

S CONCEPT STAGE • APPLICANT STUDY GUIDE

Preparing a Concept Stage *application*.

This guide explains what reviewers assess in each field of the Concept stage application, illustrates the level of detail expected, and outlines a process for completing the application. It is intended to be read before drafting.

APPLICATIONS OPEN	SUBMISSIONS DUE	CONCEPT FINAL
Sept 23	Oct 23, noon	Nov 13

Specificity is the primary differentiator.

Reviewers evaluate a substantial number of applications in sequence, and the majority describe a significant problem, an ambitious solution, and a committed applicant. Applications that score well are distinguished by particulars that could not be generated without direct investigation: a figure, a location, a reported statement, or an unanticipated finding.

This reflects the purpose of the Concept stage. Specific detail follows from direct contact with the people affected by the problem, and that contact is what the rubric is designed to measure.

01

Scale is not assessed.

A locally scoped business is evaluated on the same criteria as a high-growth venture.

02

Presentation is not assessed.

Plain language is preferred to specialized terminology. Writing quality is not a criterion.

03

Use of AI is not assessed.

Neither the use nor the avoidance of AI tools affects the score.

04

Accuracy is consequential.

Reporting that no conversations have occurred affects one criterion. A claim that cannot be substantiated in review affects eligibility.

Applicants may use AI tools to edit and refine their writing. The conversations, prototypes, and results described must nonetheless be accurate, and applicants attest to this at submission. Semifinal reviewers ask follow-up questions drawn directly from these responses.

What each field is intended to elicit.

Scored fields correspond to the four criteria: Insight, Evidence, Originality, and Why you. The remaining fields inform mentor assignment, resource allocation, and team formation, and do not affect the score.

The examples below illustrate the expected *level of detail*. They are not model answers, and reproducing their phrasing is not advised.

One-sentence description • Statement of the concept

READ FIRST BY ALL REVIEWERS

Characteristics of a complete response

- Identifies the intended user and what the offering does
- Uses ordinary language rather than category terms such as “platform” or “ecosystem”
- Can be understood by a reader unfamiliar with the field

INSUFFICIENTLY SPECIFIC

A platform that leverages technology to revolutionize how students engage with campus resources.

SUFFICIENTLY SPECIFIC

A text-message service that tells first-year students which dining halls still have hot food after 9pm.

Frequent shortcomings

- Describing an eventual vision rather than the current concept
- Deferring the substantive detail to later questions

Qo • Definition of the problem or opportunity

SCORED: INSIGHT

Characteristics of a complete response

- States in plain language what is currently going wrong, or what has recently become possible
- Describes a condition that exists independently of the proposed solution
- Is narrow enough that a reader could determine whether it had been resolved

INSUFFICIENTLY SPECIFIC

There is a lack of innovative solutions in the campus wellness space, and students deserve better tools to support their overall wellbeing.

SUFFICIENTLY SPECIFIC

Clinical rotation schedules require students to leave before dining halls open and return after they close. For six weeks, students on rotation have no access to prepared food during the hours they are able to eat.

Frequent shortcomings

- Describing the absence of the proposed solution rather than the underlying condition
- Defining the problem so broadly that no response could resolve it
- Restating the one-sentence description without adding substance

Q1 • Identification of the affected population

SCORED: INSIGHT

Characteristics of a complete response

- Describes a single, identifiable person rather than a broad category
- Indicates the context in which the applicant encountered this person
- Includes a detail that reflects direct observation

INSUFFICIENTLY SPECIFIC

Students are busy and stressed, and they struggle to manage their time effectively.

SUFFICIENTLY SPECIFIC

Second-year nursing students on clinical rotation. They leave for the hospital at 5:30am, before dining halls open, and rely on vending machines twice a day for six weeks.

Frequent shortcomings

- Naming an undifferentiated group such as “students,” which limits the response to level 1
- Describing a hypothesized problem rather than an observed one

Q2 • Existing alternatives and points of difference

SCORED: INSIGHT AND ORIGINALITY

Characteristics of a complete response

- Identifies two or three current alternatives by name, including informal workarounds and inaction
- Explains what each alternative fails to accomplish for the identified user
- States the proposed point of difference and why it is material to that user

INSUFFICIENTLY SPECIFIC

There are some apps out there but none of them do it well, so there is a big opportunity here.

SUFFICIENTLY SPECIFIC

Most students prepare meals on Sunday or order delivery. Meal preparation fails because rotation schedules change mid-week, and delivery services do not reach the hospital loading dock, where students have a twenty-minute window. The proposed service distributes at the dock during shift change.

Frequent shortcomings

- Asserting that no alternatives exist, which generally indicates limited investigation
- Listing competitors without identifying their limitations
- Stating a difference without explaining its significance to the user

Q3 · Evidence from conversations

SCORED: EVIDENCE

Characteristics of a complete response

- Reports an accurate count, including zero
- Identifies who the respondents were and how they were reached
- Describes a finding that differed from the applicant's expectation

INSUFFICIENTLY SPECIFIC

I talked to a lot of people and they all said this was a great idea and they would definitely use it.

SUFFICIENTLY SPECIFIC

Eleven respondents, all nursing students approached in the McLeod lobby between classes. Seven indicated that cost was not the constraint; scheduling was. Two indicated a willingness to pay a premium for guaranteed 6am availability.

Frequent shortcomings

- Limiting conversations to friends and roommates

- Reporting uniform enthusiasm, which provides reviewers with no usable information
 - Overstating figures. Semifinal reviewers ask follow-up questions about these responses
-

Q4 · Central assumption

SCORED: INSIGHT

Characteristics of a complete response

- Identifies a single assumption on which the concept depends
- Selects an assumption that could plausibly prove false
- Indicates how the applicant intends to test it

INSUFFICIENTLY SPECIFIC

The main risk is that we do not market it well enough or that a big competitor copies us.

SUFFICIENTLY SPECIFIC

The concept assumes the hospital will permit a non-employee to distribute food at the loading dock. If facilities management declines, the model is not viable. The applicant has scheduled a conversation with the rotation coordinator.

Frequent shortcomings

- Naming execution risks such as marketing or funding, which apply to all concepts
 - Selecting a low-stakes assumption. Identifying a genuine dependency scores higher
-

Q5 · Anticipated payer

NOT SCORED

Characteristics of a complete response

- Select all plausible options; the response does not commit the applicant to a business model
- “Not sure yet” is an accepted response

Frequent shortcomings

- Treating the question as consequential. It informs administrative routing only
-

Q6 · Dependence on AI tools

NOT SCORED

Characteristics of a complete response

- Respond accurately; all three options are acceptable
- Use the explanation field where the accurate answer is partial

Frequent shortcomings

- Introducing AI into the description in the expectation of a higher score. It confers no scoring advantage and may affect how the application is grouped

Q7 · Applicant's relationship to the problem

SCORED: WHY YOU

Characteristics of a complete response

- Identifies relevant experience, skills, or a direct connection to the affected population
- Identifies access the applicant holds that others would not: a setting, a network, or a capability on the team
- Two concise sentences are sufficient

INSUFFICIENTLY SPECIFIC

I have always been passionate about this space and I am a hard worker who loves solving problems.

SUFFICIENTLY SPECIFIC

The applicant completed the same clinical rotation in spring 2026 and is familiar with the schedule and the loading dock. A teammate manages the student-run cafe and has experience with food-handling permits.

Frequent shortcomings

- Leading with expressions of enthusiasm, which are common to nearly all applications
- Omitting the teammate who holds the relevant capability

Q8 · Work completed to date

SCORED: EVIDENCE

Characteristics of a complete response

- Select only those items that have actually been completed
- “Nothing yet” is an accurate and acceptable response

Frequent shortcomings

- Selecting “built a prototype” for a slide mockup. Reviewers compare these selections against the Q3 response
-

Q9–Q11 · Intent, support needs, and team formation

NOT SCORED

Characteristics of a complete response

- Respond directly; these items inform mentor assignment, resource allocation, and team formation
- State actual needs rather than aspirational ones

Frequent shortcomings

- Selecting a higher-growth intent for perceived advantage. An accurate response produces a better-matched mentor
-

A twenty-minute drafting sequence.

0-3 min

Identify one affected person.

Before drafting, bring to mind a specific individual who experiences this problem. If none comes to mind, the appropriate next step is a conversation rather than a draft.

3-8 min

Draft Q0, Q1, Q2, and Q3.

Produce rough text quickly and revise later. These fields account for three of the four criteria.

8-12 min

Draft Q4 and Q7.

For Q4, consider what conditions must hold for the concept to function, then select the least certain. For Q7, consider what the applicant holds that another person with the same idea would not.

12-16
min

Complete the unscored fields.

Q5, Q6, Q8, Q9, Q10, and Q11 require accurate selections rather than deliberation.

16-20
min

Remove non-specific statements.

Any sentence that could appear unchanged in a different application is not contributing. Replace it with a particular detail or delete it.

Applications close **Friday, October 23 at noon**. Applicants who have not yet held conversations can still address their weakest criterion: five conversations in the intervening period moves Evidence from level 1 to level 3.

Verify before submitting.

- ☐ Q0 describes a condition that exists independently of the proposed solution.

- ☐ Q1 identifies a specific person rather than a category.

- ☐ Q2 names at least two existing alternatives and the limitation of each.

- ☐ Q3 reports an accurate figure and an unanticipated finding.

- ☐ Q4 identifies a dependency that could plausibly prove false, not a general execution risk.

- ☐ Q7 identifies access or capability that another applicant would not hold.

- ☐ Every item selected in Q8 has in fact been completed.

- ☐ No sentence in the application could be transferred unchanged to another submission.

- ☐ Every claim can be substantiated in a subsequent conversation with reviewers.

Common questions from applicants.

Should applicants without a team apply?

Yes. Individual applicants are eligible, and Q11 informs the team formation mixer. Team size is not a criterion.

Is an application viable with nothing built?

Yes. The Concept stage assesses ideas. Construction is not scored; what the applicant has learned through conversation is.

May applicants use AI tools to prepare responses?

AI tools may be used for editing and revision. All described activity must be accurate, and applicants attest to this at submission. Responses produced entirely by AI tools also tend toward generality, which the rubric penalizes.

Are locally scoped concepts at a disadvantage?

No. Scale is not a criterion. A laundromat and a semiconductor venture are assessed on the same four criteria.

Should an applicant withdraw if a similar offering already exists?

Not necessarily. Q2 provides the opportunity to explain what existing offerings fail to accomplish for the identified user. Differentiated execution for an underserved group is a legitimate response.

Are scores available to applicants?

Yes, on request. Applicants receive an average score for each criterion and reviewer comments, without reviewer names. Scores are final; only procedural errors are reviewed.

What follows submission?

Reviewers assess each application against the published rubric. Applicants are notified by email of next steps in advance of the Concept Final on November 13.
