

The Evidence Audit.

Ten questions we ask before we read anything else.

This is the same first pass we run on every application that comes across our desk. Answer in writing, in the student's own words, without editing toward an answer you wish were true.

Honesty is the whole method.

THE RULES

Take the ten questions in one sitting, in order, and write the answers down. Do not answer in the application's voice; answer in the kitchen voice. If an answer takes longer than a minute to find, mark it and move on - the slow ones are the audit.

READING YOUR RESULTS

If two or more answers come easily, there is a real story in this application, and it is worth a closer read. If three or more questions sting, the application is currently presenting a person rather than telling the truth about one - that is fixable, and it is normal. The work is rarely better packaging. It is almost always choosing the truer story and then evidencing it.

A NOTE ON WHAT THIS IS NOT

This audit does not predict admissions outcomes, and no honest tool can. It measures one thing: how much verifiable substance the application is currently carrying. That number moves, and moving it is the job.

Point to the sentence in the essay only this student could have written.

WHY IT MATTERS

A reader works through thousands of interchangeable drafts. One unmistakable sentence is proof of an actual person on the page - it is the smallest unit of being remembered. Everything else in the essay is infrastructure around that sentence.

WHAT A STRONG ANSWER SOUNDS LIKE

You can point to it immediately. It carries a specific detail, place, number, or turn of phrase from the student's real life - cover the name at the top of the page and the sentence still identifies them.

IF THIS ONE STINGS

The essay is describing a type of person, not a person. Write one scene only the student was present for, and let the sentence carry the detail. If the scene does not exist yet, that is a finding too.

Name the activity they could defend for ten minutes with no notes.

WHY IT MATTERS

Interviews and recommendation letters both test depth, and depth cannot be rehearsed into existence. Ten unaided minutes is the dividing line between an activity the student lived and one they attended.

WHAT A STRONG ANSWER SOUNDS LIKE

The student knows the internals - the boring parts, the false starts, the names, the order of operations. They can tell you what an ordinary Tuesday inside that activity actually looked like.

IF THIS ONE STINGS

If ten minutes is impossible for every entry on the list, the list is wide rather than deep. Cut activities and grow one. A single activity with internals beats five with labels.

Which claim in the application has no evidence behind it?

WHY IT MATTERS

Every unsupported claim taxes the credible ones. Readers learn to discount a whole file after one empty assertion, and they rarely announce that they have stopped believing it.

WHAT A STRONG ANSWER SOUNDS LIKE

Each claim attaches to a fact, an artifact, a person, or a date. Nothing in the file depends on an adjective doing the work of evidence.

IF THIS ONE STINGS

Find the weakest claim and either evidence it or delete it. An honest, smaller claim is worth more than a grand hollow one - it buys back the credibility of everything around it.

What did the student choose when no one was keeping score?

WHY IT MATTERS

Unobserved choices are the cleanest signal of real interest, because they cannot have been performed for an application. Readers know the difference between a passion and a portfolio.

WHAT A STRONG ANSWER SOUNDS LIKE

A concrete choice with a date and a cost - time, comfort, other options given up - that points the same direction as the application's stated interests.

IF THIS ONE STINGS

The interests may be curated rather than lived. The fix is not better wording: start something this month that no one will ever grade. Then, when the question comes, it will be true.

What changed because of something they did - and who noticed?

WHY IT MATTERS

Impact is a delta in the world, verified by someone other than the applicant. "Who noticed" forces the evidence to exist outside the student's own account of themselves.

WHAT A STRONG ANSWER SOUNDS LIKE

A before-and-after you can state in one sentence, plus a named person who saw it happen - a coach, a teacher, a client, a younger student, a sibling.

IF THIS ONE STINGS

Participation produces hours, not change. Pick one context the student already inhabits and leave it measurably different. Small and real outranks large and vague every time.

If every adjective were deleted, what would remain?

WHY IT MATTERS

Adjectives are claims; nouns and verbs are evidence. This question compresses the application to its factual skeleton and shows whether the skeleton can stand on its own.

WHAT A STRONG ANSWER SOUNDS LIKE

What remains is still specific and still impressive - numbers, names, artifacts, sequences of real events. The writing can afford to be plain because the record is not.

IF THIS ONE STINGS

If deletion leaves mush, the writing is inflating. Take one paragraph, remove every adjective, and keep it that way. Then ask what fact would earn the adjective back - and go get that fact.

What do teachers say when the student is not in the room?

WHY IT MATTERS

Recommendation letters are exactly this question, written down. The gap between the presented self and the reported self is where applications quietly die.

WHAT A STRONG ANSWER SOUNDS LIKE

The student knows which teacher would say what, and it matches the story the application tells. The anecdotes teachers would reach for are the same ones the student would.

IF THIS ONE STINGS

If the honest answer is "solid, quiet, fine," there is no letter waiting to be written. Build one real working relationship this semester: ask for criticism, act on it, and come back with the result.

Which failure is on the record, and what did it cost them?

WHY IT MATTERS

Every real record contains failures; an application without one reads as curated. A genuine failure with a genuine price is credibility capital - it proves the rest of the file is not airbrushed.

WHAT A STRONG ANSWER SOUNDS LIKE

A specific event, an actual cost - a grade, a seat, a relationship, money, time - and a change in behavior that outlasted the semester it happened in.

IF THIS ONE STINGS

A "failure" that is secretly a brag fools no one; readers have seen every disguise. Find the one that still stings a little when you say it out loud. That is the usable one.

What connects the three things they spend the most time on?

WHY IT MATTERS

The calendar is the truest statement of priority a student makes. A thread connecting the top three uses of time is usually the real story - and it is frequently better than the one being written.

WHAT A STRONG ANSWER SOUNDS LIKE

You can name the connective tissue in one sentence - systems, audiences, making abstract things physical - and each of the three activities evidences it in a different way.

IF THIS ONE STINGS

If the three do not connect, either find the honest thread or accept a portfolio of separate goods. What you cannot do is manufacture a theme the calendar contradicts - readers check.

What would the application say if it could only tell the truth?

WHY IT MATTERS

This is the audit in one question. The distance between the truthful version of the file and the version being submitted is the entire work of the next few months.

WHAT A STRONG ANSWER SOUNDS LIKE

The truthful version is already the compelling one - maybe smaller than the polished draft, but unmistakably alive, and defensible line by line under questioning.

IF THIS ONE STINGS

If the truthful version feels weaker, the strategy is inverted. The fix is almost never better packaging: choose the truer story, then spend the effort evidencing it instead of decorating it.

AVANCER ADMISSIONS

What we do with the answers.

We run this audit on every application we read, before anything else. It tells us whether the raw material is a story, a résumé, or a performance - and it tells the family where the honest work is.

If two or more answers came easily, there is something worth a closer read, and we would be glad to give it one. If several questions stung, that is a normal starting point, and it is fixable with time and honesty.

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