

MINGXUAN TAO

THE MORE UNIQUE WE TRY TO BE

THE MORE ALIKE WE BECOME

This booklet follows the movement from an uncertain person to a coherent applicant. It asks what becomes visible, what is corrected and what must disappear before a life can be read as potential.



**THE MORE UNIQUE
WE TRY TO BE,**

University applications promise an encounter with individual potential. Yet potential cannot be evaluated until it has been organised into familiar signs: commitment, initiative, resilience, social awareness and a credible future. Applicants learn to translate the irregular texture of a life into these signs long before an evaluator reads the result. Readability is therefore not neutral. It rewards experiences that can be named quickly and arranged causally. Activities acquire value when they demonstrate development, while interests without visible outcomes become difficult to justify. The form encourages the applicant to treat biography as evidence rather than memory.

**THE MORE ALIKE
WE BECOME.**

The contradiction is structural rather than simply personal. Each student is asked to sound distinctive, but distinction must remain legible inside a shared grammar of excellence. The closer applicants move toward that grammar, the more their stories begin to resemble one another - even when the experiences underneath them are genuinely different. Similarity emerges not because applicants lack individuality, but because the route into legibility is narrow. A contradiction is resolved, a hobby is instrumentalised, a gap becomes growth and a future is announced with confidence. Repetition appears at the level of structure before it appears at the level of style.

AN APPLICATION IS NOT A WINDOW.

It is an interface. It selects the information that may enter, gives that information a sequence and asks it to perform for a distant reader. The applicant does not merely describe a life; they anticipate a system of judgement and redesign the description around that imagined gaze. Every inclusion implies an exclusion. A project enters because it can demonstrate initiative; an afternoon spent without a productive outcome is left outside. The resulting text may be accurate in each detail while remaining incomplete in its overall logic. Its truth is shaped by the conditions under which it must become persuasive.

SELECT / ORDER / PROVE



This does not mean the final statement is false. Selection is present in every act of communication. The problem begins when one narrow form of selection is treated as a transparent picture of the person, and when uncertainty, contradiction or ordinary pleasure are interpreted as weaknesses rather than normal conditions of becoming. The interface does not simply collect identity; it quietly proposes what a credible identity should contain.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Does a system intended to recognise diversity turn self-expression into another fixed task?



A DESIGN OF THE

The application begins as an act of retrieval: What have I done? What do I care about? What can my work show? It quickly becomes an act of composition. Events that occurred separately are placed on one line of development. A short interest becomes an early signal. A project becomes proof of character. A difficulty becomes the necessary first scene of a story about growth. Sequence produces intention retrospectively. The student who once followed curiosity in several directions appears, on the page, to have been preparing for one course all along.

SELF

Composition makes experience communicable, but it also changes its meaning. Once every element must support admission, the past is judged by its usefulness to the present. The application therefore creates two selves at once: the person who lived through scattered events and the persona who appears to have been moving toward one destination all along. The gap between them is not necessarily dishonesty. It is design: selection, hierarchy, pacing and emphasis applied to a life. The question is who controls those operations and which forms of personhood they repeatedly produce.



THE GRAMMAR OF EXCELLENCE

01	CLEAR DIRECTION	A STANDARD WITHOUT A SINGLE AUTHOR The standard is distributed across official guidance, consultancy language, successful examples, peer comparison and platform advice. Because no single source owns it, the applicant experiences it less as an instruction than as common sense. Advice travels through screenshots, sample essays, tutoring sessions and remembered comments. Each fragment may be practical, but together they establish a model of excellence that feels both everywhere and nowhere. Students begin to anticipate evaluation before any evaluator has spoken.
02	LONG COMMITMENT	
03	VISIBLE IMPACT	
04	REFLECTION	
05	SOCIAL VALUE	
06	FUTURE PROMISE	

None of these qualities is inherently undesirable. Together, however, they form a repeated sentence about the ideal young person: already focused, consistently productive, able to convert private experience into public value and ready to promise a future return on institutional investment. The grammar is powerful because it appears reasonable one quality at a time. Its narrowing effect only becomes visible when many applications are read together and different lives repeatedly arrive in the same rhetorical shape.

LISTEN. CODE. COMPARE.



FIELDWORK

Four semi-structured interviews explored how applicants understood the ideal candidate, where that image came from, which experiences they removed and how the finished application differed from everyday life. The conversations covered chemical engineering, humanities, media design and art and design. Rather than asking whether a statement was true or false, the interviews followed moments of choice: why one activity entered, why another disappeared, when a future became definite and which phrases were borrowed from the wider culture of application advice.

The study is exploratory rather than representative. Its value lies in tracing recurring editing moves across different fields. Quotations were translated from Chinese and lightly edited for clarity; hesitation, repetition and uncertainty were interpreted as meaningful features rather than noise to be removed. Analysis moved between individual transcripts and a shared coding sheet. The aim was to preserve the differences between speakers while identifying transformations that returned across cases: compression, magnification, renaming and extension.

01 POSITION

02 INTERVIEW

03 SYNTHESISE

04 DEFINE

WHAT DISAPPEARS

Across all four conversations, the submitted self was described as clearer, more stable and more positive than the person speaking. The omissions were not random. Short-lived interests, indecision, laziness, failed attempts and unrelated pleasures were repeatedly treated as information that might weaken the overall image.

What disappeared was often precisely what made the accounts feel lived: pauses between projects, interests pursued without achievement, work that failed to become a lesson and choices that remained unresolved. These details were not removed because they were unimportant to the speaker. They were removed because their importance was difficult to translate into the language of potential. Omission became a method for stabilising identity.

TRANSLATED AND LIGHTLY EDITED



FOUR VOICES. ONE EDITING PRESSURE.

- 01 The person in my application is much more mature and positive than I am.
- 02 I removed the projects that made me look as if I lost interest too quickly.
- 03 In real life I was still deciding; the statement made the future sound settled.
- 04 After reading many examples, I changed my own structure without noticing.

I was still unsure which direction interested me. The application made me sound completely committed.

COMPRESS



BEFORE

The student described several possible scientific interests, limited access to specialist work and real uncertainty about a future sub-field. Curiosity moved laterally between topics. At the time, this openness felt appropriate to someone still discovering what chemical engineering could contain.

AFTER

The statement reorganises those interests into one stable academic direction. A compact sequence of experiment, reflection and future intention makes commitment appear continuous. Exploration is retained only when it can function as an early step toward the destination already named by the course.

WHAT THE EDIT REMOVES

Intellectual openness is recoded as a lack of focus. The possibility of changing direction is made invisible.

CASE 02 / HUMANITIES

I had ordinary interests and no major prize.
I needed the statement to make one experience
carry more weight.

MAGNIFY

BEFORE

Reading, writing and volunteering existed as ordinary activities distributed across school and everyday life. None had originally felt like a dramatic turning point. Their significance was personal and cumulative, but difficult to demonstrate through prizes, scale or measurable impact.

AFTER

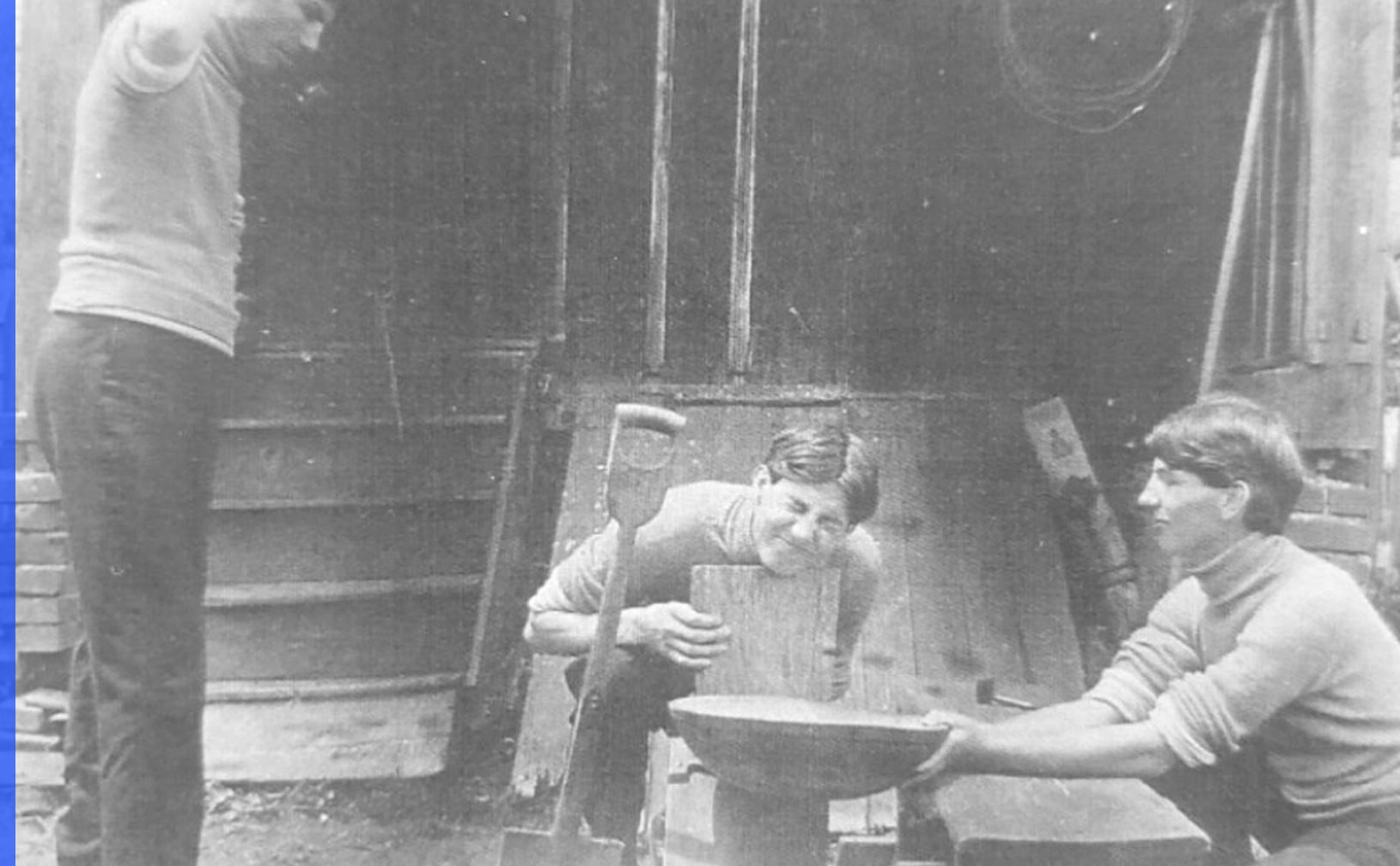
Selected moments are enlarged until they appear to reveal a stable value system and a long-term intellectual identity. Small decisions are framed as evidence of character; a limited event carries the interpretive weight of a major experience. Intensity is produced through description rather than scale.

WHAT THE EDIT REMOVES

The everyday scale of the action disappears. Meaning becomes valuable only when it can be framed as impact.

I wrote about what I learned from the video account. Delays, failed shoots and doubt about changing countries vanished.

RENAME



BEFORE

The project developed through experimentation, procrastination, abandoned footage and uncertainty about where to study. Some decisions were practical responses to time and access rather than expressions of a clear design method. Doubt remained part of the process until the application required a conclusion.

AFTER

Setbacks become reflection; inconsistency becomes iteration; the account becomes evidence of sustained commitment. Professional vocabulary gives the sequence a deliberate rhythm and converts unfinished decisions into a coherent methodology. The process sounds resolved even where the maker still experienced it as provisional.

WHAT THE EDIT REMOVES

The emotional and practical mess of making is replaced by a professional vocabulary of process and improvement.

I wanted to avoid a formula, but after reading many examples I found myself following their structure.

EXTEND

BEFORE

Interests developed unevenly. Some projects ended quickly; others returned after long pauses or changed medium. The portfolio contained genuine connections, but it also contained discontinuities, accidental discoveries and experiments that mattered without becoming part of a recognisable personal style.

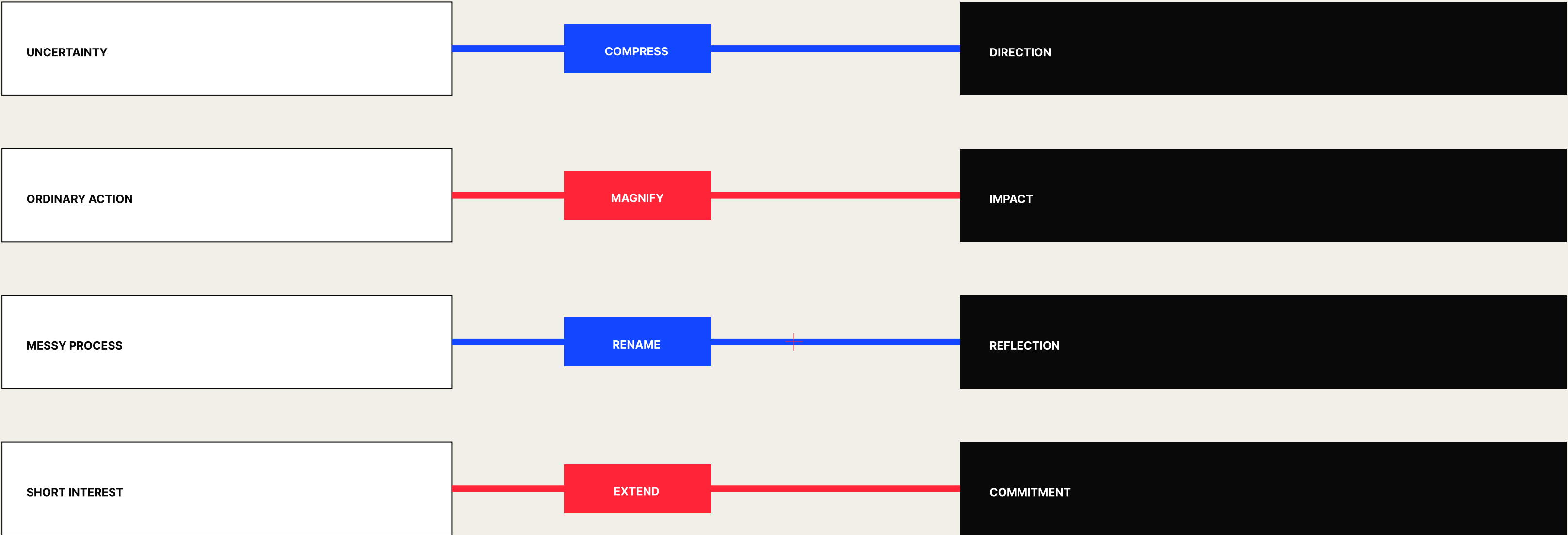
AFTER

A selective chronology connects the surviving projects into one continuous practice moving toward art school. Recurring themes are emphasised, changes of medium become development and abandoned directions disappear. The final persona seems to possess a stable practice earlier than the student actually experienced one.

WHAT THE EDIT REMOVES

Stops, restarts and changes of mind are removed, even though they may be central to how a creative practice grows.

DIFFERENT INPUTS. ONE OUTPUT LOGIC.



The four applicants did not enter the process with the same experiences, ambitions or application requirements. Their editing moves nevertheless converged. Each person learned to reduce ambiguity, intensify meaning and produce a future that looked deliberate. What changed from case to case was the material; what remained stable was the demand that experience become directional, reflective and valuable to a future institution.

This is why similarity cannot be measured only by repeated words. The deeper repetition is structural: different lives are organised through the same transformations until they become comparable forms of potential. Distinction survives at the level of topic, while a common architecture governs how that topic must be narrated. The ideal applicant is therefore less a single personality than a shared method of arranging the self.



ACTOR. REVIEWER. PROJECT.

Goffman's account of presentation helps distinguish performance from simple deception. A person can sincerely select a front-stage self for a specific audience, just as different situations call for different versions of speech and behaviour. The application becomes problematic not because it is performed, but because one performance may be treated as the complete person. A temporary role is frozen into identity, while the backstage - uncertainty, fatigue, contradiction and rehearsal - loses legitimacy. The polished statement conceals the labour required to make polish appear natural.

PERFORMANCE / GOFFMAN

Foucault helps explain why the evaluator does not need to be physically present. Applicants imagine the gaze in advance, monitor themselves and correct anything that might appear inconsistent. Advice, examples and peer comparison give that imagined gaze practical detail. Judgement is therefore active during production, not only after submission. The student becomes both the writer and the first reviewer of the text, repeatedly asking whether each sentence looks focused, useful and credible from an external position.

DISCIPLINE / FOUCAULT

Byung-Chul Han describes a subject who treats the self as a project of continuous optimisation. In this logic, experience becomes an asset, pain becomes growth and the future becomes a promise of increased value. Pressure appears as personal ambition rather than external command. The applicant does not simply obey a rule; they participate in improving the product called the self. Because optimisation feels voluntary, exhaustion and self-erasure can be interpreted as evidence of commitment rather than effects of competition.

OPTIMISATION / HAN



REFERENCE / CLASSIFICATION

MEASUREMENT IS ALSO A WAY OF SEEING.

Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen's Training Humans examines image collections used to teach machine vision how to classify people. The project demonstrates that categories are constructed rather than simply discovered, and that systems of measurement carry cultural and political assumptions. Before a system can recognise a person, someone has already decided which differences matter, how they should be named and what a representative image should look like. Classification begins with design decisions that later appear technical or objective.

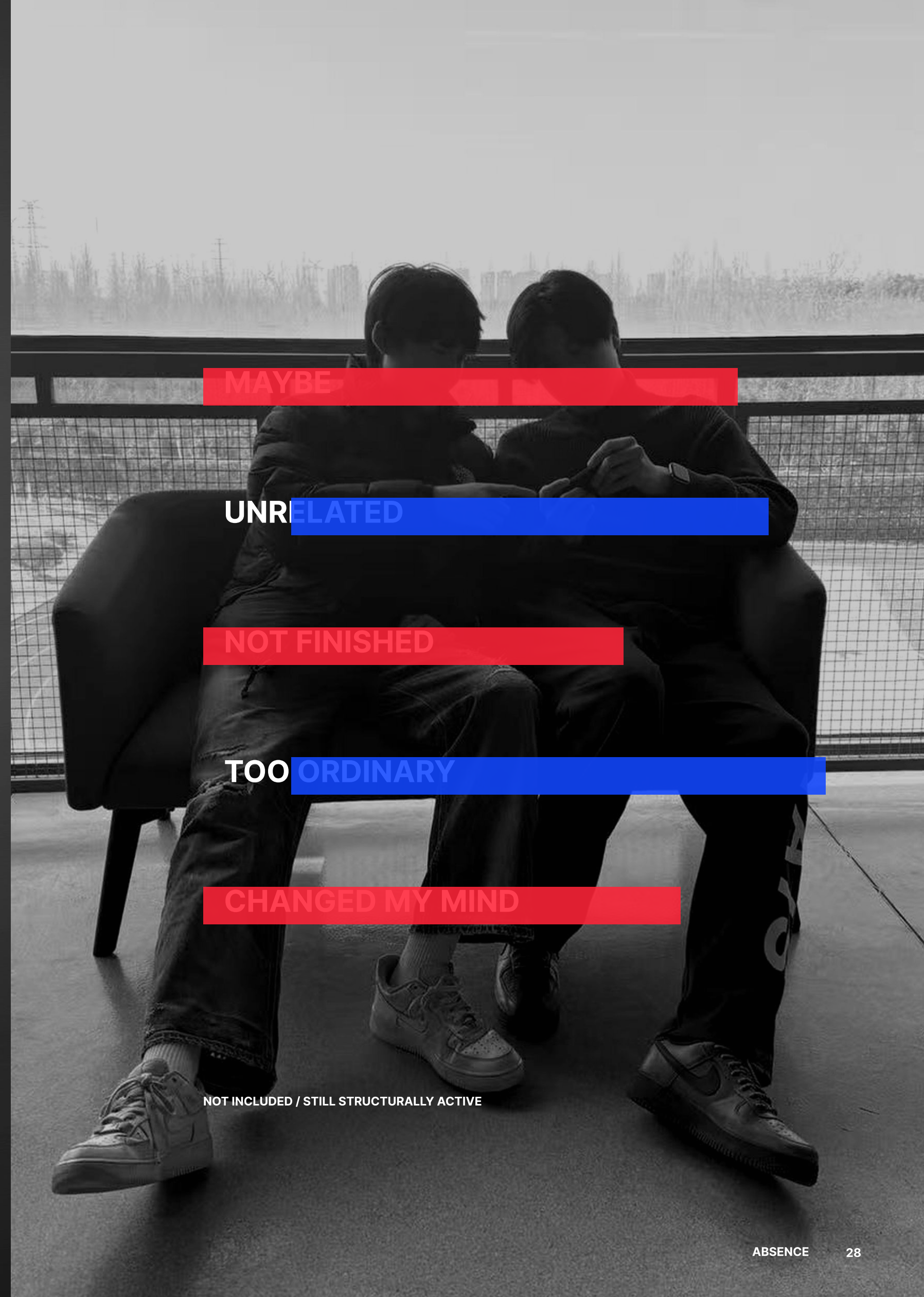
Admissions is not an AI training dataset, and the comparison here is analogical. Both cases nevertheless ask a communication question: what disappears when a complex person must become a readable category? The form does not merely record the applicant. It trains everyone involved to notice some qualities and ignore others. Repeated exposure teaches students what counts as evidence before they begin writing. The category of the promising applicant is reproduced through thousands of small acts of selection.

FACEMACHINE / VISUAL ANALOGUE

THE DELETED SELF IS STILL PRESENT.

Deletion does not erase the rejected material from the process. The applicant remembers the abandoned activity, the indecision and the ordinary afternoon while presenting a version in which none of them appears. Their absence continues to organise the final story: every clean transition marks a place where complexity was removed. The deleted material also changes how the remaining material is read. Once doubt disappears, confidence seems natural; once interruption disappears, commitment seems continuous; once ordinary time disappears, every retained moment appears consequential.

A less flawless account would not need to display every private detail. It would simply allow uncertainty, discontinuity and changing interests to exist without immediately translating them into defects. The aim is not total confession; it is a wider definition of what a credible young person may look like. Such an account could acknowledge that knowledge develops unevenly, that creative practices pause and restart, and that a future can be taken seriously without being fully settled. Credibility would no longer depend on the performance of perfect continuity.





A LESS FLAWLESS FORM

01

ALLOW UNCERTAINTY

Let applicants name open questions without forcing premature certainty. Curiosity can be credible before it becomes a fixed career plan.

03

VALUE PROCESS

Accept stops, restarts and changes of direction as evidence of learning. Development does not require an uninterrupted upward line.

THE PERSON IS LARGER THAN THE FORM

02

MAKE THE PROMPT VISIBLE

Explain what a question evaluates, why that information matters and what the response cannot reasonably measure about a person.

04

LIMIT COMPARISON

Reduce the influence of exemplary stories that quietly become templates. Examples should reveal possible approaches without defining one ideal voice.

This project does not ask institutions to stop evaluating or applicants to stop editing. It asks for forms that acknowledge editing as a condition of communication and that do not mistake polished coherence for the whole person. A more humane application would remain readable while leaving room for lives that are unfinished, nonlinear and still becoming. The goal is not to remove structure, but to design structures that can hold ambiguity without converting it immediately into failure.

THE PERSON BEFORE THE FORM.

A field report on self-editing, institutional
readability and the ideal applicant produced by
competitive admission.