Proofreading a college essay

These instructions were designed for students who wrote their essays using our *Write Like a Pro* process. You can use this as a guide to proofread any finished essay.

This is a final proofread

You're proofreading a finished essay. The student has made the decisions about what to say and how to say it, and believes this essay is ready to submit to colleges.

If you have significant concerns about the message, content, or writing, share those with the student. Hold off on proofreading for now.

The student should give you:

- A newly saved copy of their essay
- Their *personal intentions*
- *How to Read Any College Essay Like a Pro* (the second page of this document)

These resources, along with those at the link and QR code at the bottom of the page, should answer most of your questions.

Don't edit

Unless it's a simple spelling or punctuation error, please don't make edits.

Highlight the issue, and if the reason isn't obvious, make a comment. It's the student's job to find the solution.

Admissions officers read a couple of thousand essays every year and can spot adult language and thinking a mile away. The same goes for older siblings in college. Please avoid any temptation to edit. It never goes well.

The essay needs to be in the student's voice. College essays aren't academic papers, and they don't have to follow the formal rules of grammar.

Please mark:

- Repetitive words or phrases
- Misspellings
- Grammatical mistakes
- Missing or extra words
- Punctuation problems
- Line spacing issues
- Clunky language
- Formal or stilted language

Point out anything that:

- was unclear, confusing, or vague (including transitions)
- slowed down your reading
- made you think too hard
- left a negative impression (or could leave one)

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Delete stress. Write what matters. Breathe.

How to read any college essay like a pro

Start at the top and work through the questions. If you're reading rough ideas or a draft, the quality of writing don't matter. Address structure, tone, and language issues when the story and ideas are there.

1 Is it built on a strong foundation?

Know your audience
Imagine your audience was a tour guide who got a job in the admissions office after graduating last year. They want to know what kind of friend or student you'll be.

Is the essay a common type of learning and growing experience (for example, *I didn't make the team* is similar to *I didn't get a part in the play*)?

Know your intention
An effective college essay is an engaging, authentic short story that shows who the student is.

Did the essay catch your attention and keep it to the end? Was it authentic? Was it a story (in the broadest sense of the word, as opposed to a school paper, news article, etc.)? Did you get a sense of who the student is?

Know your role
The best college essays are written like a teenager telling their story around the campfire to friends. An academic or sales perspective won't lead to the kind of essays admissions officers want to read.

What perspective did the writer take? A teen around the campfire, or something else?

2 Does it have three types of content?

Stuff that happened
These are specific events, conversations, places, and so forth. This is what gives the reader a sense of "Oh, I'm in a place and time and can visualize what's going on."

In-the-moment experience
Can you tell what they were thinking or feeling at the time? What was going in their head, their heart, their body sensations, etc.?

Deep thoughts
Are there after-the-fact observations, insights, or perspectives? It's what the writer understands, thinks, or feels today looking back.

3 Is it well-written?

Everything is there for a reason
Essays can say more with less. Does every story, idea, sentence, and word serve a purpose?

It's easy to read
Does it make sense and have a flow that works? Is it smooth? Is anything confusing or ambiguous? Is it missing important information or making assumptions about what the reader knows?

It's proofread
Is it well-written? It doesn't have to follow formal rules of grammar (better if not, actually). But every sentence does need to be clear and understandable. And, no typos.

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