

November 1, 2011, 10:49 am

# Advice on Whittling Your Admissions Essay

---

By ALAN GELB

Matt Flegenheimer's interesting piece in *The Times* on Saturday on the legitimacy of exceeding 500 words on the college admissions essay got me thinking about how often such excess is actually warranted.

Most first drafts I see are several hundred words beyond that mark. That is to be expected, but by the second and third drafts, they are very close to the 500 word count. I almost never encounter essays that justify exceeding that limit. The extra verbiage usually reflects problematic writing choices, so I would like to offer a few tips on how to keep your essay concise with no sacrifice of meaning or impact:

**Know where to start.** This is the most important factor in keeping your essay within bounds. Your first decision is where to pick up the narrative. Keeping in mind that a 500-word essay is a limited piece of real estate, don't start your story about building houses in Haiti in your bedroom in Philadelphia, packing your bags. Skip the plane ride. Just plunge right into the action that matters most. That said, the work of telling a good story is understanding what matters most.

**Try a trusty literary device.** The one I am referring to is called *in media res* (Latin for "in the middle of things"). You might surprise the reader by opening your essay with a line of dialogue. "Watch out! We're falling!" Or *The line went dead*. Or *The door slammed*. Such openings grab a reader's attention and save precious time.

**Avoid adjectives, adverbs, qualifiers.** A lot of excess word count may be traced back to an overuse of word forms that often muck things up. *We went hiking on a lovely spring day* doesn't tell me much more than *We went hiking on a spring day*. (Unless it's raining, I'll assume the spring day is lovely). Adverbial excesses like *He reacted emphatically* can best be dealt with by dropping the adverb altogether or finding a good verb that says more in less words (*flinched*, *grimaced*—whatever makes sense in terms of that emphatic reaction you were trying to capture). And all those qualifiers like *very*, *most*, *especially* are usually expendable.

**Pay close attention to sentence structure.** Getting lost in your sentence structure will take up words (and exasperate readers). A good rule of thumb is to start your sentences with a subject and a verb. Here's a sentence that uses more words to say less: *Brainstorming on what we could do, we came to the solution that we could sell our origami to neighbors that lived on the same block.* (25 words) Now the alternative: *We brainstormed and came up with a solution: to sell our origami to neighbors.* (14 words—and you notice that the word "neighbors" didn't need that extra definition).

If you keep these tips in mind, you should be able to whittle your admissions essay to well within the limits.