

PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES FRAMEWORK FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS IN IRELAND



COMPILED BY MEMBERS OF THE SAI SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP ON PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES:
DR COLLEEN DOYLE (UCD; SIG LEAD), DANIEL CALDWELL (ATU), DR LISA FORTUNE (CARLOW
COLLEGE, ST PATRICK'S), MARIA KEANE (UCC), DR NIAMH NESTOR (UCD).

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Compiled for Members of the Student Affairs Ireland by the Special Interest Group (SIG) on Professional Competencies:

- Dr Colleen Doyle (University College Dublin; SIG Lead),
- Daniel Caldwell (Atlantic Technological University),
- Dr Lisa Fortune (Carlow College, St Patrick's),
- Maria Keane (University College Cork),
- Dr Niamh Nestor (University College Dublin)

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LETTER FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Dear Colleagues,

It is with great pride and appreciation that I present the Student Affairs Ireland Professional Competencies Framework. This Framework represents the expertise, commitment, and collective wisdom of our professional community, and it reaffirms the central role of Student Affairs within Irish higher education.

Our work continues to evolve in complexity, scope and impact. Student Affairs Professionals are now recognised as key contributors to the academic mission of institutions, the wellbeing and belonging of students, and the national conversation on access, equity, participation and student success. As expectations of the higher education sector continue to grow, so too must our shared understanding of the knowledge, skills and values that underpin excellent professional practice.

This Framework reflects extensive consultation, collaboration and reflection across our membership. It builds on international best practice while remaining firmly rooted in the unique culture, priorities and values of Irish higher education. Most importantly, it centres the lived experience of our members - those who work every day to support, advise, empower and advocate for students.

The Framework reflects SAI's core values of Leadership, Inclusion, Accountability, Integrity, Sustainability and Excellence. It has been designed as a living document that will continue to evolve in response to the changing higher education landscape and the emerging needs of students and institutions alike.

LETTER FROM OUR PRESIDENT

My sincere appreciation goes to the SAI Special Interest Group on Professional Competencies for their leadership, dedication and vision throughout this process, and to every member who contributed their insights and expertise during the development of the Framework. Your engagement has ensured that this is not simply a document, but a meaningful and practical guide that will strengthen our profession and support our continued growth.

I encourage you to use this Framework as a tool for reflection, development and collaboration. Whether you are beginning your journey in Student Affairs or are a long-standing leader within the sector, this framework is intended to support professional practice, articulate the value and impact of our work and reinforce the shared standards of excellence that unite us as a professional community.

As we look to the future, Student Affairs Ireland remains committed to championing our profession, advancing good practice and fostering a culture of learning, leadership, and support. Together, we will continue to positively enhance the student experience and contribute meaningfully to the future of higher education in Ireland.

Thank you for your ongoing dedication to students, to your institutions and to one another.

Yours sincerely,
Linda Barry
SAI President



Linda Barry

PRESIDENT SAI

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STUDENT AFFAIRS IRELAND

Student Affairs Ireland (Gnóthaí Mac Léinn na hÉireann) began as the Confederation of Student Services in Ireland (CSSI) which was established in 1987 after a gathering of like-minded individuals at the University of Ulster. As the number of staff hired by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to work in student support roles grew, discussions began to take place within CSSI as to the relevance of the organisation's name and remit. Historically, some Student Affairs Professionals had viewed their role simply as service provision, but this no longer correlated with the developing understanding of the role and its importance in supporting student success. In 2019, CSSI formally changed its name to Student Affairs Ireland (SAI). SAI uses the term 'student affairs' as suggested by NASPA as an umbrella term to identify the varied and diverse roles understood to directly impact students within higher education (HE) (see www.naspa.org).

SAI's mission is to be the primary national body supporting Student Affairs Professionals in Ireland. SAI's work is primarily focused on providing continuous professional development opportunities for its members and advancing good practice in research and policy development. Its vision is to lead the community of Student Affairs Professionals in Ireland and support the holistic development of students as part of their educational experience. To do this, SAI has set itself the following objectives:

- Advocate for policy development and change on issues affecting students in HE.
- Promote and improve student development and support services for students entering and participating in HE in Ireland.
- Facilitate national and international networking and communication between individuals and associations concerned with student affairs in HE.
- Facilitate research on matters of common interest.

VISION OF STUDENT AFFAIRS IRELAND

SAI's vision is to lead the community of Student Affairs Professionals in Ireland and support the holistic development of students as part of their educational experience. SAI's mission is to be the primary national body supporting Student Affairs Professionals in Ireland.

CORE VALUES OF STUDENT AFFAIRS IRELAND

SAI's core values are:



These values inform the culture of SAI, shape its identity and influence its decision-making. Our values play a critical role in defining our mission, vision and goals, as well as in how we engage with our members and the broader HE community. They underpin all of the work we do to support our members in their delivery of an excellent, evidence-based and student-centred service.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE FRAMEWORK

The Professional Competencies Framework for Student Affairs Professionals in Ireland (henceforth, the Framework) has been in development over several years. It is the product of presentations, workshops and a wide-ranging consultative process undertaken initially by Dr Doyle and more recently by the SAI Special Interest Group (SIG) on Professional Competencies. In June 2019, Dr Doyle opened the discussion around developing a competency framework at a workshop she delivered at the SAI Summer Seminar. Some discussion ensued but little progress was made until 2021 when a workshop co-facilitated by Dr Doyle and Dr Andy Ryder (University of North Carolina, Wilmington) led to the establishment of the SAI SIG on Professional Competencies. In January 2022, Dr Ryder facilitated an online 'think-in' with SIG members to continue the identification of relevant competencies within the Irish context. In October 2022, the SIG hosted two postgraduate interns who developed and circulated to SAI members a questionnaire designed to identify emerging competencies. As part of SAI Lunch and Learn sessions in 2023, the SIG held an online update and feedback session with SAI members. In June 2023 at the SAI Summer Seminar, the SIG again offered members the opportunity to give feedback on the competencies identified through the consultative and collaborative process outlined above. The final draft competencies were presented to the SAI Executive Board in February 2026.^[1] All SAI members were offered a last opportunity to provide feedback on the draft document. The Framework was published and launched at the 2026 SAI Summer Seminar hosted by the Dublin Business School.

We would like to offer our sincere thanks to everyone who contributed to and supported this process along the way.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE FRAMEWORK



INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDENT AFFAIRS IRELAND PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES FRAMEWORK

The significance and impact of student affairs within HE worldwide are receiving growing attention. In Ireland, feedback from SAI members indicates an increasing demand for upskilling opportunities to address the ever more complex demands of their roles. These roles often involve participation in annual performance evaluations, the achievement of departmental and institutional goals, contribution to quality reviews as well as national and international accreditations.

The Framework empowers our members to articulate the complex and multifaceted nature of their work; it supports discussions during performance reviews; and it guides our members in requesting resources. The Framework is for all of our members, from newcomers to the profession to help them to understand the nature of the field, to more experienced professionals to assist them in articulating their expertise when applying for promotional opportunities.

The Framework is an important step forward in the professionalisation of the student affairs community in Irish HE. It has been designed collaboratively by our members for our members. It places our members and their professional development at its centre. It is a living document that will undergo regular review to ensure its relevance to those for whom it has been created. Recognising that some of our members are bound to professional standards of external professional bodies, this Framework has been designed to complement these pre-existing standards.

CONTEXT FOR THE FRAMEWORK

The members of SAI come from a broad church, with differing experiences, educational backgrounds and lengths of service. No matter what stage someone is at in their Student Affairs career or what background they have come from, they will find a community in SAI. Our members form a kaleidoscope of different perspectives, skill sets, strengths and expertise. What unites us is our goal to provide best-in-class, holistic supports to students so that they can flourish. This aim is unifying and fortifying.

Research suggests that the student affairs profession does not have many vertical development opportunities (see, e.g. McDade, 1990), but that offering Student Affairs Professionals opportunities to develop horizontally through upskilling and training is helpful for retention of staff and in mitigating burnout, an ongoing risk in our profession (see Rosser, 2004; Marshal, Gardner, Hughes & Lowrey, 2016; Farber, 2021). The International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) has observed that, although the movement towards the professionalisation of student affairs is uneven, there continues to be a need for the professionalisation of the field (Schreiber & Lewis, 2020). We understand from this that whilst the journey of professionalisation may not be linear and may present challenges, it remains necessary. Increased professionalisation correlates directly to an increased awareness of the significant impact on the student experience of student affairs.

Schreiber and Lewis (2020) states that 'education in all regions of the world is under pressure to address issues of access and equity, transformation, efficiency and standardisation and to assist in attaining the Sustainable Development Goals. Student success and employability are critical issues that form part of performance demands in higher education.' In order to address these issues, Student Affairs representative organisations have recognised the need for a clear articulation of professional competencies within their sector.

For example, College Student Educators International (ACPA) and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) created Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners in 2010. This competency framework was updated in 2015 to Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators, which has been highly influential in the development of curricula and learning outcomes in North America (Crain, Lowery and Wells, 2025). It is currently under review again, with an updated version expected in 2026. In *Student Affairs and Services in Higher Education: Global Foundations, Issues and Best Practice* (2020), IASAS dedicates a whole chapter to the professionalisation of student affairs and services around the world (pp. 57-62). Schreiber and Lewis (2020) further state that the role of the professionalisation of student affairs should serve to strengthen ‘local-global performance and scholarship, to build epistemic communities and to develop theories and coherent practices, relevant programmes, interventions and services that contribute significantly and cogently to higher education’s provision of quality education.’ It is against this backdrop that SAI set up its SIG on Professional Competencies which, in collaboration with members around the country through a consultative process, has been instrumental in the production of this Framework.

We have followed international best practice in the drafting of these professional competencies - in particular, the ACPA/NASPA (2015) Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners served as a starting-off point. However, we felt that the professional competencies created for SAI needed to have a distinctly Irish feel reflecting the history and traditions of student affairs in Ireland. SAI members were extensively consulted in the development of the Framework. The competencies selected for the Framework were those which were broadly endorsed during this consultation process.

The Framework is not prescriptive. SAI members are not bound by the competency statements and SAI does not intend for these to be used as an indicator of quality. Instead, we wish to encourage our members to actively engage with the competencies in a way that feels meaningful for them no matter the which point in their career they are at or the nature of their role in student affairs.

HOW TO USE THE FRAMEWORK

The Framework should be used to support reflective practice and inspire changes in practice. Therefore, we have intentionally used words such as 'may' or 'could'. These competencies have been drafted so that Student Affairs Professionals understand that the suggested action points are simply that - suggestions and not mandates. It is also our intention that this Framework, while reflecting the essentials, will be reviewed regularly so that competencies remain forward-thinking, resilient and adaptable to the everchanging higher education landscape (Crain, Lowery and Wells, 2025). It is the intention of the Professional Competencies SIG that this document be a starting point for a further exploration of these competencies as appropriate to one's role and context.

All competencies are written in a similar format for ease of reading and cross-referencing:

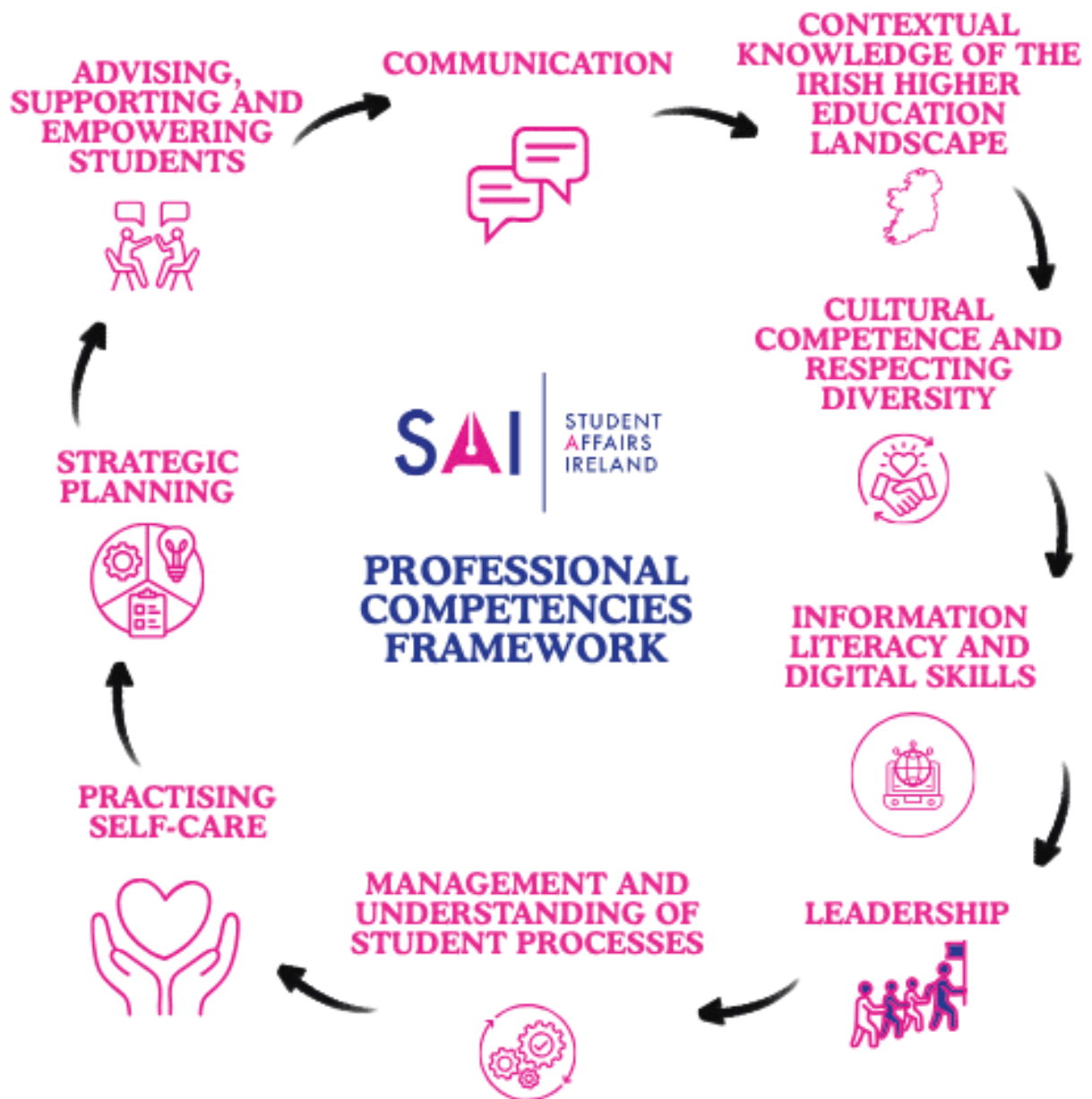
- Name of the competency.
- Definition of the competency.
- Why does this competency matter?
- Skills/Knowledge statements: 'As a Student Affairs Professional, I will strive to...'

It is our suggestion that the Framework be used as a supportive tool in a variety of settings to enhance professional development. Some examples may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- To help formulate job descriptions for new posts.
- To assist Student Affairs Professionals in drafting annual professional development plans based on the Framework competencies.
- To guide conversations in performance review meetings.
- To support the articulation of professional development needs and goals.
- To help those in leadership roles in student affairs to align and articulate the value of the work of their teams to institutional strategic priorities.
- To inspire SAI and its members to design professional development opportunities based on individual competencies.

To maximise the Framework's effectiveness, the SAI Board will implement a robust support strategy. By embedding these principles, we will ensure the Framework remains a dynamic catalyst for professional growth rather than a passive resource.

THE FRAMEWORK





DEFINITION

The ability to provide appropriate information, guidance, direction, support and resources based on individual student needs. This enables students to engage in a positive and equitable learning environment, make informed decisions and take greater control over the choices and actions that shape their lives while strengthening their capacity to succeed in higher education and beyond.

WHY DOES THIS COMPETENCY MATTER?

The ability to effectively advise, support and empower students is central to the work of Student Affairs Professionals. Across the student lifecycle, from pre-entry to post-graduation, this competency enables professionals to foster a sense of belonging, promote holistic development and support students in navigating both academic and personal challenges. In doing so, it contributes meaningfully to student success by enhancing engagement and supporting retention, persistence and completion.

SKILLS / KNOWLEDGE:

As a Student Affairs Professional, I will strive to:

- **Work from an ethos of student-centredness.**
 - Understand best practice in the field of student affairs.
 - Be familiar with the main theories and concepts in the area of student advising and support as it relates to my specific role.
 - Act in the best interests of students, ensuring their overall wellbeing through the provision of holistic care.
 - Value students through an appreciation of their needs.
 - Adopt an empathetic and individualistic approach which respects individual agency.
 - Advocate for and support the student voice within my institution, and ensure that students are an integral part of my institution's decision-making processes.



- **Be well-informed and knowledgeable about the institutional policies and procedures that relate to my core area of work.**
 - Support students by informing them of the policies, practices and services in operation and advise on how best to engage with them.
 - Be familiar with and signpost to referral services within the institution and externally in the community.

- **Communicate clearly, appropriately and effectively.**
 - Use effective verbal and written communication abilities, including face-to-face, remote and non-verbal communication.
 - Be flexible in my communication style; be non-judgemental, diplomatic and solution-focused in approach.
 - Be knowledgeable about, understand and implement principles of conflict resolution.
 - Recognise the importance of worldview in communications with others.
 - Demonstrate culturally-inclusive advising and supporting strategies.

- **Build and maintain appropriate professional relationships.**
 - Develop positive and constructive relationships within the service and cross-functionally in the institution.
 - Work in an integrated manner with other departments / offices within my institution for the benefit of students.
 - Promote opportunities for inter-professional / cross-functional / external agency collaboration to enhance the student experience.



- **Understand and be able to articulate the importance of student engagement and holistic development.**
 - Understand the role of student affairs as an integral part of a whole-of-institution approach to enhancing the student experience to facilitate student success and sense of belonging.
 - Understand the institutional, academic, administrative, political and sociocultural systems that shape a student's transition into and through higher education, recognising how these intersect to create or challenge barriers to equitable access, participation and success.
 - Act as an advocate for student needs within the institution and the removal of barriers which may impact on student participation and success.
 - Support students to adapt to the higher-education experience by recognising diverse starting points and needs, and by enabling them to navigate academic expectations, institutional systems and the social and cultural environment of university life, fostering confidence, belonging and equitable opportunities for success.
 - Acknowledge and recognise students who give their time voluntarily by celebrating their contributions, promoting their impact and ensuring their efforts are visible and valued within the institution.
 - Support students to raise and achieve their academic, personal and social ambitions through guidance, encouragement and connection to opportunities that enhance their learning, development and sense of belonging.



DEFINITION

The ability to exchange ideas, thoughts, opinions, knowledge and information with clarity and purpose across a range of contexts and audiences. This includes active listening, critical understanding and the ability to respond and take appropriate action. It involves adapting communication styles to meet diverse needs and engaging with others in ways that promote respect, equity, diversity, inclusion and meaningful dialogue.

WHY DOES THIS COMPETENCY MATTER?

The ability to effectively communicate plays a critical role in our professional lives, supporting problem-solving and overall wellbeing. This skillset is closely linked to emotional intelligence. Communicating effectively involves understanding and managing one's own emotions as well as recognising and responding to the emotions of others, which is essential for Student Affairs Professionals. Good communication skills support self-expression and active listening and contribute to positive outcomes. The competency of communication is a fundamental component of excellent leadership.

SKILLS / KNOWLEDGE:

As a Student Affairs Professional, I will strive to:

- **Use active listening and inclusive language.**
 - Use active listening techniques when communicating with students, staff and third parties.
 - Effectively use non-verbal communication cues, such as body language and facial expressions, to convey empathy and support.
 - Use student-centred, inclusive and respectful language.
 - Adapt communication style to accommodate diverse student needs, including various learning styles and language backgrounds.

COMPETENCY

Communication



- Engage in ongoing reflection on personal communication practice by seeking and acting on feedback from others, using it to enhance clarity, inclusivity, empathy and effectiveness in supporting students and colleagues.
- **Build relationships and collaborate effectively to enhance student support.**
 - Foster rapport and trust through strong interpersonal skills to create a supportive and respectful environment.
 - Develop and maintain positive, professional relationships with colleagues and external partners.
 - Understand team roles, responsibilities and dynamics within the team and broader institution.
 - Collaborate purposefully and with other campus services to deliver joined-up, holistic support for students.
- **Demonstrate clarity and proficiency in communication.**
 - Be proficient in written communication for composing emails, reports and documentation regarding student progress or issues.
 - Ensure accurate and organised documentation of student-related matters and maintain organised records, making information readily available when required and in accordance with data protection legislation.
 - Use effective virtual communication practices and appropriate netiquette to engage in online interactions and digital collaboration.
 - Develop and use the capacity to facilitate group discussions or workshops on various topics related to student wellbeing, academic success or digital literacy.
 - Be familiar with the language and skills of mediation and conflict resolution when necessary.

COMPETENCY

Communication



- Demonstrate awareness of and adaptability to emerging communication technologies and digital tools, ensuring effective, ethical and appropriate use in professional practice.
- **Advocate for necessary resources and improvements in student support services within institutional frameworks.**
 - Communicate how student support initiatives align with mission, values and strategic priorities.
 - Contribute to collaborative problem-solving, decision-making and goal-setting processes that improve student outcomes.
 - Understand and operate within formal institutional communication channels and governance structures, both within my own institution and with other HEIs, ensuring that information is shared appropriately.
 - Engage constructively with guidance, feedback and priorities from senior leadership, incorporating this into practice where appropriate.





DEFINITION

An understanding of the Irish higher-education sector, including its institutional structures, policies, governance frameworks, funding environment and quality assurance systems, and how these shape the student experience and institutional practice. This includes awareness of national priorities, key stakeholders and current developments in the sector, and the ability to apply this knowledge to support effective, informed and student-centred practice within a higher education context. This contextual awareness is essential for delivering student-centred practice that aligns with institutional and sectoral priorities while actively supporting equity of access, participation and success. It strengthens the capacity to navigate complexity, respond to change and contribute to institutional decision-making in ways that are informed, strategic and grounded in an understanding of the wider system in which students learn and develop and in which Student Affairs Professionals work.

WHY DOES THIS COMPETENCY MATTER?

This competency is important because it enables Student Affairs Professionals to work effectively within the Irish higher-education system by understanding the structures, policies and external influences that shape it. This contextual awareness supports informed decision-making, enhances the relevance and impact of student support practice, and ensures alignment with institutional and national priorities. It also strengthens the ability to anticipate change, navigate complexity and advocate effectively for students within the broader sectoral landscape.



SKILLS / KNOWLEDGE:

As a Student Affairs Professional, I will strive to:

- **Know about the Irish education system.**
 - Understand the Irish education system and, more specifically, the Irish higher-education context and how my role is situated within it.
 - Understand the pathways by which students gain entry into higher education.
 - Understand pertinent issues such as student engagement, belonging, progression and success.
 - Stay abreast of updates and changes at national level that impact upon students and the higher-education system, including budgetary and legislative changes.
 - Be aware of the external bodies whose work impacts directly or indirectly on the student experience, including the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Higher Education Authority; and others.
 - Understand and appreciate how Irish higher education compares to other higher-education systems globally.

- **Understand my own institution's culture and context.**
 - Understand my institution's governance structures, policies and practices and their impact on my practice as a student affairs professional.
 - Articulate the historical contexts of my institutional type and its remit with higher education.
 - Describe the roles of faculty, academic affairs and Student Affairs Professionals in my institution.
 - Understand how my profession contributes to student success at all levels including within my team, my institution and external to the institution.



- **Understand the field of Student Affairs in Irish higher education.**
 - Understand the history, philosophy and values underpinning Student Affairs in Ireland.
 - Articulate the contribution of Student Affairs to student wellbeing, belonging and success and to the broader higher education system.
 - Articulate the changing nature of the global Student Affairs profession and the importance of contextual understanding in higher-education practice.
 - Identify key themes, issues and trends from the history of higher education and consider their relevance to current and emerging professional practice.

- **Understand, implement and maintain principles of data protection, confidentiality and data sharing protocols as they relate to my core area of work.**
 - Understand and comply with relevant institutional policies governing data protection, privacy and the safeguarding of individual rights. This includes the appropriate handling of personal data across its lifecycle (collection, storage, use, sharing, retention and disposal).
 - Know and adhere to institutional information security and records management policies and practices.
 - Recognise that different roles within student support services may require access to varying levels of sensitive personal information about students and uphold appropriate standards of confidentiality and professional trust accordingly.



DEFINITION

The ability to effectively interact and work with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds and to understand and respect their values, beliefs, customs and unique perspectives. As Student Affairs Professionals, we are committed to creating an environment where diversity is celebrated and everyone is treated fairly regardless of gender, civil status, family status, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, race, nationality, socioeconomic status and membership of the Travelling community.

WHY DOES THIS COMPETENCY MATTER?

Cultural competence is a critical concept for Student Affairs Professionals working in increasingly diverse higher education environments. This competency matters because it helps promote diversity and inclusion, improves communication and understanding, reduces inequality, builds trust and supports the wellbeing and success of all our students, both inside and outside the classroom. The competency ensures that we concentrate on more than simply celebrations of diversity, but on creating a brave space in which it feels safe to ask questions, learn, support others and accept challenges. This competency ensures that we work in a culturally appropriate manner in all we do.

SKILLS / KNOWLEDGE:

As a Student Affairs Professional, I will strive to:

- **Be sensitive in my practice to cultural differences.**
 - Approach cultural differences with curiosity, respect and cultural humility.
 - Learn about cultures other than my own.
 - Design programmes and events that are inclusive, promote social consciousness and challenge current institutional, national, global and sociopolitical systems of oppression.

COMPETENCY

Cultural Competence and Respecting Diversity



- Connect and build meaningful relationships with others while recognising the multiple intersecting identities, perspectives and developmental differences people hold.
- Understand microaggressions.
- Show leadership on social justice and inclusion in my team and my university.
- **Understand systems of oppression, privilege and power.**
 - Engage in critical reflection to identify my own unconscious bias.
 - Understand active allyship and its importance in my practice.
 - Understand how one is affected by and participates in maintaining systems of oppression, privilege and power.
- **Have an understanding of national equality legislation and its impact on the provision of services in higher education.**
 - Articulate a foundational understanding of social justice and inclusion within the context of higher education.
 - Be fully aware of and know how to advise students seeking support under my institution's equality, diversity and inclusion policies and procedures and dignity and respect policy and procedures.
 - Understand the mechanisms in place in my institution for addressing concerns relating to equality, diversity and inclusion.



COMPETENCY

Cultural Competence and Respecting Diversity



- **Advocate for the development of a more inclusive and socially conscious team, institution and profession.**
 - Identify systemic barriers to social justice and inclusion and assess my own team's role in addressing such barriers.
 - Recognise my own skills shortages and seek out training.
 - Share knowledge and expertise and engage in meaningful discussion with colleagues.
 - Articulate the history of the inclusion and exclusion of people with a variety of identities in higher education.
 - Articulate an understanding of the ongoing nature of the history of higher education and my role in shaping it.





DEFINITION

The competence of information literacy and digital skills refers to the ability to use and navigate digital devices, technologies, and online resources effectively and responsibly. It encompasses a range of skills and competencies related to using computers, smartphones, the internet, digital tools, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) for various purposes, including communication, information retrieval, problem-solving and creativity.

Information literacy and digital skills includes understanding the basic concepts of digital technology, such as how to operate hardware and software, as well as the ability to critically evaluate information, assess the credibility of online sources, protect one's digital privacy and security, and engage with digital and AI-generated content in a critical and informed manner

WHY DOES THIS COMPETENCY MATTER?

Information literacy and digital skills are essential for Student Affairs Professionals operating in an increasingly interconnected world and complex digital environment. They enable staff to find, evaluate and use information effectively, while maintaining ethical standards in communication, data management, and service delivery. This competency is particularly important in addressing the risks posed by misinformation and the proliferation of unverified or biased online content, which can significantly impact student wellbeing, decision-making and trust in information sources.

This competency also requires awareness of digital inequality, including unequal access to technology, varying levels of digital confidence, and the ways in which these disparities can reproduce broader educational inequities. In addition, the growing use of AI in higher education introduces both opportunities and ethical challenges, including concerns around bias, transparency, data privacy, and responsible use.

COMPETENCY

Information Literacy and Digital Skills



Developing strong information literacy and digital skills is therefore critical to ensuring that digital tools are used safely, inclusively, and in ways that support equitable student success.

SKILLS / KNOWLEDGE:

As a Student Affairs Professional, I will strive to:

- **Be agile in the face of technological change.**
 - Be competent in email communication, including composing, sending and managing messages effectively and professionally.
 - Use tools and resources for online collaboration, such as video conferencing, shared documents and virtual whiteboards.
 - Demonstrate competence in internet navigation, search engines and online research skills.
 - Be familiar with, and keep up to date on, with assistive technologies and tools that support students with diverse learning needs.
 - Be familiar with developments in AI, including its use in education, student learning and student support practice.
 - Use and advise students on digital tools for time management, organisation and study skills enhancement.
 - Apply effective digital and AI-supported research skills, including critical evaluation of online and AI-generated information.
 - Understand and use the educational software commonly used for learning at my institution, such as the virtual learning environment (VLE).
 - Incorporate relevant digital, including social media and AI-enabled platforms where appropriate, into professional practice for communication and engagement.
 - Know how to refer complex digital or technical issues to appropriate information technology support services.



SKILLS / KNOWLEDGE:

- **Ensure equity and inclusion in my use of digital tools.**
 - Draw upon universal design for learning (UDL) principles to model and promote accessibility in digital practice and to demonstrate compliance with accessibility legislation and policies among students, colleagues and educational partners
 - Promote equitable access to digital tools, ensuring that all students can participate fully in learning and support services.
 - Foster digital inclusion by ensuring accessibility across platforms, systems and resources used in educational and support contexts.
- **Demonstrate awareness of safety and security when using digital tools.**
 - Demonstrate basic cybersecurity awareness and understanding through the promotion of safe digital practices, the protection of personal information and practices that maintain a secure digital environment.
 - Understand the ethical implications of digital identity, including my own, and support students in learning activities related to responsible digital engagement and reputation management.
 - Critically assess the accuracy and quality of information gathered via technology and ensure appropriate academic integrity practices, such as correct citation and respect for copyright and fair use.
 - Understand institutional policies and reporting procedures for online harm or abuse and support students in accessing appropriate safeguards and supports.
 - Understand and comply with online safety legislation, for example, The Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 (Coco's Law), to support safe, respectful digital environments and appropriate responses to online harassment and harmful communications.



DEFINITION

Leadership involves guiding, influencing and empowering others to enhance the academic, personal and developmental journey of students and to strengthen the overall impact of the teams and institutions on student success. Leadership can be exercised with or without positional authority. It entails fostering a collaborative environment where individuals work cohesively towards shared goals, such as promoting student success, wellbeing and holistic growth. Effective leadership is grounded in empathy, vision and a commitment to understanding diverse student and staff needs, alongside advocating for meaningful and inclusive solutions.

Leaders inspire and motivate those around them to deliver high-quality support, cultivate positive and inclusive environments and engage collaboratively with stakeholders to continuously improve practice and services. In doing so, leaders help to ensure that every student feels valued, supported and equipped to thrive.

WHY DOES THIS COMPETENCY MATTER?

Leadership is essential to effective practice in Student Affairs, encompassing the knowledge, skills and dispositions required to guide and support others, with or without formal authority. Leadership shapes direction, motivation and culture within teams and institutions. Effective leadership supports innovation, enables constructive engagement with feedback and challenge and drives positive change within complex higher-education environments.

A key aspect of leadership is the creation of psychologically safe environments where learning, reflection and growth are supported. Effective leaders have the ability to effectively manage critical feedback and mistakes and they cultivate a culture of collaboration, growth and success, ultimately influencing the overall performance and success of the team and institution.



SKILLS / KNOWLEDGE:

As a Student Affairs Professional, I will strive to:

- **Engage in education and training in leadership and reflective practice**
 - Understand individual-level constructs of “leader” and “leadership”.
 - Engage in education and training in leadership concepts and theories to develop a critical understanding of leadership and “leader” identity.
 - Identify my own strengths and areas for development in leadership practice and actively seek opportunities to build capacity.
 - Demonstrate congruence between my personal values, professional identity and my leadership practice.
 - Within the scope of my role and expertise, I lead in ways that support the effectiveness and success of my team and my institution’s strategic priorities.
 - Reflect on how my personal values, experiences, beliefs, histories and perspectives shape my approach to leadership in both formal and informal contexts.
 - Build mutually-supportive and respectful relationships with colleagues and students across similarities and differences.
 - Engage in ongoing reflection to develop an authentic and evolving leadership identity.

- **Understand the vision and mission of my team and institution.**
 - Understand institutional culture, traditions, structures and norms and how these shape behaviour, decision-making and practice.
 - Contribute to and advocate for a culture of dignity, respect and inclusion in my workplace.

COMPETENCY

Leadership



- Understand and apply the principles of teamwork, collaboration and community-building with teams, across my institution and within professional networks.
- Advocate for the removal of barriers to student and staff success, with a focus on equity and inclusion.

- **Identify and understand leadership processes.**
 - Recognise and trust the capacity of individuals and groups to contribute to meaningful change within their communities and institutions.
 - Identify potential barriers, risks and or points of resistance when engaging in change processes.
 - Engage relevant stakeholders, including those with diverse and underrepresented perspectives, to inform decision-making.
 - Articulate the rationale, implications and impact of decisions on individuals, teams and institutional systems.
 - Use appropriate digital tools and technologies to support communication, collaboration and leadership processes.
 - Engage constructively in institutional governance structures in a responsible, reflective and informed manner.

- **Create environments that support leadership and development in others.**
 - Encourage others to recognise their own potential for leadership, agency and civic engagement.
 - Provide constructive feedback to colleagues and students to support the development of leadership capacity.
 - Serve as a mentor or role model for others.
 - Engage in mentoring, supervision and reflective practice to enhance personal and professional development.



DEFINITION

The ability to understand, design, implement, coordinate and evaluate student-focused processes, systems and services that support student engagement, progression and success across the student lifecycle.

This includes an understanding of how institutional policies, procedures and administrative systems interact to shape the student experience, and the capacity to work effectively within and across these systems to ensure they are efficient, transparent and student-centred. It also involves applying relevant regulations, institutional policies and sectoral best practice to ensure that student processes are delivered consistently, ethically and in alignment with institutional and strategic priorities.

A key aspect of this competency is the ability to identify opportunities to improve and streamline processes in ways that enhance accessibility, inclusion and equity of experience for diverse student cohorts, while maintaining appropriate standards of governance, accountability and quality assurance.

WHY DOES THIS COMPETENCY MATTER?

Understanding student processes and procedures is essential for Student Affairs Professionals, as it underpins the effective delivery of student support services within higher education. The ability to work confidently within institutional systems ensures that student affairs practice is fully integrated into the core functions of the institution.

This competency enables professionals to respond effectively and appropriately to the diverse academic, personal, pastoral and employability needs of students by applying relevant policies, legal frameworks, regulations and sectoral best practice. In doing so, it supports consistent, fair and informed decision-making across a range of student-facing processes.



Management and Understanding of Student Processes

The ability to design, implement and evaluate student-focused processes is critical to ensuring that systems are enabling rather than obstructive and that they support student progression, engagement and success. This alignment with institutional and sectoral goals enhances the overall student experience and contributes to more effective and equitable service delivery.

SKILLS / KNOWLEDGE:

As a Student Affairs Professional, I will strive to:

- **Understand and be knowledgeable about institutional, national and global student systems processes and procedures as they relate to students.**
 - Understand institutional processes and procedures as they relate to students and support students in navigating these effectively.
 - Understand the broader national policy context within which higher-education institutions operate and how this shapes institutional policies and the student experience.
 - Recognise the global context of student affairs practice and the ways in which international developments inform local practice.

- **Demonstrate effective management, organisational and administrative skills.**
 - Contribute to the development, review and implementation of clear, accessible and compliant policies and procedures that support student success.
 - Design and implement enabling student-centred systems and processes that are informed by student needs, aligned with institutional goals and reflective of sector best practice.
 - Contribute to the development of efficient and ethical processes for collecting, managing and using data within student services .



Management and Understanding of Student Processes

- Demonstrate awareness of the importance of resource allocation and, where relevant to my role, budget management in supporting effective service delivery.
- **Use evidence and evaluation to enhance student processes.**
 - Apply a continuous improvement approach to the evaluation and enhancement of student processes.
 - Use appropriate assessment tools, surveys and analytics to generate evidence for informed decision-making.
 - Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness, impact and accessibility of systems and processes using appropriate metrics and indicators.
 - Contribute to the interpretation and communication of data to identify key trends, assess impact and inform service improvement.
- **Contribute to quality enhancement and student success.**
 - Understand the role of student processes in supporting wider institutional priorities such as retention, progression, graduate attributes, student success and Healthy Campus, among others.
 - Recognise the interdependence of student support services within my institution's quality enhancement framework.
 - Contribute to a holistic view of the student experience, ensuring student processes support equity, inclusion and positive outcomes across the student lifecycle.

COMPETENCY

Practising Self-care



DEFINITION

Self-care is a personal journey and it is important to identify what activities and practices work best for the individual to maintain a balanced and healthy life. It encompasses a proactive approach to managing stress, setting boundaries, and prioritising personal health amidst the demands of supporting students. Self-care in student affairs refers to deliberate practices and strategies individuals employ to maintain their physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing while fulfilling their professional responsibilities.

WHY DOES THIS COMPETENCY MATTER?

Practising self-care acknowledges the unique challenges inherent in student affairs work, such as emotional labour, boundary-blurring between personal and professional life, vicarious trauma, moral distress, and the potential for burnout, emphasising the importance of self-awareness and self-compassion. By practising self-care, Student Affairs Professionals can sustainably contribute to student success and institutional objectives.

Practising self-care is essential in student affairs work due to the emotionally demanding nature of the role, which can include exposure to student distress, complex decision-making, boundary management, and sustained interpersonal engagement. Without appropriate self-care, there is an increased risk of burnout, compassion fatigue, and reduced effectiveness in supporting students.

This competency supports self-awareness and reflective practice, enabling professionals to recognise the impact of their work, seek support when needed, and maintain sustainable professional engagement. In doing so, it contributes not only to individual well-being but also to the quality and consistency of student support services.

COMPETENCY

Practising Self-care



A culture of self-care within Student Affairs also supports healthier teams and more sustainable institutional practice, ultimately enhancing the ability of professionals to contribute to student success over time.

SKILLS / KNOWLEDGE:

As a Student Affairs Professional, I will strive to:

- **Understand and apply principles and practices of self-care.**
 - Practise self-care, including physical self-care, emotional self-care, mental self-care, social self-care and, where appropriate, spiritual self-care.
 - Recognise the signs of stress, fatigue and burnout, and actively put measures in place to prevent these.
 - Understand significant themes that arise in my work, such as conflict, loss, change, role scope and exposure to trauma, and their potential to impact on personal wellbeing, and how to seek advice and assistance when these arise.
 - Seek appropriate advice, supervision or support when my personal wellbeing is impacted by my work.
 - Understand the relationship between personal wellbeing and self-care and students' educational engagement, and appropriately encourage and support self-care in students.
- **Engage in professional practices that support my self-care and wellbeing.**
 - Understand the role of and engage with professional supervision, reflective practice or peer support where appropriate to support my personal wellbeing.
 - Make informed use of institutional policies and supports that promote wellbeing and support positive self-care, including leave entitlements and opportunities for professional development.

COMPETENCY

Practising Self-care



- Engage in available opportunities that support sustainable working practices and personal well-being.
- Share self-care practices and strategies with colleagues, including through professional networks such as Student Affairs Ireland members, to support a culture of wellbeing within the profession.



COMPETENCY

Strategic Planning



DEFINITION

Strategic planning is a structured and reflective process through which an institution evaluates its strengths, weaknesses, challenges and changing internal and external environments in order to set priorities and define future direction. It involves the development of clear goals aligned with the mission, vision and values of the institution, supported by measurable outcomes and ongoing evaluation and improvement.

Competency in strategic planning refers to the ability to understand, engage with and contribute to the development, implementation and review of strategic priorities in a way that supports institutional effectiveness and student success.

WHY DOES THIS COMPETENCY MATTER?

Student Affairs Professionals who are competent in strategic planning can meaningfully contribute to institutional direction and priorities. It supports alignment between day-to-day practice and broader institutional goals, ensuring that work within student affairs contributes to long-term impact.

Student Affairs Professionals who are confident in engaging with strategic planning processes are better equipped to use evidence to inform decision-making, advocate for resources and articulate the value and impact of their work. This competency also supports collaboration across teams and functions, fostering a shared sense of purpose and collective responsibility for student success and institutional development.

COMPETENCY

Strategic Planning



SKILLS / KNOWLEDGE:

As a Student Affairs Professional, I will strive to:

- **Align with institutional strategy.**
 - Understand the mission, vision, values and strategic plan of my institution.
 - Ensure my work is aligned with and underpinned by the institutional strategy and contributes to shared goals.
 - Align personal and professional development goals with institutional priorities.
 - Engage actively in performance and development processes and be able to articulate how my work and professional development goals support the strategic direction of my institution.
 - Promote understanding of, and engagement with, the strategic plan of my team, including influencing and leading up where appropriate.

- **Contribute to strategic planning and implementation.**
 - Contribute to the strategic planning processes at team and institutional level, within the scope of my role.
 - Use qualitative and quantitative data to inform planning, support decision-making and evaluate progress towards strategic goals.
 - Incorporate student voice and feedback, where appropriate, to inform and strengthen strategic priorities and outcomes.
 - Support the implementation of strategic priorities, including contributions to areas beyond my immediate role where appropriate.
 - Gather, synthesise and evaluate relevant information to support data-informed decision-making and the advancement of institutional priorities.

COMPETENCY

Strategic Planning



SKILLS / KNOWLEDGE:

- **Engage stakeholders and reflect on impact**
 - Engage with relevant stakeholders to understand perspectives and raise awareness of the potential impacts of strategic decisions on students, staff and services.
 - Consider the differential impact of strategic priorities across diverse student groups, with attention to equity and inclusion.
 - Identify personal development needs in relation to strategic planning and actively seek out relevant learning and professional development opportunities.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

Below are articles, policy documents and other sources of information which the Professional Development SIG drew from in relation to the SAI Professional Competencies. In some instances, specific competencies are listed after some of the references in green. These are references which were utilised in drawing up wording around those specific competencies. However, all references are useful to consult in relation to the student affairs profession and competencies within it.

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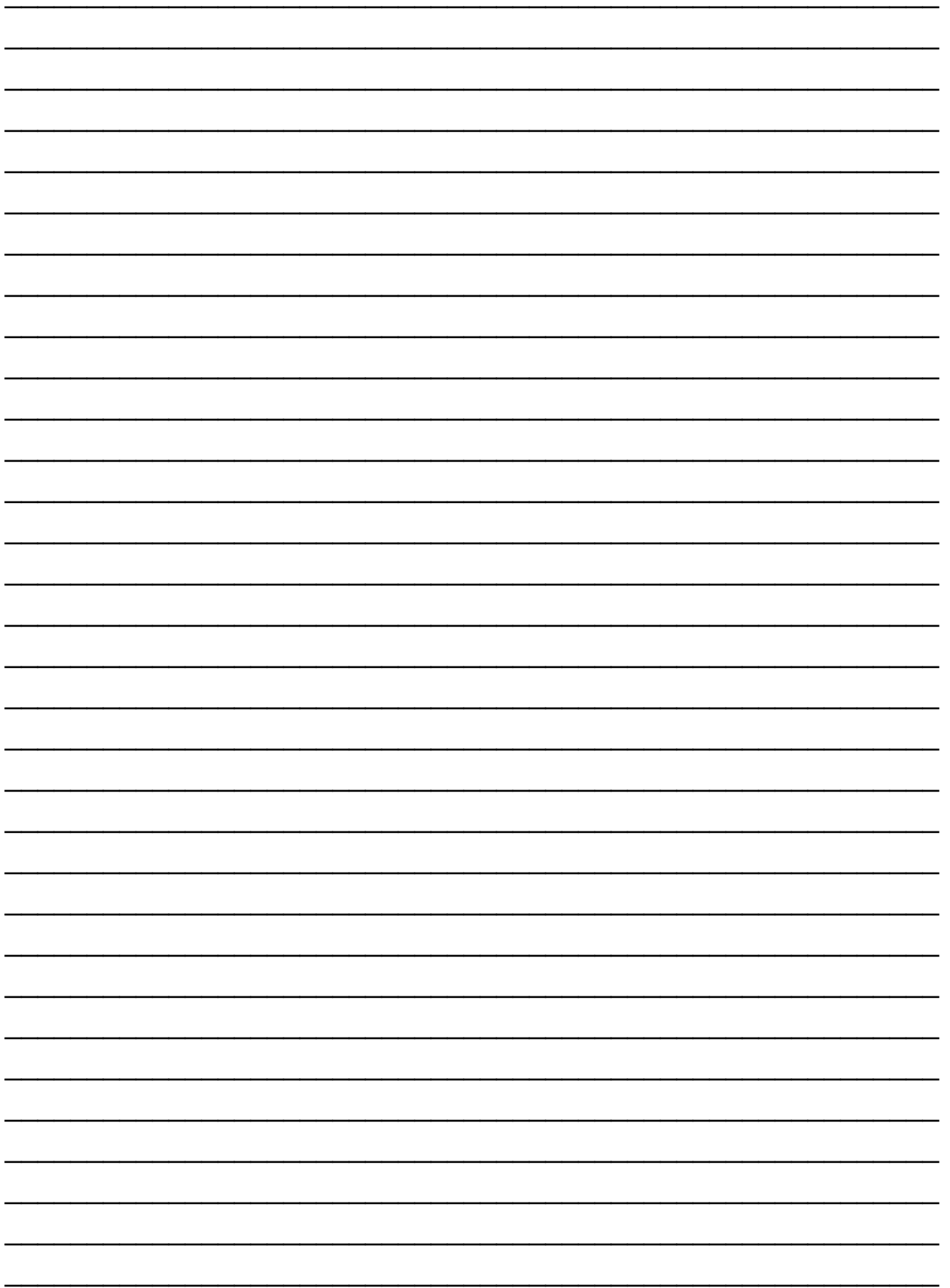
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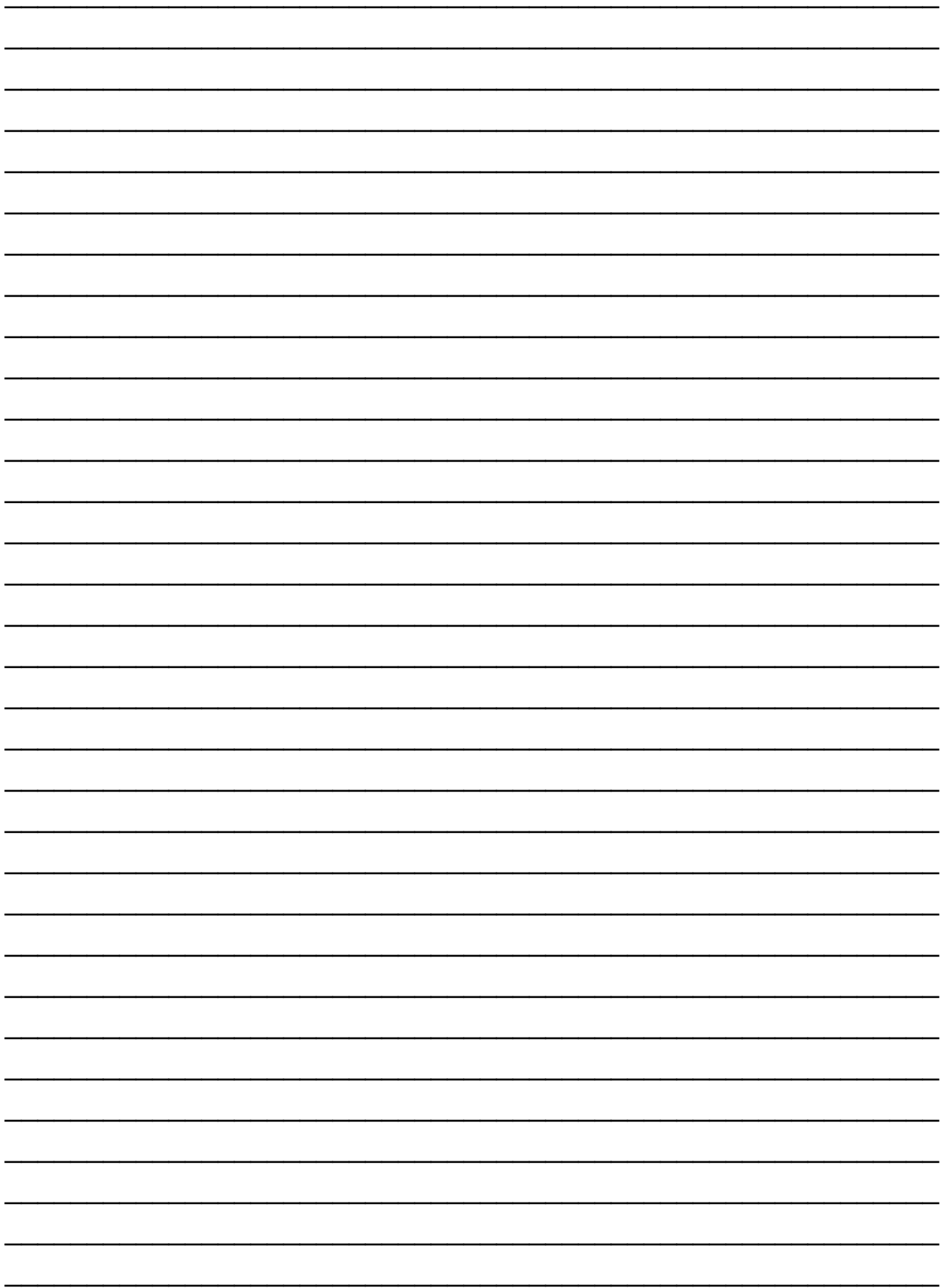
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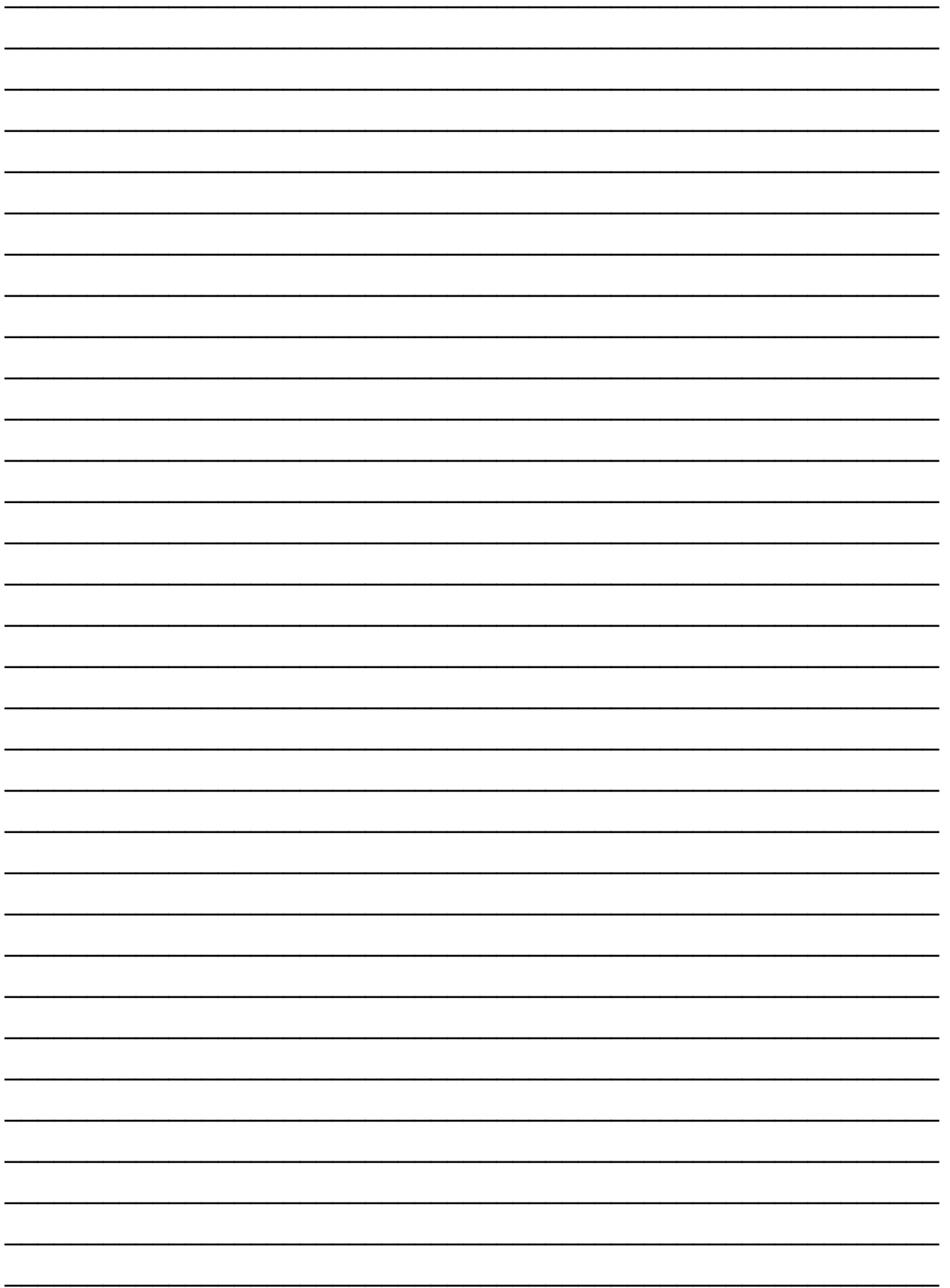
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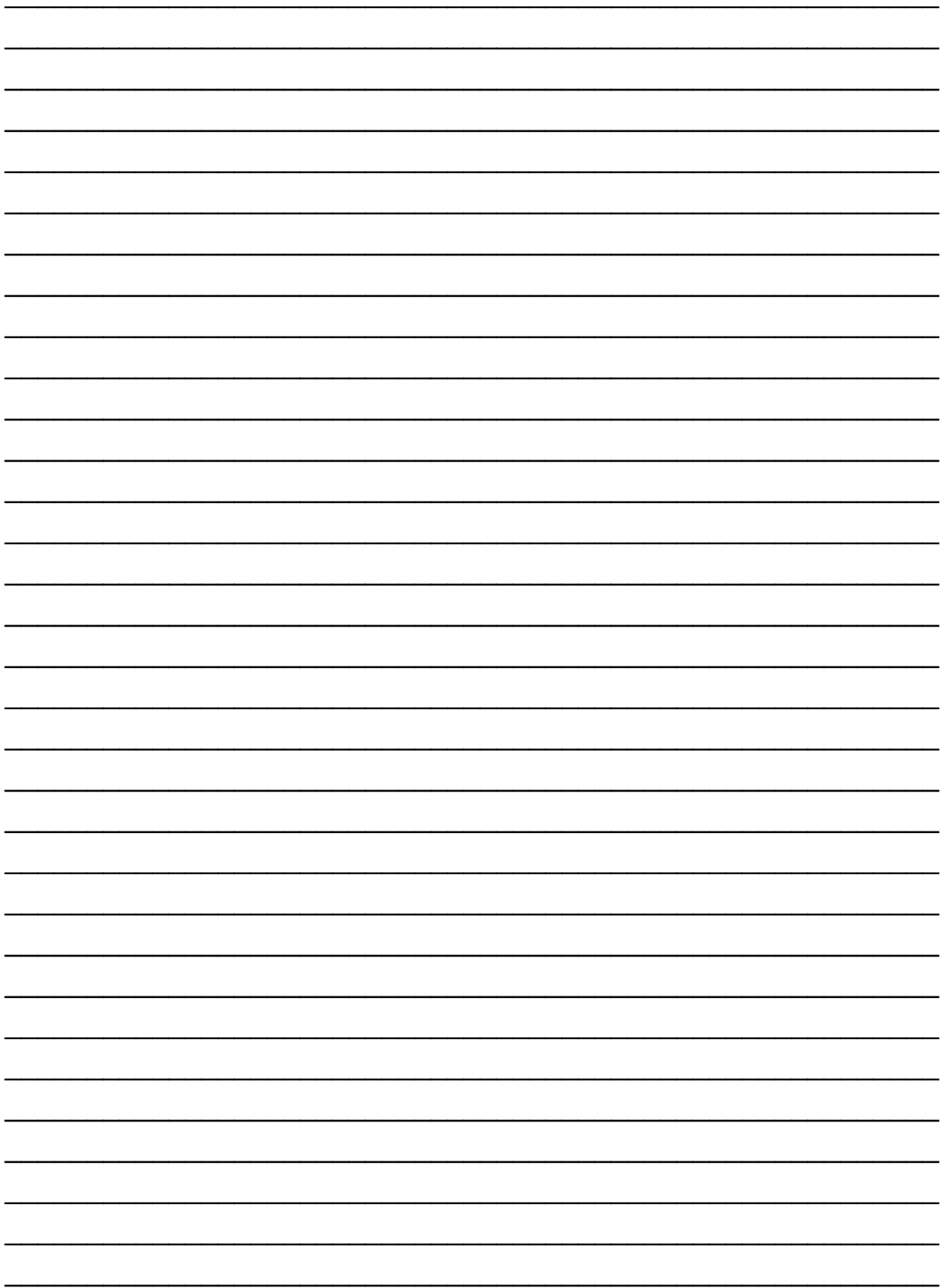
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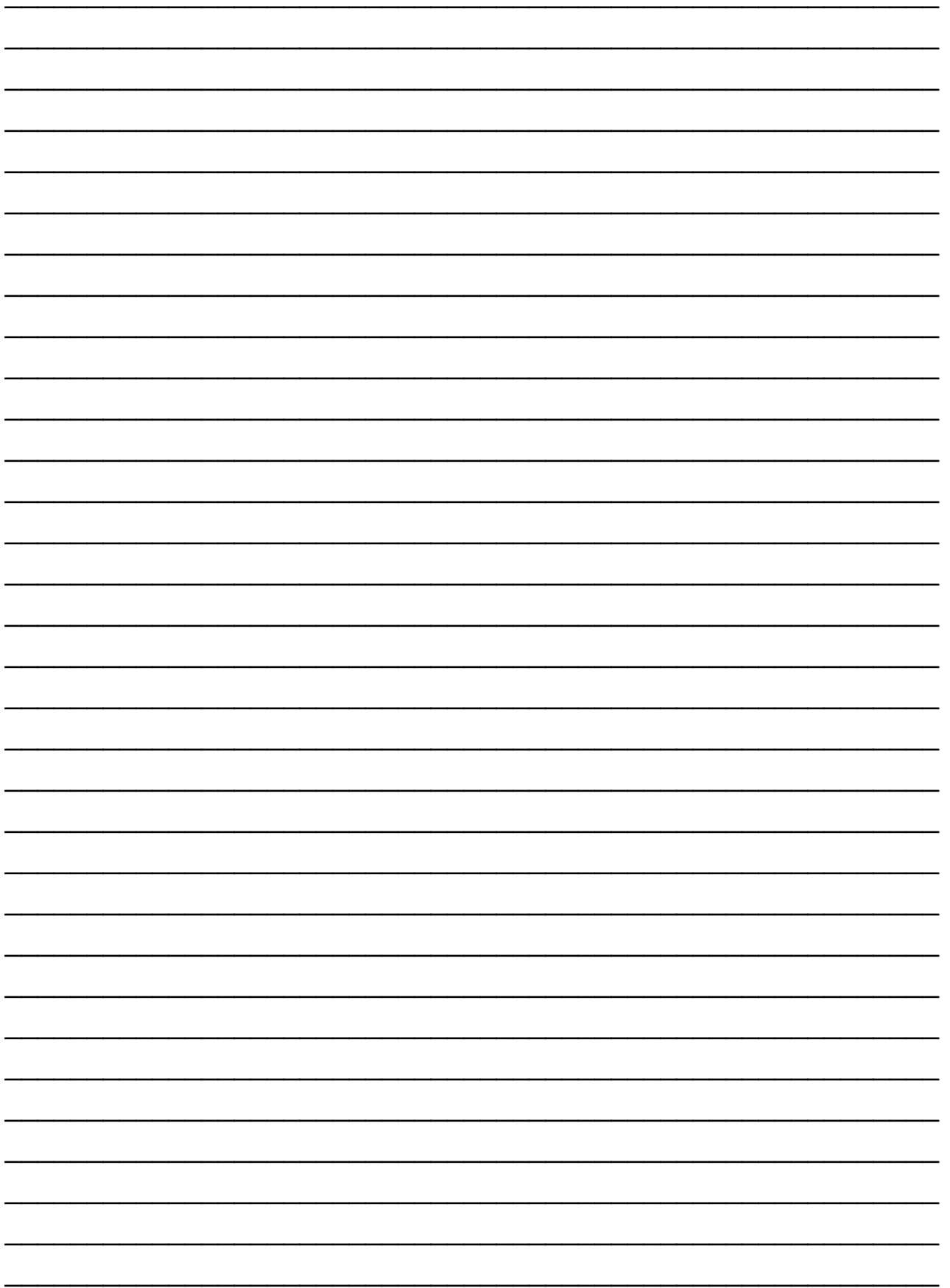
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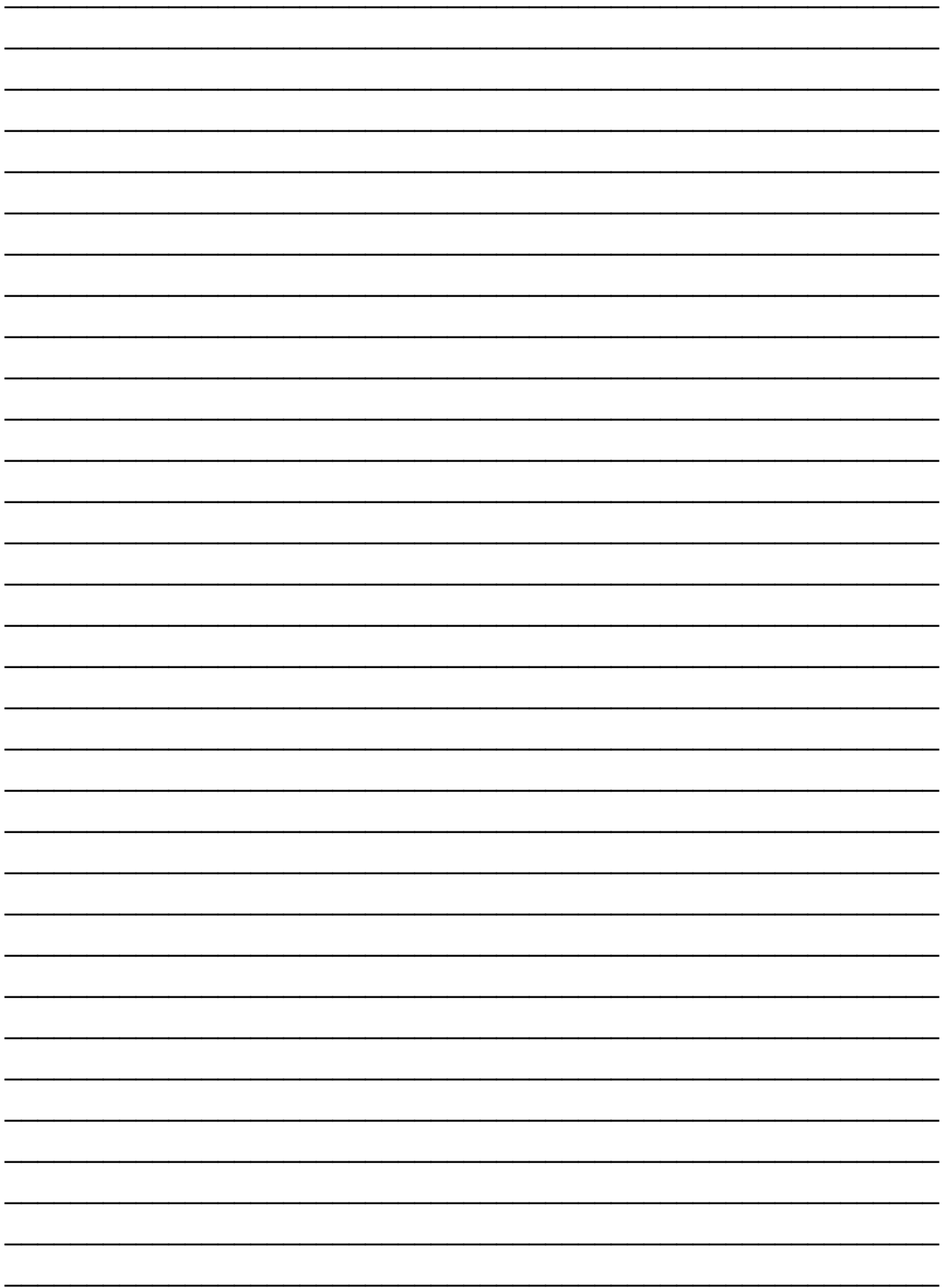












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