

Applying to Universities: Your Step-by-Step Guide

A guide for Coastline students planning to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree

If you have never applied to a university before, you are in the right place. You do not need to know anything about transfer to start. This guide explains each step in plain language, tells you what to do, and points out the mistakes that trip people up.

How to use this guide: Read the Big Picture and the Words to Know first. Then work through the eight steps in order. You can come back to any step later. Deadlines and rules change from year to year and from school to school, so always double-check on each university's own website.

The Big Picture

Transfer means you finish part of your degree at Coastline, then move to a university to finish a bachelor's degree. Most students transfer after earning about 60 transferable units (that is about two years of full-time classes, or longer if you attend part-time).

To transfer, you will:

1. Make sure your classes match what your target universities and majors require.
2. Pick the universities you want to apply to.
3. Apply during the filing window, which is usually about a year before you plan to start.
4. Finish any follow-up steps after you apply.
5. Choose an offer, and get ready to enroll.

Start early. Many working adults take classes one or two at a time, so planning ahead matters. A meeting with a counselor now can save you a semester later.

If you only do five things

1. Meet with a Coastline counselor and the Transfer Specialist.
2. Use ASSIST to find out which classes your major needs.
3. Write down every deadline for every school you are applying to.
4. Report **all** of your college classes on your applications, even old ones.
5. After you apply, check your email and your university portals often.

Words to Know

Transfer paperwork is full of abbreviations. Here are the ones you will see in this guide.

- **Transferable units:** College credits that a university will accept. Not every class counts, so ask a counselor.
- **Semester unit:** The way colleges count credit. A typical class is 3 units.
- **GPA:** Your grade point average, which is a number that sums up your grades.
- **General education (GE):** Broad classes everyone takes, such as writing, math, science, and history.
- **Major preparation:** Classes you must finish *before* you transfer because your major requires them. Also called “lower-division major requirements.”
- **ASSIST:** A free website that shows which Coastline classes count toward a major at California public universities.
- **CSU:** California State University.
- **UC:** University of California.
- **Impacted or selective:** A school or major that gets more qualified applicants than it has space for. Meeting the minimum requirements does not guarantee admission.
- **Golden Four:** Four required classes for CSU: written communication, critical thinking, oral communication, and math.
- **Seven-course pattern:** The set of required classes for UC. Details are in Step 1.
- **TAG (Transfer Admission Guarantee):** A program that guarantees admission to certain UC campuses and majors if you meet its conditions.
- **ADT (Associate Degree for Transfer), AA-T, and AS-T:** A special associate degree for California community college students who plan to transfer to a CSU. The ADT comes in two types: the **AA-T** (Associate in Arts for Transfer) and the **AS-T** (Associate in Science for Transfer). If you earn one and meet the CSU’s minimum requirements, you are guaranteed admission to a CSU campus with junior standing. This guarantee does **not** cover a specific campus or major, but you get priority consideration at your local CSU and in similar majors. You need 60 CSU-transferable semester units, a general education pattern, and at least a 2.0 GPA, and some majors want a higher GPA. Once at the CSU, you may be able to finish your bachelor’s degree with about 60 more units if you stay in a similar major. An ADT may not be the best fit if you are aiming for one particular CSU campus or a school outside the CSU, so talk with a counselor first.
- **Common App:** One application that many private and out-of-state universities accept.
- **Supplemental application:** Extra materials some programs require, such as a portfolio or audition.
- **FAFSA / CADAA:** The forms that decide what financial aid you can get. FAFSA stands for Free Application for Federal Student Aid. The CADAA is the California Dream Act Application. You must file the one that applies to you to be considered for financial aid and for some scholarships.
- **Unofficial transcript:** A copy of your grades you can view or print yourself. An **official transcript** is sent directly from the college to the university.
- **Provisional admission:** An offer that depends on you finishing your classes with the grades you promised.

- **SIR (Statement of Intent to Register):** The form that says “yes, I am coming.”

Step 1: Make Sure You Are Ready to Apply

What this means: Before you start an application, check that your classes match what your target schools and majors require. Finding a gap now, while you still have time to adjust, is much better than finding it after you apply.

What to do:

- Meet with a [Coastline counselor](#) to check your progress toward your degree.
- Meet with the [Transfer Specialist](#) to talk about requirements, university options, and how to apply.
- Count your transferable semester units, and check that your GPA meets both the campus requirement and the major requirement.
- Use [ASSIST](#) to check major preparation for California public universities.
- Make a list of the classes you still need, especially major preparation classes.

The 60-unit rule: You need 60 transferable semester units completed by the end of spring before a fall transfer. For a spring transfer, you need them by the end of the summer before. These 60 units include general education, major preparation, and other degree requirements.

If you are applying to CSU: You must finish the [Golden Four](#), which is four classes in written communication, critical thinking, oral communication, and math or quantitative reasoning. For fall admission, finish them by the end of spring. For spring admission, finish them by the end of the summer before. Each campus has its own grade rules, so check them.

If you are applying to UC: You must finish the [seven-course pattern](#). That means:

- Two transferable English composition classes
- One transferable math class
- Four transferable classes from at least two of these areas: arts and humanities, social and behavioral sciences, and physical and biological sciences

Finish the pattern by the end of spring before a fall start. UC recommends taking English and math early, and you need at least one transferable English class done by the end of the fall.

Ask about an ADT: If you plan to transfer to a CSU, ask a counselor early whether an Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) fits your major. An ADT can change which classes you should take, so it is best to decide before you are far into your coursework. The Words to Know list above explains what an ADT is.

Ask about a TAG: If you plan to transfer to a UC, ask a counselor early whether the Transfer Admission Guarantee (TAG) is an option for you. TAG is offered only at UC Davis,

Irvine, Merced, Riverside, Santa Barbara, and Santa Cruz, and not every major is included at each campus. It has its own conditions, so planning ahead helps you meet them. TAG has a separate filing period in September, which is covered in Step 3.

Watch out: Meeting the minimum requirements does **not** guarantee admission to a selective university or major. Some majors want specific classes, higher grades, or a higher GPA than the university's minimum.

Step 2: Build Your List of Universities

What this means: Choose schools where you can succeed in your classes, in your life, and with your budget, and not just the names you already know.

What to do:

- Confirm that each university offers your major and takes transfer applications for the term you want.
- Look up each major's admission rules, including whether it is impacted or selective, which classes are required, and whether it needs extra materials.
- Compare how classes are offered (in person, hybrid, or fully online), plus location, total cost, housing, and student support. If you work full-time or have family responsibilities, this matters a lot.
- Include more than one option that fits your grades, interests, and budget.

Good to know: A school's overall admission rate mixes together many kinds of applicants and majors. Your major at that school may be much harder, or easier, to get into. Look for transfer-by-major data when you can, and ask the Transfer Specialist.

Step 3: Know Your Deadlines

What this means: For most fall transfers, you apply the year *before* you start. For example, to start in fall 2029, you would usually apply in fall 2028. Start researching even earlier.

Key dates to know:

- **CSU and UC applications:** Applications open August 1. The filing period is October 1 – November 30.
- **UC TAG:** The fall filing period is September 1–30. TAG campuses are UC Davis, Irvine, Merced, Riverside, Santa Barbara, and Santa Cruz. Not every major is included at every campus, so check the [TAG matrix](#) each year.
- **Common App:** Each university sets its own transfer deadline, and the Common App opens August 1. Early deadlines are usually around November or December 1. Regular deadlines vary, and January is common.
- **Financial aid (FAFSA or CADAA):** The priority date is March 2. Applying earlier may help you get more funding.

- **Supplemental applications:** Many arts, performance, nursing, and other selective programs need portfolios, auditions, or separate materials with their own deadlines. All majors in UC Santa Barbara's College of Creative Studies require one. Your application will tell you if your major does.

Watch out for TAG: TAG does **not** replace the UC application. You must submit both. The major on your TAG must be **exactly the same** as the major on your UC application, or your TAG will be voided.

Official date pages:

- [CSU transfer admissions and application dates](#)
- [UC transfer dates and deadlines](#)
- [Common App transfer guide](#)

Tip: Put every deadline in your phone or calendar with a reminder two weeks ahead.

Step 4: Gather What You Need Before You Apply

What this means: The applications ask for a lot of detail. Having it all in front of you makes the process smoother and helps you avoid mistakes.

What to gather:

- Unofficial transcripts from **every** college you have attended, including classes you took in high school for college credit (dual enrollment).
- A complete list of grades, withdrawals, repeated classes, and any academic renewal. Include everything, not only the classes that count toward your major.
- Your current schedule and the classes you plan to take before you transfer.
- AP, IB, CLEP, and military education records, if you have them.
- Dates you attended each college, and any other information the application asks for.
- Work, military service, leadership, activities, awards, and other experiences, for applications that ask for them. Working adults often have a lot to share here.
- A way to pay the application fee, or the information you need to request a fee waiver.

Why accuracy matters: Universities use your complete academic history to decide if you are eligible. If you leave out a college, a withdrawal, or a class that did not transfer, it can show up as a mismatch when your official records arrive. That can lead to your application being **cancelled**. You must report all classes at all colleges, no matter when or where you took them, and even if you withdrew or repeated the class. Follow each application's directions for how to report them.

Step 5: Complete Your Applications

What this means: Now you fill out the actual applications. Take your time, and save your work as you go.

What to do:

- Use a personal email address that you check often and will still have after you leave Coastline.
- Create the right *transfer* applicant account for each system:
 - [CSU application: Cal State Apply](#)
 - [UC application: University of California](#)
 - [Common App: Transfer application](#)
- Choose the correct admission term, campus, and major for each application.
- Enter every college you attended, and report all coursework as the application directs, including withdrawals and old classes.
- Report classes you have finished, classes you are taking now, and classes you plan to take. Read the directions for repeated classes and academic renewal.
- Answer any campus-specific or program-specific questions, and arrange recommendations or other materials if they are required.
- Proofread everything before you submit, including course terms, grades, and your selected majors.

Writing the UC essays: UC asks for one required transfer Personal Insight Question plus three more. Your answers are shared with **every** UC campus you choose, so do not write as if only one campus will read them.

Common App: Each university may ask for different essays, recommendations, and transcripts. Check each school's requirements and do not assume they are all the same.

Letters of recommendation: Do not send them unless a school asks for them. Many private universities require them. Students who apply to [CSU EOP](#), the Educational Opportunity Program, must submit two letters.

Housing: If you plan to live on campus, look into housing applications and waitlists early. Some schools want them while you apply. Others wait until you have an offer or have committed to enroll.

Step 6: Submit and Confirm That the University Got It

What this means: Submitting is a milestone, not the finish line. After you submit, you still have to confirm that the school received it and watch for follow-up requests.

What to do:

- Review every section before you certify and submit. By certifying, you are saying that what you entered is true and complete.

- Check whether you qualify for an application fee waiver. The rules differ by system, so follow each application's instructions.
- Submit well before the deadline. Do not count on extensions or last-minute technical help.
- Save a PDF or screenshot of your submission, your payment or waiver confirmation, and your application ID.
- Watch your email, including spam and junk folders, for messages from each university. Some requests have short deadlines.
- Activate and check every campus applicant portal. Submitting does not automatically complete all campus requirements.

Why this matters: A university may still need updated grades, additional forms, transcripts, or a response from you before it can make a final decision.

Step 7: Finish Your Post-Application Requirements

What this means: After you apply, the universities want to know how your current classes are going. These updates are required, and missing them can end your application.

What to do:

- **UC:** Complete the Transfer Academic Update (TAU), even if you have no changes to report. For fall 2027, the priority deadline is January 31, 2027. Report your fall grades and the classes you are taking or planning to take. If you do not submit the TAU, your application may be cancelled.
- **CSU:** Complete the academic update in Cal State Apply by January 31. If you do not submit it, your application may be cancelled.
- Respond quickly to any request for extra applications, documents, or clarification.
- Check your email and each university portal often.
- Report any changes to your planned classes, grades, or college attendance, following the application and campus instructions. If you submit a revised UC or CSU update, confirm major changes directly with the campus when appropriate.
- Keep finishing your required classes, and keep the grades and GPA you stated in your application.

Step 8: Review Your Offers and Get Ready to Transfer

What this means: Decisions for fall often arrive in spring, though the timing depends on the university and the year. Read each offer closely before you decide.

What to do:

- Read each admission offer carefully. Look for required grades, required classes, deadlines, and any conditions.

- Compare financial aid offers. Look at your estimated **net cost** (what you actually pay after grants and scholarships), not only tuition.
- Accept the offer you choose by its deadline. You may also need to pay an enrollment deposit or submit the Statement of Intent to Register (SIR). UC's transfer SIR deadline is June 1. CSU and private universities vary by campus, from May 1 to June 15.
- Send final official transcripts, exam records, and any required GE certification. July 1 is the deadline for final transcripts. July 15 is the deadline for AP/IB results and other required documents. Other schools may use different dates.
- Complete orientation, advising, placement or registration steps, and any financial aid verification. This usually happens in the summer. At orientation, you get a general introduction to campus resources and transfer support. You also get academic advising on how your classes transferred and which classes to take in the fall.
- Plan ahead for housing, transportation, accessibility accommodations, and other support services before classes start.

Watch out: An offer is often provisional. Your university may check your final grades, confirm you finished the required classes, and review your official records before it confirms your enrollment. If anything changes, contact the admissions office right away.

Need Help Along the Way?

You do not have to do this alone. Coastline Transfer Services and academic counselors can help you review requirements, organize your deadlines, and plan your next steps. Questions are welcome at any stage, including the very beginning.

- [Coastline Transfer Services](#)
- [Schedule a Coastline Career/Transfer appointment](#)