

FROM ROUGH DRAFT TO POLISHED PIECE

A GUIDE TO EDITING
YOUR PERSONAL
STATEMENT

Ivy Global

From Rough Draft to Polished Piece: A Guide to Editing Your Personal Statement

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Welcome, students!

We wrote this guide for those of you laboring on college application essays. While the tips are catered to editing your Personal Statement or Common Application essay, you may also find them helpful when revising your supplementary essays. Work through sections of this guide step-by-step to take your rough draft to a ready-to-submit, polished piece, or jump to specific sections to make tweaks to an already-strong essay.

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Step 1: Address Structural Issues

While drafting your personal statement, you contemplated the *narrative* of your essay. You may have wrestled with questions like, “What *story* am I telling?” and, “What is the *topic* of my essay?” As you revise your statement, consider your story’s *structure*: the arrangement of events, details, and examples on the page.

Let’s say you wrote your essay about your passion for playing the piano and the significance of music to your identity. You know your topic and understand why it matters to you. But as you think about the structure of your essay, you may realize that your reader doesn’t need to know that you practice for precisely 4 hours, 14 minutes, and 44 seconds 4 days a week, or that you’ve been honored with international, national, state, regional, local, school, and household prizes (all of which your parents have posted with pride on the decidedly-cluttered fridge).

Or maybe you feel like you’ve already narrowed down your topic to a specific memory that illustrates how much piano means to you. Trouble is, you’re nervous that the sequence of events on the page won’t make sense to someone who doesn’t know your entire life story, and you know that the admissions officer is very unlikely to be your mom or your best friend.

Figure out your story’s “big picture” before you get to the fine details.

I. The Order of Events

Your essay probably doesn’t (and shouldn’t!) follow the classic five-paragraph structure mandated for some high school English classes, but it should still have a clear beginning, middle, and end. When you’re figuring out how to frame the different parts of your statement, it’s helpful to think about the scope of your story.

Did you stretch out one tiny event across your narrative, like a movie that takes place within the course of a single day? Or did you split your topic into a series of examples that connect to a broader theme, like a film that’s broken into separate but related vignettes? Was your chronology linear, moving from beginning to end, or were you more playful with time—maybe starting in the middle of a recent incident before flashing back to how you got there?

Whatever approach you've followed up to this point, your reader shouldn't feel in any way disoriented or baffled by the textual world you've created for them.

Aspire toward logical flow. So how do you make an essay flow logically if you're not following a pre-existing template (like the aforementioned five-paragrapher)? You might find some of these questions useful:

- Have you included examples that felt vitally important while brainstorming, but no longer seem to drive the narrative engine of your story? Maybe you thought the reader just had to know that you adopted a pet chinchilla growing up to contextualize how utterly unprepared you felt for the recent summer you spent in a college dorm. Is the detail that you once forgot to feed said chinchilla really the best way to convey your struggle with routines?
- Would your essay still make sense if you ditched an entire paragraph or event? Can you eliminate narrative or conceptual repetition? Perhaps you had the brilliant idea to structure your essay as a "map" of the world, walking your reader through particular places you've visited as a metaphor for an internal journey you've taken. But as it turns out, the Prague paragraph repeats the same thematic message as the Paris part.
- For those events you're certain you want to include, have you provided clear markers (*last summer, in freshman year, the following morning*) to indicate when the events happened? Reread your essay and see if you have an "oops" moment, such as unintentionally suggesting your AP Chemistry exam, your sister's wedding, and your first marathon *all* happened last Saturday.
- Did you strive to hook your reader at the beginning and hold their attention until the end? This is all about gradually building suspense. Have you given away too much in your first paragraph, spoiling the plot twist that your wallet was in your pocket all along? While you want to set up the main theme and possibly a pivotal incident early on, you also want to establish a sense of mystery to pique the reader's curiosity. Dedicate extra time to revising and re-revising your opening and closing paragraphs. These paragraphs can really make your piece stand out!

II. What's the Point, Really?

Let's take this idea of building suspense a bit further. If your essay opened with a point of tension, this tension should feel resolved, or at least dealt with in some way, by the end of the essay. Every conflict should reach a *climax* or *turning point*. Does your essay clearly build up to this shift, to that moment that crystallizes the way one fateful summer camp awakened your passion for robotics, or the reason an argument with a beloved friend catalyzed a new understanding of your identity?

Don't know what your turning point is? Maybe you had a clear sense of direction writing the first few paragraphs of your essay but feel it "falls apart" past the halfway mark? These anxieties are normal, and you may find it helpful to restore focus to your piece by drafting a *reverse outline*.

A reverse outline is exactly what it sounds like—an outline written backwards, or *after* an essay is written as opposed to *before*. Go through each paragraph one by one and summarize (in just 1-2 sentences) the "main point" of each section. For example: *Paragraph 1 shares my favorite recipe for pasta sauce to communicate my love of cooking; Paragraph 2 connects my passion for pasta to my cultural heritage and close relationship with my father; and so on, leading up to the climax of your essay and noting any moments where your narrative logic loosens and begins to fray.*

Helping Hands or Too Many Cooks in the Kitchen?: A Note on Enlisting Other Readers

For many writers, structure is one of the trickiest parts to think through alone. You may be tempted to share your draft with other readers at this point in the process, but think carefully before you do so. Maybe ask someone you trust, like a friend or family member, for general feedback about whether your narrative makes sense or if there's a certain part of your essay that confuses them. Remember, you're focusing on the overall idea of the essay, not the fine details. It might not be the best time to ask for extensive comments on every dangling modifier or spliced comma.

Step 2: Bring Out Your Voice

“Voice” marks the difference between a newspaper blurb and a story told to friends, or a presidential speech and a stand-up comedy routine. Simply put, it’s the way you tell your story—but, as important as it is, voice is often neglected in early drafts. In the revision process, you should try to ask yourself which voice would fit your particular story best. There are several stages to this process.

I. Which Tense?

Changing the tense of a piece of writing can have a significant effect on its voice. The present tense is especially suited for stories that take place over a single period of time, particularly if they have action, suspense, or comedy elements. Present tense creates the feeling of being “in the moment.” For example, if you’re writing about the day you babysat your younger siblings and everything went hilariously wrong, you could use the present tense to help your readers share the sense of chaos and uncertainty you felt in those moments.

You might also use the present tense if you’re writing about an ongoing element of your life. For example, if you’re writing about how you currently volunteer, play a sport, or pursue a hobby or academic interest, the present tense will likely make the most sense.

The past tense, meanwhile, is good for describing a series of different events, or events that require a lot of explanation or exposition. If you’re writing about memories of your grandmother, and these memories need to be explained with reference to certain historical events that shaped her life, the past tense will give you the flexibility to bounce around to different moments in time in a way that the present tense does not.

II. Which Tone?

Different tones suit different needs. There are formal and informal tones, sure, but there are also humorous and serious tones, optimistic and pessimistic tones, and minimal and verbose ones, to name just a few. You could be formal and serious or informal and serious; formal, humorous, and pessimistic, or informal, humorous, and optimistic. Just like combinations of oil paints, tone is complex, layered, and malleable enough to express nearly infinite shades of meaning. Once again, the tone you need is the tone that fits best with what you want to express about yourself. You could describe your love of grasshoppers and locusts with a funny tone or a dead-serious one; one tone will

suggest a certain kind of love, and the other will suggest another kind—different, but no less valid. Finding the right tone therefore requires a little soul-searching; you have to think about which facets of yourself you would most like to present to your reader.

Choose words that fit your desired tone. Some words are formal (*expedite, transcribe, ascertain*), some words are casual (*move, write, learn*), some words are gothic (*blood-curdling, sorrow, woe*), some words are country-and-western (*brisket, sagebrush, reckon*), and some words are “sciency” (*nebula, telomere, amphibian*). As a general rule in English, longer words with Greek or Latin roots sound more formal and technical, while shorter words with Anglo-Saxon roots sound less so.

Accomplished writers will pick and choose words of varying degrees of formality depending on their goals, but there’s a secret that will serve you well both on your application essay and beyond: **you can say everything you need to with short and simple words**. Don’t feel like you need to dig through a thesaurus to impress your reader; it’s more impressive to be simple and clear, especially if the complex words you’re tempted to use are a bit outside your comfort zone.

III. Who Are Your Role Models?

If your writing feels “flat”—if it lacks a certain “pop,” “zest,” or “character”—enliven it with help from a stylistic role model or two. Your role model as a writer could be a teacher, classmate, or parent, but you can also develop your style by studying a fiction writer, poet, or essayist whose work you connect with. You can even learn from the ways that your favorite TV or film characters speak!

To determine your role models, think about how you’d like to present yourself in your piece, and try to recognize just what it is that makes your role models’ voices work so well. Let’s say you love the character of Tina Belcher on *Bob’s Burgers*, and want to give your essay a similarly feisty spirit. What makes Tina’s way of speaking appealing? The answer is partly that she uses funny similes and so-bad-they’re-good expressions like, “This plot has a lot of holes, but it also has a w-hole lot of heart.” The resulting voice is both earnest and awkward—Tina knows she’s awkward, but she isn’t embarrassed by that, and so she confidently ploughs through anyway. In revising your essay with Tina Belcher as a role model, your task would then become a search for appropriate places to use funny similes and punning phrases of your own.

Step 3: Revise with Vivid Details

Many first-draft college essays need revision because they lack vivid detail. These essays often use vague, abstract words that do a poor job of engaging the reader. This type of draft can be improved using the following revision process:

1. Reflect: think about the ideas expressed in your first draft, and search for detailed, tangible memories that go with those ideas.
2. Set the scene: use especially vivid memories to tell your story in a way that's specific to you and your experiences.
3. Use your senses: search for words that evoke your sense of touch, taste, smell, hearing, or sight.
4. Use similes or metaphors: help your reader to share in your experience by comparing it to something else.

This process is often summed up by the phrase, “show, don’t tell.” However, that’s a vague sentiment in its own way! To demonstrate what this phrase means, let’s look at a passage that’s in its first-draft stage:

My interest in the fascinating subject of geography began when I was a junior in high school. I took an excellent class that ignited my passion in the subject and made me determined to pursue it in college.

This passage is perfectly grammatical, but it lacks vivid imagery; it is easy to understand what the author means, but the reader doesn’t learn anything specific. The author uses abstract adjectives like “fascinating” and “excellent,” and an equally abstract noun, “passion,” which—just between us—is a little overused in application essays. If you close your eyes and try to imagine what the author is describing, you can’t do it! An “excellent class” could look like just about anything. What can the author do here to make the statement more vivid?

In this case, the author should hold onto the ideas expressed in the original statement, and use them as a springboard to try to recover as many memories from that time in junior year as possible. The goal is to find something that *sets the scene* in a concrete, rather than an abstract way.

Consider a good episode of a TV show you like. You might be able to describe the main idea of the episode in a single sentence, but it would take you longer to describe the

scenes that propelled it forward. Try to think of your essay as a TV show episode with distinct scenes, then choose a memory that will be the center, or nucleus, of each scene. The more detailed the memory, the better.

Let's say the author of the geography essay excerpt has a distinct memory of a huge relief map of Alaska that hung in the hall outside of the geography classroom. This map will be the nucleus of the scene:

During my junior year, I'd walk past a gigantic map hanging in the hallway—a map unlike anything I'd ever seen before. It showed my state, Alaska, but not in the two flat dimensions of a map on a screen or a page. This map was as bumpy and craggy as a real mountain range; it was as pitted and lined as a real river valley, or even the palm of my hand. Sometimes, when no one was looking, I laid my hand over the spiky peaks of the Alaska Range, and wondered at the sheer amount of time and pressure it had taken the forces of nature to carve out that rock. I knew I had to learn more. I knew I had to take geography.

The resulting passage shows the roots of the author's academic interest in geography. Of course, the author still needs to say more about the class itself, and about future plans, but this scene gives momentum to everything that's going to come later. Note that the abstract adjectives of the first example have been replaced with more concrete ones rooted in sensory experience: "bumpy," "craggy," "pitted," "lined," and "spiky" describe things we can actually see and touch. Note, too, that the author uses a simile to further emphasize what the experience was like, comparing the lines on the map to the lines on a human hand.

Step 4: Edit for Grammar, Punctuation, Spelling, and Diction

Once you have addressed the structural issues, revised for vivid details, and ensured that what you set to page brings out your personal voice, it's time to gnaw at your essay draft line-by-line.

Contrary to what you may have been led to believe, there are no grammatical *rules*. What is commonly referred to as “grammar” is the *study* of the way we form written words together, and just like any field of study, our understanding of grammar is continually evolving. Think of grammar as a set of *conventions*. **The sole reason you should pay attention to grammar is that adhering to its conventions will allow you to communicate more effectively.**

Punctuation and grammar are intricately linked, and understanding grammatical conventions will aid you in using punctuation precisely.

I. Common Grammatical and Punctuation Errors

Sentence Fragment. In order to understand sentence fragments, let's break down what a *phrase*, a *clause*, and a *sentence* are.

- A *phrase* is a group of words.
- A *clause* contains a subject + verb.
- A *sentence* contains a subject + verb + communicates a complete thought or idea.

If one or more of the three essential components of a sentence is missing, the result is a sentence fragment; all phrases and clauses that do not communicate a complete thought or idea are fragments.

Sebastian demonstrably dallied in the candy aisle, as if he hadn't already been set on the chocolate-covered peanuts.

(subject + verb + complete thought or idea= sentence)

Demonstrably dallied in the candy aisle.

(missing subject=fragment)

As if he hadn't already been set on the chocolate-covered peanuts.

(missing complete thought=fragment)

Sebastian in the candy aisle, as if he hadn't already been set on the chocolate-covered peanuts.

(missing verb=fragment)

Subject-Verb Disagreement. Spotting a subject-verb disagreement can be tricky because what appears before you *is* a complete sentence (it contains a subject and verb and communicates a complete thought or idea). But in order for the sentence to be grammatically correct, the subject and verb must agree with one another on one specific thing: time tense. A singular subject agrees with a singular verb, and a plural subject agrees with a plural verb.

The most common subject-verb agreement error is forming the verb according to the noun that directly precedes it.

The uninhibited enthusiasm of the puppies were exhausting. ✗

The uninhibited enthusiasm of the puppies was exhausting. ✓

This year's changes to the municipal government's fiscal policy is concerning. ✗

This year's changes to the municipal government's fiscal policy are concerning. ✓

Run-on Sentence and Comma Splice. When two independent clauses are joined with a comma, the result is a comma splice. When two independent clauses are mashed together without appropriate punctuation, the result is a run-on sentence.

I shook from the cold my toes just about fell off. ✗

I shook from the cold, my toes just about fell off. ✗

I shook from the cold, and my toes just about fell off. ✓

I shook from the cold; my toes just about fell off. ✓

I shook from the cold. My toes just about fell off. ✓

That vs. Which. We've covered clauses; they are groups of words that contain, at the least, a subject and a verb. Clauses can be independent (they can stand on their own as a sentence) or dependent (they rely on another clause or clauses to make sense). Most often, your sentences will be combinations of clauses. A common error when combining clauses is to mistake the roles of *that* and *which*.

When deciding which word to use, ask yourself: Will taking out the words following *that/which* change the meaning of the sentence? If so, then use "that." If not, use "which" and precede it with a comma.

The painting that made her name was stolen.

I surveyed his collection of mugs, which he kept neatly arranged by color, and then picked up the pineapple-shaped one.

Hyphen vs. En-dash vs. Em-dash. There are three kinds of dashes: the hyphen (-), the en-dash (–), and the em-dash (—). A common error is placing a hyphen in place of either the en-dash or the em-dash.

A *hyphen* is used in compound words, such as "a dog-friendly hotel."

An *en-dash* represents a number range.

Ramil and Anastasia bake 10–12 trays of cookies a day.

The bakery's profits plummeted in the years 2012–2015.

An *em-dash* indicates a dramatic pause. An em-dash may be used instead of a colon to introduce a word or group of words, instead of a comma to emphasize what follows, and in place of a semicolon. A pair of em-dashes can also be used in place of restrictive commas (, ...) or parentheses.

And in the garden they saw—a dragon.

When they spoke to Esdaran—who was a dragon—they learned of the hidden ruins.

To decide whether the em-dash or a pair of em-dashes is justified, substitute “Wait for it...” for the em-dash(es) to see if the sentence calls for the added drama.

Apostrophe Errors. The two most common uses of an apostrophe are to indicate possession (e.g. *Jeremiah’s satchel*) and to show missing letters in contractions (e.g. *don’t* for *do not*).

Using apostrophes is especially tricky when words ending with -s are involved. A common error is using an apostrophe to form a plural, as in, “*I adore cat’s*” instead of, “*I adore cats.*” Unless you are forming the plurals of letters and words used as letters and words (e.g. *let’s tally up the yes’s and no’s*), you should never use an apostrophe to make words plural.

Pronoun Reference Errors. A pronoun is a word that refers to a noun that is either the subject of the sentence the pronoun is in or the subject of the preceding sentence. Pronouns include: *she, he, they, it, this, and that*. The most common pronoun error in application essays is the **unclear pronoun reference**.

When Tanvi rode her bike through the forest, she badly damaged it.

In this example, it’s unclear whether “it” is referring to the forest or the bike.

II. Common Errors in Diction

Today, we primarily write using computers. Whether those computers are desktops, laptops, or tiny handheld rectangles, most of them come with some kind of spell-checker.

Thanks to technology, you are unlikely to make a spelling mistake such as “definitely,” but spell-checker won’t catch your “defiantly” where “definitely” should have been used. For this reason, this section is devoted to diction: the correct use of individual words.

Commonly Confused Words

Affect:

1. emotion or feeling (noun)
2. to influence or change (verb)

A part:

indicates a portion of something

Complement:

something that completes

His scarf would complement your outfit.

Compose:

to create or arrange in some way

to compose a symphony

Comprehensible:

understandable

Continual:

frequently repeated

Different from:

the correct form of comparison

Farther:

indicates physical distance

Fewer:

used for nouns that can be counted

fewer words

Imply:

suggest or hint at

Quotation:

a noun referring to text borrowed from another source

Reason is that/why:

the correct form; the words "reason is" should be followed by either "that" or "why"

Effect:

1. result (noun)
2. to cause a change (verb)

Apart:

an adverb meaning "separately"

Compliment:

a flattering or praising remark

Comprise:

to contain or include

Her collection comprised antiques from the 19th and 20th century.

Comprehensive:

complete or thorough

Continuous:

uninterrupted

Different than:

an incorrect form of comparison; always use "different from"

Further:

indicates metaphorical distance

Less:

for amounts or degree

less water

Infer:

to conclude or deduce

Quote:

a verb meaning "to reference"

Reason because:

an incorrect form; "because" is a subordinating conjunction

Colo(u)r Me Confused: A Note on Labo(u)ring over US vs. UK spellings

If you reside outside of the United States, you may be used to certain British spelling conventions, such as using *ou*, as opposed to *o* in words like “colour” and “humour,” *-re* endings, as opposed to *-er* endings, in words like “centre” and “theatre,” and *-yse* endings, as opposed to *-yze* endings, in words like “analyse” and “paralyse.”

Disentangling the differences between American and British spelling variants may be especially challenging for Canadian students, as Canadian English borrows from both American and British spelling conventions. Whenever you can, use the American spelling, check the dictionary (such as Merriam-Webster) when in doubt, and don't stress it if you get the spelling “wrong.” If you are applying to an American college from outside of the United States, you are unlikely to be penalized for spelling “analyze” as “analyse.”

Step 5: Edit for Clarity and Concision

Once you have edited for grammar, punctuation, and diction, review your essay for excess.

Stacked Prepositional Phrases. Prepositions tie words together and often deal with location in either space (*over, beneath, on top of*) or time (*before, since*). Common prepositions include *of, in, to, with, at, for, on, by, and from*.

A modifying phrase containing a preposition and a noun or clause is called a prepositional phrase. Several prepositional phrases strung together can slow the flow of your writing. If while reading your essay you notice three or more prepositional phrases in a row, then consider revising.

How enamoured Erin was with Simone was illustrated by the fact that she could not form coherent sentences while in Simone's presence.

Erin was so enamoured with Simone that she could not form coherent sentences while in her presence.

Redundancies. Avoid unintentional repetition. Common redundancies include:

Big in size

Close proximity

Major breakthrough

Plan in advance

Trained professional

Circumlocutions. Avoid words that speak around the point instead of stating it. Common circumlocutions include:

Are in possession → *have*

At this point in time → *now*

In spite of the fact that → *although*

In this day and age → *today*

Take into consideration → *consider*

Clichés. The occasional cliché is unavoidable and often harmless. Instead of attempting to weed out all clichés, ask yourself the following three questions when you spot one in your essay:

1. Have you used the cliché correctly?

One does not “lift an eye,” for example. The correct usage is either “bats an eye” or “lifts an eyebrow.”

2. Is the cliché appropriate for the setting?

Because clichés are predictable, they undermine matters of gravity. To write that “words cannot describe” a death, for example, would be inappropriate.

3. Would the sentence be better without the cliché?

Would the sentence be improved if “vanished into thin air” were replaced by “vanished”?

Qualifiers. Words like “pretty good” and “very excited” are commonplace in speech, but in writing, qualifiers often reduce the force of what you’re communicating as opposed to strengthening it. If you’re using the correct word, a qualifier is unnecessary; and if you’re not using the correct word, a qualifier won’t save you.

Beware the following qualifiers: *very, rather, little, pretty, sort of, and really.*

very tired → *exhausted*

really good → *great*

Often, you can get rid of a qualifier entirely.

I’m feeling ~~sort of~~ sick.

Control Your Sentences or They’ll Control You: A Note on Active and Passive Voice

In the active construction, the subject of the sentence acts upon an object. In the passive construction, the subject is *being acted upon*.

You may have been told to avoid the passive voice. In most cases, you should heed this advice: overuse of the passive results in unnecessarily wordy writing. But, when used

intentionally, the passive voice may be appropriate. Use the passive voice if the “doer” of the sentence is either *unimportant*, *unknown*, or *indefinite*.

Hundreds of animals were seen running out of the burning forest.

The ambulance was called.

Cord phones are no longer considered essential in the home.

Step 6: Trim, Trim, and Trim Again

After all the revising you've done, your prose is seriously starting to sizzle. The bad news? You've added a lot of content along the way. Your essay, which needs to be within the 650-word limit, is nearly 1000 words. The admissions officers will make an exception just for you, right?

Don't despair! Let's say your essay was 699 words. In your quest to cut it down by just 49 words, you may have ended up preserving content that's better left out. An essay that started with 900 or 1000 words, on the other hand, is likely to come out stronger once you've finished attacking the length—every word, every sentence, every paragraph has earned its place.

So how do you decide what should stay and what should go? Think about the difference between *Big Cuts* and *Small Snips*:

Big Cuts are significant changes, requiring creativity to condense the structure without sacrificing content. Imagine you're making a sculpture of the human body. You're almost finished, but you feel like the approach you took is too realistic. Why not decide to make it into a headless sculpture, turning it into an abstract interpretation of the human form?

Small Snips are tiny tweaks in sentence structure or grammar; the cuts that may not seem impactful in isolation, but, as these mini-deletions accumulate, can really chip away at your structure. Returning to the sculpture example, picture yourself happy with the overall form but still chiseling the rough edges until the figure is smooth.

I. **Big Cuts**

Time Travel. Is the chain of events in your essay too elaborate? Maybe in all your worry about logical sequence, you presented a series of scenes moving from Point A to Point B to Point C. What if you jumped from A to C, converting B into a witty transition or thoughtful metaphor? Think about unusual ways to re-organize your essay, cutting words *and* spicing up the timeline.

Double Intro. When you're unsure what tack to take in your opening, your introductory thoughts may leak into multiple paragraphs. If a friend asked you to proofread their history paper, and they had written two introductions and two thesis statements, you

would likely urge them to reconsider. In admissions essays, this issue can be difficult to spot. Maybe you opened with a dream sequence of yourself as an astronaut, followed by a sarcastic summary of every “job” you held as a child. The astronaut part has lovely details; the job part makes masterful use of tone. But both paragraphs convey the same trait: your wild imagination. Let one go.

Slow-Burn(out) Conclusion. As with the introduction, your conclusion is no place for rambling. Tempting as it may be to tell your reader that your awkward middle school growth spurt led you to attempt, by high school, ballroom lessons, breakdance classes, and hip-hop workout videos on the internet (self-taught), a compelling conclusion would be more focused and less repetitive. Don’t risk losing the reader’s investment in your conflict’s resolution.

II. Small Snips

Verbs to the Rescue. Another popular form of sentence clutter is excess verbiage. For instance, are two or three dull verbs performing a task that a single evocative verb could hoist by itself? In lieu of *I was able to start my adventure*, try *I embarked on my adventure*. Also look for multiple verbs joined by a conjunction or preposition and eliminate any redundancies. You could leave as is *My horse trotted before cantering* because these verbs are different. But you don’t need both verbs in *I bolted and jolted up the stairs* (even if you’re an aspiring poet).

Over-Setting the Scene. Ideally, vivid details should be interspersed throughout your essay by this point. You don’t, however, want to drench your paragraphs in imagery. If you’re leading up to a climactic stage performance, consider whether your build-up needs to be quite this gradual:

The lights scalded my forehead, and my shirt was soaked with sweat. My costume was itchy and smelled odd. As the red curtains parted, I stumbled onto stage, stumbling over gaps between the floorboards.

If you’ve mentioned your shirt and that it was sweaty, why dedicate another sentence to the itchy costume or odd smell? And is all this stumbling and stumbling harming your pacing rather than generating suspense? Try something like this: *The lights scalded my forehead and my itchy costume was soaked with sweat. As the red curtains parted, I stumbled onstage.*

The *itchy costume* has replaced the *shirt* in the first sentence, the second sentence has been deleted, and we've waved goodbye to the bumbling floorboards. The result? From 34 words to 21.

III. Final Tips

Whether you're finally content with your length or still wrangling with that word count, here are a few stray suggestions you can consider before uploading your essay.

Ask for Help. Stumped on what else to cut? Worried your essay isn't quite as magnificent a masterpiece as you'd hoped? Too attached to that one metaphor you wrote using the hokey pokey as the vehicle? Ask for a second (or third) opinion—again, pick someone you trust! You're not obligated to take anyone's advice, but other opinions (whether similar or contradictory) can help you see beyond your own biases.

Aliens Abducted My Essay. Aside from asking another person to look at your essay, you can also attempt to look at your own essay *as if another person wrote it*. It's normal to feel too "close" to what you've written, like you can't possibly change it anymore. So take a break from it. Give yourself a few days. If you don't have a few days, sleep on it for the night. Print it out, read the hard copy, and mark it up with pencil. Make the physical object of your essay feel strange. Read it out loud to hear how it sounds. Read it backwards to catch any typos you may have missed. Trick yourself into thinking this isn't your essay.

Attack of the Robot Essay. You want your essay to *feel* alien, but you don't want it to *sound* like a robot! Avoid over-editing. Your voice should sound genuine, and your language should feel natural. An essay that's perfectly polished but utterly mechanical won't stand out to admissions officers. After revising and proofreading with care, you're allowed to leave some idiosyncratic grammar and rough edges in your essay—in fact, you might be more successful that way.

The Final Checklist

- The **order of events** in your essay flows logically.
- You've established a **clear turning point**.
- You've picked the right **tense and tone** for your story.
- If you close your eyes and try to **imagine what you wrote**, you are able to.
- You've used words that **evoke the senses**.
- You've used **similes and/or metaphors** to establish a connection with your reader.
- You've checked for common **grammatical and punctuation errors**.
- You've reviewed your essay for **common errors in diction**.
- You've **removed excess**; each sentence clearly communicates a single idea.
- You've interrogated **clichés and qualifiers**.
- You are within the restricted **word count**.

If you're afraid your essay isn't perfect, pause a minute. Have you done all you can? Have you spent so much time on it you can't bear to read it through *again*? Have you read it out loud at the kitchen table over so many dinners your family is starting to complain?

Do you, sometimes, when you're in the right mood, when the stars align, feel maybe just a little proud of what you've accomplished?

If the answer to these questions is "yes," it's time to click "submit" and step away.