

Writing the Essay

1. Write in a style that “sounds” like you. The essay should reflect your personality.

2. **Introduction** – Start with a “hook” to capture your reader’s interest. A “hook” can be:

- An unusual or unexpected statement

(Note: make sure you explain how this strange statement is related to your thesis.)

“Cockroaches, unite” was my battle cry.

- An unrealistic, contradictory, or apparently nonsensical statement

I opened the jar of mayonnaise as carefully as if I were defusing a nuclear warhead.

- A thought-provoking question

Why do teenagers think that all advice that comes from parents is wrong?

- A confession or admission

Sometimes I think that I have xanthophobia: fear of the color yellow.

- If you start by describing a scene or setting, make sure it is interesting and intriguing.
- Be careful about starting or ending your essay with a quote, statistic, or definition. This is common and only stands out if it is done exceptionally well.
- Do not begin with an overused sentence like
From _____ experience, I learned _____ and _____.
- Do not use more than ¼ of the word limit.

<p>3. Tell the reader something about yourself even if the prompt just asks about an activity or opinion.</p>	<p>Good: <i>Teaching autistic kids to swim last summer, I learned to measure success by how hard I work and not how much I achieve.</i></p> <p>Bad: <i>Last summer I taught autistic kids to swim and helped them succeed.</i></p>
<p>4. Give specific, detailed explanations and examples.</p>	<p>Good: <i>If my mother had not forced me to eat all those new foods, I might not be so eager to study in a country where I don't speak the language.</i></p> <p>Bad: <i>Without my mother, I would not be who I am today.</i></p>
<p>5. Use details to show – do not just tell.</p>	<p>Good: <i>Because of the student-faculty forums I suggested, students can now study teenage psychology instead of just memorizing the areas of the brain.</i></p> <p>Bad: <i>Because of my programs, students have more input in the school and can make the curriculum relevant to themselves.</i></p>

<p>6. Use vivid images instead of generalities.</p>	<p>Good: <i>After sleeping on the rocky ground for two weeks, our simple cabin seemed like a palace.</i></p> <p>Bad: <i>When we finished backpacking, the cabin seemed very comfortable.</i></p>
<p>7. Be concise – a good example does not need to be explained.</p>	<p>Good: <i>As my manager glowered at me, I realized I had only seconds to explain why the \$100 dollar bill was in my hand. (It is obvious that this made the writer look guilty.)</i></p> <p>Bad: <i>As my manager looked at me with a frown on his face, I could see that he was angry. Having the valuable \$100 dollar bill in my hand made me look guilty. I knew I had to come up with an explanation that would satisfy him quickly. (This explanation of the example is a waste of words.)</i></p>
<p>8. Avoid clichés – they are shortcuts for real thought.</p>	<p>Good: <i>Ellen taught me to build relationships based on shared experiences.</i></p> <p>Bad: <i>Ellen pulled me out of my shell.</i></p>

Hints:

- Write an essay within 50 words under or over the word limit. If no length is suggested, aim for 500 words for the main essay and 200-300 words for smaller ones.
- Make sure every sentence in your essay adds to what you are telling the admissions officers about yourself. Do not add extra details just because they occurred to you.
- Don't use the words "I" and "me" too much.

Finishing It Off

1. Proofread every word. Don't offend the admissions officers with grammar or punctuation errors or misspelled words. Spell Check and Grammar Check can create errors.

2. Important errors to proofread for:

- Singular/Plural Pronoun Agreement

If a person wants to get into a good college, they need a high GPA.

Error: "a person" is singular, "they" is plural

Correction: *A person who wants to go to a good college needs a high GPA.*

- Unclear Pronouns

When I got into my first-choice college, it was very exciting.

Error: "it" does not refer to anything

Correction: *Getting into my first-choice college was very exciting.*

- Passive Voice:

It is the lure of leaving home that makes me want to go to college in California.

Error: the construction using a "to be" verb is awkward

Correction: *The lure of leaving home makes me want to go to college in California.*

3. Have someone knowledgeable proofread your paper for clarity, grammar, and content, but do not let that person change your writing style. Admissions officers can spot sentences written by adults.

Original: *When the elephant charged toward me, I was terrified. My brain was filled with panic and the fear of being trampled.*

Good Edit: *When the elephant charged, I was terrified by the fear of being trampled.*

This is more concise but keeps the original structure and word choice.

Bad Edit: *Seeing the elephant hurtling across the savannah, I was petrified of being trampled.*

This is also more concise but has a different sentence structure, advanced vocabulary, and detail added by the editor – it does not reflect the writer’s original work.

Note: If you have a teacher proofread, ask what the essay tells her about you. Teachers sometimes approve well written essays that don’t reveal very much about the writer.

4, When finished, ask yourself:

- How will this make the admissions officers want to admit me?
- What image of me does this present?
- Does this add information that is not in the rest of my application?
- Does this sound like me?
- Is it interesting?