APPLICATION ESSAY / DRAFT 04
"A TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEY..."

AN UNUSUALLY USEFUL GUIDE TO USING AI

How to Use *ChatGPT* on Your College Essay

WITHOUT RUINING IT.



What AI can help with, what it can wreck, and how to keep the most important writing in your application yours.

JAKE D. SAULS
ADMISSIONS CONTROL

01 / START HERE

The essay that *went missing.*

01

> *One of the most frustrating college essays I have ever read was beautifully written.*

The student had told me about an incredibly difficult experience during one of our brainstorming meetings. I still remember the conversation. As they talked, I was nearly brought to tears. They had a story worth telling, and they understood it in a way that nobody else could.

Then I read the essay.

It looked polished on the page. The grammar was clean, and a confident discussion of growth and perseverance tied everything into a neat conclusion. The student had used ChatGPT—a generative artificial intelligence (AI) tool that produces text in response to typed instructions—to improve the writing.

And much of what had made the story powerful was gone.

The details I remembered from our conversation had been smoothed into general statements. The student's vulnerability had become a tidy lesson. The voice on the page was so conventionally impressive that I barely recognized the student I had been talking to.

I knew what the student had actually said. An admissions reader—the person at a college who reviews an application—would see only the submitted version.

That is the problem with "make this sound better."

Ask ChatGPT to smooth out a paragraph, and it may polish away the very detail that made you stop and listen. It works with whatever details you feed it and often reaches for familiar language, even when your own awkward, unexpected phrasing was better.

Some students want nothing to do with AI. I understand their concerns about how these systems are trained, their effects on writers and artists, their environmental costs, and how easily software can start doing our thinking. Those questions deserve serious attention.

I've seen students apply AI to genuinely inventive projects, including work connected with medical research. In that setting, AI can help researchers look for patterns in data and investigate questions that would be difficult to tackle by hand. That is a different undertaking from asking a chatbot to write your personal statement. Generative AI can help with preliminary research, too, although every useful lead needs to be checked against the original source. An admissions essay is a particularly poor place to hand over the writing. The reader wants to see what you notice, how you think, and how you tell your own story. Colleges also have rules about what AI may contribute.

THE COST OF POLISI

02 / THE SIDE-BY-SIDE

A good story, *improved into oblivion.*

02

Imagine a student writing about volunteering at a food pantry. Both passages below are fictional. One contains the kind of material a writer might remember; the other illustrates the glossy rewrite an AI assistant may offer when asked to "sound impressive."

EXHIBIT A — CONCRETE MEMORY

I kept putting the canned tomatoes in the wrong bin. By my third Saturday, Mrs. Alvarez stopped correcting me and asked me to show the new volunteers where everything went. I was embarrassed. I still mixed up the bins. But I started showing up fifteen minutes early to check.

We can picture this.

EXHIBIT B — AI "POLISH"

Through my transformative experience volunteering at a local food pantry, I discovered the profound importance of resilience, initiative, and servant leadership. By overcoming initial obstacles, I learned that true growth emerges when we embrace responsibility and strive to make a positive difference in our community.

WHERE DID THE PERSON GO?

What do you learn from the first passage?

You can picture a person, a mistake, a specific place, and a small shift in responsibility. You may even wonder why Mrs. Alvarez trusted this student. Good: now you want to read on. That is specificity: details a reader can picture, such as a student mixing up the bins and arriving early the next week.

And the second?

It tells you that volunteering is good, leadership matters, and obstacles can teach lessons. Those are perfectly respectable ideas. They are also so broad that the student has nearly disappeared.

The first passage is promising. Now the student needs to reflect: Why keep returning? Was Mrs. Alvarez's trust uncomfortable? What did the student learn about being useful when they were still making mistakes? The student has to do that thinking.

A USEFUL TEST. Circle the details in a paragraph that only you could have supplied. Then underline any abstract phrase—words like "growth," "passion," or "transformative experience"—that needs evidence. If your paragraph has lots of underlining and very little circling, you know where to work.

03 / THE WRITING LAB

The robot *ate the joke.*

03

WHAT THE STUDENT WROTE

"By the end of my first debate tournament, I had learned two things: the bus smelled like old french fries, and I should never be trusted with a closing argument after three hours of sleep."

PERSONALITY STILL INTACT

WHAT THE CHATBOT MIGHT RETURN

"My participation in debate strengthened my communication abilities and deepened my appreciation for preparation and perseverance."

The first sentence has a particular rhythm and a sense of humor. The second is an entry on a résumé wearing an essay costume. The difference is voice: the recognizable choices a writer makes in what they notice, what they say, and how they say it.

The essay about adversity that knows exactly what it learned

Imagine writing about a family move you are still angry about. You have not fully made peace with leaving your friends. An AI-generated conclusion might cheerfully announce that you "learned to embrace change and discovered strength in uncertainty."

Maybe you did learn that. Maybe you are still deciding. Good personal essays can acknowledge uncertainty. A machine-made moral can make a complicated experience seem suspiciously neat.

What about metaphors?

A metaphor compares one thing with another: "The new school felt like a maze." A well-placed metaphor can be useful. Keep stretching the comparison, though, and soon the metaphor swallows the essay whole. If the hallway becomes a labyrinth, every teacher a guide, and graduation the discovery of a secret key, stop and ask whether the comparison is helping anyone understand the actual student.

TRY THIS

Read a paragraph aloud to someone who knows you. Find out which line sounds most like you and which one makes them curious. Their questions will help you decide what to revise.

"A résumé in an essay costume."

04 / THE RISKS

Seven reasons to *think twice.*

7

01 A rule you break can cost you admission.

The Common App, a shared application platform used by many colleges, treats passing off substantive AI-generated content as your own original work as application fraud. “Substantive” means the meaningful ideas or writing, rather than a typo correction. Individual colleges can be stricter. You sign a certification—a statement that your application is truthful and your work is yours—when you submit. [1–3]

02 You start sounding like everyone else.

That claim about the “transformative power of teamwork” could appear in thousands of applications without changing a word. An admissions reader is trying to meet you, and a polished collection of broad observations gives them very little to work with. Remember the canned tomatoes.

03 AI may invent your reflection.

Reflection is the thinking you do about what happened and why it matters. A chatbot will happily supply a sophisticated lesson about failure. You may need several drafts to figure out what the experience actually taught you. Those unsettled moments often show a reader how your mind works.

04 Editing can erase your voice.

“More sophisticated” often means longer words, smoother transitions, and less personality. You can lose humor, hesitation, regional phrasing, or a way of speaking that reflects your background. Writing in a second language does not require pretending to be a completely different person.

Think of your essay as a conversation

If you were describing a strange afternoon to a friend, you probably would not begin, “Throughout my journey, I have learned the transformative power of adaptability.” You would start with the strange afternoon. College admissions readers are people. Give them someone they can actually recognize.

04 / THE RISKS, CONTINUED

The other three. *And a detection myth.*

04

05 It can get the facts wrong.

Generative AI sometimes produces a "hallucination": a confident, plausible-sounding answer that is false. This is a particular problem in a Why Us? essay, a short response explaining your interest in a specific college. A nonexistent seminar or a professor who moved three years ago will not help your case.

06 Your private life may stop being private.

Students write about medical issues, family conflict, finances, and other people's experiences. Before pasting a draft into an AI service, consider what identifying information it contains, who might have access to it, and how the service handles your data. Privacy settings and rules vary. When you do not need to share the detail, leave it out.

07 You may be handing over the thinking.

Writing an essay means choosing what matters, finding a structure, and deciding which sentences sound right. Giving that work to a tool is called *cognitive offloading*. A small 2025 essay-writing preprint found that ChatGPT users recalled less of their own writing; a separate trial found weaker knowledge retention among undergraduates studying with ChatGPT. Other research found learning benefits when students used AI to understand ideas rather than generate answers. These findings raise questions about reliance; they do not show lasting cognitive damage. [6–8]

THE DETECTOR QUESTION MYTH / REALITY

Will an AI detector catch you?

Possibly, but a flag is only a prediction. An AI detector is software that estimates whether text resembles computer-generated language. It cannot directly witness who wrote a sentence, and studies have found both false alarms and missed AI writing. A detector score is not proof of authorship or misconduct. [4–5]

An admissions reader might notice an essay that sounds unlike your other writing, or an account with details that do not add up. That can raise questions, although it cannot establish who wrote the text.

DO NOT TURN THIS INTO A GAME OF CAMOUFLAGE

If you are spending more time trying to beat a detector than thinking about your own experience, go back to the story. The student behind it is still more interesting than a "humanized" chatbot paragraph.

A detector is not a witness.

05 / POLICY BEFORE PROMPT

What do colleges *actually allow?*

05

There is no universal “AI is fine as long as you edit it” rule. You may apply to several colleges through the same platform and face different instructions about assistance. An extra, school-specific essay is called a supplement. Check the policy and any certification for every college, scholarship, program, or portfolio.

THE PLATFORM	Common App	Its fraud policy prohibits intentionally presenting AI-generated substantive content as your own original work. It does not provide a blanket permission slip for every other kind of assistance. [1]
ONE COLLEGE	Yale	Yale explicitly permits grammar and spelling review and general topic suggestions at the beginning of the process. Its policy prohibits AI-composed personal statements and other responses, with possible consequences including admission revocation or expulsion. [2]
ANOTHER COLLEGE	Brown	Brown’s policy is more restrictive about AI involvement with application content. It excepts basic spelling and grammar review but does not generally permit AI assistance in developing the application’s content. [3]

Picture this

You are applying to Yale and Brown. A tool offers to read your draft and suggest better ideas. Yale’s policy may leave room for some limited early brainstorming, while Brown’s published rules are much tighter about AI work on application content. You cannot assume that a technique permitted by one school is permitted by the other. If the same essay will go to both, follow the stricter applicable rule.

What about translation? Asking a tool to explain an unfamiliar English prompt or vocabulary word is different from having it compose your submitted English essay. But full-sentence translation, restructuring, and rewriting can affect authorship. If you are multilingual and the policy leaves you unsure about translation or language help, ask the college before using it.

WHEN IN DOUBT

Read the policy on the school’s official admissions website. AI summaries can miss important restrictions. If you still have a question, ask the admissions office. Every school name in the directory that follows links to its published guidance.

05A / COLLEGE AI RULES / REVIEWED OCTOBER 2026

Read the rules before *the prompt.*

30

You can ask the same question of ChatGPT and get very different answers from two admissions offices. We checked 30 schools so you can see what each one actually says.

WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

WashU

AI topic brainstorming is prohibited.

Its admissions guidance forbids AI help choosing an essay topic. Read WashU's rule ↗

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Michigan

AI brainstorming and outlining are permitted.

The applicant supplies the ideas and final wording. Read Michigan's guidance ↗

> If you're sending the same essay to both universities, follow the rules for both. A permission from one college doesn't travel with your essay to another.

In the digital PDF, each school name links to its official source. In a printed copy, open the PDF to follow those links. The first 25 entries address undergraduate AI use; the final five include published advice or other guidance, as described in each entry.

When you check a school: Read the full policy, including any application certification you must sign. Check whether a separate program or portfolio has additional restrictions. If the instructions leave you unsure, ask the admissions office.

COLLEGE AI FIELD NOTES / 01–05 OF 30 / SOURCES REVIEWED OCT 14, 2026

01/05

The index: *01–05*

Boston College through Caltech. A clear starting point: five schools, five published approaches to AI-assisted applications.

01 ## Boston College ↗

Students may consult AI as a guide. Boston College requires original writing and expressly prohibits copying AI output.

02 ## Boston University ↗

BU encourages original ideas and a personal voice. It cautions students against having AI write their essays.

03 ## Bowdoin College ↗

Brainstorming and feedback on a completed draft are allowed. AI drafting, rewriting, tone changes and full translation are prohibited.

04 ## Brown University ↗

Basic spelling and grammar checks are the exception to Brown's restriction on AI-generated application content.

05 ## Caltech ↗

Its Fall 2027 guidance allows research, proofreading and AI-generated questions for reflection. AI-produced outlines, drafts and translations are prohibited.

COLLEGE AI FIELD NOTES / 06–10 OF 30 / SOURCES REVIEWED OCT 14, 2026

06/10

The index: *06–10*

Claremont McKenna through Georgetown. Cornell publishes two documents. You should read both before asking an AI tool to help with an essay.

06 Claremont McKenna ↗

Keep AI assistance to spelling, punctuation and grammar corrections. Claremont McKenna sets a narrow boundary.

07 Cornell University ↗

Cornell's FAQ allows topic brainstorming. Its separate application-help policy prohibits AI-generated outlines, drafts and translation. Read both.

Application-help policy ↗

08 Emory University ↗

AI can provide feedback or help polish a draft. Emory expects the ideas, experiences and personal expression to come from the applicant.

09 Georgia Tech ↗

Georgia Tech welcomes brainstorming, editing and refinement. Students remain responsible for the ideas and writing they submit.

10 Georgetown University ↗

The application affirmation prohibits AI tools from completing any portion of the application, including the essays.

COLLEGE AI FIELD NOTES / 11–15 OF 30 / SOURCES REVIEWED OCT 14, 2026

11/15

The index: *11–15*

Harvard through Penn. Several schools allow specific kinds of planning or proofreading. Their statements explain the boundaries.

11 ## Harvard University ↗

Harvard directs applicants to its integrity rules, including the Common App restriction on passing off substantive AI output as original work.

12 ## Johns Hopkins University ↗

Early brainstorming and basic proofreading are allowed. Johns Hopkins requires applicants to write the material they submit.

13 ## University of Michigan ↗

Michigan explicitly permits brainstorming, outlining, proofreading and organizing. The ideas and final prose belong to the student.

14 ## Northwestern University ↗

You may research schools, brainstorm topics and proofread. Northwestern prohibits AI writing, translation and repurposing an essay for another college.

15 ## University of Pennsylvania ↗

Penn allows help organizing thoughts and checking grammar. You should be able to explain the words and ideas in your submission.

COLLEGE AI FIELD NOTES / 16–20 OF 30 / SOURCES REVIEWED OCT 14, 2026

16/20

The index: *16–20*

Rice through USC. Stony Brook has an additional restriction for Creative Writing applicants. Program requirements deserve their own check.

16 ## Rice University ↗

Rice allows AI brainstorming and help organizing ideas. Students must write the application content themselves.

17 ## University of Rochester ↗

Rochester allows help exploring ideas and refining writing. It discourages having AI compose your essays.

18 ## Stony Brook University ↗

General undergraduate guidance allows some AI support. Applicants to the Creative Writing BFA face a separate ban on AI-assisted writing samples.

19 ## Tufts University ↗

Tufts strongly discourages generative AI for short answers and essays because it tends to flatten students' personal writing.

20 ## University of Southern California ↗

USC permits thoughtful assistance, including limited brainstorming. Its guidance prohibits AI-written paragraphs and AI-generated ideas presented as yours.

COLLEGE AI FIELD NOTES / 21–25 OF 30 / SOURCES REVIEWED OCT 14, 2026

21/25

The index: *21–25*

UVA through Yale. WashU and Wisconsin–Madison offer especially revealing differences in their published approaches.

21 University of Virginia ↗

UVA permits limited brainstorming and grammar help. Applicants must write their own essays and avoid pasting AI output into them.

22 Vanderbilt University ↗

Vanderbilt describes AI as a possible source of feedback. Applicants must retain control of the thinking and writing.

23 Washington University in St. Louis ↗

WashU explicitly prohibits AI essay-topic brainstorming as well as drafting and writing. College research and limited proofreading are treated differently.

24 University of Wisconsin–Madison ↗

Wisconsin–Madison discourages AI-written essays and says it does not use AI detectors or disqualify applicants on suspicion alone.

25 Yale University ↗

Yale permits topic suggestions, general advice and proofreading. Submitting substantive AI-written material as your own is application fraud.

COLLEGE AI FIELD NOTES / 26–30 OF 30 / SOURCES REVIEWED OCT 14, 2026

Additional guidance: *26–30*

Dartmouth through the University of California. These five entries come from podcasts, dean's advice, first-year writing instructions or counselor materials. They should be read with those distinctions in mind.

26 Dartmouth College ↗

In its admissions podcast, Dartmouth discusses brainstorming and editing and warns against AI-written essays. The discussion is advice from admissions staff.

27 Massachusetts Institute of Technology ↗

MIT's first-year essay instructions emphasize authentic writing. Its ban on AI editing for student-blogger applicants applies to that separate program.

Blogger application rule ↗

28 Princeton University ↗

Princeton's dean of admission advises applicants to develop their own ideas and avoid AI-generated prose. This is published advice.

29 Stanford University ↗

Stanford asks for personal, original writing. No detailed first-year AI permission list was verified when this guide was prepared.

30 University of California system ↗

UC asks students to write personal insight responses themselves and use their own ideas and voice. Its first-year guidance does not specify general AI permissions.

A school's general encouragement to write authentically gives no automatic permission for AI-generated text. If the instructions are unclear, contact the admissions office.

06 / HOW TO USE IT

The permission *sliding scale.*

06

The safest uses usually help you learn a skill or organize the work without generating material for submission. Even then, verify that the specific college permits the assistance. Treat these categories as a starting point; the college's actual policy decides.

01 / LEARN	GENERALLY LOWER-RISK LEARNING HELP	Explain active and passive voice using made-up examples. Define an unfamiliar term in a prompt. Build a deadline calendar. Describe where to find official course catalogs. Check basic spelling when permitted.
02 / CHECK	STOP AND CHECK THE COLLEGE RULES	Suggest topics. Read or comment on an actual draft. Organize your notes into an outline. Translate your prose. Propose cuts, transitions, or an ending. These may shape submitted content even when the AI does not write a full essay.
03 / STOP	KEEP OUT OF THE SUBMITTED ESSAY	Generate a personal statement or school supplement. Write a hook or conclusion. Invent a lesson learned. Make up accomplishments. Rewrite your paragraphs "in your voice." Produce a Why Us? answer based on unverifiable college details.

The four-question decision test

1. Did the tool teach me something, or did it produce the answer I plan to submit?
2. Are the experiences, insights, choices, and final language genuinely mine?
3. Can I explain and verify every fact, especially anything about a college?
4. Does this particular college permit this particular use?

If the last answer is "I have no idea," that is your next task: find out before using the tool.

07 / A PROMPT CLINIC

Give ChatGPT a *teaching job.*

07

These prompts practice writing skills with fictional examples, so you can apply the techniques to your own essay. Always check the college's rules first, and avoid pasting sensitive information or the application draft into a tool where that use is not permitted.

01 **Learn what a sentence is doing**

"Explain active and passive voice with two invented examples about cooking. Show how the emphasis changes. Do not write anything for my application."

02 **Get better at detail**

"Teach me how to replace vague claims with concrete observations. Use a fictional story about repairing a bicycle."

03 **Think about a reader**

"What questions does a reader ask when a personal narrative jumps from one year to another? Give questions, not transition sentences."

04 **Improve your revision skills**

"Explain when a metaphor helps nonfiction and when it becomes distracting. Use examples from invented stories."

05 **Verify college information**

"Which official university pages should I consult to confirm that a course or program exists? Do not invent any courses or programs."

06 **Make a plan**

"Help me plan two weeks for brainstorming, drafting, resting, and revising before my deadline. Do not generate essay text."

Requests that hand over too much

"Write my introduction about my grandmother." • "Make this essay sound like an Ivy League student." • "Invent a powerful lesson from this experience." • "Write a 250-word Why Us? response." • "Humanize this AI draft so the college won't notice."

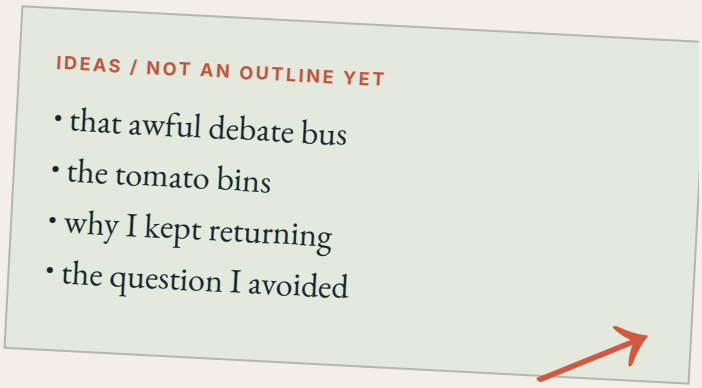
NOTICE THE DIFFERENCE. Look at what each request asks the tool to produce. The first group asks for help learning or planning; the second hands parts of your application to the chatbot.

08 / THE ACTUAL WRITING

Write the essay *yourself.*

08

The interesting stuff is in your notes.



01 Start with a memory that sticks.

Make a list of moments you keep returning to: an argument, a small embarrassment, a project nobody understood, a recurring family ritual. Talk them through with a trusted person. Your first notes should be messy and yours.

02 Find the question underneath.

What changed? What bothered you? What are you still trying to understand? Sometimes the best subject is an experience you have not entirely figured out.

03 Choose the scene and its purpose.

A scene is a particular moment with people doing or saying things. Decide what a reader will learn by witnessing that moment. Specificity is useful only when the detail earns its place.

04 Shape the narrative.

An arc is the path a story follows as something changes. My nine-part essay structure offers a flexible way to think through the opening hook, the response it creates, context, tension, a turning point, and reflection. Use those parts to examine your story. Arrange the final paragraphs however the essay needs.

08 / THE ACTUAL WRITING, CONTINUED

And then you *revise it.*

08

05 Draft before you polish.

Get your story down in language you would actually use. Some sentences will be clumsy. That is fine; revisions go much better when there is a real person on the page to begin with.

06 Revise like a writer.

Check for concrete details, active sentences, honest reflection, and a beginning that creates curiosity. When you reach the conclusion, see whether the opening means something new now that the reader knows the story. Your original experience should remain visible.

07 Verify, read aloud, and keep your drafts.

Read it to someone you trust. Check names, dates, and college facts. Keep notes and version history so you can describe your process honestly. Apply every destination college's AI policy.

HOOK ↘ ENDING

A note on hooks and endings

A hook is the opening that makes someone want to continue. It might begin with an odd detail, an action, or an unanswered question. A conclusion should give that opening new meaning after the reader knows the story. You can leave the opening's exact words alone. And please spare the reader a motivational quotation about perseverance.

~~*"I have always been passionate about..."*~~ START SOMEWHERE INTERESTING. _____

09 / VERIFY EVERYTHING

The *Why Us?* trap.

AN EXAMPLE / THIS SCHOOL DOES NOT EXIST

CEDAR HARBOR UNIVERSITY

404

NOT FOUND

HOME / ACADEMICS / URBAN FUTURES

Exercise A: when the software invents a college

A fictional student asks for a short Why Us? essay about a fictional college called Cedar Harbor University. The tool enthusiastically praises "Professor Vera Chen's renowned Urban Futures Lab." It sounds wonderfully specific. Unfortunately, in our imaginary example, neither the professor nor the lab exists.

Specific names can give a weak essay the appearance of research, even when an AI tool simply made them up. College names, majors, programs, courses, professors, and clubs must be checked against current official sources. After confirming that the program exists, you have still got the interesting question to answer: Why does it matter to you?

WEAK RESPONSE

Weak response: "Your outstanding interdisciplinary curriculum will allow me to pursue my passions and become a leader in my community."

USEFUL STUDENT NOTES

Useful student notes: "I spent last summer counting how many people crossed our town's six-lane road to reach the library. I want to study how street design changes who gets to use a city. Find the planning curriculum; see whether there's actual fieldwork."

Those notes give the student something worth investigating. The next step is visiting the real college's official website and making an honest connection.

10 / THE VOICE TEST

Do you still *sound like you?*

10

Exercise B: find your voice

Read your opening aloud. Mark any phrase you would never use while telling the story to somebody who knows you. Now ask: Did I choose this word because it is accurate, or because I thought a college would find it impressive?

Try the same with a friend who writes differently from you. You may describe identical events with different rhythms, details, and jokes. The differences are the point. Keep the phrasing, humor, and observations that belong to you.

> **LANGUAGE NOTE / ACTIVE VS PASSIVE**
>
> In active voice, the subject does the action: “Mrs. Alvarez handed me the clipboard.” In passive voice, the subject receives the action: “The clipboard was handed to me.” Both are grammatically valid; choose the one that gives the reader the clearest picture.

11 / THE AUTHORSHIP TEST

Scaffold, *Not Shortcut.*

“Scaffold, Not Shortcut” is a reminder that support should help students build their own work. Here is how that applies to AI: AI can help you understand a writing technique. You still have to decide what to say and write the meaningful passages yourself. Taking an AI-drafted paragraph and swapping words around will not give you independent authorship.

01 **OWN THE IDEA**
Can you explain why you chose the topic and what you believe about it—without asking a chatbot?

02 **OWN THE SCENE**
Are the actions, conversations, details, and memories accurate? Did you decide which mattered?

03 **OWN THE LANGUAGE**
Did you compose the substantive passages yourself, using only help your destination colleges allow?

04 **OWN THE FACTS**
Can you verify every claim and school-specific detail from a reliable source?

05 **OWN THE PROCESS**
Can you describe how the essay evolved from notes to drafts to revision?

11 / BEFORE YOU SUBMIT

A final check.

Already used ChatGPT on your draft?

First, figure out exactly what it did. Grammar review is different from creating a paragraph, and colleges treat them differently. Check the relevant policies. If AI supplied major ideas or prose that cannot be submitted, return to your own notes and write an independent new draft. Running that draft through a "humanizer" would leave the underlying authorship problem unresolved.

Keep the work you genuinely did: memories, questions, actual conversations, your own observations. If you need help understanding a restriction, contact the college. You may also ask a teacher or counselor for feedback within that college's rules.

TEAR-OUT / SELF-AUDIT

USE BEFORE YOU PRESS SUBMIT

Before you check the boxes, ask whether you could explain every important sentence to an admissions reader as your own work. That is a better standard than a detector score.

- [ ] Every experience and claim is true. No invented achievements, conversations, or emotions.
- [ ] I chose the subject and did the thinking about what it meant.
- [ ] The substantive writing is mine; any assistance followed the colleges' rules.
- [ ] I checked each school's AI policy and the certification I will sign.
- [ ] I verified college names, programs, courses, and other factual claims.
- [ ] I protected sensitive information about myself and other people.
- [ ] I can explain why every important detail belongs in the essay.
- [ ] I kept notes or version history that show how I wrote and revised.
- [ ] I read the essay aloud. The person speaking in it still sounds like me.

12 / THE WORKSHEET

Three sentences worth *writing yourself.*

12

> *What do I want a reader to learn about me? Which scene makes that visible? What changed in my understanding while I worked on this essay?*

My AI-use record (optional; keep with drafts)

A simple record, for your files.

COLLEGE & POLICY LINK

ASSISTANCE USED / DATE

WHAT THE TOOL DID—AND WHAT I DECIDED

Do not submit this record unless an institution asks for disclosure. Its purpose is to make your process clear to you.

MORE FREE GUIDES & WORKSHEETS ↗

13 / AFTER THE GUIDE

A few things *worth keeping.*

When you submit a college essay, you are giving somebody a small piece of your mind: what you notice, what makes you laugh, what embarrasses you, what you are trying to understand. Some of the best lines may be the ones you almost deleted because they seemed too odd or too ordinary. Give the reader a piece of writing that is true, thoughtfully made, and recognizably yours.

Check the rules at every college on your list. When a tool can teach you something useful and the school permits it, learn the technique. Then close the tab, open your draft, and see what you can do with it.

The person who will live through college is you. Let the admissions office hear from that person.

OFFICIAL POLICIES & RESEARCH

[1] Common Application, Fraud Policy. commonapp.org/fraud-policy/ https://www.commonapp.org/fraud-policy/

[2] Yale Undergraduate Admissions, AI Policy. admissions.yale.edu/ai-policy https://admissions.yale.edu/ai-policy

[3] Brown Undergraduate Admission, Integrity in the Application Process. https://admission.brown.edu/apply/how-apply/integrity-application-process

[4] Van Vlasselaer, Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt (2026), "Who wrote this? Evaluating the reliability of AI detection tools in higher education," International Journal for Educational Integrity. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40979-026-00226-w

[5] Angelier (2026), "The pitfalls of AI detection in academic writing: bias, false positives, and the need for inclusive assessment," AI and Ethics. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s43681-026-01376-w

NOTES ON THE EXAMPLES

The opening student account has been anonymized. The writing comparisons and Cedar Harbor University are fictional examples. College policies may change; confirm the current rules before submitting an application. Sources reviewed October 14, 2026.

Admissions Control • An educational resource for students and families.

STUDIES ON AI & LEARNING

[6] Kosmyna et al. (2025), *Your Brain on ChatGPT* (preprint). arxiv.org/abs/2506.08872

[7] Barcaui (2025), *ChatGPT as a Cognitive Crutch* (randomized trial). doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.102287

[8] Contractor & Reyes (2026), *Experimental Evidence on the Learning Impact of Generative AI* (working paper). iza.org/publications/dp/18792

ADMISSIONS CONTROL

FIELD GUIDE / 01

14 / WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

Bring the *messy draft.* Or the blank page.

Maybe your essay is still three ideas in a notes app. Maybe ChatGPT has turned a perfectly interesting life into a speech about resilience. There is plenty to work with. I help students figure out what belongs on the page, and how to make the writing sound like someone worth getting to know.

01 / LEARN TO DO IT

The AI & *College Essay Class*

We'll put chatbot essays under a microscope and see why some polished paragraphs tell an admissions officer almost nothing. Then we'll practice stronger openings, details a reader can picture, and revisions that still sound like you. We'll cover what colleges actually permit, too.

Come with questions. You'll leave with writing techniques you can use and a clearer sense of when to close the chatbot.

VIEW CLASS DETAILS →

02 / WORK WITH ME

One-on-one *essay help*

We can start wherever you are: searching for an idea, wrestling with a personal statement, or sorting through six different supplements. I'll read closely, ask questions, and help you make decisions about the writing.

Bring what you've written, including the parts you aren't sure about yet.

ASK FOR A FREE CONSULTATION →

For class information and individual essay coaching:

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