



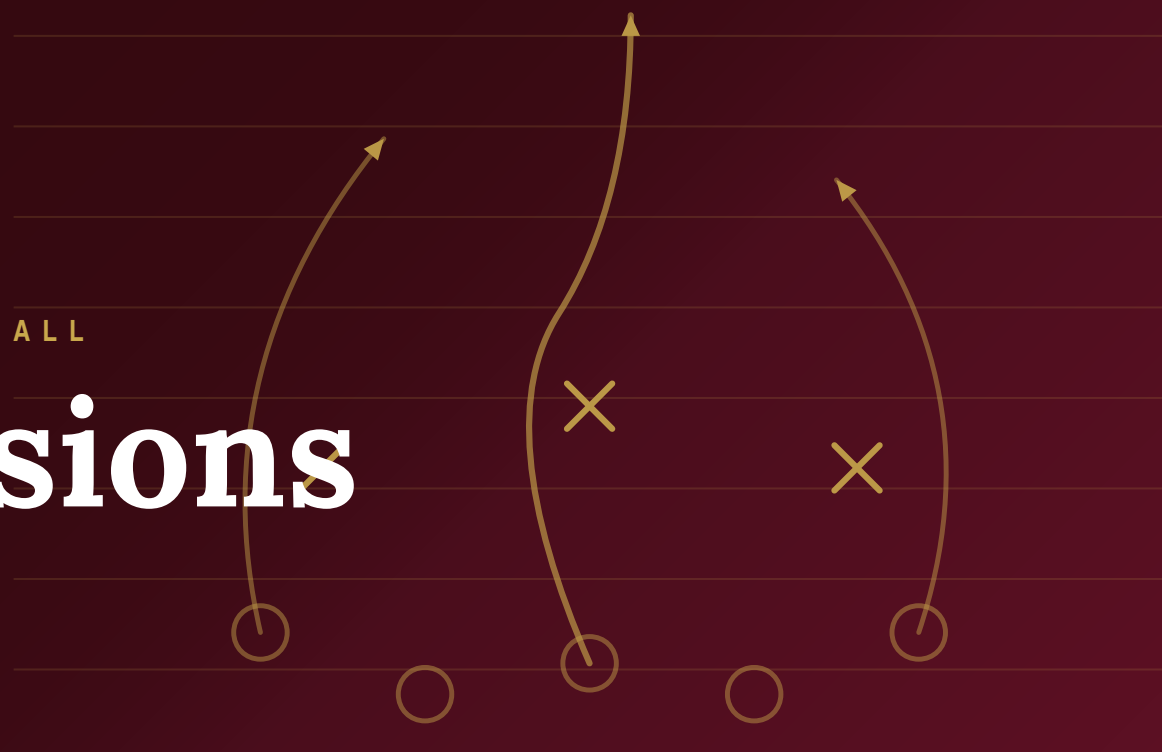
JOSEF AIDEN DURAND · VERITAS HALL

The Admissions Playbook

The Veritas Hall system for college admissions, grades 7 to 12: building the student, the list, the four pillars of the application, the money, and the mental game.

FIRST EDITION · 2026

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The Admissions Playbook

First edition, 2026. The revised and expanded successor to *Art of Admissions: The Official College Application Strategy Guide* (2024).

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Facts change. Application platforms, deadlines, testing policies and aid rules change every year. The facts in this book reflect published policies as of the

2026–27 application cycle. Always confirm the current rules on each college's official website, on commonapp.org and on studentaid.gov before you rely on them.

Examples. Example essays, activity descriptions and students in this book are illustrative unless they are identified as the author's own. Names and details have been changed or invented to protect privacy.

No guarantees. No book, counselor or app can promise admission to any school. This book describes a method that has worked for many students; results depend on each student and each year's applicant pool.

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FROM THE AUTHOR

Your Admissions GPS



JOSEF AIDEN DURAND
HARVARD COLLEGE '14
FOUNDER, VERITAS HALL

Hi, I'm Josef, and I'll be your guide through the college admissions process. I've spent more than twelve years working one-to-one with students and families from the United States to China to Southeast Asia, and I want you to think of me as three things at once.

First, your **admissions GPS**. I'll show you the most efficient route from where you are to your point B, your dream school, and I'll warn you about the traffic jams that catch most families: starting late, applying as someone you're not, and guessing at rules nobody explains.

Second, your **time investment manager**. Time is the one resource you never get back, so the question I ask every student is: how can this one hour pay off two, three, five, even ten times? Students who invest their time instead of spending it build applications that practically write themselves.

Third, your **application doctor**. When it's time to apply, we'll give your application a full physical, pillar by pillar, and perform surgery where it counts, especially on the essays.

In 2024 I published *Art of Admissions*, the strategy guide I wished every family had. This book is that guide, rebuilt as a playbook. Everything that worked is still here, updated for today's Common App, testing policies and aid rules. And because the best applications are built years before senior fall, it now covers the whole season: grades 7 through 12, the money, and the mental game that decides more outcomes than most people realize.

There's an old saying: give someone a fish and you feed them for a night; teach them to fish and you feed them for a lifetime. This book teaches you to fish. If you ever want a coach in your corner along the way, Veritas Hall is here. But my goal is that you finish this book able to run the play yourself.

We don't just get students in. We build who they become.

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How to Use This Book

Chapters teach the strategy. Plays let you run it.

THE BOOK IN ONE PARAGRAPH

College admissions is a game with rules nobody teaches. Part I explains what admissions officers actually look for. Part II builds the student in grades 7–11, when the application is really written. Parts III and IV run the application itself: the list, the early plan, and the four pillars, LEAD (Letters, Essays, Activities, Data entry). Part V pays for it. Part VI gets you to Decision Day and beyond. Part VII protects the most important player on the field: the student. The Toolkit at the end gives you every worksheet in one place.

CHAPTERS AND PLAYS

Chapters teach the strategy, in depth, with examples. **Plays** are one-page versions you can run: the situation, the steps, coaching points and a scoreboard that tells you when the play is done. Each play has a code (O for Offense, ST for Special Teams, M for Money Downs, D for Defense) so you can find it fast.

WHERE TO START

Grades 7–10: Part I, then Part II, then the Season Map. **Grade 11:** Parts I and II, then the College List chapter, then the Draft Board and Pass Protection plays in the spring. **Grade 12:** Parts III and IV in order, with the Red Zone Calendar on your wall. **Parents:** read The Handoff (O-9) and Sideline Support (D-8) first.

HOW TO READ A PLAY DIAGRAM

Crimson circles are our side (S is the student, P a parent, R a recommender). Black X's are obstacles or the reader. Solid arrows are the plan; dashed arrows are time re-invested or a follow-up. A T-bar is a cut. A gold star is a point of excellence or the theme.

There's No Official Playbook. So I Wrote One.



JOSEF AIDEN DURAND
HARVARD COLLEGE '14
FOUNDER, VERITAS HALL

I played twelve years of football. At Don Bosco Prep, we won four New Jersey state championships and a national championship, and many of the coaches who built those teams went on to coach in college and the NFL. What they taught me had less to do with talent than with preparation: a system, a playbook, and the discipline to run it the same way every time.

College admissions is a game too. The trouble is that nobody explains the rules. Families piece them together from friends and forums and hope it works. But hope is not a strategy, and small mistakes in ninth grade become big ones in twelfth.

For more than twelve years, I've watched the same pattern. The students who win aren't the ones who do the most. They're the ones with a plan, a story, and the discipline to run both. They start early, and they start strategically.

This book is that plan, written down. It began as *Art of Admissions*, my guide to the application itself. Now it covers the whole season, from the first class you choose in grade 9 to the first week of college, along with the money and the mental game.

Read it with a pen. Run the plays. And remember the words our team shouted before every game: dominate on three. One, two, three... dominate!

The Season Map

Grades 7 to 12 on one page. The students who win early don't just start early; they start strategically.

WHEN	THE JOB	THE PLAYS	DONE WHEN
Grades 7–8	Explore widely; read deeply; strong habits	Try three or four directions; start the 10X habit (O-1); private high school applications if relevant	A short list of interests that pull the student back
Grade 9	Explore with purpose	Strong grades from day one; courses mapped for four years (O-13); a time audit (O-18)	A four-year course map and two directions worth testing
Grade 10	Build	Choose two points of excellence (O-2); cut the noise (O-3); launch a project (O-4); prep for testing (O-17)	A project in motion and a test plan
Grade 11	Prove	Results and rigor; testing finished by winter; the theme locked (O-5); recommenders asked in spring (ST-3); the Draft Board (ST-11); a first college list	A theme, scores, recommenders and five ranked stories
Summer before 12	Package	Personal statement drafted (ST-4); activity list built (ST-7); list locked (ST-1); early plan set (ST-2)	A green-lit personal statement and a locked list
Grade 12 fall	Execute	Supplements (ST-6, ST-10); data entry first (ST-8); everything submitted 30 days early (ST-14)	Every application submitted early
Grade 12 spring	Decide	Aid offers compared and appealed (M-2); waitlists answered (ST-16); the decision by May 1 (M-3)	One school, the best offer, no regrets

Rules of the Game

Eight rules every play in this book follows.

- 01 The student writes every word.**
Parents, teachers and counselors can question, coach and edit. The student writes. Readers can tell, and integrity is not negotiable.
- 02 Be unapologetically you.**
Admissions officers want to meet the real student, not the applicant you think they want. The best applications sound like a person.
- 03 Show, don't tell.**
Prove passion without using the word "passion." Specific details beat adjectives every time.
- 04 Honesty in every field.**
Nothing is inflated: hours, roles, results and stories are real. Colleges can and do rescind admissions.
- 05 Every fact comes from the source.**
Deadlines, admission rates and requirements come from each college's official site, not from forums or friends.
- 06 Nothing ships until it's green-lit.**
Red, yellow, green, for every essay and form (ST-9). The only keystrokes allowed on green-lit text are copy and paste.
- 07 Thirty days early.**
Every application is finished a month before the deadline. The buffer zone is for the week everything goes wrong.
- 08 Ownership moves to the student.**
Parents start the drive; students finish it (O-9). By grade 11, the student runs the process.

PART I

The Game

What admissions officers actually look for, and how a file moves from the floor to the table.

The Game Nobody Explains

What admissions officers are actually looking for, and how they decide.

Every family asks me the same question in some form: what are these mysterious, Oz-like admissions officers actually looking for behind closed doors? The honest answer sounds too simple to be useful, so let me say it and then unpack it. They are looking for **you**. The real you, not the college-curated version you think they want to see.

Here's the paradox at the heart of the process. Platforms like the Common App give every student a universal format to make a unique case for college. One form, millions of different people. Over the past decade, the platforms and the colleges have opened that format up: the Common App added a "topic of your choice" essay, the University of Chicago famously asks quirky questions written by its own students and alumni, and the Activities section now invites experiences beyond school clubs. All of it points the same direction. Colleges want as many dimensions of you as you can fit inside the boxes they give you.

So the job is this: pack as much of the real you into the application as the parameters allow, and weave those dimensions into one story a stranger can understand in minutes. The clearer the picture you paint of who you are now, and of who you are becoming, the easier it is for a reader to say yes.

EVERY BOX IS AN OPPORTUNITY

Approach every single field of the application with two questions. First: what is this part of the application giving me an opportunity to show? Second: what can I put here that makes the most of that opportunity? A 150-character activity description and a 650-word personal statement deserve the same mindset.

This works because of something good salespeople know: people who say yes to a series of small things find it easier to say yes to the big one. Admissions officers, contrary to popular belief, are looking for reasons to admit you, not reasons to reject you. Every field you handle well is another small yes. Give them no reason to say no, and you make the final yes easier, and you make it easier for your reader to champion your file in committee.

THE FOUR THINGS READERS LOOK FOR

Every college has its own language and its own rubric, but most selective schools are looking for four things. Stanford uses almost exactly these words; Harvard uses close synonyms. Learn them, because every chapter in this book serves one or more of them.

1. Personal Qualities (PQs). This is what makes you, you. Without these qualities you'd be a "standard, cookie-cutter" applicant, if such a thing even existed. PQs put a face to the name on the file. The ten readers look for most, in no particular order:

- Passion (shown, never stated)
- Leadership and character
- Willingness to take risks
- Initiative and openness to challenge
- A sense of social responsibility
- Creativity
- Commitment and persistence
- Critical thinking

The Game Nobody Explains (continued)

- Collaboration and teamwork
- A sense of humor

2. Points of Excellence (PoE). This is where you shine. In the eyes of an admissions office, excellence is measured by the level at which it's recognized. The ladder, from the bottom rung up:

- **School:** recognized within your high school. Every student has a fair shot here, so don't be afraid to start on this rung.
- **Local:** recognized by your town or city.
- **Regional:** recognized across a district, county or region.
- **State:** the best in your state, such as a state champion in a sport or a statewide competition.
- **National:** the best in your country.
- **International:** literally world-class.

As a rule of thumb, top-20 schools look for applicants who reach the national or international level in at least one point of excellence, and the most selective institutions (the Ivy League, Stanford, MIT and their peers) look for two or more. That sounds intimidating until you remember that excellence is built, rung by rung, over years. That's what Part II is for.

3. Intellectual Vitality and Intellectual Curiosity (IV/IC). This is your thirst for knowledge. Intellectual vitality is how intellectually alive you are in academic settings, which is why grades and test scores matter here. Intellectual curiosity is what you do *outside* the classroom because you love to learn: summer or dual-enrollment courses, independent research (especially published research), an academic passion project, a book you wrote, a class you started at school, or deep reading far beyond your intended major.

4. Community Engagement and Impact. How do you make your community better? My father taught me to leave every room better than I found it, which is a small version of a big idea: leave the world better than you found it. Readers ask the same question of your community. Volunteering is the start. Founding something that serves people, and measuring how many it serves, is how service becomes a point of excellence.

PRO TIP The President's Volunteer Service Award, long a popular way to earn national recognition for service, has been paused since May 2025. Many schools and districts now offer their own service awards instead. Check what your school offers, and keep logging your hours either way.

THE SCIENCE PART AND THE ART PART

Everything above is the art part of the application. It all assumes you also have the science part: the grades, the rigor and, where required, the test scores. Think of the numbers as the key that unlocks the gate. They never get a student in on their own, but without them the art part may never be read closely. The next chapter explains exactly how that gate works.

THE GOLDEN RULE

The best advice I ever heard about demonstrating all four qualities came from Mike Short, a former Stanford admissions officer: "*The best way to convince an admissions officer of your passion is to write about your passion without using the word 'passion.'*" In other words, don't tell readers what you care about. Show them with a level of detail that nobody else could match, because nobody else has spent the hours you have. Say what others can't, and don't be afraid to nerd out about what others won't.

Someone said it even more concisely: my college screenwriting teacher, Danny Rubin, who wrote *Groundhog Day*. Three words, and they are the golden rule of this entire book: **Show, don't tell.**

The Floor and the Table

How selective colleges actually read a file, and what that means for you.

Many selective colleges practice holistic admissions: they consider the whole application rather than ranking students by a single number. But holistic doesn't mean numbers don't matter. It means numbers decide whether the rest gets a serious read.

Picture the reading room at a selective school in January. Applications arrive by the tens of thousands. In my experience, the process works something like a floor and a table. Every application starts on the floor. Those that show the student can thrive academically move to the table, where readers consider everything else: the essays, the activities, the letters, the person.

GATEWAY NUMBERS

What moves a file from the floor to the table are what I call **gateway numbers**: your GPA and, where the college requires or considers them, your SAT or ACT scores. Gateway numbers never get a student in on their own. They get the student considered.

Here's how to use them. Look up each college's middle 50% range of GPA and test scores for admitted students. You'll find it in the college's Common Data Set (search the college's name plus "Common Data Set," section C), on its admissions website, or on the federal College Scorecard. If your numbers sit at or above the 75th percentile, your academics are a strength in that pool. Between the 25th and 75th percentiles, they're competitive and the rest of the file decides. Below the 25th, the school is a reach on numbers alone, and the rest of the file has to carry more weight.

PRO TIP A 4.0 unweighted GPA with an SAT around 1540 or an ACT around 34 opens the gateway at virtually every college in the country. A slightly lower GPA can be balanced by a strong score, which is one reason testing is worth taking seriously.

TESTING IS BACK

During the pandemic, most selective colleges went test-optional. Since 2024, many of the most selective have returned to requiring the SAT or ACT, including several Ivy League schools, Stanford and MIT, while others remain test-optional. Policies keep changing, so check each college's current policy on its official site every spring and fall.

Test-optional never meant test-irrelevant. At schools that consider scores, a strong score removes doubt about academic readiness, and in a competitive pool removing doubt matters. My advice to almost every student: prepare seriously, finish testing by the winter of junior year (O-17), and then decide school by school whether to send the score. *The SAT Playbook* and *The ACT Playbook*, both free from Veritas Hall, cover test prep in full.

WHAT HAPPENS AT THE TABLE

Once a file is on the table, a reader typically spends somewhere between a few minutes and a quarter hour on a first read, often around ten minutes. In that time they are trying to put a face to the name. Readers aren't choosing between good and bad applicants; at the top, everyone is good. They're choosing between good and good, and building a class. The students who stand out are the ones who are clearly about something, who show who they are, and who make it easy to say yes.

The Floor and the Table (continued)

That's why the rest of this book matters. Strategy, positioning, story and timing, run as a system, are what turn a file on the table into an admit.

PART II

Offense: Build the Student

Grades 7 to 11, when the application is really written: direction, depth, impact and a theme.

Busy Is Not Strategic



JOSEF AIDEN DURAND
HARVARD COLLEGE '14
FOUNDER, VERITAS HALL

Some students are always doing something. School, clubs, volunteering, programs: every hour filled. It looks impressive. But zoom out and there's no throughline, no direction, no build. Just activity.

Admissions officers can see that. Busy doesn't signal excellence. It signals a lack of focus. The applicants who stand out aren't the busiest; they're the most directed. They said no to good opportunities so they could say yes to great ones.

Here's the test I give every student: if you stopped doing this activity tomorrow, would anything in your application, or your life, get weaker? If the honest answer is no, it's a candidate for the cut list (O-3). The hours you free up are the most valuable resource you have.

Depth needs time to mature, to compound and to become credible. That's why the build happens in grades 9 and 10, not senior fall. Invest your time early, invest it in a direction, and by the time you apply, the story will already be written. All you'll have to do is tell it.

Invest Your Time. Don't Spend It.

The habit that builds an acceptance-worthy application over four years.

If you're working with me one-to-one, it helps to think of me as your time investment manager. Together we choose the classes, activities and summers that deserve your time, and we manage that time so it pays off more than once. The question I want every student asking as early as possible is: **how can I get 2x, 3x, 5x, even 10x return on any single hour I invest?**

Time is the most precious resource you have, and it's non-renewable. Once it's spent, it's gone. So why spend it, or worse, waste it, when you can invest it? An hour in a class that feeds a project, which feeds a competition, which earns a recommendation, is an hour working four times. That compounding is how ordinary schedules produce extraordinary applications.

EXCELLENCE AT THE INTERSECTION

Elite institutions love students who are good, even great, at many things, but who recognize their unique strengths and invest disproportionately in them until they are unquestionably excellent. Make no mistake: these schools are looking for excellence. And remember the rule of thumb from Part I: the most selective schools look for national- or world-class distinction in two or more areas. Quality over quantity.

Where do those strengths come from? They tend to lie at the intersection of your **talent** (what you're best at) and your **passion** (what you'd do for free). Find that intersection early, double down on it, and the long-term dividends over four years tend to be acceptances, because you invested in what makes you, you, not in what you guessed admissions officers wanted.

BOTH SIDES OF THE BRAIN

One-dimensional, academics-only, perfect-score-and-GPA applicants are turned away by the most selective schools every single year. Readers look for students who engage both sides of the brain: the left side of logic and problem-solving, and the right side of creativity and art. A physics student who composes music, a debater who builds robots, a coder who paints: those combinations are memorable because they're human.

THE PLAYS IN THIS PART

The eighteen plays that follow turn these ideas into steps you can run, from grade 7 through junior year. Start with the 10X Route (O-1) and the Double Threat (O-2). Use Training Camp (O-6) every August and the Weekly Game Plan (O-18) every Sunday. If you feel behind, run the Two-Minute Drill (O-7) before anything else. And parents, read The Handoff (O-9): the most impressive students are the ones running their own process by junior year.

The Build Years: Grades 7 to 10

The cheapest years to change direction, and the ones most families waste.

Most families think college admissions starts in senior year. That's like training for the Olympics the month before the event. By the time applications open, the story is mostly written: the GPA is set, the activities are set, the trajectory is visible. Senior year is for packaging. The building happens now.

GRADES 7 AND 8: EXPLORE WITH CURIOSITY

Middle school is for range. Try things: an instrument, a sport, a coding club, a science fair, debate, art, a part-time project with a parent. Read widely, far beyond assignments. Notice what pulls the student back without being asked, and write it down. Two habits matter more than any single activity: finishing what you start and managing your own calendar (O-18).

If your family is considering private high school, grades 7 and 8 are also when those applications happen, with their own tests (the SSAT, ISEE or HSPT), interviews and student essays. The same principles in this book apply, scaled to a thirteen-year-old's voice.

GRADE 9: STRONG FROM DAY ONE

Freshman grades count. Every college sees them, and a rough first year is hard to undo. Build the four-year course plan now (O-13, T-1): the most rigorous path the student can sustain with strong grades, especially in the core subjects. Join a few activities with intention, and keep testing directions. Keep a running list of everything you do, with dates and numbers. Future you will thank you when it's time to write the activities list.

GRADE 10: THE BUILD YEAR

Sophomore year is the most underrated year in the process. It's the last year a student can change trajectory comfortably: course rigor can still shift, interests can still deepen, and activities still have time to compound. It's also where many strong students quietly drift, because applications feel far away.

- Choose your points of excellence (O-2) and invest disproportionately in them.
- Cut the activities that don't serve the direction (O-3).
- Launch a project that serves real people and can grow (O-4).
- Plan testing: a first official practice test, then a prep plan for the summer before junior year (O-17).
- Use the summer to produce something, not just attend something (O-14).

SIGNALS THAT YOU'RE ON TRACK

By the end of grade 10, a student on track can say, in one sentence, what direction they're building in and why. They have two activities they've gone deep in, at least one thing they started themselves, a course plan with rising rigor and a test plan. If that doesn't describe your student yet, don't panic. Run the Two-Minute Drill (O-7). Starting late is a constraint, not a verdict.

If You Feel Behind



JOSEF AIDEN DURAND
HARVARD COLLEGE '14
FOUNDER, VERITAS HALL

Almost every family I meet feels behind. The student next door started a nonprofit in eighth grade. A cousin is doing research at a university. Social media makes it look like every other teenager is already finished.

Here's the truth: most of what you see is the highlight reel, and comparison is the fastest way to waste the time you do have. Your student isn't competing with the kid next door. They're competing with who they were last month.

Starting late is a constraint, not a verdict. A focused late start beats a scattered early one every time. Pick one direction. Cut what doesn't serve it. Build one thing that serves real people, and measure it. Run the Two-Minute Drill (O-7) and give it eight honest weeks.

I've watched students change their trajectory in six months. None of them did it by doing more. They did it by doing less, on purpose, with everything they had.

Junior Year: The Red Zone

Prove it: results, scores, a theme, and the people who will vouch for you.

Junior year is the red zone: the last full year colleges see before you apply, and the year everything you've built has to turn into proof. It's also the busiest year of high school, which is why a plan matters more now than ever.

FALL

- Take the most rigorous schedule you can sustain, and protect your grades. Junior-year grades carry real weight.
- If you prepped over the summer, sit for your first official SAT or ACT in the fall (O-17).
- Lead something. Junior year is when roles turn into responsibility (O-16).
- Start a college research document: what you're learning about fit, majors and places.

WINTER

- Finish testing by the end of winter if you can, leaving spring for AP and IB exams and your project.
- Draft your theme in one sentence (O-5). Test it on three people: can they say what you're about after a three-second look at your activities?

- Plan the summer before senior year now, while there's still time to apply for research, jobs and programs (O-8, O-14).

SPRING

- Ask your recommenders before the end of the year (ST-3). Teachers get flooded with requests in the fall; the students who ask in spring get their best work.
- Build a long college list and visit where you can (ST-12, ST-1).
- Start the Draft Board (ST-11): rank five stories before the summer.

THE SUMMER BEFORE SENIOR YEAR

This is the most valuable summer of high school. Draft and green-light the personal statement (ST-4, ST-9), build the activities list and descriptions (ST-7), finalize the list, set the early plan (ST-2), and finish as much as you can before August 1, when the Common App opens for the new cycle. Students who arrive at senior fall with a finished personal statement and a locked list have a completely different senior year: calm instead of chaos.

Summers That Count

Plan the outcome, then choose the program.

Summer is one of the most valuable windows in the whole process: no school, more time, more flexibility. And most students waste it, either by treating it as a break or by filling it with random programs that don't connect to anything.

Most families plan summers backward. They ask, "What prestigious program can my child get into?" The better question is, "What outcome are we trying to create?" Summers should build depth, proof, momentum and differentiation, not just occupancy.

EXPLORATION EARLY, PRODUCTION LATER

In the summers after grades 8, 9 and sometimes 10, exploring is valuable. Test a field cheaply and hands-on: a course, a volunteer role, a small project, a job (O-12). By the summers before grades 11 and 12, aim to produce something: research, a real job or internship, a project that grows, an independent study with a mentor, or testing finished so the school year is free.

THE PRESTIGIOUS-PROGRAM TRAP

A famous name on a summer program does not automatically strengthen an application. Admissions officers know which families had access to which

opportunities. What they care about is what came out of it: what did the student make, discover or lead because they were there? Many students build more in a self-directed summer, with a mentor and a goal, than in a costly program with a brand name. That doesn't mean selective programs aren't worthwhile; the competitive, low-cost or free ones can be excellent. It means every summer choice should answer one question: what will exist in August that doesn't exist now?

JOBS COUNT

A summer job, especially one with real responsibility, belongs on the activities list. So do family responsibilities like caring for siblings. Colleges value students who work, and a job often teaches more about responsibility and people than a program does.

PRO TIP End every summer with one named result and one new line for the activities list (O-14). If you can't name it, plan the next summer differently.

Majors and Their Depth Charts

What each kind of applicant pool tends to expect, and how to stand out within it.

Colleges read applicants in context, including the context of what they want to study. An activity that stands out for one major can be ordinary for another. Here is what readers in common fields often look for, and how a student can add something only they would bring. These are patterns, not checklists; the strongest applicants build evidence the pool expects and then add a project that is unmistakably theirs (O-15).

PRE-MEDICINE AND HEALTH SCIENCES

Rigorous science and math, sustained exposure to patients (hospital or clinic volunteering, caregiving, emergency medical training where available), research or a lab skill, and service to people who need it. Readers look for a sincere, tested reason for medicine, not just admiration for doctors. Standing out: a specific question you want to answer, or a community health problem you've worked on with measurable results.

ENGINEERING

Strong math through the most advanced level available, physics and chemistry, and things you have built: robots, devices, software, competition projects, with what they did and who used them. Standing out: a build that solved a real problem for real people, and evidence of teamwork under constraints.

COMPUTER SCIENCE

Advanced math, programming beyond class, projects others use (apps, tools, open-source contributions), competitions and, increasingly, thoughtful work on how technology affects people. Because the pool is crowded, readers look for direction: what kind of problems do you want to

solve with code? Standing out: a project with users and numbers, or computing applied to another field you love.

BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

Strong math, economics if available, and real results with real numbers: a business, a fundraiser, a job with responsibility, an investment club with a documented strategy. Standing out: a venture or initiative that created value for others, with revenue, users or impact to show for it, and honest lessons from what didn't work.

LAW, POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Writing, argument and civic engagement: debate, mock trial, Model UN or Model Congress, published writing, and work on a real issue in your community with a measurable change. Standing out: an issue you've pursued over years, from research to advocacy to results.

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Reading and writing far beyond assignments, original research or long-form writing, languages, and intellectual curiosity readers can see on the page. Standing out: a sustained independent project, such as an oral history, a published essay or a research paper, that shows how you think.

LIFE AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

Lab or field research, science competitions, and projects that measure something in the real world. Standing out: data you collected yourself, and what you did with it.

Majors and Their Depth Charts (continued)

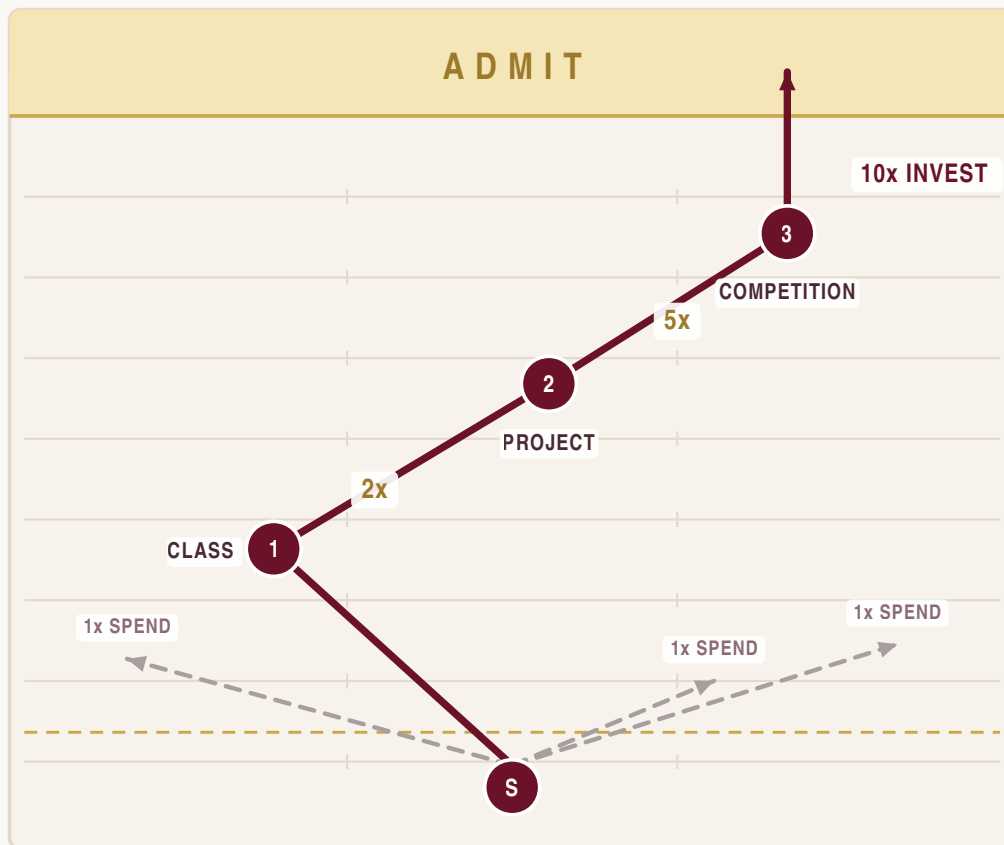
THE ARTS

A portfolio or audition showing growth and a personal voice, plus evidence of discipline: practice, performance, exhibitions, commissions or teaching. Standing out: work that connects your art to something larger, such as a community, a cause or another field.

PRO TIP Whatever the major, readers want to know why. A clear, specific reason, backed by evidence of how you've spent your time, matters more than the major itself.

10X Route

Invest time. Don't spend it.



FORMATION Combo route: every stop sets up the next.

SCOREBOARD

Every activity on the final list connects to at least one other.

FILM Invest Your Time. Don't Spend It.

SITUATION

Grades 7–11. The student is busy everywhere and excellent nowhere.

THE PLAY

- 1 Audit the week: every recurring commitment and its hours.
- 2 Score each hour. 1x stands alone; 2x and up feeds something else.
- 3 Re-route hours toward commitments that connect: a class that feeds a project that feeds a competition that earns a recommendation.
- 4 Ask the 10X question every term: how can this one hour pay off two, three, five, even ten times?

COACHING POINTS

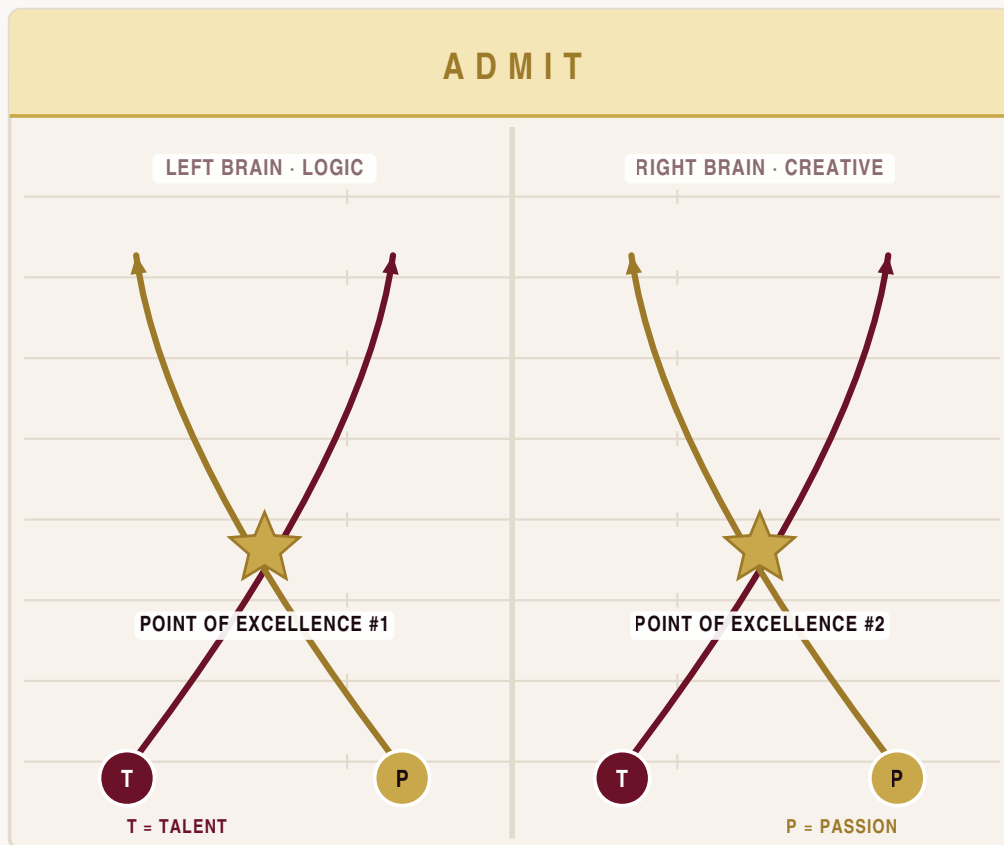
Time is the one resource that never comes back. Elite schools look for students who are good at many things and unquestionably excellent at a few. Effort is rarely the problem. Direction is.

Double Threat

Find the intersection. Then double down.

0-2

PLAY CALL



FORMATION Mesh concept: talent and passion cross at a point of excellence.

SCOREBOARD

Two named points of excellence, each with a measurable level.

SITUATION

The student is well-rounded, but has no point of excellence. At the top, well-rounded no longer wins.

THE PLAY

- 1 Map talent (what the student is best at) and passion (what they would do for free).
- 2 Mark where the two overlap. That is a point of excellence.
- 3 Choose two, ideally one left-brain (logic, problem-solving) and one right-brain (creative, artistic).
- 4 Invest disproportionately in both until each reaches a regional, national or international level.

COACHING POINTS

The most selective schools look for students who are national- or world-class at two or more things. One-dimensional, academics-only applicants are turned away every cycle. Show both sides of the brain.

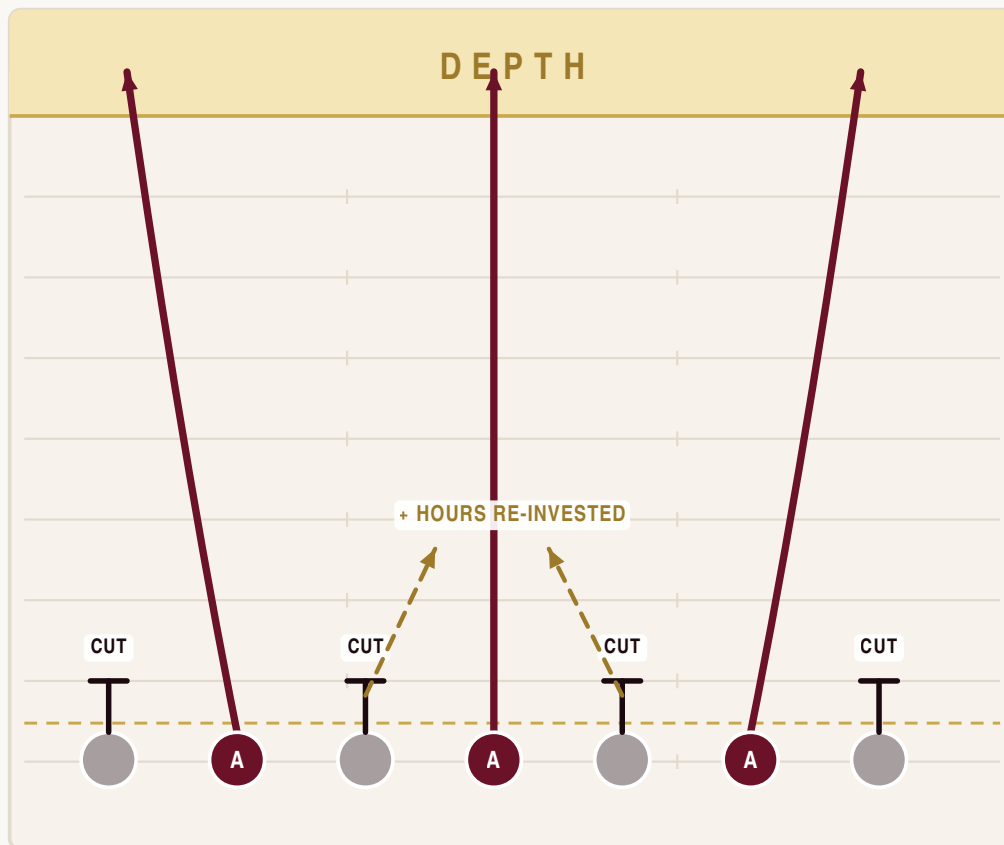
FILM Invest Your Time · The Game Nobody Explains

Cut Block

Fewer activities. Deeper roots.

0-3

PLAY CALL



FORMATION Cut four, send three deep with the hours they free up.

SCOREBOARD

Fewer activities, more hours in each, and a leadership or impact result in every one that remains.

FILM Busy Is Not Strategic

SITUATION

A sophomore or junior with ten or more activities, no depth, and early signs of burnout.

THE PLAY

- 1 List every activity with its weekly hours and one line on its impact.
- 2 Cut the ones that don't serve the theme, don't grow, or exist only for the résumé. Start with three.
- 3 Re-invest the freed hours in the two or three activities that can reach real depth or leadership.
- 4 Default to "no" on new commitments for one full term.

COACHING POINTS

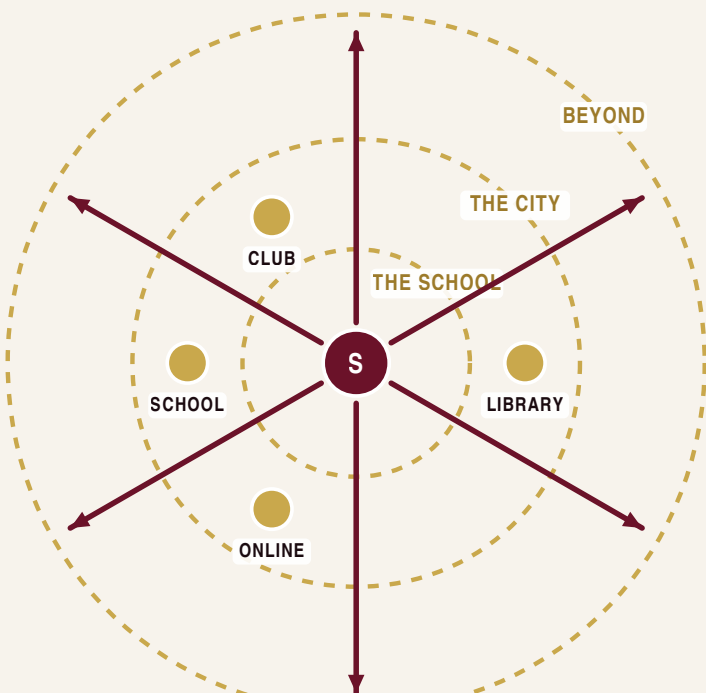
Busy is not strategic. Stacking activities creates noise; depth creates signal. Admissions officers choose between good and good, and they remember the student who went deep.

Ripple Route

Start a project that outgrows the student.

0-4

PLAY CALL



PARTNERS (GOLD) CARRY THE PROJECT TO PEOPLE THEY ALREADY REACH

FORMATION Concentric rings: the school, the city, beyond.

SCOREBOARD

Reach beyond the student's own school, with the numbers in the activity description.

FILM The Build Years

SITUATION

Grades 9–11. The profile is strong on paper, but nothing shows impact beyond the student.

THE PLAY

- 1 Start from a point of excellence and a real problem the student has seen up close.
- 2 Ship a small version within 30 days: a workshop, an app, a tutoring circle, a guide.
- 3 Grow in rings, from the student's own school to the city and beyond, through partners who already gather the people it serves: schools, clubs, libraries, online communities.
- 4 Measure everything: people reached, hours delivered, dollars raised, results.

COACHING POINTS

A project that reaches well beyond the student is the strongest proof of initiative an application can carry, and it gives the essays, the activity list and the letters one story to tell. Start imperfect. Scale beats polish.

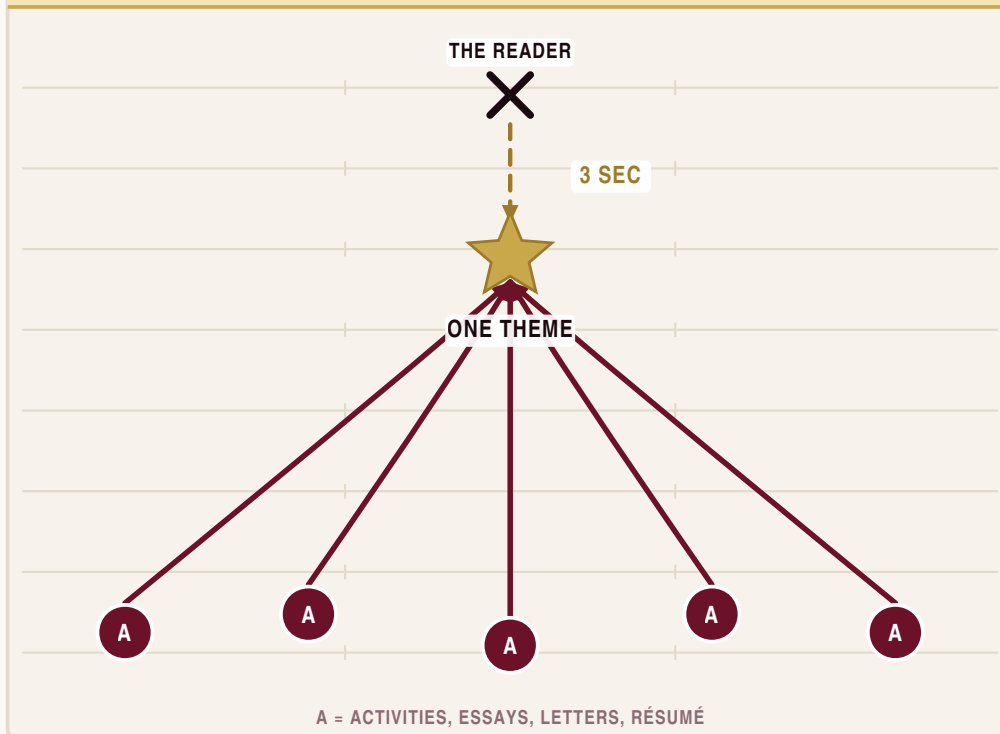
3-Second Read

One theme a reader gets in three seconds.

0-5

PLAY CALL

ADMIT



FORMATION *Every route converges on the theme.*

SCOREBOARD

Three different readers name the same theme after a three-second scan.

SITUATION

Junior year. The student has accomplishments but no through-line; the file reads like a list.

THE PLAY

- 1 Answer three questions: What problems do you keep coming back to? What have you built or led? Who are you becoming?
- 2 Write the theme in one sentence of twelve words or fewer.
- 3 Test it: show someone the activity list for three seconds. Can they say what the student is about?
- 4 Align everything to it: essays, activity order, recommender talking points, résumé.

COACHING POINTS

A theme works like a team's identity. Readers move fast; they remember a student who is clearly about something, not a student who did a lot.

FILM Junior Year • The Personal Statement

Four Quarters

Every year of high school has one job.

O-10

PLAY CALL

ADMIT

Q4

GRADE 12 · PACKAGE

Q3

GRADE 11 · PROVE

Q2

GRADE 10 · BUILD

Q1

GRADE 9 · EXPLORE

S

FORMATION One drive in four quarters: explore, build, prove, package.

SCOREBOARD

A one-page plan for the current year, with that year's one job written at the top.

FILM The Build Years · Junior Year

SITUATION

Any family asking, "What should my student be doing this year?"

THE PLAY

- 1 Grade 9, explore: strong grades from day one; try three or four directions and log what pulls.
- 2 Grade 10, build: commit to two points of excellence (O-2) and launch the project (O-4).
- 3 Grade 11, prove: results, rigor, scores finished (O-17), recommenders asked (ST-3), theme locked (O-5).
- 4 Grade 12, package: Special Teams runs the application; the Money Downs pay for it.

COACHING POINTS

The cheapest year to change direction is the one you're in. Sophomore year is the most underrated: the last year a student can change trajectory comfortably, and the year most families let drift.

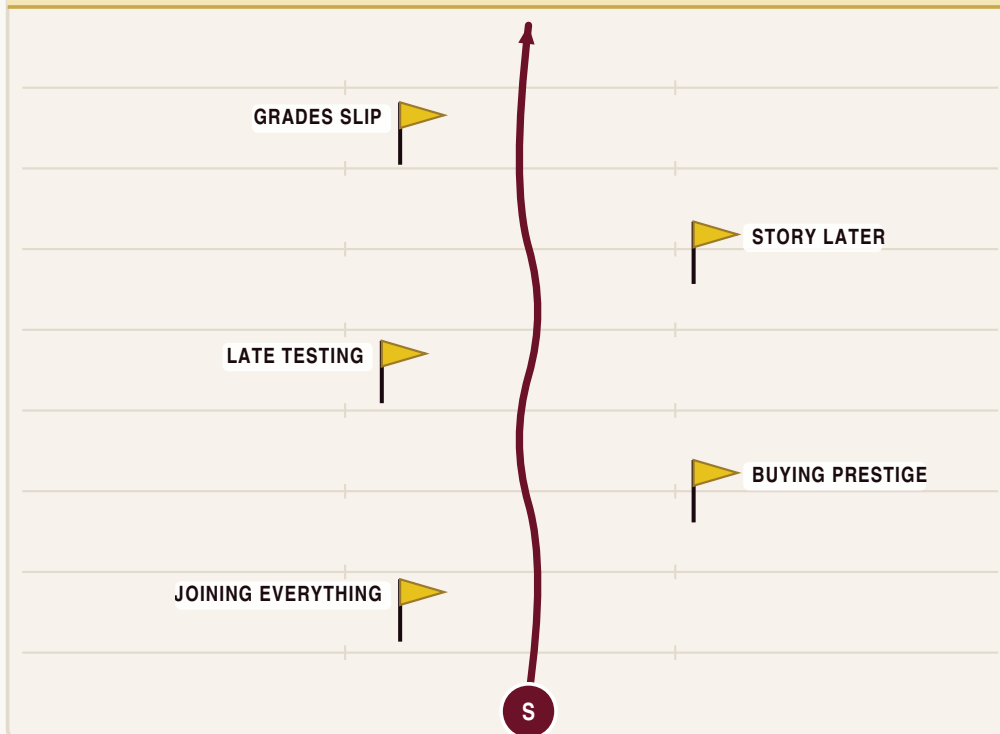
Penalty Flags

Know what not to do.

0-11

PLAY CALL

CLEAN SEASON



FORMATION Five flags that cost yards before the snap.

SCOREBOARD

Zero open flags at every Training Camp (O-6).

SITUATION

A freshman or sophomore with energy, good intentions and no filter.

THE PLAY

- 1 Joining everything. Every new yes replaces something (O-3).
- 2 Buying prestige. No paid program without a named outcome (O-14).
- 3 Pushing testing into junior spring (O-17).
- 4 "We'll figure out the story later." Start the theme log now (O-5).
- 5 Trading grades for activities. The GPA is the gateway.

COACHING POINTS

Most early mistakes are invisible until junior year, when they become expensive to fix. A clean season with no flags beats a spectacular one with five.

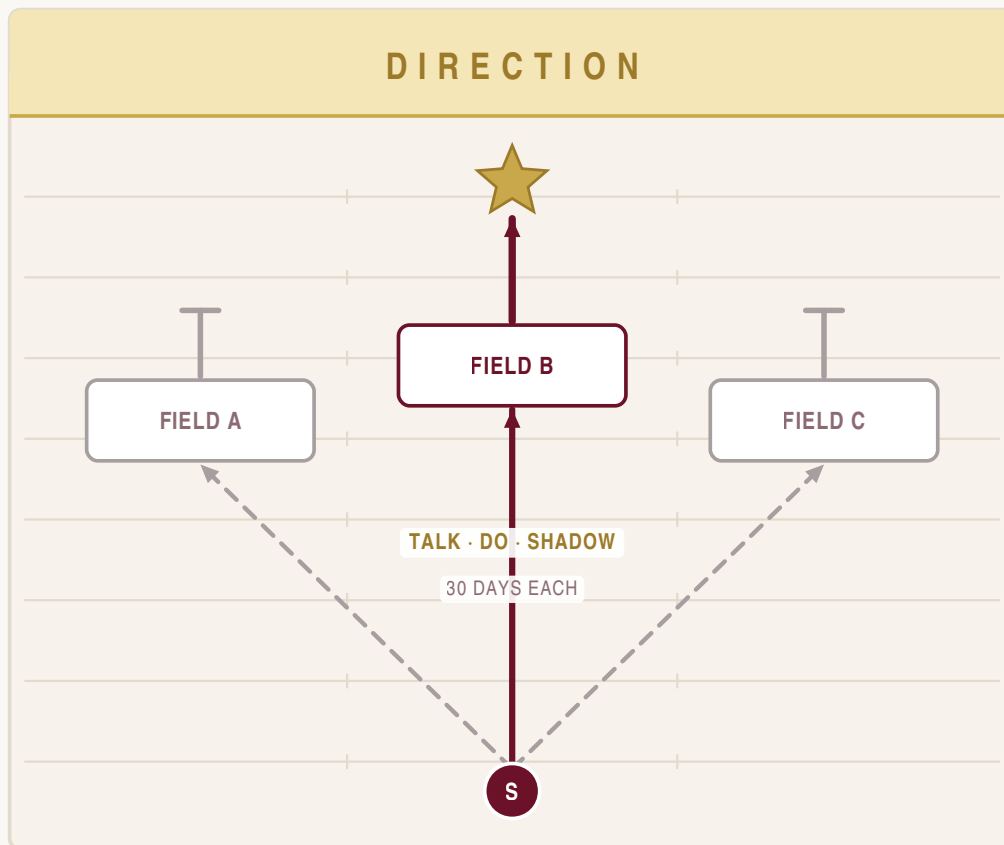
FILM The Build Years

Tryouts

Undecided is fine. Undirected isn't.

0-12

PLAY CALL



FORMATION Test three positions. Keep the one that fits.

SCOREBOARD

Three tests run in 90 days and a one-sentence direction.

SITUATION

A sophomore or junior unsure of a major or career who still needs a clear story.

THE PLAY

- 1 Name three candidate fields from what the student already reads, watches and does for free.
- 2 Test each one in 30 days: one conversation with a professional, one hands-on project or course, one shadow or volunteer shift.
- 3 Score each on interest, ability and access. Which one kept going without being asked?
- 4 Commit to one direction for the year, in one sentence the student can defend.

COACHING POINTS

Nobody expects a 16-year-old to know their career. Readers do expect a direction and a reason for it. Curiosity backed by action reads as maturity; a list of maybes reads as drift.

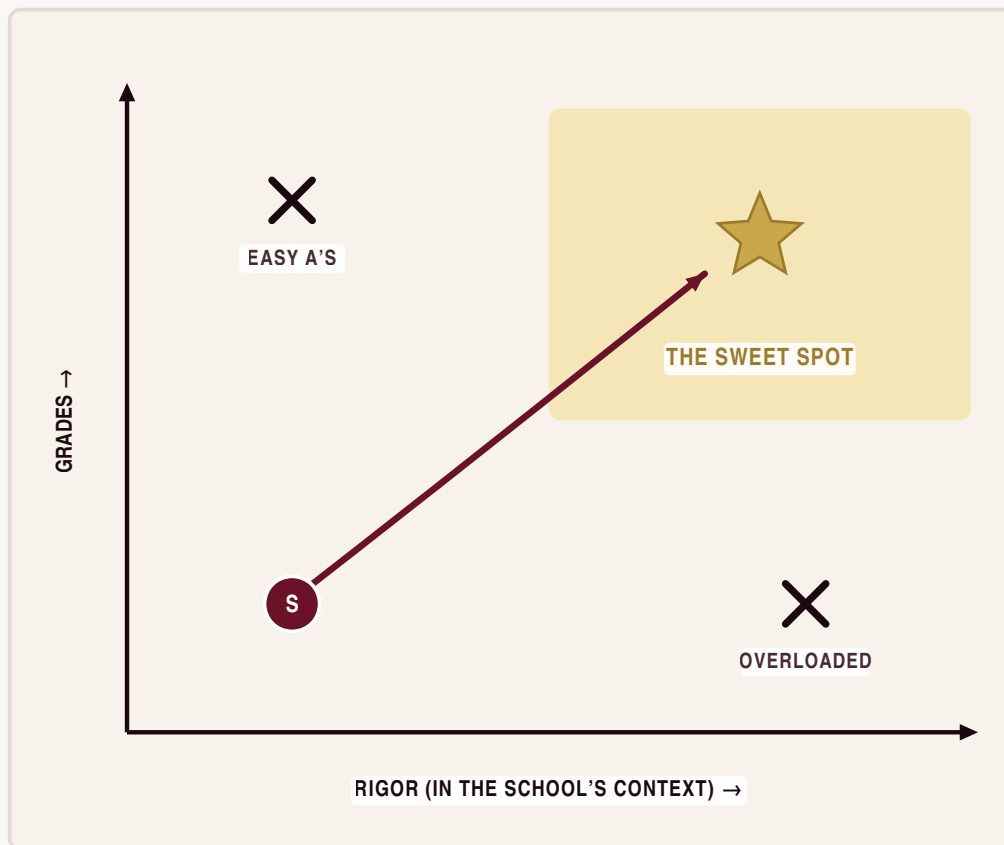
FILM Majors and Their Depth Charts

Strength of Schedule

Rigor in context, not rigor at any cost.

0-13

PLAY CALL



FORMATION *Play the toughest schedule you can win.*

SCOREBOARD

A four-year course plan, reviewed every spring.

SITUATION

Every course-selection season, and families who fear a competitive high school will hurt the student.

THE PLAY

- 1 Read the school profile. Rigor is judged against what this school offers, not every school.
- 2 Take the hardest courses the student can earn strong grades in, starting with the core subjects and the theme's subjects.
- 3 Don't trade a strong grade for one more advanced course that adds nothing to the story.
- 4 At a competitive school, stand out through the theme and the project, not by out-ranking classmates course by course.

COACHING POINTS

Readers compare students with the opportunities in front of them, and they read rigor and grades together. A school full of strong peers is an advantage only if the student uses it.

FILM The Build Years • The Floor and the Table

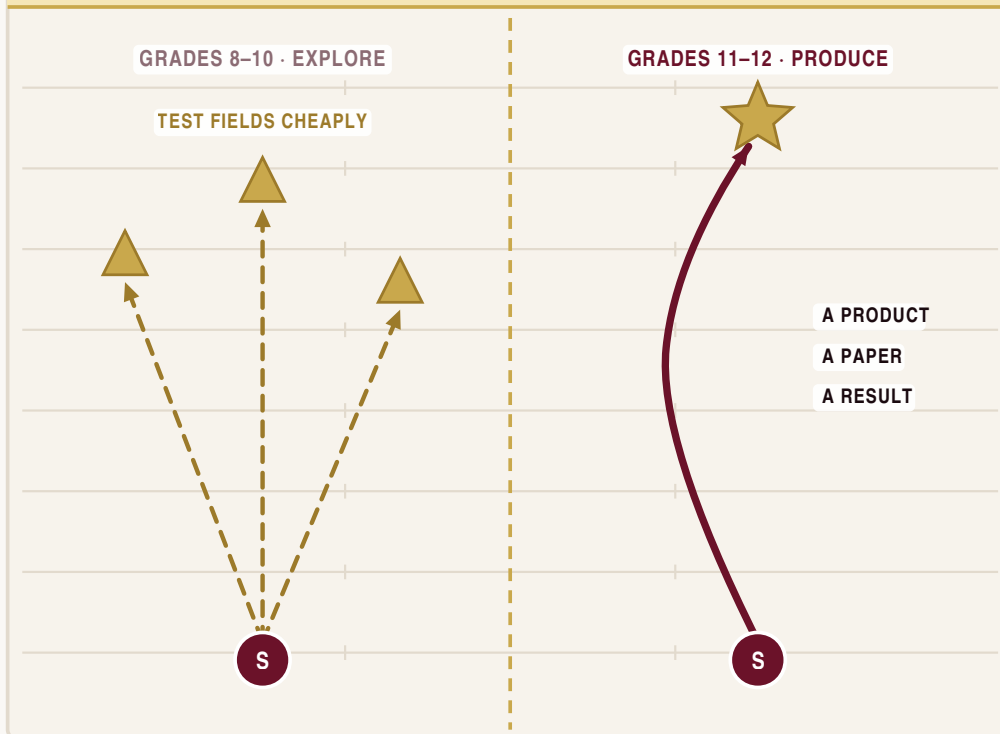
Summer League

Plan the outcome. Then pick the program.

0-14

PLAY CALL

A RESULT BY AUGUST



FORMATION Two lanes: explore early, produce later.

SCOREBOARD

Every summer ends with one named result and one new line for the activity list.

FILM Summers That Count

SITUATION

Every spring, when families start shopping for summer programs.

THE PLAY

- 1 Start with the outcome: what should exist by August that doesn't exist now? A product, a paper, a result or a skill.
- 2 Grades 8-10: exploring is fine. Test fields (O-12) cheaply, with real hands-on work.
- 3 Rising juniors and seniors: produce. Research, a job, growing the project, or finishing testing.
- 4 Judge every paid program by one question: what will the student produce because of it?

COACHING POINTS

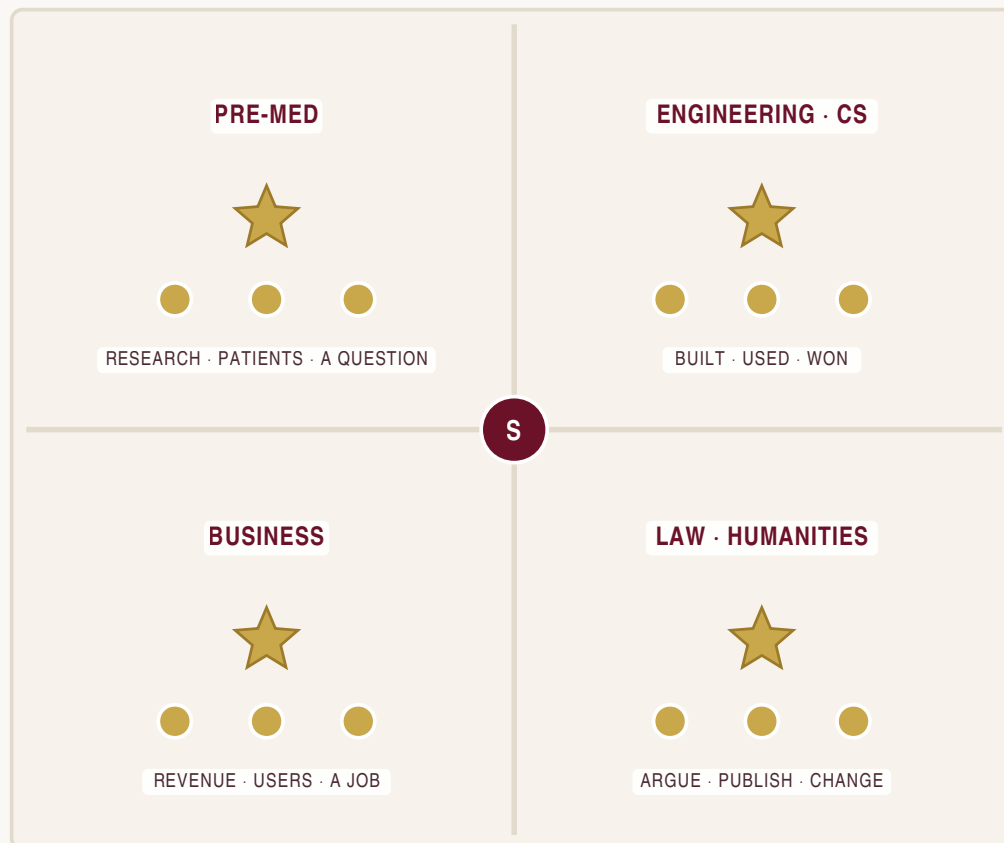
A famous name doesn't strengthen an application by itself; readers know who had access. They care what came out of it. Many students build more in a self-directed summer than in a costly program.

Position Groups

Every major has its own depth chart.

0-15

PLAY CALL



FORMATION Same field, different assignments by position.

SCOREBOARD

Each of the student's top three activities maps to the major's depth chart.

SITUATION

Grades 9–11, once a direction is chosen (O-12).

THE PLAY

- 1 Pre-med: research or a lab skill, sustained patient-facing service, and a question the student wants answered.
- 2 Engineering and CS: things built and used by others, competition results, and math beyond the standard track.
- 3 Business: real results with real numbers: revenue, users, money raised, a job.
- 4 Law and the humanities: argument and writing in public, and civic work that changed something measurable.

COACHING POINTS

Each major is read against its own applicant pool, so what stands out for one is ordinary for another. Build the evidence that pool expects, then add the project only this student would do.

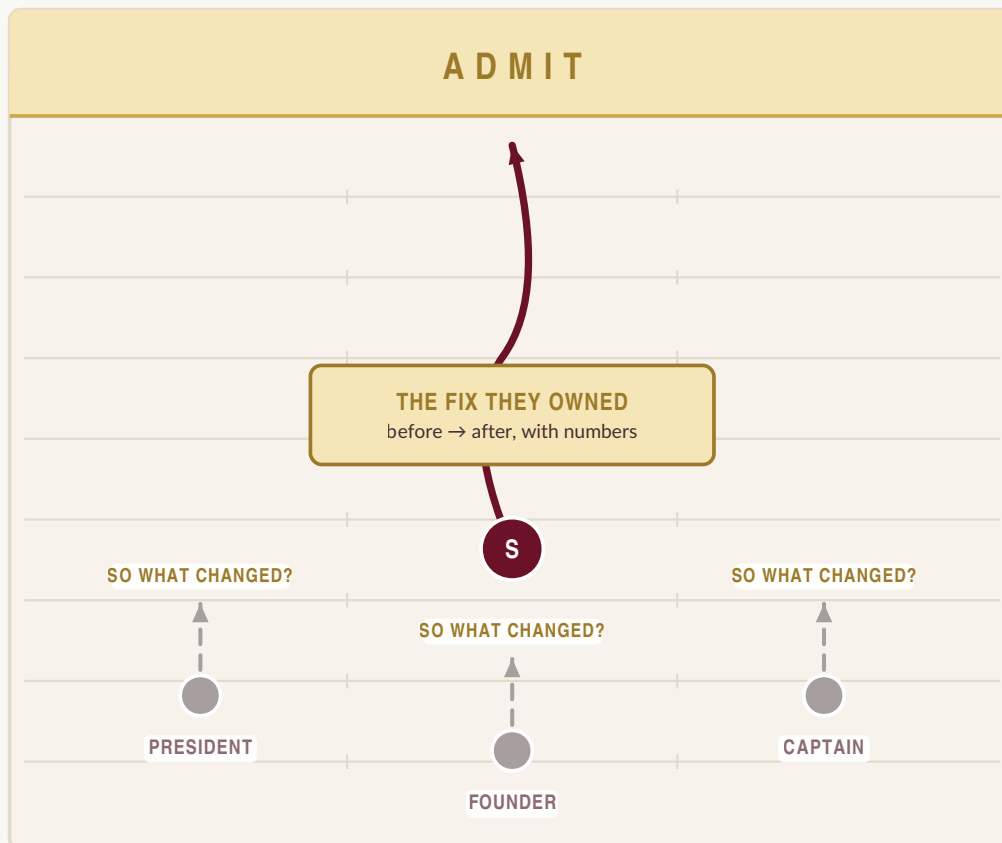
FILM Majors and Their Depth Charts

Captain's Armband

Leadership is what changed, not what you were called.

0-16

PLAY CALL



FORMATION *The captain makes the team better, with or without the patch.*

SCOREBOARD

Every leadership line on the activity list names a change and a number.

FILM Activities

SITUATION

Grades 9–11. The list is full of titles (president, founder, captain) with little to show under them.

THE PLAY

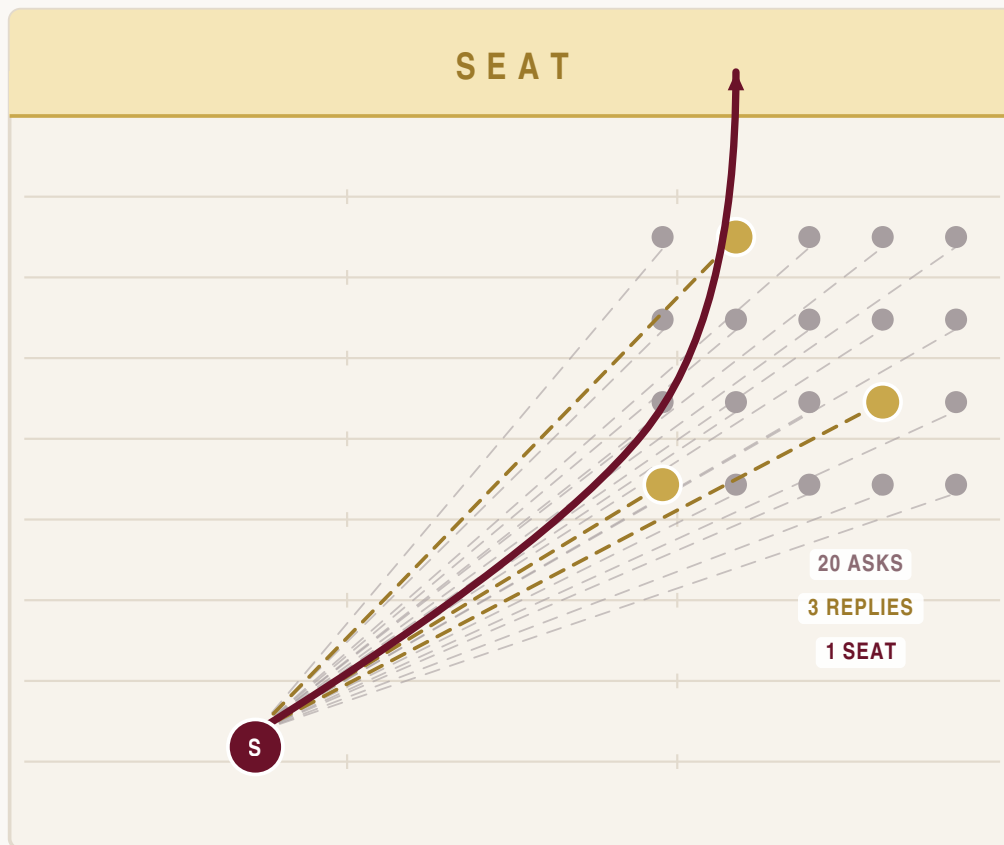
- 1 For every title, write one sentence: what is different because the student held it?
- 2 No answer? Pick one problem the group actually has and own the fix: a system, a process, a new member pipeline.
- 3 Measure it before and after: members, money, hours saved, results.
- 4 Lead without a title where it counts: the student who quietly solves problems is the one teachers write about.

COACHING POINTS

Readers can tell when leadership is just a title. One of the strongest leadership profiles can carry no formal titles at all, because what readers value is responsibility for outcomes.

The Walk-On

Earn the seat. Don't buy it.



FORMATION Twenty asks, three replies, one seat.

SCOREBOARD

One active research or work role by the end of the term, with a supervisor who can write a letter.

FILM Summers That Count

SITUATION

The student missed the summer program window, or the prestigious programs said no.

THE PLAY

- 1 Pick 20 targets tied to the theme: professors, labs, local companies, nonprofits.
- 2 Read their work. Write a short, specific email: who you are, what you read, what you can do, one concrete ask.
- 3 Follow up once after a week. Plan on two or three replies for every twenty.
- 4 Say yes to the small first task, deliver early, then ask for more.

COACHING POINTS

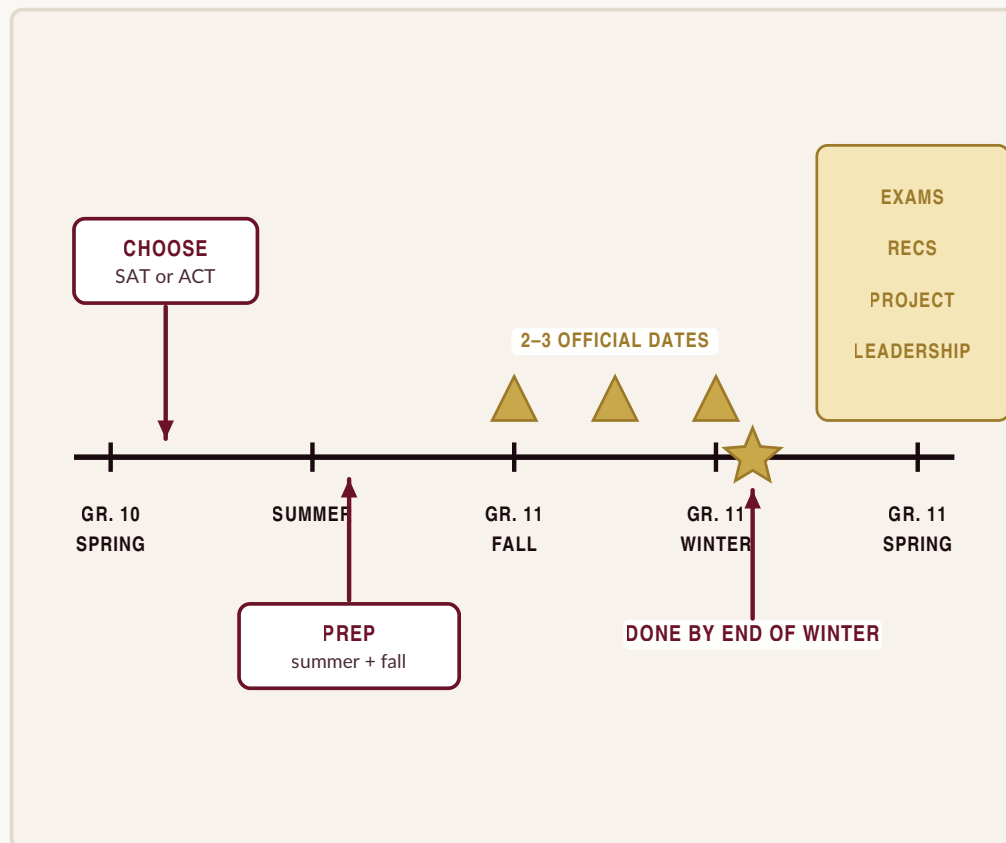
A program you pay for often helps less than a seat you earned. Admissions officers value what a student created and contributed over where they were accepted.

Clock Management

Bank the score before the fourth quarter.

0-17

PLAY CALL



FORMATION Finish testing early; spend junior spring on what sets the student apart.

SCOREBOARD

A final score at or above the list's 75th percentile before junior spring, or a deliberate choice not to send.

FILM The Floor and the Table • The SAT Playbook • The ACT Playbook

SITUATION

Grades 10–11, before the testing calendar fills up.

THE PLAY

- 1 Choose the test after one official practice SAT and one official practice ACT.
- 2 Prep in the summer before grade 11 or that fall, when the schedule has room.
- 3 Book two or three official dates, and plan around superscoring where colleges allow it.
- 4 Aim to finish by the end of junior winter, leaving spring for exams, recommenders and the project.

COACHING POINTS

Test-optional doesn't mean test-irrelevant. At selective schools a strong score still removes doubt, and several now require scores again. Testing pushed into junior spring collides with exams, finals and leadership.

Training Camp

Four calls before the season starts.

0-6

PLAY CALL



FORMATION Cone drill: four calls, in order, before the first bell.

SCOREBOARD

Four calls written down, with dates, before school starts.

SITUATION

Every August, grades 9–11.

THE PLAY

- 1 Courses: the most rigorous load the student can excel in, aligned to the theme.
- 2 Roster: the two or three activities that get the most hours, and the one that sits on the bench this year.
- 3 Test plan: which test, which date, how many prep hours a week.
- 4 Summer target: the one program, job, research role or project that comes next.

COACHING POINTS

Most families make these calls mid-season, under pressure. Deciding before school starts turns a reactive year into a planned one. Summer is the most mis-planned stretch of high school.

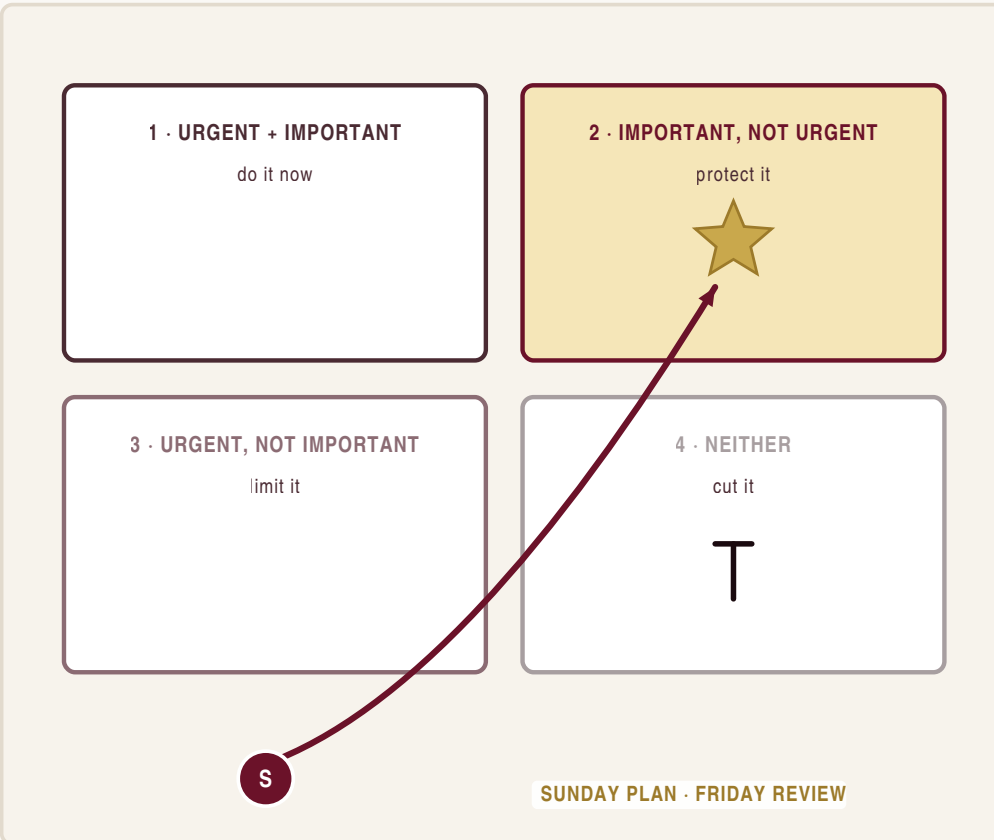
FILM The Build Years

Weekly Game Plan

Plan the week before the week plans the student.

0-18

PLAY CALL



FORMATION Big rocks first. Then everything else.

SCOREBOARD

Four weeks in a row of Sunday plans and Friday reviews.

FILM Invest Your Time. Don't Spend It.

SITUATION

A student who is busy, behind or burning out, and every student starting a new term.

THE PLAY

- 1 Sunday, 20 minutes: list every commitment and deadline for the week.
- 2 Sort them into four boxes: urgent and important, important but not urgent, urgent but not important, neither. Protect box two; shrink box four.
- 3 Put the important work in the student's best hours, and plan the after-school block hour by hour.
- 4 Friday, 10 minutes: what got done, what didn't, and one change for next week.

COACHING POINTS

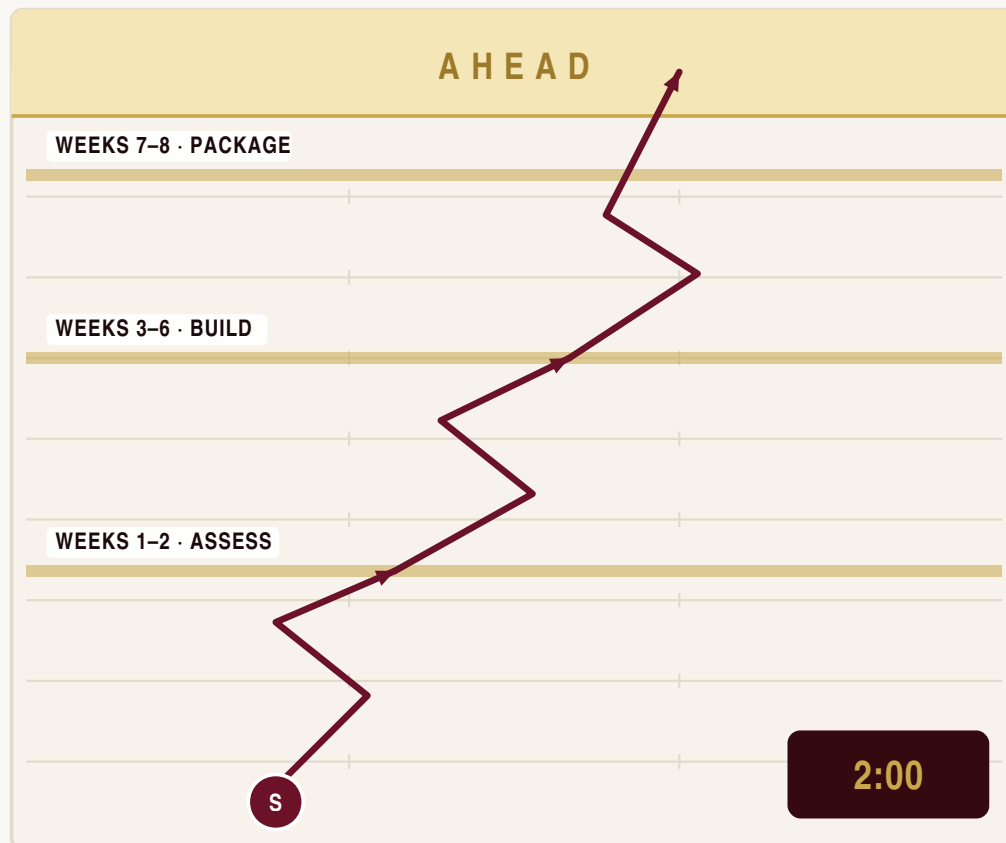
Burnout comes from misalignment more than hard work. Students who manage energy, not just hours, do their best work when they're sharp and stop spending their best hours on low-value tasks.

Two-Minute Drill

Behind? Eight weeks to catch up, one job at a time.

0-7

PLAY CALL



FORMATION *Three drives in eight weeks, each with one job.*

SCOREBOARD

By week 8: a reworked activity list, one new impact line, a test date and a drafted theme.

FILM The Build Years

SITUATION

A junior or rising senior who started late, or any family that feels behind.

THE PLAY

- 1 Weeks 1–2, assess: gateway numbers against target schools, an activity audit (O-3), a theme draft (O-5).
- 2 Weeks 3–6, build: one high-leverage project or role (O-4 or O-8) and a test plan.
- 3 Weeks 7–8, package: activity descriptions with numbers, recommender asks, essay brainstorm (ST-4).
- 4 Protect sleep and one rest day a week. Burnout costs more than it buys.

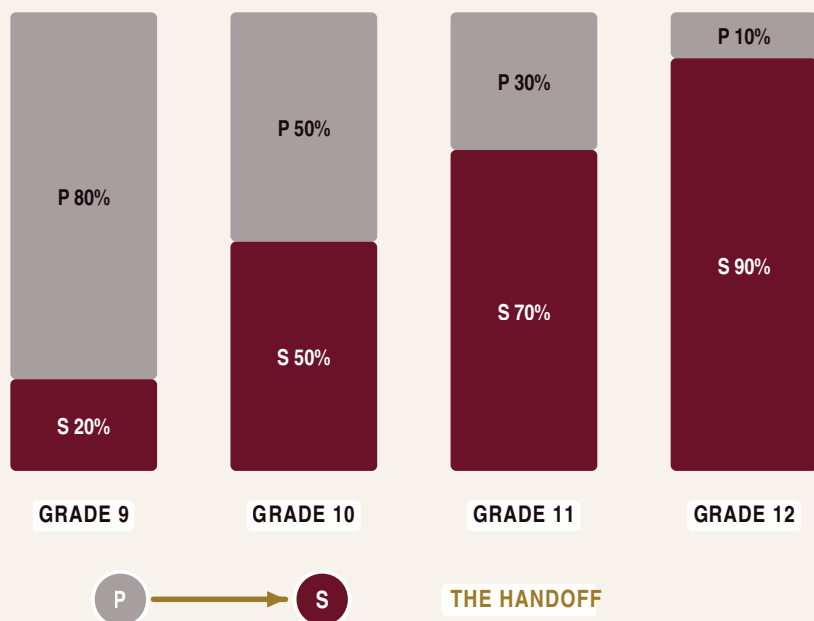
COACHING POINTS

Starting late is a constraint, not a verdict. Fast is fine; scattered is fatal. The drill works because each phase does one job.

The Handoff

Parents start the drive. Students finish it.

STUDENT-LED



FORMATION Ownership moves from parent to student, one grade at a time.

SCOREBOARD

By grade 11, the student sends every email and keeps every deadline.

FILM For Parents

SITUATION

The parent is running the process, and the student is a passenger.

THE PLAY

- Grade 9: parent-led, with the student in every meeting.
- Grade 10: shared. The student owns the calendar and the emails.
- Grade 11: student-led. The parent reviews once a week.
- Grade 12: the student owns it. The parent owns support, money and logistics.

COACHING POINTS

Ownership shows. Students who run their own process write sharper essays, ask better recommenders and arrive at college ready. Stepping back is not stepping away: the weekly check-in stays.

The Four-Year Map

One page per student, revised every spring (O-10, O-13).

Write each year's one job at the top of its row, then the courses, the activities you'll keep and cut, the summer outcome and the test plan.

GRADE · THE JOB	COURSES (CORE + THEME)	KEEP · CUT	SUMMER OUTCOME	TESTING	POINT OF EXCELLENCE LEVEL

The Activity Long List

Everything since the summer after grade 8. Aim for twenty (Activities chapter).

ACTIVITY · ORGANIZATION	ROLE	GRADES	HRS/ WK	WKS/ YR	BEST NUMBER (IMPACT)	TYPE	TOP 10?

The Grades 9–11 Calendar

The rhythm of the build years, month by month.

WHEN	EVERY YEAR, GRADES 9–11
August	Training Camp: four calls before school starts (O-6) · update the Four-Year Map (T-1)
September	Commit to the season’s activities; cut what doesn’t serve the direction (O-3) · start the Weekly Game Plan (O-18)
October–November	Grades first · grade 10–11: PSAT or practice tests; plan test prep (O-17) · keep the activity long list current (T-2)
December	Midyear check: grades, project numbers, summer ideas · apply for competitive summer programs and research roles (O-8, O-14)
January–February	Course selection for next year (O-13) · grade 11: finish testing if possible · summer plan decided (T-14)
March–April	Grade 11: build the long college list and visit (ST-1, ST-12) · ask recommenders (ST-3)
May	AP and IB exams · final push on grades · update the theme (O-5, T-15)
June–July	Produce something (O-14) · grade 11 summer: the personal statement and the Draft Board (ST-11, ST-4)

The Weekly Game Plan

Sunday plan, Friday review (O-18).

SUNDAY · 20 MINUTES

List every commitment and deadline for the week, then sort them.

1 · URGENT + IMPORTANT	2 · IMPORTANT, NOT URGENT
3 · URGENT, NOT IMPORTANT	4 · NEITHER

Protect box 2. Put it in your best hours. Shrink box 4.

My best hours this week

After-school plan, hour by hour

Friday · what got done

Friday · what didn't, and why

One change for next week

The Summer Planner

Plan the outcome first, then the program (O-14).

What will exist by August that doesn't exist now?

Explore or produce this summer? Why?

Option 1 · what I'd produce, cost, dates

Option 2 · what I'd produce, cost, dates

Option 3 · what I'd produce, cost, dates

Choice and first three steps

Who will hold me accountable?

The one new line for my activities list

The number I'll report in August

The Theme Builder

One sentence a reader gets in three seconds (O-5).

What problems do I keep coming back to?

What have I built or led?

Who am I becoming?

My theme, in twelve words or fewer

Three-second test · reader 1 said

Three-second test · reader 2 said

Three-second test · reader 3 said

Essays that point to it

Activities to move up the list

Talking points for recommenders

PART III

The List and the Early Plan

A balanced list, a smart early strategy, and a calendar that finishes thirty days early.

Options Are Leverage



JOSEF AIDEN DURAND
HARVARD COLLEGE '14
FOUNDER, VERITAS HALL

Every family wants the dream school. I want that for you too. But the most important word in April isn't "dream." It's "options."

A balanced list does three things. It plays the odds, so that a strong student finishes with real choices. It protects against the randomness of selective admissions, where wonderful students are turned away every year for reasons that have nothing to do with them. And it creates leverage: similarly ranked admissions are what you'll use to appeal for more aid.

The classic mistake is the slow slide into a reach-heavy list, one dream school at a time. The second is a list of schools the student would be miserable attending, chosen only because they're likely. Every school on your final list should be one you'd be glad to attend.

Build the list with the same discipline you'd use to build a team. Scout widely, cut honestly, and walk into the spring with a roster deep enough to win.

College List Strategy

Balanced, researched, and built to leave you with options in April.

When it comes to the college list, the most balanced choice is usually the smartest choice. Balance means casting a wide enough net that you finish the process with real options, because options are what you'll negotiate with in the spring (Part V).

HOW MANY SCHOOLS

I usually advise students to apply to at least 12 schools, and ideally 15, or even 18 if the family can manage the work and the fees. Those numbers aren't arbitrary: each divides evenly by three, which makes it easy to build the list in three equal tiers, 4/4/4, 5/5/5 or 6/6/6.

PRO TIP More applications don't fix a weak application. Fifteen strong, specific applications beat twenty-five generic ones every time. Choose the size you can execute well.

THE THREE TIERS

- **Reach:** roughly under a 30% chance of admission for you. Any college that admits fewer than about 15–20% of applicants is a reach for everyone, no matter how strong the student.
- **Target:** roughly a 30–60% chance. Your numbers sit in or above the middle of the admitted range.
- **Likely (often called safety):** roughly a 60% chance or better, where your numbers sit at or above the 75th percentile, and a school you would genuinely be happy to attend.

Equal weighting across the three tiers is what I call a **balanced list**. It plays the odds in your favor and sets up the aid negotiation later, because you'll likely be admitted to several similarly ranked schools in at least one tier.

OTHER SHAPES, AND WHEN THEY MAKE SENSE

- **Reach-heavy:** for example, half reaches and a quarter each of targets and likely schools. Some families choose this when they want expert help concentrated on the hardest applications and plan to handle the rest themselves.
- **Target-heavy:** more similarly ranked targets means more comparable offers to negotiate with in April, which can matter when cost is the deciding factor.
- **Likely-heavy:** only when there are real red flags on the file, such as a long stretch of low grades or very little rigor. Otherwise, don't overload this tier; you're already likely to be admitted.

THE BIG FIVE

Families weigh many factors, but five come up every time:

- **Brand name:** how widely the school is recognized, and the doors that recognition opens long after graduation. Rankings, such as U.S. News & World Report, are one rough signal; they are not the whole story.
- **Location:** internships, jobs, medical residency placement, recruiting, cost of living, distance from home and, yes, weather. Weather shouldn't decide anything, but it doesn't hurt.
- **Cost:** the full cost of attendance, not just tuition: housing, food, books, travel and, for study abroad, exchange rates, visas and living costs. Every college must post a net price calculator on its website; use it before you fall in love.

College List Strategy (continued)

- **Major:** rankings differ by program, and so do admission rates. Majors like computer science and engineering are often “impacted”: many colleges admit a smaller share of applicants to them than to the college as a whole. Make sure every school on your list offers your intended major at the level you want.
- **Size:** some students thrive on a sprawling campus with big lecture halls; others do their best work in small seminars. Look at where the student has been most successful so far: what class size, what school size, how much personal attention.

BUILD THE LONG LIST, THEN CUT

Start with a long list about twice the size of your final list: 24 schools for a final 12, 30 for 15, 36 for 18. Leave no stone unturned. Reverse-engineer it with your gateway numbers: compare your GPA and scores to each school’s admitted range (the Floor and the Table), and add the ones where you’d be competitive and excited to go.

For research, start with the official sources: each college’s own admissions and academics pages, its Common Data Set, and the federal College Scorecard, which lets you compare costs, graduation rates and earnings.

BigFuture from College Board and the U.S. News college search are useful for filtering. Student forums like Reddit can tell you what a place feels like, but treat them as color, never as facts.

Then cut to your final list. This is the moment to hold your discipline. If you chose a balanced list, don’t slide into what I call the classic reach regression: adding one more dream school at a time until you have a reach-heavy list by accident. We should absolutely apply to reach schools. But the list is about fit *and* about playing the odds.

FIT, DEFINED PROPERLY

Families often hear “fit” as “where my child will be happiest.” That matters. But from an admissions perspective, fit means alignment: does this student fit what the college is building, academically and socially, and will they add something? The strongest applications make that case school by school, which is exactly what the Cascade Method in the Essays chapter is for.

Think of a fisherman preparing a dinner party. You don’t drop a single line and hope; you cast a wide net so you have the best options when it’s time to cook. Cast wide, cast smart, and then make every application on the list as strong as you can make it.

Balanced Formation

Five deep at every level.

OPTIONS IN APRIL

REACH

UNDER 30%

1

2

3

4

5

TARGET

30–60%

1

2

3

4

5

SAFETY

ABOUT 60%+

1

2

3

4

5

LONG LIST · 2x



FORMATION *Three rows of five, built from a long list twice the size.*

SCOREBOARD

A 5/5/5 list (or 4/4/4, 6/6/6), with every school one the student would be glad to attend.

FILM College List Strategy

SITUATION

Spring of grade 11 through the fall of grade 12.

THE PLAY

- 1 Pick a list size divisible by three: 12, 15 or 18.
- 2 Build a long “wish list” twice that size using the Big Five: brand, location, cost, major, size.
- 3 Check gateway numbers: the student’s GPA and test scores against each school’s 75th percentile for admitted students. Numbers move a file from the floor to the table.
- 4 Cut to equal thirds: reach (under 30% chance), target (30–60%), safety (about 60% or more).

COACHING POINTS

Balance is strategy, not caution. Equal thirds leave choices in April, and choices are leverage when the aid offers arrive (M-2).

Campus Visits and Demonstrated Interest

Visit to scout, not to sightsee.

A campus visit is the best way to find out whether a place feels like home, and for early decision it's close to essential. But a visit only helps if you leave with information.

BEFORE YOU GO

Read the pages for your intended major and write three questions the website can't answer (ST-12). Register for the official information session and tour if the college offers them; many colleges note who registered.

WHILE YOU'RE THERE

Go beyond the tour. Sit in on a class if visitors are allowed. Eat in a dining hall. Talk to a current student in your field. Walk to the buildings where you'd actually spend your days. Notice the names of programs, places and people, because those details are what make a supplement essay specific.

THE QUESTIONS THAT MATTER

Could I see myself here on a hard day, not just a sunny one? Who would I become here? What would I add? Your gut is information. Write it down the same night in a one-page scouting report, before the details blur.

IF YOU CAN'T VISIT

Many families can't visit every school, and colleges know it. Attend virtual information sessions, join student panels, talk to alumni or current students, and read the student newspaper. Those are all legitimate ways to learn about a place.

DEMONSTRATED INTEREST

Some colleges consider demonstrated interest, meaning signs that a student is seriously considering them: visits, information sessions, interviews, opening their emails, applying early and writing specific supplements. Many of the most selective colleges say they don't track it. Check each college's Common Data Set (section C7 lists the factors it considers) and show genuine interest where it counts.

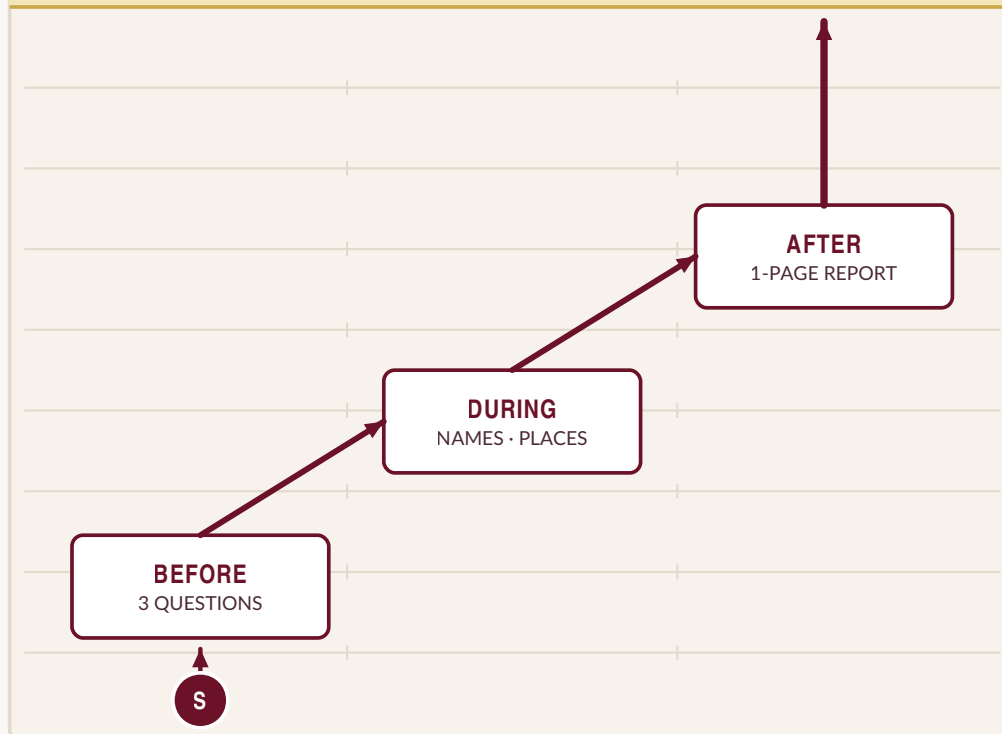
Road Game

Visit to scout, not to sightsee.

ST-12

PLAY CALL

“WHY US?” (ST-6)



FORMATION Scout the stadium, the team and the town.

SCOREBOARD

A scouting report for every school visited, filed within 24 hours.

FILM Campus Visits and Demonstrated Interest

SITUATION

College visits in grades 10–12, on campus or online.

THE PLAY

- 1 Before: read the pages for the student’s major and write three questions the website can’t answer.
- 2 During: sit in on a class or talk with a student in the major. Note programs, people and places by name.
- 3 Ask: could I see myself here on a hard day? Who would I become here? What would I add?
- 4 Same night: a one-page scouting report. It becomes the raw material for “Why us?” (ST-6).

COACHING POINTS

Fit is alignment, not comfort: does the student fit what the school is building, and does the school fit who the student is becoming? A visit with nothing written down by bedtime is a vacation.

The College List Matrix

Long list first, then cut to a balanced final list (ST-1).

COLLEGE	TIER	ADMIT RATE	GPA / SCORE (25th–75th)	MAJOR?	NET PRICE (CALCULATOR)	BIG FIVE NOTES	PLAN	DEADLINE

The Early Plan

Regular, early action, restrictive early action and early decision, and how to choose.

Once your list is final, decide how you'll apply to each school. Your early plan sets your deadlines, and your deadlines set the order in which you write supplements. Colleges offer different combinations of these options, and their rules change, so always read each college's policy on its own website.

Think of the options as a scale of demonstrated interest and commitment, from least to most.

REGULAR DECISION (RD)

Applying with everyone else, usually with a January deadline and a March or April answer. Colleges fill a meaningful share of many classes in the early rounds, so regular decision applicants often compete for the remaining seats in the largest pool. Many excellent students are admitted RD; just know what you're walking into.

EARLY ACTION (EA)

Non-binding and usually non-restrictive: you can apply early action to several schools and you don't have to commit if admitted. Deadlines are typically November 1 or 15, with answers in December or January. The admission advantage is usually modest, so don't count on EA to push an on-the-fence application over the line. Treat it as a strategic nudge: you get answers early, and an early yes can lighten your workload. If you're admitted early to your favorite school in a tier, you may not need to apply to the rest of that tier. (Still apply to a few comparably ranked schools if aid matters, because appeals require comparable offers.)

RESTRICTIVE OR SINGLE-CHOICE EARLY ACTION (REA/ SCEA)

Non-binding, but restrictive: you generally can't apply early to other private colleges, though many policies allow early applications to public universities or non-binding rolling programs. Only a handful of the most selective schools offer it, such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Stanford. Choose it only for a school you're relatively certain is your first choice, because you give up early applications elsewhere. That trade-off is the opportunity cost.

EARLY DECISION I AND II (ED)

Binding: you agree that if you're admitted, you will attend and withdraw your other applications. No option shows more commitment, and colleges often admit a noticeably higher share of their ED applicants. Part of that gap reflects recruited athletes and other special groups, but the commitment matters too. Early Decision I usually has a November deadline; Early Decision II, offered by many colleges, usually has a January deadline. If your ED I school says no or defers you, ED II gives you a second binding shot elsewhere.

Apply ED only to a school you are absolutely certain is your first choice, and visit first if you possibly can. Your gut on campus is one of the best indicators of whether a place could be home for four years.

PRO TIP Most early decision agreements let a student withdraw if the financial aid offer doesn't make attendance affordable. To protect that option, complete the FAFSA and, where required, the CSS Profile on time, and run the college's net price calculator before you apply. Read each college's ED agreement for its exact terms.

The Early Plan (continued)

ROLLING ADMISSIONS

Some colleges review applications as they arrive and decide on a rolling basis. Applying early in the window can help: fewer applications have arrived, readers have more time, and seats and scholarship money haven't been committed yet.

HOW TO SOLVE THE PUZZLE

Start with your most restrictive choice and build everything else around it. If you're applying REA to Stanford, you already know you can't apply early to other private colleges, so the rest of your plan falls into place around that given. If you're applying ED to one school, check whether its policy allows early action elsewhere; most do. If it does, apply early action to every

school on your list that offers it, because you get a small edge for little extra work: you'd write those applications anyway. Whatever remains goes regular decision.

THEN BUILD THE CALENDAR

With the list and the early plan set, build one calendar with every deadline: applications, financial aid forms, test score reports, interviews and scholarships. Then set your own deadline thirty days before each real one. That month is the **buffer zone**, and it exists for the week Murphy's Law shows up: the laptop that dies, the portal that crashes, the recommender who gets sick. The Red Zone Calendar (ST-14) shows you how to run it.

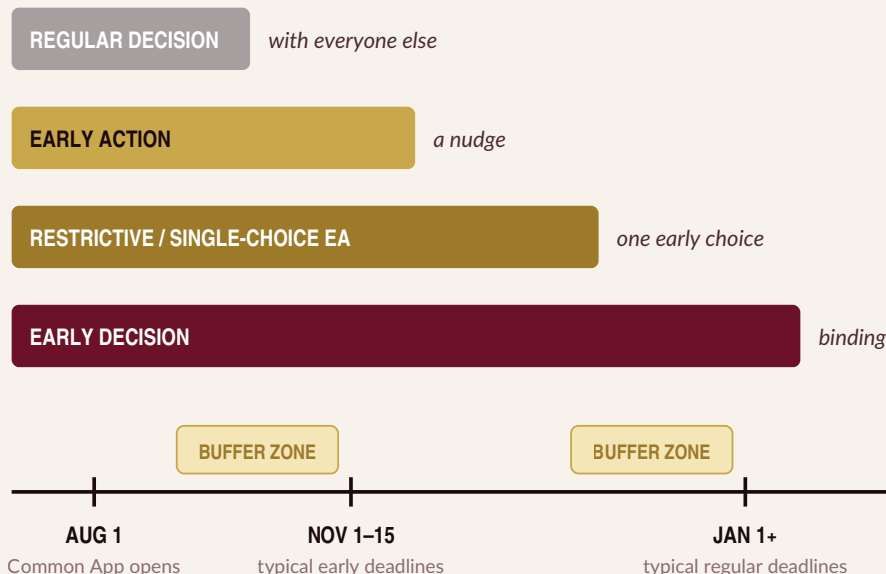
The Early Snap

Commit early where it counts.

ST-2

PLAY CALL

COMMITMENT SIGNAL



FORMATION *The early-plan ladder, and the buffer zone before every deadline.*

SCOREBOARD

The early plan locked by September 1; every application submitted 30+ days early.

FILM The Early Plan

SITUATION

Grade 12, August through November.

THE PLAY

- 1 Rank the options by the commitment they signal: Regular Decision, then Early Action, then Restrictive or Single-Choice Early Action, then Early Decision (binding).
- 2 Spend Early Decision or REA on the school where commitment moves the needle most, and only if the family can accept a binding offer.
- 3 Use Early Action across reach, target and safety. An early yes at the top of a range can clear the rest of that range's workload.
- 4 Keep comparable schools on the list anyway; they are your negotiating leverage (M-2).
- 5 Submit every application at least one month before its deadline.

COACHING POINTS

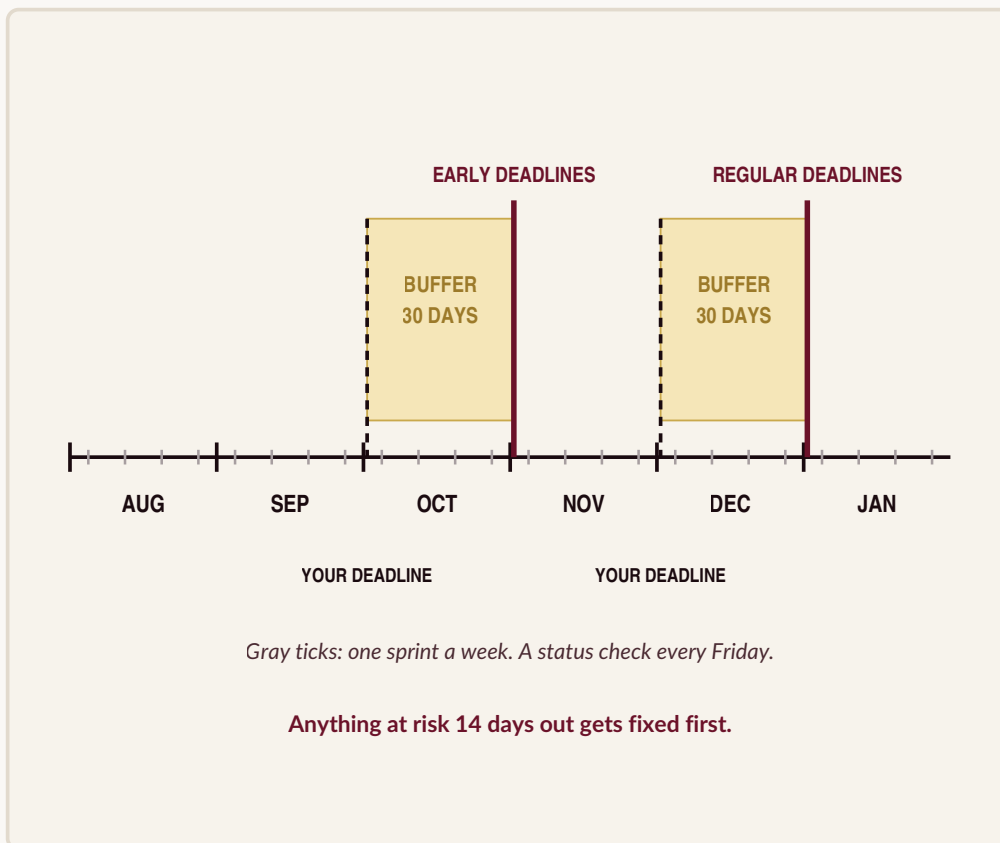
Early Action is a nudge. Early Decision is a commitment. Play chess, not checkers.

Red Zone Calendar

Every deadline, thirty days early.

ST-14

PLAY CALL



FORMATION Your deadline sits a month before theirs.

SCOREBOARD

Every application submitted by your own deadline.

FILM The Early Plan

SITUATION

From the day the list is locked until the last regular decision deadline.

THE PLAY

- 1 Build one master calendar: every application, aid form, test score, interview and scholarship deadline.
- 2 Set your own deadline 30 days before every real one.
- 3 Run one sprint a week, with a short list of goals for each.
- 4 Every Friday, check the status: done, next, at risk.
- 5 Anything at risk 14 days out gets fixed first, before anything new starts.

COACHING POINTS

The buffer zone exists for the week everything goes wrong. Murphy's Law doesn't check your calendar.

The Early Plan Planner

Start with the most restrictive choice; build everything around it (ST-2).

COLLEGE	OPTIONS OFFERED	MY PLAN	DEADLINE	MY DEADLINE (-30 DAYS)	AID FORMS DUE	NOTES (RESTRICTIONS)

The Senior-Year Calendar

Month by month, from summer to signing day (ST-14).

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
June–July	Draft Board ranked (ST-11) · personal statement drafted through BOPP (ST-4) · activity long list and descriptions (ST-7) · list near-final · recommenders confirmed and briefed (ST-3)
August 1	The Common App opens · data entry first, including majors (ST-8) · pull every supplement prompt into the Supplement Map (ST-10)
September	List locked · early plan set (ST-2) · Cascade research for early schools (ST-6) · personal statement green-lit (ST-9) · FAFSA opens on or before October 1
October	Early supplements green-lit · your own deadline 30 days before every early deadline (ST-14) · FAFSA and CSS Profile filed · interviews scheduled (ST-15)
November	Early applications submitted (typical deadlines November 1 and 15) · regular decision supplements in full swing · scholarship applications
December	Early results · deferrals answered (ST-16) · ED admits withdraw other applications · regular applications finished before winter break
January	Regular deadlines (often January 1–15) · mid-year grades matter · portals checked weekly
February–March	Interviews · updates where invited · scholarship deadlines · keep grades strong
April	Decisions and aid offers · compare net costs · appeals (M-2) · admitted-students days · waitlist replies
May 1	Commitment deadline at most colleges (M-3) · thank-you notes to recommenders · start the summer plan for college

PART IV

LEAD: The Application

Letters, Essays, Activities and Data entry: four pillars, one person.

Your Application Is a Movie Trailer



JOSEF AIDEN DURAND
HARVARD COLLEGE '14
FOUNDER, VERITAS HALL

A good trailer makes you believe a two-hour movie will be worth watching in two minutes. Your application has to do the same thing: in about ten minutes, a stranger should be able to picture you on their campus and want to see the whole film.

That's why every element matters. The activities list is the montage. The personal statement is the scene that makes you lean in. The supplements show why this particular theater. The letters are the reviews from critics who have seen you up close. And the data entry is the credits: unglamorous, essential and expected to be perfect.

Trailers are edited ruthlessly. Every cut has a reason, and nothing appears twice unless it's on purpose. Treat your application the same way. Ask of every line: what is this showing the reader that nothing else shows?

And remember who the star is. Not your achievements, not your school, not your counselor. You. Be unapologetically you, and the rest of the trailer will make sense.

The Four Pillars: LEAD

Letters, Essays, Activities, Data entry: four ways to show one person.

With the list and the early plan set, we can tackle the application itself. Every application rests on four pillars, and the first letters spell a word worth remembering: **LEAD**.

- **Letters of recommendation:** the pillar most outside your control, because someone else writes it and you usually waive your right to read it. That's exactly why it comes first: ask at the end of junior year or the very start of senior year, so your recommenders have time to do their best work.
- **Essays:** your chance to shine in your own voice. The ideal tone is “simple yet elegant,” unapologetically you and, where it comes naturally, playfully intellectual. The essays carry the most upside of any pillar.
- **Activities:** a curated montage of how you've spent your time. Actions speak louder than words, and time is finite, so how you spend it says a great deal about who you are. Start early: listing every activity and writing tight, data-rich descriptions takes longer than anyone expects.
- **Data entry:** everything else: personal, family, school, courses, honors, testing and the major field. It's the most independent pillar, best done with a parent's help, and it hides a few strategic decisions we'll cover in its chapter.

FOUR PERSPECTIVES ON ONE PERSON

Each pillar shows your strengths from a different angle. Letters give multiple third-party perspectives from adults who have watched you grow. The essays give your own perspective. The activities give the perspective of the numbers: what you actually did, and what changed because you did it. Data

entry fills in every other perspective, from family to finances. Together, the hope is that a reader can picture you succeeding on their campus, the way a two-minute trailer lets you picture a whole movie.

That's why the four pillars must agree. Strategize what goes where: which activities become evidence in which essays, which strengths your recommenders should speak to, which honors belong in the Education section. When the pillars support each other, every claim gets stronger.

WORK SMARTER ACROSS SCHOOLS

On a single platform like the Common App, the shared sections (profile, family, education, testing, activities and the personal statement) only need to be completed once. The college-specific questions and supplements are new for each school. And every time you move to a different platform, such as the University of California application, MIT's own application or ApplyTexas, you'll re-enter the four pillars in that platform's format.

PRO TIP Recycling supplement essays across schools is smart when prompts overlap, as long as you tailor every version. And always, always change the school's name.

IF IT FEELS OVERWHELMING

It's normal to feel overwhelmed by something big you've never done before. Some of the most courageous people in history admitted they were terrified while doing the very thing they're remembered for. They did it anyway. That's the key. When the whole application feels like too much, remember the four letters. All you have to do is LEAD.

The Common App, Section by Section

Where everything goes, and the traps in each section.

The Common App opens each year on August 1, and your account rolls over from year to year, so you can start before then. Its main sections, and what to watch in each:

PROFILE AND FAMILY

Personal information, citizenship and demographics; parents, guardians and siblings. Enter it accurately, with a parent's help. Questions about demographics are often optional; answer what you're comfortable sharing.

EDUCATION

Your high school, counselor, grades, class rank (if reported), courses and honors, community-based organizations that helped you, and future plans. Report your current courses exactly as they appear on your transcript. Use the five honors slots strategically (Data Entry chapter).

TESTING

Self-reported SAT, ACT, AP, IB and English proficiency scores. Policies differ by college: some require scores, some let you choose, some don't consider them. You can report scores on the Common App and still choose, college by college, whether to send official reports.

ACTIVITIES AND EXPERIENCES

Up to ten entries with 150-character descriptions; the position or leadership field is now optional. Order them on purpose (Activities chapter).

WRITING

The personal essay (250–650 words), the optional Additional Information section (300 words) and the optional Challenges and Circumstances question (250 words). Use the last two for context only (Data Entry chapter).

COURSES AND GRADES

Some colleges ask you to enter your full transcript, course by course. Do it carefully from your official transcript; mistakes cause delays.

MY COLLEGES

Each college's own questions, supplements and recommendation requirements, plus your FERPA release. Read every college's questions early: some essays only appear after you answer a question, such as your intended major. On the FERPA release, most students waive their right to see their letters; recommenders and colleges generally prefer it, because it signals the letters are candid.

RECOMMENDERS

Invite your counselor and teachers through the platform, only after they have agreed to write for you. Check that every invited recommender has submitted before your own deadline.

PRO TIP Before you submit to each college, preview the PDF the platform generates. Read every word as a reader would. That's where formatting surprises and leftover school names get caught.

Pillar 1: Letters of Recommendation

Choose for relationship, not rank. Then make their job easy.

Letters of recommendation give readers what you can't give yourself: credible, third-party perspectives on your strengths from adults who have watched you grow. A great letter speaks to who you are today, who you were when they met you, and how far you've come.

KNOW THE REQUIREMENTS FIRST

Check each college's requirements in the Common App's Recommenders and FERPA section and on its website. Some require one counselor letter and two teacher letters; some specify subjects (one STEM, one humanities); some allow an optional additional letter; a few want none. Make a simple grid, college by college.

GO FOR VARIATION

At every decision point, choose the more varied option. If a school requires two letters, consider one academic and one from outside the classroom where allowed. If it requires two teacher letters, consider one STEM and one humanities. Variation gives readers more angles on the same person. The main exception: if you're applying to a specialized program, such as an engineering-focused school, your letters should emphasize that field.

A teacher who also coached you, advised a club or watched you lead outside class is gold, because they can speak to more than one dimension.

WHO TO ASK

- **Relationship over rank.** A famous person who barely knows you writes a generic letter, and readers can tell. Choose people who know you well.
- **Recent and relevant.** At least one teacher should have taught you in junior year (or senior year, for fall classes) in an academic subject. A

freshman-year teacher usually can't speak to who you are now, unless they've stayed involved in your life since.

- **Who would light up?** Before you ask, ask yourself: whose face would light up if I asked? Those are usually the people who write the most glowing letters. If someone hesitates, thank them and move to the next name on your list.
- **Experienced writers.** Teachers who have taught for years at your school often have long relationships with the colleges your classmates attend, and they know how to write a letter readers trust. If you want an excellent letter, ask an excellent writer.
- **Not family.** Relatives can't write recommendations. A family friend or mentor who knows you well can, where a college accepts an optional letter.

When I applied to Harvard, my English teacher of three years, a Harvard Law graduate, was one of my recommenders. He had watched me grow from freshman to senior year, which is the kind of perspective a great letter needs.

BRIEF THEM

Once a recommender agrees, offer them a short brief: your résumé and a bullet list of discussion points. Not a script; a reminder. The best briefs include one or two concrete examples for each point:

- Leadership, community impact and classroom engagement
- Insight, resilience and persistence, especially how you responded to a setback
- Your intellectual vitality in their class

Pillar 1: Letters of Recommendation (continued)

- Your growth over the years they've known you
- Why you'd be a strong fit for the kinds of schools you're applying to
- Specific work or achievements they may not know about (projects, competitions, service)
- What excites you as a student. You shouldn't use the word "passion," but your recommenders can.
- What they'll remember most about you, which is entirely their call, but worth suggesting.

Letters should be positive. Use the Additional Information section (Data Entry chapter) to explain a red flag; save your recommenders' limited space for the strongest possible case. What separates a letter is its degree: every letter says a student is good, but very few say "the best student I've taught

in twenty years." Choose and brief your recommenders so you give them the chance to write that sentence.

PRO TIP Some veteran teachers don't want a brief at all. That's fine. They've been taking mental notes the whole time. Offer it once, respect their answer, and don't panic.

THANK THEM

Teachers have one of the hardest jobs there is, and writing letters is extra work on top of it. Make their job easy: ask early, provide what they ask for, respond quickly if they want to talk. Then write a real thank-you note, and consider a small gift. Tell them where you got in. For a teacher, hearing that their student reached a dream school is one of the moments that makes the whole job worth it.

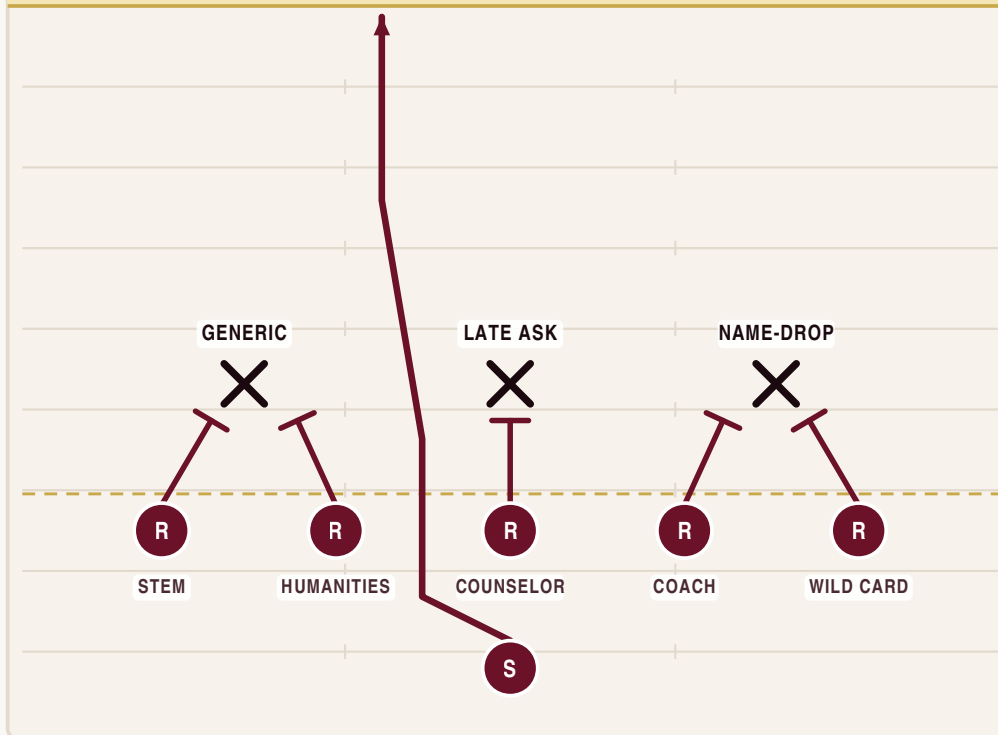
Pass Protection

Relationship over rank.

ST-3

PLAY CALL

GLOWING LETTERS



FORMATION Five recommenders hold the line against three rushers.

SCOREBOARD

Every recommender briefed with specific stories before summer.

FILM Letters of Recommendation

SITUATION

Spring of grade 11, before teachers are flooded with requests.

THE PLAY

- 1 Long-list every possible recommender by the categories schools require: STEM, humanities, counselor, other.
- 2 Rank by three tests: knows the student well, writes excellently, lights up when asked.
- 3 Ask in person, early.
- 4 Hand each one a résumé and a one-page sheet of specific moments, results and the theme to reinforce.
- 5 Send a handwritten thank-you after the applications go in.

COACHING POINTS

A famous name who barely knows the student adds nothing. Great letters come from great writers, asked by a student they are excited about.

The Recommender Brief

One page per recommender, offered with your résumé (ST-3).

Thank you for writing on my behalf. Here are a few reminders that may help.
Please use only what’s useful.

Colleges and deadlines (earliest first)

My intended field, and why

Leadership or impact you saw, with one example

Your class: a moment of curiosity or insight

How I handled a setback

How I’ve grown since you met me

Work you may not know about (projects, competitions, service)

What I hope to contribute in college

Pillar 2: The Essays

Show, don't tell. Then hook them, hold them, and land the haymaker.

Writing has been a gift of mine since I was a kid leaving short stories around the house for my parents to find, like Easter eggs. A great college essay is a lot like an Easter egg: it has something special inside, and that something is you. This is the longest chapter in the book because the essays carry the most upside in the entire application. A file with numbers at the edge of a school's range can still win if the writing leaves no doubt about the writer's curiosity, drive and character.

THE GOLDEN RULE: SHOW, DON'T TELL

Three little words often separate a rejection from an acceptance. **Show** means visuals. College essays are visual storytelling: your words should put images in the reader's head and set them moving, like a movie trailer. Use precise, vivid words and specific anecdotes that put a moment of your life under a microscope, so the reader can watch how your mind works.

Tell is the opposite. In college essays, telling usually shows up as summarizing: "First this happened, then that happened, then I realized something." That's what the activities list is for. Summarizing activities in an essay is like reading someone the menu after they've eaten the meal. If you catch yourself summarizing, stop, take a walk, and come back fresh.

AN EXAMPLE OF TELLING

I'm very passionate about math. I've always been the top student in every math class I've taken, and I've won many competitions. I was even named Most Valuable Problem-solver at my school! But nothing compares to the simple joy of solving a problem. And I couldn't forget the camaraderie: I've made so many friends in study groups and

competitions. Plus, who doesn't love snacks? Baking is another passion of mine, and it intersects with my love of math.

It reads smoothly, but it makes a weak case. It uses the word "passion" twice, it mentions "friends" without a single name or story, and nothing in it is specific enough to picture. Readers at selective colleges see thousands of essays that say "I'm passionate about this." The word has stopped meaning anything.

AN EXAMPLE OF SHOWING

I can't count the hours of sleep I've happily sacrificed to my math notebooks. At night they surround me on my bed, and numbers float around my head while I decide whether this calculus problem should be reverse-engineered. What am I trying to find? The area under the curve. What do I need? A definite integral. What's missing? The equation, so I'll build it from the graph. Eureka. No matter how many mathematical miles I have to go before I sleep, I do it. I reach into my bag of Cool Ranch Doritos and deposit my salty reward into its proper brain-fuel receptacle. The satisfying crunch of success propels me to the next problem, about two trains crossing paths. I have miles to go before I sleep.

Same length, no "passion," and you can see the student thinking. You watch the eureka moment happen. The specific snack, the allusion to Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," the playful rhythm: all of it shows a person who loves the work, and it's playfully intellectual, which readers love.

Pillar 2: The Essays (continued)

PRO TIP Repetition is a tool only when it's intentional, like the Frost line above. Unintentional repetition is redundancy, and readers notice.

SIMPLE YET ELEGANT

The tone to aim for is **simple yet elegant**. Simple: command the vocabulary you actually know rather than reaching for words you don't. Elegant: write your best, and when you have a natural chance to be poetic or philosophical, take it. Use a thesaurus to find the precise word, not the impressive one. Readers have read hundreds of thousands of applications; they can spot a stilted sentence, or a fake, instantly.

The best advice I know about tone comes from the UK's university admissions service, UCAS, and it applies just as well to the Common App: make it conversational. Write the way you'd talk to the reader if you were being interviewed on a talk show: engaging, a little formal where it counts, and real. If humor comes naturally to you, use it. A reader who smiles while reading your essay associates that good feeling with you.

VARY YOUR SYNTAX

Use simple, compound and complex sentences, and mix them. Long sentences, followed by short ones. Then a question? A paragraph made of identical sentences ("I did this. I did that. Then I...") works like the identical yellow lines on a highway: stare at them long enough and you fall asleep at the wheel. Don't hypnotize your reader. And use transitions on purpose: straight-ahead words like "moreover" and "similarly" to keep going, and divergence words like "however" and "on the other hand" to turn.

THE THREE PILLARS OF PERSUASION

Once you've hooked a reader, how do you keep them? With the three appeals Aristotle described more than two thousand years ago.

- **Logos** is the appeal to logic. Build your point so each link in the chain connects; logic is universal, so it leads the reader to your conclusion. But an essay that is all logic can make you seem one-dimensional.
- **Pathos** is the appeal to emotion and shared humanity. Some of the best essays I've helped students write start here, especially essays about adversity. One student wrote about the helplessness she felt watching her mother fight cancer, and how it pushed her toward medicine. She's at MIT now.
- **Ethos** is the appeal to credibility. Use it sparingly, and don't build an essay on it. Name-dropping rarely impresses readers who also read essays from the children of senators and celebrities. Ask: does this name or brand add real value, or am I just dropping it?

Balance the three. Logos lays the road; pathos and ethos paint the lanes so the reader knows how to feel and whom to trust.

PRO TIP When you write about adversity, give most of the essay to the overcoming, not the adversity. Nobody wants a roller coaster that only goes down. Take the reader to the low point if you must, then bring them back up, and leave them with what you learned. Never share a challenge you haven't overcome.

Pillar 2: The Essays (continued)

THE MOUNTAIN TEST

Every essay should make its point with the strongest evidence you have. Many people use the Mountain Test to separate needs from wants: would you still carry this item if you had to haul it up a mountain on your back? Apply it to your ideas. Your word count is your backpack. Does this detail absolutely need to be in the essay, so that it would feel incomplete without it? Or is it a nice-to-have you like because it sounds cool?

Think like a lawyer before a judge. A lawyer leads with the strongest evidence, because weak evidence risks the verdict. Your judge is the admissions reader. Use your strongest evidence first; add nice-to-haves only if there's room.

THE BOPP PROCESS

Every essay I coach goes through four steps: **Brainstorm**, **Outline**, **Produce**, **Proofread**.

Brainstorm. What is the prompt really asking? What different approaches could answer it? What evidence do you have? No idea is a bad idea here, but some are stronger; rank them. If you're stuck, reverse-engineer: what is my strongest evidence, and what story could I build around it? The Draft Board play (ST-11) turns this into a routine.

Outline. Before you know *how* to write it, know your two givens: the prompt and the parameters (words, characters or lines). For a 200–300 word essay, plan an introduction, one body paragraph and a conclusion, or several small vignette paragraphs for a montage. For the 650-word personal statement, you have room for more paragraphs rich with detail. If a prompt

has no limit, outline by theme: one idea per paragraph, each linked to the next.

Produce. The scariest step: going from nothing to something. Write in your own voice, not anyone else's. Don't try to copy a style or write what you think sounds impressive; both are sure ways to get lost in the stack. Readers want to picture your face while they read.

Proofread. Read it silently for errors, then read it aloud. When reading it aloud gives you goosebumps, it has the rhythm of a great speech. That's when it's ready for the Stoplight.

THE STOPLIGHT METHOD

Every piece of writing in your application moves through three colors.

- **Red:** cut material. Highlight anything you're 100% sure you won't use, then remove it, surgically, the way a surgeon removes a tumor and leaves the healthy tissue. If you're not sure, don't red-light it yet.
- **Yellow:** almost ready. One thorough proofread left, including the read-aloud test.
- **Green:** ready to submit. From here, the only keystrokes allowed are copy and paste. Any other edit drops it back to yellow.

Those two extra rounds of review catch the typos and punctuation errors that quietly cost credibility. It doesn't need to be perfect (my own Harvard essay, reproduced in this book, has a few punctuation errors). It needs to be checked.

Pillar 2: The Essays (continued)

CHOOSING A PROMPT: THE GUT CHECK

When a school lets you choose among prompts, use the Stoplight as a gut check, borrowed from the psychologist's inkblot test. Read each prompt aloud, or have someone read it to you. Don't think, at least not consciously. Say the first color that comes to mind: green ("I know exactly what I'd write"), yellow ("maybe, but I'm not sure what"), or red ("no idea"). The essays that come from a green gut reaction are usually the most vivid and authentic, because they're the stories you can tell from the inside.

THE CASCADE METHOD OF SCHOOL RESEARCH

Supplements like "Why us?" reward homework, and readers can tell instantly whether you did it. The Cascade Method gets you there in order, each step flowing into the next:

- **Courses.** On the college's website, search the course catalog for your likely major. List the classes that excite you, and note which professors' names keep appearing.
- **Professors.** The names that repeat across your course list are the professors you'll most want to learn from. Read a little of their work.
- **Research.** Look at the labs, centers and projects those professors run, and sketch a project you'd like to join or propose.
- **Internships.** Search nearby companies and organizations in your field where you could see yourself interning. This is where you show the reader you're already thinking about your future there.
- **Careers.** Look at where graduates in your field go next. Notice how each step cascades into the next, just like life: middle school into high school, high school into college, college into work. If you have momentum, don't lose it.

Keep all of it in one document, school by school. Then write with names: specific courses, professors, programs and opportunities, and what you'll contribute. Generic praise, like "a great reputation," proves you didn't do the homework.

MIND MAPS

If your thoughts feel scattered, borrow a technique students at Cambridge use: a mind map. Put your central theme in a circle in the middle. Draw lines to second-level ideas. Then draw lines from those to third-level circles filled with your most specific examples, experiences and anecdotes. Three levels is usually enough to start writing. Just don't get stuck in analysis paralysis.

PRO TIP Stuck on the first sentence? Skip the introduction. Write the body, then the conclusion, and write the introduction last, once you know exactly what it's introducing.

THE HOOK AND THE HAYMAKER

Every great essay needs a great **hook**, its first sentence, and a great **haymaker**, its last. Think of boxing. A hook is a positional punch: it moves the opponent where you want them. Your opening line should do the same, putting the reader on the edge of their seat without giving everything away. A haymaker is the knockout punch you've been setting up all along. Your final sentence should land with that weight.

Ways to write a hook:

- **Rep it out.** Write three to five opening lines. Pick the best, then write three to five more starting from it. Repeat until you find the one. It's exercise, and it builds a skill you'll use for life.
- **Onomatopoeia.** A sound drops the reader into action.

Pillar 2: The Essays (continued)

BOOM! That's the sound that would have echoed through the second-floor chemistry lab if I hadn't capped our vials of alkali metals before my lab partner knocked water across our entire setup. It's a good thing I'm in charge of safety for our section. Maybe that's why our teacher paired me with a partner who brings a mad-scientist energy to chemistry. I bring patience and precision.

- **A quotation**, always attributed.

"Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." After years of food drives, blood drives and Model UN, I've been asking that question of everyone I know: my coaches, my teachers, my parents. They all gave me the same answer: "The way you talk, you should be a diplomat."

- **Dialogue or a scene in the middle of the action** (in medias res).
- **A question.**

Have you ever wondered how sharks sense a diver they can't see? Tiny pores on their snouts, the ampullae of Lorenzini, detect faint electrical fields, like the pulse of a dive computer. I learned that on my first shark dive in Fiji, surrounded by divers who promised it would be OK. It wasn't OK. It was so much better than OK that words can't do it justice.

Notice what each of those openings does: it starts in motion, it hints at what's coming, and it reveals something about the writer's character. Humor helps, but it isn't required; the shark example has none, and it still works.

To write the haymaker, **extrapolate**, and answer the reader's silent question: "So what? Why should I care?" Widen the scope: from your school to your city, from your region to the world. Or widen the impact: if you've raised \$10,000 for a cause, name the \$100,000 you plan to raise by the time you graduate college. Show the reader not only who you've been, but who you're becoming.

INCEPTION: THE FUTURE SELF

That last idea is the heart of the whole application. The clearer the picture you can plant in the reader's mind of who you are now and who you are becoming, your **Future Self**, the easier it is to say yes. You don't have to be Leonardo DiCaprio in *Inception* to plant it. Every essay should connect the student on the page today to the person the college will help them become.

WHAT VERSUS WHY

Here is a secret that changes how students write. Admissions officers care far less about *what* you want to study than about *why*. The *what* can be anything. The *why* is what drives you, and that's what they want to understand. Every essay should leave the reader knowing your *why*.

The Personal Statement

Seven prompts, one story, 650 words.

The Common App personal statement is the one essay every college on the platform reads. It allows 250 to 650 words, and the seven prompts have stayed the same for several cycles. In my words, they ask you to write about:

- 1. A background, identity, interest or talent so meaningful that your application would be incomplete without it.
- 2. A challenge, setback or failure: how it affected you and what you learned.
- 3. A time you questioned or challenged a belief or idea: what prompted it, and what happened.
- 4. Something someone did for you that made you thankful in a surprising way, and how that gratitude has moved you.
- 5. An accomplishment, event or realization that sparked growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
- 6. A topic, idea or concept so engaging that you lose track of time: why, and who or what you turn to when you want to learn more.
- 7. A topic of your choice.

PRO TIP Always check commonapp.org for the current year's exact wording before you write.

THE PROMPT MATTERS LESS THAN THE STORY

Here's a secret: the prompts are wide doors, and almost any strong story fits through one of them. Prompt 7 accepts anything. So don't start with the prompt; start with the Draft Board (ST-11). Find the story only you can tell,

the one with a real moment in it, that shows who you are becoming. Then choose the prompt it fits best, using the gut check from the Essays chapter.

WHAT THE PERSONAL STATEMENT IS FOR

The personal statement has one job: help a stranger meet you. It is not a résumé in paragraph form, a list of achievements or an argument for admission. Readers already have your activities and grades. They're reading this to understand your why: what drives you, how you think, what you value, and who you'll be on their campus.

SHAPES THAT WORK

- **The moment:** one scene, told in vivid detail, that opens into who you are. A conversation, a failure, a discovery.
- **The montage:** four or five short scenes from different parts of your life, connected by one thread, such as an object, a question or a place.
- **The hero's journey:** a goal, an obstacle, a turn and a change. Why the hero won or lost matters far more than the result.
- **The idea:** a question you can't stop thinking about, and how it connects to your life. Best for the genuinely, playfully intellectual.

TOPICS TO HANDLE WITH CARE

Any topic can work in the right hands, but some are hard to make fresh: the big game, a mission trip described as a tourist, a grandparent's death told mostly as the grandparent's story, or a list of achievements. If you choose one, make sure the essay is about your inner change, told through details no one else could write. And avoid essays that make the reader worry about your judgment.

The Personal Statement (continued)

THE TEST

When you finish, ask a friend who doesn't know your activities to read it and then describe you in three words. If those three words are the ones you

hoped for, the essay is working. If they say “hardworking, smart, nice,” it’s telling, not showing. Go back to the Mountain Test and find the details only you could write.

The Supplement Packages

Most supplements are a handful of questions in different clothes.

After the personal statement come the college-specific questions: the supplements. A list of twelve selective schools can easily mean thirty or more prompts. The good news is that most supplements fall into a small number of types, which I call packages (ST-10). Write one strong master essay per package, then tailor it to each school.

WHY US

What readers want: proof you know this school specifically and will use it.

How: the Cascade Method: courses, professors, research, programs and communities by name, connected to your goals. **Trap:** praise anyone could write (“prestigious,” “beautiful campus,” “diverse”). If you could swap in another school’s name and the essay still works, it doesn’t.

WHY THIS MAJOR

What readers want: a trajectory, not a declaration. **How:** past, present, next (ST-13): where the interest started, what you’ve done about it, and the specific questions you’ll pursue here. **Trap:** an essay that contradicts your activities list.

COMMUNITY

What readers want: how you show up for the people around you, and what you’ll bring to their campus. **How:** one community you belong to (a team, a family, a neighborhood, an online group), your role in it, and a specific moment that shows it. **Trap:** describing the community instead of your place in it.

IDENTITY AND BACKGROUND

What readers want: the experiences and perspectives that shaped you.

How: be specific and honest; show how your background shapes how you see, act and contribute. **Trap:** writing what you think readers want to hear instead of what’s true for you.

AN ACTIVITY

What readers want: depth on one thing you care about. **How:** choose an activity your list can’t fully explain, and show a moment inside it. **Trap:** repeating the activity description in longer sentences.

INTELLECTUAL CURIOSITY

What readers want: to watch your mind at work. **How:** a question, a book, a problem or an idea, and where it led you outside class. **Trap:** listing books or courses instead of thinking on the page.

A CHALLENGE

What readers want: resilience and growth. **How:** keep most of the essay on what you did and learned. **Trap:** an essay that stays in the hard part, or a challenge that isn’t yet overcome.

SHORT ANSWERS

What readers want: personality, fast. Favorite words, a dream class, a song, a 100-character reflection. **How:** be specific, surprising and true; humor is welcome here. **Trap:** safe, generic answers that waste the chance.

The Supplement Packages (continued)

THE WILDCARD

Some colleges ask truly unusual questions. Treat them as an invitation to be playfully intellectual. Take the prompt seriously enough to answer it, and lightly enough to enjoy it. The gut check (Essays chapter) works especially well here.

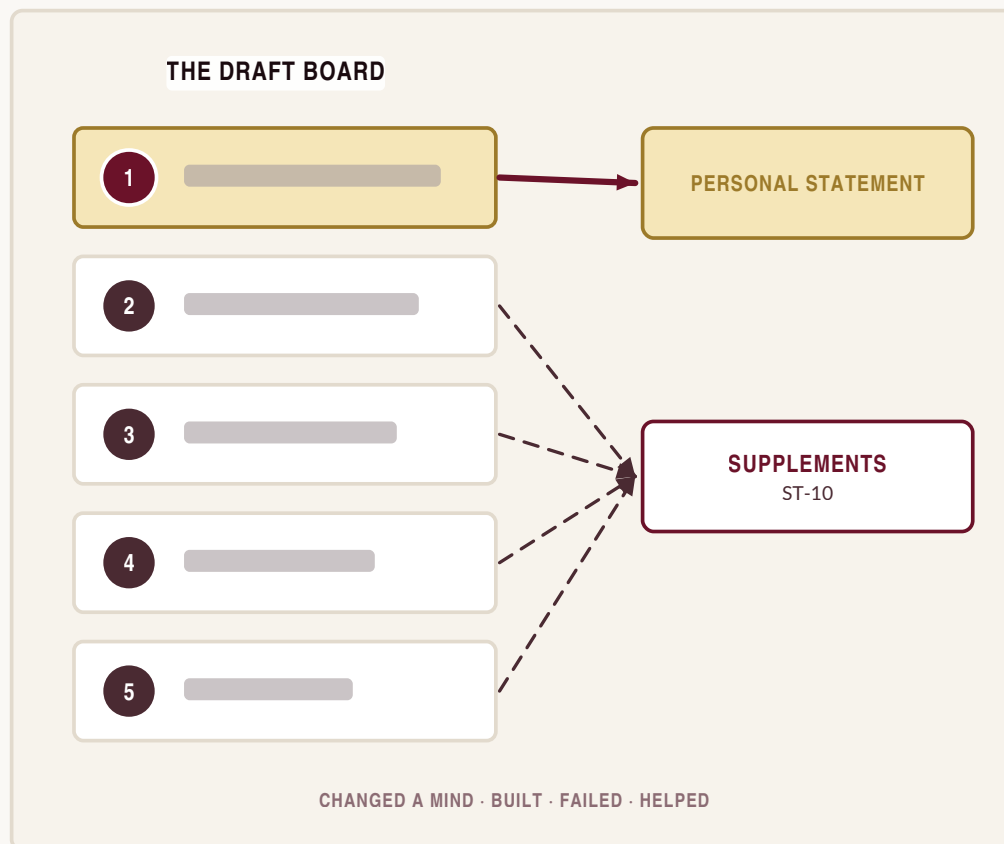
PRO TIP Avoid repeating the same story for the same college. Readers see your personal statement and your supplements together, so every piece should add something new.

Draft Board

Rank the stories before anyone writes a word.

ST-11

PLAY CALL



FORMATION Scout every prospect. Then pick in order.

SCOREBOARD

Five ranked stories by July 1 of the summer before grade 12.

SITUATION

Spring of grade 11 through the summer before grade 12.

THE PLAY

- 1 Fill the board from the student's own life: moments when the student changed their mind, built something, failed, or helped someone.
- 2 Run each story through the Mountain Test (ST-4) and ask: could only this student tell it, and does it have a moment, not just a summary?
- 3 Rank the top five. The first pick becomes the personal statement; the rest go to supplements (ST-10).
- 4 Thin board in junior year? The gap is experience, not writing. Use the summer to build it (O-14).

COACHING POINTS

Great essays come from material, not tricks. A student with a full board writes faster and better; a student with an empty one needs more living, not more drafting.

FILM The Personal Statement · The Essays

The BOPP Drive

Four downs from a blank page to a green-lit essay.

ST-4

PLAY CALL



FORMATION *Brainstorm, Outline, Produce, Proofread.*

SCOREBOARD

The personal statement green-lit by September 1.

SITUATION

Every essay, from the summer before grade 12 onward.

THE PLAY

- 1 1st down, Brainstorm: list stories, moments and evidence. Run the Mountain Test: keep only what the essay needs, not what sounds impressive.
- 2 2nd down, Outline: the arc, the point, the strongest evidence. In a hero's journey, why the hero won or lost matters more than the result.
- 3 3rd down, Produce: write the full draft fast. Show, don't tell.
- 4 4th down, Proofread: read it aloud until it lands, then run the Stoplight (ST-9).

COACHING POINTS

The essays carry the most upside in the application. Writing that leaves no doubt about a student's curiosity and drive can carry a file whose numbers sit at the edge of a school's range. Recycle wisely: similar prompts, such as "Why this major?", can share a core.

FILM The Essays

Inception

Show the reader who the student will become.

ST-5

PLAY CALL



FORMATION The arc from who they are to their Future Self.

SCOREBOARD

A reader who has never met the student can describe them in three words after one read.

FILM The Essays • The Personal Statement

SITUATION

The personal statement and every supplement.

THE PLAY

- 1 Show, don't tell. Never write "passion"; paint the scene that proves it.
- 2 Write as the unapologetic you: specific, honest, unfiltered.
- 3 Plant the Future Self: connect who the student is now to who they are becoming, so the reader can picture them on campus and after it.
- 4 Make yes easy: every detail should point to the same person.

COACHING POINTS

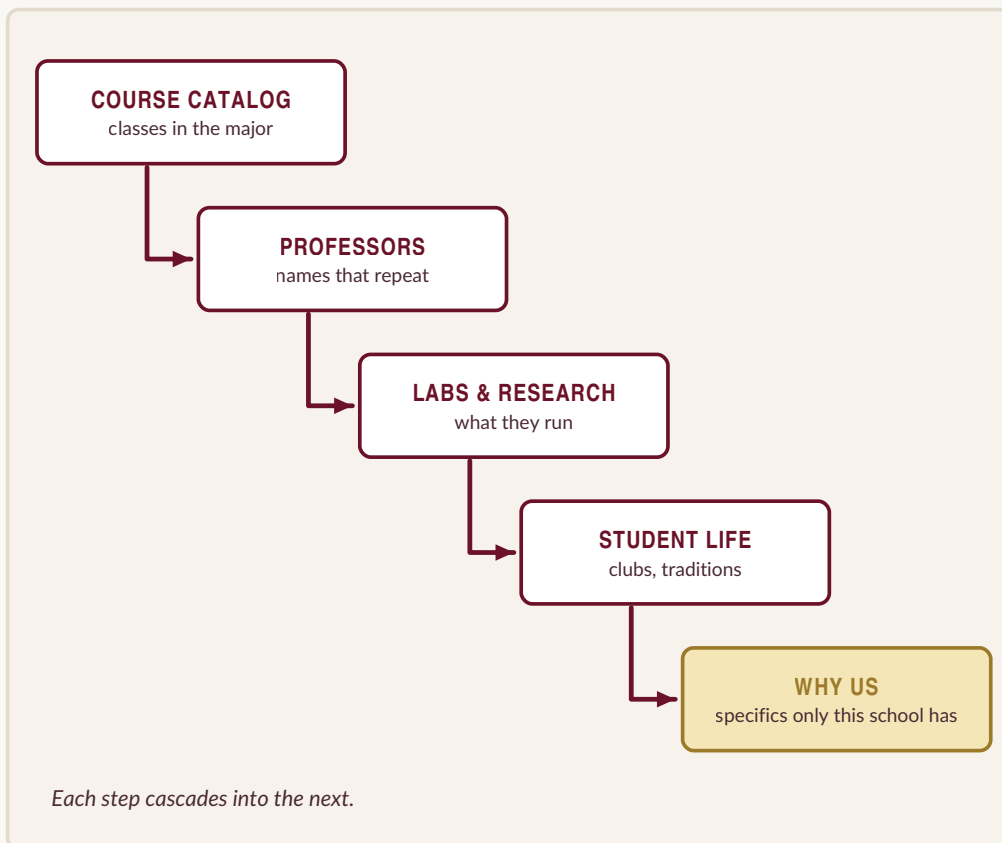
Admissions officers are trying to meet a person, not grade an applicant. The essays are the student's passions in their own words; the activity list is the same passions in numbers.

The Cascade

Research that writes the “Why us?” essay.

ST-6

PLAY CALL



FORMATION Five steps; each one falls into the next.

SCOREBOARD

Every “Why us?” names at least three things only that school has.

SITUATION

Every school-specific supplement.

THE PLAY

- 1 Course catalog: search the intended major and shortlist the most exciting classes.
- 2 Professors: note the names that repeat across the shortlist, and read their work.
- 3 Labs, centers and research those professors run.
- 4 Student life: clubs, traditions and programs that fit the theme.
- 5 Write it: name specific courses, people and opportunities, and what the student will contribute.

COACHING POINTS

Specifics prove the student did the homework. Generic praise, such as “a great reputation”, proves they didn’t.

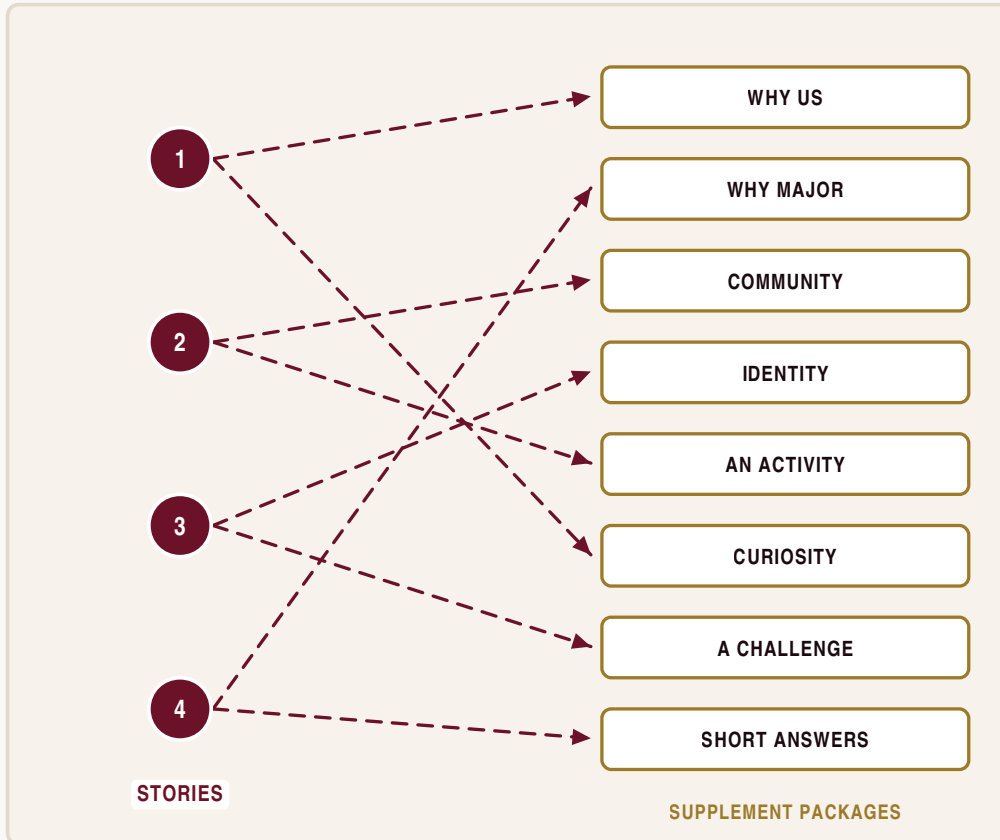
FILM The Essays • The Supplement Packages

Personnel Packages

Know every supplement before it's on the field.

ST-10

PLAY CALL



FORMATION *Different packages, one roster of stories.*

SCOREBOARD

A supplement map: every prompt sorted, every story assigned, no repeats within a school.

FILM The Supplement Packages

SITUATION

The summer before grade 12, once the list is set (ST-1).

THE PLAY

- 1 Pull every supplement prompt on the list and sort it into a package: why us, why major, community, identity, an activity, curiosity, a challenge, or short answers.
- 2 Assign stories to packages so each story runs where it is strongest, and no school sees the same story twice.
- 3 Write one master essay per package, then tailor it school by school (ST-6).
- 4 Draft in order of deadline and reuse, not in list order.

COACHING POINTS

Most supplements are a handful of question types in different clothes. Families who see the pattern write fewer, better essays, and the personal statement stays free to do its one job.

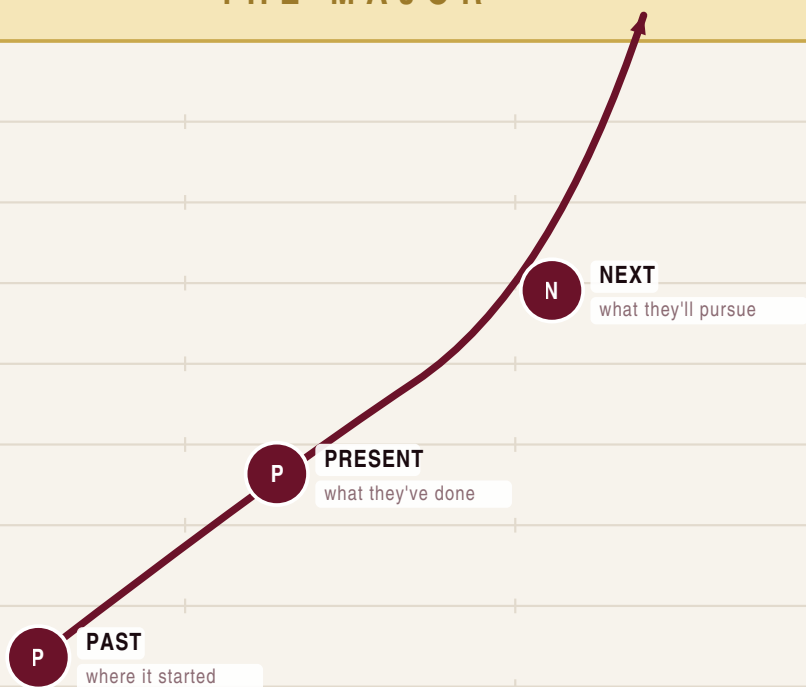
Why Major

Past, present, next.

ST-13

PLAY CALL

THE MAJOR



ESSAY · ACTIVITIES · MAJOR FIELD: ONE STORY

FORMATION One route from where it started to what comes next.

SCOREBOARD

Essay, activities and major field tell one story.

SITUATION

Every “Why this major?” prompt, and the major field itself (ST-8).

THE PLAY

- 1 Past: the moment the interest started, shown rather than told.
- 2 Present: what you’ve done about it since: courses, projects, research, results.
- 3 Next: the specific questions, classes, professors and research you’ll pursue at this school (the Cascade Method).
- 4 Check that the essay, the activity list and the major field all tell the same story.

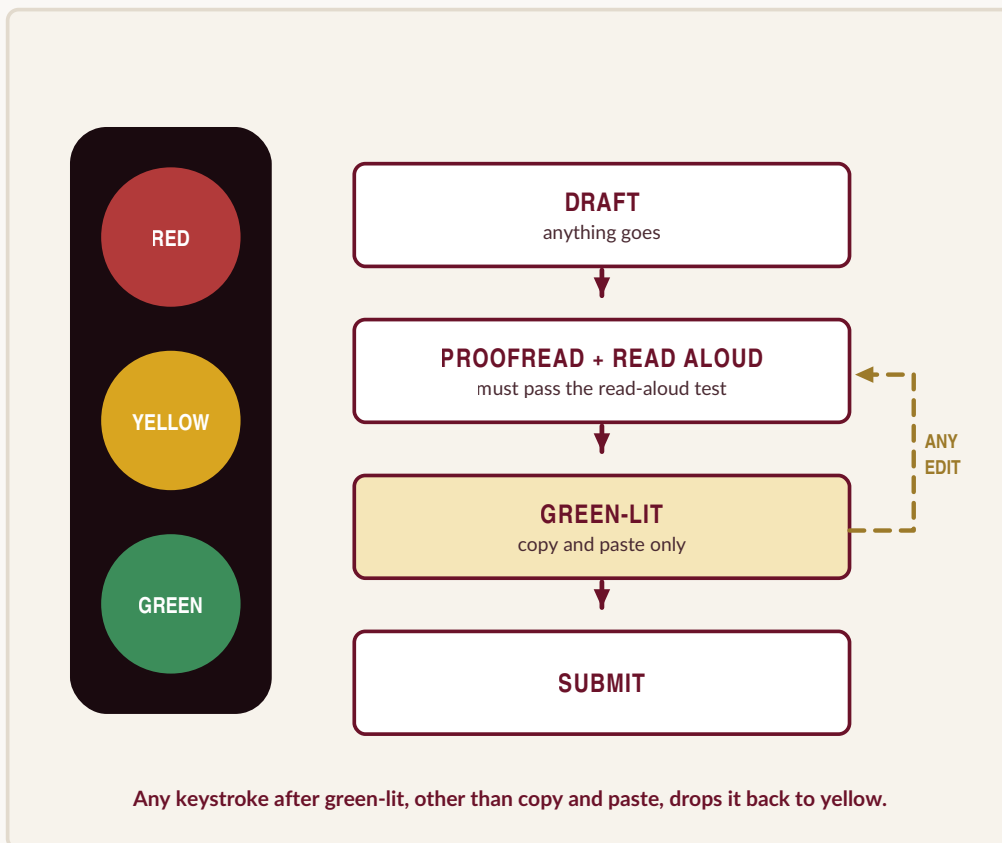
COACHING POINTS

The strongest major essays read like a trajectory, not a declaration. Readers notice when the essay says one thing and the activity list says another.

FILM The Supplement Packages · Data Entry

Green Light

Nothing ships until it's green-lit.



FORMATION Red, yellow, green. Then copy and paste only.

SCOREBOARD

Every submitted piece went red, then yellow, then green.

FILM The Essays

SITUATION

Every essay, description and form before submission.

THE PLAY

- 1 Red: drafting. Anything goes.
- 2 Yellow: almost ready. One thorough proofread left, and it must pass the read-aloud test.
- 3 Green: ready to submit. From here the only keystrokes allowed are copy and paste.
- 4 Any other edit drops the piece back to yellow.

COACHING POINTS

Two extra rounds of review catch the spelling, grammar and punctuation errors that cost credibility. It doesn't need to be perfect; it needs to be checked. The same standard works for any document that matters, from a scholarship essay to a résumé.

The Draft Board

Rank five stories before anyone writes (ST-11).

#	THE STORY (ONE LINE)	THE MOMENT	WHO I'M BECOMING	ONLY I COULD TELL IT?	USE FOR

The Supplement Map

Every prompt sorted into a package, every story assigned (ST-10).

COLLEGE	PROMPT (SHORT)	LIMIT	PACKAGE	STORY	DUE (YOURS)	R · Y · G

The Cascade Sheet

One per college, in order (ST-6 and the Essays chapter).

College and intended major

1 · Courses that excite me (catalog numbers)

Professors whose names repeat

2 · Two professors and one piece of their work each

3 · A lab, center or project I'd join or propose

4 · Internships nearby or through the college

5 · Where graduates in my field go next

What I will contribute (clubs, traditions, communities)

One sentence: why this school, and nowhere else

The Green-Light Checklist

Before anything is submitted (ST-9).

THE ESSAY

- ☐ Answers the prompt, the whole prompt
- ☐ Under the limit
- ☐ Shows, doesn't tell; no "passion"
- ☐ Strongest evidence first (the Mountain Test)
- ☐ Hook in the first line; haymaker in the last
- ☐ Varied sentences; purposeful transitions
- ☐ Sounds like me, read aloud
- ☐ The right school's name, everywhere
- ☐ Proofread silently, then aloud, then by someone else

THE APPLICATION

- ☐ Data entry checked against the transcript
- ☐ Major and program choices final

- ☐ Activities ordered on purpose; hours honest
- ☐ Honors scannable, with progression
- ☐ Additional Information only if it adds context (300 words)
- ☐ Challenges and Circumstances only if relevant (250 words)
- ☐ Recommenders invited and confirmed
- ☐ Test scores sent where required or chosen
- ☐ Fee or fee waiver ready

AFTER SUBMIT

- ☐ Portal set up within a week
- ☐ Aid forms filed
- ☐ Interview scheduled if offered
- ☐ Thank-you notes sent

Show, Don't Tell: A Gallery

Before and after, line by line. Illustrations, not templates.

The fastest way to learn show-don't-tell is to watch it happen. Each pair below shows the same honest facts written two ways. The examples are illustrative; your own details are what make your writing work.

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTIONS

Before: Member of the robotics club. Helped build robots and went to competitions.

After: Lead programmer, 14-person team. Rewrote autonomous code; cut cycle time 40%. Placed 3rd of 52 at state. Mentored 6 freshmen.

Before: Volunteered at the library and helped kids with reading.

After: Founded Saturday reading circle for 2nd–4th graders. Grew from 4 to 31 regulars. Trained 8 teen volunteers. Ran 60+ sessions.

Before: Worked at my family's restaurant.

After: Ran front of house 20 hrs/wk at family restaurant. Built online ordering page; takeout orders up 25%. Trained 3 new hires.

OPENING LINES

Before: I have always been passionate about helping people, which is why I want to become a doctor.

After: The blood pressure cuff hissed for the third time before my grandfather admitted he hadn't taken his pills in a week.

Before: Ever since I was young, I have loved learning about the environment.

After: The creek behind our school smells like rust in August, and I wanted to know why.

Before: Debate has taught me many valuable lessons.

After: I lost my first eleven debate rounds, and I kept every ballot.

WHY-US SENTENCES

Before: I am drawn to your prestigious university because of its excellent academics and beautiful campus.

After: I want to take Professor Lee's seminar on urban water systems and join the stream-monitoring lab she runs, where I could test the sensors I built for our creek.

Before: Your diverse community will help me grow as a person.

After: I'd bring my reading circle's format to the campus literacy program that already partners with three local elementary schools.

CLOSING LINES (THE HAYMAKER)

Before: In conclusion, this experience taught me a lot about myself.

Show, Don't Tell: A Gallery *(continued)*

After: *Thirty-one kids read with us last Saturday. By graduation, I want it to be three hundred, in a city I haven't lived in yet.*

Before: *I know I will be a great fit at your school.*

After: *I still keep all eleven ballots. They're the best coaching I've ever had.*

WHAT CHANGED

In every pair, the after version adds a specific detail, a number, a name or a moment, and removes an adjective that only claimed something. That is the whole technique. Find the detail only you could know, and let it do the convincing.

“I Am Ironman”

My Harvard supplement essay, reproduced as submitted in 2010, punctuation errors and all.

Josef Durand · Harvard College · 1 January 2010 · Common Application
Harvard Supplement Additional Essay: *I Am Ironman*

I attend Don Bosco Preparatory High School, and I play football for the Don Bosco football team, which is the #2 ranked football program in these United States. You could say that these two criteria entitle me to the appellation of Don Bosco Ironman, but these two criteria really fail to encompass the bulk of what I do there. Plus, I believe there is no better way of having you get to know me than to tell you about a typical day in my dress shoes at Bosco.

Let us begin with a typical Day 1A on the rotating schedule of my senior year at Bosco. I wake up to the all-too recognizable sound of my alarm clock at 5:45 a.m. I shuffle, often with my eyes still closed, to the bathroom, where I take a shower. Still not fully awake, I shuffle back to my room, having not yet turned on any lights in the hopes of retaining some iota of extra sleep during my round-trip to the bathroom.

It is when I walk through the door of my room at 6:15 a.m. that I finally turn on a light and then it hits me, like a brilliant explosion of light before my eyes, that I am about to embark on yet another academic voyage to Don Bosco Prep in Ramsey, NJ. This idea of beginning another day of learning, interacting, and maturing – much like the brilliance of the light in my room coming on for the first time in the morning – is enough to shock me out of my somnolent state and excite me into a state of complete awareness (which, may I remind you, is no easy task before noon for a teenager).

I then get dressed in my Don Bosco uniform, which consists of a Don Bosco polo T-shirt, a Don Bosco fleece, khaki pants, and dress shoes. From there, I venture downstairs with my backpack, usually to find a warm, inviting breakfast of oatmeal or scrambled eggs waiting for me on

the kitchen table, along with a virtually pre-packed paper bag for my lunch. I eat quickly and assemble my lunch and then go back upstairs to brush my teeth, during which time I check my room and the computer room to ensure I do not leave any homework assignments lying uselessly at home or on the printer.

After brushing my teeth, I then go downstairs to check my backpack and make sure that I am bringing back to school all the books and assignments that I brought home or did the preceding day. At 6:44 a.m. every morning (pending any misbehavior by my alarm clock), my dormant black 2001 Saturn L300 V6 awaits the awakening click of the “Unlock” button on my key fob and the turn of the ignition key, after which both my car and I are ready for a day of optimal and reliable performance.

My thirty-minute drive to school takes me along the Garden State Parkway and Route 17, where I get off at the Spring Street exit, pull my car around the lower lot, and head to the upper lot to look for the closest parking spot. I then walk down the hill from Granatell Stadium to my homeroom in the first floor of DeSales Hall. I stop briefly at my locker to exchange my books and sit down in my pre-assigned desk to await “the morning prayer and pledge of allegiance” on the intercom system. Once the prayer, pledge of allegiance, and daily reflection are given, I listen to the morning announcements, of which four or five out of the ten have to do with me. Then the bell rings and I take the scenic route (a.k.a. the elevator with my best friend Joe Ricciardi) to my first period class: Physics Honors. Please do not even get me started about that class, because I had wanted to take AP Physics so badly the year before, but the administration would not fix the scheduling conflict between AP Spanish and AP Physics which occurs every single year among the elite students of the senior class.

“I Am Ironman” (continued)

I invite you to read about this conundrum in the “Additional Information” section of my Common Application. Anyway, I find myself in Physics Honors taking notes on topics which I had taught myself over the summer (as I had anticipated taking AP Physics until the August just before my senior year began). Even so, I ask a few clarifying questions throughout the lesson to stay interested and optimize my understanding of the subject matter. Forty-two minutes of Mr. Montagnino’s lesson pass by in about three hours (I mean no disrespect, as I believe Mr. Montagnino is an absolutely brilliant man), and I am off to AP English Literature.

Again, I take the elevator from the second floor of DeSales Hall down to the first floor with Joe and arrive fashionably late while the late bell is ringing. We then have about five to ten minutes before class with which to socialize while Mr. O’Connor talks with students (many times, with me) about contemporary social phenomena and collects himself for the upcoming lesson. I then listen intently as Mr. O’Connor spends the first four-fifths of what remains of our class relating whatever text we happen to be reading at that time to some current societal or political phenomenon.

Whenever he asks a question about any plot transgression in or analysis of the preceding night’s reading, I am there with my hand raised to answer. The conclusions that he draws and the connections he makes between themes in literature from centuries ago to themes in today’s world are nothing short of remarkable. With the remaining five to ten minutes, we hurriedly jot down some notes about what happened in the preceding night’s reading. A bell and a handshake with a profound Harvard alumnus puts me in the hallway walking about ten feet to my right to my desk in AP European History. Mr.

Cassella then commandeers the discussion, which he often stresses is going to be student-oriented, and I listen intently to and diligently take notes on the relevant topics, and then I merely listen as he inevitably digresses into a discussion on current events. Nevertheless, I find myself the recipient of more discussion points – extra credit points awarded for profound responses or contributions to a discussion in class – by the end of each quarter. Another toll of the bell indicates the one ten-minute long break of the day and the end of AP Current Events; excuse me, I meant AP European History.

I make my way over to my homeroom, switch out my books, and head over to Introduction to Business with one of my favorite teachers on campus: Mr. Knapp. Once we are situated in “the dungeon”, which is the nickname our school has for the only classroom in the basement level of St. John’s Hall, Mr. Knapp teaches us about the intricacies of starting a small business in the world today, and we often digress, rather informatively, into a discussion about how to best go about purchasing something such as a car or laptop or about consumerism in general. I must admit that I add some fuel to the fire in these digressions with some questions and comments, as these discussions tend to interest me greatly. Another forty-two minutes puts me in Don Bosco Prep’s most advanced class: Multivariable Calculus Honors (the “Honors” part of the title being rather comical to the ten people in my class, seeing as how the class subject matter and the class itself is above and beyond AP Calculus BC). In this class, if there is anything I do not understand, I am the first to raise my hand and ask about it, which takes the pressure of clarifying key concepts off of some of the more timid students in the class.

“I Am Ironman” (continued)

Nonetheless, we quickly review Calculus BC concepts like integrals, differentiation, sequences, and series before we cover Multivariable Calculus with the Father-Director/President of the school: Fr. Louis J. Molinelli. Often in the middle of a mind-boggling problem, the class (and Fr. Lou, in some cases) is saved by the bell and I move to my next class, which is Theology 12, with another of my favorite teachers: Mr. Alcaro. If it is a Monday or a Friday, we have a “chill” session, which is usually spent doing homework or, on a “light” night, joking around with Joe Ricciardi, John Mihovics, and Billy Pascrell.

On some days, we watch award-winning movies – we have already watched “The Shawshank Redemption” and “Schindler’s List” – and on others, we discuss practical daily applications of our Catholic faith. The latter are days in which I, again, contribute a great deal to the in-class discussion.

The quickest eighty or so minutes of the long period – an 80-minute class period in which each student class (freshman, sophomore, senior, and finally junior) is given one twenty-minute lunch period and sixty minutes of whichever class happens to be period six of that day – goes by in about ten minutes (much to my dismay) and I walk about twenty feet to the left of my theology classroom in Immaculata Hall to Mr. Ramirez’s room for AP Spanish. Each day in AP Spanish, we have an extensive discussion about some cultural aspect or issue in any or all of the Latin American countries. I am proud to say that I am usually the main contributor to the discussion, which is spoken entirely in Spanish. The discussion ends about five minutes early for the afternoon announcements, most of which concern me, and then the school day ends, which by no means indicates the end of my day. Instead, my day has really just begun again. I race over to my homeroom in DeSales Hall to get the books that I need for the night’s homework from my locker, and then I hightail it to each meeting that

meets on that particular day of each of the thirteen clubs that I am a part of. Most days, I am expected in three to four places at once.

After this, the most hectic part of my day, I usually have a few minutes to collect myself before I go up to the field and get dressed in my football apparel for practice, which in recent weeks has consisted of a maroon long-sleeved Under Armour, shoulder pads, my helmet, a pair of gray “Cutter” gloves, a white mesh practice jersey with the number “80” on the front and back, my girdle, my white practice pants, and my cleats. Coach Granatell arrives around 3:15 p.m. and signals via whistle his wish that practice begin, and so we begin by stretching for fifteen or so minutes.

We then break off for around twenty to thirty minutes to work on our individual positions (“Indy” period), which is when I run routes and warm up my hands with the receivers.

A ten-minute seven-on-seven period sometimes ensues, after which we come together for a Team Defensive period, usually lasting about forty-five minutes. The starting defense then digs in against the scout offense, which mimics the offensive scheme of that week’s opponent. I get a great deal of action on scout offense, because I am the back-up to the starting varsity two-man rotation of X-Receiver. Even though I do not start, I am very proud to be the back-up receiver on a nationally ranked team.

After “Team D” is a punt session, which I spend relaxing and socializing on the sideline. “Punt” is occasionally followed by another brief seven-on-seven period (with the emphasis being on the defense if that of the first seven-on-seven period was on the offense, and vice versa), but is always followed by a forty-five minute Team Offensive period. My play in this period is sparse, but I stand around the Offensive Coordinator and listen to the plays anyway so that, if I am called upon, the offense will not miss a step on my account.

“I Am Ironman” (continued)

After “Team O” is conditioning, which entails twenty 50-yard sprints most days, but other days entails much, much more (especially during summer). If only the officers at Guantanamo Bay had been exposed to Coach Greg Toal and his rigorous conditioning regimen, there would be a whole different system of torture that Barack Obama would now be dealing with.

Practice then ends with a brief team gathering around Coach Toal, after which we “break it down” to the tune of James Kittredge, our starting defensive tackle, saying forcefully: “Dominate on three. One, two, three... Dominate!” It is a word that binds us together as a team, because everyone, from the benchwarmers – whom I love to check in on and fool around with during punt session – to the starters, says it. After practice, I change out of my football apparel and begin the long drive home, which usually puts me right in the middle of rush-hour traffic, as practice gets out anywhere from 6 to 7 p.m.

Some nights, however, I change from football to formal dress and head directly to a college open house, which I could not be more thankful for, as it is very difficult to find time in my more-than-busy schedule for individual visits to all of the schools that I am applying to. After a thirty to sixty minute drive home (depending on traffic), I take a shower, eat dinner, and then begin my homework. Some nights, I get it all done and have some spare time to write essays like this one for college.

Other times, I fall asleep on my bed in the middle of a homework question and have to scramble to finish whatever homework I fell asleep on in the morning before school or during homeroom. Still other times (though these are rare), one day will carry over into the next as I stay up all night

finishing assignments and studying for big tests. Nevertheless, when I finally do get done with everything, I am rewarded for my hard work with my soft mattress and blue silk blankets, which put me to sleep almost as soon as my head hits my matching blue silk pillows.

Then, after what always seems like a mere few minutes of rest, I awaken to the sound of my alarm, and another day begins.

So, what is the point of me telling you all this? My main point is to let you know exactly who I am and how hard I have worked every day of my high school career to get to this point of even applying to such an elite school as Harvard. The thought alone of attending Harvard is enough to make me have to sit down for a moment to collect myself. My second, ulterior point is to show that I have lived according to a rarely-changing routine until now and that I am now more than ready to break free of the strictures of my life's routine in order to experience life on my own and take the next step in my maturation, growth, and education.

Harvard College is undoubtedly and unquestionably the best place for me to do just those things, and my acceptance there would make all my efforts, all the sleepless nights, and all the hardships I have faced up to this point (which I invite you to read about in my Common Application essay) well worth it. So why did I write an eight-page essay to satisfy the supplemental requirements of a section that Harvard neither expected nor required?

Because I want this – I want to go to Harvard – more than anything I have ever done or any accomplishment I have ever won can illustrate and because I want you to know me enough to know that when I say this, I really mean it.

Pillar 3: Activities

Ten slots, 150 characters each: tell the story twice, across the list and inside each line.

This is where you show readers everything you've done inside and outside the classroom. On the Common App the section is now called **Activities and Experiences**: up to ten entries, each with a 150-character description. That's 150 *characters*, not words. I've watched students write 150 words and then cut them down for hours; don't make that mistake. Other platforms differ: the University of California allows up to 20 activities and awards, and MIT asks for up to four. The strategy below works on all of them.

There's an art and a science to this section, and the best part is that you control the order. Activities strategy and description strategy are different skills, so we'll take them one at a time.

BUILD THE LONG LIST

Start with everything. In a document or spreadsheet, list every activity you've done since the summer after 8th grade (or earlier, if that's where a real interest began): clubs, sports, jobs, family responsibilities, research, projects, service, arts, online communities, things you do on your own. Aim for at least twenty. The long list is like a CV, which includes everything; your final ten are like a one-page résumé, which includes only the best.

"Best" means two things: most important to you, and most compelling to a reader, especially in combination with your other activities.

PICK YOUR TOP TEN

- **Need-to-haves first.** The activities without which your application would be incomplete. Your points of excellence live here.
- **Sleepers next.** Activities that matter deeply to you and that you plan to write about in an essay. They may not be the most impressive on paper,

but they are part of what makes you, you. (Mention a sleeper in one essay as a side note and develop it in another; don't develop the same activity in two essays for the same school.)

- **Wild cards.** The unexpected activities that make a reader raise an eyebrow out of curiosity. Mine is scuba diving; I'm a certified open water diver, and interviewers love asking about it. Yours could be origami, EDM production or photographing a senior center's holiday party.
- **Service and leadership** to round it out: volunteering, tutoring, lifeguarding, a role that serves others.

Across the ten, show as many dimensions of yourself as you can while making your points of excellence unmistakable. Engage both sides of the brain: logic and creativity together beat either alone.

ORDER MATTERS

Activities don't go in chronological order, alphabetical order or order of hours. They go in order of importance to you, and since you control that order, be strategic. The beginning and the end of the list matter most.

- **Lead with the activity you're proudest of:** the first thing you'd want anyone in the world to know you do.
- **Get leadership and service near the top.** They are two of the strongest signals in the file.
- **Then academics, then athletics or the arts.** Academics first, because that's the core of every college's mission. If you're not an athlete, an arts activity shows a different dimension.
- **Never put volunteering last.** The last slot implies least important, and you never want to imply that about service.

Pillar 3: Activities *(continued)*

- **Put selective activities higher**, and explain the selectivity in the description: “1 of 2 students selected,” “1st of 500 competitors.”
- **Follow the Rule of Three.** Don’t place more than three activities of the same type in a row, unless you’re clustering on purpose.

CLUSTER, SEQUENCE, JUXTAPOSE

Three techniques make the list tell a story before anyone reads a description.

Clustering places up to three related activities together to prove a point of excellence fast. Say you want to show a cybersecurity profile. What does a cybersecurity expert need? Coding skill, hardware sense and risk management. So:

Python Hackathon Champion · Devpost
Network Infrastructure Engineer · Home (the family IT department)
Risk Officer · Investment Club

Three ordinary-looking entries, placed together, read as one clear direction, and they hand you evidence for a supplement essay.

Sequencing places activities in the order they grew from one another:

Technology Specialist and Lead Presenter · Summer program
Independent Researcher · Supervised by a professor from that program
Co-Founder and CTO · The startup that grew out of the research

Think of a film editor: every cut has a reason. Readers ask the same question of your list: why did this activity come right after that one?

Juxtaposition places two different activities side by side so each says more: a varsity linebacker followed by a published poet.

QUALITY AND QUANTITY

Students ask me: “Is it OK if I don’t fill all ten?” Yes, technically, and quality matters more than quantity. But the strongest applications to the most selective schools usually have all ten slots filled with real substance. If you start early, the problem you’ll have is choosing which ten, not finding them.

HOURS AND HONESTY

When you estimate hours per week and weeks per year, include the invisible time: planning, preparing, messaging, practicing. Estimate honestly and round to a clean number. Readers add up your hours, and they know there are only 168 in a week.

Never stretch the truth. Colleges can and do rescind admissions when they find inflated claims. The Common App now makes the position field optional; when you have no official title, describe your real role plainly, such as “Lead organizer” or “Founder.” Calling it like it is isn’t embellishing.

THE DESCRIPTIONS

Now zoom in. You’ve told the big story across the list; each description tells a small one. With 150 characters, a description works like a well-written post: concise and packed with data. Readers scan this section, so make it easy to scan.

- **Use fragments, not full sentences**, each starting with a strong action verb: present tense if you still do it, past tense if you don’t. End each fragment with a period.
- **Abbreviate consistently.** If you use “&” once, use it everywhere. Readers notice the attention to detail.
- **Lead with impact and numbers:** what changed because you were there.

Weak verbs put readers to sleep:

Pillar 3: Activities *(continued)*

Had to perform admin duties and get coffee. Made copies. Sent emails. Scheduled meetings. Took notes.

Strong verbs, with the same honest facts, wake them up:

Coordinated meetings & events for 12-person team. Annotated weekly strategy sessions. Corresponded with executives daily. Trained 4 new interns on procedures.

QUANTIFY YOUR IMPACT

Readers are looking for quantifiable metrics of impact, numbers that show what you changed. Aim for what I call **data density**: the most meaning in the fewest characters. Useful numbers include:

- Dollars raised, people served, items donated, hours delivered
- Members when you started versus members now
- Users, downloads, subscribers or sales
- Students tutored and hours tutored
- Ranks and finishes: “1st of 500,” “top 3 in state”
- Percent growth in reach, attendance or results
- Hours of shadowing or research, for pre-med and science applicants

FIVE EXAMPLES

Founder and President, Tutors for Tots. Founded online nonprofit tutoring service. Charged \$10/hr to tutor low-income elementary students. Donated 100% (\$9K) to school district.

Volunteer Coordinator, American Red Cross. Organized city food, clothing, toy & blood drives. Stocked local food pantry weekly. Served meals to unhoused neighbors.

Open Water Certified Diver, PADI. Completed 10 hrs of pool training & 2 days of open water dives. Surveyed coral reefs. Spotted blacktip reef sharks.

Service Dog Trainer, Bosco Club. Trained a golden retriever named Bosco as an emotional support companion for our theology teacher’s autistic son.

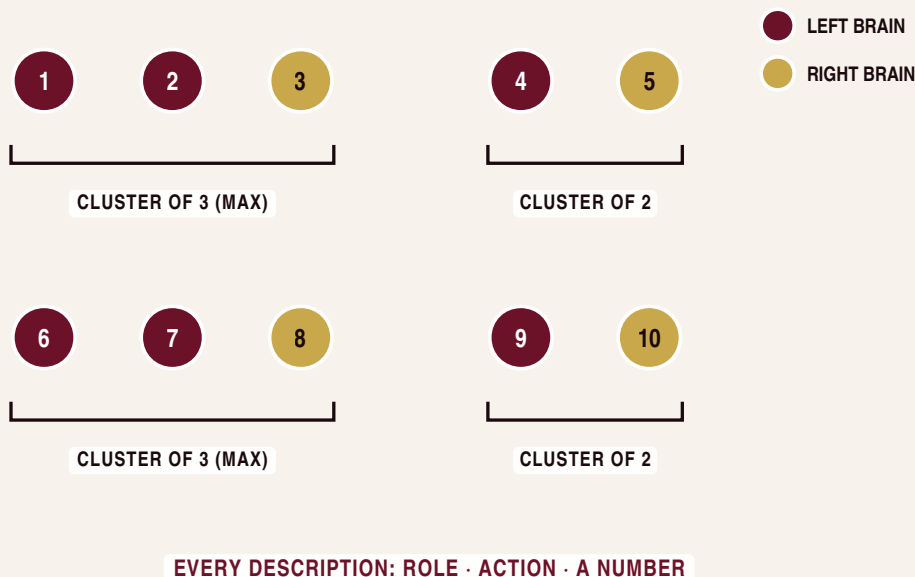
Founder and CEO, Pets Love Beds LLC. Launched online store during pandemic. Sold \$100K+ of pet beds worldwide via dropshipping. Made pets cozy.

Notice the pattern in each: fragments, action verbs, numbers, and a little personality. Those are illustrations, not templates to copy; your own numbers and your own voice are what make descriptions work.

Stat Line

Ten activities, each one a stat line.

BOX SCORE



FORMATION Ordered, clustered, and balanced across both sides of the brain.

SCOREBOARD

Every description carries at least one number.

FILM Activities

SITUATION

The activity list, every application.

THE PLAY

- 1 Lead with what matters most, and never put service last.
- 2 Cluster similar activities, but never more than three in a row.
- 3 Balance left-brain and right-brain activities across the list.
- 4 Pack every description: role, action, measurable impact (people, dollars, hours, ranks).
- 5 Round weekly hours up to the nearest five to count real planning time.

COACHING POINTS

Descriptions are tweet-sized proof. Illustrative before: "Member of tutoring club; helped with math." After: "Founded peer tutoring program; trained 12 tutors; ran 140 sessions; most students raised their math grade." The essays tell the story; the activity list is the box score.

The Description Builder

Fragments, action verbs, numbers, 150 characters (ST-7).

THE FORMULA

Action verb + what you did + for whom or how many + the result, as a number. Fragments, each ending in a period. Present tense if you still do it; past tense if you don't.

STRONG VERBS

Founded · Launched · Built · Designed · Led · Organized · Coordinated · Trained · Taught · Mentored · Researched · Analyzed · Wrote · Published · Raised · Grew · Recruited · Negotiated · Performed · Composed · Competed · Won · Served · Delivered

NUMBERS TO HUNT FOR

Dollars raised · people served · members before and after · users or sales · hours delivered · students tutored · rank and field size · percent growth · items donated

CHECK BEFORE GREEN

Under 150 characters, including spaces · Abbreviations used the same way everywhere · Every claim true and checkable · Matches the résumé

DRAFTS

Activity 1

Activity 2

Activity 3

Activity 4

Activity 5

Activity 6

The Activity Order Planner

Ten slots, ordered on purpose (ST-7).

SLOT	ACTIVITY	TYPE	WHY HERE (CLUSTER · SEQUENCE · JUXTAPOSE)	BEST NUMBER	CHARS

Proudest first · leadership and service near the top · academics, then athletics or arts · selective entries higher · no more than three of a kind in a row · volunteering never last.

Pillar 4: Data Entry

The honors, the major, and the two optional questions most students get wrong.

I won't insult your intelligence by explaining how to enter your name and birthday. Most of the data entry pillar has one correct answer: the truth. Answer every question accurately, and get a parent's help with family, school and financial details. But four parts of this pillar involve real strategy: the honors, the major, the Additional Information section and the Challenges and Circumstances question.

PRO TIP Do the data entry first, not last, even though it's the fourth pillar. Some colleges reveal extra essay questions only after you've entered your intended major or answered certain questions. Fill in the college-specific sections early so a hidden essay never surprises you in December. And to students aiming at the most selective schools: "optional" essays aren't really optional. They're another chance to make your case.

HONORS

On the Common App, honors live in the Education section, with room for five entries. Because they sit in Education, aim for mostly academic honors: a good rule of thumb is three academic and two of another kind (athletic, artistic, service). If one non-academic honor clearly outweighs your third academic honor, three and two can flip, but do it on purpose.

Honors have no description field, so any context has to fit in the title. Use that space for progression and selectivity. If you competed in the same olympiad every year and climbed from 100th to 1st, put it in one entry, with the progression in parentheses: "USA Computing Olympiad (100th, 30th, 10th, 1st)." Readers love to watch a journey, and grouping saves slots for other honors. Keep it scannable.

CHOOSING THE MAJOR

The intended-major question can change which essays you see and, at some colleges, which pool you compete in. There are four honest strategies.

1. Straight-up. Apply in the field you've been building toward for years. If you've taken every biology course available, done research and volunteered at a hospital, apply in biomedical engineering or biology. Everything in your file will point the same direction. This is the right choice for most students.

2. Adjacent. If your field is impacted (computer science and engineering are the classic examples), consider a closely related major you'd genuinely be glad to study, such as data science, a different branch of engineering, or statistics. You often learn many of the same skills alongside many of the same people, in a less crowded pool.

3. Interdisciplinary or major plus minor. Many colleges offer interdisciplinary programs that combine fields, like art and engineering. You can also pair a major with a minor that makes your direction distinctive: international relations with a legal studies minor for a future diplomat who did debate, mock trial and Model Congress. Every combination must be backed by how you've actually spent your time.

4. A genuine secondary interest. At colleges where every major lives under one roof and switching is easy, some students apply in a real but less crowded interest, say, classics for a student who has studied Latin for four years. This only works if the interest is real and documented in your activities and essays. Never claim an interest you can't prove; readers notice, and it breaks the first rule of this book.

Pillar 4: Data Entry (continued)

KNOW HOW HARD IT IS TO SWITCH

Strategies 2 to 4 depend on how a college handles majors. At some, students apply to the university as a whole and declare a major in the second year, so switching is straightforward. At others, like Cornell and Carnegie Mellon, students apply to a specific college or school within the university, each with its own admission standards, and moving between them can be nearly as hard as transferring. Research each school on its official site. Student forums like Reddit can tell you how switching feels in practice, but confirm everything with the college itself.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION (300 WORDS)

The Common App's Additional Information section was cut from 650 to 300 words for the 2025–26 cycle. That makes concision even more important. This section is for **context**, not a second personal statement. Use it for:

- A dip in grades and its reason: an illness, a family crisis, a move
- A scheduling conflict that kept you out of a course (mine was AP Physics versus AP Spanish)
- A diagnosed learning difference or health condition, stated matter-of-factly, with how you've managed it
- An unusual grading system or curriculum, or online courses that need explanation
- An IB Extended Essay or a research paper: title, a one-line abstract and a link
- A link to a portfolio or website
- Essential detail on an activity that truly didn't fit, only if it truly warrants it

Do not use it to make excuses, to obsess over a single B, to paste your résumé or activities again, or to write a second personal statement. Excuses sound like excuses; reasons sound like maturity. Show accountability. And if your personal statement already makes your case, leave this section blank. Knowing when to stop is a mark of confidence.

CHALLENGES AND CIRCUMSTANCES (250 WORDS)

The old COVID-era Community Disruption question has become an optional **Challenges and Circumstances** question, also 250 words. It gives you space to describe circumstances that affected your education or your activities: financial strain, caregiving for family members, work to support your family, health, housing instability, disruptions to school or community, or discrimination.

Write it like data entry, not like an essay: clear, factual, even in short bullet points. If you describe a challenge that affected you directly, use a simple three-act shape: what happened and how it affected you; what you did about it; what you learned. Keep the weight on the action and the learning.

PRO TIP Context isn't complaining. Readers evaluate students in the context of their opportunities and responsibilities. If you work twenty hours a week to support your family, that's not a gap in your activities; it's one of your activities, and it belongs on the list.

THE REST OF THE PILLAR

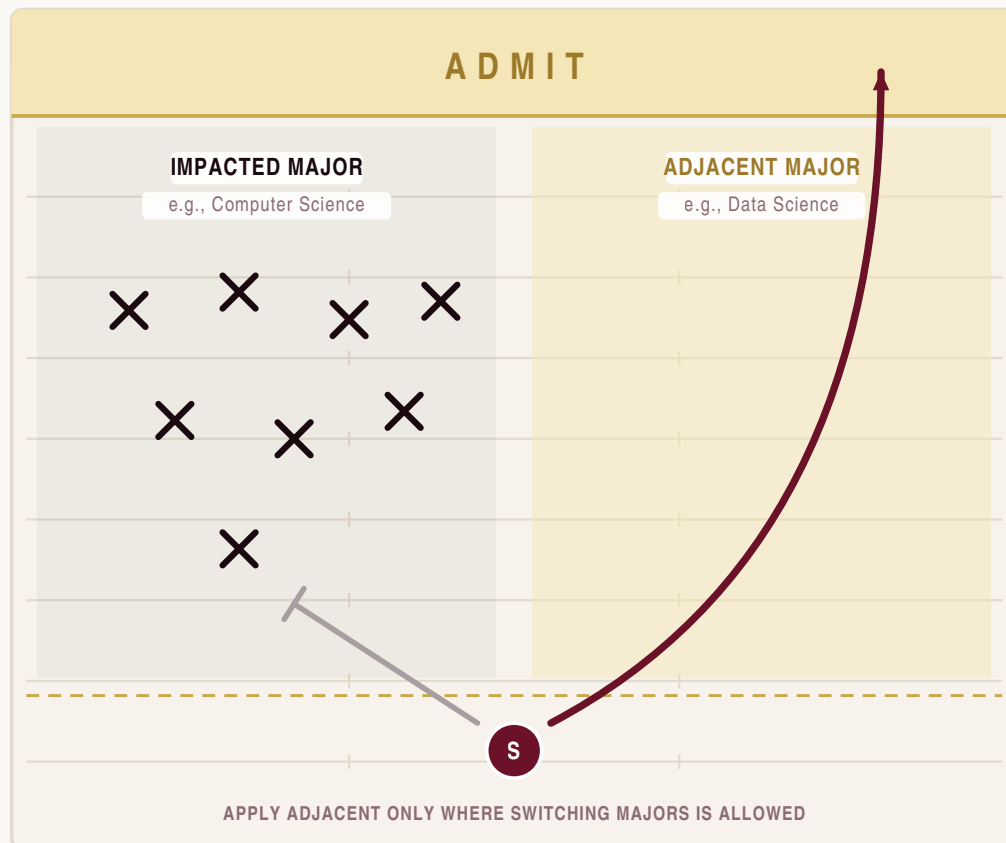
Family, schools, courses, test scores: these questions are tedious but important, and only you and your family know the answers. There are a lot of them, so don't leave them for the last minute. Start early, enter everything carefully, and double-check it against your transcript.

Clean Snap

No fumbles on the details.

ST-8

PLAY CALL



FORMATION When the major is crowded, run the open lane next to it.

SCOREBOARD

Zero errors, and every Additional Information line gives a reason with accountability.

FILM Data Entry · The Common App, Section by Section

SITUATION

Data entry, major selection and the Additional Information section.

THE PLAY

- 1 Enter every field exactly and honestly, in both the common sections and each school's own.
- 2 Choose the major play: straight-up (the major built over four years) or adjacent (a close, less crowded major when the first choice is impacted, such as Data Science instead of Computer Science), only where the school allows switching later.
- 3 Use Additional Information for reasons, never excuses: context for a dip in grades, a scheduling conflict, a portfolio link.
- 4 Never paste the résumé or repeat the activity list there.

COACHING POINTS

Impacted majors can be far more competitive than the school as a whole. A clean, honest application is table stakes; a careless one is an easy no.

The Résumé

One page, reverse chronological, dense with numbers.

Some colleges invite a résumé upload, some ask for one in an interview or for a scholarship, and every recommender should get one. Here are the principles I use with every student and on my own résumé.

THE STRUCTURE

- **Header:** full name, email, phone (optional) and city and state. No street address.
- **Headings, in this order:** Education; Extracurricular Experience; Work and Volunteer Experience; Skills; Honors and Awards. Putting honors last shows a little humility.
- **Reverse chronological order** under each heading: what you're doing now goes first.

THE STYLE

- One page. Always. A CV can run longer; a student résumé shouldn't.
- Bullet points made of sentence fragments, each starting with an action verb (present tense for current roles, past tense for finished ones), each ending in a period. It's the same style as your activity descriptions.

- Quantifiable metrics of impact in as many bullets as possible, even more than in your activity descriptions.
- Consistent formatting: one font, aligned dates, the same abbreviations everywhere.

THE PROCESS

Get everything down first: experiences, dates, numbers, skills, surprising accomplishments. Then cut to one page. Then format. Free résumé builders and templates can make a clean page look professional; choose a simple, readable design. Some students add a friendly, professional photo, which can help a reader put a face to the name, but it's optional and some readers prefer none.

PRO TIP Your résumé and your activities list should tell the same story with the same numbers. Readers notice when they don't match.

Interviews

A conversation, not an interrogation.

Many colleges offer interviews, often with alumni, sometimes with admissions staff or seniors on campus. Some are evaluative, some are informational, and many colleges can't offer one to every applicant, so not getting an interview is rarely a negative. When an interview is offered or recommended, take it.

WHAT INTERVIEWERS LOOK FOR

Curiosity, warmth and specifics. Interviewers remember students who listen, ask good questions and tell real stories, not students with memorized answers. Think of the interview as a chance to show the personal qualities from Part I in person.

PREPARE STORIES, NOT SCRIPTS

Prepare short stories you can tell naturally, each with a specific moment, for the questions that almost always come up:

- Tell me about yourself. (Two minutes: where you're from, what you love, what you're working on now.)
- Why this college? (Your Cascade Sheet, T-7.)
- What do you want to study, and why?
- Tell me about a challenge you faced.

- What do you do for fun?
- What's something you've read or learned recently that excited you?

Then prepare two or three thoughtful questions of your own, ideally about the interviewer's experience at the college.

PRACTICE THREE TIMES

Run three mock interviews before the first real one (ST-15): one with a teacher or counselor, one with family or a friend, and one on video so you can watch yourself. Look for filler words, rushed answers and stories that wander.

ON THE DAY

Arrive or log on early, dress one step up from casual, put your phone away and make eye contact. For video interviews, check your light, sound and background. Bring curiosity, not a résumé, unless the interviewer asks for one. Afterward, send a short thank-you email within 24 hours that mentions something specific from your conversation.

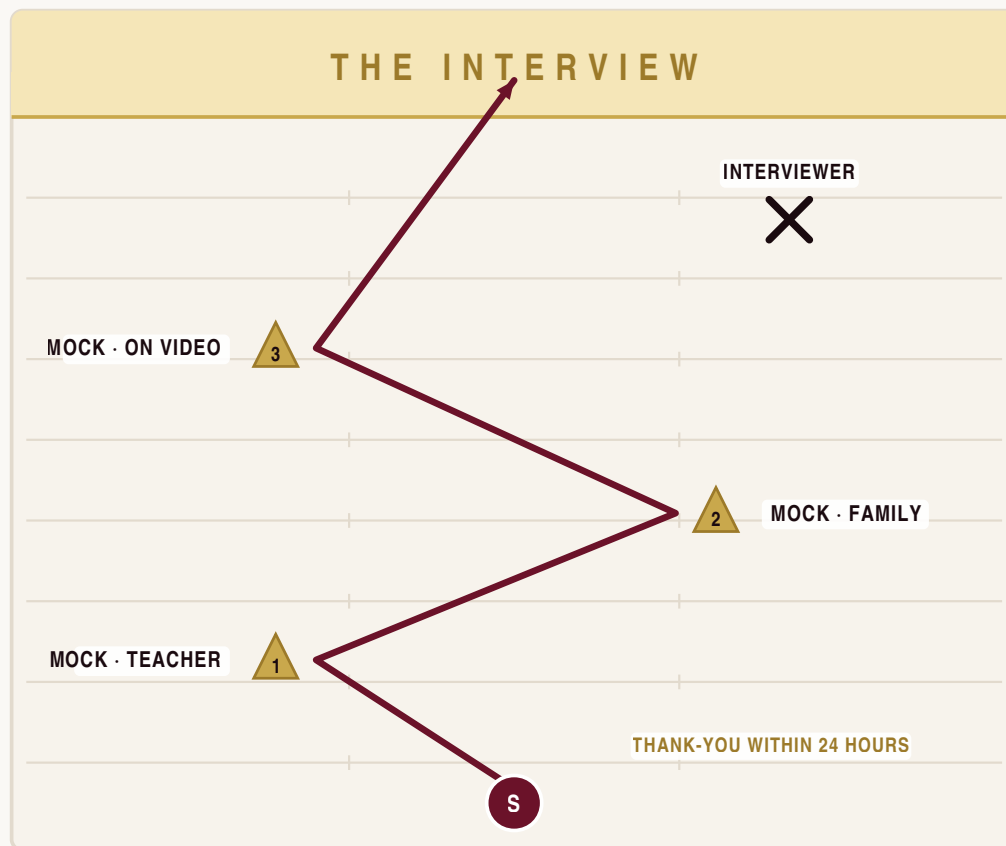
I still remember interviewers lighting up when they saw scuba diving on my résumé. The wild card on your list is often the best conversation starter you have.

The Combine

Three reps before the real interview.

ST-15

PLAY CALL



FORMATION *Three mock interviews, then the real one.*

SCOREBOARD

Three mocks completed before the first real interview.

FILM Interviews

SITUATION

Any college that offers or requires an interview, in person or online.

THE PLAY

- 1 Check which colleges offer interviews; where they're optional and offered, sign up early.
- 2 Prepare stories, not scripts, for the core questions: tell me about yourself, why this school, a challenge, what you do for fun, and two questions to ask.
- 3 Run three mock interviews: with a teacher or counselor, with family or a friend, and on video so you can watch yourself.
- 4 Send a thank-you note within 24 hours.

COACHING POINTS

Interviewers remember curiosity and specifics, not memorized answers. Practice the stories until they feel like a conversation.

The Interview Prep Sheet

Stories, not scripts (ST-15).

Tell me about yourself (two minutes)

Why this college? (from my Cascade Sheet)

What I want to study, and why

A challenge I faced, and what I did

What I do for fun

Something I learned recently that excited me

My question for the interviewer 1

My question for the interviewer 2

Mock 1 · notes

Mock 2 · notes

Mock 3 · notes

Thank-you sent (date)

PART V

Money Downs

Scholarships, financial aid, and how to appeal an offer with respect and leverage.

Money Is Part of the Strategy



JOSEF AIDEN DURAND
HARVARD COLLEGE '14
FOUNDER, VERITAS HALL

Too many families treat paying for college as something that happens after admissions. By then, most of the decisions that determine the price have already been made.

The price you pay depends on the list you built, where you applied early, which forms you filed on time, and whether you had comparable offers to appeal with. Those are strategy decisions, made months or years before the first bill arrives.

So bring money into the conversation early. Run the net price calculator for every school before it goes on the list. Know which colleges offer merit aid and which offer only need-based aid. File the FAFSA and CSS Profile as soon as they open. Build scholarships into the calendar alongside applications.

None of this is about chasing the cheapest school. It's about making sure that when the decision comes, the family is choosing between good options it can afford, not discovering in April that the dream school is out of reach.

Scholarships and Aid

Two kinds of money, the forms that unlock it, and where to look.

You made it. The applications are in. Now: how are you going to pay for college? With costs where they are, it's one of the most important questions in the whole process, and the answer starts long before the bills arrive.

TWO KINDS OF MONEY

Merit aid is earned through performance: grades, scores, talent, leadership or a scholarship essay. **Need-based aid** is based on your family's financial situation, as measured by the aid forms. Some colleges offer both; some, including the Ivy League, offer only need-based aid. Knowing which is which shapes your list (M-1).

THE FORMS

- **The FAFSA** (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) unlocks federal grants, work-study and loans, and most state and college need-based aid. It produces your **Student Aid Index (SAI)**, the number colleges use to measure need. It opens each fall, on or before October 1; the 2027–28 form opened early, in September 2026. File it as soon as you can, every year, even if you think you won't qualify. Some aid is first-come, first-served, and some merit scholarships require it.
- **The CSS Profile** from College Board is required by many private colleges for their own institutional aid. It asks more detailed questions than the FAFSA. Check each college's requirements and deadlines; they're often earlier than you expect.

Fill both out completely and honestly, on time. Honest, accurate forms are both the law and the strategy; colleges verify the information, and errors delay aid.

PRO TIP If you apply early decision, filing your aid forms on time also protects your option to be released from the agreement if the aid offer doesn't make attendance affordable (The Early Plan chapter).

KINDS OF SCHOLARSHIPS

- **Athletic:** offered by colleges to recruited athletes. Only a small share of high school athletes, around 2%, receive athletic scholarships, so don't bank on them. If you're in that group, the recruiting process runs on its own calendar with coaches.
- **Academic and merit:** from colleges, states, counties, cities, local organizations and national programs.
- **Employer:** offered by a parent's employer to employees' children, often with GPA requirements.
- **Extracurricular:** for activities like the arts, service organizations or scouting. Achieving Eagle Scout, for example, opens doors.
- **Student-specific:** based on background, identity, first-generation status, heritage, faith, disability or location. Some are remarkably specific.
- **STEM and major-based:** for students pursuing particular fields.
- **Military:** ROTC and service-related scholarships for students who serve or plan to.
- **No-essay:** quick entries. Fine to apply to, but the essay-based ones are usually less crowded and more valuable.

WHERE TO LOOK

- **Your colleges' own sites:** the financial aid office's list of institutional scholarships and grants, and their deadlines.

Scholarships and Aid (continued)

- **Common App scholarship matching**, which connects students with programs they qualify for.
- **BigFuture Scholarship Search** (College Board) and the **CareerOneStop Scholarship Finder** (U.S. Department of Labor).
- **Fastweb, Scholarships.com, Bold.org and Niche.**
- **Local sources**, often the least competitive: your school counselor, community foundations, Rotary and Lions clubs, employers, credit unions, places of worship and local businesses.

Cast a wide net and **stack**: win several scholarships and combine them. Read the fine print, because some outside scholarships reduce the aid a

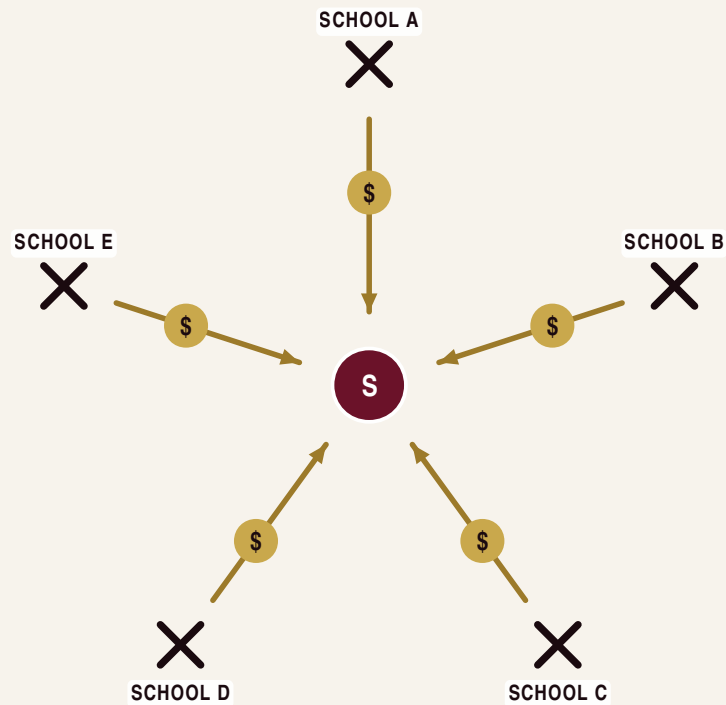
college gives you, and others are paid directly to you or the college. Reuse essays where prompts overlap, tailored every time.

PRO TIP Legitimate scholarships never charge an application fee. If one asks you to pay, it's probably a scam.

Start early. Some students win enough in senior year alone to cover a large share of college, but spreading the work over four years saves a lot of sleep. Think of scholarships like poker chips: stack them up high.

Free Agency

Be the student a school pays to land.



WHERE THE STUDENT IS A TOP ADMIT, SCHOOLS RECRUIT WITH MERIT AID

SITUATION

Families who need aid, and students who would rank near the top of a school's applicant pool.

THE PLAY

- 1 Know the two kinds of money: merit (earned through performance or essays) and need-based (from the FAFSA, and the CSS Profile where required).
- 2 Target schools where the student's numbers sit at or above the 75th percentile. That is where merit flows.
- 3 Add outside scholarships that fit the student's theme, and reuse essays where the prompts overlap.
- 4 File every aid form on time.

COACHING POINTS

Merit aid is how schools compete for the students they want most. The same student can be a reach at one school and a recruited free agent at another.

FORMATION Schools bid for the student who would be a top admit.

SCOREBOARD

At least three schools on the list where the student would be in the top quarter of admits.

FILM Scholarships and Aid

Appealing Your Aid Offer

Comparable offers, a respectful ask, and two or three rounds at most.

Here is where an early strategy comes full circle. Remember the balanced list? This is why we built it. Once the admissions decisions and aid offers arrive, a balanced list leaves you with admissions from several similarly ranked schools, and that is the leverage you need to ask for more.

THE RULE OF COMPARABLE OFFERS

Colleges seriously reconsider an offer when it's compared with an offer from a school of similar standing. An Ivy League school will typically respond to another Ivy League offer, and rarely to anyone else. As an applicant, I started a bidding war between Harvard and Dartmouth. When I first called Dartmouth with another offer, they were politely uninterested: as an Ivy League school, they explained, they didn't consider other schools' offers. Then I told them the other school was Harvard. They perked right up and said they'd get back to me. It helped that I had visited both campuses and put in face time; they knew who I was.

A balanced list of fifteen schools, with even two admissions out of five in each tier, sets up as many as three separate appeals, one in each tier. Appeal sideways or up, never down. If you show a target school an Ivy League offer, they may assume you'll go to the Ivy and step away from the table.

HOW TO START

- **Collect every offer in writing**, and line them up by net cost: the cost of attendance minus grants and scholarships. Loans are not discounts.
- **Contact the financial aid office** of the school you most want to attend, by phone or email. Many colleges have a formal appeal form; use it if they do.

- **Attach the comparable offer**, with its full breakdown, so they know the number to meet.
- **Report changes in circumstances**, too: a job loss, medical bills, a family change. Colleges can use professional judgment to adjust need-based aid when circumstances change.

tone: HAT IN HAND

Be humble, logical and matter-of-fact. Never rub one school's nose in another's offer. Say that you would love to attend, that you have another offer on the table, and that, given the long-term financial picture, you'd need the numbers to be closer to make the responsible choice. Something like: "If you're able to come closer to this offer, I would be honored to attend, because this has always been my first choice." Make the school you're talking to feel like the one, because if you're asking, it should be.

You usually get two or three rounds at most before a school is done. Push too hard and they'll leave the table, so read the room and stay calm. Cooler, humbler heads prevail.

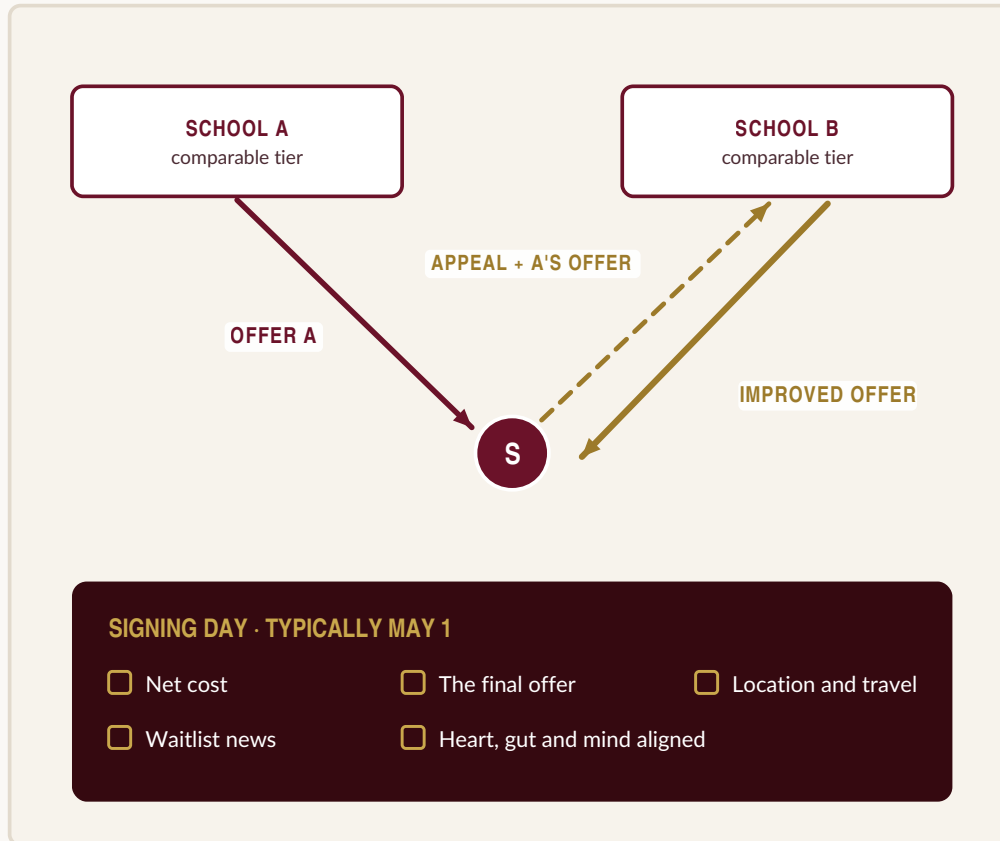
PRO TIP Colleges that offer only need-based aid, including the Ivy League, will review your financial picture, not bid on your talent. Frame the appeal around need and the comparable offer, not around being recruited.

WHY IT WORKS

The college has already said yes to you once. Asking respectfully, with a clear reason and a comparable offer, gives them a chance to say yes again. If you don't ask, you'll never know.

The Bidding War

Negotiate with comparable offers. Then sign with conviction.



FORMATION Offer A goes to School B. School B answers.

SCOREBOARD

Every offer appealed once wherever a comparable offer exists.

SITUATION

Spring of grade 12, when the offers arrive.

THE PLAY

- 1 Collect every aid offer in writing.
- 2 Appeal only with an offer from a comparable school. An Ivy matches an Ivy, and rarely anyone else.
- 3 Ask respectfully, with numbers, and with the other offer attached.
- 4 On Signing Day, weigh net cost, the final offer, location and travel, and waitlist news. Then go where heart, gut and mind agree.

COACHING POINTS

This is why the list was balanced: options are leverage. As an applicant, I started a bidding war between Harvard and Dartmouth by bringing Harvard's offer to Dartmouth.

FILM Appealing Your Aid Offer • The Math of an Aid Offer

The Math of an Aid Offer

How to read an offer, with a worked example.

Aid offers are not standardized, and some make loans look like discounts. Here's how to read one, using invented numbers.

A WORKED EXAMPLE

Cost of attendance: \$88,000 (tuition and fees \$66,000; housing and food \$18,000; books, travel and personal \$4,000)

Grants from the college: \$41,000

Merit scholarship: \$5,000

Federal Pell Grant: \$0

Outside scholarships: \$2,500

Federal Direct Loan: \$5,500

Work-study: \$3,000

Net price is the cost of attendance minus free money only: $\$88,000 - \$41,000 - \$5,000 - \$2,500 = \$39,500$ for the year. The loan and work-study don't reduce the price. The loan must be repaid, with interest, and work-study is money the student earns over the year.

QUESTIONS TO ASK EVERY COLLEGE

- Is the aid renewable for all four years, and on what conditions (GPA, credits, full-time enrollment)?
- Will outside scholarships reduce the college's grant, or replace loans first?
- How does the net price change if a sibling enrolls in college or family income changes?
- Does the merit scholarship have a GPA requirement, and what happens if the student falls below it?

COMPARING OFFERS

Put every offer on one page (T-9), using net price for all four years, not just the first. Then decide whether you have a comparable offer to appeal with (M-2). A higher sticker price can still be the better deal, and the most prestigious offer isn't always the right one for your family's long-term future.

The Aid Offer Comparison

Net cost, not sticker price. Loans are not discounts (M-2).

LINE	COLLEGE A	COLLEGE B	COLLEGE C	COLLEGE D
Cost of attendance (tuition, housing, food, books, travel)				
Grants from the college (need-based)				
Merit scholarships from the college				
Federal and state grants (Pell, state)				
Outside scholarships				
NET COST (cost minus all free money)				
Work-study (earned, not guaranteed)				
Loans offered (must be repaid)				
Is the aid renewable? Conditions?				
Comparable offer to appeal with?				
Appeal sent · response				

The Scholarship Tracker

Cast wide, stack high, never pay to apply (Scholarships and Aid).

SCHOLARSHIP · SPONSOR	AMOUNT	ELIGIBILITY	ESSAY? (REUSE?)	DEADLINE	STACKABLE?	STATUS

PART VI

Signing Day and Beyond

Deferrals and waitlists, the final decision, and the summer that starts college.

The Starting Gun



JOSEF AIDEN DURAND
HARVARD COLLEGE '14
FOUNDER, VERITAS HALL

Decision Day can feel like the end of a long race. It isn't. It's the starting gun.

The students I'm proudest of aren't defined by where they were admitted. They're defined by what they did once they got there: the professor they sought out in week two, the club they built, the internship they earned, the friends they made, the setbacks they recovered from.

Wherever you land, the same habits that built your application will build your college years. Invest your time. Go deep. Lead. Measure what you change. Protect your sleep and your standards.

We don't just get students in. We build who they become. The becoming starts now.

Deferred, Waitlisted, Denied

The game isn't over when you hit submit.

Most families stop playing after they submit. The students who keep playing give colleges a reason to say yes in the second round.

AFTER YOU SUBMIT

Set up every applicant portal within a week, and check each one weekly; colleges post missing-document notices and interview invitations there. Keep your senior grades strong: colleges see your mid-year report, and offers can be rescinded for a serious drop.

DEFERRED

A deferral moves an early application into the regular round. Read the college's instructions carefully. If it invites updates, send one concise letter of continued interest: real news since you applied (a new result, honor, role or project), a specific reason the school remains a top choice, and, if it's true, a statement that you will attend if admitted. Then keep your regular decision applications moving. A deferral is not a no.

WAITLISTED

If you want to stay on a waitlist, opt in by the deadline. Send one strong letter of continued interest if the college accepts them, with genuine updates. Ask your counselor whether a short additional note from them would help. Then commit to the best school that admitted you by its deadline, because waitlists are uncertain and some don't move at all.

DENIED

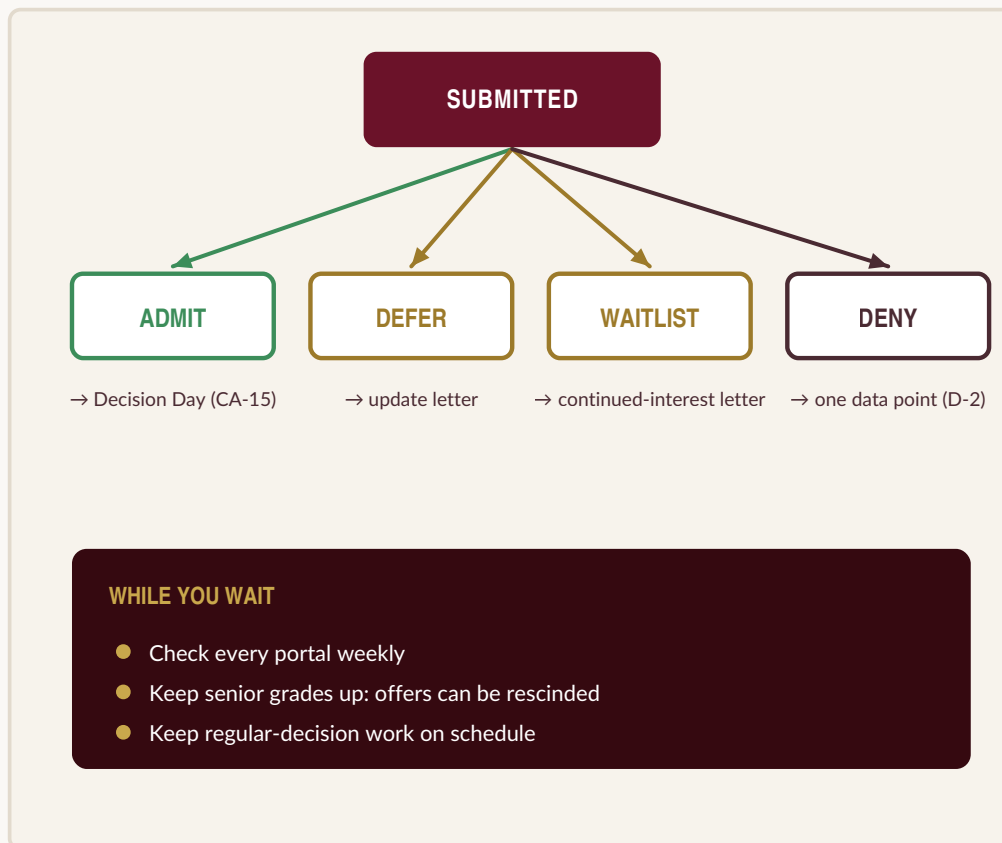
A denial is one reader's decision about one class in one year. It is not a verdict on who you are (D-2, D-6). Allow yourself to feel it, then turn back to the schools that said yes. Some of the most successful people I know were turned down by their first choice and are grateful now for where they landed.

Overtime

The game isn't over when you hit submit.

ST-16

PLAY CALL



FORMATION *Four outcomes, four next moves.*

SCOREBOARD

Every portal checked weekly; every deferral and waitlist answered within two weeks.

FILM Deferred, Waitlisted, Denied

SITUATION

From submission to final decisions.

THE PLAY

- 1 Set up every applicant portal within a week of submitting, and check each one weekly.
- 2 Keep senior grades up: mid-year reports go to colleges, and offers can be rescinded.
- 3 Deferred or waitlisted: send one concise letter of continued interest with real updates, only where the college accepts them.
- 4 Keep regular decision work on schedule. No single result changes the plan.

COACHING POINTS

Most families stop playing after they submit. The students who keep playing give colleges a reason to say yes in the second round.

The Letter of Continued Interest

One page, real news, sent only where invited (ST-16).

THE SHAPE

1. Thank the committee and confirm you remain very interested. 2. Share real updates since you applied: grades, a new result, honor, role or project, with numbers. 3. Give one or two specific reasons this college is still your first choice, drawn from your Cascade Sheet. 4. If it's true, say you will enroll if admitted. 5. Close with gratitude. Under one page.

DRAFT

Opening and thanks

Update 1

Update 2

Why this college (specifics)

Commitment, if true

Closing

Decision Day

Where heart, gut and mind agree.

You didn't come this far to only come this far. The last decision is the one that matters most, so let's make it a good one.

THE WINDOW

Most regular decision results arrive by early April. The national deadline to commit and pay a deposit is typically May 1, but check each college's date, because some differ. Waitlist decisions can arrive before or after May 1. If you're admitted off a waitlist after you've deposited elsewhere, you can still switch, but you'll usually forfeit the first deposit.

WHAT TO WEIGH

- **Fit:** Is this the best overall educational experience for you, with a strong program in what you want to study?
- **Money:** Is the final aid offer, after any appeal (Part V), the best one, and is it sustainable for all four years? Ask how aid renews.
- **Place:** Location, travel home for breaks, study abroad and the cost of all of it.

- **Waitlists:** Has anything changed since early April?
- **The visit:** If you possibly can, attend an admitted-students day. The feeling you get on campus is information.

Talk with your family and people you trust. But at the end of the day, this is your future, and it's your decision. Go where your heart, your gut and your mind agree: the most logical option, at a place you love, where you feel most at home.

IT'S WHAT YOU PUT IN

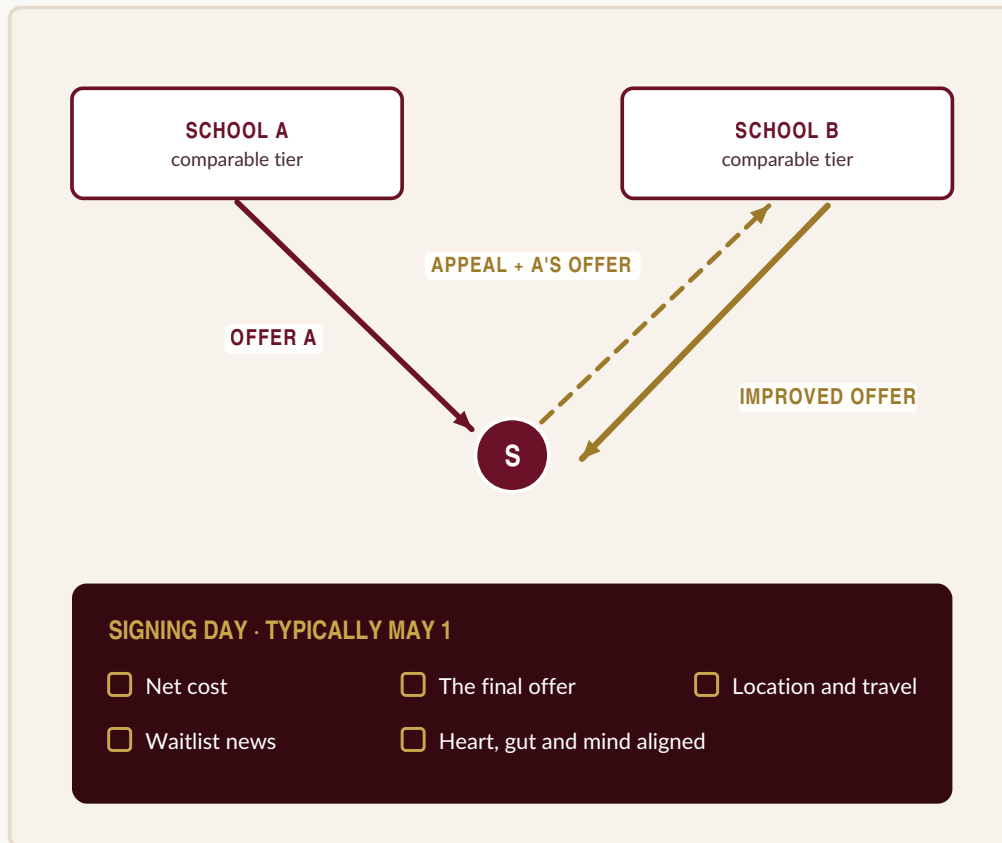
Here's what I want every student to hear before they choose: wherever you go, the name of the school matters far less than the energy you put into it. The students who thrive are the ones who show up, raise their hands, knock on professors' doors and build something. As a juice company once put it on its cartons: put good in, get good out. Words to go to college by, and words to live by.

Decision Day

Compare, appeal, decide. Then launch.

M-3

PLAY CALL



FORMATION *Line up the offers. Choose with heart, gut and mind.*

SCOREBOARD

Every comparable offer appealed; a decision made by the deadline.

SITUATION

March through the commitment deadline, typically May 1.

THE PLAY

- 1 Line up every admission with its net cost for all four years.
- 2 Appeal where you have comparable offers (M-2).
- 3 Visit admitted-students days where possible.
- 4 Decide by the deposit deadline: heart, gut and mind aligned.
- 5 Start the summer plan for college (Admission Is Not the Destination).

COACHING POINTS

This is why the list was balanced: options are leverage. And admission is not the destination; it's the starting gun.

FILM Decision Day

The Decision Scorecard

Heart, gut and mind, on one page (M-3).

QUESTION · SCORE 1 TO 5	COLLEGE A	COLLEGE B	COLLEGE C	COLLEGE D
Strength of my program or major				
Net cost for four years				
Location, travel and cost of living				
Size and feel of the campus				
Research, internships and career paths				
Communities I would join				
My gut on campus (or at admitted-students day)				
Where I picture my Future Self				
TOTAL				
Heart · gut · mind agree?				

Admission Is Not the Destination

The summer before college decides how fast you start.

For years, families treated the acceptance letter as the finish line. It isn't. It's the starting gun. The students who thrive in college start building before they arrive.

THE SUMMER BEFORE

- **Map the campus.** Use the Cascade Method again, now as a student: the courses you'll take first, the professors you want to meet, the labs, clubs and programs worth joining.
- **Build the first schedule on purpose:** a balance of requirements, one class you're excited about, and a manageable load for the first semester.
- **Start your network.** Reach out to a few upperclassmen in your field and a professor whose work interests you. Ten short conversations before move-in can change your first year.

- **Set up your systems:** a calendar, a budget and a weekly plan (O-18).
College gives you more freedom and less structure than high school.

THE FIRST SEMESTER

Go to office hours in every class, early. Try several clubs in the first weeks, then commit to two or three. Visit the career center before you think you need it. Protect your sleep. And keep the habits that got you here: invest your time, don't spend it.

The students who enter college ahead, instead of catching up, are the ones who started the moment they said yes.

Applying from Abroad

For international students and families applying to the United States, and the UK.

I've worked with students in China, Southeast Asia and the UK for years, and I've watched international families make the same avoidable mistakes. Here is what to know.

THE SAME APPLICATION, DIFFERENT CONTEXT

International students apply through the same platforms as U.S. students, usually the Common App, and readers evaluate them in the context of their own school system and opportunities. Send a school profile if your school has one, and use the Additional Information section to explain an unusual grading scale or curriculum.

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

If English is not your first language and your schooling wasn't in English, many colleges ask for an English proficiency score: TOEFL iBT, IELTS or the Duolingo English Test, among others, and some accept strong SAT or ACT scores in its place. Requirements vary, so check each college. Beyond the score, the essays and interviews are where your English has to be strong and natural. Start building that skill early; it can't be crammed.

TESTING

International applicants face the same testing policies as U.S. applicants at most colleges, and in some international systems readers rely on scores more heavily to compare students across schools. Plan your test dates early, because test centers in some regions fill quickly. *The SAT Playbook* and *The ACT Playbook* are free from Veritas Hall.

MONEY

Federal aid like the FAFSA is generally not available to international students, so aid comes from colleges. A small number of U.S. colleges consider international applicants without regard to their ability to pay and meet full demonstrated need. Most are "need-aware," which means asking for aid can affect admission. Many colleges ask international applicants for the CSS Profile or their own financial forms. Know each college's policy before you build your list, and include colleges where your family could afford the cost without aid.

AFTER ADMISSION

Admitted international students receive a Form I-20 from their college, pay the SEVIS fee and apply for an F-1 student visa at a U.S. embassy or consulate. Start early; appointment wait times vary widely by country, and rules can change.

THE UK IN BRIEF

UK universities use UCAS: up to five choices, one personal statement for all of them, and a focus on the subject you'll study from day one. UCAS replaced the old free-form personal statement with three structured questions for students applying for 2026 entry, so check the current format at ucas.com. Oxford, Cambridge and most medicine courses have mid-October deadlines; most other courses have a January deadline. The UK statement should be almost entirely about your academic interest in the subject, which is very different from an American personal statement.

Special Pathways

Athletes, artists, future doctors and public university systems.

Some students apply through pathways with their own rules and calendars. Here are the ones I see most.

RECRUITED ATHLETES

Athletic recruiting runs on its own timeline, set by the NCAA and by each division, with rules about when coaches may contact students. Talk to your high school or club coach early, build a recruiting profile with game film and verified stats, attend camps where college coaches evaluate players, and email coaches directly with your film. Academics still matter: coaches need recruits who can be admitted, and the most selective colleges hold athletes to high academic standards. Remember that only a small share of high school athletes receive athletic scholarships.

ARTISTS, MUSICIANS AND PERFORMERS

Many colleges invite an arts supplement, a portfolio, recordings or an audition, often through a separate portal or SlideRoom, with earlier deadlines than the main application. Conservatories and BFA programs weigh the portfolio or audition heavily. Ask your art or music teacher to help you choose your strongest, most recent work, and follow each program's format exactly.

BS/MD AND COMBINED MEDICAL PROGRAMS

A handful of colleges offer combined bachelor's and medical degree programs that admit students to medical school straight from high school.

They are extremely competitive and look for sustained, sincere commitment to medicine: real clinical exposure such as hospital volunteering or shadowing, research, service to patients, and the maturity to explain why medicine. Interviews are common, and deadlines often come early. Pre-med in an ordinary undergraduate program remains an excellent path; a combined program is a bonus, not the only route.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

The UC system uses its own application, not the Common App. It asks for up to 20 activities and awards and four Personal Insight Questions, chosen from eight, at 350 words each. Its deadline is November 30. The UCs do not consider SAT or ACT scores in admission. Write PIQs that are direct and specific; they're closer to short, personal answers than literary essays.

PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES AND STATE SYSTEMS

Many public universities have their own applications or priority deadlines, honors colleges with separate essays, and automatic or guaranteed admission programs for top students in their state. Texas, for example, uses ApplyTexas or the Common App and guarantees admission to many students ranked near the top of their high school class. Look up your own state's programs; they can be among the best values in American higher education.

One Student, Start to Finish

An illustrative season, from grade 9 to signing day.

To show how the plays connect, here is one student's path through the whole season. Maya is a composite, built from patterns I've seen many times; her details are invented.

GRADE 9: EXPLORING

Maya liked biology and drawing and had no idea what to do with either. She took the most rigorous science track her school offered, joined the science olympiad team and the art club, and volunteered at a local animal shelter on weekends. She kept a running list of everything she did, with dates and numbers. Her grades were strong from the first semester.

GRADE 10: BUILDING

In August, at her first Training Camp (O-6), Maya noticed the intersection: she loved drawing animals and she loved the biology behind them (O-2). She cut two clubs that weren't going anywhere (O-3) and doubled down on science olympiad, where she specialized in anatomy events. At the shelter, she noticed that adoption photos were blurry and dull, so she started photographing and illustrating adoptable animals for the shelter's website and social media (O-4). Adoptions of the animals she featured rose. She tracked the numbers.

GRADE 11: PROVING

Maya took an AP Biology class and prepped for the SAT over the summer and fall, finishing testing by February (O-17). Her project grew: two more shelters in the county asked her to train volunteers in her photo method. She cold-emailed twenty local veterinarians and researchers and landed a summer role in a university lab studying animal behavior (O-8). In the

spring, she asked her AP Biology teacher and her art teacher for letters (ST-3), and her theme came into focus in one sentence: "I use art and science to help animals find homes and help people understand them" (O-5).

THE SUMMER BEFORE GRADE 12: PACKAGING

Maya filled her Draft Board (ST-11) and chose a moment from the shelter for her personal statement: the afternoon a shy dog she had photographed for months was finally adopted, and what she learned about patience. She drafted it through BOPP (ST-4), built her activities list with numbers (ST-7), clustered her three animal-related activities, and locked a balanced list of fifteen schools (ST-1).

GRADE 12: EXECUTING AND DECIDING

She applied early decision to her first-choice school, which had a strong animal behavior program, and early action to four others, finishing everything thirty days early (ST-14). She was deferred in the early decision round, sent one letter of continued interest with real updates (ST-16), and kept her regular applications on schedule. In the spring she was admitted to several schools, appealed with a comparable offer (M-2), and chose the one where heart, gut and mind agreed (M-3).

WHAT MADE IT WORK

Nothing about Maya was extraordinary at fourteen. What made her application stand out was direction, depth, a project that served real people, and a story told with specifics. That path is open to almost every student who starts early enough and runs the plays.

Samples: Maya's Activities and Letter

Illustrative examples from the composite student in “One Student, Start to Finish.”

These samples are invented for illustration, built around Maya, the composite student earlier in this part. Use them to see the principles at work, not as templates to copy.

MAYA'S TOP TEN, IN ORDER

1. Founder, Shelter Portraits. Photograph & illustrate adoptable animals for 3 county shelters. Featured 140 animals; 112 adopted. Trained 18 volunteers.

2. Research Assistant, university animal behavior lab. Coded 60+ hrs of video on shelter dog stress signals. Built tracking sheet now used by lab.

3. Captain, Science Olympiad. Anatomy & physiology specialist. 2nd at state in Anatomy. Led study sessions for 9 underclassmen.

4. Volunteer, county animal shelter. 4 yrs, 6 hrs/wk. Socialize shy dogs; run Saturday adoption events; 400+ volunteer hrs.

5. AP Studio Art: Drawing. 15-piece portfolio on animal anatomy. 2 Gold Keys, regional Scholastic Art Awards.

6. Peer Tutor, biology and chemistry. Tutor 5 students weekly. All 5 raised semester grades by a letter or more.

7. Part-time Associate, family pharmacy. 10 hrs/wk. Manage inventory & checkout; translate for Spanish-speaking customers.

8. Illustrator, school literary magazine. Created 12 illustrations; designed 2 covers.

9. Member, varsity cross country. 3 yrs. Cut 5K time by 2:40. Team captain's choice award.

10. Caregiver, family. Care for younger brother 10 hrs/wk after school while parents work.

Notice the cluster at the top (slots 1–3: animals, research, anatomy), the service and leadership early, the job and family responsibility treated as real activities, and volunteering not last.

MAYA'S LETTER OF CONTINUED INTEREST

Dear Admissions Committee, thank you for considering my application during early decision. I remain very excited about joining the Class of 2031. Since applying, my Shelter Portraits project has expanded to a third county shelter, and 112 of the 140 animals we've featured have now been adopted. I also presented my lab's video-coding method at our regional science fair, where it placed second. Your animal behavior program remains my first choice, especially Professor Alvarez's research on stress in shelter dogs, which I would love to contribute to as a first-year research assistant. If admitted, I will enroll. Thank you again for your time and consideration. Sincerely, Maya

Short, specific, real updates, a concrete reason, and a commitment only because it's true. That's the whole formula (T-12).

Questions Families Ask Me Most

Short answers to the questions I hear every week.

Is it too late for my student? Almost never. Starting late is a constraint, not a verdict. Run the Two-Minute Drill (O-7): eight weeks, three jobs. A focused late start beats a scattered early one.

How many activities does my child need? Depth beats volume. Two or three activities with real hours, leadership and results beat ten memberships. But for the most selective schools, aim to fill all ten Common App slots with substance by senior year.

Should my child be well-rounded? Be well-rounded as a person and pointed as an applicant. Colleges build well-rounded classes out of students who are excellent at specific things.

Do I need to send test scores? At colleges that require them, yes. At test-optional colleges, send scores at or above the college's middle range for admitted students, and consider withholding scores well below it. Check every policy each year; many have changed.

SAT or ACT? Take one official practice test of each, compare with the official concordance, and choose the one where you scored better or felt more comfortable. Colleges accept both equally.

Does it matter if we visit? Visiting helps you choose, and some colleges track demonstrated interest. If you can't visit, attend virtual sessions, talk to current students and read the college's publications closely.

Should we apply early decision? Only to a clear first choice, after running the net price calculator, and with aid forms filed on time. Early decision is binding.

How long should the personal statement be? Up to 650 words. Most strong statements land between 550 and 650, but a powerful 500-word essay beats a padded 650.

Can a parent help with essays? Parents can brainstorm, ask questions and catch typos. The student writes every word. Readers can hear an adult's voice.

Is it bad to be undecided? No. But "undecided" is not a story. Write about what you're curious about and how you explore it. A direction with a reason reads as maturity.

Do colleges see social media? Some readers look, especially when something in the file prompts it. Assume anything public can be seen, and make it something you'd be proud to show.

What if my child gets a B? One B isn't a crisis. An upward trend and a rigorous schedule matter more. Don't write an essay explaining a single grade.

Is a private counselor necessary? No. This book exists so you can run the process yourself. A good counselor saves time, catches mistakes and keeps the student accountable, but it's a choice, not a requirement.

When should we start? The best time was grade 9. The second-best time is today.

Admissions Glossary

The vocabulary of the game, in plain English.

Admit rate (acceptance rate): the share of applicants a college admits. Below about 15–20%, a college is a reach for everyone.

Common App: the shared online application used by more than 1,000 colleges. It opens each year on August 1.

Common Data Set (CDS): a standard report many colleges publish each year with admissions statistics, including test score and GPA ranges (section C) and financial aid data (section H).

Cost of attendance (COA): the full estimated yearly cost: tuition, fees, housing, food, books, transportation and personal expenses.

CSS Profile: College Board's financial aid form, required by many private colleges for their own aid.

Deferral: an early applicant moved to the regular decision round for another review.

Demonstrated interest: signs that a student is seriously interested in a college: visits, interviews, applying early, specific supplement essays. Some colleges consider it; many don't.

Early action (EA): an early, non-binding application, usually due in November.

Early decision (ED I and ED II): a binding early application. If admitted, you attend and withdraw other applications. ED II usually has a January deadline.

FAFSA: the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, which determines eligibility for federal and most state aid. It opens each fall.

Gateway numbers: this book's term for GPA and test scores, the numbers that move a file from the floor to the table.

Holistic review: evaluating the whole application, not just numbers.

Hook: in admissions slang, a factor that gives an applicant special consideration, such as athletic recruitment, or a point of excellence that grabs a reader. In essays, the opening line.

Impacted major: a major with more qualified applicants than spaces, often admitted at a lower rate than the college as a whole.

Legacy: an applicant whose parent attended the college. Some colleges consider it; a growing number do not.

Letter of continued interest (LOCI): a short letter from a deferred or waitlisted student with updates and renewed interest.

Need-blind: admission decisions made without regard to ability to pay.

Need-aware: ability to pay may be considered for some applicants.

Net price: the cost of attendance minus grants and scholarships. Every college posts a net price calculator.

Personal Insight Questions (PIQs): the University of California's essays: four of eight, 350 words each.

Restrictive or single-choice early action (REA/SCEA): non-binding early application that limits other early applications to private colleges.

Rolling admission: applications reviewed and decided as they arrive.

Admissions Glossary (continued)

Student Aid Index (SAI): the number the FAFSA calculates to measure a family's ability to pay.

Superscore: combining a student's best section scores across several test dates. Many colleges superscore.

Test-optional, test-required, test-free: a college may let you choose whether to send scores, require them, or not consider them at all.

UCAS: the UK's central application service for undergraduate admission.

Waitlist: a list of students who may be admitted if spaces open after the commitment deadline.

Yield: the share of admitted students who enroll.

PART VII

Defense: The Mental Game

The opponent you can't see, and eight drills to beat it.

Winning the Mental Game

The opponent you can't see costs more applications than any rival.

Every student I've coached has faced the same opponent, and it isn't another applicant. It's the voice in their own head that says "I'm not good enough," "I'm behind," "Everyone else has it figured out." That voice costs more applications, more essays left unwritten and more opportunities never pursued than any competitor ever will.

Your brain is a terrible lawyer. It reaches a verdict first and hunts for evidence second. One bad test, one rejection, one awkward interview, and it says "case closed." But a single result is a data point, not an identity. Feelings are honest witnesses and poor judges.

Confidence works the same way. Most students wait to feel confident before they act: before they apply, lead, speak up or start. But confidence is

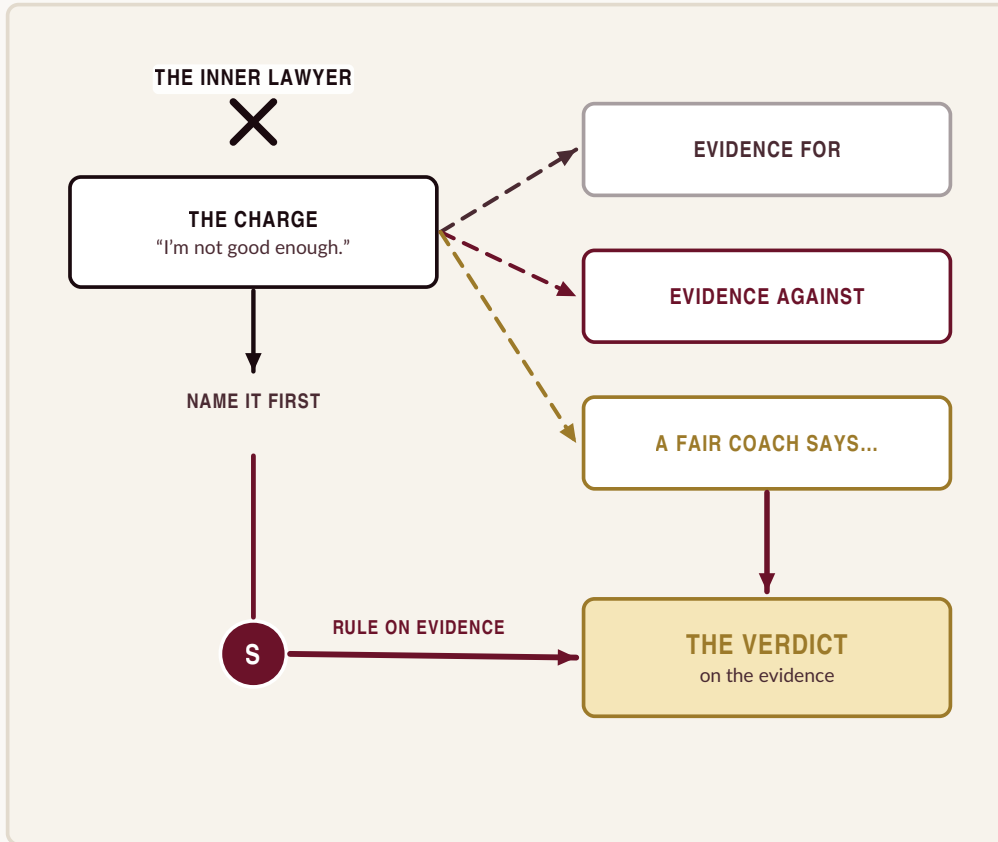
rarely the cause. It's the receipt. You build it through repeated proof, one small rep at a time.

And the students who stay steady through all of it, through deferrals and rankings and other people's acceptances, have something in common. They measure themselves against their own standards, not against applause. External validation lasts until someone disagrees with you. Internal standards stay with you even when nobody is watching.

The plays in this part are short, practical drills for students, and one for parents. Run them all season. The mental game isn't a phase of the process; it is the process.

Cross-Examination

Gather the evidence before you reach a verdict.



FORMATION Name the charge, examine the evidence, then rule.

THE DRILL

a two-column page, "What happened" and "What I told myself."

FILM Winning the Mental Game

THE OPPONENT'S PLAY

The inner lawyer starts with a conclusion ("I'm not good enough") and hunts for proof.

THE COUNTER

- 1 Name the charge. Write down the conclusion the brain jumped to.
- 2 Cross-examine. What evidence supports it? What contradicts it?
- 3 Call a witness. What would a fair coach say?
- 4 Rule on the evidence, not the emotion.

COACHING POINTS

Top performers gather evidence first, then reach conclusions. One outcome is not an identity. Emotions are honest witnesses but poor judges.

One Data Point

One result is what happened, not who you are.



FORMATION Read the trend, not the outlier.

THE DRILL

chart the last ten practice tests, grades or drafts, and draw the trend line.

FILM Winning the Mental Game

THE OPPONENT'S PLAY

One bad test, one rejection, one bad interview, and the brain says "case closed."

THE COUNTER

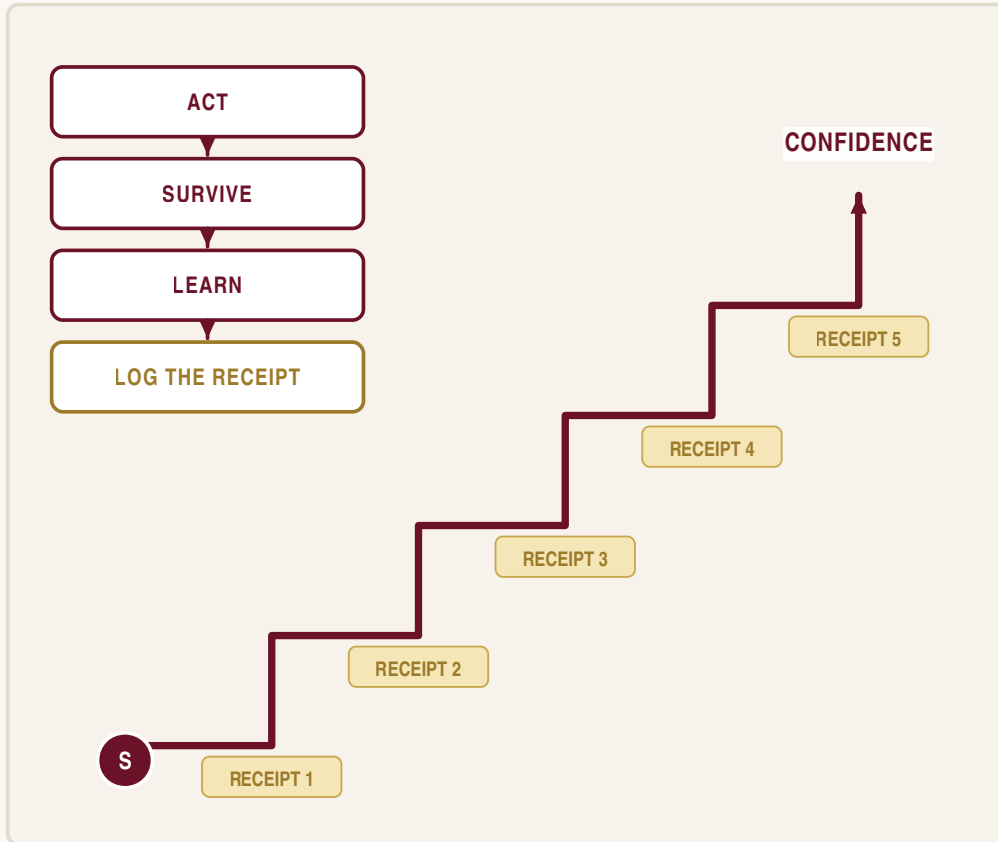
- 1 Label it: a data point, not an identity.
- 2 Zoom out. Plot the last ten results, not the last one.
- 3 Find the one adjustment for the next rep.
- 4 Run the next rep within 48 hours.

COACHING POINTS

A scientist would never publish a conclusion from one experiment. Don't overfit a life to one bad day. Feelings describe the present; they are terrible forecasters.

Receipts

Confidence is the receipt, not the down payment.



FORMATION Act, survive, learn, log the receipt. Climb.

THE DRILL

a weekly receipt log with three entries.

FILM Winning the Mental Game

THE OPPONENT'S PLAY

The student is waiting to feel ready before applying, leading, speaking or starting.

THE COUNTER

- 1 Pick the smallest scary rep: an email, a question in class, a rough draft.
- 2 Do it before feeling ready.
- 3 Log the receipt: what happened, and what was learned.
- 4 Reread the log before the next big rep.

COACHING POINTS

Confidence is rarely the cause; it is usually the receipt. It is built through repeated proof, not positive thinking. Perfectionism can be procrastination in a suit.

North Star

Internal standards over external applause.

D-4

PLAY CALL



FORMATION Hold the line to your standards; block out the noise.

THE DRILL

a five-minute Sunday scorecard against the three standards.

FILM Winning the Mental Game

THE OPPONENT'S PLAY

The student's confidence rises and falls with likes, rankings and other people's acceptances.

THE COUNTER

- 1 Write three personal standards, such as: finish what I start, tell the truth, do the reps.
- 2 Grade each week against those standards, not against applause.
- 3 Set the compass before the map: decide who you are becoming before choosing where to go.
- 4 Treat praise as a bonus, never as the foundation.

COACHING POINTS

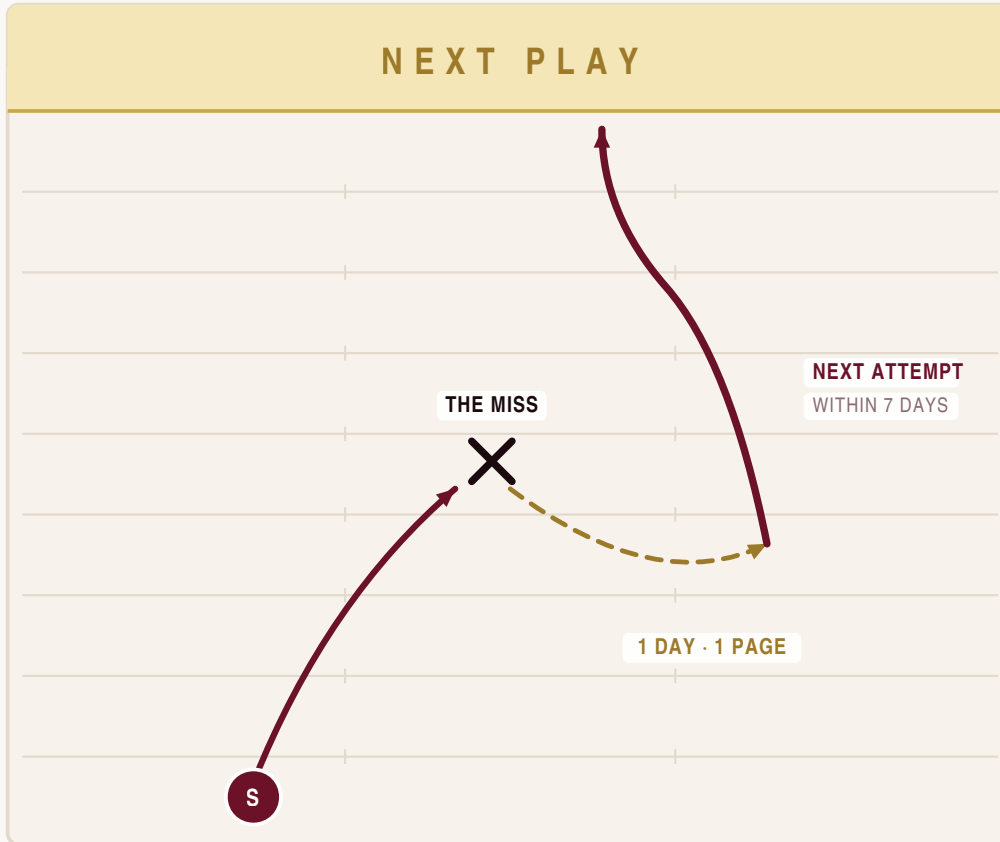
External validation lasts until someone disagrees with you. Internal standards stay with you even when nobody is watching.

Short Memory

Miss, learn, line up again.

D-5

PLAY CALL



FORMATION A cornerback forgets the last play and covers the next one.

THE DRILL

a misses log, with the lesson and the next attempt for each one.

FILM Winning the Mental Game

THE OPPONENT'S PLAY

The student avoids anything they might fail at: the hard class, the competition, the election.

THE COUNTER

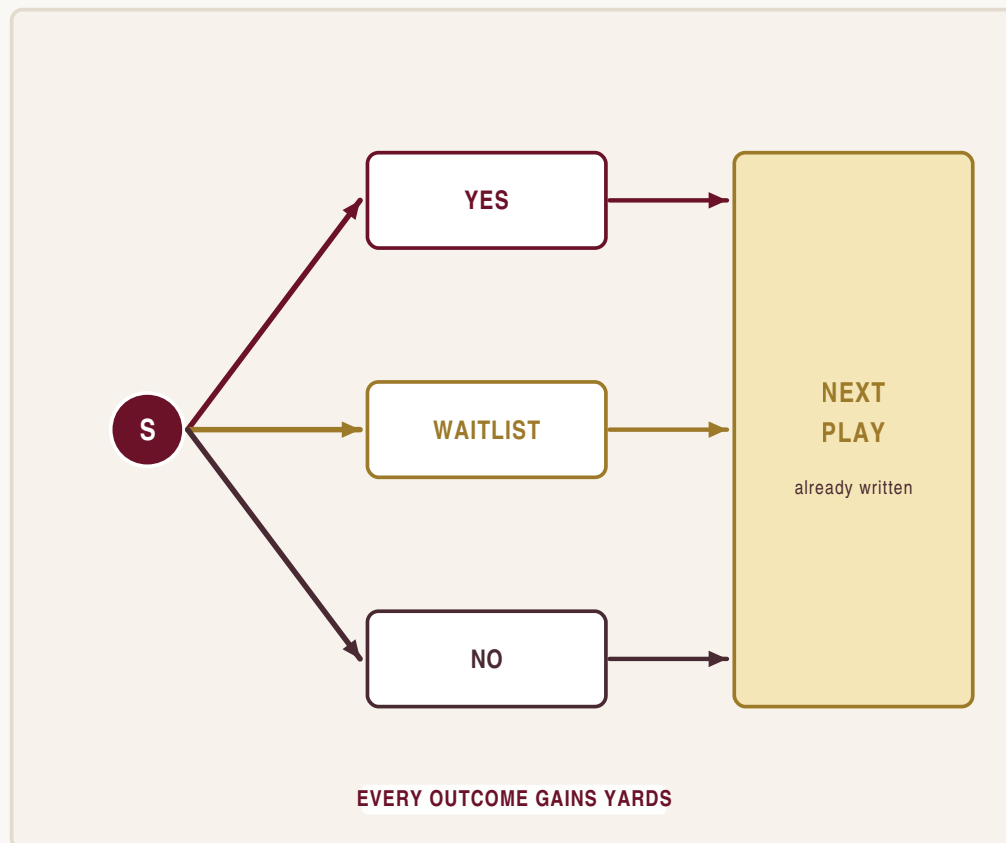
- 1 Pick one stretch goal each term with a real chance of missing.
- 2 When a miss comes, allow one day for feelings and one page for lessons.
- 3 Separate the result from the identity: "I lost the election," not "I'm a loser."
- 4 Make the next attempt within a week.

COACHING POINTS

Students who can live with failing try more, so they win more. Colleges want students who will take risks on a hard campus, and the habit starts long before move-in day.

No-Lose Formation

Set it up so every result moves the student forward.



FORMATION *Every outcome gains yards.*

THE DRILL

a written plan for all three outcomes before decisions arrive.

FILM Winning the Mental Game

THE OPPONENT'S PLAY

Decision season, and any student afraid of rejection.

THE COUNTER

- 1 Build a list where every school is one the student would be glad to attend (ST-1).
- 2 Before decisions, write down what applying already gave the student: essays, clarity, skills.
- 3 Write the plan for yes, waitlist and no before any result arrives.
- 4 Within a week of a no, run the next rep: a waitlist letter, an appeal or the next opportunity.

COACHING POINTS

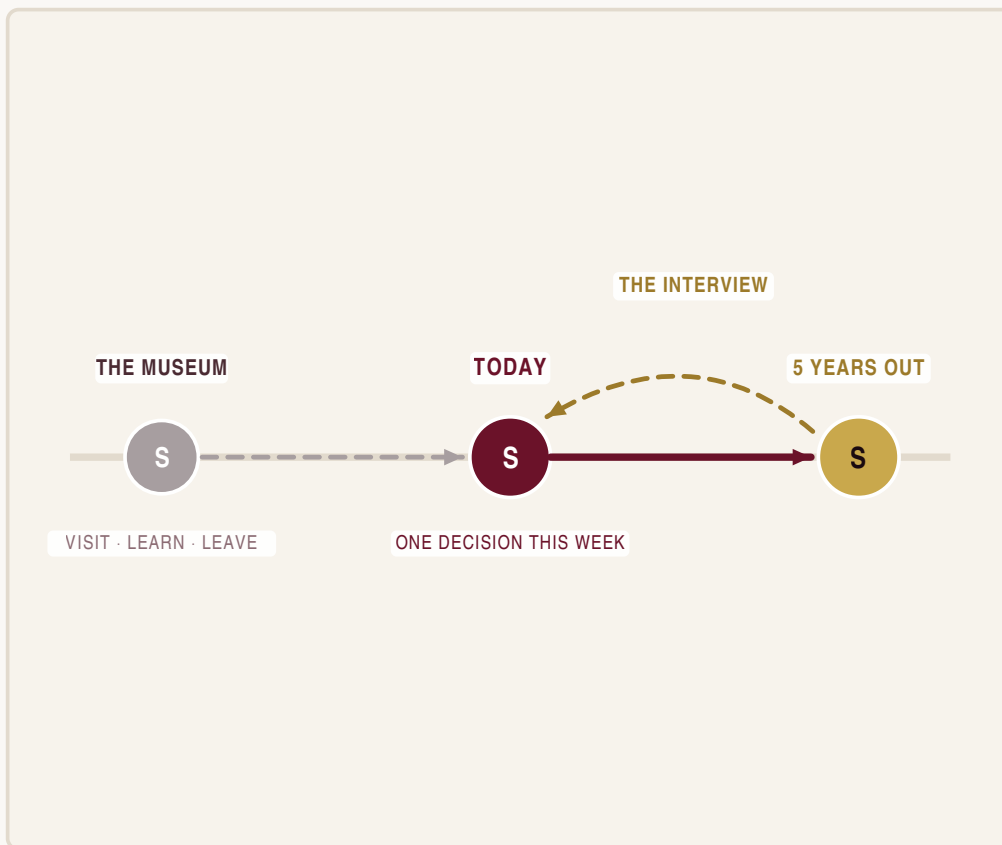
A rejection is one reader's decision about one class in one year, not a verdict on the student. Students who decide in advance that the process itself makes them stronger can't lose it.

The Rearview Interview

Answer today for the person you'll be in five years.

D-7

PLAY CALL



FORMATION Huddle with the player five years downfield.

THE DRILL

the one-paragraph answer, reread every term.

FILM Winning the Mental Game

THE OPPONENT'S PLAY

A student stuck on yesterday's mistakes or today's comfort.

THE COUNTER

- 1 Visit the museum, don't move in: name one past mistake and its lesson, then close the exhibit.
- 2 Picture the interview five years from now: "What did you do when things got hard?"
- 3 Write the answer you want to give, in one paragraph.
- 4 Make one decision this week that makes that answer true.

COACHING POINTS

The past is for learning, not living. Top performers choose for tomorrow's options, not today's comfort, and they ask what story they'll tell five years from now.

For Parents

You're the owner, not the quarterback.

If you're a parent reading this, thank you. You're probably carrying more of the weight than your student knows. Here's how to carry it in a way that helps.

YOUR ROLE CHANGES OVER TIME

Early on, parents drive the process: structure, expectations, accountability. But admissions evaluates more than achievement; it evaluates ownership. Does the student take initiative, make decisions and drive their own path? If parents stay too involved, that signal gets lost. Run the Handoff (O-9): parent-led in grade 9, shared in grade 10, student-led in grade 11, student-owned in grade 12. Stepping back is not stepping away.

PROTECT THE RELATIONSHIP

Students hear pressure even when parents mean support. Keep admissions conversations to one scheduled weekly meeting, and keep them off the dinner table the rest of the week (D-8). Ask about the person before the process: sleep, friends, what's hard right now. Praise effort and courage out loud, before any result arrives.

WHAT ONLY YOU CAN DO

- Run the net price calculator for every college on the list before anyone falls in love.
- Complete the FAFSA and CSS Profile on time, accurately, every year.
- Help with the data entry only you know: family history, finances, dates.
- Be the logistics: visits, test-day breakfasts, deadlines on the family calendar.
- Watch for signs of distress that last two weeks or more, and get professional help. Any talk of self-harm needs help immediately.

WHAT YOU SHOULD NEVER DO

Write or rewrite your student's essays. Contact admissions offices on their behalf when they can do it themselves. Compare them out loud with other people's children. Every one of these undermines the very ownership colleges are looking for, and readers can usually tell.

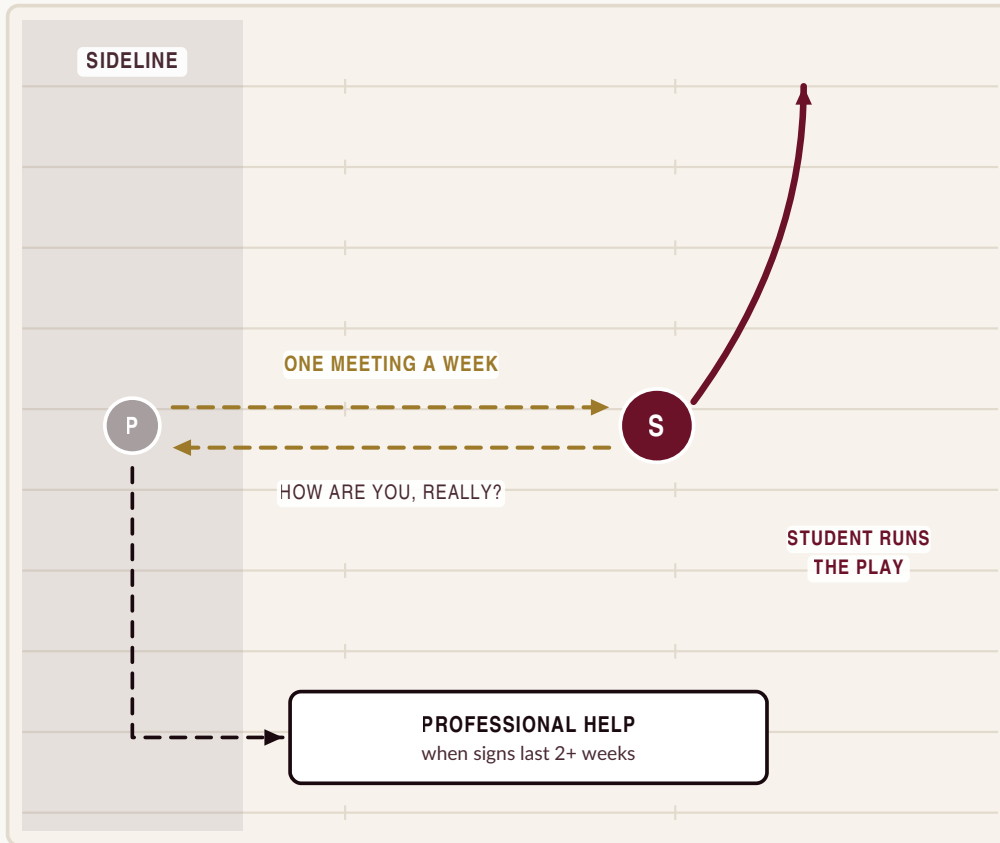
Your student will remember how this year felt long after they've forgotten where they applied. Make it a year they felt supported, and the outcome will take care of more than you think.

Sideline Support

Parents coach the person, not the application.

D-8

PLAY CALL



FORMATION *The owner stays on the sideline, not on the field.*

THE DRILL

a family rule for when admissions conversations happen, agreed by the student.

FILM For Parents

THE OPPONENT'S PLAY

Grades 11–12, when stress at home rises with every deadline.

THE COUNTER

- 1 Hold one 30-minute admissions meeting a week; keep admissions off the dinner table the rest of the time.
- 2 Ask about the person before the process: sleep, friends, what's hard right now.
- 3 Watch for changes that last two weeks or more (withdrawal, sleep, appetite, hopelessness) and call a professional. Any talk of self-harm: get help immediately.
- 4 Praise effort and courage out loud, before any result arrives.

COACHING POINTS

Students hear pressure even when parents mean support. Keeping admissions to one meeting a week lowers the temperature at home, and a supported student writes, decides and recovers better.

The Mental Game Log

Two drills, one page, every week (D-1, D-3).

CROSS-EXAMINATION (D-1)

WHAT HAPPENED	WHAT I TOLD MYSELF

Evidence for · Evidence against · What a fair coach would say · My ruling

RECEIPTS (D-3)

THE REP I DIDN'T FEEL READY FOR	WHAT HAPPENED · WHAT I LEARNED

The Weekly Family Meeting

Thirty minutes, once a week, and college stays off the dinner table (D-8, O-9).

THE AGENDA

1. The person (5 min). Sleep, friends, what’s hard right now. **2. Wins (5 min).** What got done; what took courage. **3. The plan (10 min).** This week’s three priorities, owned by the student. **4. Help needed (5 min).** What only a parent can do: money, forms, logistics. **5. Next week (5 min).** Dates and deadlines on the family calendar.

Date

How are you, really?

Wins this week

Three priorities (student owns)

What I need from you (parent)

Deadlines this week

Next meeting

A Letter to the Student Reading This



JOSEF AIDEN DURAND

HARVARD COLLEGE '14
FOUNDER, VERITAS HALL

If you made it this far, you already have something most applicants don't: a plan. That puts you ahead of more people than you realize.

There will be weeks when the plan feels too big, when a rejection stings, when someone else's news makes you doubt your own path. When that happens, come back to the basics: invest your time, show don't tell, be unapologetically you, and run the next play.

Admissions is a game, and now you know the rules. But the person you become while playing it is not a game at all. The discipline, the curiosity, the courage to ask, the habit of finishing what you start: those will carry you long after anyone asks where you went to college.

I'm rooting for you. Dominate on three. One, two, three... dominate!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josef Aiden Durand



Josef Aiden Durand is the founder and CEO of Veritas Hall and a graduate of Harvard College (A.B. in Psychology, Class of 2014). For more than twelve years he has coached students in admissions and test prep across the United States, China, Southeast Asia and the UK, with firms including Quad Education, Elite Educational Institute, IvyMax, FLEX College Prep, Bridge Education Foundation and Zenith Prep Academy.

His students have been admitted to Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, MIT, Columbia, Penn, Brown, Dartmouth and Cornell, and to competitive BS/MD programs. He has been featured in Forbes and The Hill discussing standardized testing and admissions.

Before admissions, Josef co-founded Spayce, Inc. (raising \$2.5 million in venture funding), worked on Wall Street at Nasdaq OMX, and worked in film and television production. He studied screenwriting at Harvard under Danny Rubin, the writer of *Groundhog Day*.

Josef played twelve years of football, including at Don Bosco Prep, where his teams won four New Jersey state championships and a national championship. The coaches who built those teams taught him that winning comes from a system, a playbook and the discipline to run it. He is also the author of *The SAT Playbook* and *The ACT Playbook*, and of *Art of Admissions* (2024), the book this one grew from, available on Amazon.

veritashall.com



*We don't just get students in.
We build who they become.*

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