



Strategies to Write a Great Essay

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Purpose



- Rounds out an application
- Presents the person behind the paper
- Illustrates the “why” behind the “what”
- Speaks to your service ethic
- Reveals your character
- Exhibits an overall “fit” with a program or organization
- Highlights:
 - Intellectual curiosity
 - Level of engagement
 - Openness to differences, challenge
- Distinguishes you from a pool of candidates with similar credentials



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Reality

At this level, good writing skills are not sought; they are expected. So, while a beautifully written essay isn't going to get you into school, a poorly written one could keep you out.



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How to write a great essay



- Lesson 1: The Audience
- Lesson 2: What “They” Look for
- Lesson 3: Brainstorming
- Lesson 4: Introductions
- Lesson 5: Tone and Voice
- Lesson 6: Editing Checklist

Lesson 1: Audience

- Admission Counselors spend 3-10 minutes per essay
- Read 40-50 essays a day
- Your personal statement needs to function both as an essay and as an advertisement



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Lesson 2: What “They” Look For

- **Motivation** – The ultimate goal is to show why you would be a good fit for their institution
- **Writing/Communication Skills** - Writing skills are not sought out; they are expected
- **Soft Skills** - Let the rest of your application speak to your hard skills and achievements. Instead highlight your soft skills (sincerity, maturity, empathy, compassion and motivation)
- **Real Person** - Be honest, be sincere, be unique, be personal, BE YOURSELF!
- **Get Personal** - Drop the formalities and write about something meaningful to you
- **Details, Details, Details** - Show, don't tell, who you are by backing your claims with real experiences
- **Tell a Story** - Makes your essay interesting and enjoyable

Lesson 3: Brainstorming



- Chronological Method
- Assess Your Accomplishments
- List Your Skills
- Analyze Personality Traits
- Note Major Influences
- Identify Your Goals

Come up with 50 different topics; the last 10 will be your most creative

Lesson 4: Introductions



- **Standard** – who, what when, where, why, & how
- **Creative** – Attempts to add interest by being funny or obtuse
- **Action** – Takes you to the middle of the action
- **Personal or Revealing** – Reveals something about the writer. Informal and conversational tone
- **Quotation** – Don't interpret, or try to sound smart
- **Dialogue** – Takes the reader into a conversation
- **Informative** – Fact of statistic connected to the topic of your essay



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Lesson 5: Style and Tone



Tone is created by several elements in your writing, including word choice, word order, and content

- Should match the seriousness of the topic
- Use your normal tone of voice, though it should be your “best behavior” tone, not the tone you use with your friends

Tips

- Warning: Be careful when you use humor; it is hard to write
- Create suspense
- Don't begin with a cliché
- Don't try to sound older than you are



Word Choice: Good Words



- Words and phrases that add specifics
 - Provide details regarding the what and the why
- Action Verbs
- Concrete Nouns and Positive Modifiers



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Word Choice: Bad Words

- No-No Words
 - Slang or profanity
 - Inauthentic (or Incorrect!)
 - Text-Speak/All Lowercase
 - Prejudiced Vocabulary

- Nondescript Words
 - “It was something I’ll remember for a long time.”
 - “It was very important to me.”



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Writers Block!

- Free Write
- Just get started!
- Accept the “rough-ness” of your first draft
- Write continuously
 - Free of all expectations and self-criticism
 - Just keep moving, no matter WHAT
 - Remember that your goal is to write a very rough, crummy first draft



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Lesson 5: Editing Check List - Substance

Substance refers to the content of the essay and the message you send out.

1. Have I answered the question asked?
2. Do I back up each point that I make with an example? Have I used concrete and personal examples?
3. Have I been specific? (Go on a generalities hunt. Turn the generalities into specifics.)
4. Could anyone else have written this essay?
5. What does it say about me? After making a list of all the words you have used within the essay – directly and indirectly – to describe yourself, ask: Does this list accurately represent me?
6. Does the writing sound like me? Is it personal and informal rather than uptight or stiff?
7. Regarding the introduction, is it personal? Is it too general? Can the essay get along without it?
8. What about the essay makes it memorable?



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Lesson 5: Editing Check List - Structure



The meaning of an essay can be obscured by not properly ordering your ideas. Your essay should be a roadmap leading the reader to an inevitable conclusion.

- To check the overall structure of your essay, conduct a first-sentence check. Write down the first sentence of every paragraph in order. Read through them one after another and ask the following:
 - Would someone who was reading only these sentences still understand exactly what I am trying to say?
 - Do the first sentences express all of my main points?
 - Do the thoughts flow naturally, or do they seem to skip around or come out of left field?
- Now go back to your essay as a whole and ask these questions:
 - Does each paragraph stick to the thought that was introduced in the first sentence?
 - Does a piece of evidence support each point? How well does the evidence support the point?
 - Is each paragraph roughly the same length? Stepping back and squinting at the essay, do the paragraphs look balanced on the page? (If one is significantly longer than the rest, you are probably trying to squeeze more than one thought into it.)
 - Does my conclusion draw naturally from the previous paragraphs?



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Lesson 5: Editing Check List - Interest

As we know, the interest factor is crucial in keeping the admissions officers reading and remembering your essay. Look at your essay with the interest equation in mind: $\text{personal} + \text{specific} = \text{interesting}$. Answer the following:

1. Is the opening paragraph personal?
2. Do I start with action or an image?
3. Does the essay show rather than tell?
4. Did I use any words that are not usually a part of my vocabulary? (If so, get rid of them.)
5. Have I used the active voice whenever possible?
6. Have I overused adjectives and adverbs?
7. Have I eliminated clichés?
8. Have I deleted redundancies?
9. Does the essay sound interesting to me? (If it bores you, imagine what it will do to others.)
10. Will the ending give the reader a sense of completeness? Does the last sentence sound like the last sentence?



Types of Questions

The “You” Question

- "Please complete a one-page personal statement and submit it with your application." (James Madison University)
- "How would you describe yourself as a human being? What quality do you like best in yourself and what do you like least? What quality would you most like to see flourish and which would you like to see wither?" (Bates College)

The “Why Us” Question

- "Why is UVM a good college choice for you?" (University of Vermont)
- "Please tell us about your career goals and any plans you may have for graduate study." (Westfield State College)

The “Creative” Question

- "Do you believe there's a generation gap? Describe the differences between your generation and others." (Denison University)
- "Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence." (Common Application)



Practice



- Avoid repetition of information already included in the application
- Proofread – errors in grammar, punctuation and mechanics distract from your message
- Tell a story – it helps the student come alive
- Provide insight and stories – rather than iterate a list of activities
- Keep institution/scholarship program in mind
- Avoid clichés... Current slang phrases
- Use type no smaller than 12-point. It is better to have 2 pages than too small of print – preference is one page.

Sample 1

Starting the spring semester of my junior year, I had little idea of how the intersection of two great men would soon shape my future. Without ceremony, they arrived at my doorstep: titans of a different century, in top shape and looking for a tussle.

Antonio Vivaldi entered first, in the form of his double cello concerto...

Not long after, Isaac Newton barged in unannounced...

At first our relationship was lukewarm...

The night of the final performance arrived...

A few weeks later, the final chord still echoing in my brain, it came time to wrestle with Newton. I was alone in the ring...

Both the exam and the recital finished, I bid adieu to the two giants...they will always be my mentors...I will always have as a guide the lessons from the two greats in discipline, confidence and excellence.

Sample 2

Bread. A staple of the American diet and my favorite food, yet I bid farewell to it forever last year.

On a beautiful October morning during my junior year, I laid weakly on a bed in the recovery room and drifted in and out of consciousness as the anesthesia slowly lost its potency. Waves of nausea came over my body. The world seemed to swirl around me. I could hardly move. That said, the two years leading up to this day had been much worse; persistent abdominal pain, significant hair loss and a lack of energy plagued my body.

I felt isolated and deprived for a while, but after a “Bon Voyage” party to bread and all of its gluten-containing friends, living with Celiac Disease became a grand adventure.

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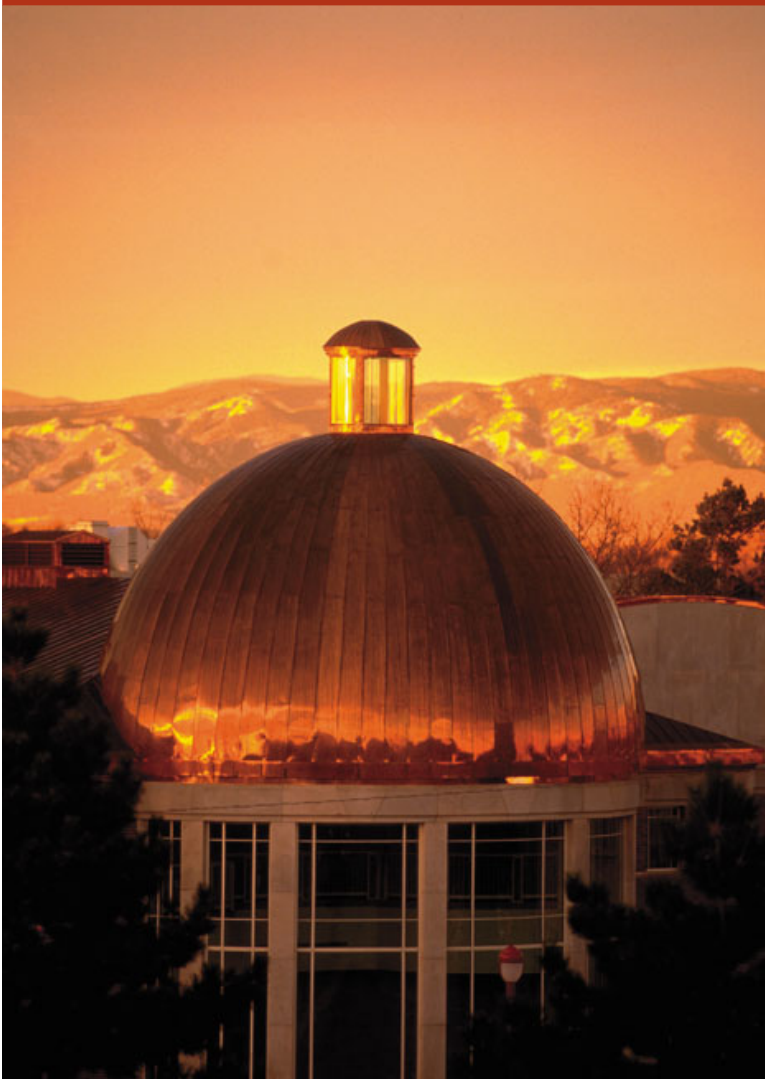
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