**Good Writing Habits You Ought to ~~Adept~~ Adapt and Mistakes to Avoid**

Some of these suggestions might seem obvious or elementary, but give them a try and you will improve the quality of your writing. At bare minimum, make sure you don’t show any of these bad writing habits in your admissions essays.

1. “Show” by using Action Verbs and Description

One of the keys to writing well is your verb selection. Carefully selected action verbs make a sentence much more meaningful. Sometimes you’ll need to use being verbs, but when you can get a quality action verb in there, do not hesitate. This relates to the concept of “showing” when you write, instead of “telling.” Action verbs help you paint a clearer picture. Look at these examples and see for yourself:

Henry’s favorite food is butter. He takes it from the kitchen counter whenever someone isn’t looking. As a result, Henry has gained weight, and our veterinarian has put him on a diet.

Or

Our dog, Henry, loves to eat butter. He regularly indulges his craving as soon as one of us unsuspecting humans turns away from the kitchen counter. As a result, Henry has gained weight, and our veterinarian insists that he eat a low fat diet.

The second version uses more action verbs. As a result, some of the wording had to be changed, but the passage is more descriptive as a result. But watch what happens when the second version is revised again with the purpose of adding more descriptive words and phrases:

Our dog, Henry, loves to eat butter. The glutton regularly indulges his craving as soon as one of “his” unsuspecting humans shifts their attention from the kitchen counter. As a result Henry has become quite chunky, and our veterinarian insists that our little “butterball” eat a low fat diet from his dish, like a good dog.

The third version’s tone shows more of a connection between the speaker and the dog—a sense of ownership is conveyed both ways. This passage could be considered more humorous than the first two based on new words added to describe Henry’s appearance and personality.

2. Run-on Sentences are your enemy whatever you do don’t write them.

A run-on sentence occurs when the writer has not used proper punctuation to separate two or more independent clauses (sometimes with additional phrases and dependent clauses, to confuse matters even more). Read the following examples and make sure you don’t have any errors like these in your essays.

Not only are yard sales are an effective way of making extra money, you’ll also be glad to have more free space. problem is here

You see where the problem is, right? The writer has used a comma inappropriately, and as a result has created a “comma splice” type of run-on sentence. This can be fixed 3 ways.

Separate the ideas into 2 complete sentences by adding a period:

Not only are yard sales are an effective way of making extra money**.**  You’ll also be glad to have more free space.

Or, add a comma and a coordinating conjunction:

Not only are yard sales an effective way to make extra money**, but** you’ll also be glad to have more free space.

The semi-colon (;) can be used to separate 2 independent clauses, but only if they share related content:

Not only are yard sales an effective way to make extra money**;** you’ll also be glad to have more free space.

Run-on sentences are not always long, so be careful. Check this out:

The pool is closed someone vomited.

Careful. The pool is closed *because* someone vomited.

And remember, if a sentence is lengthy and contains a lot of commas and other punctuation, this does not mean that it is automatically a run-on; sentences built with very complex structures can be difficult to decode, but they can still be considered complete, functional, and grammatically correct sentences.

3. Sentence Fragments can be used for evil or for good. Choose wisely.

A complete sentence contains a subject and a verb, and it expresses a complete thought. If any of these components is missing, the sentence is not complete, and it is considered a sentence fragment. Here’s an example:

The woman who bought twelve pairs of shoes.

This is a sentence fragment. What is missing? The verb. But isn’t “bought” a verb? It can be, but not in this sentence, because it is part of the restrictive clause “who bought twelve pairs of shoes,” which describes the woman. To correct this fragment, a verb that shows action on behalf of the subject of the sentence should be added.

The woman who bought twelve pairs of shoes asked the salesperson to bring her bags to the car.

That’s better. The verb “asked” fixes the problem. Note that “woman” is the subject, and “asked” is the action performed by the subject. Voila. Fragment avoided.

But, believe it or not, there are places where a sentence fragment is appropriate in writing. Where? Fragments often appear in dialogue, because people speak in fragments. Dialogue that sounds natural will most likely contain a good amount of fragments.

“Where’d you get the balloon?” Susie asked her brother, Josh.

“The store.”

“How much was it?”

“None of your business.”

“Gosh golly. I was just askin’, Josh,” Susie said, as she shook her head. *What a brat,* she thought.

See all of the fragments? That dialogue would sound terrible if it was written in complete sentences.

“Where’d you get the balloon?” Susie asked her brother, Josh.

“I bought it at the store.”

“How much was it?”

“The price is none of your business.”

Get the idea?

Sometimes fragments can be used for effect, but only when the writer has established the kind of atmosphere that would allow for fragmented sentences. Formal kinds of writing, like a research paper, would not allow for fragments. But personal or narrative writing can offer opportunities for a more distinct writer’s voice, which may be enhanced by the use of a few nicely placed, well-designed sentence fragments. For example:

One day, I saw Jenny talking to Gus MacFarland. I waved, but she did not wave back. I swore she was looking straight at me. She did not respond in any way. No smile. No nod. Nothing.

Then, that sinking feeling. Jenny and Gus were holding hands. Hands. Touching with purpose. Displaying affection. The mark of coupledom. And commitment. Commitment she had never made with me.

And that was that. They would be married four years later.

A little angst ridden, but that’s the idea. Those fragments convey the narrator’s sense of shock and disappointment about seeing his love interest with another guy. Try using a stylistic fragment here or there, and see what happens. But remember, as with all areas of life, everything is better with moderation.

4. Point of View

Point of view refers to the perspective of a written piece. There are 3 points of view: 1st person, 2nd person, and 3rd person.

Regardless of which point of view you choose for a particular essay, consistency is key. If you start in 3rd person point of view, you have to maintain 3rd person point of view throughout the piece (with the exception being dialogue—if you have characters who speak, they will have the freedom to use 1st, 2nd, or 3rd person, since their words are not part of the background language or explanation you provide in the paragraphed/non-dialogue parts of your writing).

For your college application essay, you will most likely write in 1st person point of view, since you will be writing about yourself. But since you are encouraged to take risks and show your creativity with this essay, you can try something different in the point of view department.

5. Using Quotations

Remember— we use quotation marks to show that someone is speaking, or that we are including a direct quote (another person’s words, exactly as originally stated). The key to writing dialogue well or adding a direct quote lies in seamless incorporation. The concept of “flow” is important here. Here’s how to maintain that “flow.”

First off, know the rules:

When you write dialogue, all sentence punctuation comes before the ending quotation mark.

“Sarah, tie your shoes**.”**

If you are using a tag (unspoken recognition of the speaker), end the dialogue with a comma before the ending quotation mark (note that the tag is **not** included in the quotation marks) and put a period after the tag, to show the end of the sentence.

“Sarah, tie your shoes**,”** said John.

tag

If your dialogue is a question or an exclamation, use the identifiable punctuation in the quoted part of your sentence, but still include a period after your dialogue tag to show that the sentence has officially ended.

“Do you have any money**?**” asked Susan.

“You are crazy**!**” yelled Susan, as we jumped into the car.

You can invert your dialogue tags and put them in front of the quote.

John asked, “Do you have a copy of the book?”

Sally said, “I can make pancakes.”

If you include a direct quote, acknowledge the speaker in the sentence with the quote to retain fluency.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”

Or, mention her name in the following sentence, like this:

“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.” Eleanor Roosevelt’s famous observation has resonated with many people, men and women alike.

**Do not do this:**

“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent**.” –Eleanor Roosevelt.** This quote means a lot because people often feel inferior.

In this example, Mrs. Roosevelt’s name is just floating in-between sentences. Every word in your essay should be part of a sentence, or, if it is not, it should be stylistically included, which, if done properly, will be obvious to your reader. This example is not stylistic.

6. Proofreading

You are a famous chef. The President of the United States has heard of your talent and wants you to cook dinner for a very important political figure he has invited to the White House. Your career depends on this. If you mess this dinner up for the President and the First Lady (and for the country), you’ll be ruined. To make matters worse, this individual has food allergies, so you are limited when it comes to menu choices and preparation. But, if anyone can handle this, you can. Top Chef ain’t got nothin’ on you.

You decide on the menu. You painstakingly choose each ingredient to ensure the best quality. You preheat the oven. Put on your hairnet. Wash your hands. You select your tools and prepare them—knives are sharpened, silverware is shined. You clean each vegetable individually by hand. You marinate the meat. And when all is ready, you begin. You cook.

And when you finish, you look around. The food is ready to be delivered to the table. It’s looking great. Smells great. Everything is great. Sure.

You don’t need to taste it.

Wait-- what? You don’t taste it???? Seriously??? You’re going to send a meal—one you’ve worked so hard to prepare-- to the table of the President of the United States of America, where he sits with the aforementioned figure of political importance, and you aren’t going to taste it first? And what about the guy’s allergies? What if you get sued for accidentally using cayenne pepper or whatever it was they told you he’s allergic to? What if there’s too much salt? Not enough sugar? What if?

And don’t you deserve to taste the fruits of your hard work? To feel that sense of pride?

This is an obvious analogy created to remind you of the importance of proofreading. If you spend time writing an essay, an essay that could be the deciding factor in whether or not you are accepted at a certain institution of higher learning, then why wouldn’t you read it before sending it? Silly you.

Admissions essays are expected to be free of all spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and grammatical errors.

Proofreading Tips

* Read backwards. Start at the end of the essay and read each sentence out loud. This disrupts the normal sequence you are expecting when you read your own writing, and so you’ll be more likely to notice any errors.
* Double check (triple check) to be sure that the name of the institution to which you are applying is spelled and capitalized correctly.
* If you are using the same essay for more than one school, be sure that you don’t forget to change the names of each school in your essay each time you mention them. West Chester will put your essay in the “bad” pile if they read about how excited you are to attend Kutztown. Got it?
* Use Times New Roman, size 12 font.
* Watch out for words that are often confused:

There Its Your

Their It’s You’re

They’re

Except Through Although

Accept Though Though

However

* Remember rules for writing plural nouns, possessive nouns, nouns that are both plural and possessive:

Plural: The dogs were groomed.

Possessive: The dog’s coat was groomed.

Plural and possessive: The dogs’ coats were groomed.

* Subjects and verbs should always agree.

Mary plays in the ocean waves.

Mary and Jessica play in the ocean waves.

* Pronouns and Antecedents should always match in number.

Mary and Jessica play in the ocean waves. They have been on the beach all morning.