

Read the following article about Safety, Reach and Match schools. Complete a **CLOSE READ** of the article (*annotate, highlight, add questions/comments*) notes on information presented. Be sure to pay attention to subheadings and words in bold to determine what key information you should have in your notes. Finally, complete a summary at the end of the article based on the “2” essential questions.

Essential Question:

1. **What schools are considered a safety school, Reach school and a Match school, and what criteria will you use to select these schools?**
2. **Which criteria will you use to determine which school you will attend in the event your plans change?**

How to Pick Your Safety, Reach, and Match Colleges

by Jessica Tomer Editor-in-Chief, Carnegie Communications

Reach, match, and safety colleges.

You might already be familiar with this trifecta of terms. But you may not realize how important it is to seek out a good mix of safety, reach, and match schools. Spoiler alert: it's a big deal.

There's also a magical secret to picking these schools—and it's the closest thing you're gonna get to a guaranteed win in your college search! But more on that in a second.

First, let's get down to basics. What makes a college a safety, reach/dream, or match school, anyway?

Defining safety, match, and reach schools

In basic terms, a **safety school** is one where you are almost positive you would be admitted based on your academic profile. Your GPA and test scores will be notably higher than their average admitted student.

A **match school** (also sometimes referred to as “target” or “50/50”) is one where you feel reasonably certain you'd be admitted because your GPA and test scores are similar to the average admitted student.

A **reach school** (or dream school) is one where your academic profile puts you at the lower end of their admitted student spectrum—or perhaps even below. It is less likely that you will be admitted. However, a reach school should still be within the realm of possibility. If your academic profile is lightyears away from the average admitted student, it's generally not worth the time or money to apply. This isn't to say you shouldn't stretch yourself in your college search and application process—you definitely should. You just don't want to put all your eggs in one ivy-lined basket, if you know what I mean.

Related: The Ultimate Guide to the College Search: How to Find Your Perfect College Match

How to pick your schools

Picking your reach, match, and safety schools is all about comparing *your* academic profile to that of the average admitted student.

The averaged admitted student profile is typically just a short list of admission statistics for the current freshman class, with things like average SAT/ACT scores and GPA. You might find other student stats like geographic diversity or class rank too. Make sure you find the school's overall acceptance rate too. You should be able to find this info on virtually any college or university's website. A simple Google search for "[College Name] admitted student profile" often does the trick. You can also find these statistics on college search sites (including right here on CollegeXpress! [Here's an example](#)). Always look for the most recent admitted class profile.

If you're unsure whether a college is a safety, match, or reach choice for you, ask around. Your high school guidance counselor can probably help. You can also ask people who know you well, such as family, friends, or mentors, for their opinion. But *do not* go to admission representatives asking if they think you'll be admitted. They don't like that, and they really can't tell you on the fly anyway. Remember, the more research you put into your college search, the better you'll know your schools and how your academic background fits in with their student population. (Pro tip: with all these figures floating around, this is a great opportunity to make a [college search spreadsheet](#). Just sayin'.)

The secret to picking your reach, safety, and match colleges

Okay. This is the important part, so listen up.

Choosing your safety, reach, and match schools isn't just about comparing numbers to determine your chances of being admitted. It's about making sure all of your schools are places you'd *actually be happy to attend*. That means every school—from your #1 choice to the backup to your backup plan—should fit your needs.

Plenty of students think "safety school" and imagine any old school that admits 99% of its students. But that's not how it should be, and it doesn't have to be if you do your college search right. (Follow this [college search guide](#); it won't let you down.)

As you track down colleges that have the academics, location, and extracurricular activities you want, ask yourself if the school is a safety, reach, or match option for you too. Then, when it comes time to apply, make sure you have a good mix of reach, safety, and match choices. For the record, **you probably shouldn't be applying to more than 10 schools**. Five to seven is usually sufficient, with one or two safeties, one to three reaches, and three to five match. (If you follow this advice and conduct a thorough college search, you won't need to apply to more!)

Even if your top college choice is squarely in your “match” column, you should still explore and apply to a variety of schools. You might surprise yourself by falling in love with another college. And you never know what will happen after you get your acceptance letters—and **financial aid award letters**. Your #2 choice can get pretty attractive once they offer you a bigger financial aid package than college #1.

Some students and their families might also use price as a reason to call a school a reach (or a match or safety choice, for that matter). But try to remember that this is about your overall fit as a student. Besides, if you really match the criteria for their average admitted student, you’ll likely get their average financial aid package too. That can knock the sticker price *way* down at many schools.

Speaking of college costs, a cool offshoot of picking safety schools like this—that is, picking safeties that make you truly happy—is that you could be offered more institutional financial aid to attend a school you really like, since you’ll be among their top applicants.

A warning

Now, all of this being said, it’s important to remember college admission decisions are based on much more than your GPA and test scores. So choosing your safety, match, and reach schools is *far* from an exact science.

At the end of the day, you might get a full-fledged acceptance to a reach school, while you might get rejected by a safety. But the idea is to give yourself lots of options (and safety nets) by putting in the work to **find plenty of schools that really, truly fit you**.

Also keep in mind that admission to the reachiest of reach schools is especially difficult to predict. Practically everyone has a perfect GPA, perfect test scores, and a glowing extracurricular résumé. In those cases, it’s factors beyond academics—like the clean water nonprofit they run or IT company they founded or youth orchestra they conduct—that shoot applicants into admitted student territory. If your dream schools include the nation’s most selective colleges, remember admission is all about how you stack up to your fellow applicants. And pure luck.

Don’t panic!

Before you start worrying about the new layer of complexity this adds to your **college search**, remember: there are about 4,700 degree-granting institutions in the United States. Almost 3,000 of them are four-year colleges. These schools come in every size, shape, specialty, and selectivity you can imagine. In fact, the vast majority of colleges accept more students than they reject. (The national average seems to be around 65%.) So your chances of finding a complete set of safety, reach, and match schools you love is actually very good, especially if you open your college search to the entire country.

