

# The Admissions Essay

## A Help Packet



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### Accepted by Harvard, Princeton, Stanford & Dartmouth

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## Admission Essay Writing Tips:

### Step One: Brainstorming an Admissions Essay Topic

The most important part of your essay is the subject matter. You should expect to devote about one to two weeks simply to brainstorming ideas. To begin brainstorming a subject idea consider the following points. From brainstorming, you may find a subject you had not considered at first.

- What are your major accomplishments, and why do you consider them accomplishments? Do not limit yourself to accomplishments for which you have been formally recognized since the most interesting essays are often based on accomplishments that may have been trite at the time but become crucial when placed in the context of your life.
- Does any attribute, quality, or skill distinguish you from everyone else? How did you develop this attribute?
- Consider your favorite books, movies, works of art, etc. Have these influenced your life in a meaningful way? Why are they your favorites?
- What was the most difficult time in your life, and why? How did your perspective on life change as a result of the difficulty?
- Have you ever struggled mightily for something and succeeded? What made you successful?
- Have you ever struggled mightily for something and failed? How did you respond?
- Of everything in the world, what would you most like to be doing right now? Where would you most like to be? Who, of everyone living and dead, would you most like to be with? These questions should help you realize what you love most.
- Have you experienced a moment of epiphany, as if your eyes were opened to something to which you were previously blind?

- What is your strongest, most unwavering personality trait? Do you maintain strong beliefs or adhere to a philosophy? How would your friends characterize you? What would they write about if they were writing your admissions essay for you?
- What have you done outside of the classroom that demonstrates qualities sought after by universities? Of these, which means the most to you?
- What are your most important extracurricular or community activities? What made you join these activities? What made you continue to contribute to them?
- What are your dreams of the future? When you look back on your life in thirty years, what would it take for you to consider your life successful? What people, things, and accomplishments do you need? How does this particular university fit into your plans for the future?

If these questions cannot cure your writer's block, consider the following exercises:

### 1. Ask for Help from Parents, Friends, Colleagues, etc.

Ask your friends to write a list of your five most salient personality traits until an image of your personality begins to emerge; consider life experiences that could illustrate the particular traits.

### 2. Consider Your Childhood

Interests that began in childhood may be the most defining parts of your life. Analyze the reasons for your interests and how they were shaped by your upbringing.

### 3. Consider Your Role Models

If you have role models, consider their admirable traits and how experiences from your life demonstrate those traits.

## 4. Read Sample Admissions Essays

Before you sat down to write a poem, you would certainly read past poets. In the same way, we recommend reading sample admissions essays to understand what topics other applicants chose. EssayEdge maintains an archive of over 100 free sample admissions essays.

Coming up with an idea is difficult and requires time. Without a topic you feel passionate about, without one that brings out the defining aspects of your personality, you risk falling into the trap of sounding like the 90 percent of applicants who will write boring admissions essays. The only way to write a unique essay is to have experiences that support whatever topic you come up with.

Have fun with the brainstorming process. You might discover something about yourself you never consciously realized. Good Luck!

## Step Two: Selecting an Essay Topic

You must now confront the underlying problem of the admissions essay. You must now consider topics that will allow you to synthesize your important personal characteristics and experiences into a coherent whole while simultaneously addressing your desire to attend a specific institution. While most admissions essays allow great latitude in topic selection, you must also be sure to answer the questions that were asked of you. Leaving a lasting impression on someone who reads 50 to 100 essays a day will not be easy, but we have compiled some guidelines to help you get started. Consider the following questions before proceeding:

- Have you selected a topic that describes something of personal importance to your life, with which you can use **vivid personal experience** as supporting details?
- Is your topic a gimmick? That is, do you plan to write your essay in iambic pentameter or make it funny? You should be very, very careful if you are planning to do this. We recommend strongly that you do not do this. Almost always, this is done poorly and is not appreciated by the admissions committee. Nothing is worse than not laughing or not being

amused at something that was written to be funny or amusing.

- Will your topic only repeat information listed elsewhere on your application? If so, pick a new topic. Don't mention GPAs or standardized test scores in your essay.
- Can you offer vivid supporting paragraphs to your essay topic? If you cannot easily think of supporting paragraphs with concrete examples, you should probably choose a different essay topic.
- Can you fully answer the question asked of you? Can you address and elaborate on all points within the specified word limit, or will you end up writing a poor summary of something that might be interesting as a report or research paper? If you plan on writing something technical for college admissions, make sure you truly can back up your interest in a topic and are not merely throwing around big scientific words. Unless you convince the reader that you actually have the life experiences to back up your interest in neurobiology, the reader will assume that you are trying to impress him or her with shallow tactics. Also, be sure you can write to admissions officers and that you are not writing over their heads.
- Can you keep the reader's interest from the first word? The entire essay must be interesting, considering admissions officers will probably only spend a few minutes reading each essay.
- Is your topic overdone? To ascertain this, peruse through old essays. EssayEdge's 100 free essays can help you do this. However, most topics are overdone, and this is not a bad thing. A unique or convincing answer to a classic topic can pay off big.
- Will your topic turn off a large number of people? If you write on how everyone should worship your God, how wrong or right abortion is, or how you think the Republican or Democratic Party is evil, you will not get into the college of your choice. The only thing worse than not writing a memorable essay is writing an essay that will be remembered negatively. Stay away from specific reli-

gions, political doctrines, or controversial opinions. You can still write an essay about Nietzsche's influence on your life, but express understanding that not all intelligent people will agree with Nietzsche's claims. Emphasize instead Nietzsche's influence on your life, and not why you think he was wrong or right in his claims.

- In this vein, if you are presenting a topic that is controversial, you must acknowledge counter arguments without sounding arrogant.
- Will an admissions officer remember your topic after a day of reading hundreds of essays? What will the officer remember about your topic? What will the officer remember about you? What will your lasting impression be?

After evaluating your essay topics with the above criteria and asking for the free opinions of EssayEdge editors, of your teachers or colleagues, and of your friends, you should have at least 1 to 2 interesting essay topics. Consider the following guidelines below.

- If you are planning on writing an essay on how you survived poverty in Russia, your mother's suicide, your father's kidnapping, or your immigration to America from Asia, you should be careful that your main goal is to address your own personal qualities. Just because something sad or horrible has happened to you does not mean that you will be a good college or graduate school student. You don't want to be remembered as the pathetic applicant. You want to be remembered as the applicant who showed impressive qualities under difficult circumstances. It is for this reason that essays relating to this topic are considered among the best. Unless you only use the horrible experience as a lens with which to magnify your own personal characteristics, you will not write a good essay. Graduate and professional school applicants should generally steer clear of this topic altogether unless you can argue that your experience will make you a better businessman, doctor, lawyer, or scholar.
- Essays should fit in well with the rest of a candidate's application, explaining the unexplained and steering clear of what is already obvious.

For example, if you have a 4.0 GPA and a 1500 SAT, no one doubts your ability to do the academic work and addressing this topic would be ridiculous. However, if you have an 850 SAT and a 3.9 GPA or a 1450 SAT and a 2.5 GPA, you would be wise to incorporate into your essay an explanation for the apparent contradiction. For example, perhaps you were hospitalized or family concerns prevented your dedication to academics; you would want to mention this in your essay. However, do not make your essay one giant excuse. Simply give a quick, convincing explanation within the framework of your larger essay.

## Step Three: Writing the Essay

Even seemingly boring topics can be made into exceptional admissions essays with an innovative approach. In writing the essay you must bear in mind your two goals: to persuade the admissions officer that you are extremely worthy of admission and to make the admissions officer aware that you are more than a GPA and a standardized score, that you are a real-life, intriguing personality.

Unfortunately, there is no surefire step-by-step method to writing a good essay. Every topic requires a different treatment since no two essays are alike. However, we have compiled the following list of tips that you should find useful while writing your admissions essay.

### 1. Answer the Question

You can follow the next two steps, but if you miss the question, you will not be admitted to any institution.

### 2. Be Original

Even seemingly boring essay topics can sound interesting if creatively approached. If writing about a gymnastics competition you trained for, do not start your essay: "I worked long hours for many weeks to train for XXX competition." Consider an opening like, "Every morning I awoke at 5:00 to

sweat, tears, and blood as I trained on the uneven bars hoping to bring the state gymnastics trophy to my hometown."

### 3. Be Yourself

Admissions officers want to learn about you and your writing ability. Write about something meaningful and describe your feelings, not necessarily your actions. If you do this, your essay will be unique. Many people travel to foreign countries or win competitions, but your feelings during these events are unique to you. Unless a philosophy or societal problem has interested you intensely for years, stay away from grand themes with which you have little personal experience.

### 4. Don't Thesaurize Your Composition

For some reason, students continue to think big words make good essays. Big words are fine, but only if they are used in the appropriate context. Think Hemingway.

### 5. Use Imagery and Clear, Vivid Prose

If you are not adept with imagery, you can write an excellent essay without it, but it's not easy. The application essay lends itself to imagery since the entire essay requires your experiences as supporting details. Appeal to the five senses of the admissions officers.

### 6. Spend the Most Time on Your Introduction

Expect admissions officers to spend 1 to 2 minutes reading your essay. You must use your introduction to grab their interest from the beginning. You might even consider completely changing your introduction after writing your body paragraphs.

- **Don't Summarize in your Introduction.** Ask yourself why a reader would want to read your entire essay after reading your introduction. If you summarize, the admissions officer need not read the rest of your essay.
- **Create Mystery or Intrigue in your Introduction.** It is not necessary

or recommended that your first sentence give away the subject matter. Raise questions in the minds of the admissions officers to force them to read on. Appeal to their emotions to make them relate to your subject matter.

### **7. Use Transition**

Applicants continue to ignore transition to their own detriment. You must use transition within paragraphs and especially between paragraphs to preserve the logical flow of your essay. Transition is not limited to phrases like "as a result, in addition, while .. ., since ..., etc." but includes repeating key words and progressing the idea. Transition provides the intellectual architecture to argument building.

### **8. Conclusions are Critical**

The conclusion is your last chance to persuade the reader or impress upon them your qualifications. In the conclusion, avoid summary since the essay is rather short to begin with; the reader should not need to be reminded of what you wrote 300 words beforehand. Also do not use stock phrases like "in conclusion, in summary, to conclude, etc." You should consider the following conclusions:

- Expand upon the broader implications of your discussion.
- Consider linking your conclusion to your introduction to establish a sense of balance by reiterating introductory phrases.
- Redefine a term used previously in your body paragraphs.
- End with a famous quote that is relevant to your argument. Do not TRY to do this, as this approach is overdone. This should come naturally.
- Frame your discussion within a larger context or show that your topic has widespread appeal.
- Remember, your essay need not be so tidy that you can answer

why your little sister died or why people starve in Africa—you are not writing a "sit-com"—but should forge some attempt at closure.

### **9. Give Your Draft to Others**

Ask editors to read with these questions in mind:

- What is the essay about?
- Have I used active voice verbs wherever possible?
- Is my sentence structure varied or do I use all long or all short sentences?
- Do you detect any clichés?
- Do I use transition appropriately?
- Do I use imagery often and does this make the essay clearer and more vivid?
- What's the best part of the essay?
- What about the essay is memorable?
- What's the worst part of the essay?
- What parts of the essay need elaboration or are unclear?
- What parts of the essay do not support your main argument or are immaterial to your case?
- Is every single sentence crucial to the essay? This MUST be the case.
- What does the essay reveal about your personality?
- Could anyone else have written this essay?
- How would you fill in the following blank based on the essay: "I want to accept you to this college because our college needs more \_\_\_\_\_."

## **10. Revise, Revise, Revise**

Revise, Revise, Revise. You are only allowed so many words; use them wisely. If H.D. Thoreau couldn't write a good essay without revision, neither will you. Delete anything in the essay that does not relate to your main argument. Do you use transition? Are your introduction and conclusion more than summaries? Did you find every single grammatical error?

Have your Essay Professionally Edited. You take SAT Prep courses and spend hours with college counselors. Consider showing the same care with your admissions essay by submitting your essay to a professional editor.

## **Sample Successful Essay:**

### **Accepted by Harvard, Princeton, Stanford & Dartmouth**

#### **Hiking to Understanding**

Surrounded by thousands of stars, complete silence, and spectacular mountains, I stood atop New Hampshire's Presidential Range awestruck by nature's beauty. Immediately, I realized that I must dedicate my life to understanding the causes of the universe's beauty. In addition, the hike taught me several valuable lessons that will allow me to increase my understanding through scientific research.

Although the first few miles of the hike up Mt. Madison did not offer fantastic views, the vistas became spectacular once I climbed above tree line. Immediately, I sensed that understanding the natural world parallels climbing a mountain. To reach my goal of total comprehension of natural phenomena, I realized that I must begin with knowledge that may be uninteresting by itself. However, this knowledge will form the foundation of an accurate view of the universe. Much like every step while hiking leads the hiker nearer the mountain peak, all knowledge leads the scientist nearer total understanding.

Above tree line, the barrenness and silence of the hike taught me that individuals must have their own direction. All hikers know that they must carry complete maps to reach their destinations; they do not allow others to hold their maps for them. Similarly, surrounded only by mountaintops, sky, and silence, I recognized the need to remain individually focused on my life's goal of understanding the physical universe.

At the summit, the view of the surrounding mountain range is spectacular. The panorama offers a view of hills and smaller mountains. Some people during their lives climb many small hills. However, to have the most accurate view of the world, I must be dedicated to climbing the biggest mountains I can find. Too often people simply hike across a flat valley without ascending because they content themselves with the scenery. The mountain showed me that I cannot content myself with the scenery. When night fell upon the summit, I stared at the slowly appearing stars until they completely filled the night sky. Despite the windy conditions and below freezing temperatures, I could not tear myself away from the awe-inspiring beauty of the cosmos. Similarly, despite the frustration and difficulties inherent in scientific study, I cannot retreat from my goal of universal understanding.

When observing Saturn's rising, the Milky Way Cloud, and the Perseid meteor shower, I simultaneously felt a great sense of insignificance and purpose. Obviously, earthly concerns are insignificant to the rest of the universe. However, I experienced the overriding need to understand the origins and causes of these phenomena. The hike also strengthened my resolve to climb the mountain of knowledge while still taking time to gaze at the wondrous scenery. Only then can the beauty of the universe and the study of science be purposefully united. Attaining this union is my lifelong goal.

# WHO'S GOING TO READ YOUR ESSAY?

*A perfect judge will read each work of wit  
With the same spirit that its author writ.*

—Alexander Pope

Before you can write an essay, you have to know something about the people who are going to read it. Who are they? How old or young are they? How much are they like or unlike you? Are they going to read your essay the way your English teacher does? Or will they practice their speed-reading skills on the essay you spent hours producing? Why are they reading your essay? Only because it's their job? Or because they're trying to get a sense of who you are? What do they expect, or want, or hope to find there?

Once you've answered these questions, you can figure out how to help your readers find what they're looking for in *your* application essay.

The next pages will give you a big head start...

## PROFILE OF AN ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE

Here's a profile of a typical admissions committee:

- an experienced director, who's been working in college admissions for ten to twenty years

- one or two associate directors with at least five years' experience
- a handful of assistants who have just graduated from the college you're applying to

The assistants read all the applications. The associate directors and director read only what the assistants pass along. In short, your principal audience consists of young men and women four or five years older than you are. In other words, you are writing for your peers.

And why are you writing for them? *Not* to sell yourself or give the admissions committee what you—or your parents—think it wants. Your transcript, SAT scores, extracurricular activities, and the recommendations of your teachers and counselors will tell the admissions committee a great deal about you and your accomplishments—how bright and busy you are, how athletic and well traveled. Your essay is an opportunity to reveal something new.

In other words, you're writing simply to tell your readers something true about yourself, in a fresh and unpretentious way. When you're writing your essays and need to refresh your memory about what you're doing and for whom, keep what admission officers want to see in mind.

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*Writing is simply the writer and the reader on opposite ends of a pencil; they should be as close together as that.*

—Jay R. Gould

## **WHAT ADMISSIONS OFFICERS LOOK FOR . . .**

**YOU** The person behind the GPA, the test scores, the extracurricular activities, and even the mailing address; the you that you have not revealed in the rest of your application.

**SURPRISE** An unexpected angle on your topic—even if the experience you're writing about is ordinary.

**GENUINENESS** Writing as yourself, without pretension and without taking yourself too seriously; relying on your own vocabulary rather than the thesaurus or the words your parents think you should use.

**THOUGHTFULNESS** Thinking about your experience and its meaning, to yourself or to others (or both); showing through your reflections that you are a person on whom nothing is lost.

## **. . . AND HOW TO HELP THEM FIND IT**

**THINK ABOUT WHO YOUR AUDIENCE IS** Five or six recent graduates of the college you're applying to and (probably) a thirtyish director of admissions, all of whom have spent the last month reading thousands of applications. This is

an overworked audience on whom your essay needs to make a single, vivid impression.

**THINK ABOUT YOUR PURPOSE** Not "selling yourself or "getting in," but being yourself—which usually means writing about yourself in human, rather than superhuman, terms. For example, if your transcript reveals that you are a stellar student of French, you might write about the time that a Parisian pointedly responded in English to your request in French for directions to the Louvre.

**FOCUS** Instead of generalizing about your experience ("I enjoy sports"), be as specific as you can be. Write about the thrill of catching a fly ball deep to center just before it became a home run, or of a Little League career spent waiting for someone, anyone, to hit the ball to your position so that you could stop studying the grass and watching the butterflies.

**USE PRECISE AND ECONOMICAL LANGUAGE** Imagine that each word you write costs you a dollar, and that you don't have unlimited funds. Instead of writing "On a yearly basis we would spend 5 hours driving to the lake, where I never gave up the hope of meeting the boy that would be my Prince Charming,"



write "Every August we trekked to Lake Apponaug, where I always hoped to meet my Prince Charming."

**GIVE YOUR ESSAY MOMENTUM** Make the parts work together and move to a point. In an essay about the summer you spent working in a marine research laboratory, a paragraph on the unreliable bus that took you there each day can almost certainly be cut.

**USE CORRECT GRAMMAR, SPELLING, PUNCTUATION** Don't distract your reader from what you're saying by saying it incorrectly. Misspellings, typos, and grammatical errors, such as subjects that don't agree with verbs, make your reader's task more difficult and suggest that you don't care much about the impression you make.

## Words of Wisdom from Admissions Officers

*"There is no correct formula for a college essay! . . . view the essay as an opportunity (not an arcane form of torture) to tell us whatever you'd like about yourself, to have a little fun, and tell us*

*'what makes you tick.' Those of you who give yourselves plenty of time to write your essays will usually produce the best results; a rushed job is generally apparent."*

—Jane Schoenfeld, Associate Dean of Admission, Washington University

*"When selecting a topic, choose (within the required topic) what you want to write about, not what you think we want to read. Trying to predict who the reader will be is a losing proposition. Being true to yourself will be viewed positively by whoever reads the essay."*

—William T. Conlev, Dean of Admission, Case Western Reserve University

*"Write your own essay and work on it over a period of time—not over Thanksgiving break!"*

—Dr. James Walters, Associate Provost and Director of Undergraduate Admissions, University of North Carolina

*"The essay is one of the key subjective elements in the admission application. Where statistics, scores, and the transcript are the 'skeleton,' the essay, recommendations, and description of outside time commitments are the 'skin' that makes an applicant a human being. In our process, a particularly well-written essay could move an applicant from a wait-list status to admit, and a poorly done essay could mean a denial or wait list—even with an outstanding academic record."*

—Daniel C. Walls, Dean of Admission, Emory University

*"I have seen the essay swing a decision. Some students, by virtue of skilled writing and insightful content, pull their applications out of the jaws of rejection. In these cases, the essay often crystallizes some im-*

*pressions that have the committee leaning in favor but not sure why or how to substantiate the gut feeling. On the other hand, a ragged essay frequently points out a person right by the numbers but wrong by the personal qualities or fit."*

—William T. Conley, Dean of Admission, Case Western Reserve University

## REVISING YOUR ESSAY TO GET IT RIGHT

*I have often written—often several times—every word that I have ever published. My pencils outlast their erasers.*

—Vladimir Nabokov

**In revising your essay, you'll sooner or later reach one of two points: You'll be happy with the work you've produced and want the next draft to be your last. Or you'll know in your writer's heart that something's still not quite right with your essay but feel at a loss to fix it.**

No matter which feeling you have, the next pages should help you take the essay you've drafted and make it work from first sentence to last. You'll find questions to guide you in revising your work. You can pose them to yourself or give them as guidelines to parents, friends, or counselors—to anyone, in short, who reads your essay while it's in progress.

## QUESTIONS FOR REVISING

### CONTENT

1. What is the most important thing you're trying to say? If you've said it, find it in your draft and underline it. If you haven't said it, write it now.

2. Does everything you've written work toward your essay's main point? What parts don't you need? If you're writing about the moment during your summer internship on Wall Street when you realized you'd rather be a nuclear physicist, you probably don't need those sentences about how you took the subway to work every day.

3. Have you been specific? If you find that you've written in general terms about anything, go back and make that generalization specific. Your trip to Ireland may have been the "formative experience of your life," but your readers would rather hear about the Irishman who helped you repair your flat bicycle tire on the road to Killarney.

4. Have you anticipated and answered the questions your readers are most likely to ask? If you observe in passing that it's been months since you last felt like diving off a steep cliff into a shallow lagoon, you should expect your reader to wonder—in more than passing—about your mental well-being.

5. Does your essay sound like you? Are you presenting yourself too formally ("Throughout the entire course of my high school career, many factors have influenced me to arrive at the decision that . . .")? Are you presenting yourself too casually ("The Secretary of State needs to chill")? Aim for a tone that suits your subject (a stuffy tone can spoil a good story) and your audience (most readers have built-in phoniness detectors and can tell when you're not being yourself).

6. What works best in your essay? What are you most satisfied with?

7. What works least well? What parts don't feel right yet? What can you do to make them work as well as the parts you do like?

### INTEREST

8. Will your opening sentence grab your reader's attention? (Would it grab yours if you were the reader?) Is "When I was 14, we moved to Kuala Lumpur" as engaging as "They came with their large vans and assorted boxes. Heartlessly, they threw my possessions into them until only the room and I remained. We were moving again"?

9. Does your essay need more detail at any point? For instance, if you've

written that the children at the camp where you volunteer have taught you "to appreciate the simple things in life," you need to write a sentence or two illustrating specifically what that lesson means.

10. Will the ending give your reader a sense of completeness? Does the last sentence sound like the last sentence? In an essay about a mistake you've learned from, a closing generalization about how we all learn best in the school of hard knocks or an inspiring quotation from the *Tao Te Ching* is probably less effective than this simple statement: "I was lucky, as it turns out, to have spoken ill of a person like Mr. Walters, whose natural dignity deflected my unkindness. Maybe I'll be luckier still one day, and earn some of that dignity myself."

11. Read your essay aloud. Trust your ear. Does it sound interesting to you? If you're bored, imagine how your reader will feel!

### **CLARITY**

12. Does each paragraph have a clearly defined place in the essay's design? If not, you may need to do some cutting or write some good transitions.

13. Will your reader easily be able to follow your train of thought? Are there any gaps you need to fill or backtrackings you need to eliminate?

14. Are any of your words or sentences either awkward or ambiguous? If so, eliminate the ambiguity and repair the awkwardness.

### **CONCISENESS**

15. At what point does your essay really begin? Can you delete the sentences leading up to that point and begin there?

16. Have you included details or sentences that don't really serve the design of your essay as a whole? If so, cut them out.

17. Have you used several words when one or two would do? "It is important to note that I am completing an application only for your school, which it has been my lifelong ambition, since early childhood, to attend" is an impossibly long-winded way of writing "I'm applying only to Emory because I've always wanted to go there." Remember, in a brief essay every word must count.

### **USAGE AND STYLE**

(For examples of the points raised in this and the section below, look in Chapter 9 for "The Most Common Punctuation Mistakes, Grammatical Errors, Wasted Words, and Stylistic Lapses.")

18. Have you banished all tired, worn-out expressions?

19. Have you used the active voice and energetic verbs?

20. Have you varied the length and structure of your sentences?

21. Have you used picture words and metaphors?

22. Have you avoided empty qualifiers, such as "very," "rather," "some-what," etc.?

23. If you've used contractions, do they work with your essay's style? And are the apostrophes in the right places?

### **CORRECTNESS**

#### **Grammar**

24. Do the subjects of your sentences agree in number with the verbs?

25. Do pronouns agree with their antecedents?

26. Do pronouns refer clearly to their antecedents? (Watch out especially for "this" and "that.")

27. Have you placed modifiers close to the words they modify?

28. Have you fixed any dangling or misplaced modifiers?

29. Are the tenses and moods of your verbs consistent?

30. Are there any comma splices?

31. Are there any unintentional sentence fragments?

#### **Punctuation**

32. Do your punctuation marks clarify the structure of your sentences?

33. Have you used punctuation marks—such as apostrophes, colons, semicolons, commas, dashes, ellipses, hyphens, and quotation marks—correctly?

34. Have you kept your use of exclamation points to a minimum? (You can convey your enthusiasm more effectively through your choice of words than through exclamation points.)

#### **Mechanics**

35. Have you used capitalization correctly and consistently?

36. Have you been consistent in your treatment of numbers? (It's best to

spell out numbers up to ten and use numerals for the others. But if you're mixing these ranges of numbers in a sentence, use numerals for all of them.)

37. Have you spelled your words correctly?

38. Have you divided words correctly at the right margin?

39. Does your essay look neatly typed and inviting to read? Have you laid it out on the page in the most attractive way?

### Proofreading

40. Have you left out any "words or lines"?

41. Have any typos crept in?

## YOURWRITER'S SURVIVAL KIT

The following pages contain a writer's survival kit. It will help you polish your college application essays. And if you take its advice to heart, it may continue to help you through the rest of your writing life. You'll find

- a guide to avoiding the kinds of mistakes in grammar, punctuation, and style that students most often make
- answers to questions about "rules" for writing that you can afford to break now and then
- a reprinted essay that explains why colleges sometimes ask bizarre questions and why students should relax and have some fun with their responses
- an annotated list of books about writing—the kind that will see you not only through your application essays but also through the writing you'll do in college and beyond

## THE MOST COMMON PUNCTUATION MISTAKES, GRAMMATICAL ERRORS, WASTED WORDS, AND STYLISTIC LAPSES

### MISTAKES IN PUNCTUATION

#### 1. Avoid using quotation marks to distance yourself from a word.

Incorrect: Linda and James went on a "date."

Kuldeep ate a "humongous" pizza all by himself.

Sheila Flanigan is the "president."

Correct: Simply eliminate the quotation marks. Their use suggests

that you're uncertain about the word you've chosen and need to find a better one.

#### 2. Use the apostrophe to indicate possession, not to form the plural.

Incorrect: Sally is going over to the **Randolphs** house for dinner.

Correct: Sally is going over to the **Randolphs'** house for dinner.

Incorrect: The **Randolph's** are not at home.

Correct: The **Randolphs** are not at home.

#### 3. Be especially careful not to confuse "it's" and "its." It's is the contracted form of "it is." Its is a possessive pronoun.

Incorrect: **Its** never a good idea to take a bone away from a hungry Doberman.

Correct: **It's** never a good idea to take a bone away from a hungry Doberman.

Incorrect: The Doberman likes **it's** bone and knows **its** his.

Correct: The Doberman likes **its** bone and knows **it's** his.

#### 4. Avoid using a comma to link two complete sentences.

Incorrect: Mom said she was going to the office. Dad said he was going to the gym.

Correct: Mom said she was going to the office; Dad said he was going to the gym. Or, Mom said she was going to the office, and Dad said he was going to the gym.

Notice in the last example, in which "and" joins the two independent clauses, that a comma precedes "and."

#### 5. Avoid using a comma when you need a semicolon or a period (in this case, to link a dependent to an independent clause).

Incorrect: I don't want to read this book, however I have to write a report about it for my English teacher.

Correct: I don't want to read this book; however, I have to write a report about it for my English teacher.

Incorrect: Judy wants to go to the movies on Saturday, furthermore she wants to see a double feature.

Correct: Judy wants to go to the movies on Saturday; furthermore, she wants to see a double feature.

## 6. Do use commas between items in a series.

Using a comma before the final "and" in a series is optional. What matters is consistency. If you place a comma before the final "and" at one point in your essay, be sure to do so throughout.

- Incorrect: Jan came home from camping feeling tired hungry and ill.  
Correct: Jan came home from camping feeling tired, hungry, and ill.  
(Or . . . tired, hungry and ill.)
- Incorrect: Peter refused to get up get dressed eat breakfast and go to school.  
Correct: Peter refused to get up, get dressed, eat breakfast, and go to school. (Or . . . eat breakfast and go to school.)

## GRAMMATICAL ERRORS

### 1. Avoid problems of agreement between subject and verb.

A singular subject takes a singular verb; a plural subject takes a plural verb.

- Incorrect: **Justine**, along with her parents, **are** due back in an hour.  
Correct: **Justine**, along with her parents, **is** due back in an hour.
- Incorrect: Each **one** of the apples in this barrel **are** rotten.  
Correct: Each **one** of the apples in this barrel **is** rotten.
- Incorrect: The **group** she hangs out with **seem** pretty wild.  
Correct: The **group** she hangs out with **seems** pretty wild.
- Incorrect: Either **A** or **B** **are** the correct answers.  
Correct: Either **A** or **B** **is** the correct answer.
- Incorrect: Neither **John** nor his **brother** **plan** to go away for the summer.  
Correct: Neither **John** nor his **brother** **plans** to go away for the summer.

### 2. Avoid problems of agreement between pronouns and antecedents.

- Incorrect: **Everyone** knows what **they** need to be happy.  
Correct: **Everyone** knows what **he or she** needs to be happy. Or, **We** all know what **we** need to be happy. Or, Everyone knows what's needed for happiness.
- Incorrect: The basketball **team** lost **their** last five games.

- Correct: The basketball **team** lost **its** last five games.  
Incorrect: Neither **James** nor **Julio** admitted **their** responsibility.  
Correct: Neither **James** nor **Julio** admitted **his** responsibility.

### 3. Make sure every pronoun you use has a clear antecedent.

- Unclear: I want to go to San Francisco this summer; **this** would make me happy.  
Clear: I want to go to San Francisco this summer; **this trip** would make me happy.
- Better yet: Going to San Francisco this summer would make me happy.  
Unclear: If you are ever arrested for a crime, be sure to seek legal aid. **They** are eager to help you.  
Clear: If you are ever arrested for a crime, be sure to seek legal aid. **Lawyers** are eager to help you.

### 4. Avoid dangling modifiers.

- Incorrect: **Roasted on the grill, topped with onions and tomatoes, and doused with ketchup**, you can make your guests happy with hamburgers.  
Correct: **Roasted on the grill, topped with onions and tomatoes, and doused with ketchup**, hamburgers are sure to please your guests.
- Incorrect: **Feeling as he does about recycling**, roadside trash has become Jake's obsession.  
Correct: **Feeling as he does about recycling**, Jake spends his Saturdays picking up roadside trash.
- Incorrect: **Summer-weight and wrinkle-free**. Dad will enjoy this fine cotton shirt.  
Correct: **Summer-weight and wrinkle-free**, this fine cotton shirt will please Dad.

## WASTED WORDS

### 1. Avoid using intensifiers like "really," "very," or "really very," and "rather."

- Instead of: I **really** enjoy hiking.  
Try: I enjoy hiking.
- Instead of: I would like **very** much to eat all the brownies on this plate.  
Try: I crave every crumb of every brownie on this plate.

Instead of: Are you **really very** sorry that you just smashed the fender of my father's brand new Jaguar?  
Try: You just smashed the fender of my father's brand new Jaguar. Do you wish you had never been born?  
Instead of: Jean Paul is **rather** devious.  
Try: Jean Paul is devious. Or, Jean Paul could disappear behind a corkscrew.

## 2. Try to avoid passive verbs.

Instead of: Students **are said** by their teachers to be more serious now than they were ten years ago.  
Try: Teachers **say** students are more serious now than they were ten years ago.  
Instead of: Bad grades **were given** to all students who cut class.  
Try: The teachers **gave** bad grades to all students who cut class. Or, All students who cut class **received** bad grades.  
Instead of: Sally **is thought** by her friends to be funny.  
Try: Her friends **think** Sally is funny.

## 3. Watch out for redundancies.

Redundant: In these **modern times** of **today**, many of us are concerned about the environment.  
Better: **Today**, many of us are concerned about the environment.  
Redundant: Randy's new baby brother is unusually **large in size**.  
Better: Randy's new baby brother is unusually **large**.  
Redundant: **In my opinion, I think** we should return to the gold standard.  
Better: **In my opinion**, we should return to the gold standard. Or, **I think** we should return to the gold standard.

*"Perfect" is as good as a thing can get, "complete" means there's nothing left to add or to do, and "unique" means "singular, one of a kind." None of these words takes "more" or "most."*

Incorrect: My party was **more perfect** than I imagined it would be.  
Correct: My party was **perfect**. Or, My party was **better** than I imagined it would be.

## 4. Eliminate unnecessary words and phrases.

Instead of: I need this class **in order** to graduate.  
Try: I need this class to graduate.  
Instead of: She seems **to be** upset about her test scores.  
Try: She seems upset about her test scores.  
Instead of: He used the blackboard **for the purpose of** showing how to solve the math problem.  
Try: He used the blackboard to show how to solve the math problem.  
Instead of: My **use of the** backhand is weak.  
Try: My backhand is weak.

## 5. Find single words to take the place of phrases.

Instead of: Avnish's performance on the SAT may not **be indicative of** his success in college.  
Try: Avnish's performance on the SAT may not **indicate** his success in college.  
Instead of: Doug **has an influence** on his younger brother.  
Try: Doug **influences** his younger brother.  
Instead of: I'm not sure **at this point in time** whether I'll go to the dance.  
Try: I'm not sure whether I'll go to the dance.  
Instead of: **Due to the fact that** blue is my favorite color, I bought a blue shirt.  
Try: **Because** blue is my favorite color, I bought a blue shirt.

## 6. Avoid beginning sentences with false starts such as "There is," "It is important to note that," and "It is essential that."

Instead of: **There** is a feeling among students that getting into college is difficult.  
Try: Students feel that getting into college is difficult.  
Instead of: **It is important to note that** he must pop the top before he drinks the soda.  
Try: He must pop the top before he drinks the soda.  
Instead of: **It is essential that** you meet the deadline for this application.  
Try: You must meet the deadline for this application.

## 7. Watch out for words that are often confused or misspelled.

Use your dictionary or a handbook of usage to check the meaning of or to distinguish between *accept* (a verb, meaning "to receive") and

*except* (a preposition, meaning "excluding, omitting")

*affect* (usually a verb, meaning "to influence" or "to pretend") and  
*effect* (a noun, meaning "result" or "outcome"; a verb, meaning "to bring about")  
etc.

## STYLISTIC LAPSES

### 1. Don't immediately choose the long word over the short one; pick the right word.

Instead of		Try	
analyze		think	
antithesis		opposite	
communicate		say, tell	
conjecture		guess	
concept		idea	
demonstrate		show	
encounter		meet	
facilitate		ease	
metamorphosis		change	
optimum		best	
subsequent		next	
sufficient		enough	
utilize		use	
viable		workable	

### 2. Avoid clichés.

If you've often seen or heard a particular expression, stay away from it in your writing. Your essay is not a place to observe that you

- are ready for the acid test
- have stayed the course
- are coping well
- have a lot to contribute
- can rise to the challenge
- expect great things
- are eager for feedback
- are open to new experiences
- seek the meaning of life

And you don't want to bore your reader by using such overused phrases as

- interpersonal relationships
- growth experiences
- expanded horizons
- hopes for the future
- pursuit of excellence
- commitment to values

### 3. Find strong verbs to replace weak ones.

Instead of: This **is** a book about the World Series, in which the author **is saying** how the Red Sox lost even though they **were** the superior team. This **is** not the sort of book a Mets fan is likely to enjoy reading.

Try: This book **deals** with the World Series. The author **claims** that the Red Sox **outclassed** their opponent and should have **won** the championship. Mets fans will probably **hate** this book.

Instead of: Keashan **is** a kind person and **has** a sweet disposition and **is** my dearest friend.

Try: I **cherish** Keashan's kindness and sweetness.

### 4. Keep subject and verb together (or as close together as you can).

Instead of: **David**, having decided that he'd like to drive to Los Angeles in his old Chevy, **took** the car to his mechanic for a tune-up.

Try: Having decided that he'd like to drive to Los Angeles in his old Chevy, **David took** the car to his mechanic for a tune-up.

Instead of: The **tree** that grew at the bottom of the driveway and was the twins' favorite hiding place quite unexpectedly during the last rainy season **fell** over.

Try: The **tree** at the bottom of the driveway, which was the twins' favorite hiding place, **fell** over quite unexpectedly during the last rainy season.

### 5. Keep adverbs near the verbs they modify.

Instead of: I don't **enjoy** watching football games **generally**.

Try: I don't **generally enjoy** watching football games.

Instead of: Jennifer **deals** with rejection **poorly**.

Try: Jennifer **deals poorly** with rejection.

## 6. Be natural, not stuffy, in your tone.

If you wouldn't **say** it that way to your audience, don't **write** it that way.

Instead of: It is characteristic of my behavior that I seek to improve myself in every conceivable way.

Try: I try to be better today than I was yesterday.

Instead of: You have my sincere condolences on the occasion of your loss.

Try: I'm sorry your bike was stolen.

Instead of: Words cannot express the depth of the emotion I feel whenever I think of you.

Try: I love you.

## WRITERS OFTEN ASK

### Q. Do periods and commas belong inside or outside quotation marks?

A. Inside. For instance: "I'm not feeling well today," Jane complained. Or, "As my grandfather was fond of saying, 'Any experience you walk away from alive can't be all bad.' "

### Q. Is it all right to end a sentence with a preposition?

A. A preposition usually precedes its object (it is in a "preposition"). But sometimes it sounds unnatural to preserve this word order. For instance, "About what do you want to talk?" sounds stilted and overly formal. "What do you want to talk about?" is less formal—and more inviting. In informal writing, sounding natural is the best policy.

### Q. Are sentence fragments ever permitted?

A. Sure. After you've made it clear to your reader that you can write complete, grammatical sentences, you can use the occasional sentence fragment for effect. For instance, "I never want to see your face again. Ever. No kidding."

### Q. Is it all right to begin a sentence with "And" or "But"?

A. Yes. But once again, do so only for effect. Beginning a sentence with "And" calls attention to your point. And it contributes to the variety of sentence patterns at your command. (Notice that the previous sentence begins with "And.") Using "But" calls attention to the exception you're expressing (see the first two words in this paragraph) or to the contrast you're drawing.

### Q. Is it all right to begin a sentence with "Because"?

A. Yes. Varying how your sentences begin can help you avoid monotony in your writing. Because that's a worthy goal, go ahead and use "Because" now and then at the beginning of a sentence.

### Q. Is it proper to use contractions?

A. In informal writing, such as your college essay, it's certainly OK. In more formal writing, such as a college term paper, you may find it customary to spell out fully all the words you write.

### Q. How can I avoid gender bias in my writing?

A. Shift from the singular to the plural. For instance, instead of writing "Every member of the senior class hopes to be admitted to the college of his choice," try "All seniors hope to be admitted to the colleges of their choice." Or use "he or she," but do so sparingly to avoid sounding as if you're trying too hard to avoid gender bias. Example: "Every senior hopes to be admitted to the college of his or her choice."

### Q. Is it all right to split infinitives?

A. Ever since the Starship Enterprise set out "to boldly go where no man has ever gone before," split infinitives have shown up everywhere. However, to frequently split them is to excessively tax your reader's patience (as in this sentence), which a good writer tries to never do.