After-school help from your teachers

After-school help is great for short-term help if there is a particular section or chapter you don’t understand. This option should always be your first option when trying to get help. In some states in the U.S., teachers are required to be available for 1-2 hours after-school to help students who need help. Meeting with your teachers after-school is a great way to understand the material first-hand from the instructor. It also is a great way for you to get to know your teachers on a more personal level; this has its advantages when you are looking for teacher recommendations during scholarship and college application time.

The only disadvantage to after-school help is that there is only one teacher for 25-80 students. If many students need help on a particular day, you may have to wait in line for a very short visit. Make appointments with your teacher ahead of time to avoid the lines.
Quick Tip: Many times, the publishers of the textbooks that you use in class send the teachers a special set of tutorial CD-ROMs or books. Most teachers don’t usually tell the class about them. However, if you privately ask your teacher about the tutorials, he/she may let you borrow them for a few days.

A-14-2. Tutoring books and videos available in bookstores

Bookstores are also a great place to purchase tutoring books on your subject of interest. Many of the large chain bookstores (such as Barnes and Nobles, Walden, Chapter 11, Amazon, etc…) sell study-guide books and videos that supplement your coursework. Although it can get costly to buy lots of tutoring books, you may find these books more understandable than your school textbooks. These books and videos are usually sold by subject area (such as Biology, US History, Algebra, etc…). They try to cover a lot of material in very short reading passages. For this reason, they are not as thorough as your schoolbooks.

Caution: If you only study the material in the tutoring books, you will most likely not improve your grades. You will only improve your grades if you use the tutoring books alongside your regular textbook and class notes.

A-14-3. Private tutor

If you feel very weak in a subject (for instance, geometry or chemistry) and can’t keep up with any of the material taught in class, you might wish to hire a private tutor. Private tutors offer one-on-one assistance either at your home, at their home, or over the phone at your convenience. Most private tutors will charge anywhere from $15-$35 an hour depending on their experience. Private tutors work in different ways. Some will teach you material and then go over example problems. Others will actually help you on your school homework and give you more homework problems to do for him/her. Ask around to find the best private tutor for you in your subject of interest.

The ideal place to find a private tutor is a college campus. Go to local college campuses in your area and look for flyers and posters that advertise private tutoring services. There are many college students out there who have recently gone through high school and who are looking to earn extra money.

You can also inquire with your local Aga Khan Education Board for jamati tutoring and mentoring services. Even if your local AKEB is not ready to offer a tutoring/mentoring program, they will definitely be happy to help you find a tutor from within your jamat.

A-14-4. Learning Centers (e.g. Sylvan, Huntington, Kumon, etc.)

As standards of public education rise in the US, new businesses are popping up to provide extra academic help and gifted enrichment studies to students of all age groups. These learning centers have specialized one-on-one and group classes that can meet directly after school or on weekends to help students in math, reading, writing, study skills and SAT preparation. Some public schools may also give school credit for courses taken at such learning centers. This is good for students who need more special attention in one or two subjects than a large public school can provide.
Students who wish to join a Learning Center should be aware that there are costs associated with joining such a center. Call or visit a local center to find out about the prices in your area. Here are the contacts of three large US learning center chains:
Sylvan Learning Center (1800-EDUCATE or www.educate.com)
Huntington Learning Center (1800-CAN-LEARN or www.huntingtonlearning.com)
Kumon Math and Reading Centers (1800-ABC-MATH or www.kumon.com)

A-14-5. Peer tutoring groups

A fun and no-cost way to get extra help is to form peer-tutoring groups with your classmates. Students tend to study better with other students their age than with adults. Also, classmates can compare class notes and drill each other to study for exams. Ideal study groups consist of 4-5 students. The main disadvantage to using study groups is the potential “distraction” caused by having friends within talking distance. Most study groups that fail, fail because the classmates can’t stay focused on topic. They get distracted and hungry all too often. However, on the flip side, some study groups succeed beyond expectation. What’s the secret to forming good study groups?

1. Find study partners who are serious about getting good grades. Consider finding people outside your circle of friends.
2. Find study partners who can meet at the same time and location regularly.
3. Randomly assign the following roles to each member of the study group every time you meet:
   a. Facilitator: This person keeps the group on topic. If the group goes off-topic or gets distracted, this person needs to put his/her foot down and get the group back on track
   b. Encourager: This person’s job is to encourage the group at all times. Every study group has times when it just drags along and no one feels like they understand the material. The encourager has to create the positive feeling in the group. The encourager should never say any negative comment during the study session.
   c. Recorder: This person records all the major breakthroughs and ideas of the group. This person also writes down the information the group found difficult and the questions the group has for the teacher. At the end of the group study session, the recorder should make his notes available to everyone.
   d. Includer: This person’s role is to make sure everyone has a chance to speak and present concerns. Some group members tend to shy away in large groups. The includer must always be aware of who is speaking too much and who is not getting a chance to speak. It is the includer’s job to stop the conversation and make sure each and every student understands the material.
   e. Timer: The timer’s role is to set the agenda for the study session and allocate enough time for the group to make it through all the material. The timer should keep reminding the group of the amount of time left for a given topic and allow the group to decide whether or not its worth spending more time on the current topic or moving on.

A-14-6. Tutoring Websites
Study aids are also available over the Internet where you can access them 24 hours a day. You can take online tutorial courses or read about selected topics of discussion on tutoring message boards. There are many different websites available. If you’re looking for a great starting point to find the right tutorial website for you, log on to www.EduOnline.net (The official AKEB website). Once you log on, you can click on the “Resource Links” tab at the top and then on the link for “Tutoring and Homework Help.” You will see a long list of AKEB-recommended websites. Different sites suit different needs. Find the one that’s right for you and bookmark it for easy access later.

A-14-7. Do homework help-lines help?

Homework help-lines are not designed to do your homework for you. Rather, they are there to assist you on working through 2-3 problems so that you get the hang of solving similar problems. If your grades are low because you have difficulty understanding your homework, homework help-lines are great, free services that can help you get on the right track when your teachers are not available. However, the disadvantage of a help-line is that you don’t get very personal one-on-one help. Give them a try and see if they work for you. Check the Resource Links tab on www.EduOnline.net to find a list of homework help-lines.

You might be surprised to hear that your parents or guardians might be better sources of homework help than a help-line in some cases. Although it’s been some time since your parents have gone to school, they might remember how to solve some of your homework problems. Why not ask them to sit down with you for a little while. It might be a quick way for you to get help, and it will make them feel good. Just be careful though…don’t let your parents do your work for you 😊

A-15. What is the difference between active learning and passive learning? Which is better?

Most of us are familiar with passive learning. During passive learning, we sit in our classes while our teachers drag on and on about some topic while we desperately try to take notes. Then we go home, read the chapter, and fiddle through our notes to try to figure out what the important details were. This form of learning tends to be more reactive than proactive, and it becomes a very inefficient and emotionally draining form of study, especially around test and quiz times.

Active learning is a more time-intensive but also a more rewarding form of learning. Active learning is also known as reflective learning. During active learning, students prepare for classes ahead of time and reflect on the material once the class is done. To practice active learning, you must look ahead on your schedule and read the chapters that will be covered in class before the class even starts. However, don’t just passively read the chapter, you must actively read the chapter. Active reading requires you to read the bold headlines that begin every section of your textbook. Once you read the headline, you should ask yourself 3 questions about the topic:

1. What do I know about this topic?
2. What do I want to learn about this topic?
3. Why is this topic important?
By seriously asking yourself these questions before you read the text, you are mentally getting ready to learn the material that you will soon read. This process is what generates critical thinking skills. It allows you to think about conclusions before you read them. It also makes reading the text a lot more fun.

Once you’ve read through the text and listened to your teacher lecture about it, the next phase of active learning is called reflection. In order to practice good reflection, you should spend about 10 minutes at the end of every class (or at home) and write down some of your thoughts about how the material you learned is useful in your life or how it relates to something else you learned in another class. This short reflection period will give you a chance to really put ideas and concepts in order in your head. You will find that you will be much more ready for tests and essays using active learning.

**A-16. What are different study habits I can try?**

Everyone is wired differently. What works for one person, doesn’t work for another. Some people are naturally inclined towards numbers and logic, while others are more inclined toward abstract concepts or aesthetic qualities. Everyone is different, and each person should develop study habits that are personal to him or her. Here are a few tips that you might use to determine your best study habits:

1. Most people tend to have one time during the day when they can concentrate more than any other time of the day. That doesn’t mean you can’t study at other times of the day, it just means that you should study things that require lots of concentration during those peak times. For instance, some people are most relaxed at 5AM and can study well. Other people feel more relaxed during the afternoon sunlight hours. Experiment around with different peak study times and plan your sleeping schedule around the ones that fit you best.

2. If you’re the kind of person of who needs to be organized with lists and numbers, you should get in the habit of taking notes while your teacher talks or while you read. You should take your notes in Outline form. That means, you should write down all the major points of a lecture or reading on the far left side of your paper and indent about ½” on the next line to write down any supporting details about your major point. Here’s an example from a World History lesson:

   -- During Imperialism the British were busy conquering countries around the world
   -- England was a small country, so they were looking for a way to get more natural resources
   -- If they got natural resources, they could create more technology and become a world superpower
   -- At the same time, the US was busy conquering countries to keep up with the British
3. Some people are naturally inclined to learn things spatially. They organize information in their heads by creating mental spatial images. If you are one of these people, you might want to learn a different form of note-taking called Mind Mapping. Mind maps use different colors to create drawings that organize all major concepts of a topic into an easily identifiable arrangement. If you're interested in Mind Maps, you can check the following sources:

4. If you’re naturally interested in logic and reasoning, you can try experiential learning. Experiential learning requires learning through hands-on discovery. Science experiments and social projects are good examples of experiential learning. If these types of projects are of interest to you, you may try different experiential learning techniques to enhance your school experience. There are many, many websites available on the World Wide Web that show you step by step how to create experiments and social science projects. Just type “education” or “science projects” in any search engine (like Google or Yahoo) and it will generate a list of many different great websites for you to try.

5. Reflective (active) learning may have the most positive influence on your study habits. Get into the habit of writing short reflective pieces (such as daily journals) about the topics covered in school each day. This will not only help you organize information daily, but it will also improve your critical thinking skills and writing skills. For more information on Active Learning, see section A-15.
B. Extra-Curricular Activities

B-1. What are Extra-Curricular Activities?

There is no great definition of an Extra-curricular activity, but you can think of them as activities a student does outside of the normal school classes. Extra-curricular activities are meant to enrich a student's educational development by exposing him/her to a rich variety of cultural, athletic, social, and aesthetic experiences. These varied experiences enrich the learning that is done inside and outside the classroom.

You should note that free elective classes (see A-5) such as band, dance, woodshop, art, etc… are not considered as extra-curricular; however, they may form the foundation of a student’s interest in a related extra-curricular activity done outside of the normal school classes. Extra-curricular activities can take place almost anywhere, from school and jamatkhana to community centers and individual homes. Reading the next few sections will give you an idea of different types of Extra-curricular activities and their role in your development.

B-2. Why are Extra-Curricular Activities important to my personal development?

Experiences form the foundation of life. The more you experience as a student, the more promising and fulfilling your career and personal life will be. All students will experience the joys and pain of schoolwork in their lives, but it is during the Extra-Curricular time that a student really gets to develop his/her interests in other facets of life besides academics. Once an adult, he/she will appreciate the finer qualities of life through his/her lens of experience. For instance, a student who has played in his high school orchestra will appreciate the emotional character of different types of world music. A student who has played linebacker on his/her high school football team will appreciate the self-confidence value of personal fitness and exercise. A student who has volunteered her time weekend after weekend to feed the hungry will appreciate the necessity of nonprofit organizations in bettering the quality of lives for everyone.

Your participation and leadership in different Extra-Curricular activities will also give you the chance to explore first-hand different fields of interest. For instance, if you’re interested in medicine, then by becoming a local hospital volunteer you get to feel what it’s like to work in a hospital and care for patients. At the same time, Extra-curricular activities allow you to become interactive with other students and community members who are interested in the same things as you.

In general, Extra-Curricular activities give you the insight to make important career and personal decisions in your life that ordinary schoolwork can’t.
B-3. What are the different types of Extra-Curricular Activities?

There are so many different types of Extra-Curricular activities in which you can participate that no list of them would ever be complete. You can participate in these activities almost anywhere – from school to jamatkhana to community organizations. To try to get a grasp of their sheer numbers, we can categorize different Extra-Curricular activities. Below is a very small list of different activities grouped by categories. Beside each activity you will see range of three letters in brackets. The “H” stands for High Quality; the “M” stands for Medium Quality; the “L” stands for Low Quality. See the section entitled “How do I tell if an activity is high quality or low quality” (B-7) for more details.

1. Service Activities
   a. Key Club [L-H]
   b. Beta Club [M]
   c. Rotary Club [L-H]
   d. Boys / Girls Scouts [H]
   e. 4-H [M-H]
   f. UNICEF fundraising [L-H]
   g. Feed the Hungry [L-H]
   h. March of Dimes [L-H]
   i. Community volunteering [L-H]

2. REC/Jamati Activities (see B-10)
   a. RE Class participation [M-H]
   b. REC teaching [M-H]
   c. Volunteer / Security Corps [M-H]
   d. EXCITE! Facilitator [L]
   e. Camp Mosaic Staff [L-H]
   f. Institution volunteer [L-H]
   g. Y.E.S. participant [L-H]

3. Athletic Activities
   a. JV / Varsity team sports [L-H]
   b. YMCA intramurals/leagues [L-H]
   c. Athletic classes/lessons [L-M]
   d. Backpacking / climbing [L-M]
   e. USTA tennis [M-H]
   f. Dance / Cheerleading squads [L-H]

4. Cultural/Aesthetic Activities
   a. Theater/Drama [M-H]
   b. Sculpture / Painting clubs [L-H]
   c. After-school Orchestra/Band [M-H]
   d. Foreign language clubs [L]
   e. Literary societies [L-M]
   f. Glee Club / Chorus [M-H]
   g. Dance [L-H]
5. Academic Activities
   a. Academic Team [L-M]
   b. Debate Team [L-H]
   c. Model UN [L-M]
   d. Math and Science Team [L-M]
   e. Science Olympiad [L-M]
   f. Odyssey of the Mind [L-M]
   g. Duke’s TIP program [M-H]
   h. National Honors Society [L-M]
   i. Pre-professional clubs [L-M]

6. Hobby Clubs
   a. Photography club [L]
   b. Art clubs [L]
   c. Chess club [L]
   d. Engineering Club [L]
   e. Coin / Stamp collecting [L]

7. Other
   a. Student Government [H]
   b. Newspaper staff [L-H]
   c. Yearbook staff [L-M]
   d. Broadcast Journalism [L-H]
   e. FBLA [L-M]
   f. Certain types of paid jobs [L-H] (see B-11)

Note: Test-prep and supplementary classes (such as Kumon and Sylvan classes) do not count as extra-curricular activities. Also, most reading programs (such as EXCITE! or local read-a-thons) are not considered Extra-curricular either even though they are very important in a child’s education. (see B-12)

B-4. Which types should I participate in?
If you are in 6-9th grade, you should be very active in as many different categories of Extra-Curricular activities as possible. This is your time to sample and experiment with lots of different organizations. You should be actively involved in different sports practices, art clubs, service organizations, academic clubs, and other interest groups (see B-3). BUT DON’T DO IT ALL AT THE SAME TIME!!! You have 4 years between 6th and 9th grade; take your time while experimenting and try to enjoy every activity you do. You may never have thought you had a good voice, but by joining Chorus you might find you have a hidden treasure in your throat. The same is true for all your other activities. If you find something that you really like, stick with it and excel at it. If you joined your high school band and found yourself to be a really good musician, keep practicing hard; there may be a special recognition in there for you along the way. 6-9th grade is about trying to become an all-rounder.
If you’re in 10-12th grade, you should be experimenting less and excelling more. Once you’ve found out that you enjoy painting, roller-blading, camping, canoeing, researching, writing, or even playing an instrument, get very involved in your interest. If there are competitions for your interest, go compete for recognition. If there are other youths who want to get involved, form an organization. If there are already clubs for your interest, become leaders (see B-15) in them. If there are more cool things to learn about your interest, go learn them. 10-12th grade is less about being an all-rounder and more about being a special individual in your interests.

It’s best to find your peak interests across different categories of Extra-Curricular activities (see B-3) rather than in only one category. For instance, rather than being an amazing sculptor and singer and ballet dancer (all under the Cultural/Aesthetic category), try to be an amazing sculptor, an all-star athlete, and an active community volunteer all at once. Being able to excel across different categories while maintaining good school grades will really enrich your life in the future.

**B-4-1. What if I’m not the artistic or athletic type?**

It’s one thing to assume you’re not the artistic or athletic type, but it’s another thing to actually try to be an artist and athlete before jumping to conclusions. You never really know what your human potential is. You can do anything you put your mind to. If you really want to be a great athlete, you can start training really hard as a 6th or 7th grader. If by 9th grade you feel you’re not the athletic type, no problem; at least you’ll never regret not trying. Plus, you still have plenty of time to try other Extra-curricular activities.

By the end of 12th grade, you don’t have to be an artist or athlete. You may have found that community and jamati service is what makes you who you are. But it will just feel good that you tried everything with your heart and that you’ve lived a fulfilling childhood. Plus, you never know when your hard athletic training will pay off in a backyard football game with your college buddies or your artistic skills will lead to impressive marketing campaigns.

**B-5. When should I begin joining Extra-Curricular activities?**

NOW! Don’t wait until high school to join Extra-Curricular activities. Start now! The sooner you begin exploring further interests outside of your school classes, the more you will enrich your life with valuable experiences that will help you in college, in your career, and in your personal life. If you think Extra-Curricular activities are only good for getting into college, think again! You will be involved in some form of Extra-Curricular activity throughout your life, whether it be as a jamati volunteer, or local sports team coach, or some other role. Enjoy an active and energetic life – join Extra-Curricular activities as soon as you can.
B-6. How many activities should I participate in?
Extra-curricular activities can take up a lot of your time after school, leaving you with very little time to study or spend time with family and friends. You have to be responsible in finding the right balance in your life. In general, most students can spend time in a minimum of **2-3 high quality extra-curricular activities and a couple of low to medium quality activities** (see B-7 for more details). Your goal should not be to fill your resume with lots and lots of activities. Any employer or college will see right through that kind of resume. Your goal should be to find a genuine mix of activities that represent your interests, that are valuable to your growth, and that give you enough time for studying.

B-7. How do I tell if an activity is high quality or low quality?
Different activities have different values to you as a student, depending on how well the activities are organized and how much they focus on both skill and character development. This is what determines the quality of an activity.

High quality activities focus not only on skill building or knowledge sharing, but also on character development. Character development includes activities that emphasize ethical decision-making, civic duty, social conscience, teamwork, leadership, self-confidence, cultural identity, and/or aesthetic appreciation. The more an extra-curricular activity emphasizes each of these facets of character, the higher its quality. Usually, the higher the quality of the activity, the larger the amount of time you have to put into it throughout the year, including weekends and holidays.

On the flip side, low quality activities emphasize only skill building or knowledge sharing components. Because of their reduced number of objectives, they don’t demand as much of your time. Most extra-curricular activities of this type meet only once or twice a month for the 9 months of the school year. Does this mean you should stay away from low-quality activities? Absolutely not! Skill building and knowledge sharing are important parts of development. If you’re interested in playing chess as a hobby, then a chess club is a great place to learn how to play the game and how to learn different strategies from other chess players. Hobby clubs are great places to relax and still learn something in the process.

If you’re interested in an activity, you should join it regardless if it is high quality or low quality. Just keep in mind that you need both high and low quality activities to have an enriched life.

B-7-1. What are examples of good quality activities?
It’s hard to generalize since your personal commitment to an activity plays a large part in determining whether the activity is of high or low quality to you. If you really put your heart and soul into the following examples of high quality activities, then you will really cherish what you will gain from them:
- Boys Scouts
- Girl Scouts
- 4-H
• JV / Varsity / League sports
• Orchestra
• Drama
• Community Service
• REC Classes
• Student Government
• Debate Team
• Volunteer Corps
• USTA Tennis
• ROTC
• Scientific Research (for publication)

B-8. Is it really important for me to join a club/organization or can I participate in Extra-Curricular activities on my own?

You can definitely participate in Extra-Curricular activities on your own. Clubs and organizations are often helpful in getting people introduced to various activities; however, if you are interested in pursuing your interests on your own, you can definitely follow that path. Just don’t rule out the possibility of joining a club or organization; such groups are helpful for you to meet people who can assist you in furthering your interests. At the same time, clubs and organizations can vouch for your dedication to an activity when it comes time for college and scholarship applications.

B-9. How can I find out about joining a club/organization?

B-9-1. In-school

Schools are generally good about publicizing clubs and organizations at the beginning of the year. If you are joining the school year late, approach your class representative or student council member. Teachers and counselors are also good ways to find out about different clubs in your school. Here is a sample of different types of activities offered at middle and high schools:

• Academic and Debate Teams
• Academic and Honors societies
• Art and Music clubs / orchestra / band
• Community Service clubs
• Cultural / Foreign Language clubs
• Literary Societies (including newspaper, yearbook, and other print media staffs)
• Science and Engineering clubs
• Sports / Athletic teams
• Student Government

You can even form your own club as long as you can find a teacher to sponsor you and way to raise funds.
B-9-2. Out-of-school

There are plenty of activities that you can join that have nothing to do with your school. Your local community or other non-profit agencies in your state probably organize different activities as well. Check your local newspaper or community bulletins to see what’s going on around your town. You can also search the Internet or ask your local Youth and Sports Board member for information or tips. Your school counselors and local librarians are also great sources for out-of-school activities.

B-9-3. YMCA

The YMCA is a nationwide organization that seeks to build strong and united communities. Every YMCA is different in its program offerings. The YMCA website writes, “A YMCA in your community may offer child care or teen leadership clubs. A Y in the next town may have swimming lessons or drawing classes.” Since each YMCA is tailored to its specific community, each YMCA charges varying fees for its programs. Keep in mind, though, that the YMCA does offer financial assistance to those families who need it. The YMCA offers programs in the following areas:

- Aquatics
- Arts & Humanities
- Camping
- Child Care
- Community Development
- Family
- Health & Fitness
- International Exchanges
- Teen Leadership
- Sports
- Scuba

If you want more information about the YMCA or would like to locate one near you, visit their web page at www.ymca.com

B-9-4. Boy Scouts of America

The Boy Scouts is a large scouting organization designed for boys between 11 to 17 years old (younger boys can look into the Tiger or Cub Scouts program). You can join one of the thousands of Boy Scouts troops across the US by calling your local Boy Scouts Council office or visiting their website. You can begin your search at www.scouting.org. Once you’re part of a troop, you will usually meet once a week or once every two weeks throughout the year plus on weekends for camps and excursions. The Boy Scouts organization develops character and citizenship among its scouts through:

- Community service projects
- Skill development in over 100 fields (merit badge program)
- Physical fitness activities
- Outdoor survival activities
- Troop leadership
B-9-5. Girl Scouts of America

The Girl Scouts of America is an all-girl organization equivalent in its mission to the Boy Scouts – to develop leadership, character, and social conscience in girls. It is open to all girls ages 5-17 years old. Each girl must pay a yearly membership fee, but financial assistance is available. Girls in the Girl Scouts explore topics in:

- Leadership
- Math, Science, and Technology
- Financial Literacy
- Health, Fitness, and Sports
- Environmental Education
- The Arts
- Global Awareness

If you would like more information about the Girl Scouts or would like to join, you can find them on the Internet at www.girlscouts.org

B-9-6. Boys & Girls Club

The Boys and Girls Clubs are safe recreation centers designed with positive reinforcements to make kids feel useful, competent, and energetic. These clubs are great places to foster friendships, have a little fun, and study while parents are away at work. Most clubs include the following rooms for students to use:

- Game Rooms
- Teen Centers
- Learning Centers
- Arts and Crafts Rooms
- Gyms
- Technology Centers

If you would like more information about the Boys and Girls Club or would like to find one near you, you can visit their website at www.bgca.org or call them at 1-800-854-CLUB.

B-9-7. 4-H Club

The 4-H club was designed as a project of the US Dept of Agriculture, and it currently serves over 6.8 million kids in the US. 4-H youths from ages 5-21 learn skills, responsibility, and self-confidence through camps, fairs, shows, youth conferences, youth exchanges, and community service projects. There is no membership cost to join the 4-H club. Involved families usually donate money to cover the costs of projects and activities. The 4 “H’s” of the club stand for the following:

- Head
  - Thinking critically
  - Solving problems
- Heart
  - Respecting self, others, and the environment
  - Communicating
- Hands
  - Preparing for a career
  - Serving others
• Health
  o Choosing healthy lifestyles
  o Managing change and challenges
If you would like more information about 4-H or would like to find one near you, please visit their website at www.4-H.org

**B-9-8. local libraries**

You local public libraries may also organize different activities throughout the year. You can help organize these activities or volunteer your time to run an activity. Here is a list of some of the activities you can be involved in at the local library:

• Reading programs for elementary and middle school
• Holiday activities
• Guest Lecturers
• Community Service Days

If you want information about what your library is doing, you can sign up with your librarian to receive weekly or monthly bulletins in the mail.

**B-10. Are jamati activities considered as Extra-Curricular?**

Yes, jamati activities are just as important to your development as non-jamati activities. Getting involved with jamatkhana is important in developing both your religious identity and your cultural identity. At the same time, jamatkhana offers plenty of opportunities for you to do community service as well as get involved with fun recreational activities. Depending on how large or small your jamat is, you may find a lot of Extra-Curricular activities from each of the main categories (see **B-3**) in your jamat.

Definitely get involved with jamatkhana, but don’t lose sight of your community involvements. In order for Ismailis to really make a positive intellectual mark in the US, we must remember to build bridges with our non-Ismaili friends and neighbors as well. We strongly recommend to you that you don’t only stay within the jamat for your Extra-Curricular activities. Find maybe 2-3 other Ismaili friends and go join community or school groups together. That way you will feel comfortable with your 2-3 friends, your parents will feel comfortable that you are around people they can trust, and you will be able to easily get involved with your local community members.

**B-11. Does holding a job count as Extra-Curricular?**

This is always an interesting question. Since there are thousands of possible jobs you can hold, there are thousands of possible responses to this question. If you think of Extra-Curricular activities as being important to your education development, then it’s hard (but not impossible) to make the case that convenient store work is important in your educational development. It’s definitely easier to make a case for a job at a doctor’s office or a paid internship at a university.

Holding almost any job definitely develops responsibility, social confidence, and financial independence. For this reason, most people accept jobs as an Extra-Curricular activity. However, some people feel that true Extra-Curricular activities are those which help you develop the skills and character that you will need to succeed in your future career.
Whichever way you choose to look at it, the bottom line remains that many students are required to work to help their families survive financially. If you are one of these students, then you should consider arranging your work schedule so that you can spend some time on other Extra-Curricular activities besides your job. Most students hold down a job because of its financial rewards; therefore, they miss out on the chance to seek activities which they can do solely for the personal achievement rewards. You can make all the money in the world, but until you feel like you’ve really explored all that life has to offer you will probably feel unfulfilled. 

Before taking any job, you should weigh the benefits and disadvantages of the decision with your parents. Make sure your parents understand the value of Extra-Curricular activities and the choices available to them. If you work together as a family on this issue, there will be no conflict between your financial and educational needs.

**B-12. Are reading programs considered Extra-Curricular?**

Reading programs are generally used to excel in your individual schools. Because reading programs are more of a motivational tool, they are not considered extra-curricular. However, if you begin working as a tutor or facilitator of a reading program, then you can categorize your work with the reading program as extra-curricular.

**B-13. Are there any advantages to entering a competition or joining a competitive Extra-Curricular activity?**

By participating in competitive activities, schools recognize that you are confident in your skills and are willing to represent your school. Furthermore, colleges know that competitions require a lot of preparation and time. By being able to compete for an extra-curricular activity and maintain a good academic record, people will recognize that you work well even when you have multiple things to do. Your dedication and effort will definitely show through at any competitive event.

Moreover, competitions give you the feeling of personal achievement. There is nothing worse than putting in hours and hours of time into an activity and coming out feeling like you haven’t really accomplished anything. Competitions are a way of gaining that seal of approval that you’ve accomplished something. If you’ve been dancing for years, then winning a competition or even coming in the Top 5 or Top 10 will feel really great!

**CAUTION:** Always remember one thing about competitions: **You are always competing against yourself, not other people. You want to be the best you can be.** Five or ten years down the line you probably won’t even remember the name of the person you competed against, but you’ll definitely remember how you started off as a slow and pudgy 6th grader and trained hard to become an all-star. **Recognize the talents of other people, but also recognize the talents within yourself.**
B-14. **About how many hours of Extra-Curricular activities should I do in a week?**

In middle school, it is good to spend about 10-20 hours a week if not more on Extra-Curricular activities. Remember, middle school is your time to experiment so definitely get highly involved.

High school classes usually demand a lot more of your study time but you should also be better at managing your time. Therefore, you should be averaging about 20-30 hours a week in Extra-Curricular activities. It may seem like a lot of time, but that’s what it takes to really begin to excel at your activities.

B-15. **What are leadership roles in Extra-Curricular activities?**

All Extra-Curricular activities need leaders. Leaders are the ones who organize the meetings, plan the activities, manage the administrative work, motivate the other students, make important decisions, and who are there to support everyone else. However, a leader is NOT the Boss! The difference between a Boss and a Leader is that a Boss directs people on what to do while a Leader encourages his peers to be active in deciding what should be done. Being a true Leader is one of the most fulfilling roles a person can take on in his/her life. As you become more involved within your Extra-curricular activity, you should constantly be looking for ways to become a leader. Some leadership positions are elected, such as presidents, vice presidents, secretary, etc…, but those aren’t the only leadership positions available to you. If you don’t get elected to a position, you can still be a sub-committee leader or team leader who encourages people to submit their ideas and discuss them.

Even if you’re not part of a club or organization, you can still be a leader in your community. Let’s say, for instance, that you really enjoy cheerleading but didn’t make it as the Cheerleading captain. Just because you’re not the Captain doesn’t mean you can’t still be a cheerleading leader. Here are some innovative ways to still be a leader:

1. Create some innovative cheers during your free time and present them to your team – They might like them and include them in the routine
2. Start a cheerleading squad in your community for up-and-coming cheerleaders
3. Organize community solo and team cheerleading competitions in which others can participate and gain recognition

**Being a leader is about being creative, encouraging, and active.**

B-16. **Should I try to be an all-rounder (without becoming exceptional in any one area)?**

See the Extra-Curricular section entitled “Which types should I participate in?” (B-4) for a detailed answer to this question.

Also, high school students should also see their local College Prep Advisor on the Education Board to ask what colleges look for in regards to Extra-Curricular activities.
B-17. What is a good mix of Extra-Curricular activities?

A good mix of activities will almost always include some form of community service or volunteer work. Societies of people can only work if everyone commits to contributing something to the social good. That could mean anything from cleaning up parks to feeding the hungry to raising money for community projects. Most major communities have some form of organized volunteer organizations. You can either join one or two of these organizations or go and start your own organization. If your local Youth and Sports Board has started the Y.E.S. (Youths Engaged in Service) program, then you can volunteer your time through it. To try to stay connected both to your jamati community and to your fellow American community, you should join some jamati volunteer group as well as a non-jamati group. One thing you should know about volunteering, though, is that you should be continuously volunteering your time throughout the year; you won’t really learn much from volunteering only one or two days out of the year.

As a middle school student, your mix of activities should include at least either an athletic activity or an artistic/cultural activity. Make sure, though, that sometime in your middle school years you try your hand in both types of activity. Neither of these two activities has to be done at your school. You may decide that instead of joining your school softball team you would prefer taking softball lessons at your local YMCA. You might even prefer learning to play an instrument through a private instructor and band. However you choose to mix these activities into your life, make sure you are putting your 100% effort in each of them.

Middle school students should also be very active in 1-2 good high quality character-building activities likes Scouts, 4-H, or a competitive sports team. Character building is absolutely essential at the middle school level. Middle school is the formative time for students to begin developing their character and personality, which they will carry into their adult life. It is crucial for parents to make sure their students are involved in some character building activity for at least 10 hours a week. In addition, parents must also find a way to be a part of that activity. If a student is part of a competitive sports team, the parents should be at the games. If the student is in Scouts, the parents should help out at the meetings and go camping with the Scouts every now and then.

For high school students, the mix of activities should focus on your interests as well as on your career. As a middle school student you should have discovered your natural interests by experimenting with different types of activities. Now, in high school you should develop your interest further and really try to make your mark as a recognized student in that field. If your interest was in dance, get involved with a few dance teams, go compete at dance competitions, and try to organize dance groups for young up-and-coming dancers. If your interest was in writing, become a writer for your school newspaper, poetry magazine, and yearbook. Also, write essays for different competitions and organize writing classes for students who find writing difficult. If your interest was in scientific research, go and get one of your science teachers to help you design an amazing scientific experiment. Submit your results to a scientific journal and to science competitions like the Westinghouse Scholarship. You could get recognized by a huge science company or university and be set for the rest of your life in science.
High school students can also try to find their way into career paths through Extra-Curricular activities. For instance, students who want to pursue medicine can volunteer at a hospital. Students who want to get involved with teaching can volunteer at a local school. Students who want to get involved with scientific research can design their own experiments and submit their results. Students who want to pursue a career in public policy can volunteer their time with a local political campaign. Be pro-active in getting your career off the ground right in high school. You’ll be amazed at how useful your high school years were once you graduate from college.
C. Standardized Tests

C-1. What are standardized accountability tests?

As part of George Bush’s “No Child Left Behind Act”, the federal government is now requiring that schools be held accountable for what they are teaching their kids. Every state in the US, except Iowa, has created a list of standards for what students should be taught at each grade level from Kindergarten to 12th grade. This means there are 49 different sets of standards being taught in 49 different states. At the same time, each state is creating a set of tests that are used to evaluate whether schools are teaching the minimum standards of education for that state. Again, these tests test the most basic standards of education. They do not indicate how much a student knows; they simply test whether a student has the most basic knowledge needed for his/her age.

Some (but not all) school systems are implementing these tests as “gateway” tests that students must pass to go on to the next grade. Some schools test students at every grade, while others test students at 1st, 4th, 8th, and 11th grade. In order for a school to receive state money to stay in operation, they must show the state that their students are passing the accountability tests.

The TAAS (Texas) and MCAS (Massachusetts) are two well-known examples of such accountability tests.

C-2. What are standardized Basic Skills tests

Many of us are familiar with tests such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills or the California Assessment Test (CAT) or the Stanford-9. These tests are slightly different from state accountability tests (see C-1). These tests don’t test basic knowledge; instead, they test basic skills. More specifically, they test whether a student has the basic math cognitive abilities, reading comprehension skills, and critical writing skills. These are considered the basic foundation skills all students need to succeed in both school and their career.

C-3. How often do I take these standardized tests?

Each individual school system and state Board of Education decides how often they wish to administer both the accountability tests and basic skills tests. Most states require students to take the basic skills tests once during middle school and once during high school. Accountability tests may possibly be given every year (as they are in North Carolina) or at specific grade levels (as they are in Georgia). Since these tests are not something for which you need to “study,” their frequency should not really matter to you. You should just continue studying hard at school and take the accountability tests seriously whenever they come.
C-4. How do my scores on these tests affect me?

Your scores on the accountability tests may be used to decide whether you can move up to the next grade level or not. They may also determine how much money a school gets from the government to provide better and higher quality education to you. In this way, the standardized tests can have a great impact on you. But don’t worry. As long as you’re not struggling through school, these tests should not worry you. Remember, these tests test your most basic knowledge. They are not designed to be very hard. On the other hand, if you’re new to this country and are required to take these exams, just tell yourself that whatever happens, it will be better in the long-run for you to be placed with other students who are at the same basic knowledge level as you.

The main thing to remember is that these tests do not affect your school grades and will not hurt your admissions to college. It’s better to think of these tests as ways that the government evaluates how good your teachers and administrators are at teaching students.

C-5. How do these tests help me?

Even though most standardized tests are designed to evaluate the school’s performance rather than you personal performance, you can still benefit from your scores. Many tests such as the Iowa Test and Stanford-9 report your scores as a breakdown of how well you did in each of the components of math, reading, writing, science, and social studies. You should use the percentile lists and the scores to find out where your strengths and weakness are. If you find yourself weak in reading comprehension, you should make a real effort to spend more time outside of school reading magazines and books. If you are weak in math or writing, you can join tutoring centers like Sylvan to get one-on-one attention in these areas.

Once your scores are released, you should sit down with your scores in one hand and your report cards in the other. Sometimes schools have a habit of inflating the grades they give you, but it is not until you take a standardized test that you realize how well you really know the material. If both your grades and test scores are low in math, then that should signal to you that you need to get extra help in math. On the other hand, if your grades in English are high but your test scores on reading and writing are low, then you should also be alarmed. Go visit with your English teacher after school and discuss with him/her why your scores are different from your grades. Ask your teacher to be very objective when he/she grades your assignments so that you honestly know where you stand. The last thing you want is to think that you’re good at writing and then find out from a college admissions team that your essay writing is not good enough for college.

C-6. What is a graduation test?

Many states are now requiring students in high school to pass a basic skills graduation test in order to earn their high school diploma. The graduation test is essentially another basic skills and accountability test that measures the minimum basic skills and information a student has in the fields of English, Science, Social Studies, Math, Reading, and Writing. If a student can meet the bare minimum standards, they are allowed to graduate.
The results of the graduation test are important for graduation, but they are not reported to colleges. Your state government simply uses the scores to determine how well its system of education is working. Government officials use the results to learn where they need to improve and how to continue to raise the minimum standards of education.

C-6-1. What if I don’t pass the graduation test?

Most school systems that administer a graduation test will have their students take them in the 11th grade. Students who pass in 11th grade are granted permission to graduate as long as they finish their Carnegie Unit (see A-6) requirements. Students who do not pass the exam are given multiple opportunities over the course of their 12th grade year to continue taking the exam until they pass. If a student does not pass the exam by the end of the 12th grade year, he/she will be held back for another year of high school.

C-7. What about other standardized tests like the SAT I / ACT / PSAT / SAT II?

Besides the accountability and basic skills tests, high school students must also take other standardized tests as part of their college admissions process. Two individual companies, the ETS and the ACT, administer these exams multiple times during the year. Every high school student must take at least one if not more of these exams to report to colleges.

If you are a high school student, make sure you see your local Education Board and College Prep Advisor to find out more details on what these exams are and how to prepare for them.
D. Essay-Writing

D-1. What is a formal essay?

Formal essays are short written pieces that an author uses to argue his or her viewpoint on a topic. Basically, it’s an argument politely put on paper.

The old black preacher, when asked why his sermons were so effective, said: “First I tells them what I’m gonna tell them, then I tells them, then I tells them what I told them.” Basically this is what a formal essay does. It is a way of telling your reader 1) what you are arguing, 2) what evidence supports your argument, and 3) how your evidence supported your argument.

Formal essays are used in almost every field of study. You will find literary criticisms, scientific ethical debates, political editorials, and many other topics discussed through essays. This is why schools across the country emphasize the importance of essay writing.

D-2. What is the difference between writing a story and writing a formal essay?

Stories are written to narrate a tale and foster the imagination of the reader. Essays, on the other hand, are written to argue a point.

When we think of stories, we think of books like “Snow White” or “Beauty and the Beast”. These works contain characters and plots and settings that take the reader to a world beyond, where action and mystery and suspense are unfolding. The author of a story isn’t looking to prove anything to the reader or make the reader believe something. The author simply writes stories to let the reader interpret whatever he/she feels.

Essays, however, are written so that the author tells the reader exactly what to believe and why to believe it. The essayist uses facts and examples (rather than plots and characters) to make a point. At the same time, essays are written with very rigid structures so that the reader can follow the line of reasoning. Stories, in contrast, are free-flowing and tend not to follow any rigid paragraph or sentence structure.

As a student, it is important for you to understand the difference between a story and an essay. If you’re asked to write an essay on a topic such as “Describe an experience that was important to you,” you should be able to look at your writing and tell whether you’re narrating a story about your experience or whether you’re actually arguing a point about why a particular experience was important to you. Essays are not meant to be stories.

As you read through many different types of essays from famous writers, you will see that many times authors will use very, very small stories in their essays to create an example. Examples may be used as evidence in essays. These types of examples are called anecdotes. They are very small stories that usually last a maximum of 3-4 sentences. Anecdotes do not focus on developing the characters or plot or setting. Instead, they are quick summaries of what could be a much longer story. You may use anecdotes in your essays, but try to use only 1-2 anecdotes for every one page of text you write.
**D-3. What is the difference between writing a journal/newspaper article and writing a formal essay?**

Many times students tend to blend journalism writing with formal essay writing. All of us have read a newspaper sometime in our life. Newspapers tend to include both journalism writings as well as essay writings. Stories on the front page of the newspaper are examples of journalism writing. However, if you dig deeper into the newspaper, you will find the editorials section. Editorials are generally written as essays. So you ask yourself, “what’s the difference?”

Both journalism and essays use facts and evidence as part of their development. However, journalism merely presents facts and evidence to an interested audience; essays, on the other hand, use facts and evidence to argue a certain point. Journalism tells its readers what happened at a certain event and why it happened. An essay argues a certain philosophical viewpoint around an event. For instance, journalism would report that a 1 AM fire broke out at an apartment complex because of a lighted cigarette in one of the units. An essayist would take this event and create an argument that apartment complexes are a threat to public health because one negligent neighbor can ruin the lives of so many innocent and careful families. The essayist could use the example of the 1 AM fire along with lots of other examples and facts to argue his/her point.

The main area where students mix up journalism with formal essay writing is in the Introduction (see D-4). Ideal journalism can be very boring for a reader. The reader just reads one fact after another. That’s what a journal is supposed to report. However, in reality, newspapers have to make their audience feel interested in the story so that they will buy the newspaper and read it. To do this, you will notice a lot of journalists start their stories with some human-interest story like little Johnny who lost his favorite baseball glove in the 1 AM fire and won’t ever be able to play baseball again. These little human-interest stories use very emotionally moving words and exclamations to capture the reader’s interest. Many students try to use similar human-interest stories to begin their formal essays because they think it adds creativity points. Don’t fall in this trap! Essays actually get marked off for such beginnings. The introduction of an essay should be made up of relevant background sentences that narrow down to a thesis, not little stories to capture the reader’s interest.

Journalism writing was especially designed for presenting facts to an interested audience. Do not try to borrow concepts that were designed for journalism to use in your formal essay. You can create very creative essays using the concepts designed for formal essay writing.

**D-4. Should I use a 5-paragraph essay format?**

Essays are used to convince the reader of a specific argument. To do that, essays are very structured to make sure they don’t lose the reader through the line of reasoning. When students learn to write essays in schools, they are taught the 5-paragraph essay structure. This is how a 5-paragraph essay is setup:

1. One **Introduction** paragraph: presents relevant background information and ends with a thesis statement.
2. Three **Body** paragraphs: each paragraph presents one main supporting detail of the author’s argument.
3. One **Conclusion** paragraph: ties together all the supporting details with the author’s thesis statement. Do not introduce any new information or thoughts into your conclusion.

As you go from middle school to high school, you will become better and better at using the 5-paragraph essay form. It is the standard structure for an essay. In fact, you will see the 5-paragraph essay structure a lot in newspaper editorials.

So, are you limited to the 5-paragraph structure? No. As you begin writing more advanced essays, you will sometimes find that the 5-paragraph structure limits your creativity. You may decide that one of your body paragraphs should be divided to set apart a 3-4 sentence anecdote. Also, if you’re writing a business or scientific essay, you may choose to add a bulleted list into your essay. The 5-paragraph essay is the basic starting point from which you can add your own personal touches to fit the audience and topic you are writing about.

If you choose not to use the 5-paragraph essay structure for a school assignment, make sure you get permission from your teacher first. Your school teacher is required to teach you the 5-paragraph essay form; if you don’t use it, your grade might be affected.

**D-5. What are the basic characteristics of a good essay?**

**D-5-1. Content**

Content refers to the actual information presented in the essay. Every good essay uses facts, evidence, examples and/or anecdotes to support its argument. Some essays also use information to refute an opponent’s counterpoint.

Here is how your reader judges your essay for content:

- **You bring your topic down to a manageable size** (Readers get tired of reading long essays. Keep your topic narrow enough for you to fit all your supporting ideas in a short 1-6 page easy-to-follow essay.)
- **You choose which ideas to develop and which to leave out.** (Don’t beat your argument to death with too many supporting details. Include only those details you think are crucial and leave out the rest…even though you really want to put all of them in)
- **You support your ideas with enough details and evidence.** (Make sure your choose at minimum 3 strong supporting ideas for your argument. If you only have 2 strong points and a weak one, change your thesis argument. There is no point in arguing a point if you don’t have strong ideas to support it)
- **Your evidence is accurate and you give its source when needed.** (Don’t cheat, don’t plagiarize)

**D-5-2. Style**

Style refers to the way you write. Your Style of writing includes your personal touches that make your essays enjoyable to read. Just as a great painting uses the right mix of colors to make it look real, your essay can use just the right blend of vocabulary, adjectives, sentence structures, idea development, imagery, etc… to make it memorable. A lot of components go into writing style. Here are just a few ways a reader will judge your use of Style:

1. Adapted and Modified from Parker Charter School Criteria for Excellence
• You put your ideas in a logical order or one that moves the piece forward (don’t lose the reader in a maze of random thoughts…keep things orderly)
• You use transitions to connect ideas
• You write for a specific audience (if you’re writing for literary critics, don’t write your essay using lots of scientific terms and numbers)
• You know your point and make it clear
• Your form suits your purpose (if you’re writing to prove a scientific point, don’t use lots of quotes from other authors)
• Your tone suits your purpose (if you’re passionate about your argument, use passionate and emotional words)
• Your techniques suit your purpose
• Your voice sounds natural, honest, and direct (write your essay the same way that you would naturally talk with a respected adult…don’t try to sound over-sophisticated)
• Your words call up pictures. You show rather than tell (a picture says a 1000 words. Use short but effective imagery that your reader will understand. You should try to move the reader emotionally with examples they can “feel” or “relate” to.)
• You choose clear and precise words
• You choose words for sound as well as sense (if you’ve ever read Shakespeare, you know what this means. Natural speech has a musical quality to it. Try to keep your essays close to your natural speaking pattern.)
• You vary the rhythm and pace of your sentences to suit your purpose
• You omit needless words (This is crucial!!! Get in the habit of revising your essays to find shorter sentences that say the same thing.)
• You bring the piece to an effective close

D-5-3. Grammar

Grammar refers to your ability to use the English language properly and effectively. Even small grammar mistakes in an essay can distract and annoy a reader. When writing an essay, make sure you use a grammar structure with which you are familiar. If you’re unsure when to use a hyphen and when to use a semicolon, try to rephrase your sentences. However, remember that great essays use lots of different sentence structures to keep the reader interested. If you only know basic grammar structures, you should definitely go out and learn more.

Here is a list of the most common grammar mistakes students make on their essays:
1. Sentence fragments
2. Comma splices (using a comma incorrectly)
3. Not using parallel sentences and phrases
4. Incorrect verb conjugation (the subject and verb don’t match)
5. Spelling mistakes
6. Constantly changing verb tenses throughout a paragraph. (if you start off using past tense, then continue using past tense throughout the paragraph unless you have a good reason not to.)
Here is how your reader will judge your essay for grammar:

- **You use correct spelling, capitalization, and punctuation**
- **You use correct grammar and sentence structure**
- **If you break conventions you do so with a purpose** (you are allowed to make grammar mistakes on purpose if you have a good reason to do so. If you’re writing a formal school essay, you will rarely find a good reason to break the rules of grammar)

### D-5-4. Creativity

Most students think that creativity means being funny or surprising the reader with unexpected remarks. Although these certainly are ways to be creative, in essay writing creativity has a deeper meaning. Creativity refers to the author’s way of thinking as well as presenting. Creativity is being able to think of your topic in a different way than others would. For instance, if 100 middle school students were given a topic about predicting the future, almost 90 of them will write about robots in homes or space travel. This is because TV and Movies have shaped our imagination that way. However, the creative writer will think of something completely different about the future – instead of talking about inventions and science, they may see the world from a social studies perspective (i.e. people are starving because there are no natural resources left, or people are fighting because cultures are clashing, or people are living in harmony because they finally resolved all border and political disputes, etc…)

Being creative also means presenting your essay so that the readers are immediately interested in what they are about to read. Maybe you’ve started out with a real powerful sentence and argument. Maybe your language makes people emotionally charged. Maybe you’ve hit on an example that everyone can relate to. One or two good sentences do not make your essay creative. Essays can only be judged as creative after the whole thing has been read and the reader reflects on it and says, “Wow, that was pretty cool. I’ve never seen this topic from that perspective before.”

Here is how your reader will judge your essays for creativity:

- **You capture the reader’s interest from the beginning**
- **You reflect on your process and your work with the purpose of learning more about yourself or your work**
- **You keep and open mind and appreciate different points of view**
- **You seek out excellence in your pursuit to finding creative and rational conclusions/solutions** (think of different and fresh ways of arguing your topic)

### D-5-5. Depth

Depth refers to your ability to really dig deep down and ask yourself honestly what you believe about your topic and why you believe it. Then you must show it in your writing. In order to show depth in your writing, you must be willing to take a stand on an issue and defend it with all your passion. As you can tell, this is extremely difficult. In fact, depth is the hardest part about writing an essay.
For instance, if an essay topic was about the role of media in politics, you could be very shallow and say that media is bad for invading the privacy of politicians. However, if you really dig deep down and ask yourself thought provoking questions, you might see the issue from a whole different perspective. For instance, you as a taxpayer pay over $35,000 in taxes to the government every year from your pocket. Shouldn’t you know whether or not your politician is a scoundrel looking for a way to collect that money for himself? If it were not for the media, how would you know whether or not the politician really and truly believes in spending the money for better education and health reform? How would you ever make any decision without the uncensored information the media gives you? The moment you start thinking about what you truly believe, you begin adding depth to your essay – you begin showing your reader that you’ve been seriously thinking about this topic. In order to add depth to your essay, keep asking yourself “How” and “Why” questions.

Here is how your reader will judge your essay for depth:

- **You show intellectual curiosity and wonder about the world**
- **You ask thoughtful questions and seek out their answers**
- **You communicate honestly what you know or what you want to know, and what you believe or feel**

D-6. What are the steps to writing an essay?

D-6-1. Topic and Thesis

The first step to writing an essay is to choose a topic and determine what you want to argue about that topic. If you’re writing for your classes or for a competition, many times you will either be given a topic or a list of three topics from which to choose. If you’re asked to choose any topic you want, then choose one with which you feel very attached and one into which you can really put your heart and soul. Topics are very broad questions that have no right or wrong answers. Here are examples of a few essay topics from different fields of study:

- **Social Studies**: Did Japan’s role in World War II hurt or help their global presence?
- **Science**: Does human cloning have a place in society?
- **Religion**: Does organized religion compromise on human potential?
- **Literature**: Discuss the role of color motifs in Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness”
- **Business & Politics**: Should the federal government use tax dollars to bail out failing businesses?
- **Technology**: Should companies be allowed to monitor their client’s Internet usage?
- **Education**: Should the government support private school vouchers?

As you can see, these are very general topics. Different people will have different opinions on how to answer each of these topics. Once you are given a topic such as the ones above, it is your job to create a thesis, an argument. After thinking deeply about the topic, you should formulate a 1-2 sentence answer stating what you believe about the topic and why. For instance, here is a very small list of thesis statements that could be used for the topics listed above:
• Social Studies: 1) Japan’s display of technological innovation during the war earned it favorable respect in the field of technology for the next 50 years. 2) Japan’s alignment with Marxist Germany and Fascist Italy during the war cost Japan valuable financial and natural resources that took valuable time to recover.

• Religion: Rules established by religious authorities inhibit the capacity for individual creativity.

• Literature: Contrasts of black and white are used effectively throughout the novel to establish racial distinctions between the imperialist British and the native Africans.

• Business & Politics: As a practice, government bailouts should be used only if it serves a need of the public good that would go unfulfilled if the company stopped operating.

• Technology: Monitoring a client’s Internet usage is a valuable tool in focusing a company’s financial and human resources on the client’s primary subjects of interest.

• Education: The government is not equipped to make public education decisions; therefore, the government should encourage the privatization of schools while funding tuition bills of all students through public monies.

As you can see, the thesis statement is the author’s argument regarding the topic. For each of the thesis statements listed above, the author will use at least three strong facts/examples in the Body (D-4) to support his/her claim.

**D-6-2. Pre-writing**

The pre-writing stage is what sets apart a good essay from a poor one. I know it’s hard for you to believe, but if you ask your teachers, they will all say that they can easily tell which students did the pre-writing stage and which didn’t – just by reading their final essays. It is during the pre-writing stage where Depth and Creativity are formed.

During the pre-writing stage, you go into full thinking mode. This is the time where you will lay in bed all night thinking and debating in your head all the reasons why you can support and refute your thesis. This is the time when you really need to go inside yourself and find the three strongest reasons why your argument is correct. Here are some ways you can do this:

1. Talk to a close friend or another student. During a normal everyday conversation, just ask your friends what they think about the issue. You’ll be really surprised at what they have to say. Usually they’ll mention one or two things you’ve never thought of. You may even start debating the issue with your friends. That’s exactly what you want! You want to hear both sides of the story so that you can pick out which points are stronger than others. After doing this, you may even want to change your thesis statement because you’re convinced your friend’s viewpoint is sounder. That’s alright; it’s all part of the learning process.
2. Carry a pocket recorder with you at home. Parents and brothers and sisters are
great people to talk to about your issue. It’s actually a fact that you can’t
organize your thoughts until you’ve either spoken them to someone or put them
down on paper. As you talk about your essay at the dinner table or in the family
room, you will naturally start talking about your essay topic as if you know
exactly what you’re talking about. Believe me, it happens with every student.
The problem is, you’ll basically speak out your entire essay at the dinner table
and get back to your room and forget everything you said. That’s why you
should carry a pocket recorder with you. Once you sit at the dinner table, turn it
on. If your conversation moves to your essay, you’ll at least have a recording of
yourself trying to prove your point to your family. Most of the time you will
find that 90% of your essay can be just dictated from your recording.

3. Write your thoughts down as they come to you. Sometimes you’ll be walking
around the mall and all of a sudden a quick thought will come to you. If you
don’t write it down, chances are that you’ll forget it. Keep a small memo pad
and golf pencil with you all the time. Write down your thoughts right when
they come to you. It will save you the trouble later to think of what to write.

4. Some students like the organization that Outlines provide. If you need to create
a skeleton of your essay right from the beginning, try creating an outline.
Outlines help you see the overall structure of the essay before you add in the
transitional sentences and stylistic touches. Here is a blank outline you can use
if you’re writing a 5-paragraph essay:

I. Introduction
   i. background information
   ii. thesis

II. Supporting Detail #1:
   i. description/example of Supporting Detail #1
   ii. another description/example of Supporting Detail #1

III. Supporting Detail #2:
   i. description/example of Supporting Detail #2
   ii. another description/example of Supporting Detail #2

IV. Supporting Detail #3:
   i. description/example of Supporting Detail #3
   ii. another description/example of Supporting Detail #3

V. Conclusion
   i. restated thesis
   ii. concluding remarks

Other students have come up with other ways of pre-writing. Some like to stay up
in bed and think. Others like to go to the beach or other secluded place in nature to think.
Find a technique that best fits you, and do it. Just don’t skip the Pre-Writing phase!
D-6-3. Drafting

Once you’ve gone through your deep thinking phase, you will actually create a Rough Draft of your essay. The Rough Draft is your first attempt at writing the entire essay from start to finish. If you have an outline or recording of yourself, this process is much easier. Worry a little bit, but not so much, about grammar and style (see D-5) in your Rough Draft. The Rough Draft is all about getting your ideas into paragraph form. Some students prefer to handwrite the Rough Draft so that they can mark things out and put comments in the margins, but if you prefer to type it directly into your computer, go right ahead.

Depending on how much time you’ve been given for your essay, you should have a Rough Draft ready at least 5-6 days before your essay is due. This will give you enough time to revise your essay.

D-6-4. Revision

Once your Rough Draft is complete, take a hardcopy of it (on actual paper) and begin editing it for grammar and style (see D-5). You should start rearranging your sentences and ideas so that the essay flows nicely from one sentence to the next.

Every time you revise a paragraph or sentence, go back and read through the entire essay to make sure it makes sense. Reading through it out loud will also help you “hear” the essay as it would sound in natural speech. If it doesn’t sound like your natural way of talking (like the way you would personally talk to a respected adult) (see D-5-2), then chances are that your reader won’t enjoy reading it.

You will go through many different revisions of your essay until you get it right. You just have to keep grappling with it until you’re proud of your work. You have to take personal pride in all your work.

D-6-5. Getting it reviewed

After going through a couple of revisions, have your essay read by an adult or mentor or friend. They will give you words of confidence and also objective advice on how to improve your essay. Going to a jamati college student is always a great idea. You don’t have to take all the advice they give you; just take those ideas which make sense to you. Once you get it reviewed by another person, you will have more ammunition to improve your writing.

D-6-6. Put it down for a few days before picking it up

Have you ever written anything that you were so proud of and then come back to it 1-2 months later and think, “Oh, my God, this is horrible…what was I thinking?” It happens all the time. In fact, go back and try to find some of your old essays you wrote just a few months ago and see. When we are busy writing an essay, we get so involved in it that we begin to think every thing we write sounds good and will make sense to the reader exactly as we write it. We become very subjective about our own writing, rather than objective.
To avoid this, you really should leave yourself enough time before the essay is due to put the essay away for a few days and come back to it. Your mind will be fresh and you will see minor problems in your essay that you wouldn’t have caught before. This one little step will really improve your writing a lot.

**D-7. Should I use big words to impress the reader?**

Students sometimes like to use big vocabulary words to make their writing sound professional and sophisticated. It is true that some English words are more specific and more appropriate than others, but you should follow this rule of thumb for all your writings: **If it’s not a word YOU would use in NORMAL everyday conversation, don’t use it in your writings.** The bigger your conversational vocabulary gets, the more words you can use in your writings.

Can you just imagine a 7-year old kid writing something like this on a homework assignment: “My paternal relatives are traversing to my abode.” This kid was trying to say, “My dad’s family is flying across the country to my house.” Because he was using big vocabulary words incorrectly, you found his first sentence funny and out-of-place. That is exactly how your teachers see your essays when you use big vocabulary words incorrectly. So follow the general rule of thumb and build your conversational vocabulary before you build your essay vocabulary.

**D-8. Can I quote other authors in my essay?**

Sure you can, but be careful. Remember that an essay is supposed to be your own viewpoint, not another author’s viewpoint, on a certain argument. Use small quotes from other authors only as supporting details. Only use another author’s quote 1) if there is no better way of stating the same idea or 2) if the author’s reputation adds support to your argument. Otherwise, try to stay away from quoting other authors. Quoting another essayist is usually bad news when it comes to questions of plagiarism.