

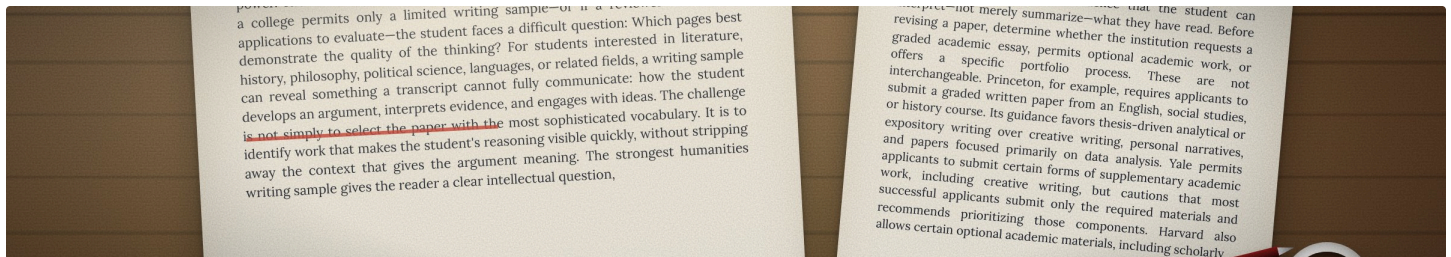
ADMISSIONS STRATEGY

The Humanities Portfolio: How to Present Long-Form Writing Without Boring Readers



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A student submits a 15-page paper on Shakespeare, a historical investigation of immigration policy, or an essay examining the relationship between language and power. The work may be thoughtful, well researched, and carefully written. But if a college permits only a limited writing sample—or if a reviewer has several applications to evaluate—the student faces a difficult question: Which pages best demonstrate the quality of the thinking?

For students interested in literature, history, philosophy, political science, languages, or related fields, a writing sample can reveal something a transcript cannot fully communicate: how the student develops an argument, interprets evidence, and engages with ideas.

The challenge is not simply to select the paper with the most sophisticated vocabulary. It is to identify work that makes the student's reasoning visible quickly, without stripping away the context that gives the argument meaning.

The strongest humanities writing sample gives the reader a clear intellectual question, a defensible argument, and evidence that the student can interpret—not merely summarize—what they have read.

FIRST, UNDERSTAND WHAT THE COLLEGE ACTUALLY WANTS

Before revising a paper, determine whether the institution requests a graded academic essay, permits optional academic work, or offers a specific portfolio process. These are not interchangeable.

Princeton, for example, requires applicants to submit a graded written paper from an English, social studies, or history course. Its guidance favors thesis-driven analytical or expository writing over creative writing, personal narratives, and papers focused primarily on data analysis.¹

Yale permits applicants to submit certain forms of supplementary academic work, including creative writing, but cautions that most successful applicants submit only the required materials and recommends prioritizing those components.²

Harvard also allows certain optional academic materials, including scholarly articles and creative writing, through its applicant portal. Its instructions specify that students submitting such work should identify collaborators.³

These examples demonstrate why families should not automatically create a separate humanities portfolio for every college. A school may require an ordinary classroom paper, permit an optional sample, or have no appropriate submission route for the material.

The assignment matters, too. If a college requests a paper written for a class, submitting a heavily rewritten independent essay may fail to meet the instructions. Students should follow the actual requirements rather than assume that a more polished or longer piece is always preferable.

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Students often gravitate toward their longest paper, their most personal essay, or the assignment that received the highest grade. Each may be a reasonable starting point, but none is automatically the best choice.

CHOOSE THE PAPER THAT BEST DEMONSTRATES YOUR THINKING

Instead, evaluate a paper against four criteria.

A clear intellectual question. Does the paper investigate a specific problem, tension, interpretation, or historical question? A broad topic such as “The American Revolution” is difficult to develop in a short sample. A focused question about competing ideas of political representation gives the argument a clearer direction.

A defensible thesis. Does the paper advance an interpretation that can be supported with evidence? “Shakespeare uses imagery throughout Macbeth” announces a subject. An argument about how recurring images of illness transform the play’s portrayal of political disorder makes a claim that the writer must demonstrate.

Meaningful use of sources. Does the student explain what evidence means and why it supports the argument? A paper filled with quotations may demonstrate reading, but quotations alone do not demonstrate analysis.

A coherent structure. Can a reader follow the reasoning from the opening claim through the evidence to the conclusion? A paper may contain excellent paragraphs but still be a weak submission if its argument depends on several pages of background before becoming clear.

The best sample is often the one in which these qualities work together. A narrow, well-supported interpretation can reveal more about a student’s intellectual ability than a sweeping argument that the available evidence cannot sustain.

MAKE THE OPENING ESTABLISH A REAL QUESTION

A humanities paper does not need a dramatic opening designed to resemble a magazine article. It needs to establish the intellectual problem clearly enough that readers understand what is at stake.

Consider a hypothetical paper about a historical speech.

Weak opening: “Throughout history, speeches have played an important role in shaping society. Many leaders have used speeches to influence their audiences.”

These statements are broadly true but provide little direction. They could introduce thousands of papers.

Stronger opening: “The speech presents national unity as its central goal, yet its description of political opponents repeatedly draws boundaries around who belongs to the nation.”

The second opening identifies a tension that can be investigated through the text. It also gives the reader a reason to continue: how can a speech promote unity while defining some people as outsiders?

A strong introduction should establish the relevant context, identify the question, and present the paper’s main claim. It does not need to reveal every conclusion in the first sentence, nor should it manufacture a paradox simply to sound sophisticated.

For humanities writing, intellectual precision is usually more valuable than theatrical language.

SHOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SUMMARIZING AND ANALYZING

One of the most important distinctions in a humanities portfolio is the difference between reporting what a source says and explaining what it means.

Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab describes synthesis as bringing sources into conversation to develop a broader interpretation, rather than merely restating each source separately.⁴

Suppose a student is writing about the causes of a historical conflict.

A summary might explain that one historian emphasizes economic conditions while another emphasizes political institutions.

An analytical paragraph would go further. It might examine whether the historians use different definitions of political power, whether their evidence addresses the same period, and whether the two explanations can coexist.

The same principle applies to literary analysis. Identifying a metaphor is not the same as explaining its significance. A strong paper examines why the author uses that metaphor in a particular context, how it shapes the reader’s

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understanding, and how it supports the paper's broader interpretation.

A useful revision question is: After every quotation, paraphrase, or piece of evidence, have I explained what it establishes and how it advances my argument?

If the answer is repeatedly no, the paper may be relying on its sources to do the thinking for the writer.

SHOULD YOU INCLUDE AN ABSTRACT?

An abstract can be useful when the college explicitly requests one, when the submission format allows it, or when a research paper's subject and method would otherwise be difficult to understand quickly.

It should not be added automatically to a conventional classroom essay. If an institution requests a graded paper in its original form, adding a new abstract or substantially revising the assignment may be inappropriate.

For a permitted independent research submission, a concise abstract can identify the question, approach, principal argument, and conclusion.

For example, consider a hypothetical paper investigating how two newspapers described the same protest.

Sample abstract: "This paper examines how two newspapers framed a public protest through their descriptions of participants, political objectives, and public order. A comparative close reading identifies differences in word choice, source selection, and the attribution of responsibility. The analysis argues that the newspapers' framing choices shaped how readers were invited to interpret the protest, while recognizing that two publications cannot represent the full range of public opinion."

This abstract identifies the material examined, the method, and the central interpretation. It also acknowledges a limitation.

Notice what it does not do: claim that the paper proves how every reader reacted, assert that the research is groundbreaking, or use technical terminology without explanation.

An abstract should accurately summarize the work that exists—not promise a more ambitious paper than the student actually wrote.

EDIT FOR CLARITY WITHOUT ERASING THE STUDENT'S VOICE

Students preparing a writing sample may feel pressure to make every sentence sound more sophisticated. This often produces longer sentences, unnecessary terminology, and elaborate openings that obscure the actual argument.

Revision should instead improve precision.

Replace vague claims with specific ones. Remove background information that does not advance the argument. Check that paragraph transitions explain the relationship between ideas rather than simply announcing the next topic. Ensure that quotations are accurate and properly cited.

Students should also resist the temptation to remove every qualification. In history, philosophy, and literary studies, acknowledging a plausible alternative interpretation can make an argument more credible. Nuance is not indecision when the writer explains why one interpretation remains better supported.

Preserve the student's genuine intellectual voice. If a sentence uses terminology the student cannot explain in conversation, or if a claim extends beyond the evidence, the prose needs revision regardless of how polished it sounds.

Finally, respect academic integrity and the assignment's rules. Students should not present another person's writing or analysis as their own, and they should follow any restrictions on outside editing or assistance.

HOW SCHOLAR COACH HELPS STUDENTS SELECT AND REFINE A HUMANITIES WRITING SAMPLE

Scholar Coach helps students and families evaluate academic writing strategically while preserving the student's original thinking.

Step 1: Review the submission requirements. We identify whether the college requests a graded paper, accepts optional academic work, or provides a specific supplementary-material process. We check the required format, length, and submission instructions before recommending changes.

Step 2: Evaluate the student's existing papers. We compare potential samples for the quality of the thesis, depth of analysis, use of sources, organization, and clarity. We do

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not assume that the longest paper or highest grade is automatically the strongest choice.

Step 3: Identify the intellectual core. We help the student articulate the question being investigated, the argument being advanced, and the evidence that supports it. If the paper's central claim is unclear, we address that problem before polishing individual sentences.

Step 4: Strengthen the analysis. We examine whether quotations and source material are interpreted meaningfully, whether competing explanations receive fair consideration, and whether conclusions remain within the limits of the evidence.

Step 5: Edit for precision and coherence. We help remove unnecessary background, clarify transitions, refine word choice, and correct structural weaknesses while maintaining the student's voice and respecting the original assignment.

Step 6: Prepare supplementary context when appropriate. If the college permits an abstract, explanatory note, or additional research documentation, we help determine whether it adds useful information. We do not recommend extra materials simply because they are available.

The result is a writing sample selected for its actual intellectual strengths and presented in a format that meets the institution's requirements. Scholar Coach does not guarantee admission or imply that submitting optional work is always advantageous.

THE GOAL IS TO MAKE THE THINKING IMPOSSIBLE TO MISS

A strong humanities portfolio does not depend on an elaborate introduction, an impressive title, or a long list of sources. It depends on the relationship between the question, the argument, the evidence, and the student's interpretation.

Before submitting a paper, ask whether a reader can identify the central question, understand the thesis, follow the reasoning, and distinguish the student's analysis from the material borrowed from other sources.

If those elements are clear, the paper can demonstrate serious academic thinking without trying to impress through complexity alone.

For humanities applicants, the ultimate objective is not to sound like a university professor. It is to demonstrate the habits of a developing scholar: asking precise questions, reading carefully, weighing evidence, recognizing complexity, and making a defensible argument.

SOURCES

¹ Princeton University Admission, Graded Written Paper: <https://admission.princeton.edu/apply/graded-written-paper>

² Yale Undergraduate Admissions, Supplementary Materials: <https://admissions.yale.edu/supplementary>

³ Harvard College Admissions, Application Requirements: <https://college.harvard.edu/admissions/apply/application-requirements>

⁴ Purdue University Online Writing Lab, Synthesizing Sources: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/conducting_research/research_overview/synthesizing_sources.html

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