More cheating, here from cowardice rather than emptiness or deception. Don’t waffle. If you have something to say, say it: I was tired. Megan is opinionated. That’s risky.

Clearly, in the rush of your draft you will use many words that don’t pull their weight. Obviously, you can revise out all sloppiness, all smoke screens, all cheating. Unquestionably, you will write a better essay if you do.

TRANSITIONS

Writing transitions is the art of getting from here to there and back in your thoughts without jolting the reader out of his seat. Think of your essay as a chain. Each link (idea, anecdote, description) is complete in itself and yet is also part of the one before and the one after. Many of the usual devices for connecting parts of an essay are useful and quick if not skillful: but, instead, now, later, then. But others are clanky: nevertheless, therefore, moreover, in addition, thus, more important, secondly (and thirdly), finally, and other formal, archaic-sounding words. They clank because, like chains in the attic, they carry the sound of deadness.

Sometimes you can’t avoid the ordinary devices. Updike, the least clanky of writers, calls on them in making transitions in “Beer Can”: although he shifts simply from present to past with the use of “was” in his third sentence, he brings back the present with “Now we are given, instead.” Then “However” and “But” take us into the future. But because the shifts are quick, the words do not call attention to themselves, and we hardly notice the transitions at all. That’s the goal.

In “Summer Beyond Wish” (p. 128), Russell Baker doesn’t even try to make smooth transitions. He moves from scene to scene like a filmmaker, in sharp cuts. He can do this because he’s arranged his images in gradually increasing importance and because he’s followed the sequence of a day—morning images first, then afternoon happenings, and then evening.

Transitions connect or contrast time or thought. Sketch the big movements of your essay, the way an artist suggests with a few broad strokes the main shapes in his composition. Is the piece an If... but no... therefore essay? Or is it in two sections, Once... but now? Or a simple time sequence: This... then this... then this? There are as many formats as there are essays. Charting the main transitions in your draft can help you polish its shape.

TRIMMING THE FAT: AN ABSURDLY BRIEF GUIDE

Many college essays are bloated with sentences that could be tightened or completely eliminated. When you’ve got only five hundred words—and often fewer—to nourish readers, every one must count.

In other words, simplify. Here are ways to reduce the most unsightly sentence fat.

1. Who, which, that, and what often swell a sentence with blubber. Use them only when necessary.

   FAT:
   Uncle Nathan is someone who cares only about fly fishing.
   TRIM:
   Uncle Nathan cares only about fly fishing.

2. There and it are often unnecessary.

   FAT:
   Todd had a dog which he took on long walks.
   TRIM:
   Todd took his dog on long walks.

   FAT:
   What Betty hoped was that the president would admit a mistake.
   TRIM:
   Betty hoped the president would admit a mistake.

2. There and it are often unnecessary.

   FAT:
   There were geese swimming on the pond.
   TRIM:
   Geese swam on the pond.
It is the love of fly fishing that keeps Uncle Nathan going.

Love of fly fishing keeps Uncle Nathan going.

At the end of the play there was a groan from the audience.

At the end of the play the audience groaned.

The thing I'm interested in is science.

I'm interested in science.

Fifty years ago, it was natural for athletes to play before adoring crowds.

Fifty years ago, athletes expected to play before adoring crowds.

In a telephone survey it was shown that there is little support for secret operations.

A telephone survey revealed little support for secret operations.

We know honesty is a quality and your brother is a person.

Try cutting out the second helpings in this paragraph:

A piano is a temperamental thing. The unpredictable nature of this instrument is apparent to anyone who has an old one, as we do. My mom's big upright has good days, when it sounds like a concert grand. It also has bad days, when the keys become stiff or sticky as a result of slight changes in humidity, and it never quite acts the same under different conditions. It's often as stubborn as a mule. When the temperature is colder, the tone has a harder character than when it is warm. At these times it makes sounds more like something being tortured.

An old piano is as temperamental as a mule. On good days my mom's big upright sounds like a concert grand. But when the humidity changes quickly, the keys stiffen and stick and the tone hardens, and it whines and groans as if tortured.

Replace vague verbs. Remember, verbs are the muscles of writing. Become, get, do, make, and have are weak muscles; they don't generate motion or action. Reread the two paragraphs above.

the keys become stiff or sticky

the keys stiffen and stick

the tone has a harder character

the tone hardens

it makes sounds more like something being tortured.
it whines and groans as if tortured.

7. Replace passive verbs. Use the active voice. The passive voice fattens on lazy uses of to be:

PASSIVE: Gooden’s next pitch was lined by Boggs into left.
ACTIVE: Boggs lined Gooden’s next pitch into left.

PASSIVE: This bread was baked by Mr. Schiller.
ACTIVE: Mr. Schiller baked this bread.

PASSIVE: In the scene it was proved that Gatsby was innocent.
ACTIVE: The scene proved Gatsby innocent.

As you can see, sometimes one fatty usage leads to another—in this case, a sagging it developed a passive verb, which led to a lazy was.

One warning about all this butchering. You can’t always cut out an is, or a which, or a there. These words have their uses. “It is hot,” for example—two empty calories out of three—can’t really be tightened or improved. The same is true of the passive voice—a writer will now and then use it purposefully, as Russell Baker does on page 129. When Baker writes, “Kerosene lamps were cleaned and polished,” the passive expresses a child’s feeling of distance from grown-up chores, as if they somehow get done magically without a doer.

Writing isn’t a matter of rule, but of taste. Read, write, and ruthlessly edit, and you won’t mistake fat for good meat.

CORRECT DOESN’T COUNT

When you trim the fat, you’re strengthening, not correcting. No grammar book would complain of “the keys become stiff or sticky.” It’s correct, but that doesn’t make it good. Many people write empty, deceitful prose that is perfectly “correct.” But many people don’t get in to First Choice University. Think about what you’re trying to say and don’t be concerned about correctness.

Why not? Because admissions officers—not being editors or English teachers—don’t know or care much about the fine points of grammar. Most admissions officers wouldn’t know which is correct:

A. Chris is one of those reporters who always meets his deadline.
B. Chris is one of those reporters who always meet their deadlines.

Even admissions readers who do know can’t pause long enough to think about it, and it doesn’t make much difference. (B is correct; “who” refers to reporters, not Chris.)

I don’t mean throw grammar and punctuation out the window. Just don’t think about it. Unless you have problems with the basics—periods at the end of sentences, subject-verb agreement—it’s not an issue. By senior year you know enough grammar to write a college essay. Use what you’re familiar with and don’t get fancy. Concentrate on the writing.

Spelling is different. I’ve seen otherwise intelligent admissions officers get themselves into a lather about student spelling, as if it mattered. (Usually because the applicant misspelled the name of the college.) Spelling is a visual skill that has nothing to do with intelligence. Either you can spell or you can’t spell. Many great writers can’t. Many admissions officers can. Solution: give your essay to a good speller when you’re finished. And follow the same principle if you can’t help worrying about the grammar: give it to someone who’s good at it.

Neatness also counts. If your handwriting looks like mashed insects, type your essay. If the college instructs you to write in your own hand, as Brown does, print carefully or send a typed translation as well.

But even so, remember that one typo or spelling error won’t sink you. One empty idea, vaguely developed, will.