

Your Complete Guide to Securing Your U.S. Student Visa

From Acceptance to Arrival — Step by Step

Welcome!

Congratulations on your acceptance to a U.S. school! This is a huge milestone, and we know the visa process can feel overwhelming at first. Don't worry — you've got this, and we're going to walk through every step together. By the time you finish reading this guide, you'll know exactly what to expect and feel confident heading into your visa appointment.

At a Glance: The Process

#	Stage	What Happens
1	Receive Your I-20	Your school sends you this critical document after enrollment
2	Pay the SEVIS Fee	One-time government fee paid online before your appointment
3	Complete the DS-160	Fill out your online visa application form
4	Pay the Visa Fee	MRV fee paid through your country's designated bank/portal
5	Book Your Appointment	Schedule your interview at the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate
6	Attend Your Interview	Bring your documents and answer a few questions
7	Receive Your Visa	Passport returned to you with visa stamp — you're ready!

Understanding Your I-20

Before you do anything else, you need to understand the most important document of your student journey in the U.S. — the I-20.

What Is the I-20?

The I-20 is an official U.S. government form called the "Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status." It is issued directly by your school (both high schools and colleges/universities issue them) and is the key document that proves you have been accepted and are authorized to apply for an F-1 student visa.

Think of it this way: without the I-20, there is no visa. This document is that important.

What's Listed on Your I-20?

Your I-20 contains the following information:

- **Your Full Legal Name:** Must match your passport exactly. If there is any discrepancy, contact your school's DSO (Designated School Official) immediately.
- **SEVIS ID Number:** Starts with the letter 'N' followed by 10 digits (e.g., N0012345678). You will need this number throughout the entire visa process.
- **School Name and Address:** The official name and address of your school in the U.S.
- **Program of Study:** Your major or field of study.
- **Level of Education:** Whether you are enrolled as a high school student, undergraduate, or graduate student.
- **Program Start and End Dates:** The official dates of your academic program. Your visa will be tied to these dates.
- **Financial Information:** The estimated cost of your program per year (tuition, housing, living expenses) and the amount you have available to cover those costs. This shows the U.S. government that you can financially support yourself.
- **DSO Name and Signature:** The Designated School Official at your school who issued the form. They are your point of contact for any I-20 related questions.

 **Important:** Your I-20 must be signed by your DSO to be valid. Check that the signature is there before proceeding. Also keep in mind that the I-20 has a start date — you can enter the U.S. no earlier than 30 days before that date.

Step 1 — Pay Your SEVIS Fee

Now that you have your I-20, your first action item is to pay the SEVIS (Student and Exchange Visitor Information System) fee. This is a one-time fee paid to the U.S. government to register you in their student tracking system.

Your U.S. Student Visa Guide

How Much Is It?

- F-1 Student Visa (most college and university students): \$350
- J-1 Exchange Visitor Visa (some high school programs): \$220

How to Pay

Pay online at the official SEVIS fee website:



[Pay your SEVIS fee at www.fmjfee.com](http://www.fmjfee.com)

You will need your SEVIS ID number (from your I-20) and your school's code (also on the I-20) to complete this payment.



Pro Tip: After paying, print or save the payment confirmation (Form I-901). You will need to bring this to your visa interview.

Step 2 — Complete the DS-160 Application

The DS-160 is the official online visa application form. It asks for your personal information, travel history, background questions, and details about your studies in the U.S. This form is submitted electronically to the U.S. Embassy or Consulate.

Where to Fill It Out



[Fill out the DS-160 at ceac.state.gov](http://ceac.state.gov)

Tips for Filling Out the DS-160

- Take your time — this form can take 60–90 minutes to complete.
- Use your legal name exactly as it appears on your passport.
- You will need a digital photo that meets specific U.S. visa photo requirements.
- The system allows you to save your progress using an application ID — use this! Don't try to do it all in one sitting.
- When asked about your U.S. point of contact, you can list your school's international student office.

Your U.S. Student Visa Guide

- Answer all questions honestly. If you make a mistake, you can go back and correct it before submitting.

✓ **After submitting:** Print your DS-160 confirmation page. The barcode on this page is required at your visa appointment.

Step 3 — Pay the Visa Application Fee (MRV Fee)

In addition to the SEVIS fee, you need to pay the visa application fee, also called the MRV (Machine Readable Visa) fee. This is separate from the SEVIS fee and is paid directly to the U.S. Embassy in your country.

The F-1 student visa fee is \$185 USD (note: this is subject to change, so always verify the current amount).

How to Pay

The payment process varies by country. You will pay through the U.S. Embassy or Consulate website for your home country. To find the correct payment portal for where you live:

 [Find your country's payment instructions at travel.state.gov](https://travel.state.gov)

✓ **Save your receipt!** You will need the MRV fee receipt number to book your visa appointment. Store it safely.

Step 4 — Book Your Visa Appointment

With your DS-160 submitted and your fees paid, you're ready to schedule your visa interview. This is done through the U.S. Embassy or Consulate in your home country.

Where to Book

Appointments are booked through the U.S. Visa Appointment Service portal. Each country has its own portal, so make sure you're on the correct one for your country:

 [Book your appointment at ustraveldocs.com](https://ustraveldocs.com)

Your U.S. Student Visa Guide

Things to Know When Booking

- You will need your DS-160 confirmation number, your MRV fee receipt number, and your passport number.
- Choose the U.S. Embassy or Consulate closest to where you live. You do not have to go to the capital city if there is a consulate nearer to you.
- Appointment wait times vary by country and time of year. During peak seasons (April–August), waits can be several weeks to months long. Plan ahead!
- You will often have two appointments: a biometrics appointment (fingerprints and photo) and then the interview. Sometimes these happen on the same day.

 **Plan Early:** We strongly recommend starting this process at least 3–4 months before your program start date. Appointment slots fill up quickly, and you need time to receive your passport back before you travel.

Step 5 — Gather Your Documents

Before your interview day, you'll want to have everything organized and ready to go. Here is what you need to bring:

Required Documents (Must Have)

- Valid Passport — must be valid for at least 6 months beyond your intended period of stay in the U.S.
- DS-160 Confirmation Page — the printed page with the barcode.
- Visa Appointment Confirmation — your appointment scheduling letter or email.
- MRV Fee Receipt — proof that you paid the visa application fee.
- I-20 Form — your original, DSO-signed I-20 from your school.
- SEVIS Fee Payment Receipt (Form I-901) — proof that you paid the SEVIS fee.
- One Passport-Style Photo — even if you uploaded one for the DS-160, bring a physical copy.

Supporting Documents (Highly Recommended)

- Acceptance letter from your school.
- Financial evidence — bank statements, scholarship letters, or sponsor letters showing you can cover your costs.
- Academic transcripts and diplomas from previous schools.
- Standardized test scores (TOEFL, IELTS, SAT, etc.) if applicable.

Your U.S. Student Visa Guide

- Evidence of ties to your home country (property ownership, family ties, job offer for after graduation) — this helps show you plan to return home after your studies.

✓ **Organization Tip:** Put all your documents in a folder in the order listed above. The officer will ask to see them, and being organized makes a great impression and keeps you calm!

Step 6 — Your Visa Interview: What to Expect

The visa interview is often the part that makes students the most nervous — but the truth is, it is usually very brief (most interviews are just 2–5 minutes) and straightforward. Here is exactly what you can expect so there are no surprises.

Before You Arrive

- Dress neatly and professionally. You don't need a suit, but look presentable.
- Arrive 15–20 minutes early. Bring water and a snack — there may be a wait.
- Leave your phone and electronics in the car or at home if possible. Many embassies do not allow electronics inside.
- Do not bring anyone into the interview room with you — this is your individual appointment.

At the Embassy

When you arrive at the embassy or consulate, here is the general flow:

1 Security Check: You will go through a security screening similar to an airport. Have your appointment confirmation ready to show at the entrance.

2 Document Review: A staff member will review your documents and check that everything is in order.

3 Biometrics: You will have your fingerprints scanned and your photo taken (if not done at a separate biometrics appointment).

4 The Interview: You will speak briefly with a consular officer through a window. They will ask you questions about your plans.

Your U.S. Student Visa Guide

5

Decision: Most students receive a decision on the spot. If approved, your passport will be held and your visa will be mailed or ready for pickup within a few days to weeks.

Common Interview Questions

The consular officer wants to understand your plans and confirm you are a legitimate student. Here are the types of questions you may be asked:

- Which school will you be attending?
- What will you be studying?
- Why did you choose this school?
- How are you financing your education?
- Do you have family in the United States?
- What are your plans after you finish your studies?
- Have you ever visited the United States before?

✓ **Answer Confidently:** Keep your answers short, honest, and to the point. You don't need to over-explain. The officer is not trying to trick you — they simply want to confirm that you are a genuine student.

Step 7 — After Your Interview

If Your Visa Is Approved 🎉

Congratulations! Here's what happens next:

- Your passport will be kept by the embassy to have the visa stamp placed in it.
- It is typically returned to you within a few business days to 2 weeks, either by mail or available for pickup (they will tell you which).
- When you receive it, check that all the information (your name, visa type, dates) is correct. If anything looks wrong, contact the embassy immediately.
- Your visa will be an F-1 visa. It may be valid for multiple years, but your actual permission to stay in the U.S. is tied to your I-20 end date.

If Your Visa Is Denied

A denial can happen, and it is not the end of the road. The officer will give you a reason (citing a section of U.S. immigration law). Common reasons include:

- Insufficient proof of financial ability to pay for school.

Your U.S. Student Visa Guide

- Concerns that the applicant intends to stay in the U.S. permanently rather than return home.
- Incomplete documentation.

If denied, you can reapply after addressing the reason for the denial. Reach out to your school's international student office and to us — we will help you understand your next steps.

Entering the United States

Having a visa does not guarantee entry into the U.S. — a border officer at the port of entry makes the final decision. Here is what to know:

- You may enter the U.S. up to 30 days before your I-20 program start date. Do not try to arrive earlier than this.
- At the port of entry (airport or land border), have your passport, visa, and I-20 ready to present.
- The border officer will ask you a few questions, similar to your visa interview. Be honest and consistent.
- If approved to enter, you will receive an I-94 record (electronic). You can access it at i94.cbp.dhs.gov and should print it for your records.
- Your status in the U.S. will be "D/S" (Duration of Status), meaning you are authorized to stay as long as you are enrolled in school.



Check your I-94 after arrival:

[Access your I-94 record at i94.cbp.dhs.gov](https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov)

Quick Reference: Important Links

Resource	Link
Pay SEVIS Fee (I-901)	www.fmjfee.com
DS-160 Visa Application	ceac.state.gov
U.S. Visa Fees Info	travel.state.gov — Fees
Book Visa Appointment	www.ustraveldocs.com
Official U.S. Visa Info	travel.state.gov — Student Visas
Check Your I-94	i94.cbp.dhs.gov
SEVIS Information (SEVP)	studyinthestates.dhs.gov

Your U.S. Student Visa Guide

You've Got This!

We know this process has a lot of steps, but thousands of students navigate it successfully every year — and you will too. If you have any questions at any point, please don't hesitate to reach out to us. We are here to help make your journey to the U.S. as smooth as possible.