Sentence Variety

Many students think that the longer the sentence they write, the better the sentence. This is far from the truth. You do not need long, complicated sentences to show that you are a good writer. In fact, short sentences often pack the most punch. The best essays contain a variety of sentence lengths, mixed within any given paragraph. Try reading your essay out loud, pausing at every period. Listen to the rhythm of your prose. Are all of the sentences the same length? If each of your sentences twists and turns for an entire paragraph, or you run out of breath at any point, break them up into smaller statements. You may also want to try a more methodical approach:

EXERCISE: SENTENCE VARIETY

Once you have completed your essay, try labeling each sentence "short" (under 10 words), "medium" (under 20 words), or "long" (20 or more words). A nice paragraph might read something like M S M L M S. A dry essay would be S S S M L L L.

Read more: Sentence Variety
http://www.infoplease.com/edu/collegebound/applying/lesson4_variety.html#ixzz1F1OaZxyM

Word Choice

Don't "thesaurusize." The second trap into which many students fall is thinking that big words make good essays. Advanced vocabulary is fine if it comes naturally to you, and when used correctly in an appropriate context. After reading thousands of essays, admissions officers know which students have come up with difficult words by themselves and which have looked them up in a thesaurus.

Show, don't tell. Too often, an essay with an interesting story will fizzle into a series of statements that "tell" rather than "show" the qualities of the writer. Students wrongly assume that the reader will not "get it" if they do not beat to death their main arguments. Thus, the essay succumbs to the usual clichés: "the value of hard work and perseverance" or "learning to make a difference" or "not taking loved ones for granted" or "dreams coming true" or "learning from mistakes." Such statements are acceptable if used minimally, as in topic sentences, but the best essays do not use them at all. Instead, allow the details of your story to make the statement for you.

An example helps elucidate the difference:

In a mediocre essay: "I developed a new compassion for the disabled."

In a better essay: "Whenever I had the chance to help the disabled, I did so happily."
In an excellent essay: "The next time Mrs. Cooper asked me to help her across the street, I smiled and immediately took her arm."

The first example provides no detail, the second example is still only hypothetical, but the final example evokes a vivid image of something that actually happened, thus placing the reader in the experience of the applicant.

Don't get too conversational. Slang terms, clichés, contractions, and an excessively casual tone should be eliminated from all but the most informal essays. The following excerpt gives examples of all four offenses:

You are probably wondering, what are the political issues that make this kid really mad? Well, I get steamed when I hear about my friends throwing away their right to vote. Voting is part of what makes this country great. Some kids believe that their vote doesn't count. Well, I think they're wrong.

In an essay like this one, in which you must show that you take things seriously, your language should also take itself seriously. Only non-traditional essays, such as ones in the form of narrative or dialogue, should rely on conversational elements. Write informally only when you are consciously trying to achieve an effect that conveys your meaning.

Don't repeatedly start sentences with "I." It is typical for the first draft of an essay to have many of the following type of sentence: I + verb + object, for example, "I play soccer." If this kind of simple structure is used too many times in an essay, it will have two effects: Your language will sound stunted and unsophisticated; You also will appear extremely conceited -- imagine a conversation with someone who always talks about herself. The trick is to change around the words without changing the meaning. Here is an example:

Before: "I started playing piano when I was eight years old. I worked hard to learn difficult pieces. I learned about the effort needed to improve myself. I began to love music.

After: "I started playing piano at the age of eight. From the beginning, I worked hard to learn difficult pieces, and this struggle taught me the effort needed for self-improvement. My work with the piano nourished my love for music.

Don't repeat the same subject nouns. When writing an essay about soccer (or leadership), do not repeatedly use the word "soccer" (or "leadership"). The repetition of nouns has much the same stunting effect as the repetition of "I" (see above). Look for alternative phrases for your subject nouns. For soccer, you might use vague synonyms ("the sport," "the game") or specific terms ("going to practice," "completing a pass"). In the case of leadership, you could use phrases such as "setting an example," or "coordinating a group effort."

Read more: Word Choice
http://www.infoplease.com/edu/collegebound/applying/lesson4_choice.html#ixzz1F1P3tU64
Verb Tense

As you write your essay, remember to focus on verbs and keep adjectives to a minimum. Pumping your sentences full of adjectives and adverbs is not the same thing as adding detail or color. Adjectives and adverbs add lazy description, but verbs add action.

Passive Tense

Our editors find that one of the greatest weaknesses of admissions essays is their frequent use of the passive tense. For this mini-lesson you will learn why the passive voice should be avoided, how to identify it, and how to replace it with the preferred active voice.

Overuse of the passive voice throughout an essay can make your prose seem flat and uninteresting. Sentences in active voice are also more concise than those in passive voice. You can recognize passive-voice expressions because the verb phrase will always include a form of to be, such as am, is, was, were, are, or been. The presence of a be-verb, however, does not necessarily mean that the sentence is in passive voice. In sentences written in passive voice, the subject receives the action expressed in the verb; the subject is acted upon. In sentences written in active voice, the subject performs the action expressed in the verb; the subject acts.

EXAMPLES:

(Passive) I was selected to be the tuba player by the band leader.

(Active) The bandleader selected me to be the tuba player.

(Passive) I will be prepared for college as a result of the lessons my mother taught me.

(Active) My mother taught me lessons that will prepare me for college.

(Passive) I am reminded of her voice every time I hear that song.

(Active) That song reminds me of her voice.

EXERCISE: STRONG VERBS vs. WEAK VERBS

1. After working closely with my mentor, I __________ advanced techniques in oil painting.
   a) was beginning to master
   b) began to master
   c) mastered

2. My newspaper article on the labor strikes __________ both praise and criticism.
3. Once I joined the debate team, I _________ the opportunity to compete every weekend.
   a) sought
   b) had
   c) was exposed to

4. Samuel's touchdown _________ the stadium crowd.
   a) created much energy in
   b) energized
   c) really energized

5. Woolf's essay _________ my opinion of gender inequality.
   a) challenged
   b) made me take another look at
   c) was challenging to

6. As Jessica drew near me, I _________ the baton and took off running.
   a) grasped
   b) got
   c) was given

7. Once my mother had fallen asleep, I _________ the dolls on her nightstand.
   a) put
   b) arranged
   c) set up
8. Chris and I __________ an educational project for first-graders in our community.
   a) began
   b) started
   c) initiated

9. "Why didn’t you ask me before throwing it away?" Jason __________.
   a) hollered
   b) said angrily
   c) started to yell

10. Mr. Franklin __________ that he was our true father.
    a) let us know
    b) told us
    c) revealed

**Answers: 1) c; 2) a; 3) a; 4) b; 5) a; 6) a; 7) b; 8) c; 9) a; 10) c;**

**Changing Passive Voice to Active Voice**

If you want to change a passive-voice sentence to active voice, find the agent in the phrase, the person or thing that is performing the action expressed in the verb. Make that agent the subject of the sentence, and change the verb accordingly. For many instances of the passive voice in your essay, you can follow these steps:

1. Do a global search for the words "was" and then "were." These words often indicate the passive voice.
2. Cross out the "was" or the "were."
3. Add -ed to the verb that follows "was" or "were."
4. If that changed verb does not make grammatical sense, it is an irregular verb, so change it to the simple past tense.
5. Rewrite the sentence around the new active-voice verb.

**EXERCISE: MAKING SENTENCES MORE ACTIVE**
Change these sentences from passive voice to active voice, or note if no change should be made.

1. I was taught by my brother the principles of barbecuing.
   __________________________________________________________
   My brother taught me the principles of barbecuing.

2. My father was given the title by the former head chief.
   ____________________________________________________________

3. The house was wrecked by the party and the cat was let loose by the guests.
   ____________________________________________________________

4. The house is a mess, the cat is lost, and the car has been stolen by Justin.
   ____________________________________________________________

5. Unfortunately, my plan was ruined by Gerald, the building superintendent.
   ____________________________________________________________

6. The roof was leaking. It had been leaking all week.
   ____________________________________________________________

7. The ball was thrown by Lucy, who had been hiding in the bushes.
   ____________________________________________________________

8. Francesca was placed on the first flight to Boston. Her father put her there.
   ____________________________________________________________

9. "To be or not to be?" That is the question.
   ____________________________________________________________

10. A feast had been created from nothing. I was astounded.
    ____________________________________________________________

Answers:

1. My brother taught me the principles of barbecuing.
2. The former head chief gave the title to my father.

3. The party wrecked the house and the guests let the cat loose.

4. The house is a mess, the cat is lost, and Justin has stolen the car.

5. Unfortunately, Gerald, the building superintendent, ruined my plan.

6. No change.

7. Lucy, who had been hiding in the bushes, threw the ball.

8. Francesca's father placed her on the first flight to Boston.

9. No change.

10. A feast had been created from nothing. This astounded me.

Read more: Verb Tense http://www.infoplease.com/edu/collegebound/applying/lesson4_tense.html#ixzz1F1PXX2eo