

University applications tips and useful phrases

Cross off the tips below which are definitely bad ideas, leaving any which you think are good or are possibly good (depending on the situation etc).

Content

1. Get as much information about yourself into the essay as you can, starting with a detailed biography.
2. Only mention things which are relevant to your application, i.e. things which could be used by someone to decide that you are the right person for a place on the course.
3. It's okay if most of the information in your application essay or email is the same as in your CV or application form.
4. Put in lots of positive words about yourself.
5. *Include positive things about yourself, giving evidence for each thing.*
6. *Also use positive words to describe experiences.*
7. *Include some negative things, showing something positive about them such as how you got over them.*
8. *Say why you particularly want to study at that university.*
9. *Say why you want to study that subject in particular.*
10. *Make it clear that you understand the demands of the course/ what you will be required to do during the course, explaining why you are sure you will be able to cope and benefit from it.*
11. *Mention people, books, ideas, etc which have influenced you.*
12. *Mention the future.*
13. *If you want to mention things or concepts that don't exist in English, put the word or expression in italics or quotation marks and then explain it.*
14. Imagine what questions someone reading the essay might have, and then try and answer them.

Language and organisation

15. Use as many long, complex words and sentences as you can.
16. Divide your writing into paragraphs, with a (at least slightly) different topic in each paragraph.
17. Include an introduction and conclusion.
18. Try to avoid clichés.
19. Spend a lot of time on making sure your essay is original, stylish, easy to read and amusing.
20. Add lots of linking expressions like "On the other hand" and "Moreover"

Process

21. Only look at other people's essays when you have written at least the first draft of your own.
22. Leave your essay for about a week after writing it and then go back and check it with a fresh eye.
23. After you have polished it up and edited it as much as you can, pay for a native English-speaking proofreader.
24. It's better to go beyond the word or character limit than to miss something important.
25. Cut the essay down until you get down to exactly the right number of words or characters.

Compare as a class or with the suggested answers, brainstorm useful language for doing the things in italics above, then compare those phrases.

Suggested answers

Bold = not a good idea

Content

- 1. Get as much information about yourself into the essay as you can, starting with a detailed biography.**
2. Only mention things which are relevant to your application, i.e. things which could be used by someone to decide that you are the right person for a place on the course.
- 3. It's okay if most of the information in your application essay or email is the same as in your CV or application form.**
- 4. Put in lots of positive words about yourself.**
5. Include positive things about yourself, giving evidence for each thing. – “I have proved...”, “People have described me as...”, “I was named...”, “I think... shows...”, “I was awarded... for...”, “Due to... I was able to...”, “My knowledge of... helped me to adapt to...”, “My experience of... has allowed me to develop...”, “I have used my ability to... to...”, “Using..., I accomplished...”, “I found my adaptability to be useful when...”, “By... I was able to contribute to...”, “ambitious”, “creative”/ “original”, “curious”, “diligent”/ “hard working”, “efficient”, “energetic”, “adaptable”/ “flexible”, “independent”/ “self-sufficient”/ “proactive”, “logical”/ “systematic”, “dynamic”, “innovative”, “mature”, “broad minded”/ “open-minded”, “organized”, “proactive”, “dependable”/ “reliable”/ “responsible”, “determined”/ “resilient”, “sociable”, “caring”/ “sympathetic”, “well-rounded”, “motivated”, “teamwork”, “leadership qualities
6. Also use positive words to describe experiences. – “I found... to be very rewarding”, “I gained a lot from...”, “... was a life-changing/ life-affirming/ inspiring/ rewarding/ invaluable/ eye opening experience”, “... (really) broadened my horizons”
7. Include some negative things, showing something positive about them such as how you got over them. – “I (eventually) overcame this by...”, “In the end I learnt that...”, “With the help of...”, “Although it took some time,...”, “Initially/ To start with/ At first..., but (eventually/ in the end)...”, “... although I wouldn't realise it until many years later”, “a blessing in disguise”, “I thought I'd missed the opportunity to..., but...”, “By approaching the problem in a... way, I was able to...”, “I didn't know how to react to... but...”, “I really struggled with...”, “I wish that I could have..., but...”, “... made me question my assumptions”, “The hardest thing about.... was...”
8. Say why you particularly want to study at that university. – “... is well-known for... and I...”, “According to..., your institution... and I...”
9. Say why you want to study that subject in particular. – “I was inspired to study... by...”, “The perfect course for me would... and I believe I can find this...”, “This program would be the best way to...”, “... is exactly what I'm looking for because...”, “I have been looking for a class where I can...”, “I'm particularly keen on extending my knowledge of... by...”, “a perfect opportunity to...”
10. Make it clear that you understand the demands of the course/ what you will be required to do during the course, explaining why you are sure you will be able to cope and benefit from it. – “I'm eager to tackle...”, “I'm looking forward to the challenge of...”, “Although the course..., I'm sure I...”, “I'm not daunted by the prospect of... because...”, “an exciting challenge”, “I'm determined to...”

11. Mention people, books, ideas, etc which have influenced you. – “I was inspired by... to...”, “After reading/ hearing/ meeting...,...”, “Ever since (first) reading/ hearing/ meeting...,...”, “... convinced me that...”, “I have been fascinated with... since...”, “My interest in... started when...”, “... has been a great influence on me, particularly...”, “I have developed a strong interest in (the area of) ... due to...”, “my mentor...”, “my role model...”, “... taught me...”, “I learned... from...”, “I first gained my passion for...”, “It was then that I appreciated...”, “It was this that taught me to appreciate...”
12. Mention the future. – “My ambition is to...”, “After finishing the course, I am planning to...”, “The course will help me... in the future”, “in the short/ long term,...”, “my ultimate aim/ goal”
13. If you want to mention things or concepts that don't exist in English, put the word or expression in italics or quotation marks and then explain it. – “There is a word in Japanese..., which means/ could be defined as/ is similar to...”
14. Imagine what questions someone reading the essay might have, and then try and answer them.

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Choose the most useful words and phrases above for you.

Which positive things are most important to show?

Try to think of positive words that you could use in your application and then evidence for each.