

What Classes Should You Take in High School? Expert Advice

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[Coursework/GPA](#)

Figuring out which classes you should take in high school is complicated! Not only do you have to navigate your school's requirements and college expectations, but you also have to take your own interests, abilities, and life into account. Because there are so many different questions you have to answer and decisions you have to make, it helps to start the planning process early.

We will help you get a big picture perspective of what your high school classes will look like, and breakdown the details of the various requirements, the kinds of choices you will have to make, and the exciting possibilities you will get to explore! If you're wondering what classes to take in high school, this guide should be a great launching point to figuring out your own personal plan.

What Classes Do I Need for High School Graduation?

In large part, many of your class choices will be guided by your high school's mandatory requirements. All high schools have a set curriculum that you need to take in order to graduate. The actual details vary slightly from school to school, but usually it goes something like this:

- four years of English (sometimes called Language Arts)
- three or four years of math
- three years of science
- two or three years of social studies or history

It's a good idea to start planning at least the broad outlines of your high school schedule earlier rather than later. This is why, in 9th or 10th grade, it makes sense read through your student handbook and then set up a meeting with your guidance counselor. Your counselor is a great resource for nailing down:

- your school's exact graduation requirements
- any prerequisites for any courses you may want to take further down the road

What Classes Do Colleges Want to See?

Luckily for you, most colleges expect to see the same core classes for admission that high schools do for graduation. This means that simply by fulfilling your high school's curriculum requirements, you will most likely have all your transcript ducks in a row for applying to college!

As always, of course, not every college's admissions requirements are exactly the same, so definitely make sure you find out exactly what classes your target school wants you to have taken in high school by looking at its admissions info online. Search Google for "[college name] admissions requirements" to get the full scoop.

Rigor

The main thing that colleges are looking for in your high school course load is what they call "rigor". Basically, this is the idea that you have spent your time in high school challenging yourself by taking increasingly more and more difficult classes. Colleges want to see that you are always trying to reach just a little farther than your grasp.

What does rigor mean in terms of choosing classes?

Knowing that colleges want to see you push yourself doesn't mean overloading yourself to the point of collapse! Instead, it means you should strive for balance: take classes that are as challenging as you can handle, but also show good judgment by not overwhelming yourself.

To strategize in depth about the level of rigor that your high school course load should demonstrate, explore [our guide to what a challenging high school course load looks like](#).

What Decisions Will I Make When Choosing Classes?

Even though many of your class slots will be taken up by your high school's requirements and by the admissions expectations of your target colleges, the person who has the most influence over your high school curriculum is... you!

With that in mind, let's take a look at some of the choices you will have to make when picking your classes.

Harder classes or better GPA?

When you realize that you can get much better grades in lower level courses, you'll really be tempted not to take a particularly challenging course load in favor of getting straight A's.

But actually, this is a mistake. If you are getting straight A's in standard-level classes, to colleges this will look like you are coasting through rather than challenging yourself. Because colleges will always look at your GPA in context (meaning because they know what classes your school offers), they will look at this negatively.

Generally speaking, you should push yourself to take the highest level class that you can reasonably get a B or higher in each year. This is especially true in classes that you are interested in, that are your strengths, or that you see yourself pursuing in college.

Standard, honors, or AP/IB?

With the choice to challenge yourself, comes yet another question. Should you take the standard, honors, or AP version of a class? It all depends on your skill level and ability in each subject. To find out how you measure up, you can talk to a teacher to see whether in their opinion you are ready for a higher level course or, if your school offers this, you can take a placement test to see whether you qualify for honors.

If you are deciding between honors and AP, AP is the better bet for improving college applications. If you do well on the AP test, this national comparison will help colleges understand your skill level, and potentially either give you college credit or at least to the ability to place into a higher level college course.

If you are having trouble [deciding between AP and IB](#), let us help you make that decision with our explanation of the differences between the two.

Which foreign language should I take?

As far as college is concerned, what matters is not the language but the amount of time you spend studying it. For example, four years of French is more impressive than one year each of Latin, Chinese, Sanskrit, and Spanish.

Our recommendation is to take four years of the same foreign language. To see which language would be the best fit for you, check out [our guide to which foreign language you should take in high school](#).

What am I interested in?

After you schedule all of your required classes, you will still have lots of space on your schedule for electives. Electives are entirely up to you – this is where it's time to listen to your heart and find your passion.

Whether you use your elective spaces to pursue the performing arts, the visual arts, engineering, computer science, or anything else, the advice is the same as for the core courses: find what you love, stick with it, and pursue it at the highest level of your ability.

In order to give you a sense of the possibilities, even though no school could possibly offer all of them, we have rounded up [the complete list of all high school electives](#).

What Class Selections Do I Have Choice Over?

It might sound like a lot of your high school experience has already been preprogrammed. But actually, you get to decide much more than you think!

Even for mandatory required classes, you still have some say over whether you take them standard, honors, for AP. Not only that, but there is even some choice in the core curriculum. This is particularly true in science and history classes because those are not cumulative and so do not follow the standard progression. The most choice, of course, is in your electives.

Here are your options, from least to greatest choice.

Least Choice: The Core Subjects

English

It's true that you will take this all four years, and that your high school most likely has least choice about what you study in English class and when. Still, you do get to decide how much you want to challenge yourself.

Learn more about the breakdown of all the English or Language Arts you are likely to encounter in [our guide to high school English classes](#).

Math

You may not have to take math every year. Still, because math is cumulative (meaning, what you learned one year depends on what you learned the year before), there is usually not that much choice about which math class you can take. Just like with English, you will have some say over how much to challenge yourself at each level of math.

Your high school will have developed a sequence usually something like:

- Algebra 1
- Geometry
- Algebra 2/Trigonometry
- Pre-Calculus
- Calculus

To dig in further, read our complete explanation of [the math classes you should take in high school](#).

Science

You will most likely take two or three years of science. Like with math, there is usually already a pre-developed progression for the sequence in which you can take science classes. It usually goes like this:

- earth science/biology
- chemistry
- physics

Still, because you do not have to take science all four years, and because many schools offer various science electives, like astronomy, this is one of the core curriculum subject where you can have a whole bunch of choice, especially if science is one of your interests or strengths.

Our [complete guide to planning your science education in high school](#) lays out all the details for you.

Social Studies/History

You will most likely take two or three years of history or other social sciences like government, civics, economics, world cultures, or geography. At the same time, it helps to know that the standard requirements that both high schools and colleges will expect are:

- a year of US/American history
- a year of European/world history

Because you will not have to take history all four years of high school, this is another core requirement that allows a lot of choice, and one where you will probably have many options to pick from.

For a really in-depth look at all the possibilities in the social sciences, read through our [guide to the high school history classes you should take](#).

Most Choice: Electives

Unlike core required classes, electives are the you-do-you of the high school curriculum. They're how your transcript shows colleges what you're interested in, what you're passionate about, and how hard you are willing to work to pursue those interests and passions.

Electives are also a way for you to discover subjects that you previously did not know you were interested in, or a way to learn from excellent teachers who don't teach the core subjects. Pro tip: if you hear wonderful things about a teacher, try your best to take a class with that person. It doesn't matter what the class is – the experience of learning from an amazing teacher is something you will carry with you all your life.

No school offers the same electives as another school, and there is no way for anyone school to offer every possible elective. Here are some typical offerings, by category:

- Computer science: programming, graphic design, web design
- English: journalism, creative writing, speech and debate
- Family and consumer science: nutrition, child development, culinary courses
- Math and Science: environmental science, zoology, astronomy, statistics
- Social Studies: psychology, anthropology, economics
- Visual and Performing Arts: drawing, painting, photography, choir, band

To get some help with figuring out [which electives to take](#), read our guide- (<https://blog.prepscholar.com/which-high-school-electives-should-you-take>)