

## **“Ten Top Tips on the Fine Art of Essay Editing”**

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“Once and done” doesn’t cut it with the college essay. Essays need to marinate and be reviewed, revised and edited again.

Word or character length of college essays is critical. Fine-tuning an essay so that it says exactly what you want to communicate in as few words as possible is a developed skill. Allegedly, Voltaire apologized for sending a 27-page letter to a friend, saying that if he had more time, he would have written a shorter letter. The sentiment is true of the college essay; being concise is considered a virtue in the college admissions office.

A number of writing professionals recommend an editing process with five stages of revisions. That sounds like overkill to me. Here are my top 10 recommendations on the art of essay editing.

1. Print your essay and read it aloud. Hearing your essay will allow you to pick up on awkwardly constructed phrases and help you identify when to use commas and semi-colons that are easily missed with an on-screen read.
2. Don’t “try” to sound smart. Word choice is important. It is a window into who you are and how well you write. Strong action verbs give an essay life and demonstrate your analytical abilities. Make sure you are communicating exactly what you want. Don’t settle for “close enough,” and by all means don’t use words from a thesaurus that you aren’t sure of. Selecting “\$10 words” inappropriately does more harm than good. Focus on your message, and don’t use big words because you think they’ll impress the readers.
3. Don’t talk in generalities. Be precise in the words you choose, and be specific in your content. Don’t say: “I now see the world differently.” Tell them how you see the world differently.
4. Skip the clichés. I once had an admissions representative tell me that he cringes every time he reads the word “plethora,” as in “high school offered me a plethora of opportunities.” He went on to say that he’s never met a teenager that would ever use that word without a sarcastic eye-roll. Other common words or phrases to avoid: “outside my comfort zone,” “expand my horizons,” “from the bottom of my heart,” “at the end of the day,” and “be able to give back to the community.”
5. Check your essay structure. Your introductory paragraph sets the tone for the remainder of the essay. Draw the reader in; make him or her want to read more. Review your transitions between paragraphs and ask yourself if there is a natural flow. Effective segues are a sign of a sophisticated writer.
6. Be certain you’re responding to the specific prompt. Duh. But you’d be surprised, especially as it gets later in the application process and students get burned out, they are much more likely to re-purpose an essay already written when it really

doesn't answer the question being asked by the college. Multi-purposing your essays is a fine idea, as long as you tweak them appropriately.

7. Focus on a unique aspect of yourself. Ask yourself how you're different from your peers. Do you participate in any non-traditional teenage activities? Have you followed a passion or a curiosity? If so, where has it taken you? What's important to you?
8. Check your formality. Dialogue is fine and innovative, and insightful writing is appreciated. Appropriately informal is better than too formal. Don't try to write in a style that comes off as stilted and off-putting by bragging on yourself too much.
9. Run spellcheck and then review the essay. Reread the essay for spelling, grammar and punctuation errors. Focus on subject/verb agreement, verb tense consistency, plurals and possessives and run-on sentences.
10. Create book-ends and tie your essay together. In the best essays I've reviewed, the conclusion references something in the introductory paragraph.

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