



WRITING THE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS ESSAY 101

How to craft the
college
admissions
essay to tell your
unique story.



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ADMISSIONS ESSAY

WHAT IS IT?

Most colleges and universities require you to submit an essay or personal statement alongside your application.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Admissions Committees use this to determine what makes you unique and sets you apart from other applicants. While many competitive students will have similar test scores and grades, the application essay is a chance to tell your unique story in a way that can make you a memorable and appealing candidate on a more personal level.

WHAT SETS YOU APART?

Write a personal essay that tells your unique story and focuses on a topic that is important to you. The personal essay is often used to convey why you are a good match for the specific university, your eagerness to get involved on campus, your commitment to learning/growing, and a more reflective snapshot of you as a person - whether it is discussing your background, challenges, interests, accomplishments, etc. Many schools will provide a specific prompt, so be sure to tailor your essay to each school. If submitting the Common Application, you may write one essay which is then sent to each school on your application list. Make sure that you follow the prompts provided by the Common Application website as these prompts can change from year to year. The prompts for the 2024-2025 application year are provided for you in this guide.

COMMON APP PROMPTS

2025-2026

1

Background Essay:

Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

2

Challenge Essay:

The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

3

Belief Essay:

Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?

4

Gratitude Essay:

Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?

COMMON APP PROMPTS

2025-2026

5

Accomplishment Essay:

Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

6

Topic Essay:

Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?

7

Create-Your-Own Essay:

Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

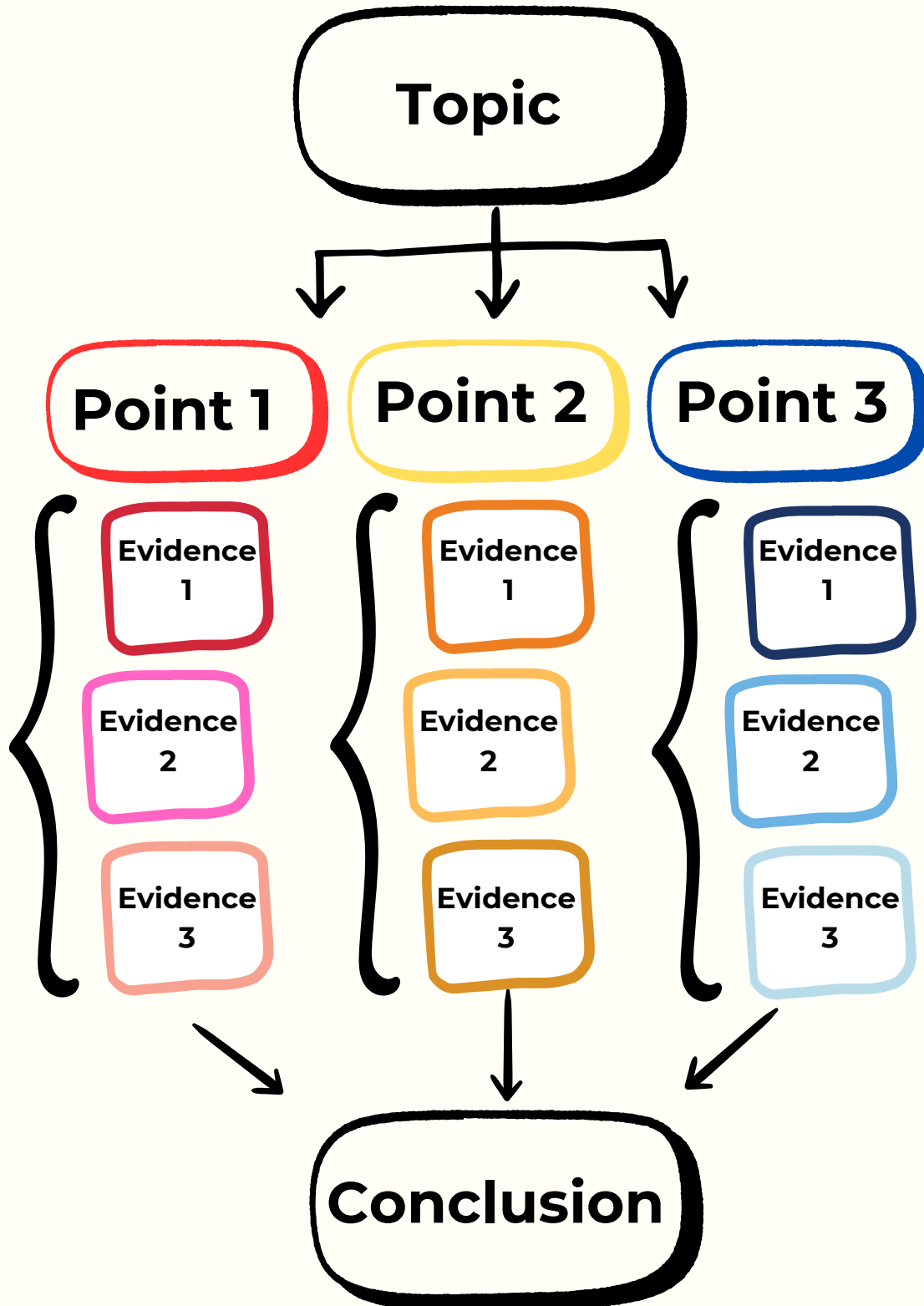


PICTURE PROMPTS

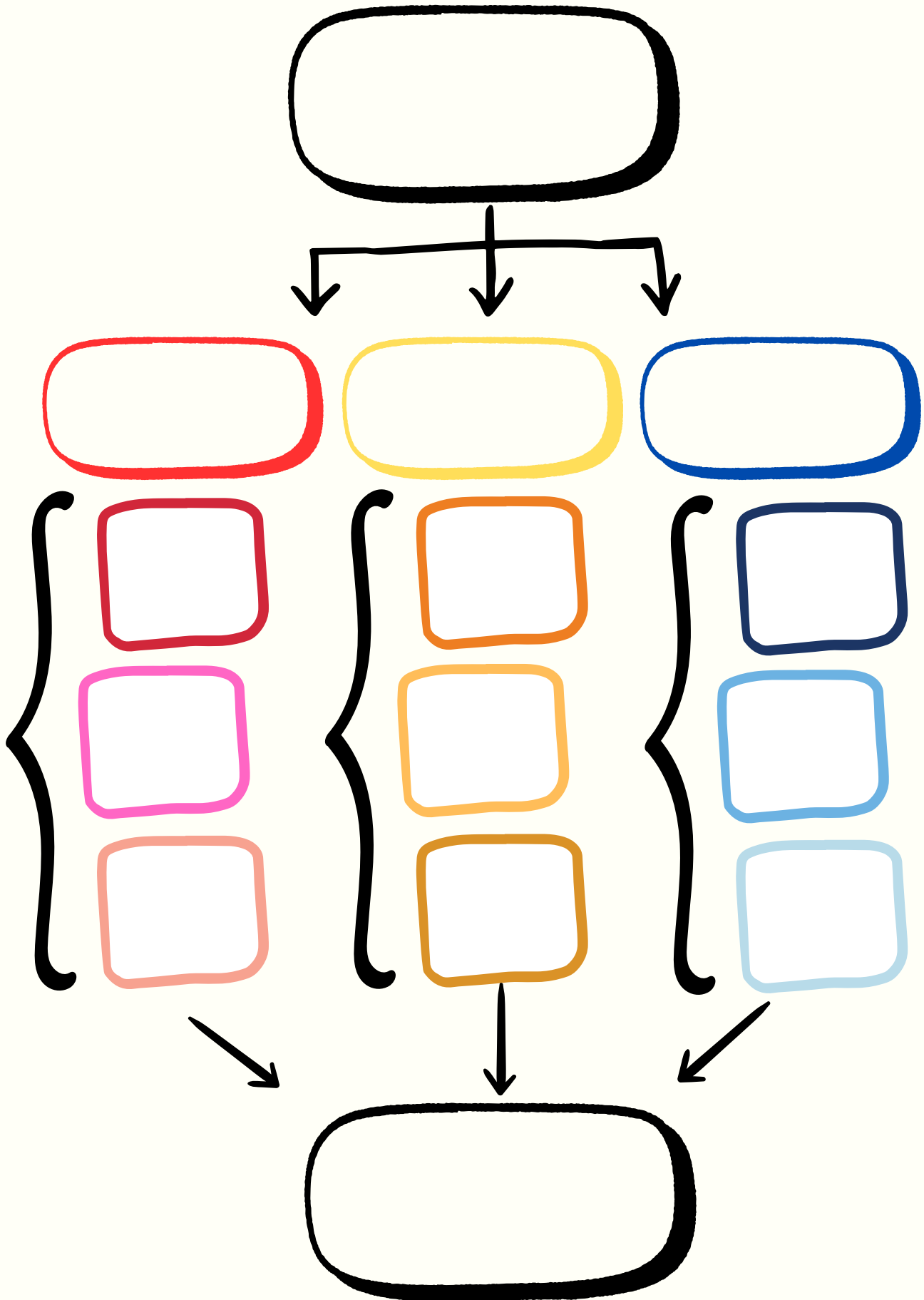
Select a prompt and then choose pictures from your life, pictures from the internet, or draw to help you illustrate your thoughts. This can help you brainstorm before writing.

BRAINSTORMING

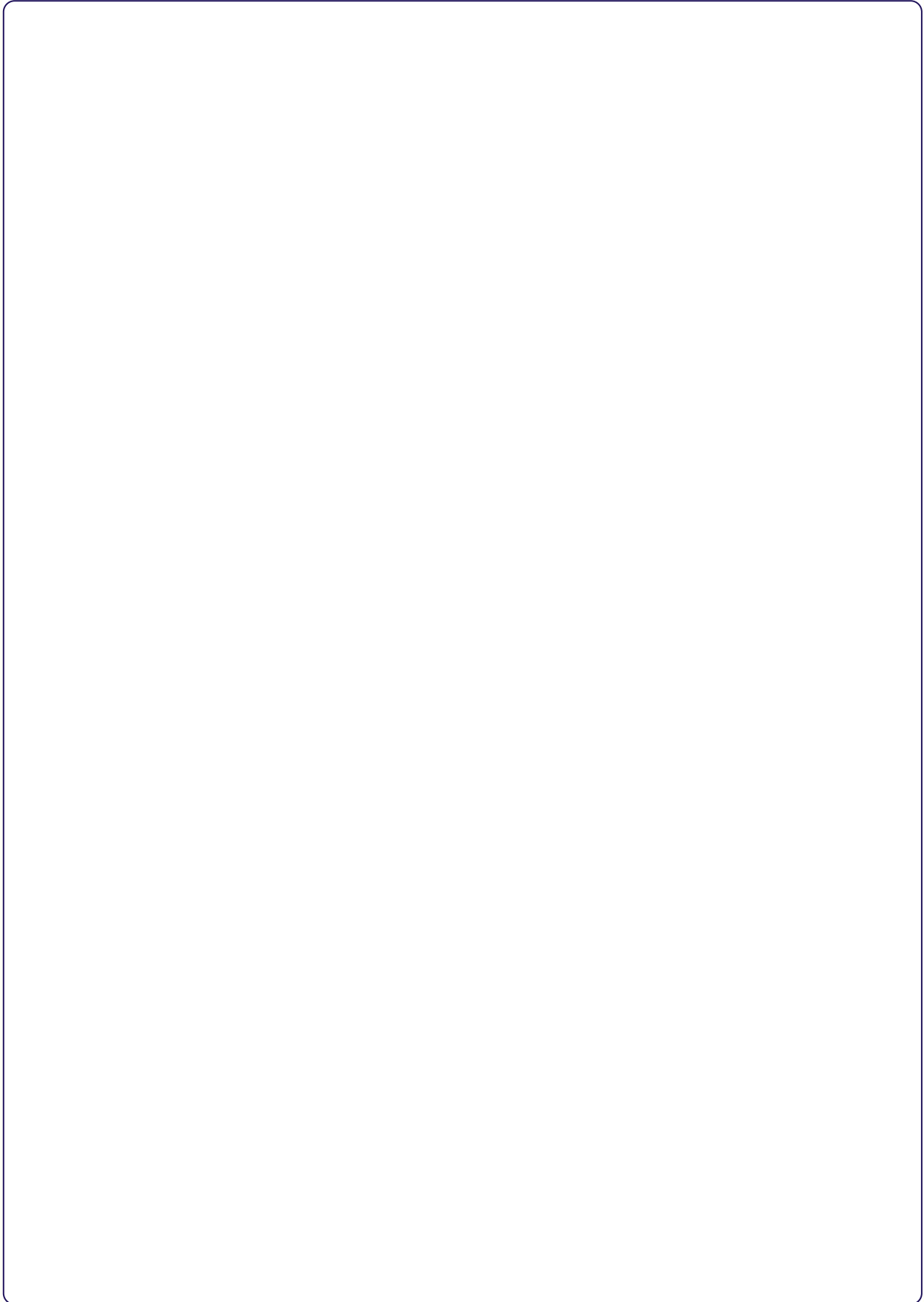
Use your pictures/illustrations to guide your brainstorming. Then turn your pictures into words. Divide them into separate points and then support them with evidence from your life. Use your final paragraph to tie your ideas/experiences together and explain how this supports why you would be a good fit for the school.



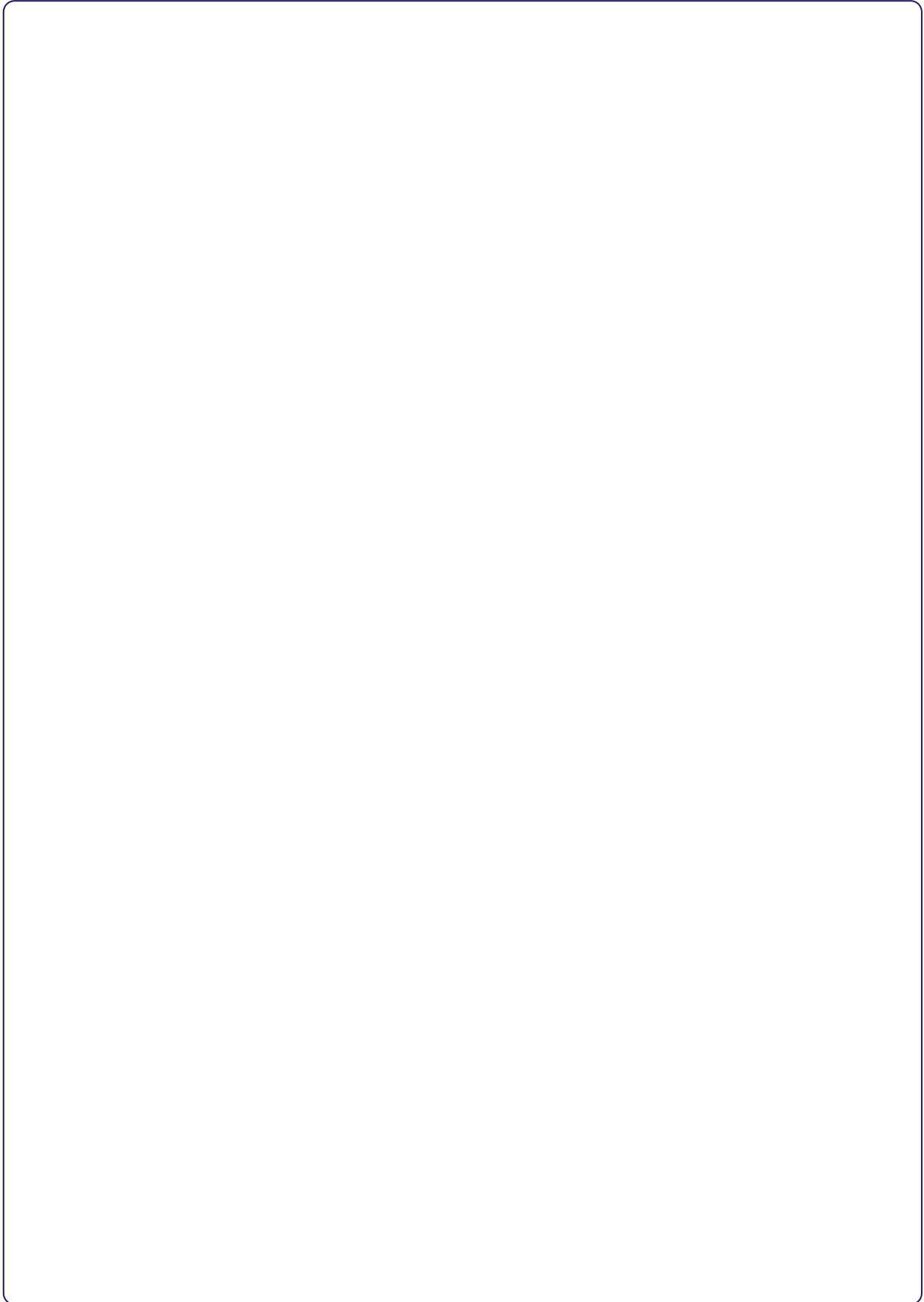
BRAINSTORMING



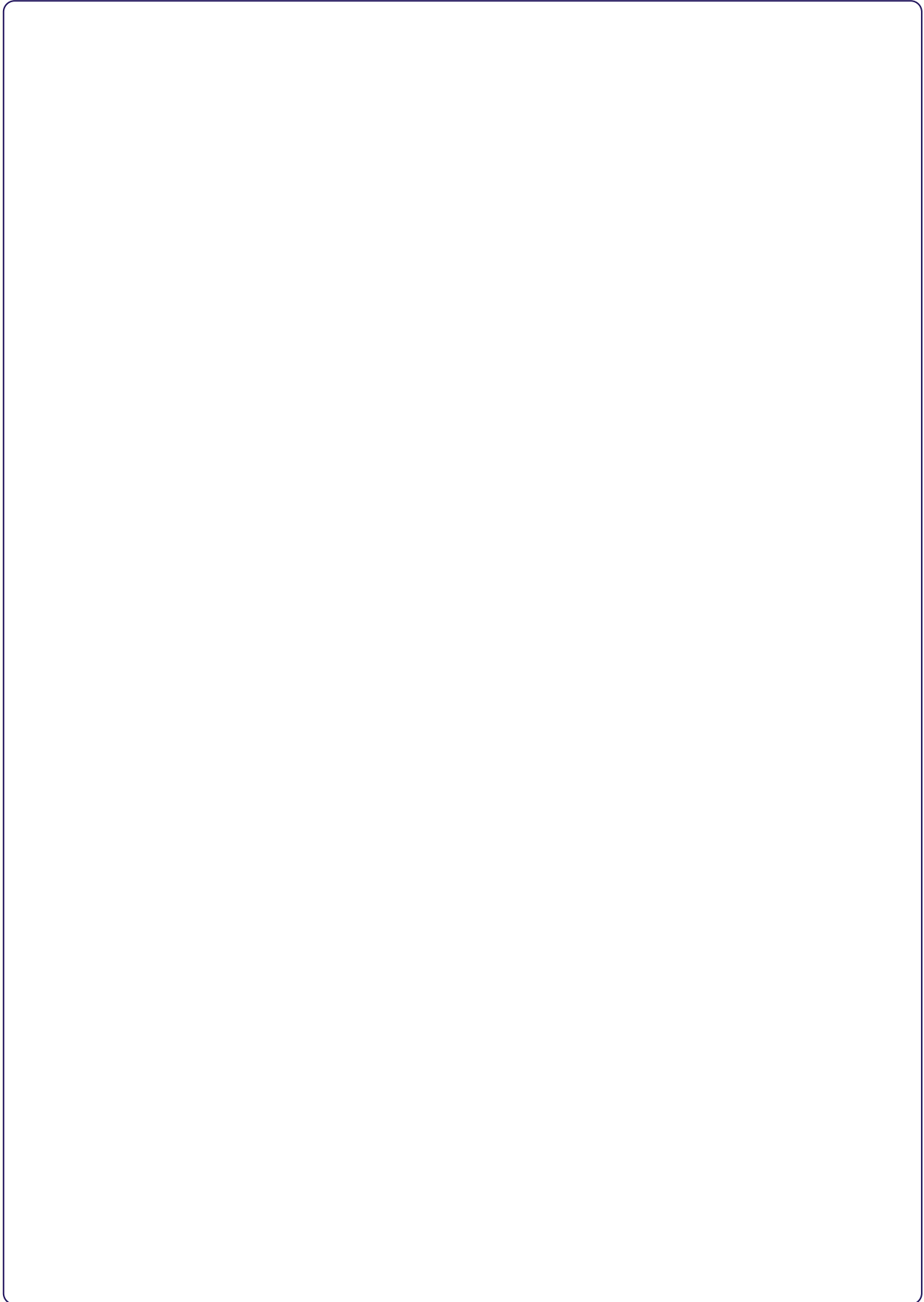
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Application Essay

CHECK LIST

- Write your essay based on something meaningful to you. If you don't care about the topic it WILL reflect in your writing.
- Provide a hook at the beginning to capture your reader's interest and convey the gist of what you will discuss in the first few sentences. You want them to WANT to learn more. They will be reading hundreds of these types of essays, so you have a small window to hook them from the start.
- Use the essay as an opportunity to convey who YOU are, what YOU value, and why YOU value these things. Let the reader get a feel for you as a person and be personable. This shouldn't read as a boring and generic essay that could be about anyone. It needs to tell your individual story in a way that makes you sound like a full fledged person.
- Include feelings and emotions in your essay. This is a way to help convey more about yourself/how you see the world. It SHOULD include vulnerability and self-awareness.
- Do not just explain what happened without also reflecting. As said above you need to show self-awareness. Did you mess up at one point? That's human. How did you navigate the aftermath, and what have you learned? How have you grown/changed?
- Do not use this essay as a way to discuss your awards and grades. The Admissions Committee reading your essay will see all of these listed out in your application, so you do not need to waste your time and limited amount of space to write about something they will already be reviewing.
- For your conclusion, try to find ways to summarize your ideas/experiences/together in a way that exhibits growth and demonstrates why you would be a good fit for the school.
- Revise, revise, revise. You will need to keep revising in order to submit the most polished version of your essay. Simple typos DO matter, so have someone look it over for errors before submitting.