9 Rules for Scholarship and Application Essays

- **Read the essay prompt carefully and answer it in full.** Most applications will require a response to a specific writing prompt. Often this prompt will contain one main question and several sub-questions, or will be complex in nature. Read the prompt carefully and number each “step” or question in the prompt. As you answer these in your essay, cross them off so that you can be sure you have answered the prompt in full.

- **Be selective in content.** While these essays can be thought of as personal narratives, they should be narratives that focus on your professional or academic goals. Thus, any experience or story you recount should connect in a significant way to the application prompt. Resist telling multiple, disconnected stories or long autobiographies.

- **Resist the laundry list format.** Your transcript and application will catalog your accomplishments and activities; the essay then should work to interpret those experiences to explain who you are personally and academically, how your experiences have shaped you into the person you are, and what you wish to accomplish in the future.

- **Be concise and precise.** Because you do not have much space (1-2 pages at the most), nor much time to catch the reader’s attention, be direct and clear in your message. Begin with a “hook” to lure the reader, avoid repetition, and use transitions to guide your reader through to the end of the essay.

- **Avoid abstract and vague statements.** Part of being precise in your writing is avoiding confusing, general, or sweeping statements. Move beyond “I am hard working” and instead show the reader how you are hard working; the initial statement can be true of anyone, while your personal experience is unique. While writing, ask yourself of each statement, “Could this be true of anyone?” If so, then you know you need to be more precise and concrete.

- **Clarify significant anomalies in your record.** Felony convictions, academic inconsistencies, and non-traditional preparation may require explanation in your essay.

- **Use academic diction.** Avoid slang, clichés, repetition, and textspeak.

- **Proofread, proofread, and proofread!** Check spelling, sentence structure, and grammar. Have trusted friends, family members, and teachers read your drafts. Scholarship and application essays should be polished, perfect prose.

- **Avoid academic dishonesty.** If you use research (such as quotations), be sure to cite your source. Do not, under any circumstance, plagiarize your essay or purchase one from a for-profit website.

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