

## Style and Grammar

Below are sections from the Economist's Style Guide that are relevant to college essays. Ultimately, your essays are a means to an end: they communicate a conceptual message. Admissions officers are, first and foremost interested in what you have to say. The way that you say it will determine the enthusiasm they feel about you as an applicant and will determine whether they choose to read or doze off. Clarity is always the most important consideration, followed by flow and then beauty. Beautiful writing does not have big words in every sentence. It communicates an interesting idea in the way that you, as an individual feel it.

### Basic rules

1. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
  - o Prefer about to approximately, after to following, but to however, enough to sufficient, let to permit, make to manufacture, plant to facility, set up to establish, show to demonstrate, spending to expenditure, take part to participate, use to utilise, and so on. Underdeveloped countries are often better described as poor. Substantive often means real or big. "Short words are best and the old words when short are best of all." (Winston Churchill).
2. If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out. (!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!)
3. If it is possible to cut out a sentence, always cut it out
4. If it is possible to cut out a paragraph, always cut it out
5. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
6. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a technical word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
7. Use the language of everyday speech. Prefer let to permit, people to persons, buy to purchase, colleague to peer, way out to exit, present to gift, rich to wealthy, show to demonstrate, break to violate. Pomposity and long-windedness obscure meaning, and reveal the lack of it: strip them away in favour of plain words.
8. When you express opinions, do not simply make assertions. The aim is not just to tell readers what you think, but to persuade them; if you use arguments, reasoning and evidence, you may succeed. Go easy on the oughts and shoulds.
9. Do not be too instructive. If too many sentences begin Compare, Consider, Expect, Imagine, Look at, Note, Prepare for, Remember or Take, your essays sounds like a textbook

10. Do your best to be lucid. Simple and short sentences help. Keep complicated constructions and gimmicks to a minimum. A sentence should not last longer than two lines and, even then, should contain punctuation that separates its clauses. Mark Twain said "At times he may indulge himself with a long one, but he will make sure there are no folds in it, no vaguenesses, no parenthetical interruptions of its view as a whole; when he has done with it, it won't be a sea-serpent with half of its arches under the water; it will be a torch-light procession."
11. When using possessive pronouns (its, his, hers) always be sure that a reader knows who possesses what. Keeping your sentences short is an effective way to do this.
12. Long paragraphs, like long sentences, confuse the reader. A paragraph is essentially a unit of thought, not of length; it must be homogeneous in subject matter and sequential in treatment. One-sentence paragraphs should be used only occasionally.
13. Prefer the ~~passive voice~~ over the passive voice. A hit B > B was hit by A. *Active*
14. where division is involved, among should be used where three or more are concerned, between where only two are concerned.
15. An should be used before a word beginning with a vowel sound (an egg, an umbrella, an MP) or an h if, and only if, the h is silent (an honorary degree). But a European, a university, a U-turn, a hospital, a hotel. Historical is an exception: it is preceded by an, the h remaining silent.
16. Adjectives qualify nouns and adverbs modify verbs. If you have a sentence that contains the words firstly, secondly, more importantly, etc, they almost certainly ought to be first, second, more important.
17. To beg the question is to adopt an argument whose conclusion depends upon assuming the truth of the very conclusion the argument is designed to produce. All governments should promote free trade because otherwise protectionism will increase. This begs the question.
18. Both...and: a preposition placed after both should be repeated after and. Thus, both to right and to left; but to both right and left is all right.
19. If a whole sentence is within brackets, put the full stop inside.
20. Use by contrast only when comparing one thing with another: Somalia is a poor country. By contrast, Egypt is rich. This means Egypt is rich by comparison with Somalia, though by other standards it is poor. If

- you are simply noting a difference, say in contrast: Tony Blair takes his holidays in Tuscany. In contrast, Gordon Brown goes to Kirkcaldy.
21. "There is perhaps no single word so freely resorted to as a trouble-saver," says Gowers, "and consequently responsible for so much flabby writing." Often you can do without it. There are many cases of it being unnecessary is better as It is often unnecessary. If it is the case that simply means If. It is not the case means It is not so.
  22. Centred on, not around or in.
  23. Though duels and gauntlets have largely disappeared into history, modern life seems to consist of little else but challenges. No one nowadays has to face a change, difficulty, task or job. Rather these are challenges—fiscal challenges, organisational challenges, structural challenges, regional challenges, demographic challenges etc. Next time you grab the word challenge, drop it at once and think again.
  24. Use a colon "to deliver the goods that have been invoiced in the preceding words". They brought presents: gold, frankincense and oil at \$60 a barrel.
  25. Try suggest, originate or produce instead of come up with.
  26. Community is a useful word in the context of religious or ethnic groups. But in many others it is not. Not only is it often unnecessary, it purports to convey a sense of togetherness that may well not exist. The black community means blacks, the business community means businessmen (who are supposed to be competing, not colluding), the homosexual community means homosexuals, or gays, the intelligence community means spies, the online community means geeks and nerds, the migration and development communities (yes, really) means NGOs, the international community, if it means anything, means other countries, aid agencies or, just occasionally, the family of nations. What the global community means is a mystery.
  27. Comparatives. One thing may be many times more expensive than another. It cannot be many times cheaper. A different but similar mistake is to say that Zimbabweans have grown twice as poor under his stewardship. Instead, say Zimbabweans' incomes have fallen by half under his stewardship (if that is what you mean, which, since one statement concerns income and the other wealth, it may not be).
  28. A is compared with B when you draw attention to the difference. A is compared to B only when you want to stress their similarity. ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?")
  29. Comprise means is composed of. The Democratic coalition comprises women, workers, blacks and Jews. Women make up (not comprise)

- three-fifths of the Democratic coalition. Alternatively, Three-fifths of the Democratic coalition is composed of women.
30. Compound does not mean make worse. It may mean combine or, intransitively, it may mean to agree or come to terms. To compound a felony means to agree for a consideration not to prosecute.
31. Could is sometimes useful as a variant of might: His coalition could (or might) collapse. But take care. Does He could call an election in May mean He might call an election in May or He would be allowed to call an election in May?
32. Critique is a noun. If you want a verb, try criticise.
33. Different from, not to or than.
34. When used to mean caused by, due to must follow a noun, as in The cancellation, due to rain, of... Do not write It was cancelled due to rain. If you mean because of and for some reason are reluctant to say it, you probably want owing to. It was cancelled owing to rain is all right.
35. Effectively means with effect; if you mean in effect, say it. The matter was effectively dealt with on Friday means it was done well on Friday. The matter was, in effect, dealt with on Friday means it was more or less attended to on Friday. Effectively leaderless would do as a description of the demonstrators in East Germany in 1989 but not those in Tiananmen Square. The devaluation of the Slovak currency in 1993, described by some as an effective 8%, turned out to be a rather ineffective 8%.
36. The fact that can often be reduced to That.
37. Fewer (not less) than seven speeches, fewer than seven samurai. Use fewer, not less, with numbers of individual items or people. Less than £200, less than 700 tonnes of oil, less than a third, because these are measured quantities or proportions, not individual items.
38. Avoid the use of the former and the latter whenever possible. It usually causes confusion.
39. Identical with, not to.
40. Use single ones only for quotations within quotations. Thus: "When I say 'immediately', I mean some time before April," said the spokesman.
41. Investigations of, not into.
42. Key: this overused word is a noun and, like many nouns, may be used adjectivally (as in the key ministries). Do not, however, use it as a free-standing adjective, as in The choice of running-mate is key.

43. The last issue of *The Economist* implies its extinction; prefer last week's or the latest issue. Last year, in 2006, means 2005; if you mean the 12 months up to the time of writing, write the past year. The same goes for the past month, past week, past (not last) ten years.
44. Avoid such constructions as He will likely announce the date on Monday and The price will likely fall when results are posted Friday. Prefer He is likely to announce... or It is likely that the price will...
45. Try to avoid one as a personal pronoun. You will often do instead.
46. Put only as close as you can to the words it qualifies. Thus, These animals mate only in June. To say They only mate in June implies that in June they do nothing else.
47. This word is often superfluous. If your sentence contains on the same day that, try on the day that.
48. Soft is an adverb, as well as an adjective and a noun. Softly is also an adverb. You can speak softly and carry a big stick, but if you have a quiet voice you are soft—not softly—spoken.
49. There is, there are. Often unnecessary, seldom elegant. There are three issues facing the prime minister is better as Three issues face the prime minister.
50. To try and end the killing does not mean the same as to try to end the killing.
51. Underprivileged. Since a privilege is a special favour or advantage, it is by definition not something to which everyone is entitled. So underprivileged, by implying the right to privileges for all, is not just ugly jargon but also nonsense.
52. Which informs, that defines. This is the house that Jack built. But This house, which Jack built, is now falling down. Americans tend to be fussy about making a distinction between which and that. Good writers of British English are less fastidious. ("We have left undone those things which we ought to have done.")
53. While is best used temporally. Do not use it in place of although or whereas.
54. None usually takes a singular verb. So does neither (or either) A nor (or) B, unless B is plural, as in Neither the Dutchman nor the Danes have done it, where the verb agrees with the element closest to it.
55. Nor means and not, so should not be preceded by and.
56. Focus can be a useful word. It is shorter than concentrate and sharper than look at. But it is overused.

57. Be sparing with quotes. Direct quotes should be used when either the speaker or what he said is surprising, or when the words he used are particularly pithy or graphic. Otherwise you can probably paraphrase him more concisely. The most pointless quote is the inconsequential remark attributed to a nameless source: "Everyone wants to be in on the act," says one high-ranking civil servant.
58. Semi-colons should be used to mark a pause longer than a comma and shorter than a full stop. Don't overdo them. Use them to distinguish phrases listed after a colon if commas will not do the job clearly. Thus, They agreed on only three points: the ceasefire should be immediate; it should be internationally supervised, preferably by the AU; and a peace conference should be held, either in Geneva or in Ouagadougou. Semicolons are essentially like bullet points.
59. A government, a party, a company (whether Tesco or Marks and Spencer) and a partnership (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill) are all it and take a singular verb. So does a country, even if its name looks plural. Thus The Philippines has a congressional system, as does the United States; the Netherlands does not. The United Nations is also singular. So are acoustics, ballistics, dynamics, economics, kinetics, mathematics, mechanics, physics, politics and statics when being used generally, without the definite article. Thus Economics is the dismal science, Politics is the art of the possible (Bismarck), Statics is a branch of physics. But such -ics words are plural when preceded by the, or the plus an adjective, or with a possessive.
60. Always make sure you know what is and/or are refers to and check whether you have used them appropriately
61. Unlike should not be followed by in. Like like, unlike governs nouns and pronouns, not verbs and clauses.
62. Some words add nothing but length to your prose. Use adjectives to make your meaning more precise and be cautious of those you find yourself using to make it more emphatic. The word very is a case in point. If it occurs in a sentence you have written, try leaving it out and see whether the meaning is changed. In general, be concise. Try to be economical in your account or argument ("The best way to be boring is to leave nothing out" — Voltaire). Similarly, try to be economical with words. "As a general rule, run your pen through every other word you have written; you have no idea what vigour it will give to your style." (Sydney Smith). Raymond Mortimer put it even more crisply when commenting about Susan Sontag: "Her journalism, like a diamond, will sparkle more if it is cut."

- Shoot off, or rather shoot, as many prepositions after verbs as possible. Thus people can meet rather than meet with; companies can be bought and sold rather than bought up and sold off; budgets can be cut rather than cut back; plots can be hatched but not hatched up; organisations should be headed by rather than headed up by chairmen, just as markets should be freed, rather than freed up. And children can be sent to bed rather than sent off to bed—though if they are to sit up they must first sit down. Pre-prepared just means prepared.
- The omens were good may have more force than The omens were very good. Avoid strike action (strike will do), cutbacks (cuts), track record (record), wilderness area (usually either a wilderness or a wild area), large-scale (big), the policymaking process (policymaking), sale events (sales), weather conditions (weather), etc. This time around just means This time, just as any time soon just means soon.
- This advice you are given free, or for nothing, but not for free.
- Certain words are often redundant. The leader of the so-called Front for a Free Freedonia is the leader of the Front for a Free Freedonia. A top politician or top priority is usually just a politician or a priority, a major speech usually just a speech, an executive summary a summary and a role model a model. A safe haven is a haven; a free gift, a gift; a whole raft, a raft (who has ever had half a raft?). Most probably and most especially are probably and especially. The fact that can often be shortened to That (That I did not do so was a self-indulgence). Loans to the industrial and agricultural sectors are just loans to industry and farming. Community is another word often best cut out.

63. In the sentence This is the man who can win the support of most Tory MPs, the word you want is who, since who is the subject of the relative clause. It remains the subject, and therefore also who, in the sentence This is the man who she believes (or says or insists etc) can win the support of most Tory MPs. That becomes clearer if the sentence were punctuated thus: This is the man who, she believes (or says or insists etc), can win the support of most Tory MPs

64. However, in the sentence This is the man whom most Tory MPs can support, the word in question is whom because the subject of the relative clause has become most Tory MPs. Whom is also necessary in the sentence This is the man whom she believes to be able to win the support of most Tory MPs. That is because believe is here being used as a transitive verb, when it must be followed by an infinitive. If, however, believes were insists, the sentence could not be similarly changed, because the verb to insist cannot be used transitively.
65. Use commas as an aid to understanding. Too many in one sentence can be confusing.
- It is not always necessary to put a comma after a short phrase at the start of a sentence if no natural pause exists there: When night fell he fell too. But a breath, and so a comma, is needed after longer passages: When day broke and he was able at last to see what had happened, he realised he had fallen through the roof and into the Big Brother house.
  - Use two commas, or none at all, when inserting a clause in the middle of a sentence. Thus, do not write: Use two commas, or none at all when inserting...or Use two commas or none at all, when inserting...
  - Similarly, two commas or none at all are needed with constructions like And, though he denies it, he couldn't tell a cornflake from a cornflake and But, when Bush comes to Shuv, he'll find it isn't a town, just a Hebrew word for Return. Commas are essential (and often left out) after the names of American states when these are written as though they were part of an address: Kansas City, Kansas, proves that even Kansas City needn't always be Missouri (Ogden Nash).
  - If the clause ends with a bracket, which is not uncommon (this one does), the bracket should be followed by a comma.
  - Commas can alter the sense of a sentence. To write Mozart's 40th symphony, in G minor, with commas indicates that this symphony was written in G minor. Without commas, Mozart's 40th symphony in G minor suggests he wrote 39 other symphonies in G minor.
  - Do not put a comma before and at the end of a sequence of items unless one of the items includes another and. Thus The doctor suggested an aspirin, half a grapefruit and a cup of broth. But he ordered scrambled eggs, whisky and soda, and a selection from the trolley.

- Do not put commas after question-marks, even when they would be separated by quotation marks: “May I have a second helping?” he asked.
1. You can use dashes in pairs for parenthesis, but not more than one pair per sentence, ideally not more than one pair per paragraph. “Use a dash to introduce an explanation, amplification, paraphrase, particularisation or correction of what immediately precedes it. Use it to gather up the subject of a long sentence. Use it to introduce a paradoxical or whimsical ending to a sentence. Do not use it as a punctuation maid-of-all-work.”
  2. Headings and captions set the tone of the paper: they are more read than anything else. Use them, therefore, to draw readers in, not to repel them. That means wit (where appropriate), not bad puns; sharpness (ditto), not familiarity (call people by their last names, not their first names); originality, not clichés.
  3. Like and unlike govern nouns and pronouns, not verbs and clauses. So as in America not like in America, as I was saying, not like I was saying, as Grandma used to make them, not like Grandma used to make them, etc. English has no un-as equivalent to unlike, so you must rephrase the sentence if you are tempted to write unlike in this context, unlike at Christmas, or unlike when I was a child. If you find yourself writing She looked like she had had enough or It seemed like he was running out of puff, you should replace like with as if or as though, and you probably need the subjunctive: She looked as if she had had enough, It seemed as if he were running out of puff.
  4. May and might are not always interchangeable, and you may want may more often than you think. If in doubt, try may first. I might be wrong, but I think it will rain later should be I may be wrong, but I think it will rain later. Conditional sentences using the subjunctive also need might. Thus If Mr Bush were to win the election, he might make his horse ambassador to the UN. This could be rephrased by If Mr Bush wins the election, he may make his horse ambassador to the UN. Conditional sentences stating something contrary to fact, however, need might: If pigs had wings, birds might raise their eyebrows. Sometimes it is all right to use might if the if part of the sentence is understood though not explicitly stated: Tony Blair would never tell a fib, but Jeffrey Archer might (if circumstances demanded or if he had forgotten the truth). That might be actionable (if a judge said it was). Only if you are putting forward a hypothesis that may or may not be true are may and might interchangeable. Thus If George Bush studies hard, he may (or might) learn the difference between Greek and Grecian. Could is sometimes

useful as an alternative to may and might: His coalition could (or may) collapse. But take care. Does He could call an election in May mean He may call an election in May or He would be allowed to call an election in May? Do not use may or might when the appropriate verb is to be. His colleagues wonder how far the prime minister may go. The danger for them is that they may all lose their seats should be His colleagues wonder how far the prime minister will go. The danger for them is that they will all lose their seats.

5. If choose to begin your essay with a narrative element, don't start it with a description of the weather

## Syntax

Do not force nouns or other parts of speech to act as verbs: A woman who was severely brain-damaged in 1990 would be better put as A woman whose brain was severely damaged in 1990 (unless, remarkably, she was no longer brain-damaged at some later date).

Make sure that plural nouns have plural verbs. Kogalym today is one of the few Siberian oil towns which are [not is] almost habitable. What better evidence that snobbery and elitism still hold [not holds] back ordinary British people?—and this in a leader on education.

Use the subjunctive properly. If you are posing a hypothesis contrary to fact, you must use the subjunctive. Thus, If I were you... or If Hitler were alive today, he could tell us whether he kept a diary. If the hypothesis may or may not be true, you do not use the subjunctive. Thus If this diary is not Hitler's, we shall be glad we did not publish it. If you have would in the main clause, you must use the subjunctive in the if clause. If you were to disregard this rule, you would make a fool of yourself.

Take care with the genitive. It is fine to say a friend of Bill's, just as you would say a friend of mine, so you can also say a friend of Bill's and Carol's. It is also fine to say a friend of Bill, or a friend of Bill and Carol. What you must not say is Bill and Carol's friend. If you wish to use that construction, you must say Bill's and Carol's friend, which is cumbersome.

Take care, too, when making comparisons, to compare like with like: The Belgian economy is bigger than Russia should be Belgium's economy is bigger than Russia's. An advertisement for *The Economist* recently declared, ~~Our style and our whole philosophy are different from other publications~~ be preceded by a personal pronoun. So the following are wrong: I was awoken by him snoring, She could not prevent them drowning, Please forgive me coming late. Those sentences should have ended: his snoring, their drowning, my coming late. In other words, use the possessive adjective rather than the personal pronoun.

Check your clauses. When walking to the mall, but before having lunch, Calvin was stopped by a police officer. This sentence is correct because when deleting the middle clause the sentence makes sense: "when walking to the mall Calvin was stopped by a police officer".

Make sure the all the verbs in a sentence are in the correct tense; in most cases they will all be in one tense.