

Style Tips for Scholarship Essays

This page offers some basic ideas regarding how to polish your writing. 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.

- Follow the instructions. Format as directed.
- No instructions provided? Then ease of reading should instruct your choices.
- No larger than 12 point type if no parameters are given. No smaller than 10 point type.
- Minimum margins of one inch.
- Do not right-justify your text. **Align Left** is the right setting.
- No funky fonts.
- Always type it (or word process it) even if they say *Type or Print Neatly*.
- Almost all top awards prefer ordinary white paper. Seriously.
- Are you supposed to sign the essay?

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.

- Two spaces at the end of a sentence. One space after a comma, colon or semicolon.
- Use complete sentences, despite the fact that there are ten fragments on this page.
- Learn how to use commas, semicolons and colons effectively and correctly.
- ~~It is the passive voice that should be revised.~~ Revise the passive voice.
- Subject-verb disagreement ~~ruin~~ ruins a sentence.
- Contractions are often considered too informal for scholarship essays.
- Many points of grammar are not mentioned here due to space. They still matter. If you are uncertain, check *Elements of Style* or Turabian.
- Rewrite the sentence (or split it into two) if the grammar looks wrong but the remedy eludes you.
- Artfully break the rules no more than once or twice per essay.

Technique

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

- Cut words are not “missing” from the sentence if eliminated. Do the same for sentences within paragraphs.
- ~~Seek to eliminate, so to speak~~, empty and meaningless phrases.
- On the other hand, transitional words and phrases are priceless. They show the reader how sentences and paragraphs relate to one another.
- Use the first personal singular. That teacher who told you never to use "I" was incorrect.
- Variety is good. Try using your experiences or your actions as the subject when you feel that you have used "I" once too often. You (your experiences or actions), however, are the actor, not the direct object.
- Avoid repetitive sentence structure and vary the length of your sentences. It makes the prose sing.
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Other Resources

Since this page cannot cover everything you need to know.

- *Elements of Style* by Strunk and White. A classic. Complete text available at www.bartleby.com/141
- *On Writing Well* by William Zinnser. Another classic.
- *How to Write with Style* by Kurt Vonnegut. *How to Punctuate* and *How to Write Clearly* are two other essays that may also interest you.