

Make Essay Gold with Rubrics

Application Action Sheet Overview

Our next task is to review the essay as a whole. We've created a rubric for you to use on the following pages.

Page 2 is the overall rubric where reviewers should mark the score for each of the 10 components of essay gold (structure, focus, etc.)

The remaining pages are detailed rubrics for each section: ie. what does it mean to be excellent vs. great with regards to each component. Reviewers should write specific notes about each section on these pages.

Choose 2 people to review your essay. Give each person your essay(s) and a copy of this entire action sheet.

Instructions for essay reviewers:

1. Make sure you have the essay, scorecard, and detailed rubrics for each of the 10 rubric sections.
2. Review the rubric sections, then read the whole essay once.
3. Review the essay with regards to each detailed rubric. Reread the essay or sections as needed. Mark what the essay does well and where it could improve. Write additional notes on these detailed sheets.

Essay Rubric

REVIEWER:

ESSAY TITLE:

OVERALL SCORE:

| RUBRIC SECTIONS | NEEDS WORK < TOP 25% | GREAT TOP 25% | EXCELLENT TOP 10% | OUTSTANDING TOP 5% |
|----------------------|-------------------------|------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Planning & Structure | | | | |
| Singular Focus | | | | |
| Show, Don't Tell | | | | |
| Captivating Intro | | | | |
| Engaging Voice | | | | |
| Emotional Connection | | | | |
| Insight into You | | | | |
| Specific Details | | | | |
| Flawless Grammar | | | | |
| Powerful Conclusion | | | | |

Detailed Rubric 1

Planning & Structure

Overview: Your main point or thesis should be clear to the reader. They should know where you're going and what you're trying to articulate from the beginning.

Needs Work

- The stories and content mostly relate to the prompt.
- The essay generally answers the question, though it is not always clear how it will do so.
- The reader can identify the main point.
- The reader has little trouble following along. There are some transitions between ideas, sentences, and paragraphs.
- The essay shows some progression. It includes at least 2 of 3 things: who they are, how they have evolved, and/or who they want to become.

Great

- The stories and content all relate to the prompt.
- The essay answers the prompt.
- The main point is clear from the beginning.
- It is easy to follow. Ideas, sentences, and paragraphs flow from one to the next.
- There is no confusion about where the essay is going.
- There is a story arc. By the end, you have a good sense of how the author has evolved, who they are, and whom they want to become.

Excellent

- The stories and content are unique to this individual and relate to the prompt.
- The essay answers the question.
- The main point is clear from the beginning.
- It is easy to follow. Ideas, sentences, and paragraphs flow seamlessly from one to the next with excellent transitions.
- There is no confusion about where the essay is going or why an idea is mentioned. The essay builds on itself.
- There is a story arc. By the end, you have a strong sense of how the author has evolved, who they are, and whom they want to become.

Outstanding

- The stories and content are unique & personal. There are few stories as perfect for this prompt.
- The essay answers the prompt holistically.
- The main point is crystal clear from the beginning.
- It is a pleasure to read. There is no pause or break. It flows seamlessly from one idea, sentence, paragraph to the next.
- There is no confusion about where the essay is going.
- There is a story arc. By the end, you have a strong sense of how the author has evolved, who they are today, whom they want to become, and how their college education will help them get there.

Instructions: Circle the bullet points that best reflect the essay. Add notes below.

Detailed Rubric 2

Singular Focus

Overview: Focus on one thing, event, theme, etc. Otherwise you'll dilute your story and leave the reader confused.

Needs Work

- There are many great ideas that are connected, but it is difficult to summarize in one sentence.
- The essay covers a couple major themes or events. They could be better connected.
- At times, I lose track of the main point or focus.

Great

- There is one underlying message or theme that connects the essay.
- I can summarize the essay in a sentence, but it might not stick in my head after reading 100 other essays about this prompt.

Excellent

- There is a powerful and memorable message or theme that connects the essay.
- I can easily summarize the essay in a sentence.
- The main theme and stories used to articulate it are unique enough to easily remember after 100 other essays.

Outstanding

- There is a powerful, memorable, and unique message or theme connecting the essay.
- I can easily summarize the essay in a sentence.
- I would have no trouble remembering this essay, even after reading 100 other essays responding to the same prompt.
- I could easily recall the main point of this essay (and the student) a week from now.

Instructions: Circle the bullet points that best reflect the essay. Add notes below.

Detailed Rubric 3

Show, Don't Tell

Overview: Bring your essay to life by showing them who you are. Make them feel as though they know you, as if they are/were there with you.

Needs Work

- For the most part, the author shows reactions, feelings, deeper insights.
- For the most part, the author shows me who they are, how they think, etc. with real examples.
- I can picture these stories with some effort, but they do not have many engaging details that bring me into the stories.

Great

- The author shows reactions, feelings, deeper insights.
- The author uses examples to illustrate who they are, how they think, etc.
- I can easily picture these stories with the vivid details in the essay.
- I have a sense of how this person thinks or acts.

Excellent

- The author delves beyond the obvious to show how experiences or interactions impacted them, illustrating their feelings, thoughts, etc.
- The author always uses poignant examples to illustrate who they are, how they think, etc.
- I can easily picture these stories with the vivid details in the essay.
- I have a strong sense of how this person thinks or acts. I feel I know what it'd be like to chat with them.

Outstanding

- The author delves beyond the obvious to show how experiences or interactions impacted them, illustrating their feelings, thoughts, etc.
- I feel as though I were there with them during these moments.
- The author always uses poignant examples to illustrate who they are, how they think, etc.
- I naturally picture these experiences or stories as I read them because of the vivid details in the essay.
- I have a strong sense of how this person thinks or acts. I feel I know what it'd be like to chat with them.

Instructions: Circle the bullet points that best reflect the essay. Add notes below.

Detailed Rubric 4

Captivating Intro

Overview: You don't get a second chance to make a first impression. Grab their attention and reel them into your essay!

Needs Work

- The first sentence is interesting, but not very unique.
- The intro is a bit hard to get through (confusing, long, complex.)
- The intro borrows an analogy or uses someone else's ideas or words instead of the author's.
- There are some broad statements that do not move the essay forward.

Great

- The first sentence is interesting and somewhat unique.
- The first sentence is short and simple.
- The intro provides focus for the essay.
- The intro does not ramble, but does have some unnecessary info.
- The intro does not borrow anyone else's ideas or words.
- Only a handful of people could write this intro.
- The intro captures attention and makes me want to read on.

Excellent

- The first sentence is interesting and unique.
- The first sentence is short and simple.
- The intro provides focus and direction for the essay.
- The intro is concise.
- The author's personality is visible even in the intro.
- Only this individual could write this intro.
- The intro captures attention and makes me want to read on.
- The intro seamlessly transitions into the subsequent content.

Outstanding

- The first sentence is interesting, personal, and original.
- The first sentence is short, simple, and captivating.
- The intro provides focus and direction for the essay.
- The intro is concise and powerful.
- The author's personality is visible from the outset.
- Only this individual could write this intro.
- The intro captures attention and launches the reader into the next paragraph or idea.
- The intro seamlessly transitions into the subsequent content.

Instructions: Circle the bullet points that best reflect the essay. Add notes below.

Detailed Rubric 5

Engaging Voice

Overview: An animated, engaging voice is critical to keep attention and make a lasting impression.

Needs Work

- There is some varied sentence structure, punctuation, and vocabulary but certain areas are monotonous, slow, or repetitive.
- Some points or ideas could be articulated more clearly.
- There is some fluff and jargon.
- The essay jumps from one idea to the next.
- It **sounds** like the author used a thesaurus.
- Some parts are cliché.
- It's hard to distinguish the author's voice.

Great

- There is varied sentence structure, punctuation, and vocabulary.
- Any repetition is intentional.
- Writing is clear and concise.
- Transitions are used as appropriate.
- There is no fluff.
- There is no unnecessary jargon.
- It sounds like the author.
- There are no clichés.

Excellent

- Varied sentence structure, vocab, and punctuation make it easy and fun to read.
- Literary devices make reading the essay easier or more enjoyable.
- Writing is clear and to the point.
- The author easily transitions between ideas.
- Every sentence is crucial to the essay (there is no fluff).
- The author's unique voice and personality shine through.

Outstanding

- Varied sentence structure, vocab, and punctuation make it easy and fun to read.
- The author uses literary devices that bring their essay to life.
- Writing is clear and to the point.
- The author seamlessly transitions between ideas.
- Every sentence is crucial to the essay and moves it forward.
- The author's unique voice and personality shine through.
- I feel as though they are talking to me when I read the essay.

Instructions: Circle the bullet points that best reflect the essay. Add notes below.

Detailed Rubric 6

Emotional Connection

Overview: Keep your audience in mind. Consider how you want to make them feel at the end of the day.

Needs Work

- Inspires some emotional reaction but no lasting connection.
- Emotional connections could be stronger in certain areas.
- Left with negative or sad feelings.
- There are some significant moments that could be made more memorable.

Great

- Inspires emotional reaction or connection through storytelling.
- Creates lingering feelings after the essay finishes.
- Musters a positive view and feelings about the author, their story or their future.
- Does not foster negative emotions.
- Would be easy to remember later today.

Excellent

- Inspires emotional connection through masterful storytelling and attention to detail.
- Creates positive lingering feelings about the author, their story, and their future.
- Creates an emotional bond with the author and a desire to see them succeed.
- Would be easy to remember after reading 20 other essays.

Outstanding

- Inspires deep emotional connection through masterful storytelling and attention to detail.
- Creates positive lingering feelings about the author, their story, and their future.
- Creates an emotional bond with the author that makes me want to advocate for them or "go to bat" to make sure they succeed.
- Would be difficult to forget, even after 100 other essays because of the emotional reaction and connection formed.
- I feel compelled to share their story.

Instructions: Circle the bullet points that best reflect the essay. Add notes below.

Detailed Rubric 7

Insight into You

Overview: Include personal reflection and opinion to help readers learn about YOU, your thought process, your character, etc.

Needs Work

- Answers most of the 4 core questions at least somewhat: Who am I? Why am I here? What is unique about me? and What matters to me?
- Transforms at least one specific experience into a deeper insight about who the author is.
- If I knew nothing about the author beforehand, I'd now have a positive view of who they are.
- I generally understand why they are applying to college and how it ties into their big picture.

Great

- Answers each of the 4 core questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is unique about me? and What matters to me?
- Transforms specific experience(s) into deeper insights about the author's character.
- If I knew nothing about the author beforehand, I'd now have a positive view of who they are.
- I can clearly see why they are applying to college and how it ties into their big picture.

Excellent

- Clearly answers each of the 4 core questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is unique about me? and What matters to me?
- Transforms specific experience(s) into deeper insights about the author's character and thought processes.
- If I knew nothing about the author beforehand, I'd now have a positive view of who they are and what they want to accomplish.
- I understand why college is an integral part of their growth and how they hope to use their education.

Outstanding

- Clearly answers each of the 4 core questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is unique about me? and What matters to me? (As the reader, I could easily point to the parts of the essay where they answer these questions.)
- Transforms specific experience(s) into deeper insights about the author's character and thought processes.
- If I knew nothing about the author beforehand, I'd now have an inspired view of who they are and what they want to accomplish.
- I understand why college is an integral part of their growth and believe they will make great use of their education. Based on this alone, I'd advocate for them.

Instructions: Circle the bullet points that best reflect the essay. Add notes below.

Detailed Rubric 8

Specific Details

Overview: Writing comes alive with specific word choice.

Needs Work

- Could use more details in stories to make them more memorable or tangible for the reader.
- May ramble or overuse detail to the point of distraction.
- As the reader, I sometimes wonder "who, what, when, where, why, or how" during the essay.

Great

- I can easily picture what the author is describing.
- The author uses details to make the stories more real.
- Does not ramble or overuse detail to the point of distraction.
- Always answers the 5Ws and H as necessary.

Excellent

- I naturally picture what the author is describing.
- The author uses details that make the stories more tangible and memorable.
- I feel drawn into the stories through the details.
- Does not ramble or overuse detail to the point of distraction.

Outstanding

- I naturally picture what the author is describing without effort: it's as though the scenes appear before me.
- The author uses details that make the stories more tangible and memorable.
- I feel drawn into the stories through the details, as if I were there to observe them myself.
- Each detail has a purpose and moves the story forward. The author does not ramble or use detail unnecessarily to the point of distraction.

Instructions: Circle the bullet points that best reflect the essay. Add notes below.

Detailed Rubric 9

Flawless Grammar

Overview: Don't trust spell check. Proofread multiple times and ask others to proofread. Use active voice, not passive voice.

When it comes to grammar in your application essays, admissions officers don't judge you on a sliding scale but a pass/fail grade. Thus, we only have 2 scores:

Needs Work

- Some typos
- Some grammatical errors
- Some punctuation errors
- Some spacing issues
- May surpass the word limit
- Some repetition of words, phrases, or sentence structure
- Sounds awkward in certain places

Outstanding

- No typos
- No grammatical errors
- No punctuation errors
- No spacing issues
- Adheres to the word limit
- Only intentional repetition of phrases or words so as to make a point or add to the essay
- Uses active voice whenever possible
- No awkward areas, sounds polished

Instructions: Circle the bullet points that best reflect the essay. Add notes below.

Detailed Rubric 10

Powerful Conclusion

Overview: If you want to be remembered at the end of the day under piles of other applications, you need to leave them with something to think about. Be the applicant they can't get out of their head, even as they read other essays.

Needs Work

- Does little more than summarize your main points.
- Uses generic phrases like "in conclusion" or "to conclude".
- Doesn't leave them with anything to think about.
- Ties most of the essay back together, with a couple loose ends.

Great

- Doesn't just summarize the essay's main points.
- Uses interesting transitions and concluding phrases (no "in conclusion" or "to conclude").
- Leaves an idea, thought, or question to think about.
- Ties the essay/stories back together in a satisfying way or leaves it open-ended so they keep wondering what happened (and curious to find out.)

Excellent

- Naturally transitions from the previous anecdote or point into the conclusion.
- Clearly ties up any loose ends and creates a holistic story or thesis that represents the author.
- Leaves the reader with a thought-provoking or captivating idea, thought, or question to think about.
- Ties the essay/stories back together in a satisfying way or leaves it open-ended so they keep wondering what happened (and curious to find out.)
- Gives the reader a call to action.

Outstanding

- Naturally transitions from the previous anecdote or point into the conclusion.
- Clearly ties up any loose ends and creates a holistic story or thesis that represents the author in a positive, memorable way.
- Leaves the reader with a thought-provoking or captivating idea, thought, or question that they can't get out of their head.
- Ties the essay/stories back together in a satisfying way or leaves it open-ended so they keep wondering what happened (and desperate to find out.)
- Compels the reader to act: advocate for the author, share the essay or idea, etc.

Instructions: Circle the bullet points that best reflect the essay. Add notes below.

Final Questions

After you review all the feedback, determine which to use. Remember, we don't want to lose your voice and personality under all the advice.

Look at your essay critically. If many people offer the same advice, pay attention. But if someone tells you to edit your essay in a way that makes it feel like it's not yours anymore, consider the matter more deeply.

After you jot down revisions, look at your essay one more time:

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Does this essay show insight into who I am, what matters to me, and what makes me unique? Yes / No

Does it sound like me? Yes / No

Am I proud of it? Yes / No

Does it answer the question? Yes / No

Do I open and close with a punch? Yes / No

If you answered 'no' to any of these, why? What could you do to make it a resounding YES!