

Your Admissions Essay

How Important Is My Essay In The Admissions Decision?

The essay is your chance to set yourself apart from the crowd and give the admissions officers a good reason to back your candidacy. In today's extremely competitive college admissions process, there are many students with 4.0 GPAs and 1600 SAT scores who are denied admission to their schools of choice. The essay is the way for you—whether you are the valedictorian or the "class clown"—to enhance your application by showcasing your writing skills. Simply put, there is no more important skill in college than the ability to express your ideas clearly and in an engaging manner.

Who Will Read and Evaluate My Essay?

Typically, an admissions officer will read your essay and write an evaluation. If you remain a viable candidate after the first "read," your essay will then be scrutinized more closely by another admissions officer, or by the admissions director or assistant director. Some schools will subject your essay to further scrutiny by circulating your file among members of an admissions committee comprised of several individuals, including admissions officials, faculty members, and possibly current students.

How Do Schools Evaluate My Essay?

Some larger institutions that process many applications use a multiple-scoring system in which each essay receives separate scores for content, style, and mechanics. Other schools take a more holistic approach, relying on written comments by evaluators, as well as dialogue among members of the admissions committee.

The Audience

Before you write your essay, you should know about the people who are going to read it. Who are they? How old 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 worked on for hours? 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, want, or hope to discover? 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.

Profile of an Admissions Committee

A typical admissions committee consists of:

- An experienced director who's been working in college admissions for ten to twenty years.
- One or two associate directors with five years of experience.
- A handful of assistants who have just graduated from the college.

The assistants read all the applications, but the associate directors and director read only what the assistants pass along. In short, your principal audience consists of young men and women about four to five years older than you are.

Why are you writing for them? Not to give the admissions committee what you—or your parents—think it wants. Focusing too much on such preconceptions will lead only to a

hackneyed product. Moreover, you should remember that your transcript, SAT scores, extracurricular activities, and letters of recommendation will tell the admissions committee a great deal about you and your accomplishments. Your essay is an opportunity to reveal something new about yourself, in a fresh and unpretentious way.

Key Attributes

Admissions officers review numerous applications, frequently reading as many as fifty per day. Although it's impossible to predict exactly what a particular college is looking for in its applicants, in general, colleges want to admit a mix of students who can handle the academic workload and make a positive contribution to the college experience—for themselves and their classmates.

To get a favorable reaction from admissions officers, your application should demonstrate:

- Serious intent to pursue a college-level education.
- Genuine desire to attend the particular college.
- Match between your interests and abilities, and what the school needs and has to offer.
- Ability to think clearly, logically, and creatively.
- Ability to write engaging, thoughtful essays that keep your reader's attention and differentiate you from the other applicants.

From *Peterson's College Applications and Essays, 4th Edition* by Susan D. Van Raalte

What Admissions Officers Look For

You – The person behind the GPA, the test scores and the extracurricular activities.

Surprise – An unexpected angle on your topic, even if the experience you're writing about seems ordinary.

Sincerity – Writing as yourself, without pretension and without taking yourself too seriously; relying on your own vocabulary, rather than the thesaurus or your parents.

Thoughtfulness – Thinking about your experiences and their meanings, to yourself and to others; showing through your reflections that you are a person on whom nothing is lost.

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 an experienced director of admissions will read your essay. This is an overworked audience on whom your essay needs to make a vivid and memorable impression.

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 field 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.

Before: "On a yearly basis, we would spend five hours driving to the lake, where I never gave up the hope of meeting the boy that would be my Prince Charming."

After: "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 toward a thoughtful conclusion. 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 should be eliminated.

Special Circumstances

If you want to explain special circumstances affecting your application to the admissions committee, don't be apologetic or frightened. Simply put an asterisk or footnote next to the issue in question and explain the situation at the bottom of the page or where there is room. In extreme cases, such as when an illness or death in the family affected your grades, you could even write a separate letter. Frequently, colleges will provide space on the application for you to inform them of these circumstances. Just be sure you don't tell more than they need or want to know, or draw unnecessary attention to negative points.

Making Connections Between Your Experiences And Personal Qualities

The essay is one of the most important parts of your application. It is your opportunity to reveal the thoughtful side of yourself. The essay is where your voice is heard most clearly—where you can state something that only you can write about.

People generally write best when writing about topics that are of personal interest or that have personal meaning. When you are offered a choice of topics, decide for yourself what to write about, based upon what is personally meaningful and interesting to you. Be careful not to allow your parents or others to determine the subject of your essay. Take full advantage of any opportunity to choose your own essay topic. Most colleges allow applicants a great deal of flexibility as to the subject of the essay.

The Personal Qualities Admissions Officers Look For In Applicants

- **Concern for others** – either by devoting time to social service activities, such as tutoring, or by being considerate and empathetic to others' feelings
- **Confidence** – in your ability to handle difficult situations
- **Creativity** – as reflected in the way your mind works to solve problems, and/or a talent in the arts, such as theater, music, writing, painting, dancing, etc.
- **Diligence/Persistence** – as demonstrated by your ability to stay with a task until you complete it
- **Enthusiasm** – as demonstrated by your eagerness to engage in activities
- **Initiative** – as in the ability to start a project or assume a responsibility
- **Insight** – as reflected in your ability to use introspection to understand aspects of yourself, such as your preferences and your motivations
- **Intellectual Ability** – to handle college-level work
- **Intellectual Curiosity** – about ideas, academic subjects, people, trends, etc.
- **Leadership** – as shown in your ability to inspire others to work together to reach a mutual goal
- **Maturity** – as demonstrated by being responsible and trustworthy
- **Open-mindedness** – to ideas, people, and circumstances different from your own
- **Optimism** – as reflected in your ability to find positive aspects in seemingly negative situations
- **Organization** – as in the ability to stay on top of multiple tasks

- **Overcoming Adversity** – as demonstrated by your resourcefulness in dealing with serious problems, such as divorce, death, illness, etc.
- **Risk Taking** – as shown in your ability to deal with uncertainty to reach your goal
- **Sense of Humor** – as in your ability either to find humor in difficult situations or to make others laugh
- **Seriousness of Purpose** – to pursue a college education

Use Details

How will your essay stand out, even if you think you are writing about a topic common to most applicants? Details, details, and more details. The reader needs to know what makes your story unique. To differentiate yourself from other applicants and help your essay stick in the minds of admissions officers, you need to incorporate, for example, names of people and places, times and dates, colors and textures of objects, and degrees of feelings.

Too often, an essay with an interesting story will fizzle into a series of statements that tell rather than show the qualities of the writer. As a result, the essay succumbs to the usual clichés: "the value of hard work and perseverance," and "learning from mistakes." The following example will help you understand the difference:

Before: I developed a new compassion for the disabled.

After: The next time that Mrs. Cooper asked me to help her across the street, I smiled and immediately took her arm.

The first sentence is vague and could have been written by anybody. The second sentence, however, evokes a vivid image of something that actually happened, placing the reader in the experience.

Admissions officers will appreciate good use of detail. They will be able to assess that you are a mature candidate capable of getting others to understand the uniqueness, significance, and value of your experiences.

Tell a Story

The best essays tell a story about the applicant. The essay doesn't have to be the story of your life, but rather a glimpse of it—rich with meaning, alive with imagery, and clear in purpose. It helps to think about the impact that past events have had on you. A good strategy is to select one significant event that you can expound upon at length, using vivid details and thoughtful commentary.

Begin with an engaging introduction, drawing your reader into the story. A creative way to do this is to drop the reader into the middle of the action and then fill in the before-and-after facts. Then present the rest of your anecdote, followed by insightful analysis of the experience—why it was important, what you learned, and how it will help you in the future. Stay away from creating an introduction that includes clichéd ideas or generalizations and then inserting your anecdote. By the time the admissions officers get to your experience, they may already be soured by generic assertions.

Common Flaws

There is no excuse for careless errors, and having even one on your application can affect the way you are perceived by admissions officers. You have more than enough time to proofread and have others look over your essay. If an error slips through, your readers may assume that you are careless, disorganized, or not serious enough about your application.

Remember that the spell check feature of your word processing program does not catch all possible errors. In addition to eliminating typographical errors such as repeated words, you have to read the essay carefully to catch mistakes in meaning that might even come in the form of a grammatically correct sentence.

Let these humorous but unfortunate examples be a lesson to read your essay carefully for unintended meanings and meaningless sentences:

- It was like getting admitted to an Ivory League school.
- Berkeley has a reputation of breeding nationalists and communists.
- I'd like to attend a college where I can expose myself to many diverse people.
- I was totally free except for the rules.
- In a word, the experience taught me the importance of dedication, friendship, and goals.
- I have an extensive knowledge of the value of intelligence.
- I envy people with a lot of time in their hands.

Answering the Question

You can follow our advice, but if you fail to answer the essay question, you will not be admitted to any institution.

A Boring Introduction

Remember that admissions officers will probably spend no more than a few minutes on your essay. In the first two sentences, you must capture their interest. The first lead below does not engage the reader. A boring introduction will cause the reader to skim the essay, and the essay will not be memorable. In contrast, the second introduction's use of detail makes the experience personal and draws the reader into the story. By also leaving out key details, the second lead creates intrigue, forcing the reader to find out: Who is this child? How and when did his parents die? How will the author help?

Before: I volunteer as a Big Brother to a little boy. He lost his parents in a car accident a few months ago. From this experience, I hoped to help him cope with his loss and open up his personality by spending time with him after school on certain days.

After: While the other children played outside, eleven-year old Danny's sad eyes focused on the white wall in front of him. He sat alone in silence—a silence that had imprisoned him since his mother and father died in a tragic accident.

Long-windedness

Use the allotted space wisely and do not exceed word limits. Make sure you omit irrelevant details, clichés, and undeveloped ideas. Do not distract the reader with repetition or extra words. The second passage does not need the cliché "hit me like a ton of bricks," because it expresses the same thought through forceful, concise writing.

Example of Irrelevant Detail: After a meeting with my adviser, I returned home to think over the matter more carefully. Ultimately I came to the conclusion that my interests in physical properties and mental life would best be explored in a double major of biology and psychology.

In this example, we learn nothing about the applicant from the mention of his meeting with an adviser. What is relevant are his interests and the decision he made based on them. The details about how he arrived at the decision are not illustrative of his character in any way and are therefore superfluous.

Example of Redundancy: The experience taught me a great deal about sensitivity. I learned to be more sensitive to the needs of others in the context of a volunteering experience.

The first sentence is unnecessary, because the second sentence makes the same point with more specificity.

In addition to superfluous content, you also have to watch out for wordy writing. Wordiness not only takes up valuable space, but also often confuses the important ideas you are trying to convey. Short sentences are more forceful, because they are direct and to the point.

Before: My recognition of the fact that the project was finally over was a deeply satisfying moment that will forever linger in my memory.

After: Completing the project at last gave me an enduring sense of fulfillment.

Phrases like "the fact that" are usually unnecessary. Notice how the revised version focuses on active verbs rather than forms of "to be," adverbs, and adjectives.

Passive-Voice Verbs

Passive-voice expressions are verb phrases in which the subject receives the action expressed in the verb. The passive voice employs a form of "to be," such as "was" or "were." Overuse of the passive voice makes prose seem flat and uninteresting.

Before: The lessons that prepared me for college were taught to me by my mother.

After: My mother taught me lessons that will prepare me for college.

Big Words

Put your thesaurus away when writing your application essay. Using longer, fancier words does not make you sound more intelligent. Simpler language is almost always preferable, as it demonstrates your ability to think and express yourself clearly.

Before: Although I did a plethora of activities in high school, my assiduous efforts enabled me to succeed.

After: Although I juggled many activities in high school, I succeeded through persistent work.

Learn More About Yourself

Admissions officers want to get to know you personally through your essays. How can they get to know who you really are if you yourself are not really sure? Here are some self-discovery tools and techniques that will help ensure that the schools are meeting the real you through your essays.

Interview Your Friends and Relatives

This can be a tough but very useful exercise. Use the following five questions, and encourage your interview subjects to be brutally honest:

- How have you described me to people who have not met me?
- What is the best thing anyone has ever told you about me?
- What is the worst thing anyone has ever told you about me?
- What do you think is my most unusual or unique character trait?
- What was your initial impression of me when you first met me? How has that changed?

Write Down Your Thoughts and Feelings About Issues That Are Most Personal And Immediate

Most sixteen- and seventeen-year-old students are usually not as concerned with geopolitics and medieval literature as they are about more personal issues such as:

- Self-esteem (approval and validation of self, ideas, and values)
- Identity
- Independence from parents
- Academic and extracurricular success
- Popularity and acceptance by a peer group
- Loyalty, trust, and honesty

Set aside some time every day to be alone and reflect on your own thoughts and feelings about these issues. If you keep a diary or journal, excerpts from these writings may very well provide the genesis of a highly effective essay.

Self-Assessment Exercises

Chronological Method

This is the easiest and most basic exercise to use to develop ideas for your essay. Think back to your earliest memories and recount your experiences since childhood. What stands out in your mind? In the minds of family members and friends? Record the details around these experiences: what you achieved, what you learned, how you succeeded, and how you failed. This exercise will serve as a springboard for most of your essay question topics, since your experiences will involve personal growth, future goals, role models, accomplishments, failures, hobbies, etc. Whatever you choose to write about, make sure it has personal meaning to you. Do not write about what you think admissions officers want to hear. An honest, personal essay about how your first successful bicycle ride without training wheels served as the catalyst for your marked independence can be better than discussing how volunteering at your local soup kitchen has moved you to save the world.

Accomplishments

Admissions officers will want to see that there is more to you than your SAT scores and GPA. Therefore, it is important for you to find a way to differentiate yourself from the other qualified applicants. You can demonstrate that you are not just another pretty transcript by showing a completely different side of yourself through the nonacademic experiences, interests, and values that make you the person you are.

The key here is to get your reader to know and like you. Focus on what your experiences mean to you and how you have grown. Tie in relevant aspects of your personal or family life--without unloading embarrassing or intimate details on your reader. Show your strengths in new ways without restating the obvious. If you can demonstrate unusual maturity, sensitivity, and direction in your essay, you will be ahead of the game.

Skills/Personality Traits

Whether you apply to one or several colleges, the odds are quite high that you will be asked to discuss your strengths and weaknesses. Think of all different kinds of strengths. If you are good at math, consider discussing your keen analytical abilities. However, do not simply limit yourself to your technical ability. Show how you are also good at helping others understand math by tutoring your friends or leading group projects. Outside of school, think about your extracurricular activities. Write about your excellent writing skills by relating an anecdote about a front-page story you wrote for the school newspaper. Think about personal qualities, too. Most of all, do not be modest, since you are using the essay to sell yourself to people who have never met you.

Now for the hard part. When an essay prompt asks about your weaknesses, admissions officers want you to be candid and honest. However, remember that you are trying to be positive. Therefore, any time you write about a weakness, you should be able to state what you are doing about it. Do not make excuses for a weakness. Instead, tell the reader about what you are doing to fix it.

Before you choose to draw attention to a special interest or talent, be sure the school wants what you have to offer. Your finesse with a lacrosse stick will buy you nothing if you are applying to a college with no lacrosse team. Similarly, a college may have an orchestra but no need for cellists this year.

When you write about your talent, show your strengths without restating the obvious. Instead of rehashing the facts about the special lessons you take or the awards you have won, give the reader insight into your passion. For example, you can discuss:

- What appeals to you about playing football, the flute, etc.
- What you have learned about yourself as you have pursued your talent
- How you have faced challenges and disappointments
- How you plan to incorporate your talent into your life in college and beyond

In some instances, you may be able to demonstrate your talent firsthand. For example, you may want to send slides of your artwork or a taped recording of your musical ability. A trusted teacher in your area of special talent can help you prepare your demonstration.

Influences and Role Models

Begin by brainstorming the people in your life that have impacted you the most. Chances are, you will have some obvious individuals on that list, including your mother, father, sister,

brother, or teacher. Maybe you had a football coach who taught you to push yourself harder to succeed. Perhaps your minister helped you realize how worthwhile organizing a Thanksgiving food drive was to your community. The point is to stay away from people you think admissions officers will be impressed by, such as a noted politician or businessman who happens to be a family friend. Unless that person has made a significant impact on you, stay away from name-dropping.

Some applications will prompt you to discuss an influence or role model directly. For example:

- If you could have dinner with anyone in the world, living or dead, whom would you choose and why?
- What famous person do you esteem highest and why? This could be a remarkable statesman, scientist, businessperson, or anyone else.
- What person that you know personally do you admire the most? What person in your life has most inspired you?

Whatever person or people you choose, the point is the same. There are obvious answers that anyone could come up with, and it can be hard to find an original take on a familiar subject. As much as you admire Abraham Lincoln, did he really influence you in a personal way? Focus on how the person has impacted you, not on what he or she has done for others or for society in general.

Research the School

Check Out the College's Own Resources For Essay Ideas

Colleges themselves are great places to start gathering information and ideas for your essays. However, many applicants never think to look there. Here are some suggestions to help you take advantage of all that a college has to offer you as an applicant.

Read Several Issues of The School Newspaper

You will learn what local and regional issues are important to the administration, faculty, and students. Certain newsworthy school events or happenings might strike you as particularly interesting, unique, shocking, or praiseworthy. Consider writing about such an issue or event in your essay for that school.

Read the Alumni Publications Produced By the School

Ask yourself: What values seem to be important to the administration and to the trustees? What image is the school attempting to convey? What are the school's policies and attitudes? What alumni accomplishments is the school touting? These values, policies, and accomplishments might be worth addressing in your essay.

Tour the Campus with Your Eyes Wide Open

Observe the architecture, the sculptures, and other artwork around the campus. Read the plaques and engravings on, in, and around the buildings. Walk around the neighborhood surrounding the campus looking for essay nuggets in your path. If you cannot visit the school in person, take an online tour of the school or obtain an informational video from the school, if one is available. Keep in mind, however, that schools' websites and videos are marketing tools as well as informational resources, so they may not present a completely objective picture of the school.

Investigate the School's History

Here are a few investigative questions to get you started:

- What were the political and economic circumstances surrounding the founding of the school? What were the founders' ideals and educational philosophies, and has the school moved away from its initial educational mission?
- Did the school ever serve as the subject, locale, or backdrop for an important historical event? What does that event mean to you?
- Who are the school's most famous alumni (or dropouts)? What are their accomplishments and impact upon you, the school, and society? Why did those individuals attend the college, and what kind of students were they?

Talk To Current Students

Go to the central meeting place on campus, find some students who are hanging out, and strike up a conversation. Ask them about life in the dormitory, fraternity, or sorority. Ask them what attracted them to the school initially and whether their initial perceptions about the school have changed. You are sure to walk away with essay ideas and the inside scoop on student life.

Read What the Application States about The Essays

A surprisingly large number of applicants ignore the directions and guidelines for essay writing that are spelled out in the school's application. Be sure you are not one of these students. Many schools include not only directions but also advice for writing the essay.

Contact the Admissions Staff with Unanswered Questions about The Essay

After you have read the application materials thoroughly, if any of the guidelines are still unclear, contact the school and ask for clarification. Do not be afraid to communicate with the school's admissions staff yourself.

Visit the School's Website

The Internet is the quickest and least expensive means of gathering information about colleges. Virtually all colleges and universities now make available online their school catalogues as well as admission policies, procedures, applications, and other information.

Brainstorming a Topic

Use the following list as a springboard as you develop your own connections. You can browse the questions below without a specific structure in mind and see what results from that free-association process. On the other hand, some people prefer to have more guidance as they brainstorm, and for those people we have ordered and grouped the questions into a logical structure.

Each subtopic begins with a series of questions and then an explanation of their potential relevance to the big picture.

Personal

- Give an example of a time when you exhibited creativity in a personal or professional setting. Describe your thoughts and actions.
- Think of a time when you truly helped someone. What did you do? How did this impact the other person? How did your actions impact you?
- Give an example of a difficult interaction you had with someone. Describe the situation, what was difficult about it, and how you resolved it.
- Provide a candid assessment of your strengths and weaknesses.
- If you could have dinner with anyone in the world, living or dead, whom would you choose and why?
- What famous person do you esteem highest and why? This could be a remarkable statesman, scientist, businessperson, or anyone else.
- What person that you know personally do you admire the most? What person in your life has most inspired you?
- What value do you place on diversity and why?
- What creative work has influenced you the most (a piece of music, a painting, a film, etc.)? How? Why?
- If you could change anything about yourself, what would it be? What bad habits or personal faults are you currently working on?
- Think of a failure or a time when you disappointed yourself, whether personally, academically, or professionally. What did you learn from this experience? How did it change you? What did you do to correct this problem?
- Give an example of a time when you had an impact on a person, group, or organization. Describe the situation, your actions, and the results.
- How do your friends describe you? How would you describe yourself?
- What values are most important to you?
- Do you have strong religious convictions that have influenced your academics or outside activities?
- Think of an occasion when someone gave you negative feedback. How did you respond, both initially and in the long term? How did this experience change you? Were you able to improve yourself as a result?

Come up with unique combinations of your skills and characteristics, and consider how these have applied in past experiences or will apply to your future—both in college and afterward. Do not simply name skills for which you know the schools are looking, because that will detract from the unique portrait you are trying to paint.

Family

- What is your most valued childhood memory?
- Have you been responsible for caring for family members? For an ailing parent, a sibling, a disabled or aging relative, or a child? How has this impacted your academics? Your goals and values?
- If different from your current place of residence, does your home country or place of birth have special meaning for you? Do you visit it often?
- What do your parents/other family members do for a living? How have they influenced/inspired you? How has your family's economic status impacted your education and childhood?
- Have you suffered any serious hardships that impacted your academic or professional performance?
- If you live in the U.S. but are not a native-born American: How did you deal with the challenges of moving to the U.S. from your home? Did you experience culture shock? How did you adapt? What was most difficult for you? What aspects of your new home did you enjoy the most?

Although these questions may seem routine, your answers can give admissions officers more information than meets the eye. They can learn something about your life at home: whether both your parents work; if you grew up in a "blue collar" or a "white collar" environment; or if your parents (or brothers and sisters) are alumni of the school.

You need to think about how your family has helped to shape you into the person you are today. Thinking about your parents and their character traits can help you identify some of your values and where they came from. You might realize, for example, that your interest in social work originates from your mother's concern for the welfare of others. Do not worry if your experiences do not seem earthshaking. Often, everyday living can be most influential—and most interesting—to an admissions officer.

Activities

- How did you spend the majority of your time over the past year?
- To what non-academic activity did you give the most time over the past year? Or past several years?
- What has been your most significant service activity? Your most memorable one-time volunteer opportunity? Your longest regular volunteerism commitment?
- What has been your most significant cross-cultural experience? Why? How did it change your perspective?
- What has been your most significant international experience?
- Can you identify trends in your commitments? What do they say about your values and abilities?
- Did you work during high school? If so, where did you work? How many hours per week? What were your responsibilities and duties? What did you learn?

Do not feel obligated to bring up every activity you have ever done, especially if it has been sufficiently covered elsewhere in the application. Remember that depth is more important than breadth. Admissions officers want to gain insight into what you care most about, and to see how you have devoted yourself.

As you think about why you joined an activity and chose to continue with it, look for trends or similarities. Sometimes there are links between different types of activities. For example, you may have joined the band and the soccer team because you like to contribute to a group effort. One way to determine your priorities is to imagine that you have time for only two or three activities. The ones that you would want to continue doing under these circumstances are probably the most significant to you. In analyzing which activities are the most valuable to you and why, you may come up with an interesting idea for an essay.

Accomplishments

- What achievement are you most proud of? Why?
- What significant challenges have you overcome?
- Describe accomplishments for which you have been formally recognized. What qualities did you demonstrate in your path to success? What does each accomplishment mean to you personally?
- Describe accomplishments for which you have not been formally recognized but that you are particularly proud of. Take even more time to reflect on why these have special meaning for you.
- Discuss an accomplishment in which you exercised leadership. How effective were you in motivating or guiding others? How did people respond to your leadership? What did you learn that you can apply to future experiences?
- Think of a time when you truly helped someone. What did you do? How did this impact the other person? How did your actions impact you?

- Give an example of when you exhibited creativity. Describe your thoughts and actions.
- Reflect on a time in which you failed to accomplish what you set out to do. How did you recover from that failure? How did you respond to your next challenge?
- What was an important risk that you took? Why did you take this risk? What was the outcome? Would you do it again?

The important point here is that you develop insight into your accomplishments beyond their face value. Your essay should not merely list your most significant successes, nor is it enough to say that you are proud of them. You need to dig deeper to discover what these accomplishments mean to you, what they say about you, and how you learned from them. Also, reflect closely on your path to achievement rather than the result itself.

Goals

- What are your career aspirations, and how will college help you to reach them?
- What specifically do you hope to gain from the college to which you are applying?
- What unique skills and experiences do you have to offer the school, your fellow students, the faculty, the broader community?
- Why do you think you will succeed in college?
- What is your dream job? What would you ideally like to be doing in five years? In ten years? In twenty years?
- Are there specific faculty members at this college whose work interests you? With whom would you most like to study or conduct research?
- What attracts you to this particular school?
- How did you become interested in your intended field of study?
- Name a current obstacle to the realization of your goals. What causes this problem? What are you doing to change it?

The questions concerning your academic experiences, special programs, and extracurricular or work activities may have triggered some thoughts about your future. While colleges are interested in your academic and career plans, they do not expect you to know exactly what you want to do or stick with this course of action forever. If you cannot put down a specific interest, you can narrow the field down to a few. In this way, you can show the admissions committee that you have a sense of where you are going without committing yourself to a particular destination.

When you respond to questions about your career or major on your application, be sure your answers are compatible with your abilities. Do not, for example, say that you want to write the great American novel if your grades in English are mediocre or poor.

Selecting a Topic

After brainstorming, you should have a lengthy list of potential topics to cover. Some essays that answer specific questions will require only one topic. For other general personal statements, you may want to discuss between two and four subjects. If you try to tackle more than four subjects, you are probably treating each one in insufficient depth.

Use the following guide to help narrow down your topics.

Conveying Something Meaningful

Does your topic convey something meaningful about your personality? Will the reader walk away with an enriched understanding of who you are? If you cannot answer "yes" to these

questions, then you have probably chosen a topic that is too generic. Search harder to find a subject for which you can take a more personal and original approach.

Painting a Complete Portrait

You cannot write a comprehensive essay that discusses everything you have ever done, but you can aim to offer an argument that details the full range of what you have to offer. If you choose only one topic, that topic should be broad enough in scope to allow you to discuss layers of your skills and characteristics. If you choose multiple topics, they should build upon and supplement each other, but not be redundant.

Standing Out

Is your topic unique? It is hard to have something entirely new to say, but you should at least have a fresh take on your topic. If you recognize a lack of originality in your ideas, try to be more specific and personal. The more specific you get, the less likely that you will blend in with the essays of other applicants.

Keeping Your Reader's Interest

Will your topic be able to sustain your reader's interest for the entire length of the essay? It is true that good writing can make any topic fascinating to read about, but there is no need to start yourself off with a handicap. Choose a topic that will naturally be of interest to any reader. For this criterion, it is necessary to step back and view your topic objectively, or else consult the opinion of others. If someone described the basic idea to you, would you care enough to ask for more details?

Staying Grounded In Detail

You should make sure ahead of time that your topic is fundamentally based on concrete evidence. If you are choosing specific experiences or events, then the relevant details should be clearly available. However, if your topic is more abstract, then you must be prepared to back up any claims with concrete examples and illustrative details.

Answering the Question

Applicants often overlook the very basic necessity of actually answering the question posed. They think they can get away with a loosely adapted essay from another application, or they simply do not take the time to review the question carefully. Make sure the topic you choose gives you room to address all parts of the question fully. Admissions officers could perceive an irrelevant response as an indication of your carelessness or lack of interest in their school.

What to Avoid

After you have determined that your topic meets the above criteria, you should make sure that it also avoids the following pitfalls:

- **Resorting to gimmicks** – While creativity is encouraged, there must be substance to make your tactics worthwhile. Do not expect mere novelty to win you any points, and realize that you risk coming across as frivolous. Also, there is a good chance that any gimmicks you come up with have been done already.
- **Focusing on the negative** – As far as your topic is concerned, the main idea should be focused on your positive attributes. This does not mean that you should not mention

past weaknesses that you have learned to overcome, as the emphasis there is still on the strength you demonstrated.

- **Repeating information that is listed elsewhere in the application** – Your topic should not merely be a list of activities. Rather, it should offer the kind of insight that only you can provide in a personal manner.
- **Being too controversial** – If you get a sympathetic reader, a controversial topic might help you to stand out, but you risk offending others and severely hurting your chances. You would do better to search for a topic that makes you unique without resorting to cheap shots or obvious cries for attention.
- **Seeking pity** – You can describe misfortunes or a disadvantaged background, but do not use them as an excuse for bad performances or to seek pity. Doing so not only could sound manipulative, but also means that you have not emphasized your strengths sufficiently. Thus, as in the case of weaknesses, you should bring up obstacles in your past only to show how you have overcome them.

Question-Specific Strategies

- Admissions officers will often emphasize that they do not care what you choose to write about in your essay. They stress this because most writers err on the side of unoriginality, having tried too hard to meet the expectations of their imagined readers and discarding all of their own personality in the process. Of course, there is truth in their advice: You should write with the goal of expressing your own values and conveying the qualities most important to you. You should frame this discussion in a way that highlights your unique character. However, you must exercise your creativity with a definite eye toward the themes and points that will justify your suitability for college. Your ultimate goal is not just to stand out as a likeable person, but also to obtain admission to your college or university of choice.

Personal Growth

- This is perhaps the most popular essay topic, since it delves into the heart of what the admissions essay is all about: helping the college gain better insight into an applicant's personality and character. Some schools ask targeted questions—"What was the most challenging event you have ever faced, and how have you grown from it?"—while others leave the topic open: "Describe an event that has had great meaning for you. Explain why and how it has affected you."
- One of the most successful strategies is to use a past event as a lens through which you can assess who you were and into whom you have grown and changed. Most children are inquisitive, but were you the one who asked your kindergarten teacher what caused the seasons of the year, and then proceeded to create a model of the solar system and explain the concept to your fellow classmates? Though you may think that your topic needs to be more grandiose, that is not necessary for an essay to be effective. Success lies in painting an accurate and vivid picture of yourself—one that will show admissions officers that you have much to offer their school.
- The most important advice we can give is to be honest, refrain from employing clichés, and show maturity. College represents a radical change from high school, so you want your reader to realize that you are more than ready to take the next major step in your life.

Role Models and Influences

- You can demonstrate that you are not just another pretty transcript by showing a completely different side of yourself through the role models and influences that shaped the person you are today. The key here is to personalize: Do not go off on tangents,

focusing on someone else instead of the most important element—why your topic is significant to **you**. Focus on what these influences have meant to you and how you have grown, tying in relevant aspects of your personal or family life when appropriate. Show your strengths in new ways without restating the obvious.

- However, do not feel that you need to write about famous people or impress admissions officers by noting your family's ties to an influential member of the government or movie star. Writing about a teacher who sparked your interest in archeology by taking your third-grade class on a field trip to a local museum to see a dinosaur exhibit is more effective than name dropping in the hopes of impressing admissions officers.
- If you can demonstrate unusual maturity, sensitivity, and direction in your essay, you will be ahead of the game.

Accomplishments

- Most of what is applicable to writing a successful [Personal Growth](#) essay holds here for Accomplishment pieces: Colleges use the relation of accomplishments to get insight into applicants' personalities and character traits. Some schools ask targeted questions, while others leave the topic open for applicant interpretation.
- An important point is to refrain from repeating information found elsewhere in the application. Some "overachievers" try to include virtually all their accomplishments in one essay, missing the point of the exercise altogether. A laundry list of academic, extracurricular, and work successes will not give admissions officers much more insight into your personality. In fact, they may infer that you do not realize that, in college, you will not be able to be editor of the yearbook, editor-in-chief of the school newspaper, president of the honor society, captain of the football team, and president of the class all at the same time. The mature applicant knows that college will require a student to focus on a few interests but spend more time and effort pursuing them.
- For those of you who were not the school "all-star," do not worry. Some of the best Accomplishment essays have been written about what could be construed as mundane events—learning how to bake a cake, miraculously getting the engine in your first car (which you affectionately call your "clunker") to start, or getting your elderly and bed-ridden neighbor to smile by performing your cheesy stand-up routine. The accomplishment does not need to be earth shattering, but you do need to show why it is important for you and how it has affected you in a discernible way.

Hobbies and Interests

- This topic is very wide open. You could choose to write about an extracurricular activity, job, hobby, or just about anything that involves a high level of interest and dedication. Most of our suggestions for [Accomplishments](#) essays also apply here, especially refraining from repeating information found elsewhere in your application and not including a laundry list of academic, extracurricular, and work successes.
- Focus on why the interest is important to you, making sure to highlight its relevance to other areas of your life and what you have learned from it. Demonstrate passion, devotion, and leadership skills, as these are all character traits admissions officers seek in future college students. Most of all, be genuine—admissions officers will know if you are telling them what you think they want to hear.

Childhood Experiences

- These types of questions can be some of the most fun to answer, since they ask you to recall probably the most enjoyable time of your life—childhood. The key, however, is to develop an interesting topic and show what the experience you choose means to you today. Though the narrative style will most likely be your expository method of choice,

remember to employ thematic coherence and a solid thesis. Because you are the one who knows yourself best, this is your chance to be precise, incorporating specific, vivid details. Show growth. Show maturation. But, most importantly, show yourself.

Favorites

- Usually a topic of short-answer essays, Favorites questions ask you to write about books, songs, art, people, and just about anything else you can think of, focusing on how the topic of choice has made an impact upon your life. As mentioned before, do not pick a subject because you believe it will impress admissions officers. Instead, choose something special to you, something that you can use to relate who you are in a unique fashion.
- If you choose a popular subject, be prepared for the challenge. You will have to work harder to stand out from other applicants who are also writing about, for example, Albert Einstein as the most influential person of the twentieth century. Choosing a topic closer to home could prove more successful, since you will be able to provide more personal insights. Be personal. Be specific. Be yourself.

Social Issues

- Unfortunately, this is one of the most difficult categories of questions to write about. Admissions officers are looking for your take on age-old problems, such as racism, poverty, and world hunger, as well more publicized current issues, such as business ethics, the impact of technology upon society, and the rapid spread of AIDS across the globe. The tragic events of September 11, 2001, gave special meaning to this category, as applicants were asked to discuss issues that hit closer to home than most of us ever expected.
- Though it is tempting to argue in favor of your point, remember to be as objective as possible and consider multiple sides of the issue. This will portray you as a mature, astute individual. Stay away from clichés and generalizations. Instead, write about what the topic means to you personally—what it has meant in your life and why *you* think it is important. Spending some time researching the topic on the Internet or at your local library will ultimately prove worthwhile.

School Target

- Surprisingly, most students find this topic difficult to write about. If you have chosen to apply to an institution based upon its ranking in a popular magazine or because your parents told you to, you may have to spend some time thinking deeply about exactly what it is that makes this particular institution right for you.
- A main point of these questions is to see if you care enough about the college or university to have researched it beyond what anyone could have read in its marketing literature or on its web page. Knowing yourself—your passions, skills, and goals—can go a long way in helping you answer School Target questions. If you see yourself as an aspiring journalist and are applying to a school that can help you land a coveted internship writing for the *Washington Post*, you can discuss how you plan to make it as the editor-in-chief of the college newspaper. If you want to be a social worker and are applying to a university in a large urban area, you can talk about how the geographic location will provide ample opportunity for your involvement in community outreach programs. However, make sure to show how and why that particular school offers what others do not.

International Experience

- Students applying to U.S. schools from overseas will already have a wealth of experience from which to choose a topic. For those who have only ventured beyond U.S. borders, think about the significance of your international experience: What did you learn about another culture? What did you learn about yourself and your fellow travelers? How has your experience shaped your views?
- Another effective way to tackle the question is to explain how the experience has moved you to develop new goals. For example, did your trip to France with your French class during spring vacation solidify your goal of studying eighteenth-century French literature in original manuscript form? If so, you could discuss how your college of choice fits in with your aspirations—how its top-notch French department and liberal policy on studying abroad will help you discover the literary wonders of Rousseau.
- When brainstorming for a theme to provide coherence to your piece, remember to visualize the experience so that you can include precise details that will help the reader imagine he was actually there with you. Follow the general guidelines we have provided for other question topics, making sure to personalize the experience as much as possible.

Family Essays

- Like [Childhood Experiences](#) questions, Family questions are usually easy and fun to write about. This is your opportunity to relate how you have been shaped by those closest to you—how that ten o'clock curfew really did keep you attentive to your studies and out of trouble.
- Aside from discussing how your family has influenced you, you could choose to write about difficult situations, such as caring for an ailing parent or sibling. Such events can show a great deal about your character and perseverance in the face of adversity.
- Thinking about the character traits of your family members can help you identify some of your values and where they came from. You might realize, for example, that your interest in social work originates from your mother's concern for the welfare of others. Do not worry if your experiences do not seem earthshaking. Often, everyday living can be most influential—and most interesting—to an admissions officer.

Explaining Blemishes

Certain aspects of your application may call for an explanation. Such aspects might include any of the following:

- Grades
- Standardized examination scores
- Deficiency in the number of letters of recommendation submitted
- Lack of work experience or extracurricular activities
- Why you are applying again after being denied previously
- Gaps in the chronological account of your previous education or employment
- Disciplinary action
- Criminal record

Under what circumstances should you use your personal statement to explain a particular deficiency, weakness, or other blemish? First of all, the application might explicitly invite you to explain deficiencies, weaknesses, aberrations, or any other aspect of the application that might not accurately reflect your abilities or potential and fitness for college study. Schools almost without exception ask specifically about the last two items above. For the other items, where applications do not explicitly provide for such explanations, the schools nevertheless permit and generally encourage applicants to provide brief explanations. Most schools suggest that you

attach an addendum to your personal statement for this purpose while reserving the personal statement itself for positive information about yourself. If you are in doubt about the policy and preferred procedure of a particular school, contact the school directly.

Another point you should keep in mind is whether you have a valid reason. Staying up late the night before the SAT is not a legitimate reason for a bad performance, while documented sickness could be. A particularly bad semester could be explained by a death or illness in the family. If you lack extracurricular activities, you might point out the number of hours you had to work to help your family or save for college.

There are many more gray areas. For example, is it worth noting that you simply have a bad history of standardized testing? Doing so tactfully (in other words, do not rail against the arbitrariness of tests or demand the right to be considered for your grades alone) can help the schools understand your exact situation, but it most likely will not have a substantial effect on their perspective, since they know to take into account the imprecision of standardized tests. What about the class for which you simply did not grasp the material, or a sub-par GPA during your freshman year? Again, what you have to say will not constitute an extenuating circumstance, since everyone has weaknesses. Your best approach might be to try to transform such blemishes into something positive by pointing out particular classes in which you performed well, especially those that were more advanced, more relevant to your intended career path, or more recent.

Finally, make sure that you do not take a contentious tone. Do not accuse your teachers of unfair grading standards or complain about lack of extracurricular opportunities at your school. Be clear that you are not trying to excuse yourself of responsibility, but emphasize that you simply want the schools to have the complete picture.

Explaining Blemishes

Certain aspects of your application may call for an explanation. Such aspects might include any of the following:

- Grades
- Standardized examination scores
- Deficiency in the number of letters of recommendation submitted
- Lack of work experience or extracurricular activities
- Why you are applying again after being denied previously
- Gaps in the chronological account of your previous education or employment
- Disciplinary action
- Criminal record

Under what circumstances should you use your personal statement to explain a particular deficiency, weakness, or other blemish? First of all, the application might explicitly invite you to explain deficiencies, weaknesses, aberrations, or any other aspect of the application that might not accurately reflect your abilities or potential and fitness for college study. Schools almost without exception ask specifically about the last two items above. For the other items, where applications do not explicitly provide for such explanations, the schools nevertheless permit and generally encourage applicants to provide brief explanations. Most schools suggest that you attach an addendum to your personal statement for this purpose while reserving the personal statement itself for positive information about yourself. If you are in doubt about the policy and preferred procedure of a particular school, contact the school directly.

Another point you should keep in mind is whether you have a valid reason. Staying up late the night before the SAT is not a legitimate reason for a bad performance, while documented

sickness could be. A particularly bad semester could be explained by a death or illness in the family. If you lack extracurricular activities, you might point out the number of hours you had to work to help your family or save for college.

There are many more gray areas. For example, is it worth noting that you simply have a bad history of standardized testing? Doing so tactfully (in other words, do not rail against the arbitrariness of tests or demand the right to be considered for your grades alone) can help the schools understand your exact situation, but it most likely will not have a substantial effect on their perspective, since they know to take into account the imprecision of standardized tests. What about the class for which you simply did not grasp the material, or a sub-par GPA during your freshman year? Again, what you have to say will not constitute an extenuating circumstance, since everyone has weaknesses. Your best approach might be to try to transform such blemishes into something positive by pointing out particular classes in which you performed well, especially those that were more advanced, more relevant to your intended career path, or more recent.

Finally, make sure that you do not take a contentious tone. Do not accuse your teachers of unfair grading standards or complain about lack of extracurricular opportunities at your school. Be clear that you are not trying to excuse yourself of responsibility, but emphasize that you simply want the schools to have the complete picture.

Essay Structures

Now that you have seen the complex themes with which you must engage and have begun thinking about the personal details you will use, it is time to begin the daunting task of structuring your essay.

Your first concern should be **clarity**. If your essay is haphazardly structured, the reader simply will not be able to follow your ideas, and your whole purpose will be lost.

Your second concern is **focus**. An essay could be clear on the sentence or paragraph level, but still lack overall coherence. Perhaps you have written three paragraphs each clearly devoted to one topic, but you have not shown how each topic contributes to a larger point. The basic focus of every essay is why you should be admitted to the school, but a more specific theme can be helpful. You want your reader to take away a clear point after he or she puts down your essay.

Your third concern is **impact**. Even a clear and coherent essay can fail to achieve the optimal structure that would maximize its overall impact. For example, the overarching theme of an essay might be your desire to help others. After outlining this clear focus in your first paragraph, you go on to write three clear paragraphs each independently offering evidence of your desire to help people. What is lacking is a sense of progression: the reader sees not growth but repetition. To maximize impact, your structure must allow each point to build upon previous points, thereby improving not only your essay's flow but also the overall force of your argument.

It is important to remember that these three areas overlap. You do not achieve the optimal structure by treating each one as an isolated step, but must keep each one in mind as you plan the structure of your essay.

The first subtopic, [Overarching Themes](#), explains how to identify and incorporate the underlying principles or fundamental ideas that will give your essay focus. The second subtopic, [Organization](#), details specific approaches to integrating your content in a clear and logical way. The third subtopic, [Narratives](#), deals with the tricky issue of incorporating stories and anecdotes in an admissions essay and getting the most out of your details. The final subtopic,

[Paragraphs](#), explains how to structure individual paragraphs for maximum effectiveness and how to write the important transitions that affect your essay's coherence and impact.

Overarching Themes

The overarching theme you decide on will inform the manner in which you organize the rest of your content. This theme is analogous to the thesis of an academic essay, though it's often less explicitly stated.

When we use the term "theme," we mean something that usually has multiple layers. A strong essay will never boil down to a statement as simple as the following: "My reason for wanting to study journalism is X." That kind of theme would invite a repetitive structure that merely includes a series of paragraphs offering evidence for a single point. Instead, your theme should introduce complexities, as in the following: "While Experience A demonstrates my commitment to B Aspect of journalism, Experience C drives me toward Objective D."

There are essentially two ways to set forth your theme. The first is to bring it up in the introduction, usually at the end of the first paragraph. At this stage, since you haven't explored your concrete evidence, the theme should subtly indicate the direction the essay will take rather than try to tell the whole story.

The second approach is to ensure a strong flow between paragraphs, connecting each point with previous ones so the underlying theme gradually emerges. Then the conclusion wraps these individual themes together and includes some kind of encapsulation of the material that preceded it. Below we will use examples to illustrate these two tactics:

Upfront Approach

The theme of [this essay](#) comes down to the following: "Experiencing color prejudice on both sides of the race line and struggling to remain connected in the African American community have been some of my greatest struggles." This sentence comes at the end of the first paragraph and outlines the ensuing material. The writer goes on to examine issues of racial stereotyping, including the oft-associated traits. More importantly, she examines issues of identity, personalizing the struggle of Blacks. What makes her essay unique is her focus on an ironic issue: "I find it ironic, however, that my greater struggle has been, not to be considered equal to the majority society, but rather to be included by the Black American community."

Though her feelings of exclusion could have led to self-pity, she shows her maturity by focusing upon her strength, noting how the struggles of past African-Americans have paved the way for her and her fellow Black Americans. The writer's acceptance of her identity is executed well, using a steady flow and precise language to evince that she is a confident and mature woman ready to take on future challenges: "I have inherited their strength and conviction to overcome a struggle based on prejudice and to believe in myself each day I go forward."

Gradual Approach

[This essay](#) is done in a narrative style but also involves an obstacle the writer has faced. The applicant employs a powerful event—witnessing the death of his great-grandmother—to show the great effect the woman had on his life. The success of the essay is based largely upon its gradual style. Instead of immediately stating that his great-grandmother is a role model, he alludes to her strength and importance in his life: "In a place devoid of laughter and hope, this room was the one bright spot in this whole mess of concrete and cement that could make me smile." Though the applicant was only eleven years old at the time, he showcases his maturity: "Yet, despite her appearance of good health, I knew that her time was drawing to a close."

Rather than waiting until the end to relate the impact of his great-grandmother's last words to him, he recounts the powerful moment midway through the piece: "Her last words to me were ones of encouragement: she told me I had the power to achieve anything in this world as long as I wanted it bad enough and was willing to put in the effort. Those words are precious to me not only because they came from someone close to my heart, but also because they were spoken by an uniquely strong-willed woman: a Holocaust survivor, a mother of two, a grandmother of two, and a great-grandmother of three." Finally, the conclusion ties things together more explicitly: "My great-grandmother inspired me to believe that my future is whatever I choose to make of it...her greatest gift to me: the confidence and desire to achieve." The theme cannot be easily summarized, indicating real depth to his ideas.

Whether you choose the Upfront or Gradual approach depends on the overarching themes you choose. If you have a useful comparison to make or any other framework that lends itself to succinct expression, then providing more direction at the beginning can be very helpful. But if your ideas need to be developed before being tied together, then you should let them unfold naturally and save the integration for a nice, forceful ending. Whichever route you choose, make sure your theme is multi-layered and sophisticated. Any oversimplification would not do justice to your candidacy.

Organization

The purpose of this section is not to delineate one structural approach that will work for everyone's individual essays, but rather to discuss principles of organization that should guide you in constructing your argument. Some of these principles are mutually exclusive, and you may have to decide between them to determine which approach best suits your material.

Hierarchy of Evidence

Because your reader will be reading quickly and looking for the main points, it is often a good idea to start with your strongest evidence. You may even highlight your most interesting experience in the introduction.

[This applicant](#) relates his international experience in Florence, Italy, when he first came face-to-face with Michelangelo's statue of "David." The applicant immediately lets the reader know that his international experiences have had a great influence upon his life: "My childhood in Munich, Germany, and my travels throughout the continent have shaped me in countless ways." Employing precise and vivid language to describe the statue, as well as his experience, the writer creates a moving piece. However, there is room for more extensive commentary on how he has been shaped by his experiences, both with "David" and throughout Europe. Although the reader can acknowledge the impact this event had upon the writer, he is left without a definite picture of the applicant, and therefore cannot readily assess his character traits or personality.

Showing Progress

This approach might invite a chronological order, but we maintain that chronology should not be reason in itself (as explained in the introduction to this lesson) to organize material in a particular manner. The guiding principle here is to structure your evidence in a way that demonstrates your growth, from a general initial curiosity to a current definite passion, or from an early aptitude to a refined set of skills. It differs from the Hierarchy of Evidence approach because your strongest point might come at the end, but its strength lies precisely in the sense of culmination that it creates.

[This applicant](#) was asked to attach a photograph of something important to her and explain its significance. She chose a picture of a coffee mug from Delany's and used this as a device to

evinced her maturation and personal growth. Instead of stating upfront who she is today and then backtracking to an exposition of how past events have shaped her, she uses a chronological approach tempered by an introduction that foreshadows the theme to be explored: "There's got to be more to life than weekend coffee at Delany's," I remember saying out loud." The growth she describes is not merely a matter of accumulating one experience after another, but rather a process of enrichment. She relates her childhood propensities ("As far back as I can recall, I have tasted life with gusto and an insatiable curiosity") before focusing on her current personality traits ("Nowadays, I channel my childhood exuberance into doing what I love most: venturing out into the world."). The maturation is most poignant because she employs specific examples to support her claims.

The writer moves effectively from experience to experience; the result does not feel like a list or a haphazard construction, but rather a logically flowing piece. Moreover, the applicant's final points have more force because we have witnessed a process of growth: "It's probably too late for me to become a concert pianist or ballerina, and I may never become the family's first lawyer or doctor. Whatever I choose to pursue, I know that I will attack it with the same passion I had sharing those adventures with my brother."

Dramatic Appeal

Not all essays will have potential in this area, but if you have undergone dramatic experiences, then you should set up your essay to reflect that. The most effective way to accomplish this is to use the introduction to sketch some kind of problem or question, and then use each subsequent paragraph to engage with that problem until a resolution is gradually reached.

[This applicant](#) sets up a harrowing—yet undefined—problem in the first paragraph that is tied to significant consequences. The reader later learns that the problem is that the applicant's father is battling cancer. The issue of cancer and its effects on families and children is a topic that should be executed with care and is one that weighs heavily on the reader's mind throughout the course of the essay.

The middle of the exposition relates how the writer was affected by his father's illness ("My bad grades, in turn, lowered my confidence even further, for my dad had always stressed academics quite heavily—but after seeing my grades, I felt like I had failed my father"). The success of the essay lies in this very fact that instead of simply relating his father's painful battle with the disease, the writer personalizes the events for himself—how they affected him and how he has grown from them: "When I realized that by following his example I could surmount any obstacles, I made up my mind. I would face the world 'brave and hard,' and I would cast off the anxiety, which constrained my personality from growing." Although this statement seems as if it would serve as a successful conclusion, the writer goes on to develop his theme further, providing precise examples on how he used this adversity to motivate himself to improve. The conclusion contains the most succinct thematic statement that serves to unify the entire piece: "His struggle with colon cancer became a model for my own struggle to improve myself."

Narratives

Stories can be the heart of your essay, if you handle them effectively. Below are some tips on how to maximize their value.

How to Incorporate a Narrative

Integrating your story effectively ensures that it flows well within the essay and has a strong impact. Failing to do so could lead to chopiness or confusion on the reader's part. Here are some possible approaches, but what you ultimately use depends on your content:

1. The Origin – If your essay is about your passion for some subject or activity, you may want to begin with a story about how your interest originated. This tactic can be an effective way to grab the reader's attention and offer insight into your fundamental values. You should be aware, however, of two concerns: a) it has been done many times before; and b) most early stories revolve around passive observation and therefore offer limited insight into your character and abilities. Despite these concerns, there is still much potential in this approach if you have a compelling, original story to tell.

2. The Flash Forward – Sometimes your essay's main focus will be showing the progression or growth of your interests and abilities. That does not mean, however, that your essay must start from the beginning. Often it can be effective to open with a more recent episode to accomplish two purposes: a) establishing a clear context for the rest of the material; b) bringing to the forefront a significant experience with depth you could not have achieved in an earlier stage. It is the last point that distinguishes this approach from the previous one. Using a Flash Forward opening enables you to highlight your strongest points, as in the Hierarchy of Evidence structure, but then move backward to show your growth process.

3. The Bookend – Like the first two, this approach involves using a story in the introduction, but it leaves that story unfinished until the conclusion. For example, you might stop within the story to reflect on how you found yourself in that position. The body of the essay would then be a flashback to the experiences that led you to the place of the introduction, and the conclusion would return to complete the story. Another possibility would be a story that involved two distinct phases; the body of such an essay might discuss what you learned between the phases, and the conclusion would show how you applied what you learned to the second phase. Again, the precise approach depends on your content, but the Bookend method can be a very effective way to create a flowing, coherent piece.

4. Within the Body – Regardless of whether you choose to open with a narrative, you may find opportunities and reasons to insert a story within the body of the essay. This is the approach for which you have to worry most about integration. Unlike introductory anecdotes, you should not jump right into these stories without preface. You will need at least one sentence to make the transition from the previous paragraph and briefly hint at what themes your story will illustrate. Actually beginning your story will usually require some introductory phrase, such as the following:

"One memorable incident involved..."

After the story, you should have some significant insight with which to conclude to justify the story's inclusion. The line should not be a mere repetition of the transition from the beginning of the paragraph, because you now should have more concrete details from which to draw more in-depth conclusions.

What to Include

The basic rule here is the same as always: include specific details. The purpose of using stories is to illustrate your points with concrete evidence, thereby giving your ideas force and context. Telling one specific story enables you to achieve depth and convey personality beyond what you could achieve in brief, isolated descriptions. It is not enough, however, merely to decide to include a story. Some writers will start on the right track but end up conveying nothing meaningful. For example, they might name a specific personal incident and then jump to generic conclusions without demonstrating anything substantive about their character. Here are some more specific tips that have come up in other contexts but are especially important for stories:

1. Show Active Contribution – Many people tell stories in which the payoff is a lesson learned. While this can have some value, it does not say as much about your character because you are only responding passively.

2. Emphasize the Process – Do not set up a problem and jump to the solution. Show us the process of reaching that solution. Give details about your approach and your reasoning.

3. Paint a Vivid Picture – Try to draw the reader into your story by including details that bring the story alive. One effective way to accomplish this is to think visually. For example, if you are meeting a person in the story, describe the color of his hair or the expression on his face. Of course, you should not get carried away and go down tangents or become monotonous. For example, if you are recalling a conversation, do not bother recounting all the pleasantries with which it began.

Gleaning Insights

Anecdotes should serve some clear purpose, but you have to be careful about sounding contrived. One common mistake is to start citing lessons before you have finished the story. This kind of interruption adulterates the force of the story itself. Be careful that your insights flow naturally from the details of your anecdote: Stay close to your personal story and avoid making grand pronouncements based on a minor episode.

An Example

To put the above suggestions in more concrete terms, we will analyze one actual essay from a critical perspective. This applicant focuses upon a special diamond necklace that has great significance for her. She relates several discrete events in a logical progression, rather than a classical narrative revolving around a single event. Yet the necklace is the common element that binds her experiences. The introduction is successful because it shows the focus of the essay while creating an element of suspense: The reader does not know why or how this diamond necklace is meaningful to the applicant.

The writer provides essential context for the necklace in the second paragraph in a subtle fashion: "A small piece of paper had been ripped and folded to make a card which read: 'Congratulations on your Bat-Mitzvah. Love, Dad.'" What is unique is that the applicant relates why the necklace was initially important ("I valued the necklace only because it was the first time in seven years my dad and mom came together without screaming or causing tears. Thus, it becomes a charm of good luck"), though she admits that it was not of supreme importance to her.

Through specific examples of her subsequent experiences, the writer shows how the importance of the necklace increased in her life: "My necklace brought me strength and the harder I pressed my fingers against it, the more secure I felt...I left work that night and walked in the cold air caressing my star with a sense of connection, a feeling of closeness to the people of my faith." Though vivid details draw in the reader, the essay's power lies within the expressed insight: "While the shape of my star stayed the same, the shape of my life took off in many directions."

Finally, note that she allows the story to unfold naturally without forcing many conclusions. Though several statements seem to be the thematic underpinnings, the writer saves her most significant point until the final two sentences: "My necklace was my identity. I pulled it from underneath my shirt and placed it on the outside of my clothing, not caring if the diamond side faced forward." The flow from anecdotes to insights drawn is smooth and fitting, creating an overall moving personal statement.

Paragraphs

As in the case of those that include narratives, most of your paragraphs will have the same underlying structure. You begin with a transition, you offer supporting evidence, and you offer a resolution. Supporting evidence for the most part affects the strength of individual paragraphs, but transitions and resolutions are even more crucial because they affect the coherence and impact of the essay as a whole. The beginnings and endings of each paragraph are the places to draw connections between experiences, demonstrate progression, and highlight your key themes.

Not every paragraph you write will have these three distinct parts, but it is worthwhile to look at how typical paragraphs are structured so you know how to evaluate your essay on this level.

Transitions

The basic purpose of a transition is to serve as a topic sentence. It should give enough direction so the reader knows what to expect. When your essay is following not only a chronological order but a single train of thought, the paragraphs may flow smoothly anyway. For example, in [this essay](#), note the ways in which Paragraphs 2 and 5 begin: with clear references to time. The step-by-step flow of the essay is logical and easy to follow.

The topic sentence has more work to do when you move from theme to theme or experience to experience. The reader has to know where you are going next. [This applicant](#) prefaces her subsequent discussion about how she is sometimes considered an outcast from other African-Americans with the following: "My color, without regard to my race or identity, causes me to be affiliated with the white community." The sentence sounds natural, a distinct idea in itself but also one that intimates what is to follow. Note that the transition is smooth because it takes a step back and makes a somewhat general point.

The strongest transitions will not only introduce the ensuing material but will draw connections to prior paragraphs. These connections can note both similarities and differences. For example, [this applicant](#) notes the irony of her racial constitution: "I find it ironic, however, that my greater struggle has been, not to be considered equal to the majority society, but rather to be included by the Black American community." She has discussed previously her obvious African-American heritage, yet also focuses upon the unique contrast between that background and how she is considered at times part of the Caucasian community because she is fair-skinned.

What Not to Do

The most common mistake—other than not including transitions at all—is to rely on words such as "also" or "further," which do not provide any thematic link. Using such substance-less transitions makes your essay sound like a list instead of a logical argument. For example:

Bad: "Volunteering at the local hospital also provided a great deal of useful experience."

Good: "Although working at St. Anne's soup kitchen showed me the fulfilling nature of community service, my longer and more in-depth interactions with patients at Mercy Hospital proved to me that I want to pursue a career where I can serve others."

Whenever possible, you should aim to create transitions with as much depth as this one has. When you can make a substantive statement both about what is to follow and what preceded, then you not only ensure a smooth flow, but you also reiterate and highlight your key themes.

Supporting Evidence

While the transition statement can be general to orient the reader, your very next sentence should be specific. The movement within each paragraph should be from specific to general, rather than vice versa. There are two main reasons for this approach: 1) the reader will be more interested in the specifics of your situation than in generic, broad themes; 2) you can draw much more interesting, in-depth insights after you have laid out the evidence. The principles here are therefore the same as for stories.

Consider the following paragraph, taken from [this essay](#):

"While the shape of my star stayed the same, the shape of my life took off in many directions. I still wore my necklace, but always over my required uniform of the Papa Murphy's Pizza shirt and apron. Tomato paste and oil splattered onto the chain and occasionally onto the stone. One evening, an irritable old man came in near closing. As I took his order, I noticed that he too wore a Star of David. I started a conversation meant to last seconds that turned into ten minutes. We talked of voyages to Israel, Rabbis that made us question, and my distaste for parsley and salt at Passover Seders. I left work that night and walked in the cold air caressing my star with a sense of connection, a feeling of closeness to the people of my faith."

The reader-friendly orientation comes with "the shape of my life took off in many directions," but after that, the writer focuses on the details of her experience: how she always wore the necklace, even when it became dirty, and how it served as common ground to appease an angry customer and identify what she had in common with the man. The writer saves the broader lesson for the final statement of the paragraph. Looking at this example, you might think that this is the natural, obvious approach, and it seems that way because it works so seamlessly. But writers who are not conscious of what they are doing will often go the opposite route. Their paragraph might look something like the following:

"While the shape of my star stayed the same, the shape of my life took off in many directions. I soon had an experience that gave me a sense of connection to other people of the Jewish faith. I still wore my necklace, but always over my required uniform of the Papa Murphy's Pizza shirt and apron. Tomato paste and oil splattered onto the chain and occasionally onto the stone. One evening, an irritable old man came in near closing. As I took his order, I noticed that he too wore a Star of David. I started a conversation meant to last seconds that turned into ten minutes. We talked of voyages to Israel, Rabbis that made us question, and my distaste for parsley and salt at Passover Seders. I left work that night and walked in the cold air caressing my star."

These writers will be wise enough to keep the resolution at the end, but they will state a general point closer to the top. Their reasoning is that the big lesson needs to be highlighted, but they do not realize that bringing it up prematurely gives it less weight and in turn downplays the uniqueness of their personal details.

Resolutions

It is a shame to see a paragraph with vivid, powerful details end on a flat note, but that is precisely what happens even in otherwise strong essays. The challenge is to state something both meaningful and personal. Most resolutions are too broad and superficial. For example, a writer might conclude a strong paragraph about his interactions with a person dying from cancer as follows: "Learning about Jane's struggles taught me that life is precious and must be lived to the fullest." Even if we overlook the use of two egregious clichés, we are left with no real insight into the writer's character because this resolution is so far removed from his personal situation.

The other mistake that writers tend to make is just to state the obvious. For example, every paragraph will end with some form of the following: "This experience reaffirmed my passion for community service." Such a poor attempt not only hurts the impact of the paragraph but also makes the writer appear simple-minded and superficial. A better format is to present a point that has broader significance, while closely tying it to the specifics of your experience. For example: "Besides instilling within me a desire to help others who are ill, my experience with my mother also heightened my sensitivity to other people and the difficulties with which they sometimes must cope."

Ultimately, your approach to writing resolutions should follow the same basic principles you use for other areas: be detailed, personal, specific, and concrete. The additional challenge arises from the fact that you also must speak to some broader significance, and it is tempting either to get carried away and write too generically or to take the easy way out and conclude something superficial.

Style and Tone

While the structure of your essay affects the clarity, coherence, and impact of your content, writing style affects presentation in an even more fundamental way: It determines how engaged your reader is from sentence to sentence. Poor writing can make fascinating experiences a dull read, while strong writing can transform mundane details into an exciting tale.

The best advice we can give is to **be simple and straightforward**. Occasionally an essay will sound choppy or unsophisticated because of too many short sentences, but usually the problem is the opposite scenario. Applicants think that flowery prose and large words will make them sound more intelligent, when in reality their expression ends up being muddled and tedious. A direct style is not only more efficient to read, but it is also more enjoyable because it allows a steadily moving pace.

The tone you use should be **conversational, not too formal or informal**. The sentences you write should be sentences that you would actually say. This is not to suggest that you should not spend time refining your writing carefully, but the ultimate goal should be a natural voice.

In this section of the course, we will cover the major weaknesses and mistakes most applicants are guilty of and show you how to turn them into strengths.

Sentence Variety

Inexperienced writers tend to use longer, more complex sentences because they think they demonstrate intelligence. In contrast, strong writers know that a point is most forceful when it is conveyed concisely and directly. Although the purpose of this section is to teach you to improve your sentence variety, we also want you to be aware that simplicity should be your ultimate goal. Sophisticated thoughts will require complex sentences, but you should never complicate a simple idea for the sake of creating more intricate sentences.

Does this mean that the best essay will consist of all simple sentences? No. We stress this point only because most people have a tendency to start with sentences that are more complex than necessary, because ideas do not formulate themselves in our minds in the clearest, most direct structure. The best-written essays will feature steady variation in sentence length—but with no sentences forced into a more complex mode.

Simplifying

The first step in simplifying is to identify what needs to be fixed. Usually the problem comes from trying to cram too many points into one sentence and using too many auxiliary clauses. Consider the following two sets of examples:

Before: To this program I will bring a determined spirit, coupled with a strong background in research and volunteer work, which I pursued with energy and a focus on the future that grows ever closer to being within reach.

After: I have pursued all my research and volunteer work with relentless energy and clear focus. To this program I will bring the same sense of determination that has made my once distant goals now close within my reach.

The total word count remains the same, but the ideas are now much clearer and more fully fleshed out.

Before: Having long been interested in a career in social work, which will allow to combine my analytical thinking skills with the pursuit of social justice, I now feel that I have accumulated the necessary experience and education to begin a formal pursuit in this field, with X college offering the best curriculum for my needs.

After: A career in social work will allow me to combine my analytical thinking skills with the pursuit of social justice. Having accumulated the necessary experience and education, I now look forward to pursuing my long-held interest at X College, which offers the best curriculum for my needs.

Oversimplified: A career in social work will allow me to combine my analytical thinking skills with the pursuit of social justice. I have accumulated the necessary experience and education. I now look forward to pursuing my long-held interest at X college. X college offers the best curriculum for my needs.

The second version still includes a complex sentence, but separating out one clause makes the ideas much clearer. We are not advocating the extreme simplicity of the third version. It is oversimplified not only because it sounds choppy, but because it has removed certain textual relationships that were in the original—most importantly, "Having accumulated . . . I now look forward."

Varying Constructions

Sentence variety is not just a matter of length: A well-paced piece of writing will vary its sentence constructions as well. Everyone can recognize what is wrong with the following:

- I walked into the room. The patient looked up at me. I greeted him with a smile. His eyes brightened.

Most people, however, would write something like the following without realizing their error:

- Having entered the room, I saw the patient look up at me. Sensing his discomfort, I tried to ease his concerns by greeting him with a smile. Appreciating my gesture, he responded with glowing eyes.

Every sentence starts with a present participle (a verb + "ing" → adjective), states the subject, and gives the predicate. The following is a revision:

- I saw the patient look up as I entered the room. Sensing his discomfort, I tried to ease his concerns by greeting him with a smile. Although his brightening eyes showed that he appreciated my gesture, pain prevented him from responding any further.

The first sentence now starts with the subject, and the third sentence introduces a new kind of dependent clause with the conjunction "although."

If you have trouble finding ways to vary your sentence constructions, try some of the following basic ideas:

1. Combine two short sentences into one compound sentence:

- The game had just started, and our seats gave us a perfect view.

2. Use prepositional phrases, and vary their location:

- With only an hour left to finish, I knew I had to focus.
- I knew I had to focus, with only an hour left to finish.

3. Use the many conjunctions available to you—*however, when, while, as, because, for, since, although, though*—and vary their location:

- When we arrived, I knew we were too late to stop the fight.
- We watched in disbelief, though we longed to intervene in some way.

4. Use participles and gerunds (a verb + "ing" --> noun):

- Facing great risks, he nevertheless accepted the challenge without hesitation.
- Working at an immigration law firm has given me firsthand knowledge of the struggles people face in settling here.

Using just these basic tools, you can create a powerful and engaging piece of writing. The key is to keep changing your constructions so each sentence sounds fresh and new.

Word Choice

Whenever possible, use the shorter, simpler word.

You can use a thesaurus to jog your memory when you are trying to come up with a better synonym, but never use a word with which you are not already familiar. Words often have connotations and nuances of meaning that you can appreciate only after having seen them in context, so you are taking a great risk if you use a word that you do not know well.

Even if you do feel comfortable with more advanced vocabulary, you should use the simpler synonym if that captures your meaning just as well. For example, instead of "ameliorated the situation," you could just as easily state "improved the situation." On the other hand, a word such as "exasperated" is more intense than a synonym like "frustrated," and so you should use it if that is the sense you are trying to convey.

Use precise language.

Choose words that capture your experience fully and accurately. For example:

Vague: When we first started the business, I performed a range of duties to get the company going.

Precise: When we first started the business, I took the initiative to contact potential partners, evaluate the service of our competitors, and tailor our plan to local markets.

Use nouns and verbs rather than adverbs and adjectives.

Inexperienced writers think that using fancy adverbs and adjectives will make their writing look more eloquent, but in fact they just bog down your rhythm and usually sound like fluff. They also tend to make your writing sound abstract because they are not actual physical substances. Good writers stick to concrete nouns that the reader can grasp, and even more importantly, vivid verbs that are the lifeblood of active, engaging language.

Before: I ran quickly to the board where the results would be posted, with many curious people standing around waiting anxiously to see their scores.

After: I rushed to the board to find people crowded around muttering prayers to themselves as they awaited the dean's arrival with their score results.

The phrase "ran quickly" has become the more succinct and punchy "rushed." Instead of "many curious people standing around," we have substituted "people crowded around muttering prayers to themselves." Thus we gain a more vivid verb in "crowded" and a concrete image of people muttering prayers instead of the abstract adjective "curious" and the clunky adverb "anxiously." In focusing on nouns and verbs, we have succeeded in *showing* instead of *telling*.

Avoid repetition.

Do not use words twice in close proximity, and do not use the same words regularly throughout an essay. The problem usually comes in overusing the same noun that is central to your topic. Although we emphasized the importance of precision when you are describing the details of experiences, you can get away with synonyms when writing more broadly about themes and topics.

For example, if your essay is about your skills in interpersonal interaction, you could use such similar phrases as "communication strengths" and "building trusting relationships."

Verbs

The reason we are devoting nearly an entire section to tips on removing the passive voice from your writing is that it is both a very common flaw and very easily correctable. Within this section we also will explain how to choose more active language even when passive voice is not involved.

Defining Passive Voice

Passive voice occurs when the subject and object of an action are inverted, so the subject is the recipient of the act instead of its performer. For example:

Passive: The man was bitten by the dog.

Active: The dog bit the man.

Passive: I was told by my teacher to come at noon.

Active: My teacher told me to come at noon.

Note that the word "by" is present in these two examples. A sentence can be passive without the word "by," but it is always at least implied. For example: "I was given bad directions [by my friend]."

Passive voice always involves a *to be* verb. *To be* verbs include *am, are, been, being, is, was, were*. On the other hand, a sentence can include a *to be* verb without being passive. For example:

- "I have been involved in this organization for several years."
- "He is leaving in five minutes."

Later we will discuss ways to avoid *to be* verbs even when they are not in passive-voice constructions.

When Passive Voice is Acceptable

There are generally two cases when passive voice is acceptable: 1) when there is no defined or tangible subject; 2) when the emphasis really should be on the object of the action. In these cases, the alternative is often awkward and less natural sounding.

Case 1: He is referred to as "the great one."

Awkward alternative: The general public refers to him as "the great one."

Case 2: For the fifth time this year, Johnson was hit by a pitch.

Awkward alternative: For the fifth time this year, a pitch hit Johnson.

Avoiding Passive Voice

As we have already shown, the basic approach to avoiding passive voice is quite simple. Identify the subject of the action (the noun that follows "by" or is otherwise implied) and bring that to the front of the clause. Remove the *to be* verb. Adjust any other word-order issues as needed. Try these five examples as an exercise:

1. He was given too many chances to start over by his friends.
2. She was instructed to remain seated by her teacher.
3. Their efforts were obstructed by brilliant defensive strategy.
4. The machine was started by the operator on time.
5. The door was shut by the angry mother.

Answers:

1. His friends gave him too many chances to start over.
2. Her teacher instructed her to remain seated.
3. Brilliant defensive strategy obstructed their efforts.
4. The operator started the machine on time.
5. The angry mother shut the door.

Achieving Active Writing

Active language comes not just from avoiding passive voice but further requires the use of strong action verbs. In addition to avoiding *to be* verbs, you should try to replace helping verbs such as *have, had, has, do, does, did* and other vague verbs like *got* and *get*.

Before: I **had** opportunities to develop my skills.
After: I **sought** opportunities to develop my skills.

Before: I **got** the promotion through hard work.
After: I **earned** the promotion through hard work.

Before: She **did well** in this competitive environment.
After: She **thrived** in this competitive environment.

Before: My mother **didn't want** to show up without a gift.
After: My mother **hesitated** to show up without a gift.

Before: The salesman **told** the audience about his products.
After: The salesman **promoted** his products to the audience.

The last two examples demonstrate the lack of clear distinction between strong and weak verbs. There is nothing in the dictionary that will tell you that *promoted* sounds stronger than *told*. It is largely a matter of how much meaning the word contains. *Promoted* has a more precise and nuanced meaning than *told*.

You can certainly develop a strong eye for these subtle issues, but active writing is an area where professional editing can make a substantial difference.

Tone

Tone is broadly described as the author's attitude toward his or her subject. It can be passionate, distant, angry, and lighthearted, among many other possibilities. Unfortunately there are too many possibilities for us to cover, and without knowing your subject, we cannot give the most specific advice possible. The obvious pitfalls include sounding condescending or frivolous, while sounding energetic and enthusiastic is a definite positive.

Although we cannot be more detailed about these specific approaches, there are still important general lessons to convey. In this section we will teach you how to strike a balance between sounding too casual and too formal. Then we will discuss ways to achieve the confident, energetic tone for which all writers should strive.

Too Casual

The danger in writing too casually is that you might come across as someone who does not take the application process seriously enough. When we say that you should be conversational, you should think in terms of an interview conversation. In other words, the situation is serious, but your words sound natural and not overwrought. Writing that is too informal would be the language you use when chatting with friends.

Some examples include the use of colloquialisms, sentence fragments, or slang. The following should illustrate a clear problem:

"The way I look at it, someone needs to start doing something about disease. What's the big deal? People are dying. But the average person doesn't think twice about it until it affects them. Or someone they know."

Too Formal / Detached

More people err on the side of being too formal, because they take the quality of being professional to an extreme. They forget that this is a personal and not an academic essay. For example, some people even try to write about themselves without using the first person, because they were taught in high school English that "I" is anathema.

Generally the problem of sounding too formal goes along with detaching oneself from one's subject. Some writers will try to write too objectively or as though they were trying to provide logical evidence for a thesis. Consider this before-and-after example:

Before: There was a delay in the start of the project, attributable to circumstances beyond the control of all relevant parties. Progress came to a standstill, and no one was prepared to undertake the assessment of the problem and determination of the solution. An unexpected shift in roles placed this duty on myself.

After: The project got off to a late start due to circumstances beyond our control. We could not move forward, and no one stepped forward to take the lead in figuring out what went wrong. Despite my junior status, I decided to undertake this challenge.

The second version clearly sounds more natural, and the uses of "our," "we," and "I" make the reader sense that the writer has a more personal stake in the problem. There are several differences worth noting.

1. The second version is shorter. Writing in excessively formal language often requires more words, such as "beyond the control of all relevant parties" vs. "beyond our control."
2. The second version avoids two *to be* verbs and replaces them with more active ones.
3. The first version turns words that are usually verbs into nouns: "determination" and "assessment." This adds a definite stiffness to the writing.
4. The second version uses phrases that sound conversational but not informal: "got off to a late start" and "figuring out what went wrong." The line is fuzzy, but again, ask yourself if you would use these phrases in an interview. The answer here should be yes, while "What's the big deal?" is a clear mistake.
5. Another example of the first version depersonalizing the issue is in the last sentence, which is ambiguous. The new version does not rely on the vague phrase "an unexpected shift in roles" and has the further benefit of making the writer sound more active in assuming leadership.

Sounding Confident

Within this category, we will also cover how to sound enthusiastic, positive, and passionate—in other words, the basic qualities every essay should have regardless of its subject. We will go through some general guidelines and offer before-and-after examples when appropriate:

1. **Avoid phrases such as "I believe," "I feel," and "I think."** Even worse are phrases that add an adverb, such as "I strongly believe." Your tone will be much more confident if you just make the statement without preface.
2. There is little value that can come from being negative, whether you are writing about a weakness or a negative external situation. **Downplay the negative aspects and emphasize the positive.**

Before: Our business has struggled since the whole market started its downturn, but we are staying strong.

After: Despite a slowdown that has coincided with the market struggles, we have taken measures to remain competitive and are beginning to reverse the downturn.

3. When you are trying to convey your enthusiasm about a subject, the language you use should parallel your feelings. Stiff, deadened, and passive writing will contradict the passion you are claiming to possess. **Use action verbs** to inject vigor into your writing, and of course, **show rather than tell whenever possible**.

Before: Civil rights is an issue I feel strongly about. The legal field is closely related to this issue, and I would like to use it as an avenue to effect change.

After: I have marched, demonstrated, and campaigned for the civil rights of all people. Now I hope to tackle the systemic roots of the problem through a career in law.

4. **Emphasize your active role.** This point has come up so many times because it affects so many aspects of your writing. Highlight the ways in which you actively contributed to a situation or to your own progress. For example, if you were assigned an important project, you should point out that your consistent quality of work earned you higher responsibilities.

Before: I was not sure what job to take next, but a great opportunity in health care administration came up.

After: I explored a wide range of career possibilities and discovered an opportunity in health care administration that intrigued me most.

A Note on Humor

Being funny in writing is very difficult, because the voice and exact context depend on the reader and are in a sense beyond the writer's control. You could be a very funny person and nevertheless be unable to show that side of you in writing. If you see potential for using humor, you should aim small. Do not expect big laughs by being outrageous. Instead, aim to bring a smile to the reader's face by including a clever witticism.

Be careful that your tone does not come across as flippant or overly sarcastic. Slight irony is good, and self-deprecating humor can be effective, because it shows that you do not take yourself too seriously.

Essay Clichés

In everyday language, clichés are simply common expressions that are an easy way to get one's point across. For example, saying, "He really put his foot in his mouth" is a convenient way to make the point that "He said something that he should now regret saying."

What is acceptable in spoken language can be offensively bad in writing. Good writing must be original: You should instead always aim to state your ideas in engaging language and from a fresh perspective.

In addition to the general clichés of the English language, you have to watch out for those that are more specific to the application essay. The challenge here is that these themes have become clichés precisely because they are valuable and significant, so you do not want to ignore them. You simply have to find fresh ways to convey hackneyed ideas. The best advice is to be as

specific and personal as possible, thereby emphasizing your uniqueness. The following is a list of some of the most egregious clichés, within the context of a bland statement:

- As I finished the race, I realized I had learned **the value of hard work** and appreciated the fact that I could accomplish anything **if I set my mind to it**.
- Working in this atmosphere made me appreciate **the value of diversity**.
- With each member contributing something valuable to our purpose, I soon recognized the **importance of teamwork**.
- As the young child embraced me in gratitude, I discovered the **true value of making a difference in people's lives**.
- That summer in New York truly **broadened my horizons**.

There is no way to reword the above sentences to make them significantly stronger. The problem lies in the very approach the hypothetical writer of those statements has taken. A reliance on clichés is usually indicative of superficial ideas and *telling* instead of **showing**. The only way to improve upon the above sentiments would be to enrich them with concrete details and add depth using a more personal perspective.

Introductions and Conclusions

The introduction should orient the reader to the ideas the essay will undertake, while the conclusion synthesizes those ideas. You should introduce your theme early, usually at the end of the first paragraph. At this stage, since you have not explored your concrete evidence, the theme should subtly indicate the direction the essay will take rather than try to tell the whole story.

How do you draw in the reader to your story? What, specifically, should be included in the conclusion? Read on and find out how to pack both the beginning and ending of your essay with the most punch.

Introduction Types

The introduction is the most important part of your essay, and it has one purpose to fulfill above all others: to draw in the reader. Ideally this should all begin right from the attention-grabbing opening sentence. If the introduction can then go on to orient the reader to the focus of the essay, then that can be very helpful. Orientation, however, is not an essential purpose because that can be achieved gradually in the essay. Many people make the mistake of writing a paragraph that explains what they are going to talk about in the rest of the essay. Such a paragraph might include something such as the following: "My journey toward college has been shaped by a variety of experiences, including academic studies, volunteer work, and extracurricular activities." The reader knows that you are going to talk about these things and is most likely muttering to himself, "Get to the point."

If you have a paragraph such as this in your essay, the best move is to delete it. Often your second paragraph, which begins to discuss a specific experience, will work much better as an introduction. Yet you may also find that a later paragraph works even better. In general, you should bring your most compelling experience to the forefront and then structure your essay around that.

The following is a list of possible approaches to the introduction.

Jump Right In

Some people will start with a compelling experience but will insist upon prefacing that experience with a very generic statement such as the following: "I want to go to college to learn and achieve my goals." Often the reason people will write such a statement is that they feel compelled to restate the question in some way. If your essay is answering the question "Why do you want to go to college?" you should be able to demonstrate your reasons without relying on such a bland summary sentence.

Consider [this applicant's](#) introduction:

"I can't tell you in which peer group I'd fit best because I'm a social chameleon and am comfortable in most; I will instead describe my own social situation and the various cliques I drift in and out of."

This applicant writes what starts out as a potentially engaging introduction, but the paragraph immediately loses the reader's interest by telling him what the applicant is going to write about.

Now consider the applicant's second paragraph:

"My high school's student body is from a part of town that is much more diverse than the rest of the city, and the city as a whole is more diverse than most of the state. The location of my school, only a few blocks from the University of Oregon, is greatly responsible for the social atmosphere. Whereas the other high schools in town draw mainly from middle-class white suburban families, mine sits in the division between the poor west university neighborhood and the affluent east university one. East university is hilly and forested with quiet residential streets and peaceful, large houses. A few blocks west, using the university as the divider, the houses become small and seedy. On the west side of my school there are many dirty apartments; crime is high and social status is low."

Here, the writer engages the reader by providing a vivid description of the locale of his home and school. He probably felt he needed the introductory paragraph so the reader would not be confused by his second paragraph. However, by adding such a short and bland introduction, he has decreased the effectiveness of his personal statement. It is sometimes unnecessary to establish context right away. Let your story flow, engaging the reader and gradually relating setting and context.

The advice to jump right in also applies to anecdotes. One effective way to grab the reader's attention is to describe the action of your story.

Consider [this applicant's](#) introduction:

"'Breez in and breez out. Clear yor mind by zinking of somezing plasant.' For five minutes, all of us found ourselves sitting cross-legged on the floor with a soft, sleepy look on our faces as we subconsciously nodded to the soothing rhythmic voice of our French teacher. Our heads were still half wafting in the delicious swirls of dreamland, barely dwelling in the bittersweet shock of reality. Time whizzed by swiftly and we were forced to tend to the grueling task of untangling our aching frames, stiffened from prolonged straining positions."

The above introduction does a much better job of engaging the reader. Dialogue can be a very effective way to win over the reader's attention. This applicant lets the reader know the setting—his French class—even though he never explicitly states the location of the story. He paints a vivid picture in the reader's mind while incorporating the element of mystery, as the reader

wonders what further action will occur, as well as what the point of this anecdote will ultimately be.

Show Your Originality

If you can make yourself stand out right from the first sentence, then you will have contributed a great deal to your case for admission. You should not just throw out a random fact about yourself. However, if your essay is going to emphasize a unique aspect of your life, then by all means that should come up right away.

[This applicant](#) starts with:

"When I was four years old I decided to challenge conventional notions of the human limit by flying through a glass window. The impetus was Superman, whose exploits on television had induced my experiment. Nine stitches and thirteen years later, while I no longer attempt to be stronger than steel or faster than a speeding bullet, I still find myself testing my limits, mental and physical."

[This applicant](#) takes a similar approach:

"I am an addict. I tell people I could stop anytime, but deep inside, I know I am lying. I need to listen to music, to write music, to play music every day. I can't go a whole day without, at the very least, humming or whistling the tunes that crowd my head. I sing myself hoarse each morning in the shower, and playing the trumpet leaves a red mouthpiece-shaped badge of courage on my lips all day. I suspect that if someone were to look at my blood under a microscope, they would see, between the platelets and t-cells, little black musical notes coursing through my body."

Both writers have succeeded in grabbing our attention and revealing something unique about their personalities, which they will go on to explain in further detail.

A Concrete Image

Starting with a concrete image helps the reader to grasp your point more immediately. For example, [this applicant](#) begins to describe her favorite places to think:

"While eating Cheerios, my eyes wandered from the yellow giant cardboard box, to the white plastered ceiling, with shades of dawn in muted colors, and back to my bowl of cereal."

This is probably not a particular episode, since the applicant frequently uses the kitchen table as a thoughtful refuge. Yet she offers a vivid description with concrete details, and so we can picture her sitting at her kitchen table, letting her mind drift into pensive thought.

The Element of Mystery

There are many ways to engage your reader, but the elements of mystery and surprise are perhaps the most effective. With admissions officers pouring over as many as fifty essays in a day, they begin to scan applicant statements, stopping to read only those that are written extremely well and are out of the ordinary. There is perhaps no better way to get your readers to finish reading your personal statement than to make them guess what you are writing about through the element of mystery.

Consider [this applicant's](#) introduction:

"I had a mental image of them standing there, wearing ragged clothes, hot and depressed, looking upon us as intruders in their world. They would sneer at our audacity. We would invade their territory only to take pictures and observe them like tourists."

Though the applicant provides precise details that help form a concrete picture in the mind of the reader, he makes sure to keep from relating other vital information that will establish context until the second paragraph:

"We climbed out of the van and faced eleven men assembled in the shade. My mental image was confirmed. My class, consisting of twelve primarily white, middle-class students, felt out of place. Our Politics of Food curriculum at Governor's School, a summer environmental program, included an interview with migrant workers. We were at a farm worker labor camp in southern New Jersey, but judging from the rural landscape, it may as well have been Iowa. I felt like a trespasser."

State a Problem

By stating a problem, you create instant curiosity because the reader wants to see how you will address the issue. [This applicant](#) relates how an issue of international prominence became personalized for him and his family:

"I have often wondered whether the United States has an obligation to get involved in the internal conflicts of other countries. When does the power to intervene become an obligation to act? I gained some insight into this dilemma when a small part of the Bosnian war spilled into my home last year."

You do not need to limit yourself to far-reaching global issues. You could state a general problem common to the lives of most people and then go on to personalize it for yourself, relating how it affects you and what you are doing or will do to address it. There are many possibilities here, but what unites them is the element of drama, and you should use that to your advantage in creating a strong introduction.

Conclusions

The conclusion is the second most important part of your essay, after the introduction. Just as the introduction had the primary purpose of drawing the reader in, the conclusion's foremost function should be to leave the reader with a lasting impression. This section will offer guidelines on how to maximize the impact of that impression. These guidelines can be grouped into three categories, each of which encompasses a lesson of what not to do.

Synthesize, Do Not Summarize

The chief difference between these two tactics is that the former deals with themes while the latter deals with facts/experiences, though there is some overlap. You do not need to recap the essay paragraph-by-paragraph. You do not need to remind the reader of the experiences you discussed (except as individual experiences might be tied to certain themes you want to synthesize).

You do want to reiterate key themes, but preferably not in a way that merely repeats them. Ideally, the process of synthesizing them will add a fresh perspective. Try to tie themes together and demonstrate how they complement each other. Of course, you should stay away here as always from trite and clichéd generalizations.

If in the process of synthesizing you can invoke your introduction, that will add a strong sense of closure. There are a number of different ways this could be accomplished. You might complete a story you started in the introduction, or you might show how something has changed in your present since the timeframe of the introduction.

[This applicant](#) uses the essay to relate personal characteristics through a child's toy: Lego building blocks. He does not involve any overstatement on how Legos have dramatically changed his life. Instead, he uses his unique theme to showcase how he has become a mature young man—and strong college applicant

"Legos may not have changed the world the way the airplane and the computer have, but for one little boy, they accomplished what no incredible piece of technology could do. They released an unstoppable flow of imagination and curiosity that has shaped the boy into a creative, energetic, and confident young man."

Expand on Broader Significance—Within Reason

One way to ensure that your last paragraph has something fresh to say is to tie your ideas to some broader implications, whether about yourself or your field. However, do not get carried away: Some applicants think they have to make reference to saving the world or derive some grand philosophical truths from their experiences. Stay grounded and focused on your personal details as [this applicant](#) does:

"I cautiously placed my necklace around my neck as I once again boarded a plane to leave for Jonquiere, Quebec. For the following six weeks, I studied in a country where few people knew of the Jewish religion, and where those who looked at my necklace noticed it only for its beauty. Classmates in my courses knew of Judaism solely through stereotypes from television. For many, I was the first Jew they had met. I spoke less of my faith as a Jew, yet noticed its impact on me more. My necklace was my identity. I pulled it from underneath my shirt and placed it on the outside of my clothing, not caring if the diamond side faced forward."

Do Not Add Entirely New Information, Except to Look Ahead

We have used the word "fresh" several times here, and we are thinking mainly of perspectives and ideas. You should avoid adding entirely new information about your experiences. In shorter essays, you might have to pack details in everywhere, but in general, if it is an important experience, it should come earlier.

That said, speaking of goals in your conclusion is a strong way to end. Some essays will be chiefly about the writers' qualifications and intentions, but they will not touch on specific goals until all of that has been established. The delineation of goals can be like a process of synthesizing, because you are trying to tie your themes together in the context of where you will go next.

[This applicant](#) closes by emphasizing how important music is in his life and by relating that he wants to share his gift with others. The essay has been building toward such a conclusion, so it is fitting:

"I hope to continue performing and studying music after high school. One of my band members met Sean Lennon last week while in the Village and said that Sean was very interested in hearing the demo we are wrapping up sometime in late November. Just the opportunity to present my music to a larger audience makes me realize how deeply I want to share the positive experience music has been in my life. Every time I make a new film, DJ a radio show, or record

music with my band, I hope to promulgate music that will inspire other people to listen closely to the music that surrounds and impacts their lives."

You may also want to make reference to the specific schools to which you are applying (some questions will ask why you want to attend). This information can come earlier, but it is not unacceptable to bring it up in the conclusion.

Editing and Revising

Even the best writers need to edit their work. Their first drafts might be very strong already, but they can always get better. You too will find aspects to improve during the editing process, from broad content issues down to basic word choice.

Editing Checklist

Try to write a complete first draft before you worry too much about editing. Otherwise you might find your creativity hampered by your analytical side. Once you have a first draft finished, set it aside for a few days or more if you have that luxury. When you return to it with a fresh perspective, you will probably notice many problems that did not occur to you before and recognize better ways of handling various points.

Do not hesitate to edit at all levels, even if it means you will be doing a lot of rewriting. Throw out entire paragraphs if you cannot recall what purpose they were serving. Replace boring passages with vivid details and banal generalizations with sharp insights. Cut and paste until you have achieved the optimal structure. Fine-tune every sentence until it is clear, concise, and graceful.

Is there such a thing as over-editing? If you begin to lose sight of your goals and can no longer distinguish between constructive and unconstructive changes, then you may begin to detract from the freshness and strength of your essay. At that point, the only course you can take is to set the essay aside again until you can read it with a clear mind.

The following checklist is divided into the basic categories that we used to organize this course: content, structure, and style.

Content

- Are you answering the actual question given in the prompt?
- Have you been sincere and personal?
- Is your essay within the word limit?
- Will your reader find the essay interesting?
- Are you showing rather than telling?
- Does your introduction grab the reader's attention?
- Do you explore your experiences in sufficient depth?
- Does your essay contain a high level of detail and concrete evidence?
- Have you avoided unsubstantiated claims?
- Do you offer specific, personal insights rather than trite generalizations and clichés?
- Does your essay reveal anything meaningful about your character?
- Do you avoid summarizing information that can be found elsewhere on your application?
- Will your essay make you stand out?
- Does your conclusion leave a lasting impression?

Structure

- Can you identify an overarching theme? Have you articulated that theme in the essay?
- Does your theme have multiple layers and genuine depth?
- Do you have a reason for placing every paragraph where it is?
- Do your paragraphs flow smoothly? Are there any gaps or jumps?
- Does each point build upon previous points, or does your essay sound like a list?
- Have you written insightful transitions and resolutions that highlight your key themes?
- Are your stories well integrated into your essay?
- Is the essay clear and coherent? Have you strengthened its impact by using the optimal structure?

Style

- Have you achieved a simple, straightforward style?
- Have you varied your sentence constructions?
- Have you avoided unnecessarily fancy vocabulary?
- Have you avoided passive voice?
- Have you achieved active writing through the use of strong verbs?
- Have you avoided overusing adjectives and adverbs?
- Is your tone conversational, rather than too casual or too formal?
- Have you conveyed confidence, enthusiasm, and passion?

Information taken from Petersons 2011 Guide on-line @ www.educationplanner.org