Within “good essay land” are many, many approaches to style.

None of them is **best**. But one of them is “**most you**.”

Plan your draft, write it, then revise.
Notes on *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White

**Rules of Use**

1. **MAKE A NOUN POSSESSIVE by adding ‘s — Phil’s car**
   a. plural nouns get only a ’ — the cars’ engines, the buses’ seats
   b. most pronouns get no apostrophe — his, hers, yours, ours, its
   c. but indefinite pronouns do — one’s rights, someone else’s toys

2. **USE COMMAS TO SEPARATE A LIST of 3+ nouns or verbs. The last also gets a conjunction.**
   *Gene, Sal, and I can pay Phil’s mortgage, bills, or car payment.*  *I ate, walked, drank, stank, and slept on Sunday.*
   a. For the names of business firms, omit the last comma — Little, Brown & Company

3. **EXTRA INFO? Enclose it in commas. EXTRA INFO includes...**
   a. A name or title used to directly address someone — I think not, Sir. You, Susan, are in trouble.
   b. Titles following a name — Horace Fulsome, Ph.D., presided.
   c. etc., i.e. and e.g. — Letters, bills, etc., go here.
   d. A phrase (includes subject and verb) of info not required for the sentence to make sense — In 1769, *when Napoleon was born*, Corsica had only recently been acquired by France.

4. **JOINING TWO SENTENCES? If each has a subject and verb, then they’re “complete sentences.” Use a comma, PLUS a conjunction that shows how the two are related.** *Gene went home, but Sal went to the library.*
   a. Omit the comma if using “and” to combine two closely related thoughts about the same subject.
   b. OR use a semicolon. — *Gene went home; Sal went to the library.* …to suggest that the two are part of the same thought.
   c. OR let them stand as separate sentences. — *Gene went home. Sal went to the library.* …to suggest that the two are separate thoughts.

7. **GOT COLON? A colon must follow a complete sentence that makes sense on its own. A colon functions to...**
   a. ...add a LIST of particulars — *A whittler needs three things: a knife, a wood block, and a porch.*
   b. ...add EXTRA INFO — *My biography regards the Bard: the great playwright, Shakespeare.*
   c. ...add a SECOND SENTENCE THAT AMPLIFIES the first — *There was a directness and dispatch about animal burial: there was no stopover in the undertaker’s foul parlor, no wreath or spray.*
   d. ...add an ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTATION — The squalor reminded her of a line from Oscar Wilde: “We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.”

8. **USE A DASH only when other punctuation won’t suffice, to...**
   ...set off a long statement of EXTRA INFO — *His first thought upon waking—weak and half-dead of starvation—was a longing for his dreams.*
   ...or to SHOW AN ABRUPT BREAK or interruption — *The rear axle made a noise—an ear-splitting squeal.*

9. **The NUMBER OF THE SUBJECT must determine the NUMBER OF THE VERB.**
   *One of those people who is never ready on time → One of those people who are never ready on time*
   a. Any noun which refers to a unit is singular, and therefore demands a singular verb
      *The audience is clapping. → The audience is clapping.*
      *Politics are arts, not sciences. → Politics is an art, not a science.*
   b. Most compound subjects require a plural verb — *Gene and Sal are bums.*
   c. ...unless connected by with, as well as, in addition to, except, together with, or no less than.
      *Gene, together with Sal, is a bum.*
   d. Certain cliché compounds are inseparable, and are therefore comprise a single unit
      *The long and the short of it is...*  *Give and take is essential...*

10. **Use the correct PRONOUN FORM. Note: He, she, we, they, and who take different forms as subjects (performing the action) than they do as objects (receiving the action)**
    *Will he or Jane be hired? Surely we will hire him or Jane.*
    *Who knocks? Upon answering the door, whom did you see?*

11. **AVOID IMPLIED VERBS: state them outright**
    *Polly loves cake more than me. → Polly loves cake more than she loves me.*

12. **Extra info that begins a sentence must refer to the subject of the sentence —**
    *As a soldier of proven valor, they entrusted him with the city’s defenses.*
    *As a soldier of proven valor, he was entrusted with the city’s defenses.*

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**Doyen Rainey, UT Dallas, NAAHP Conference, Washington, DC, June 2018**
Principles of Composition

13. Choose a structure and stick to it.

14. Make the paragraph the unit of composition

   In dialogue, each new statement gets its own paragraph.
   Single sentences rarely constitute a paragraph, except to transition between two full paragraphs.
   In non-fiction, the first sentence of each paragraph should suggest what the paragraph will discuss and/or illustrate what role the paragraph will play in the overall composition.
   In fiction, the first sentence of each paragraph should suggest the main subject of the paragraph.
   In unmediated, rushing narrative, paragraphing serves only to provide a rhetorical pause, throwing the action into prominence.
   Paragraphing can also break up long, intimidating blocks of text.

15. Use the ACTIVE VOICE

   My first visit to Boston will forever be remembered by me. \(\rightarrow\) I will forever remember my first visit to Boston.
   There were dead leaves covering the ground. \(\rightarrow\) Dead leaves covered the ground.
   Note that making a sentence stronger usually makes it shorter. Shorter is good.

16. Delete TAME, COLORLESS, HESITATING, or NON-COMMITTAL words

   She found Latin somewhat boring \(\rightarrow\) She found Latin boring.
   He did not pay attention to... \(\rightarrow\) He ignored...

17. Use specific, concrete language

   A period of unfavorable weather set in. \(\rightarrow\) It rained for a week.
   He seemed pleased when he got his reward. \(\rightarrow\) He smiled and pocketed the coin.

18. Delete NEEDLESS WORDS

   he is a man who \(\rightarrow\) he
   in a hasty manner \(\rightarrow\) hastily
   this is a subject that \(\rightarrow\) this subject

   Delete ADVERBS. Use a more accurate or interesting verb instead.

   He ran very fast. \(\rightarrow\) He sprinted. He launched. He hurtled. He took off running.
   He quickly, brutally, and repeatedly punched... \(\rightarrow\) He pummeled... He jackhammered...

   Delete “the fact that,” “who is,” “which was,” and the like.
   the fact that he had not succeeded \(\rightarrow\) his failure
   His cousin, who is a member of the same firm \(\rightarrow\) His cousin, a member of the same firm.
   Trafalgar, which was Nelson's last battle \(\rightarrow\) Trafalgar, Nelson's last battle

19. Vary sentence structure

   Sentences should be varied enough that a repeated structure stands out.

20. To link similar ideas in the reader's mind, express them using PARALLELISM (artistically repeated structure)

   Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth...

   Even individual words can create parallelism.
   The French, Italians, Spanish, and Portuguese \(\rightarrow\) The French, the Italians, the Spanish, and the Portuguese
   A time not for words but action \(\rightarrow\) A time not for words but for action

   Repeated sounds and meters create parallelism, too
   It was autumn, the springtime of death. Rain spattered the rotting leaves and a wild wind wailed. Death was singing in the shower. Death was happy to be alive. (Tim Robbins, Still Life with Woodpecker)

   And the results of parallelism are significant.

   It was a time of both good and bad events \(\rightarrow\) It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.

21. KEEP RELATED WORDS TOGETHER

   The position of words in a sentence implies their relationship to each other. Keep those relationships clear.
   The large stain he noticed in the rug was right in the center. \(\rightarrow\) He noticed a large stain right in the center of the rug.
   Often, extra info is better placed at the beginning of the sentence so that it doesn't break up the flow.
   You can call your mother, for two dollars, about George. \(\rightarrow\) For two dollars, you can call your mother about George.

   Separating modifiers from the words they modify only creates confusion
   He wrote three articles in the magazine about Spain. \(\rightarrow\) He wrote three articles about Spain in the magazine.

22. Place the EMPHATIC WORDS at the beginning, or at the end.

   Humanity has hardly grown in fortitude since then, though it has grown in other ways. \(\rightarrow\)
   Since then, though it has grown in other ways, humanity has hardly grown in fortitude.

   Words other than the subject are emphasized when placed at the beginning.
   “Deceit,” she said, “I can never forgive.”