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 Living at Yale
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[Advice to Candidates](#)
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Advice on Selecting High School Courses

“Do I have to take a fourth year of math or can I start a second foreign language instead, which is what I really want to do?”

“I’d like to write for our community newspaper next year, but that means I won’t have time for an AP Chemistry class. Will that hurt my chances of getting in?”

Many high school sophomores and juniors (and their parents) want to know what courses to take to improve their chances for admission to Yale and other highly competitive colleges. With the caveat that every situation is different, here is some advice to help guide you as you make these decisions.

A Holistic Approach to Admissions

The high school transcript is almost always the most important document in a student’s application. But it is hard to conceive of a situation in which the appearance (or absence) of any one particular class on a transcript would determine the applicant’s outcome. The admissions committee does not make its decisions based on a piecemeal review of an applicant’s recommendations, test scores, activities, or individual elements of a high school transcript. It considers each application as a comprehensive picture of that student.

When the admissions committee looks at your transcript, it will not focus on whether you have taken any specific course. It will be far more interested to see that you have challenged yourself with difficult coursework, and have done well.

Trajectories & Trends

Trends are important. Remember, the admissions committee is primarily concerned with what kind of Yale student you will be. So it is very important that we see a high level (or an improving degree) of rigor and success throughout your high school years. This includes your senior year. If you wish to make your application among the most competitive, you must take a challenging senior program and continue to excel in it. Senior year is not the time to take a light course load. Do not catch “senioritis!” The admissions committee will check an applicant’s senior year program and performance before offering admission.

Remember that we are looking for students who will make the most of Yale and the most of their talents. Knowing how you have engaged in high school gives us an idea of how you might engage at Yale. If you push yourself to excel all the way through your senior year and beyond, we take that to be a good sign that you will do the same at Yale. And that is the type of student we welcome.

Context, Context, Context

Does your school offer AP courses? An International Baccalaureate program? Both? Neither? We know you did not design your school’s curriculum, and we only expect you to take advantage of such courses if your high school provides them. Different schools have different requirements that may restrict what courses you can take. Again, we only expect that you will excel in the opportunities to which you have access.

Balance

Yale does not have any specific entrance requirements (for example, there is no foreign language requirement for admission to Yale). But we do look for students who have taken a balanced set of the rigorous classes available to them. Generally speaking, you should try to take courses each year in English, science, math, the social sciences, and foreign language.

We encourage you to pursue your intellectual interests, so long as it is not at the expense of your program’s overall rigor or your preparedness for college. Be honest with yourself when you are deciding between different courses. Are you choosing a particular course because you are truly excited about it and the challenge it presents, or are you also motivated by a desire to avoid a different academic subject?

You should also bear in mind that many other selective colleges do have minimum course requirements for entering students. It is best to research each school individually.

Advice to Candidates

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Ask Yourself These Questions

When weighing your course selection for the upcoming year, here are a few things to consider:

- Am I taking a well-balanced academic program that will provide me with a good foundation for college?
- Am I prepared to take college-level math, writing, and science courses?
- Do I feel challenged by the courses that I am taking?
- Are my courses among the more rigorous ones available to me at my school?
- Am I seeking challenge or avoiding it?
- Overall, is my four-year high school program among the most challenging programs available at my school?

It is wise to first consult your teachers and high school counselor on what courses are most appropriate for you at your high school. You will doubtless have to make some difficult decisions about which courses to take and how to balance your schoolwork and your extracurricular pursuits. We hope that this advice helps inform you as you make those decisions.

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