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The 6 Elements of a Perfect Essay

Despite the ACT's past inconsistencies, the grading process is extremely standardized to ensure that scores remain consistent across the board. Graders are given a checklist of things to look for, and they're trained to put their own opinions aside and base their scores solely on the models that have already been set. And given the sheer number of essays that must be read, they're required to be quick.

As a result, they won't spend any longer than TWO MINUTES reading your paper. Two minutes and that's it. It's a snap judgment: *Does this essay look like a 6? Yep. Next!* Any flashes of your literary brilliance will be glossed over in a ruthless grading procedure that only cares about whether your work matches the standard model.

Your job, then, is not to write a masterpiece. This isn't AP English. The teacher won't be looking at every word and dissecting every little thing you did wrong.

Instead, your job is simply to write something that looks like a 6. Write something that looks smart, something that looks like all the essays that have been awarded 6's before, and you in turn will be rewarded with a final score of 36. That's it. It doesn't have to be innovative and it doesn't have to be in your voice and style. Just give them what they want.

Whenever I explain this mindset to students, there's always a slight outcry because it conflicts with the creative writing process they've been taught throughout school. A lot of students want to stand behind their own writing abilities instead of relying on any kind of pre-scripted formula. "I'm already a good writer," they say. "I don't need to follow a template."

I totally understand. As much as I would like the essay portion to be less of a game and more of an indicator of true writing ability, it's not. A 45-minute essay is hardly a good way to measure one's competence and the truth is, those who go in prepared with a good idea of what they're going to write do better than those who don't.

The ACT is simply not the place for you to get fancy. There will be plenty of opportunities later on, whether you want them or not, to express yourself more creatively. The ACT is not one of them. Your purpose is to ace it and get into college, not start the next great American novel.

Having said all that, let's take a look at the characteristics of a perfect essay.

1. Length

Most students don't realize just how much essay length affects the score. You might think that a short essay can compensate for its length by being well-written, but while quality does count, you're much better off sacrificing some of that quality for a longer essay. In a 2005 *New York Times* article, writer Michael Winerip reports how Dr. Les Perelman, one of the directors of writing at MIT, posted student essays on a far wall and graded them solely on length. After he finished, he was stunned by the results—his predictions had been right over 90 percent of the time. The shorter essays received the lowest scores and the longer essays received the highest. Even though his study was done with SAT essays, the results apply just as much to the ACT. Write longer essays. More often than not, an essay's score can be determined by its length. It's no coincidence that my first essay, which scored a 36, was longer than my second essay, which scored a 32.

With that in mind, you want to fill up as much space as you can, at least 2.5 pages (which actually isn't a lot given the line spacing). Filling up 2.5 pages means you have to **write fast from the start**. Minimal brainstorming. No wasting time. Just go. **You want to spend every minute writing.**

Now this doesn't mean you should start lengthening the spacing between words. The graders are wary of essays that inflate their spacing and from my students' experiences, it definitely doesn't work. Write how you would normally but do so at a much faster pace. My essay in Appendix A shows the degree of illegibility you can get away with.

2. Thesis

As you probably have learned countless times from your English classes, a thesis is a statement that captures the main idea or essence of your argument. It's usually placed at the end of the introductory paragraph.

Always have a thesis statement because it's something graders can easily spot and reward you for. A grader should be able to grasp your stance on the issue just by reading your thesis. I'll be teaching you how to write effective and easy thesis statements in the next chapter.

3. Organization and Structure

Always make sure you use paragraphs and that each paragraph serves a purpose that is distinct from the others. In other words, each of your paragraphs should contain a different idea but one that still relates to the overall argument.

Essays that are just one humongous paragraph don't get high scores, so make sure you indent!

4. Vocabulary

People judge essays by the level of their vocabulary. If you've ever thought of a book or article more highly because there were words you didn't understand, then you probably know just how much vocabulary can impress people, and the ACT essay graders are no exception. After all, good essays are good in part because they have sophisticated yet well-chosen words. Later on, we will be showing you not only what words to use but also some automatic ways of injecting them into your essay.

On the flip side, avoid using vague words like "stuff", "things", "lots of", "many cases", "many reasons", especially when you don't clarify them later with specifics.

5. Sentence Variety

Good writers use a mix of simple and complex sentences. Essays consisting solely of simple sentences won't get you a high score. Imagine reading a paragraph like this:

People are most productive under pressure. They have to think faster. They work harder to meet deadlines. Most people are lazy. They need motivation. Pressure is the best motivator.

Choppy and repetitive—not what you want. Let's take a look at a revised version:

People are most productive under pressure because they have to think faster and work harder to meet deadlines. Without motivation, most people are lazy. For those reasons, pressure is the best motivator.

Still not perfect, but a whole lot better. Notice that the main ideas didn't change, only the way in which they were connected.

By definition, the secret to creating complex sentences is **the comma**. By finding appropriate ways to insert commas, you force yourself to add detail to your sentences. Let's use an example sentence to see how this is done:

The tiger ate my aunt earlier today.

Now let's add in some phrases:

After starving for several hours, the tiger, which had previously been so tame, ate my aunt earlier today.

Notice that by adding in those phrases, which required commas, **we not only made the sentence complex but also made it more detailed, which is part of what good writing is all about.**

Here is a toolbox of things you can do for sentence variety:

Tool	Example
Use <i>because</i>	The tiger ate my aunt earlier today because it was hungry.
Use <i>who, which, or that</i>	The tiger, which had been very hungry, ate my aunt earlier today.
Use a conjunction (FANBOYS)	The tiger was hungry and ate my aunt earlier today.
Put <i>although/even though</i> in front	Although it is usually well-behaved, the tiger ate my aunt earlier today.
Use a modifier	Always on the lookout for food, the tiger ate my aunt earlier today.

As you practice, make it a point to put complex sentences among simple ones.

6. Transitions

One other weapon in your sentence variety toolbox is transitions, the words that show how your ideas are connected. These are so important to getting a high score that they deserve their own section. If you look at the official essay rubric on the ACT's website, graders are specifically required to look for them. Not only do they serve as the "glue" between your ideas, but they also give your sentences rhythm and structure.

Common Transition Words		
Example	Transition...	Similar Transitions
<i>I love eating vanilla ice cream. However, too much of it makes me sick.</i>	presents an opposing point or balances a previous statement	<i>fortunately, on the other hand, conversely, whereas, while, in contrast</i>
<i>Math trains you to approach problems more analytically. Furthermore, it helps you calculate the exact amount of tip to be left for the waiter.</i>	adds new and supporting information	<i>in addition, also, moreover, and, too, as well, additionally, not to mention</i>
<i>Pandas are rapidly becoming extinct. In fact, some experts predict that pandas will die out in 50 years.</i>	gives emphasis to a point by adding a specific detail/case	<i>as a matter of fact, indeed, to illustrate, for instance, for example</i>
<i>The state is facing a flu epidemic. Consequently, all hospital rooms are filled at the moment.</i>	shows cause & effect	<i>as a result, because, hence, therefore, thus, as a consequence, accordingly</i>
<i>Granted, the ACT is a long and tedious exam, but it's necessary for college admissions.</i>	concedes a point to make way for your own point	<i>nevertheless, although, even though, despite, even if</i>
<i>Place the bread on an ungreased baking sheet. Finally, bake in a preheated oven for 10 minutes.</i>	shows order or sequence	<i>subsequently, previously, afterwards, next, then, eventually, before</i>
<i>Social security numbers uniquely identify citizens. In the same way, IP addresses identify computers.</i>	shows similarity	<i>similarly, likewise, by the same token</i>
<i>In conclusion, the world would be a happier place without nuclear weapons.</i>	gives a summary	<i>in all, to summarize, in sum, to sum up, in short, as mentioned, thus</i>

You'll want to include several transition words in your essay to show the grader that you understand their importance and how they're used. The essay template in the next chapter will give you easy ways to add both transitions and sentence variety to your essay.