

WHEN YOU WRITE YOUR ESSAY...

DO write lean! A cardinal rule promulgated by former Cornell University Professor William Strunk, Jr., is for the writer to omit needless words. Strunk, with noted author E.B. White, wrote The Elements of Style, a concise and practical “carry along” handbook on the art of writing. The two gentlemen maintain that “vigorous writing is concise”. “A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts”. Each time you use the passive voice, you add words to a sentence. “Bob struck Bill” is 65 percent leaner than “Bob was struck by Bill.” The simple sentence in itself is active, moving from subject through verb to object.

DO start early. Leave plenty of time to revise, reword, and rewrite. You can improve on your presentation.

DO read the directions carefully. You will want to answer the question as directly as possible, and you’ll want to follow word limits exactly. Express yourself as briefly and as clearly as you can.

DO tell the truth about yourself. The admission committee is anonymous to you; you are completely unknown to it. Even if you run into a committee member in the future, he will have no way of connecting your essay (out of the thousands he has read) to you.

DO focus on an aspect of yourself that will show your best side. You might have overcome some adversity, worked through a difficult period, or profited from a specific incident. A narrow focus is more interesting than are broad-based generalizations.

DO feel comfortable in expressing anxieties. Everybody has them, and it’s good to know that an applicant recognized them and is able to face up to them.

DO speak positively. Negatives tend to turn people off.

DO write about your greatest assets and achievements. You should be proud of them!

But...

DON’T repeat information given elsewhere on your application. The committee has already seen it ~ and it looks as though you have nothing better to say.

DON’T write on general, impersonal topics ~ like the nuclear arms race or the importance of good management in business. The college wants to know about you.

DON’T sacrifice the essay to excuse your shortcomings unless you intend it to be a natural and integral part of your topic. If it’s a question of underachievement, you should find a spot somewhere else in the application (or use a separate sheet of paper) to explain why you had not been working to your ability.

DON’T use clichés.

DON’T go to extremes: too witty, too opinionated, or too “intellectual”.

REMEMBER:

- The personal statement is yours. If it looks like Madison Avenue, the admission committee will probably assume that it is your mother’s or your father’s or their secretaries’.
- A “gimmick” essay rarely goes anywhere. The committee is amused, but unimpressed with your candidacy.
- Write a serious essay, from the bottom of your heart, in the most mature manner possible.