

GAP YEAR
ASSOCIATION

THE ULTIMATE
GAP YEAR
PLANNING GUIDE

**Advice gathered from former gap year students
with resources from expert gap year educators**

3rd Edition: Updated 2024



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Look for the compass throughout this guide for tips and examples from former gappers!

A group of five people are camping on a grassy mountain ridge. They are gathered around a campsite with various gear, including a blue sleeping bag and a red cooler. The background features a vast landscape of rolling mountains and a sea of white clouds filling the valleys. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds, and the overall scene is bright and scenic.

GREETINGS FROM THE GAP YEAR ASSOCIATION!

As a public benefit nonprofit association, the Gap Year Association (GYA) is committed to providing resources that help students, families, and educators plan meaningful gap year experiences. We believe that intentional gap year opportunities should be accessible and encouraged for most high school graduates, and that they should be recognized as a vital step in personal, professional, and educational development.

In this guide, you'll find student stories, expert advice, resources, and information on gap year program providers and gap year consultants that can help you design the gap year that's right for you.

Happy gap year planning!

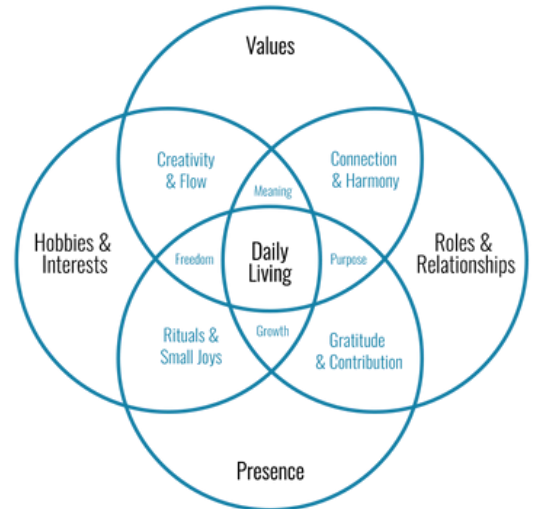
-Team GYA

01 WHAT TO DO

In order to plan an intentional gap year, you should start by centering yourself in your motivations for taking gap time, thinking about how you want to feel *after* your gap year experiences.

REFLECTING ON *IKIGAI*

The diagram to the right illustrates the Japanese concept of “*ikigai*,” or “reason for being.” Within the rules of *ikigai*, the elements of a meaningful life can be identified within the confluences of these circles.



This Western iteration of the *ikigai* diagram focuses on identifying one’s purpose. Reflect on the circles in this diagram: are there aspects that you’ve already identified? Which aspects have you yet to discover?



“My gap time significantly impacted my career path. I learned that it is possible to combine personal interests and my career and that I didn’t have to take the traditional path of getting a corporate job after graduation....The personal growth I experienced on my gap semester was monumental and has positively impacted every aspect of my life!”

–Anne K., Gap Year Alum



Photo: Seamester

GAP YEAR EXPERIENCES

Gap year experiences commonly fall under the following broad categories, which each cover a range of different opportunities for personal, professional, and educational growth:

Paid Work: An essential component of many students’ gap years – to fund other parts of their gap year, establish independence and ownership over their experiences, and deepen financial literacy.

Internship/Career Exploration: To gain professional skillsets and explore interests and potential college majors in a real world setting.

Service/Community-Based Learning: To learn about issues affecting a given community while building connections and contributing to community-defined solutions.

Choose Your Own Adventure: The possibilities for personal enrichment are endless: whether through cultural immersion, language learning, refining hobby skillsets, etc. – the sky’s the limit!

01 WHAT TO DO

GOAL SETTING

Make a list of goals you'd like to achieve, skills you'd like to learn, and experiences you'd like to have. Your goals should inspire you, while also feeling like they'll require some stretch and challenge to achieve.

Identify your **CHALLENGE ZONE**

Every person has different thresholds when it comes to their levels of comfort and challenge, and those thresholds will continue to shift as a person gains new experiences. As you think about goals for your gap year, try to identify experiences that will push you out of your comfort zone and into your "challenge zone," which is where the most transformative learning will take place. What are some areas you would like to grow in? What are some experiences that might feel uncomfortable at first, but that will be enriching in the long run?

It is equally important for you to identify where the limits of your challenge zone are: there may be experiences that go too far, and that trigger a fear response in you. This is the "danger zone," where you may start to experience trauma, and where productive learning is no longer possible. Steer clear of the danger zone, and try to keep your gap year within a healthy balance of your comfort and challenge zones.



"For each item on the 'to-learn' list, I thought about steps I would need to take to get to each of my listed goals."

-Sterling D., Gap Year Alum



For example, one of Sterling's gap year goals was to learn how to bike tour. To achieve her goal, she worked at a local cake pop store, saving enough money to attend a bike school where she learned how to repair bikes. She then mapped out a bike route from Arizona to Oregon.

Photo: Outward Bound Costa Rica

ASK YOURSELF

- What am I curious about?
- Where have I always wanted to go?
- What things do I love to do that would be fun to try with no distractions?
- What sorts of experiences will be more difficult to pursue once I'm a full-time student or starting a career path?
- How do I want to feel about myself at the end of my gap year?
- What personal qualities am I most proud of, and which qualities do I want to cultivate more?
- Do I have healthy living habits? How might I live more healthfully during my gap year?
- Am I feeling burned out on anything in particular? What do I need a break from in order to feel more refreshed and excited?
- What life skills should I develop that will help me thrive as an adult?

02 WHERE TO GO

Whether in your own community or on the other side of the globe, a meaningful gap year can take place anywhere! Intentionality is key: tie your location(s) to your goals, and have a clear idea of how specific places can support your learning and growth.



When considering visits to different locations, savvy travelers will have a good understanding of the social and political contexts they are entering. The U.S. Department of State offers [travel advisory information](#) for prospective travelers to different countries, which is a helpful resource to consult before traveling. If you end up traveling abroad, it's a good idea to enroll in the State Department's [STEP](#) (Smart Traveler Enrollment Program) service, which allows U.S. citizens and nationals to enroll with appropriate U.S. embassies in order to receive important safety information about their destination countries, and to help them be contacted by family, friends, and/or the U.S. government in the case of an emergency.

ASK YOURSELF

- Are there aspects of your home community that you want to learn more about or be more involved in?
- Are there areas of your home country you would like to explore? The U.S. reflects a diverse array of landscapes, communities, and cultural identities - remember that you don't have to go abroad in order to experience a different culture!
- Do you want to learn or practice a new language?
- If you want to go abroad, ask yourself why: what are the goals that international travel can help you achieve?
- If you want to travel during your gap year, consider whether you want to visit many places, or immerse yourself deeply in one location. Both options are valuable for different reasons.
- Do you want a host family, group, or solo living experience? Think about how each situation could serve you in different ways.
- What kind of communication (frequency & method) would you prefer to have with your family and friends during your gap year? Consider communication accessibility in different locations.
- Are you concerned about sustainability and the carbon footprint of your travels? Think about available transportation methods and how you will be able to travel to/within different areas.



03 HOW TO STRUCTURE

Should you participate in a program, plan a self-designed experience, or do a combination of both? When making these decisions about how to structure your gap year, consider your budget and how much structure and support you desire. You will also need to decide if, and how, college applications will fit into the process.

TYPES OF GAP YEAR EXPERIENCES

STRUCTURED

Refer to highly supported and facilitated gap year experiences with an established experiential education pedagogy. These are often cohort-based experiences with a high degree of coordination, including lodging, food, and program travel/activities.

SEMI-STRUCTURED

Refer to moderately coordinated experiences that include an element of formal support and supervision during specific periods of time. Participants might have a higher degree of independence and more control over their experience during unsupervised periods of time.

INDEPENDENT

Refer to highly independent, often self-coordinated experiences that do not have an established or reliable experiential education pedagogy. These are often unsupervised and unsupported, requiring students to take full ownership and overall responsibility of the experience.

ASK YOURSELF

- Do I want a built-in peer group to have a common experience with?
- How much structure and support do I need?
- What skills would I build during a structured program and what skills would build if I designed my own independent plan?
- How much independent time do I need in order to properly recharge? Do I need a lot of control over my own time, or will the experience be richer for me if I have a leader to guide and structure my time?
- Critical self-assessment: how mature am I? Do I have a good sense of how to travel independently, manage my own finances, make connections with other people, manage risks, and make responsible decisions for my own health and well-being?

A common progression for gap year experiences is to start off with a more structured experience, then move towards more independence at the end of the gap year timeline.



Photo: Irish Gap Year



Understanding the role of a Gap Year Consultant: Gap Year Consultants are professional advisors who work one-on-one with students to plan and personalize intentional gap year experiences. They concentrate specifically on gap year planning, and are very specialized in their gap year expertise. A Gap Year Consultant can help you prioritize your goals, recommending vetted, quality individual experiences or structured programs based on your goals and budget. Many even offer free introductory conversations to help you brainstorm. View a list of [GYA's Accredited Gap Year Consultants](#) on the GYA website.



GAP YEAR PROGRAMS



GYA's **Accredited Gap Year Programs** have undergone a thorough application process to demonstrate that they meet the highest standards for gap year education as approved by the U.S. Department of Justice and Federal Trade Commission. In addition to accredited programs, GYA has a list of over 100 **program members** that meet GYA's criteria for gap year program provider membership.

When exploring structured gap year programs,

ASK YOURSELF

- What is my ideal program length?
- Would working with a program open doors that I couldn't open for myself?
- Do I want to focus on cultural immersion, community-based service learning, outdoor adventure, career exploration, language learning, etc.?
- Do I want to stay with a host family?
- Do I want to visit many places, or immerse myself in one location?
- What is my budget for program fees and tuition?

ASK PROGRAMS

- What are your emergency response protocols?
- Can you connect me with program alumni?
- What does a typical day look like on your program?
- What is included in program tuition? Are there additional costs for things such as airfare, insurance, or other activities?



Photo: Gap at Glen Brook



Photo: EF Gap Year

INDEPENDENT GAP YEARS

Most former gappers will advise that you spend at least a part of your gap year on your own. They've found independent experiences to increase their confidence, especially when meeting new people, and they often end up trying something new and rewarding.



If you plan well, an independent gap year experience can save you money and give you flexibility. It will also take extra work to plan, so start early!

EXPERT ADVICE

- **If you want your plans to include service-learning or volunteering, make sure you research the specific communities you'll be visiting, as well as guidelines for ethically responsible volunteering. [GYA's Fair Trade Learning Guide](#) for students is a good place to start.**
- **Take a self-defense and/or first aid course in order to prepare yourself for solo travel.**
- **Check out the resources at the end of this guide in order to collect important information about specific destinations and traveling in general.**
- **Think about ways to save or even *earn* money during your gap year. Check out resources like [GYA's Financial Assistance](#) webpage and the work exchange/national service options listed under the resources section at the end of this guide.**
- **Intentionality is key! Have a clear set of goals, and an understanding of how your experiences will help you achieve them. It's also important to be flexible: allow your goals to evolve with new experiences, and allow some room for uncertainty, which is when some profound learning can take place.**

Photo: CIEE

Photo: Carpe Diem Education

FACTORING IN COLLEGE

Pro-tip: apply to college while still in high school! You will have more support for the application process, and you won't have to worry about it during your gap year.



A common myth is that a gap year will interrupt a student's academic momentum and will make them less likely to pursue college in the future. On the contrary, according to GYA's most recent alumni survey, the vast majority of gappers attended college immediately following their gap years, reporting increased motivation, clarity of purpose, and overall academic success once they returned to an academic setting.

ASK YOURSELF

- **Am I certain of what I want to study in college, or do I want to use my gap year to explore different topics?**
- **Do I already have some top-choice schools, or could I benefit from more time to figure out what I want to do and which school would be best for me?**
- **Do I want to earn college credit during my gap year, or do I need to take an intentional break from academics?**
- **Will taking a gap year affect my scholarship or financial aid prospects for college?**

EXPERT ADVICE

- **Check timelines and deferral policies for the schools you want to attend.**
- **Earning college credit during a gap year can open the door to funding from 529 plans, as well as getting ahead in credits. However, some schools prohibit earning credit during a deferral period and/or may not easily accept transfer credits from other institutions, so make sure you talk to an admissions officer and know the policies before making a deferral decision!**
- **If choosing to defer, make sure that you only defer a SINGLE acceptance, as it is unethical to disingenuously promise attendance at more than one institution.**

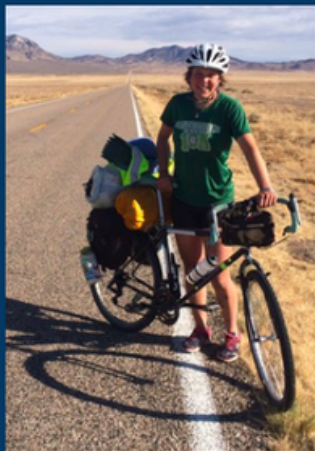
Photo: LIU Global

Photo: Warren Wilson College

04 ITINERARY PLANNING

SAMPLE GAP YEAR PLANS provided by Gapyearly

Sterling D.



- Led youth wilderness trips in Maine & peer-led a youth trail maintenance crew for the Northwest Youth Corps.
- Biked alone from Oregon to Arizona, camping on public lands & surviving off of acorns, fish, and wild edible plants in the Cache Creek wilderness of California.
- Worked on a ranch in Argentina and a farm in Chile through Workaway, learning Spanish.
- Joined an Argentine family on their month-long horseback cattle drive from the Andes to the winter grazing grounds
- Found a job in a village of Chilean artisans and learned to turn fresh goatskin into slippers
- Taught hammock-making to dozens of youth at a wilderness summer camp
- Started making and selling sandals from re-purposed tires and leather

Minh Anh D.



- July-August: took improv training at the iO Theater in Chicago
- September-December: theater training at the National Theater Institute in Connecticut
- January-May: acting, dog walking, writing in NYC (Bed-Stuy specifically)
- June-August: working as the Assistant Technical Director at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center

Kate N.



- August-January: Traveled throughout the United Kingdom and mainland Europe, utilizing Workaway as a means of finding accommodation with a variety of host farms and families
- January-March: Came back home to work several jobs and raised up enough money to get out into the world again
- April-May: Worked on a coffee farm/animal sanctuary in Kona, Hawaii, found through Workaway.
- June: Went on a month-long backpacking and rafting trip in Southern Utah with Outward Bound.
- July-August: Returned home and worked on an organic farm/kids' day camp just outside of Portland.

04 ITINERARY PLANNING

Using your notes from the first three sections, use this space to plan out a few possible itineraries, then add your goals to the corresponding timeline on the following page.

GOAL 1:

Location:

Activities:

Length of Time:

GOAL 2:

Location:

Activities:

Length of Time:

GOAL 3:

Location:

Activities:

Length of Time:

GOAL 4:

Location:

Activities:

Length of Time:

GAP YEAR TIMELINE

June, July, August



Example: Work the summer after high school to save up for gap year adventures.

September, October, November, December



Example: participate in a structured program in the fall, bond with a group of fellow gap year students while learning new skills and visiting new places.

January, February, March, April, May



Example: spend part of the spring traveling with a new friend, then embark on some independent travel, perhaps volunteering for a month with a trusted company/organization that you've researched.

June, July, August



Example: take a class to learn a new skill (photography? woodworking? coding?), work a summer job to save for college, save plenty of time for reflecting on the past year and implementing lessons learned!



It can be helpful to think about your gap year timeline within the general structure of an academic year. Many gappers spend the summer after graduating high school working to save money. Students tend to begin their gap year experiences with structured activities in the fall, moving towards more independent projects in the spring (e.g., solo traveling, creating a website, pursuing independent internships, etc.). The summer before starting college is a great time to intentionally reflect on your gap year experiences, internalize the learning and growth that occurred, and prepare yourself to jump back into traditional academics.

05 LIFE AFTER GAP YEAR

Don't be afraid to jump back into an academic setting after your gap year! Gappers often reflect that their year of growth offered them many social and academic insights that make them more motivated to learn and participate in the classroom. An overwhelming majority of gappers also report that they enter school with heightened confidence and maturity, allowing them to interact more easily with a diverse group of people.

ADVICE FROM THE EXPERTS

TALK TO PEOPLE!

Don't stress alone! Talk to your academic advisor(s) early on about your questions and concerns, and connect with other former gappers for support.

START WITH A LIGHTER WORKLOAD

It is completely okay - in fact, it is wise - to ease into your first semester with a light load. Use your time to get to know the resources available to you on campus, and to establish a community in this new place.

ASK FRIENDS FOR ADVICE

Many of your peers from high school have likely finished their freshman year - ask what they wish they'd known before starting!

SHARE YOUR GAP YEAR EXPERIENCES

If you kept a journal, blog, or video log of your gap year, consider sharing your story through the Gap Year Association's [Gap Year Stories](#) webpage. You can also contribute to GYA's ongoing data collection on gap year experiences by filling out our short [Gap Year Alumni Questionnaire](#). These are great ways to share your experiences, stay connected to a gap year community, and inspire others to pursue their gap year dreams.

UPDATE YOUR RESUME

Many employers have come to recognize gap year alumni as focused, flexible, and well-positioned to thrive in a team environment. Make sure to highlight the skills gained and growth achieved on your resume to set yourself apart from other job applicants!



Photo: Where There Be Dragons

The National Association for Career Readiness (NACE) has identified eight core competencies for career readiness:



1. Career & Self-Development
2. Communication
3. Critical Thinking
4. Equity & Inclusion
5. Leadership
6. Professionalism
7. Teamwork
8. Technology

Read more about how NACE describes each of these competencies, and think about how to frame your gap year experiences around these skillsets for a resume and cover letter.

06 RESOURCES

Go-to resources for deeper research and gap year planning.

GAPYEARASSOCIATION.ORG

- Search GYA Accredited Programs and Consultants who have passed an intensive review process to ensure they've met GYA's **Standards of Accreditation**, the official standards for gap year education in the U.S.
 - **Accredited Gap Year Programs**
 - **Accredited Gap Year Consultants**
- Read inspiring gap year stories on GYA's **Gap Year Stories** webpage.
- Explore college deferral policies and Official Gap Year Colleges for insights into planning for **college after a gap year**, and which campuses are particularly supportive of gap year alumni.
- View a regularly-updated list of scholarship opportunities and financial aid packages for gap year students, as well as affordable gap year options for students with a tight budget on GYA's **Financial Assistance** webpage.



GAP YEAR COMMUNITY

- **USA Gap Year Fairs:** a network of 40+ annual in-person fairs taking place in January and February across the country.
- **GoOverseas.com:** search programs, peer reviews, and scholarship opportunities
- **TeenLife:** a directory of summer and gap year programs
- **Gap Year Radio:** a stellar podcast covering all things gap year!



WORK EXCHANGE & NATIONAL SERVICE

- **Workaway**
- **WWOOF**
- **HelpX**
- **AmeriCorps NCCC**

06 RESOURCES

Big picture planning will eventually lead the way to nitty gritty logistical planning. Especially for those embarking on international travel for their gap year, it can be helpful to consult travel planning resources to avoid feeling overwhelmed by all the little details.

TRAVEL CHECKLIST

- Build or buy a small medical kit.
- Book airfare at least one month in advance and take advantage of student fares.
- Research travel insurance plans.
- Make a detailed packing list and make an effort to avoid buying everything new - there are advantages to looking like a seasoned traveler!
- Make a communication plan. Will you bring a cell phone? Buy a local phone? What will you need to do in order to make sure you have a functioning communication device during your travels?
- Make a plan for transportation from airports. Understand the costs associated with different options to avoid being taken advantage of.
- Have a plan for mental health support! Reflect on the coping mechanisms you'll use if things get stressful or overwhelming.
- Arrange for relevant visas and vaccinations. Some might take up to 8 weeks to complete.
- For international travel, make sure your passport will be valid for at least 6 months AFTER your last day of travel. Even if your passport is currently valid, you may be denied entry to certain locations if you have an impending expiration date.
- Email yourself a photocopy of the front photo and signature pages of your passport in case you need to get it replaced while traveling.
- Register international itineraries with the U.S. State Department's Smart Travelers Enrollment Program (STEP) service.
- Let your bank and credit card companies know about your travel plans. Find out if you'll be subject to any transaction fees while traveling. Bring a debit card and a backup credit card. In international settings, Visa is generally more widely accepted than other major credit card companies.



Photo: BroadFutures

TRAVEL PLANNING RESOURCES

- U.S. State Department's [**Traveler's Checklist**](#)
- REI's [**guide to plugs and electrical information**](#) for international destinations
- Worldpackers.com: [**Ultimate International Travel Checklist**](#)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): [**Travelers' Health Advice**](#)
- [**Lonely Planet**](#) and [**Fodors**](#) offer great country-specific advice and guidebooks
- [**Wanderlog**](#): Free trip planning app and website for travelers



Photo: Outward Bound

YOU CAN DO IT!

There is a whole community of former gappers, family members, mentors, and GYA members cheering you on.

GET IN TOUCH

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