



**Dr. Nathan Hurwitz
College Admissions Consulting, LLC**

(203) 613-9262

nathan@hurwitzadmissions.com

Student Starter Kit

A clear, honest guide to the college process –
without stress, panic, or pretending.



(Full Workbook Edition)

This guide aims to make students' path to college smoother and more organized—free from stress, panic, or trying to be someone they're not.

By Dr. Nathan Hurwitz

University Professor ♦ Author ♦ Mentor ♦ Admissions Consultant

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Student Starter Kit

Start Here

If you're reading this, you're likely somewhere between realizing college is approaching and feeling uncertain about the next steps. This guide clarifies what truly matters, what doesn't, and offers advice on how to move forward without feeling overwhelmed.

Understanding The College Process

College admissions is not a test. It's a way for colleges to understand who you are, how you think, and how you're growing.

If You're Feeling Overwhelmed

Most students feel fine at first—until deadlines pile up, essays don't come easily, and everything suddenly feels urgent.

The Writing Process

Most students start with a blank document, write one sentence, delete it, and then feel stuck. Don't delete! Get as much down on paper as you can, then edit and rewrite. Revising is so much easier than facing a blank page.

Feeling Behind

Students usually feel behind the moment someone else mentions finished essays or college lists.

Interviews

An interview is just a conversation with an adult who wants to get a sense of you—not a test.

What You're Responsible For

You don't have to be confident all the time. You just need to keep showing up and asking questions.

Next Steps

Contact me now, and we can set up a consultation package and schedule that work for you. I will be your guide and mentor, and together, we are unstoppable!



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nathan@hurwitzadmissions.com

A Note to Parents

Your student faces one of the most demanding college admissions seasons in recent years. Today's applications demand more than just good grades or test scores. Students must articulate their identity, reflect thoughtfully on their experiences, meet multiple deadlines, and present themselves with maturity and purpose.

At the same time, parents are expected to support their children without taking over, causing unnecessary pressure, or becoming admissions experts.

This guide is designed to help you understand what your student is experiencing, recognize common family challenges, and see how expert, structured support can reduce stress and improve outcomes. Most families I work with contact me not because their student is failing but because they want clarity over confusion, structure rather than last-minute anxiety, and confidence that they haven't missed anything important.

What Working With Me Looks Like

Families often ask what support looks like in practice. Here's what to expect:

Structure & Sessions

- Weekly or bi-weekly one-on-one meetings
- Clear short- and long-term goals
- A personalized admissions timeline

Writing & Strategy

- Guided personal statement development
- Supplemental essay strategy and revision
- Thoughtful college list development
- Interview preparation when appropriate

Accountability & Progress

- Draft tracking and revision checkpoints
- Clear expectations for follow-through
- Consistent progress without last-minute pressure



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Parent Communication

- Periodic progress updates
- Clear boundaries that support student independence
- Reassurance that the process is moving forward

Most parents say the greatest benefit is not having to manage the process themselves, while knowing it's handled thoughtfully and professionally.

When Students Don't Have a Clear Plan

Most students are capable and motivated, but so many lack structure. Without a clear plan and experienced guidance, families often face rushed deadlines, essays written too late for revision and polishing, hazy application narratives, unnecessary stress at home, and missed opportunities to strengthen their positioning or secure scholarships.

This isn't about intelligence or effort—it's about navigating a complex system without a roadmap. Professional admissions coaching isn't about pushing students; it's about organizing the process, creating accountability, and reducing uncertainty before pressure mounts.



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A Welcome Note from Nathan Hurwitz



Welcome to your college journey! This process isn't about perfection; it's about understanding yourself — a path to becoming a thinker, writer, and communicator.

You don't need to have everything figured out about who you are, what you want to study, or your future career. Just be willing to reflect, write honestly, and stay open to what you'll discover along the way.

Nathan Hurwitz



Dr. Nathan Hurwitz College Admissions Consulting, LLC

(203) 613-9262

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2. What is the college admissions process *really* about?

Admissions officers look for students who they believe will succeed on their campus. They review hundreds or even thousands of applications, and each time they open one, they hope to encounter a student who feels genuine, not just a resume. That's the purpose of essays and interviews.

A *great* essay doesn't rely on fancy words or try to impress. A great essay helps the reader understand:

- how you think,
- what matters to you,
- how you engage with the world, and
- what you might contribute to their campus.

Your personal statement, supplemental essays, and interviews all serve the same purpose: they let colleges hear your voice—your perspective, reasoning, and values.

Here's the most important thing to understand:

You are not being extraordinary; instead, you're assessed on being thoughtful, self-aware, and true to yourself.

Many students worry, "I don't even know who I am yet," but in reality, you do.

You know what moves you, what frustrates you, what you believe in, what you stand for, and what's important to you. Those things come from your experiences, relationships, and the world you live in.

While you'll grow over the next few years, you already have a real voice and real insight. Our job is to draw them out and get them on paper.



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3. College Admissions Timeline (Grades 10-12)

Sophomore Year to Early Junior Year (Spring-Fall)

Laying the Foundation

- Begin **SAT or ACT preparation** (diagnostic + skill building)
- Reflect on academic strengths, interests, and learning style
- Explore extracurricular activities with depth, not just breadth
- Start thinking about **what you want in a college** (size, location, academics, culture)
- Begin light **college research** to understand different types of schools
- Focus on strong grades and course rigor

Goal: Build skills, self-awareness, and momentum—without pressure.

Late Junior Year (Winter-Spring)

Clarifying Direction

- Continue or intensify SAT/ACT preparation; take first official exam(s)
- Narrow academic interests and possible majors
- Develop a preliminary **college list** (reach / target / likely)
- Begin documenting activities, leadership, and achievements
- Start informal **essay reflection**: meaningful experiences, challenges, growth
- Visit colleges (in person or virtual) when possible

Goal: Enter summer with clarity and a working plan.

Summer Before Senior Year

Strategic Preparation

- Finalize SAT/ACT testing (if needed)
- Draft the **personal statement** (early drafts, not final polish)
- Refine and balance the college list
- Research each school's supplemental essay prompts
- Plan application strategy: Early Decision, Early Action, Regular Decision
- Begin résumé/activity list polishing

Goal: Remove pressure from fall by doing the hardest thinking early.



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Fall of Senior Year Execution Phase

- Finalize and polish personal statement
- Write and revise **supplemental essays**
- Submit Early Action / Early Decision applications
- Prepare for interviews (when offered)
- Request recommendation letters and transcripts
- Track deadlines carefully and submit applications on time

Goal: Submit strong, thoughtful applications without last-minute stress.

Winter of Senior Year Completion & Follow-Up

- Submit remaining Regular Decision applications
- Complete interviews as needed
- Send mid-year grades if required
- Respond to additional requests from colleges
- Begin reviewing early results and adjusting expectations if necessary

Goal: Finish strong and stay organized while waiting.

Spring of Senior Year Decision and Transition

- Review admissions decisions
- Navigate waitlists strategically (letters of continued interest)
- Compare financial aid and scholarship offers
- Revisit top-choice campuses (if possible)
- Make a final college decision by May 1
- Prepare for the transition to college life

Goal: Choose the best academic, social, and personal fit—with confidence



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4. How do we work together?

You're not doing this alone – this is a partnership. Here's what you can expect:

- **One-on-one coaching sessions** where we discuss meaningful experiences, beliefs, and moments from your life—and shape them into a compelling story.
- **A clear writing process**, including outlining, drafting, revising, and polishing, with clear assignments and due dates.
- **Structure and a timeline** to keep you moving forward so the process doesn't stall or become overwhelming.
- **Clear, usable feedback** on your writing so you know exactly what to work on before our next session.
- **A calm, focused space** to think and write. With so much going on—school, activities, friends, and family—college admissions can easily get sidetracked. Our sessions help keep it organized and manageable.

The goal isn't pressure. It's progress.



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5. The writing process – a quick overview

Writing effective essays can seem daunting—until you learn the process. Here’s our approach:

Reflect on experiences that changed, challenged, surprised, or stuck with you. Some ideas may feel small or random at first—that’s often where the best essays start.

Discover what those experiences uncover about you. What insights have you gained? Why are they important? How might they be relevant on a college campus?

Write - the toughest part of writing is starting. So we don’t aim for “good”—we aim for “*something*.” We start with an outline and deveop it from there. Early drafts are called rough for a reason.

Revise - This is where the essay takes shape. We deepen understanding, clarify the message, and remove anything unrelated to the story.

Clarify - Final polish to ensure your message is clear and maintains your authentic voice.



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6. Understanding the personal statement

The personal statement addresses this key question:

Why will you be a valuable member of their campus community?

Think of it as a pitch—not salesy, but focused on “why you”. Similar to Shark Tank, you’re explaining why a college should invest in you..

You can be valuable in many ways:

- a strong academic interest,
- curiosity and intellectual growth,
- leadership or teamwork,
- creativity or performance,
- empathy and engagement in the community,
- resilience or perspective.

There is no single “right” type of student.

A strong personal statement often:

- tells a story of growth,
- shows perspective or empathy,
- reflects honestly on your experiences, successes, and failures
- focuses on insight—not just events.

Here’s the key: Your story does **not** need to be extraordinary. It just needs to be thoughtful and true. Honesty beats drama every time.



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7. Theme Discovery Workbook

Writing about yourself is hard—especially getting started. Many students find it difficult because they self-censor too soon. The aim at this point is **not** to produce polished writing; it's to generate real material.

How To Get Started

Set aside 30–60 minutes. Write for **2–5 minutes on each question** without stopping or editing. Feel free to use bullet points, fragments, and messy thoughts are all fine.

1. What have you discovered about yourself lately?
2. Identify a challenge that has transformed you.
3. What small detail is more important to you than most realize?
4. Which questions keep circling in your mind?
5. Is there a moment from the past two years that remains vivid to you?
6. What topics ignite your academic curiosity?
7. When do you feel most authentic?
8. What do people typically seek your advice or help with?

After answering all the questions, review your responses carefully. Look for recurring patterns, overlaps, or ideas that appear frequently. The points where these answers intersect often highlight the central theme of a compelling personal statement.

Final reminders:

- You don't need a perfect idea.
- You don't need to sound impressive.
- You don't have to do this alone.
- You just need to start and keep moving forward.



8. Identity Mapping & Values (Find Your “Core”)

“Who am I?” feels like a big question. So we don’t answer it in one sentence—we build it piece by piece. For each prompt below, jot 3–5 bullets. Don’t overthink. This is your identity map—a quick snapshot of who you are right now.

Identity

1. Which groups are you a part of, such as teams, family, work, clubs, community, and culture?
2. What roles do you play in those groups (leader, helper, organizer, quiet observer, problem-solver)?
3. How would you describe yourself as a person (how you think, feel, act, and relate to others)?

Values

4. What do you care about more than most people realize?
5. Which qualities do you respect in others?
6. What rules do you try to live by, even when it’s hard?
7. Who do you look up to—and why?

Curiosity

8. What problems do you want to solve, or which questions keep coming back to you?
9. What ideas truly interest you, even outside school?

Experiences

10. What challenge has affected you, even if you didn’t succeed?
11. What achievement are you proud of—big or small?
12. What shifts have you experienced (relocations, losses, new roles, additional responsibilities)?
13. When have you faced conflict—and what lessons did it teach you?
14. What moments have changed you (key turning points)?

Goal: You’re not trying to sound impressive. You’re gathering real material.



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9. Story Mining Exercises

Set aside **15–20 minutes** for the next 5 days. Answer **one** of these prompts each day. Keep it informal. Your job is to produce insights that will become “essay gold.”

1. ***A Moment That Taught Me Something***

What happened? What did you learn?

2. ***A Time I Changed My Mind***

What changed? Why? How did it change you?

3. ***A Challenge I Didn't Expect***

What did you do? What did success—or failure—teach you?

4. ***A Small Detail That Says Something Big About Me***

What's one small thing that reveals something real about you?

5. ***A Conversation I Still Think About***

Who was it with? What was said? Why does it still matter?



10. Personal Statement Structure (with Models)

Effective essays go beyond good writing; they showcase organized thinking. A clear structure avoids aimless wandering. Choose your topic and select one of these models:

A) Past → Change → Now - Best for: a moment that transformed you.

- **Paragraph 1:** A particular moment from the past
- **Paragraph 2:** The insight it gained from it
- **Paragraph 3:** The way it changed you
- **Paragraph 4:** Who you are now today of it

Model opening: - “When I stood outside the rehearsal room door, my hand hovering over the handle, I didn’t realize the next 90 minutes would change how I understand myself.”

B) The Lens - Best for: showing who you are through one repeated thing (such as activity, habit, object, or responsibility).

- **Paragraph 1:** Introduce the “lens”
- **Paragraph 2:** Explain why it matters to you
- **Paragraph 3:** Share a specific incident
- **Paragraph 4:** What it taught you + why it matters now

Model opening: - “I’ve always liked fixing small things—broken pens, loose hinges, necklaces. The work is quiet, slow, and strangely calming.”

C) Question → Exploration → Growth - Best for: students who think deeply and enjoy ideas.

- **Paragraph 1:** The question you’re exploring
- **Paragraph 2:** Various perspectives on the topic
- **Paragraph 3:** The moment or idea that clarified your understanding
- **Paragraph 4:** Your current beliefs and their impact on your life

Model opening: - “I’ve been trying to understand why people interrupt one another.”



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11. Drafting Your Essay

Once you have a structure, start drafting. Drafting isn't about being good—it's about putting something down on the page.

Drafting rules:

- **Write quickly**, without self-editing.
- Include **everything** on the page. You can cut later (we often cut half or more).
- Start with a **moment you can picture** (an image, action, or scene).
- Tell the story first, reflect afterward.
- **Insight matters more than plot.**

A messy first draft is a *good* sign. It means that you're exploring, not performing!



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12. Revision Workbook

Revisions are the process by which your essay becomes refined. Consider these questions during the revision process:

Clarity

1. What is my main message?
2. Am I communicating clearly, or just trying to sound smart?

Depth

3. What does this reveal about me?
4. What's the broader idea behind this moment?

Voice

5. Does this sound like me when I said it out loud?
6. Is this honest—or “application-perfect”?

Precision

7. What can I cut without losing meaning?
(Rule: *Say it in 3 words, if possible, rather than 5..*)



13. Supplemental Essays: What Colleges Want

Write and submit supplemental essays, whether they are required or optional. These essays highlight your enthusiasm and reveal your character. More importantly, conducting thorough research for these essays demonstrates your genuine interest in each specific school. The good news is that, although some research is needed to craft quality responses, many prompts are similar, allowing you to reuse ideas strategically and save time. That's why we keep everything organized in a simple spreadsheet.

Common Supplemental Prompts—and How to Approach Them

“Why Choose This School?” Specify details by researching the school’s culture, programs, and opportunities, and explain why it suits you.

“How Will You Integrate Into Our Community?” Demonstrate how you interact with others academically, socially, creatively, or through leadership, linking your habits to the campus culture.

“Academic Interests” Highlight specific programs, courses, or faculty to show genuine interest (emailing a professor after applying is a smart move).

“What Will You Bring?” Describe how you present yourself and connect that to your potential contributions on campus—not just past actions, but how you plan to participate there.



14. Supplemental Strategy Workbook

Here's the process:

- First, identify the core values of each school (noting commonalities and differences).
- Next, align your most compelling story or angle with each institution.
- Then, structure your outline in three parts:
 - Hook to quickly grab attention;
 - Fit to explain why this school suits you; and Contribution to show why they should admit you.
 - Draft and revise this just like your personal statement.

Remember, efficiency is key—strategic planning is better than burnout.



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nathan@hurwitzadmissions.com

15. The Resume

Your activities list shows colleges how you're likely to engage **once you're on campus.**

Start by writing everything down, then organize it clearly. Include:

- academic programs or summer courses,
- clubs and organizations,
- leadership roles,
- community service or advocacy,
- jobs,
- sports,
- arts and performance, and
- religious or cultural involvement

A strong activity resume: is well-organized and easy to read, uses action verbs, highlights leadership and commitment, and emphasizes impact rather than mere participation.

Avoid clutter. Clarity wins.

A strong activity resume should be clean and easy to read, use action verbs, showcase leadership and dedication, and emphasize impact over mere participation. Keep it uncluttered; clarity is key.



16. Interview Preparation

A college interview isn't a test; it's a purposeful conversation. Interviewers are interested in how you communicate, reflect, think quickly, and whether you appear curious and engaged.

Prepare Stories, Not Scripts. Avoid memorizing answers. Instead, develop a few adaptable stories:

- a challenge you faced,
- something you deeply care about deeply,
- a moment of change or growth,
- a setback and your response,
- something you're curious about.
- These stories can be tailored to different questions.

Practice Out Loud. Thinking of answers silently isn't enough.

- Practice with bullet points, not scripts
- Speak answers out loud
- Get comfortable pausing before you speak
(A pause makes you sound thoughtful—not unprepared.)

Common Questions to Expect

- "Tell me about yourself."
- "What's been your biggest challenge?"
- "What excites you academically?"
- "Why this school?"

Your answers should be:

- specific,
- reflective, and
- authentic—meaning they should genuinely sound like you, not like an essay.

Ask Smart Questions. Always ask questions like:

- "What kind of students thrive here?"



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- “How do students work with professors?”
- “What surprised you about this school?”

Interview Day Essentials

Before:

- Dress neatly and comfortably
- Review your application
- Research the school
- Bring questions

After:

- Send a brief thank-you email within 24 hours

Goal:

The interviewer should walk away with the impression: *“This student is thoughtful, self-aware, and capable of contributing here.”*



17. Time and Stress Management Guide

Stress is a normal part of life, but chaos is avoidable!

To keep stress manageable:

- Work in **brief, focused sessions**
- Use a **weekly planner**
- Track tasks in a simple checklist
- Take genuine mental breaks
- Acknowledge stress rather than ignoring it
- Seek help early, rather than at the last minute

Creating structure helps reduce stress more effectively than relying on motivation.



Dr. Nathan Hurwitz College Admissions Consulting, LLC

(203) 613-9262

nathan@hurwitzadmissions.com

18. Writing Confidence Toolkit

Everyone experiences writer's block. Here are some tips to overcome it:

- Write **one sentence**, instead of a full paragraph
- Say it out loud, then write it down
- Change your environment if you're stuck
- Write a "quick, informal throwaway" paragraph just to get started
- Remember: **first drafts are for discovery, not performance**

Confidence doesn't come before writing. It comes *from* writing.



Dr. Nathan Hurwitz College Admissions Consulting, LLC

(203) 613-9262

nathan@hurwitzadmissions.com

19. Your Monthly Timeline

College applications can be overwhelming when it seems like everything happens at once. The solution is simple: divide the process into monthly steps.

When students collaborate with me, they receive a detailed monthly calendar covering the entire timeline, including what to focus on each month, writing checkpoints, supplemental essay targets, and all application deadlines.

If you're tackling this on your own, creating a month-by-month plan is highly recommended. Visualizing the whole process laid out in segments makes it more manageable rather than daunting. Having a clear structure helps reduce stress.



20. College Admissions FAQs

What Students Actually Need to Know

These are the questions students ask most often—sometimes out loud, often quietly.

When should I start considering college?

Sophomore or early junior year is ideal. Beginning early doesn't mean stressing out early—it means avoiding last-minute pressure.

Do I need to know my major?

No. Many students apply undecided or change majors later. Colleges value curiosity and engagement more than a fixed plan.

How important are grades?

Grades are important—but not everything. Colleges also look at: course difficulty, improvement over time, extracurricular activities, writing skills, maturity. A strong application presents a complete story.

Do colleges actually read essays?

Yes. Essays are very important. They reveal how you think, reflect, and communicate. Being honest is more impactful than being dramatic..

Do I have to write about trauma?

No, you are not required to share pain or highly personal experiences. Growth, curiosity, and insight are more important than hardship.

What if I'm not a good writer?



Dr. Nathan Hurwitz College Admissions Consulting, LLC

(203) 613-9262

nathan@hurwitzadmissions.com

That's okay. Colleges value clear thinking and your authentic voice—not perfect prose. Writing is a skill that improves with practice.

Does my essay need to be impressive?

No. Many great essays come from everyday experiences. Insight matters more than the topic.

Can I be rejected even if I'm qualified?

Yes—and it's common. Decisions depend on space, demand, and institutional needs. A rejection is not a judgment of your worth.

What does “college fit” mean?

Fit means a place where you can succeed academically, feel comfortable, be supported, and grow. The best college is where you'll thrive—not the most selective one.

How many colleges should I apply to?

Most students apply to 8–12 schools, including safeties, targets, and reaches. This balance creates options.

Are interviews required?

Sometimes. If an interview is offered, take it. It's another chance to show interest and share your story.

What if I'm nervous about interviews?

That's normal. Interviews are conversations, not tests. Preparation makes them much easier than students expect.

Do extracurriculars matter if I'm not a leader?

Yes. Colleges prioritize commitment, depth, and consistency, valuing impact over titles.

Should I participate in activities just to impress colleges?

No. Colleges can see through that. Instead, select activities you genuinely care about and stay committed.

What if my grades aren't perfect?

Colleges do not automatically penalize students; instead, they evaluate trends, effort, and context. Good writing can provide valuable perspective.



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nathan@hurwitzadmissions.com

How important are test scores?

It varies by school. Good scores can be helpful, but they are just one factor—not the final judgment.

What if I fall behind?

That can happen. What's important is catching up early, asking for help, and developing a plan. Staying organized is better than striving for perfection.

Should my parents be involved?

Yes—and appropriately. They can assist and help organize, but your application should represent your voice and efforts.

What if I don't get into my first-choice school?

Many successful students don't. Most find themselves happy, challenged, and growing. What matters more is your experience in college than the institution you attend.

How do I know if I need help?

Guidance might be beneficial if you're feeling overwhelmed, unsure how to present yourself, or need more structure and clarity. Asking for help is a wise decision.

Myth vs. Reality: College Admissions

Myth: Only perfect students get into top colleges

Reality: Colleges value growth, character, and fit.

Myth: You need an extraordinary story

Reality: Reflection and thoughtfulness are more important than sensational stories.

Myth: Everyone else has it all figured out

Reality: Many students feel uncertain about the process.



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nathan@hurwitzadmissions.com

Myth: One mistake can ruin your chances

Reality: Admissions are evaluated holistically, considering the whole applicant.

Myth: The most selective school is the best

Reality: The best school is where you'll thrive.

The Big Picture

College admissions isn't about being perfect. It's about showing who you are, how you think, and how you're ready to grow. With preparation, honesty, and support, this process can feel **manageable—and even empowering**.



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nathan@hurwitzadmissions.com

21. Final Message and Next Steps

You are capable of crafting a strong, honest college application, and you don't have to do it alone. Together, we will build your application—even essays—step by step. My role is to support, guide, and mentor you throughout the process.

Next Steps for Families

If you seek clearer structure, less stress, and confidence that nothing is overlooked, the next move is just a conversation—no commitment involved. We'll discuss:

- your current situation,
- potential challenges,
- what level of support is most appropriate for you.

Since I work with a limited number of students to provide personalized attention, schedule a conversation to determine if this is the right fit.

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