Question 1: Academic Excellence

Prove the mind: one piece of work, one validation, one honest bridge to the course.

Academic excellence	About 200 words, up to 1,400 characters	Claim, work, validation, range, bridge	Proves the mind
CRITERION	WORD LIMIT	METHOD	JOB IN YOUR THREAD

ABOUT THE EXAMPLES.

Every example here is invented: the people, institutions, scholars and numbers are fictional and exist only to show technique. In your own answer every name and figure must be real and defensible at interview.

THE PROMPT IN SHORT.

How, through your education and past experiences, you have displayed academic excellence

01 SECTION 1

What the question asks

The form asks you to describe how, through your education and past experiences, you have **displayed** academic excellence. Two words matter. "Displayed" asks for evidence, not a claim. "Past experiences" means the answer is not limited to your degree: research, work, self-teaching and teaching others all count.

It is the only one of the four answers that does not ask about your future. It still needs to point forward, in one closing clause, so the four answers read as one trajectory.

02 SECTION 2

What the reader is checking

The Criteria page says academic excellence is shown through transcripts, references, experience and the potential to succeed on your chosen course. Your transcript and your two academic referees cover the first two. This answer covers experience and potential.

By the time Gates reads it, your department has already nominated you as one of its most outstanding applicants. The panel is not asking "is this person clever?" It is asking "among clever people, whose mind do we most want in the Gates community?" That is why a list of grades fails: everyone in the pool has them.

03 SECTION 3

Where Question 1 sits in your thread

ANSWER	ITS JOB
Q1	Proves the mind
Q2	Proves the direction
Q3	Proves the purpose
Q4	Proves the method

Use a different story here from Questions 3 and 4. If your Question 3 story is a research project that helped farmers, Question 1 should describe the intellectual problem inside it, not the farmers.

04 SECTION 4

The evidence ladder

RANK	TYPE OF EVIDENCE	EXAMPLE
1	Original contribution	A finding, method, dataset, design, argument or archive you created
2	Recognition by people who judged	A prize, a paper or presentation, a competitive selection, being asked to teach or assist
3	Going past the syllabus	A self-started project, a second discipline, a hard problem taken on after the course ended
4	Performance	A rank, a distinction, a first, with cohort size and meaning
5	Participation	Attending, completing, being enrolled

Weak answers spend most of their words at ranks 4 and 5. Start at rank 1 or 2, and use rank 4 as one supporting number.

05 SECTION 5

Choosing your evidence

List six to eight candidates and score each against four tests. Pick the one or two that pass most.

CANDIDATE	ORIGINAL?	CHECKABLE?	SHOWS THINKING?	NOT ALREADY ON MY TRANSCRIPT?
Final-year thesis				
A research assistantship				
A prize or competition				
A self-taught skill used at work				
A published or presented paper				
Teaching or tutoring				

"Checkable" means a referee or interviewer could confirm it. "Shows thinking" means you can describe a choice you made and why, not only a result.

06 SECTION 6

The structure and the word budget

MOVE	WORDS (OF 200)	WHAT IT DOES
1. A claim in your own terms	About 20	Says what kind of thinker you are, as something the evidence then proves
2. Your strongest piece of work	About 80	The question, what you did, what you found, one exact figure
3. External validation	About 45	A rank with its cohort size, a prize, a presentation, a selection
4. Range or growth	About 30	A second discipline, a field switch, teaching others, or recovery from a poor start
5. The bridge	About 25	The question your work leaves open, pointing to the course without making Question 2's case

Roughly half the marks sit in moves 2 and 3. Protect them when you cut.

07 SECTION 7

Numbers and denominators

- **Give every rank a denominator.** "First of 212" is evidence. "Top of my class" is a claim.
- **Explain an unfamiliar grading scale in a clause.** "A first, awarded to about 8 per cent of the year" tells an international panel what it needs.
- **Use the exact figure.** 359 of 380 reads as measured. "About 95 per cent" reads as remembered.
- **Never manufacture a number.** If your work has no metrics, use a concrete change of state: a method adopted, a dataset still in use, an argument cited by someone else.

- **Do not rely on institution prestige.** Relative standing inside your institution is clearer than its name.

08 SECTION 8

Adapting to your profile

PROFILE	YOUR BEST EVIDENCE	WATCH OUT FOR
Laboratory or quantitative scientist	A problem you solved, a method you changed, a result with a number	Listing techniques instead of describing a decision
Humanities or social science	The argument, the archive, the languages, the sources you built	Topic description with no claim or method
Professional returning to study	Self-taught skill applied to a real problem, a working paper, recognition from a professional body	Apologising for your grades. State them once, then show the later work
Uneven record	The upward trajectory, with the later ranks and numbers	Long explanations. There is no minimum GPA, so one sentence is enough
Switched disciplines	The bridge you built between the two fields	Presenting the switch as a lack of focus
Limited-resource institution	What you made with what you had	Comparing your institution to others

09 SECTION 9

The writing process

1. **Pick the story.** Use the scoring table in section 5.
2. **Write the claim last.** Draft moves 2 to 5 first. The claim then writes itself from the evidence.
3. **Draft long, then cut.** Aim for 260 words, then reduce.

4. **Cut in this order.** Adjectives that do the work of numbers, then repeated grades, then a second prize, then background that is not the work.
5. **Count characters, not words.** The form's hard cap is 1,400 characters including spaces. About 200 words usually fits, but check.
6. **Read it to someone outside your field.** If they cannot say what you found, rewrite the second paragraph.

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10 SECTION 10

Three worked examples (all invented)

Example A: laboratory science (about 180 words)

> *My strongest academic work began as a failure. In my third year I was assigned to validate a published assay for cassava brown streak virus, and it gave false negatives on 22 of 60 field samples. Instead of reporting that and moving on, I spent four months testing why, and found that sap from older leaves inhibited the reaction. I redesigned the extraction step, and the revised assay agreed with laboratory PCR on 359 of 380 samples. My thesis became a paper presented at the Eastern Africa Plant Health Conference, where I was the only undergraduate speaker.*
> *I graduated first of 212 students in plant pathology with a first-class degree, awarded to about 8 per cent of my year, and was selected by my department as a teaching assistant for two later cohorts.*
> *What I learned is that I am strongest where a method meets a messy real sample. What I cannot yet do is explain why the virus keeps evolving past the tests we design, and that is the gap a PhD in Plant Sciences would let me close.*

WHY IT WORKS.
It opens with rank 1 evidence, a problem she solved. The failure (22 of 60) makes the result (359 of 380) believable. The rank carries a denominator and a base rate. The last two sentences deliver the bridge: strength, gap, course. Every figure can be checked at interview.

Example B: humanities and social science (about 175 words)

> *Academic excellence, for me, means asking a question the existing sources cannot answer and then building the evidence to answer it. My undergraduate dissertation asked how*

families displaced from a Beirut neighbourhood remember a street that no longer exists. No archive held the answer, so I recorded and transcribed 41 interviews in Arabic and Armenian over eight months, and cross-checked each account against municipal records and 1950s property deeds. The dissertation was awarded 91 per cent, the highest mark in the faculty that year, and the university library now holds the interview collection as a research resource.
I also teach what I have learned. As a research assistant to Dr Nadia Khoury I coded 600 pages of testimony for an edited volume, and I co-taught a methods workshop to 25 first-year students. I earned a first in every year of my degree and received the Faculty Prize for Research in my final year.
My next question is how such memories travel across generations in exile, which needs the comparative method and supervision that Cambridge anthropology offers.

WHY IT WORKS.

The opening claim defines excellence, and the rest proves it. The evidence is the argument and the archive: languages, interview counts and sources. The library keeping the collection is rank 2 evidence, because others judged it worth keeping. It shows range (assistant, co-teacher) without an awards list.

Example C: a professional with an ordinary record (about 170 words)

My degree was in accounting, and my record there is solid but not remarkable: an upper second, ranked 31st of 160. What I did afterwards is the better evidence. As a bank analyst I found that our loan-default model ignored seasonality in market traders' incomes, and I taught myself time-series methods from open lectures and two textbooks, working through every exercise at night over eight months. I rebuilt the model, cutting its false-alarm rate from 23 to 14 per cent on 9,000 loans, and wrote it up as a working paper that the Central Bank's research department invited me to present in 2025.
Since then I have completed an online econometrics programme with a mark of 91 per cent and tutored 18 junior analysts in the method.
I do my best thinking where a messy real dataset meets a clean theoretical idea, and I now need the formal training in causal inference and macroeconomics that only a full research degree offers.

WHY IT WORKS.

It states the unimpressive grade once, with its denominator, and moves on. The self-taught method (rank 3) and the invited paper (rank 2) carry the answer. It is honest about the gap, and

the bridge names exactly what a degree would add.

11 SECTION 11

Weak versus strong

WEAK	WHY IT FAILS	STRONG
"I have always been passionate about learning and graduated with excellent grades."	Adjectives, no evidence	"I graduated third of 140 in economics, and my thesis on informal credit changed the survey design my department used the next year."
"I achieved a CGPA of 3.9."	Duplicates the transcript	"My 3.9 included the only distinction awarded in advanced econometrics that year, on a course where the median mark was 52."
"I participated in several research projects."	Participation is rank 5	"On the three-person team studying soil carbon, I wrote the sampling protocol that all later fieldwork followed."
"I was awarded many scholarships and prizes."	A list with no meaning	"The Dean's Prize, given to one student in 300, went to my thesis on groundwater modelling."

12 SECTION 12

The test suite

- **The denominator test.** Does every rank, prize or grade carry a cohort size or a meaning?
- **The transcript test.** Delete every grade that is already on your transcript. Does the answer still stand?
- **The so-what test.** After each achievement, ask "so what?" until the answer is something that changed or something you can now do.
- **The outsider test.** Can a smart reader from another field say what you found after one reading?
- **The referee test.** Could your academic referee confirm every claim?

- **The thread test.** Is this a different story from Questions 3 and 4?

13 SECTION 13

Common mistakes

1. Repeating the transcript.
2. Describing a topic instead of a piece of work.
3. Listing five prizes without saying what one of them proves.
4. Ranks without cohort sizes.
5. Explaining weak grades at length.
6. Using the same story as Question 3 or 4.
7. Starting with "I have always been passionate about learning."
8. Exceeding 1,400 characters, and losing the ending.

14 SECTION 14

Checklist

- [ ] The first sentence is a claim or a piece of work, not a statement about learning
- [ ] One piece of work is described in enough detail to follow
- [ ] Every rank, prize or grade has a denominator or a meaning
- [ ] Nothing is repeated from my transcript for its own sake
- [ ] A reader from another discipline can follow every sentence
- [ ] My academic referee could confirm every claim
- [ ] The last clause points to the course without making Question 2's case

- [ ] It stays under 1,400 characters including spaces