CRAFTING YOUR STORY

Applications & Essays to Stand Out

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SESSION NORMS

Confidentiality & Respect. What is shared in this room stays in the room.

Personal Statements involve vulnerability. It is okay to pause, skip, or step away if needed.

Everyone has a story, and we all deserve the space to tell it safely.

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GOALS

UNDERSTAND KEY PRINCIPLES OF STRONG PERSONAL STATEMENTS

RECOGNIZE HOW TO REVISE, REFINE, AND GET FEEDBACK

BRAINSTORM MEANINGFUL, MANAGEABLE STORY IDEAS

BE THOUGHTFUL ABOUT SENSITIVE NARRATIVES

WHAT MAKES A STRONG PERSONAL STATEMENT?

1. SHOW DON'T TELL
2. REVEAL SOMETHING NEW
3. VALUES, MOTIVATION, GROWTH
4. VULNERABILITY + REFLECTION
5. CRAFT & POLISH
6. ADHERE TO PROMPT & CONSTRAINTS
7. GET FEEDBACK

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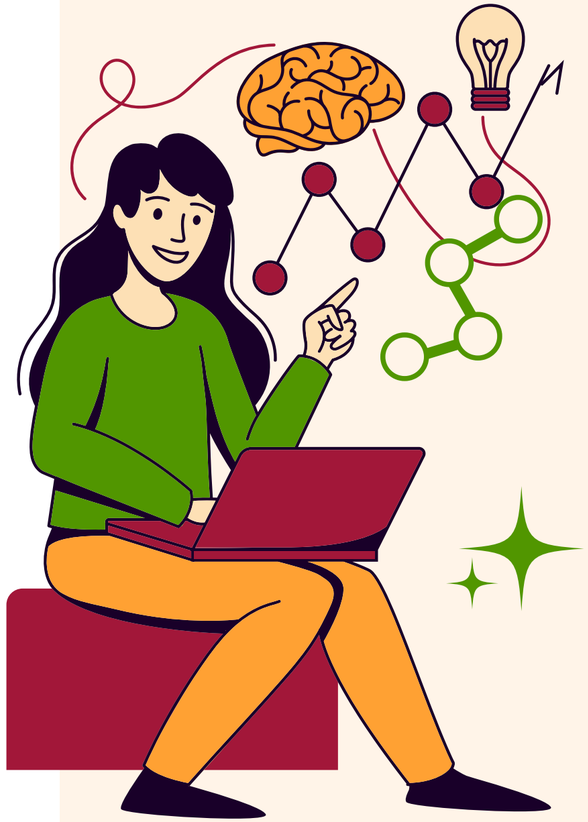
01

PERSONAL STATEMENTS *Matter*



Show Don't Tell

Use vivid details, specific moments, and scenes, not just claims.

❌ "I'm a strong leader."

✅ "I remember organizing our fundraiser in the school hallway...sticky notes covering the table, phones buzzing as we tracked donations."

Close your eyes and "see" the moment you want to describe. What did you hear, smell, or feel?

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SHOW DON'T TELL

Break into groups of 3-5 people

Your group will pick one of the following statements:

- I am a hard worker.
- I care about my family.
- I love science.
- I like to cook.
- I play football.
- I babysit my siblings.
- I have straight A's.
- I want to be a dentist.

Take 2 minutes...

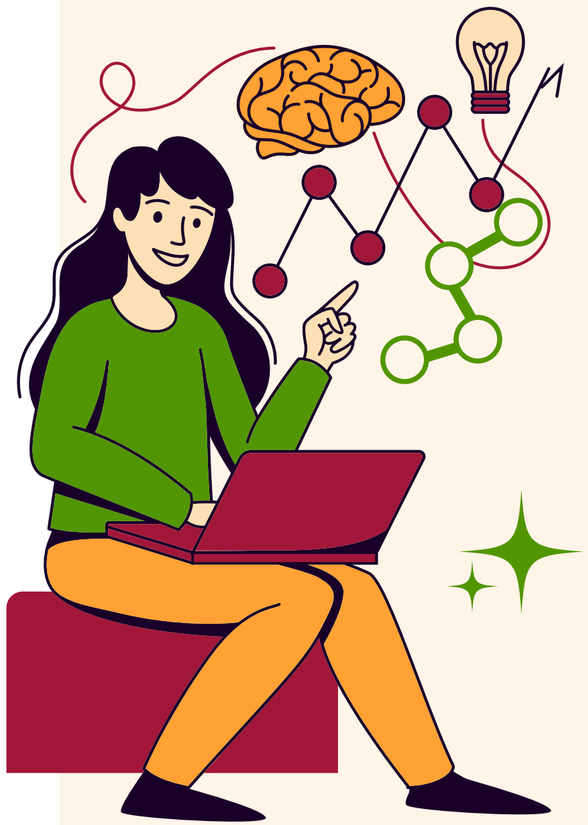
Your group will rewrite it in a show-don't-tell style. It will take a few sentences to SHOW the trait through action.

You will share your rewrite out loud.

The group that earns the most "ooohs" or laughs wins!

02

PERSONAL STATEMENTS *Matter*



Reveal Something New

Your essay should go beyond your application. It's a chance to share insight into your personality, background, or motivation.

❌ Repeats info: "I served as class president for two years."

✅ Adds depth: "Leading my peers taught me that listening quietly often builds more trust than speaking loudly."

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THE 21 DETAILS *Challenge*

1. Think of a day that changed something. What could a camera have captured in that moment?
2. List 21 details about that moment that shaped who you are. Small things like sounds smells, people, or feelings.

Example: The scratch of the violin bow or Mom's 3 a.m. coffee

Once you have them listed, circle the THREE that feel powerful or emotional.

Now, when you leave here, you could build your opening paragraph using one of those details as the first line!

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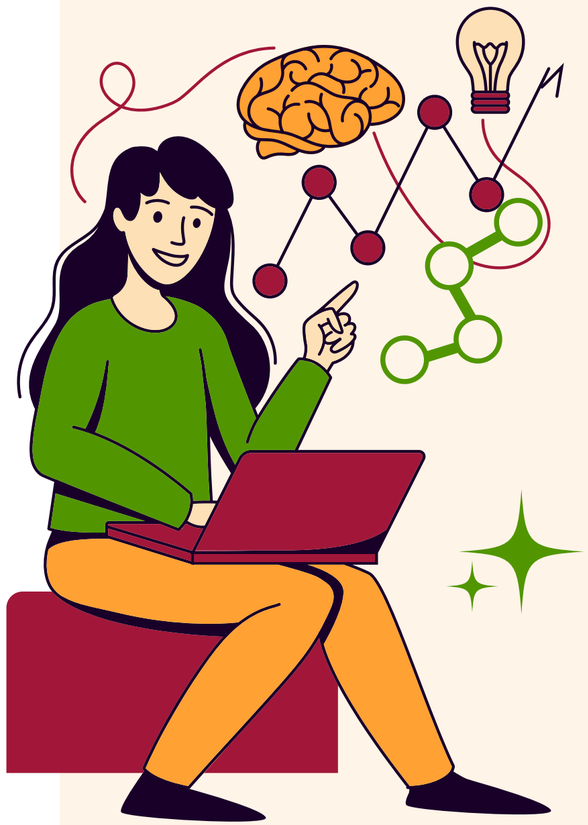
PERSONAL STATEMENTS *Matter*

Values, Motivation & Growth



Application readers look for who you are becoming, not just what you've done.

"When my first tutoring student failed her test, I realized success wasn't about my pride, it was about learning how she learned best."

Think about: What value guided me? What challenged me? How did I change or grow?

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VALUE SPEED ROUND

Using the handout of values, I want you to circle the top five that resonate the most with you.

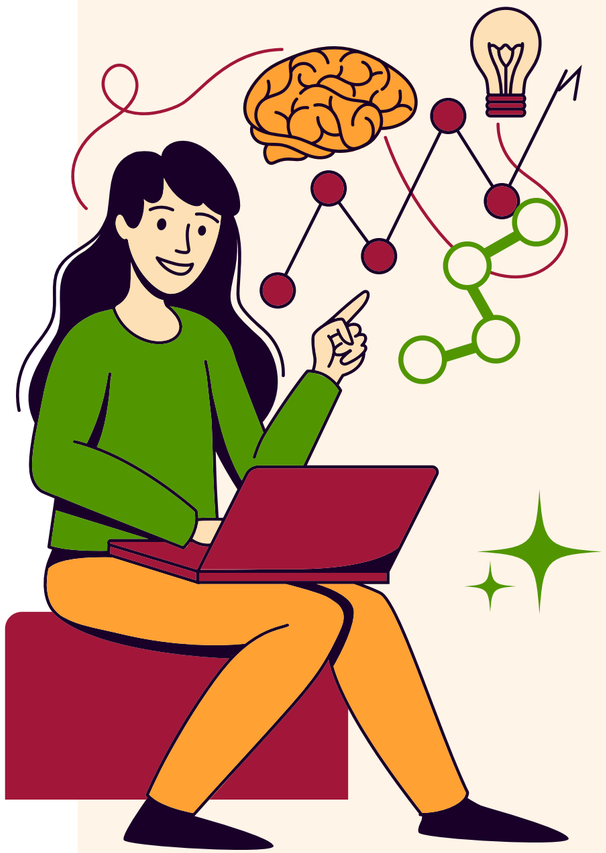
Now, narrow those down to 2 - these are your two core values.

What life moment best shows this value in action?

Take a minute and write it down.

06

PERSONAL STATEMENTS *Matter*



Vulnerability + Reflection

Strong essays include moments of tension, doubt, or emotion, followed by reflection on why it mattered.

"When my project fell apart the night before the deadline, I sat on the floor surrounded by scraps of paper and realized that failure could be a teacher, not a verdict."

What's a time when you ALMOST GAVE UP - and what did you learn about yourself?

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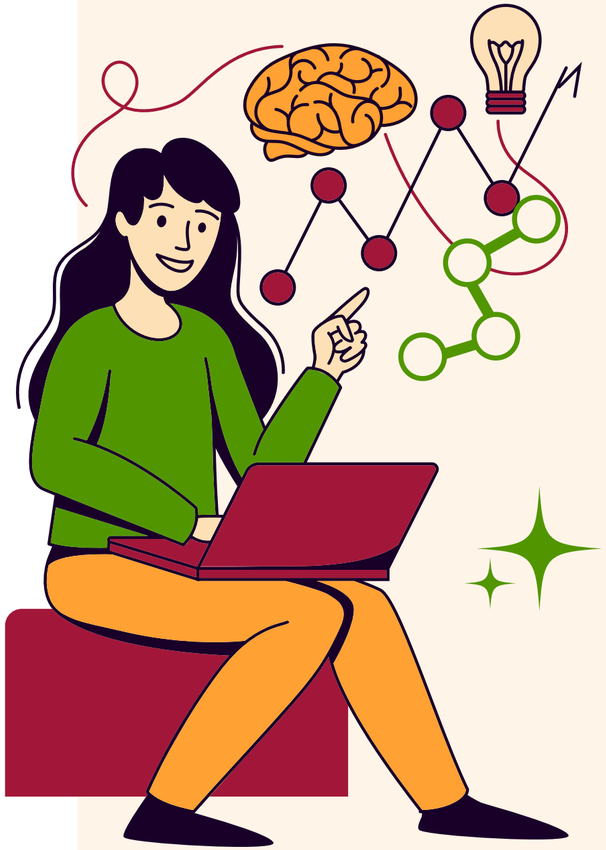
07

PERSONAL STATEMENTS *Matter*



Craft & Polish & Get Feedback

Powerful essays are rewritten, not just written.

Create multiple drafts.
Read aloud to catch rhythm and clarity.
Ensure logical flow and transitions.

Get feedback from diverse readers: a teacher for clarity, a friend for tone, a counselor for authenticity.

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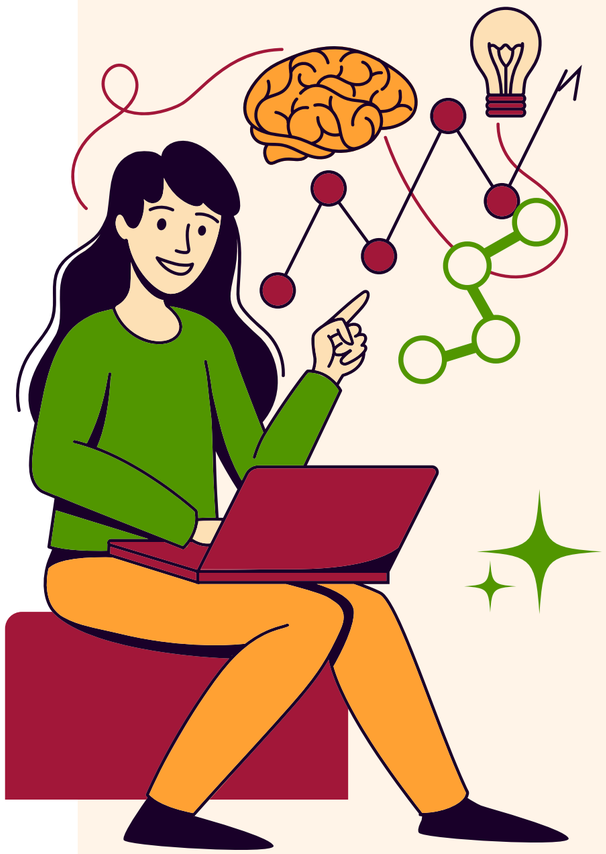
PERSONAL STATEMENTS Matter



Avoid Clichés

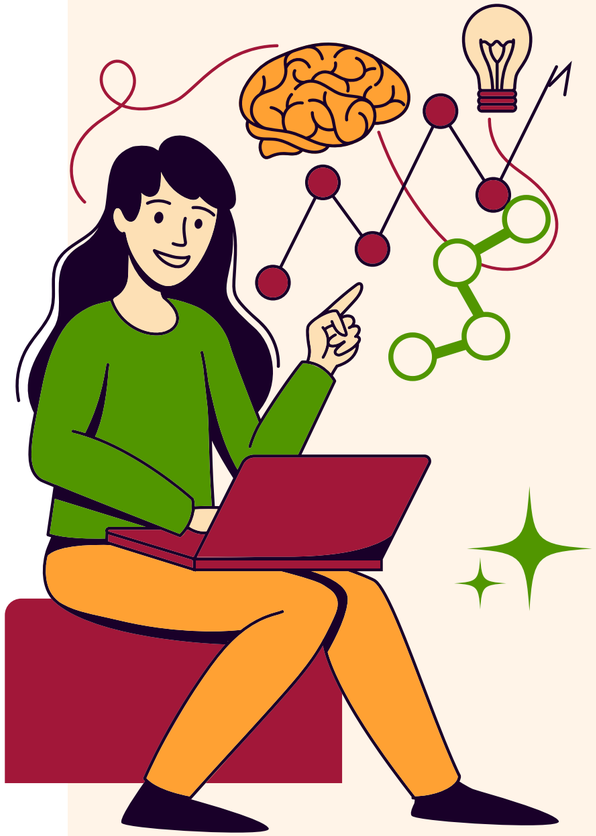
Common themes like “winning the big game,” “overcoming injury,” or “helping others on a mission trip” can feel generic.

Instead, you can find your unique lens.

“Basketball didn’t just teach me teamwork: it taught me patience with myself when progress felt invisible.”

Activity: Let’s think together about overused tropes. Now, let’s take one and make it personal with a specific twist.

PERSONAL STATEMENTS *Matter*



Adhere to the Prompt, Constraints, and Professionalism

Always answer the question asked and respect word limits.

Stay focused on the main idea.

Cut any sentence that doesn't move your story forward.

Write in full sentences and words: no texting shortcuts or slang!

Think about your audience: who is reading your content?

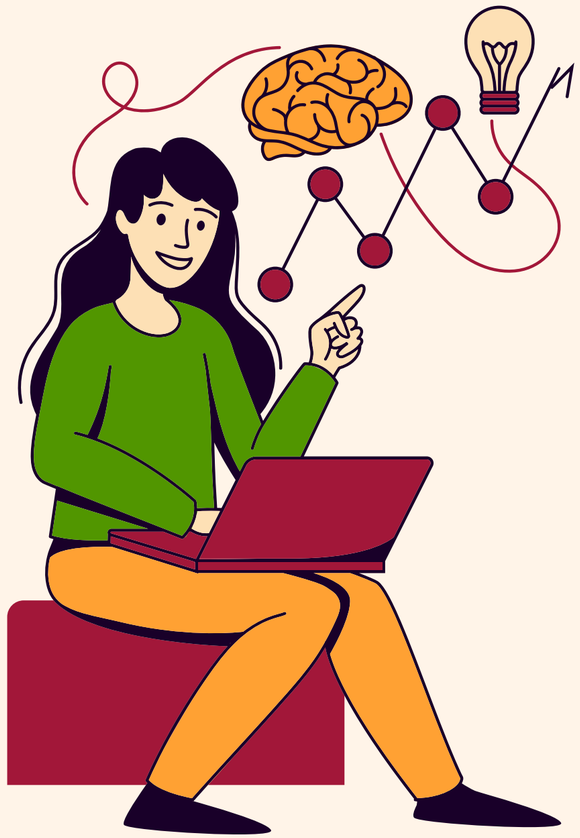
POWERFUL STORIES COME IN MANY FORMS

You don’t need to struggle to show strength.

What matters is how you’ve grown, what you value,
and how you use your experiences to move forward.

Reflection, curiosity, and purpose make a story unforgettable.

Readers remember conviction more than conflict.



Show

GROWTH, NOT GRIT ALONE

Everyday moments can reveal extraordinary character.

📚 "Balancing school and work taught me to manage time and stay focused."

💡 "Helping a classmate understand a tough concept showed me I love mentoring."

⚙️ "Fixing a coding bug for hours taught me patience and problem-solving."

Think of a small moment that shows your values in action, no tragedy required.

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Thoughtful NARRATIVES

Telling Your Story

Sometimes, you want to share experiences that involve your family, immigration status, community conflict, or trauma.

These stories can be incredibly powerful, but you also want to do so thoughtfully.

Remember: scholarship readers aren't judging what happened to you; they're trying to understand who you are now.

Protecting your privacy doesn't make your essay weaker. It demonstrates maturity, emotional intelligence, and an awareness of boundaries, qualities that aree valued.

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You CONTROL YOUR STORY

Guideline One

You do not owe anyone full details of something painful or risky. You can allude to experience without naming specific people, places or agencies.

Example:
Instead of “I was expelled from school my Junior year”

You could say, “During my Junior year I faced personal struggles. This caused me to not show the best version of my self.”

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You CONTE[illegible]RY

You do not owe [illegible]
You can allude [illegible]
places or [illegible]

Example:
Instead of:"I strugg[illegible]
years, and it made me [illegible]

You could say:"Le[illegible] taught me the importance of [illegible] for help[illegible]ting boundaries, and caring for my [illegible]ntal health, skills that now help me stay balanced and f[illegible]cused in school."

Why it works:

It conveys resilience, leadership, and family commitment without naming immigration, detention, or a government agency

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Focus ON YOUR GROWTH, NOT AN EVENT

Guideline Two

Scholarship readers want to know how you've grown. Keep the essay centered on your response and resilience.

Example: "I struggled with depression and anxiety for years, and it made me fall behind in school."

Sharing by showing growth: "Learning to manage overwhelming stress taught me the importance of asking for help, setting boundaries, and caring for my mental health, skills that now help me stay balanced and focused on school."

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Focus

ON YOUR

Admissions of

drama of wh

respons

Example:
Instead of, "during

violent clashes that

say, "Growing up

with resistance,

up."

Why it works:

It acknowledges the challenge honestly without labeling or detailing the condition. The focus is on growth, coping strategies, and self-awareness, which shows emotional maturity.

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Use GENERAL LANGUAGE WHEN NEEDED

Guideline Three

Avoid identifying details that could draw attention if you or your family are vulnerable. Focus on your growth.

Example:

Instead of: “I had to raise my little brother while my parents worked long hours. It was exhausting.”

You could say: “Supporting my younger brother after school taught me how to stay organized, manage my time, and find pride in being a dependable role model.”

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Use

GENERAL

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Why it works:

It focuses on growth, care, and responsibility.

It honors the student's experience without centering on hardship.

It shows traits that scholarship readers deeply value: reliability, compassion, and initiative.

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Test

SAFETY WITH SOMEONE YOU TRUST

Guideline Four

Before you submit an essay that mentions anything related to immigration, legal issues, family separation, or trauma, share it with a counselor or trusted mentor. Ask:

- Does this reveal anything that could put me or my family at risk?
- Does this version still express my growth and values clearly?

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Test

SAFETY W ST

Have a counselor
to check that it's

Example:
Instead of "Governm
for people like me, I wo
try, "Seeing how ine
community motiva
understand syste s and create ch om within.

Why it works:

It honors the experience but protects family privacy. The focus is on resilience, leadership, and care for others, qualities that scholarship readers value highly.

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PRIVATE VS PUBLIC

Use a two-step process to help you narrow down your ideas. Remember: scholarship readers are not judging what happened to you; they are trying to understand who you are now. Protecting your families privacy does not make your easy weaker!

TWO VERSIONS

Private Draft

Write the story in full, uncensored detail, just for yourself. Capture the emotions, memories, and lessons.

Public Draft

Extract the values, actions, and insights. Rewrite the story focusing on growth and aspiration, without the risky parts.

Example Transition:

Private draft line: After my parents' deportation, I felt invisible.

Public draft line: During a time of family separation, I discovered strength in small acts of care, helping my siblings stay grounded and hopeful.

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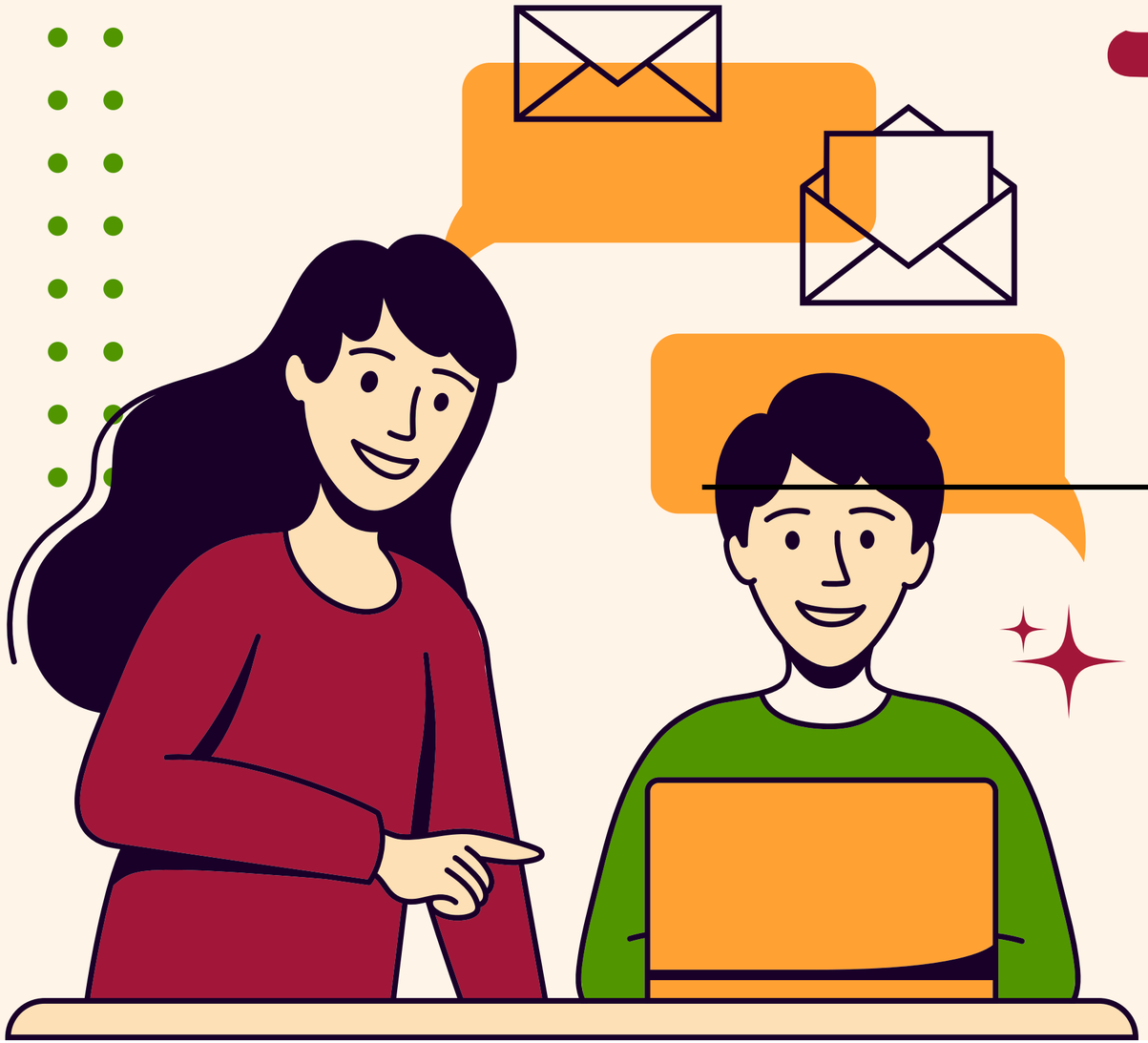

THANK You

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