



VERITAS PREP

Veritas Prep Presents:

The Guide to Writing Great Admissions Essays





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The process of executing a powerful and persuasive application essay is both an art and a science. The art lies in the story you tell about why you are the person you are today, and why you want to go certain places in life—this is the substance of the essay. The science of creating great essays and personal statements, meanwhile, deals with the structure of your story—how effectively you tell it, how well you keep the reader engaged, and how well your key themes tie together to support your candidacy.

That said, you are not alone in this endeavor. Veritas Prep has distilled its proven method for writing captivating admissions essays into ten concrete steps that any applicant can use, regardless of background or amount of writing experience. The hints and suggestions in this guide will get you thinking about how you can strengthen your writing, so that by the time you finish the first drafts of your essays, you will be that much closer to a fantastic final version.

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“If you want to write like a pro, you have to approach the task like a professional.”

Step 1 – Create a writing environment.

One of the most common and easily avoidable mistakes when it comes to essay writing is one’s setting—applicants too often elect to write in the wrong place or at a bad time. What makes an environment inappropriate for writing? It could be many things, but it almost always centers around a negative impact on the author’s ability to focus. Examples of contributing factors to a poor writing environment include:

- Noisy area
- Cluttered or messy workspace
- Too many distractions or opportunities to focus on other tasks
- Rushed timeframe
- Writing at odd hours, particularly late at night
- Uncomfortable seating and lighting

While the problems above may sound trite and obvious, or like considerations from a bad copywriting manual, each example above is unfortunately very common. At one point or another—out of necessity or otherwise—you may have found yourself guilty of committing some of these writing environment sins. Working on an essay while riding the train to work, outlining your paragraphs in the student lounge, keeping one eye on your email inbox, slumped on the couch late at night in a dimly lit room . . . all are very realistic scenarios in which you might find yourself composing an essay. Considering the number of essays you will write and the busy lives that most graduate school applicants lead, it is not surprising to see people cramming in writing whenever they get a break in the action. As a result, you must be willing to make the commitment to your writing.

If you want to write like a pro, you have to approach the task like a professional. To create the proper writing environment, take these important steps:

1. Block out time in your schedule to work on your essays.

Ensure that the block of time is long enough to get significant work done, factoring in time to brainstorm as well as compose. “Writer’s block” is bound to occur and you want to be able to push through any slumps before your session concludes. Additionally, adherence to a schedule is mandatory.

2. Find a proper work space and use it every time you write.

An easy way to create an environment conducive to focus is to sit at a desk with proper lighting and a comfortable chair. Try not to let your office or cubicle at work double as your essay writing work space; however, so long as you can disengage from the work day, writing in your office is often better than writing on the train, on the couch with your laptop propped up on your knees or amongst noisy roommates.

3. Shut down your wireless connection.

Nothing is more distracting than the looming temptation to check email, cnn.com, Defamer or whatever your Internet preference might be. For the duration of your essay writing session, turn off your phone, turn off your wireless connection and concentrate on the task at hand.



- 4. Pay attention to the audio environment.** Some people enjoy listening to music while others are distracted by it, or perhaps you need earplugs to drown out the sound of the TV from the other room. Discover what makes you comfortable and allows you to concentrate, and consider looking into the many available relaxation and concentration tools that are available in audio form. It's all about getting comfortable, settled in, and focused.
- 5. Eliminate mental clutter.** There is nothing more difficult than writing while daydreaming or dwelling on problems. Your best writing will come when you are able to focus all of your attention to the task at hand—composition. Obviously, achieving total focus is easier said than done, but it can still be achieved if you eliminate tasks from your to-do list beforehand and vow never to write when you are upset or fresh off of dealing with a complicated issue.

Step 2 – Practice.

Remember that you will work on multiple versions of each essay and will address critical components such as themes, content, structure, and style in each iteration. This iterative writing process is perfect for improving your writing, crystallizing your story, and polishing up your presentation. That said, your finished product will always be relative to your starting point. The Veritas Prep method for great writing ensures that your key ideas and motivations do not get lost after multiple revisions and rewrites. Too much editing and revising can be like creating a copy of a copy of a copy—the finished product may end up being different than what you wanted. Upfront practice can ensure that each revision will be better than the last, yet will still stay on message.

Think of the improvement you will make in this process as a guaranteed amount, limited only by your starting point. Put into simple terms, we believe that practice and a strong editing process can boost your writing by two letter grades. If you are starting with “C,” then practice can help you get to an “A” quality essay. However, if your essays are “D” quality to begin with, your likely finish line will be a “B” essay.

What does the above analysis mean for you? Try your very best to start with at least a “C” of course! The goal of creating an adequate and satisfactory starting point is the reason for this entire guide, but it is also the most compelling reason to practice writing. Before you ever complete your first draft of an essay, you should spend time examining great sample essays and practice, practice, practice.

This process is really an ongoing one, one that happens while you're writing your essays. During this time, you can start developing great writing habits by carving out a schedule and an ideal writing environment, as detailed above, and you can begin to turn essay-writing into second nature through practice. Immediate outcomes of practice include:

- 1. Improved efficiency with words and ability to adhere to designated word counts.** There is no worse feeling than sitting down to write a 400-word essay, pouring your heart into a first draft, and subsequently realizing that you are over by 150 words. Practicing staying within the confines of various word counts will help you see the value in economical writing and enable you to consider ways of condensing your work so as to get more affirmative statements out of fewer words.

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“Focus on content and on telling a great story that encapsulates who you are as a person and an applicant and effectively articulates that message to the reader.”

“The mark of strong writing – of interesting writing – is stylistic diversity, blending short and long, simple and complex sentences.”

- 2. Improved clarity regarding your motivations.** The more times you grapple with common essay questions and themes, the more clarity you will have when you sit down to craft responses on your actual applications. Answering the same question in multiple ways or addressing the same themes embedded in different answers is a great way to really hone in on your reasons for pursuing admission to graduate school. Getting comfortable with your motivation allows you to interject those answers into your application without resorting to contrived or forced answers.
- 3. Comfortable using the first-person narrative.** One of the most consistent problems we see with candidates' essays is that they are not crafted as a bold and clear portrayal of the individual in question. In almost every instance, this issue stems from a discomfort with writing from a first-person, or “I” perspective. From the time we are old enough to write in complete sentences, our teachers have encouraged us to avoid using the word “I” when we write. However, the personal statement is the one time when using the word “I” is completely necessary. After all, it is your story - your case to make to the reader in question.

While many applicants are not comfortable with the usage of “I,” most understand its necessity in the application essay. The main problem, then, is not an awkward avoidance of the word “I,” but rather a massive proliferation of the pronoun. This syndrome is primarily due to a lack of comfort and skill with the first-person device, making practice the surefire way to gain that level of comfort. Practice does not even have to take the form of application essays—instead, take a stab at writing a few short stories or essays that feature a first person narrative. Write 600 words about taking a bus ride, completely from your perspective. Get comfortable with offering a genuine, first-person narrative without starting every sentence with “I.” When you feel comfortable with the narrative style, you can stop worrying about counting your “I” uses and wincing at stilted phrasings, and instead focus on content and on telling a great story that encapsulates who you are as a person and an applicant and effectively articulates that message to the reader.

Step 3 – Be specific!

Most applicants know that they are supposed to be specific in their essays, yet the majority of writing samples are still filled with vague proclamations. Part of the reason for this disconnect is that there is some level of confusion as to what specificity means. It does not mean that you merely provide examples—in fact, if you've ever heard the phrase “specific examples,” then you know that the words mean different things (otherwise it would be redundant). Writing with specificity means eliminating the diluted, vague statements in favor of detailed explanations. While that can often mean providing examples, sometimes being specific is as simple as expanding on an idea.

Consider the following sentence, which is typical essay fare:

“Upon conclusion of the deal, I had the opportunity to hear a diversity of opinions and enjoy the company of a variety of different types of people, from unique backgrounds.”

The example sentence is the opposite of specific as it reads as vague, Inspiration 101 content. Consider a more specific alternative:



“Upon conclusion of the deal, I dined with a most unusual dinner party and bore witness to the sight of a died-in-the-wool Republican and a bleeding heart Democrat arguing their political views and opinions to a Korean businessman armed with just two days of American culture under his belt.”

Granted, the second sentence burns up more precious words and while managing your word count is important, you never want to sacrifice specificity just to trim space. Lending a rich and powerful voice to trite sentiments is the surest way to keep your essay from being passed over and dismissed as standard fare.

The best way to inject specificity into your writing is to search your essay for anything that feels clichéd or “too easy.” Look for buzz words that have lost their impact due to overuse and swap in the exact idea you are trying to convey. Most of all, examine your conclusions to ensure that they actually say something. If you examine the first example above, you can see that buzz words like “diversity,” “variety,” “unique,” and “backgrounds” populate the sentence, rendering it nothing more than a cliché. By articulating the message with specific details, the sentence is transformed into a rich statement on a truly memorable conclusion to a business deal.

Step 4 – Diversify your style.

When handing out advice on essay writing, many experts encourage applicants to use short sentences. Others demand essays to be rich in detail, which require a longer sentence. So which is the most effective approach?

The answer, of course, is both. The mark of strong writing – of *interesting* writing – is stylistic diversity, blending short and long, simple and complex sentences. Words have power and the way we string them together can call attention to the most important themes or points. What follows is a short breakdown of the types of stylistic devices you want to incorporate into your work:

- **Simple sentences.** The anchors of any essay, short, simple sentences are the surest bet when conveying an important message in a small space. Simple sentences keep the reader interested and afford your work clarity, as you reduce the risk that a thought will go on too long and run out of steam. Perhaps most importantly, using a shorter sentence lowers the odds of committing a mistake likely to occur in a more complex sentence. It also goes without saying that simple sentences are the friend of any author battling a constrictive word count.
- **Compound sentences.** Linking two simple sentences together is a great way to diversify your style, but compound sentences can also bridge ideas and lead into a powerful conclusion. These sentences are also useful to mitigate a weakness allowing that the final thought expressed by the sentence is the solution or takeaway rather than the weakness itself. Remember that compound sentences always feature a coordinating word such as *and, but, nor, for, so* or *yet*.

An example of what not to do:

“My goal is to graduate from a top program with the necessary tools for success. Business acumen. Management experience. Vision.”

Play it safe and express this notion in a more conventional way:

“My goal is to graduate from a top program with the necessary tools for success, which include business acumen, management experience, and vision.”



“The easiest way to raise the linguistic bar is through word choice; finding appropriate synonyms to stand in for tired words is one of the most effective things you can do to improve your writing.”

- **Complex sentences.** We'll avoid the word “long” here, because there is no value in drafting a sentence that is long just for the sake of being long. However, there are times when you should use complex sentences that articulate multiple ideas. A well-crafted and artful complex sentence is suggestive of strong writing ability, which is one of the traits being evaluated in your application essays. Remember that a complex sentence is not merely the joining of two simple sentences (that is a compound sentence), but rather the joining of an independent clause and a dependent clause. Look for subordinating words such as *since*, *after*, *although*, or *when*.
- **Use of a series.** One of the most common questions with regard to writing style is how to make the words in a series stand out to the reader. Again, diversity is ideal, but be careful not to go too far. Applicants see the power of simple sentences and go overboard in listing out a series of thoughts as individual sentences. Listing a series of ideas as separate sentences is a device that has become increasingly common and effective in fiction writing, but is dangerous ground in a professional document.

Whatever you do, never decide to list the serial items as individual *paragraphs*. Time and time again, this tactic has proven ineffective with essay readers.

Step 5 – Marry your thesaurus.

Variety is the spice of life, and that goes for food, people, travel, and, yes, words. The easiest way to raise the linguistic bar is through word choice; finding appropriate synonyms to stand in for tired words is one of the most effective things you can do to improve your writing. The trick is in finding descriptive words while avoiding esoteric or “showy” language. Consider the following strategies:

1. **Play it straight while drafting, spice it up while revising.** You've probably been warned against using fancy words in your writing and that is a worthwhile piece of advice. That said, it doesn't require that you be bland. The best way to avoid using forced language and ridiculous words is to express your thoughts in the most straightforward way possible on the first pass. Then – and only then – should you go back through the composition with your handy thesaurus and find more reader-friendly and natural replacements. Thanks to Microsoft Word, you don't need an actual thesaurus—simply highlight the word and right click to find the “synonyms” option.
2. **Say each word out loud; then define it.** If you can't pronounce a word, or you don't know exactly what it means, don't use it. Just because a word is synonymous with another word does not ensure that they mean *exactly* the same thing within the context of your idea.
3. **Be bold.** If you are interested in writing at the highest level, consider investing in a great thesaurus and experimenting with word origins. In particular, make an effort to use English words with Germanic origins. Most words in the English language derive from either Romance languages rooted in Latin, or Germanic languages. Romance words are typically more elegant, while Germanic words are more forceful and in most instances, there is a counterpart for each word. Depending on the situation, one is more appropriate than the other. In the case of persuasive writing steeped in results, forceful, Germanic words are often preferable.



Step 6 – Get passive aggressive.

This step is relatively short, but it may be the most important one of all. Scour your writing for any passive voice and immediately change it to the active voice. Writing in a passive voice is not effective in persuasive writing, so you should take the opportunity to rid yourself of the habit now.

How can you ensure that you have stripped out your passivity? For starters, look for the following verbs: *is, where, was, could have,* and *would have*. This will clue you into instances in which the object of the sentence is “doing” the verb, which creates the passive voice. Once you’ve identified these sentences, alter the verbiage such that the subject of the sentence is the one “doing” the verb in question.

Note the subject and object of the sentence. Again, the subject must be the one performing the verb in question (*draft*, in the example sentence). It is more difficult in English than in other languages to dissect subjects and objects because the words remain the same whether they are subjective or objective (exceptions include *who/whom* and *I/me*), but this is the occasion to spend more time getting assistance and getting it right.

Step 7 – Link everything together.

Given the strict parameters that often accompany essays and other application writing assignments, there is a tendency for applicants to write in stilted, disconnected paragraphs. When you have to express a number of ideas or cite a series of reasons – and do it all within a strict word limit – choppy writing is a common result. Fortunately, there is an easy and graceful solution: link your paragraphs together with transition words. In addition to elevating the art of your writing, the use of a transition word requires you to bridge two thoughts and lead into a new idea while acknowledging the previous concept. Transition words will make your essays read more smoothly, provide logical structure, and allow your readers to easily navigate from the first point to the last.

While the concept of applying transition words is a simple one, there is still an art to selecting the right word or phrase. Be sure to examine the purpose of the sentence or paragraph and determine what type of connection you are striving to make. Consider the following:

Words and Phrases to Use

- **Additions** – Good for tacking on additional reasons or supporting ideas. *Also, again, as well as, besides, coupled with, furthermore, in addition, likewise, moreover* and *similarly*.
- **Consequence** – Best used to arrive at conclusions. *Accordingly, as a result, consequently, for this reason, subsequently, therefore* and *wherefore*.
- **Illustration** – Effective for citing specific examples of a more general concept. *For example, for instance, illustrated with, as an example, in this case* and *exemplified by*.
- **Emphasis** – Use to call attention to a prominent theme or example. *Chiefly, especially, namely, particularly, including, singularly* and *specifically*.
- **Similarity** – Ideal for bridging similar concepts or ideas. *Correspondingly, identically, likewise, moreover, comparatively* and *coupled with*.
- **Exception** – Use sparingly, only when distancing a weakness that you are mitigating out of necessity. *Aside from, barring, besides, excluding, other than, outside of* and *save for*.

Note the Voice:

Passive: *The personal statement was drafted by the applicant.*

Active: *The applicant drafted the personal statement.*

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“Do not let essay word limits intimidate you—like every aspect of an application process, what can easily be construed as a hurdle is merely an opportunity to stand out from the crowd.”

Words and Phrases Not to Use

- **Generalizing** – Never use a generalizing transition word or phrase, as it dilutes the specificity of your essay. *As a rule, as usual, for the most part, generally, generally speaking, ordinarily* and *usually*.
- **Restatement** – Avoid using a restatement transition word or phrase for conclusions; instead utilize something from the consequence group above. *In essence, in other words, that is to say, in short, in brief* and *to put it differently*.
- **Diversion** – Never divert your focus in an essay. *By the way, incidentally*.

Bonus

Never use dead sentences in your writing. A “dead” sentence is something that is pure filler and that stands in for a meaningful and accurate transitional word or phrase. Dead sentences begin with phrases such as: *it is often said, it can be determined* and *we can surmise*.

Step 8 – Scrub out your indexing.

Indexing is when an author uses substitute words to stand in for a thought previously expressed. Rather than restate the concept or, better yet, elaborate on the premise, the author swaps in an index word as a placeholder. Consider the following sentence:

The candidate applied to Harvard Business School. He hoped to learn a great deal about management by doing this.

“This” is an index word that stands in for the previously stated action of applying to Harvard Business School. Index words do not read well and can indicate either lazy writing or a last minute attempt to shave words to fit under the word limit. A better way of framing the second example sentence would be something along the lines of:

He hoped to learn a great deal about management at one of America’s finest institutions.

Index words are often indicated by *this, that* and *these*, and come at the beginning or end of a sentence.

Step 9 – Manage the word limit.

Nothing strikes fear into the heart of an applicant like a word limit. It is an imposing number whether you are trying to reach the limit, or, more likely, trying to stay under that magic threshold. It confines your expression and suggests that whatever needs to be said can be done so in the exact amount of space allotted. Do not let the word limit intimidate you—like every aspect of an application process, what can easily be construed as a hurdle is merely an opportunity to stand out from the crowd. Targeted, refined writing will allow you to convey more with less and use the word count to your advantage.

The following is a five-pronged method for handling the challenges of a word limit:

1. **Write with clarity and brevity.** As discussed in Step 4 (“Diversify your style”), you want to create a mix of simple, compound and complex sentences, but the backbone of your essay should be simple sentences that convey points in a concise manner.



- 2. Practice.** As stated in Step 2, practicing is the best way to hone your skills and master the art of saying more with less. The more you write, the more adept you will become at finding a better way to state your idea and the words will melt away.
- 3. Respectfully push the limit.** If the word limit is 600 words and you have a perfect essay at 608 words, do not revise it simply to get under the count. Programs will usually allow you about 10 percent of the designated word count as a buffer zone, so feel free to go over by just a bit. That said, do not push the envelope and exceed the limit by more than that 10 percent because readers will notice. Once they notice, they will either be frustrated by the extra work it takes to read the essay or insulted by your lack of respect for the guidelines, neither of which are good outcomes for you.
- 4. Pay attention to flow.** There is nothing more obvious or underwhelming than an essay that has clearly been chopped down to fit under a word limit. If you are 100 words over the limit on a 600-word essay, then you need to revise the entire essay. Do not simply lop off a paragraph or a sentence here and there or eliminate examples and transition words—stripping your work of its style and grace is not the solution. The best course of action is to first revise all cumbersome and wordy sentences and see where that leaves you. If you are still over the designated word limit, go back to the drawing board and execute an entirely new essay.
- 5. Seek evaluation.** Having a fresh pair of eyes—or, even better, professionally trained eyes—look at your work is the surest way to trim the fat and boil down your ideas and concepts to their most precise and effective form. If you start with an essay that is within 15% of the word limit, a helping hand can usually help you boil it down the rest of the way.

Step 10 – Revisions.

It is shocking how often applicants present essays (either to professors, consultants, or even to the admissions committee) that are nothing more than glorified drafts. Crafting an essay is a time intensive process that requires a great deal of revision in order to write with economy, power, and persuasion. You will almost certainly go through multiple revisions with your consultant, but the client who takes the time to execute multiple drafts on their own will be leaps and bounds ahead when it comes time to take the next step.

Proper revision requires at least three steps:

- 1. On Screen.** Review your work on your computer screen and make changes as you go. Doing so will clean up the bulk of your original errors and the most obvious misuses of style and structure.
- 2. Pen and Paper.** Walk away from your work and give it some time before sitting down and reviewing the document carefully in printed form. Doing so not only allows you to read from a fresh perspective, but also to lavish more attention on the finer points, such as transition words, passive voice and indexing.
- 3. Read Aloud.** While most people take the time to review their own work, few actually read it out loud. Reading aloud forces you to read each word and ensure proper inflection, and it also represents an ideal way to spot excess words, misplaced modifiers and other issues that will trip up a reader.

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“Crafting an essay is a time intensive process that requires a great deal of revision in order to write with economy, power, and persuasion.”



*“Success Favors
the Prepared”*

Where to Go From Here

This 10-step guide to great writing enables you to create a starting point for effective, impactful essays. This document gives you techniques that you can perfect (with practice) to elevate the art of your writing to the highest possible level. Succeed in doing this, and you significantly increase the likelihood that admissions officers will come away from your essays with a clear view of who you are as an applicant.

A final piece of advice: Time is often one of the most overlooked key ingredients of great admissions essays and personal statements. If you are reading this for the first time and your admissions deadline is just days away, then there’s obviously only so much you can do. But, nothing helps you more than the ability to let your essays “soak” for a few days, after which you can read them with a fresh pair of eyes and read ***what the essays actually say***, rather than ***what they should say***. This is a powerful technique for catching typos, and it can also help you identify where your essays might miss the mark in a bigger, strategic sense.

We hope these ten tips help you in your journey. A finished product is only as good as its starting point, so be sure to take these tips to heart and truly put in the effort to become a great writer.

About Veritas Prep

Founded in 2002, Veritas Prep has emerged as a global leader in GMAT® education and MBA admissions consulting. The company’s business school admissions consulting team includes more than 300 graduates of the world’s elite MBA programs.

The Veritas Prep consulting model is built on adding value to a student’s application process by providing both mentorship and expertise. The business school admissions process has become increasingly competitive and applicants must do everything possible to showcase their value. Our consultants assist applicants in presenting their unique stories in the most professional and meaningful way possible.

In a sense, our consultants are translators – helping an applicant discover raw materials and information and then helping that candidate articulate a unique story in a language that admissions committees understand. More than anything, Veritas Prep gives candidates a sense of ownership and control over the process. Quality of work, attention to detail, care for the student, and integrity are the lynchpins of a successful consultation.

In addition to elite MBA admissions consulting services, Veritas Prep also offers the finest GMAT preparation available in the industry, as well as admissions consulting for law school, medical school, and graduate school services. For comprehensive information on all of Veritas Prep’s services, please visit our website at www.veritasprep.com.





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