

Lesson Four: 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's 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 shouldn't 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.

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EssayEdge Extra: Achieving Genuine Style

In a sense, the advice covered in this section is remedial. We're trying to teach you to avoid the common mistakes of bad writing. The goal is to achieve a clean, readable, and enjoyable piece of writing. Very few writers in the entire applicant pool will have the kind of style that will make them stand out on the strength of writing alone.

Developing such a style requires time and investment, and some may argue that it can't be taught. If you want to undertake a more long-term investment in your writing aptitude, here are some tips:

1. Immerse Yourself in Good Writing: Read publications like The New Yorker and Atlantic Monthly. Even without conscious effort, your writing will improve because you will begin to think in more vivid language.

2. Imitate Good Writers: Try a broad range of styles, from Faulkner to Hemingway. This will get you thinking about writing on a higher level and prepare you to forge your own voice as you begin to master the nuances of language.

3. Keep a Journal: No matter what you choose to write about, your writing will improve simply because you're practicing the craft. Keep to a steady schedule.

4. Become a Good Editor: Whether you're rewriting your own piece or someone else's, the process of editing will help you learn to pay attention to subtleties and keep an eye on the big picture.

5. Have Your Work Critiqued by Professionals: Using a service such as EssayEdge's will not only help you improve the essay you submit, but will also teach you to recognize your general strengths and weaknesses as a writer.

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 on 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 don't 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 law, which will allow me 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 school offering the best curriculum for my needs.

After: A career in law 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 in law at X school, which offers the best curriculum for my needs.

Oversimplified: A career in law 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 in law at X school. X school offers the best curriculum for my needs.

As you can see, the second version still includes a complex sentence, but separating one clause makes the ideas much clearer. We are not by any means 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's 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 in the United States."

Using these basic tools, you can create a powerful and engaging piece of writing. The key is to keep changing your constructions so that 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're trying to come up with a better synonym, but never use a word with which you aren't already familiar. Words often have connotations and nuances of meaning that you can appreciate only after having seen them in context, so you're taking a great risk if you use a word that you don't 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 say "improved the situation." On the other hand, a word like "exasperated" is more intense than a synonym like "frustrated," and so you should use it if that's the sense you're 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 services 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.

Don't use words twice in close proximity, and don't use the same words regularly throughout an essay. The problem usually comes in overusing the same noun that's central to your topic. Although we emphasized the importance of precision when you're 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."



Verb Tense

The reason we are devoting nearly an entire section to tips on removing the passive voice from your writing is that it's both a very common flaw and very easily correctable. Within this section we also will explain how to choose more active language even when the 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've 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's nothing in the dictionary that will tell you that *promoted* sounds stronger than *told*. It's 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 doesn't 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's 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" versus "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 like "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's little value that can come from being negative, whether you're 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're 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're 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. Don't 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 don't 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's acceptable in spoken language can be offensive in writing. Good writing must be original: you should always aim instead to state your ideas through 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 don't 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's 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.