

Style Tips for Personal Statements

This page offers some basic ideas regarding how to polish your personal essay. Top swimmers and runners often win by a narrow margin . . . perhaps one tenth of one second. Execution of detail can also make or break your personal statement when the field is very competitive.

Formatting

The goal of formatting is to make the format disappear.

1. Follow the instructions. Format as directed.
2. No instructions provided? Then ease of reading should instruct your choices.
3. No larger than 12 point type if no parameters are given. No smaller than 10 point type.
4. Minimum margins of one inch or *slightly* less if necessary.
5. Paginate and get your name on every page.
6. Do not justify your text. **Align Left** is the right setting.
7. Your font should have serifs. **Times New Roman** is a safe choice. No funky fonts.
8. Always type it (or word process it) even if they say *Type or Print Neatly*.
9. Just use ordinary white paper. Seriously.

Punctuation & Grammar

Good punctuation tells the reader how words and phrases relate to each other. Good grammar tells the reader that you are careful and precise when you communicate.

1. Two spaces at the end of a sentence. One space after a comma, colon or semicolon.
2. Use complete sentences. Even though there are several fragments on this page.
3. Learn how to use commas, semicolons and colons effectively and correctly.
4. You should mostly avoid exclamation marks. “They really only work in dialogue!” he shouted.
5. ~~It is the passive voice that should be revised.~~ Revise the passive voice.
6. Subject-verb disagreement ~~run~~ ruins a sentence.
7. Use contractions with care. They can “sound” too informal in some passages.
8. To/too/two. Led/lead. Their/they’re/there. ~~Its~~ It’s like confusing O₂ and O₃ in the lab.
9. Rewrite the sentence (or split it) if the grammar looks/sounds wrong but the remedy eludes you.
10. ~~And~~ stay away from starting sentences with conjunctions.

Technique

Even after you learn the grip and the stance, you can still work on your swing.

1. Say things only once. Avoid writing one idea five different ways. Don’t repeat yourself. Et cetera.
2. ~~Seek to~~ eliminate, ~~so to speak~~, empty ~~and meaningless~~ words and phrases.
3. *On the other hand*, transitional words and phrases are priceless. They show the reader how sentences and paragraphs relate to one another. They hold the outline together.
4. Use the first personal singular. That teacher who told you **never** to use “I” was overstating the case.
5. Variety is good though. Try using your experiences and actions as the subject when you feel that you have used “I” once too often.
6. Elaborate similes – *I am like a submarine sandwich with many layers* – and other forms of narrative artifice generally fail. Just tell your story.
7. Including quotes from others is typically cliché. Stick with your own voice.
8. Avoid repetitive sentence structure and vary your sentence length. It makes the prose sing.
9. Use the right/customary preposition. We say “cause *of* death” not “cause *for* death.” We just do.
10. Read your essay aloud to catch clunky phrases and odd preposition use.