

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD WRITING

E. B. White, one of America's finest writers, once observed that there is "no infallible guide to good writing." There are, however, some principles of good writing which can be learned and which, when learned, can improve virtually everyone's writing. A first requirement is that one find something of interest, preferably something original, to say about the subject at hand. Having satisfied the first requirement, the writer's second goal is to communicate his or her ideas with absolute clarity. To communicate clearly in an essay of the kind required on the MCAT one must focus on the three major components of written communication: (1) unity and coherence, (2) support of the main idea with concrete details and examples, and (3) mechanical concerns.

Unity in an essay results from having a sharply focused central idea, often referred to as a thesis. This thesis typically includes the subject about which one is writing and a predicate, which consists of the major point or points that the writer is making about the subject. The body of the essay will develop this thesis in detail, and the essay will have unity or lack of it to the degree that the writer maintains focus on the central idea. If, for example, the thesis of an essay is that justice (the subject) is blind (the predicate), the essay will be unified in direct proportion to the skill with which the writer maintains focus on this thesis—in other words, the success he or she has in avoiding excursions into subjects unrelated, or related only tangentially, to the main idea.

Closely related to unity in an essay is coherence, which refers to the integration of the various parts. When ideas in a composition flow smoothly from one idea to another and thus create the sense that each idea follows logically from the one preceding it, the essay is said to have coherence. A primary way that one achieves coherence is by using transitional words and phrases such as "moreover," "however," "therefore," "in other words," and "for example." In a good essay each sentence flows smoothly into the next, and each paragraph grows logically from the one which precedes it.

If an essay, therefore, contains those ingredients mentioned above—unity, typically resulting from a thoughtful, original thesis which runs through the essay much the way the spinal column runs through the body, and coherence, which results from the use of devices that hold sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph, much the way glue holds clippings on the page of a scrapbook—it will very likely be a good, strong essay. To make a good essay better and a very good one excellent requires attention to the two remaining aspects of written communication: (1) supporting, concrete details and examples and (2) mechanics. For an essay to convey a sense of authority, general or abstract statements must be anchored in specific details. If one asserts, for example, that the American dollar is strong in the world market, he or she might observe that it is worth \$1.30 in Canada. Or if one is writing about the dangers of horseback riding and jumping, he or she might cite the paralysis from the neck down of the experienced equestrian, Christopher Reeve.

The final area for concern for this discussion is mechanics, which covers such things as grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Because many mechanical errors result from carelessness, all writers should proofread as carefully as time permits. There is little disagreement among writing teachers as to the importance of revision, but in a timed essay such as that on the MCAT, there will be a minimum amount of time to devote to revision. You should, however, proofread your essay at least once and, because it will be scored as a rough draft, do not hesitate to make interlinear corrections as neatly as you can when you see that you have made a mechanical error, such as a misspelling, faulty punctuation, or a subject-verb disagreement. Neatness, while certainly a praiseworthy quality in any manuscript, is much less important on the MCAT essay than that the essay be legible.

Bryant Mangum
Virginia Commonwealth University