

# Demystifying the College Admission Essay Genre

*I am a girl who will do anything to be someone in life. I want to have a career and make my parents proud. In this workshop, I learned that when I put all my effort into writing something that matters to me and helps me move closer to achieving my life goals, then my work really shines.*

—Roxanna, 12th-grade student, written reflection

Roxanna, a student from Dan’s class, describes in this written reflection a sentiment shared by many of her classmates about the way the college admission essay workshop aligned with her future goals. She realized that she is more invested in her writing when she sees a clear connection between a writing task and her next life steps. The purpose of this chapter is to offer insight into the specific curricular and teaching choices involved in designing and implementing a real world, gate-opening writing workshop so teachers and researchers may draw from these pages to create similar opportunities for their students. This chapter provides:

- a. an overview of the college admission essay genre
- b. the key components of the college admission essay workshop
- c. examples of student writing produced in the workshop
- d. extensions and professional resources for teaching the college admission essay.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF THE COLLEGE ADMISSION ESSAY**

The college admission essay, personal statements, application letters, and other similar writing tasks hold a great deal of power. However, as with so many writing genres students encounter in their transition from high school to college and from college to the workplace, an air of mystery prevails. As reading skills and literary analysis become increasingly im-

portant in the classroom due to high-stakes testing, many students are not provided opportunities to engage in writing tasks that are of any-substance, depth, or complexity (Applebee & Langer, 2009). This is disconcerting for students who aspire to attend college and will encounter challenging and complex writing tasks in their college courses, as well as for those students who want solid-paying jobs with high literacy demands (American Diploma Project, 2004).

What is even more concerning is that low-income, second language, and ethnic minorities often miss out on these rich writing opportunities and are more likely to be exposed to skill and drill learning in the classroom due to issues of sorting and tracking as well as ongoing political pressures and scripted curriculum (Kohn, 1999; Oakes & Wells, 1998). Rather than engaging in a rich curriculum that helps them become productive members of the community and find success in college, the workplace, and beyond, far too many ethnically and linguistically diverse youth are immersed in remediated curriculum that is designed to help them perform well on standardized tests. However, engaging in gate-opening writing tasks helps students begin to understand how these tasks function both rhetorically and socially, and provides them with a form of currency that they may use to access and participate in various institutions of power, including universities, businesses, and community organizations.

Most colleges and universities in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and other countries around the world evaluate students' admission applications using multiple criteria. According to the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC, 2008), these criteria include:

- a. ability to pay
- b. recommendations from high school counselors and teachers
- c. interviews
- d. high school grade-point averages
- e. high school class rank
- f. evidence of extracurricular activities
- g. admission test scores
- h. quality of a written essay.

The college admission essay is one example of a real world, gate-opening genre form because it is a basic requirement of many higher education institutions that has real consequences. That is, it is clear that this genre of writing serves as a gate through which students must pass to gain admittance to many universities and colleges around the world.

Post-secondary-bound high school students typically write these essays during the first semester of their senior year as part of the college application process. Some students seek assistance from English teachers, guidance counselors, or parents, whereas others write the essay on their own. This genre is especially tough for students who are in the process of learning English or whose parents do not speak English and may not be able to offer feedback on the essay. To complicate matters, 12th-grade students generally write these essays for a particular yet unknown audience: college admission officers and admission committees. If students do not have a clear understanding of the audience, it is challenging to compose an essay that meets that audience's needs and expectations.

For many post-secondary institutions, the admission essay is the only opportunity to learn about applicants personally. It also is one of the only ways these institutions are exposed to students' writing prior to admission. The importance of these essays is evidenced by the large university systems in the United States that have adopted common prompts and instructions that help define the genre. For example, the University of California requires all applicants to write two personal statements based on prompts like these (UC Regents, 2010):

- a. Describe the world you come from—for example, your family, community, or school—and tell us how your world has shaped your dreams and aspirations.
- b. Tell us about a personal quality, talent, accomplishment, contribution, or experience that is important to you. What about this quality or accomplishment makes you proud and how does it relate to the person you are? (UC Regents, 2010, para 3 & 5)

The importance of admission essays has increased recently as more colleges and universities have opted not to require SAT scores as one of their criteria for evaluating students' admission applications. In 1993, only 14% of colleges thought the essay was of "considerable importance," but by 2006, 28% considered the essay to be a significant admission factor, and that number continues to grow (NACAC, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2009). Currently, 414, or approximately 15%, of 4-year degree-granting institutions in the United States use the Common Application, which is accepted at private and public schools around the country (n.d.b.). The Common Application (n.d.a.) essay prompt is open-ended and allows students to choose from six essay topics:

- a. significant experience, risk, or ethical dilemma
- b. issue of local, national, or international concern
- c. significant person
- d. important character from a text
- e. personal experience that represents diversity
- f. topic of choice.

Although numerous guides have been published on how to write successful college admission essays (see Gelband, Kubale, & Schorr, 1986; *The Harvard Independent*, 2002), there is little empirical support for the efficacy of these methods (Samway, 2006). Of the writing workshops and research studies that focus on ethnically and linguistically diverse secondary students, none examines the impact of features-based instruction on improving the writing quality of college admissions essays (Graham & Perin, 2007a). This is where our workshop comes in.

The college admission essay workshop took place during the fall semester and involved explicit teaching, modeling, and practicing of writing skills connected to the college admission essay genre. All instruction was provided during the students' regularly scheduled, 55-minute English class and was offered 2 to 3 days a week over the course of 6 weeks, for a total of 13 class sessions (see Appendix A for a detailed schedule created by Jessica). Students received instruction from members of the teaching and research team and from their classroom teachers. All curriculum for the workshop was created and designed by Jessica, with assistance from Arturo and Cynthia, the two doctoral students who assisted with the teaching of the workshop.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE COLLEGE ADMISSION ESSAY WORKSHOP**

There were three phases of the workshop process, including the introduction to the workshop, teaching key genre elements, and the conclusion to the workshop. Students wrote three drafts (one draft for each stage of the workshop) of their essays over the course of the workshop: an initial draft, a working or instructional draft developed as part of the curriculum unit, and a third and final draft. Students wrote the initial draft during the second class session of the writing workshop, prior to instruction on the key genre elements. This draft was an essay responding to a written prompt from the Common Application (n.d.a.), which is also the required prompt for one of the major universities in the state

where the study took place. The research and teaching team wanted to collect an initial writing sample to gain an understanding of students' strengths and weaknesses in writing this genre prior to instruction. In the second phase of the workshop, students received instruction on the key genre elements for the instructional essay. For this essay, students chose from three open-ended essay topics taken from the Common Application prompts, which required students to write about personal experience. For example, one of the questions asked students to evaluate a significant experience, achievement, or risk they have taken, or an ethical dilemma they have faced and its impact (The Common Application, n.d.b.). The third and final draft was completed at the conclusion of the workshop. It was important to give students multiple opportunities to write and revise in this genre and see what challenges presented themselves with this type of writing. The three drafts also gave the research team a chance to gauge student progress over the course of the workshop.

Each class session of the college admission essay workshop consisted of seven steps:

- a. a skill lesson to introduce and define the genre element or skill
- b. use of models/examples
- c. opportunity for students to practice skill(s)
- d. opportunity for students to share writing
- e. opportunity for students to practice skill(s) again as part of a college admission essay project in progress
- f. opportunity for students to receive feedback from peers or instructors
- g. opportunity for students to revise.

Although each session was structured in this way, the research and teaching team used examples of successful writing strategies, conferred with students, and continually revised curriculum and lessons to address students' questions, strengths, and needs. Because the research and teaching team wanted the workshop to be dynamic and not prescriptive, it was important to mold the curriculum around students' unique needs.

The following sections cover the introduction to the workshop, the key genre elements for the college admission essay, and the conclusion of the workshop. Excerpts of student writing appear throughout the description and analysis of the different stages of the workshop to illustrate students' writing before and after the explicit skill lessons devoted to this gate-opening genre.

## INTRODUCING THE WORKSHOP

In the first phase of the workshop (Days 1–4), the research and teaching team spent time getting to know students in both classes through writing, discussion, questionnaires, and surveys. These days were also devoted to introducing students to the college admission essay as a genre so they could think about the purpose, audience, and context for this writing task. On the first day of the workshop, the research and teaching team distributed one questionnaire and one survey. The questionnaire asked students to respond to a series of questions regarding their experience with and understanding of the college admission essay genre. The questionnaire invited students to answer questions such as:

- a. Please describe any prior experience writing the college admission essay.
- b. Describe your feelings associated with applying to college and writing admissions essays.
- c. What would you like help with in the process of writing college admission essays?

The survey was a writing self-efficacy survey and asked students to rank their confidence in a variety of areas. Jessica derived the questionnaire from Bandura (1986) and Shell et al. (1995). This questionnaire consisted of 15 questions connected to facets of writing associated with the college admission essay genre in a response format of an 11-point confidence Likert-like scale ranging from “not at all confident” to “completely confident.” Seven of the survey questions asked students to note their confidence with particular genre elements of a college admission essay:

- a. overall writing of a college admission essay,
- b. understanding different parts of the college admission essay,
- c. writing an introduction,
- d. writing a conclusion,
- e. using description,
- f. sharing lived experiences,
- g. audience awareness.

Five questions asked students about their confidence with general writing skills:

- a. varying sentence structure,
- b. expressing voice,

- c. use of adjectives,
- d. use of description,
- e. writing about setting.

Three of the questions asked participants to rate their confidence with elements of the writing process, including:

- a. asking for help with the essay,
- b. revising their own essay,
- c. revising someone else's essay.

This questionnaire was administered on the first day of the workshop with all participants and again at the end of the workshop on the last day.

Through their responses to the questionnaire and survey and in informal conversations, students described having no prior experience writing college admission essays, and many said they felt anxious or intimidated at the prospect. The research and teaching team used the first days of the workshop to understand students' perspectives and to plan curriculum based on their needs. For example, from the first day of the workshop, students expressed how college admission essay questions felt intimidating, like a "test" or a "trick," because they seem so open-ended and provide such a range of topic choice. The research and teaching team's goal was to provide students with access to some of the unwritten rules of the genre so they could think of the questions as part of a larger pattern rather than a test or a trick. The first days of the workshop were also devoted to pre-writing and brainstorming work as a way to warm up to the writing task as a whole and to think about the importance of choosing a strong writing topic.

### **Choosing a Strong Topic**

An entire class (Day 3) was devoted to strategies for selecting strong essay topics. The research and teaching team began by pointing out how most college admission essay topics, regardless of their wording, fall into three general categories:

- a. questions regarding the writer's interests,
- b. questions regarding the writer's values and beliefs,
- c. and questions regarding the writer's thought process (College Board, n.d.b.).

The research and teaching team then asked students to practice selecting a topic using a range of options taken directly from the Common

Application prompt. (Most colleges and universities that require college admission essays as part of their application process provide potential students with more than one essay question.) Examples of some options follow:

- a. What experiences have led you to select your professional field and objective?
- b. Does any attribute, quality, or skill distinguish you from everyone else? How did you develop this attribute?
- c. Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, and so on) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.
- d. What was the most difficult time in your life, and why? How did your perspective on life change as a result of the difficulty?
- e. In your opinion, what is the greatest challenge that your generation will face? What ideas do you have for dealing with this issue?

The research and teaching team wanted students to practice selecting successful topics for their writing for a real world audience, but this step created anxiety and uncertainty for many students. Through class discussion, students shared that they were not used to having the freedom to choose their topic and were unsure of their audience. For example, Marco spent half of one session staring at the questions until Dan asked him to articulate what he was thinking. He explained, "I am not sure what I am supposed to write about. This feels like a test. If I choose the wrong topic, I am doomed from the beginning." Other students, such as Tiana, shared Marco's feelings and felt the openness of the questions created too much freedom. Tiana explained, "I feel more comfortable when someone just tells me what I'm supposed to write about and then I can go ahead and write. If I have too many options, I feel out of control. . . . I'm not sure what they want me to say."

To help students like Marco and Tiana, the research and teaching team told them to go with their gut and choose a topic they knew something about and felt invested in right away. The research and teaching team also gave students permission at any time to change their topics if they felt stuck or uninspired. In a conversation with Jessica after class, Mariah shared her relief once she heard she could change her mind:

I initially chose to write about community service because I was working on a scholarship that addressed this issue and I had already written a little bit on this topic previously. I thought it would be easy. Now, after writing a little bit, I realize I am sick of the subject

and I decided to make a change. It felt like a huge relief lifted off my shoulders to know I could start fresh with a new idea.

But not everyone struggled with picking a topic. Talia knew immediately that she wanted to write about the loss of her mom, and she stayed with this topic throughout the workshop. Although choosing her topic came easily, she felt less sure of the focus of her essay because the loss of her mom was such an overwhelming experience. She noted, “I feel like I could write a whole book about my mom and her impact on my life. I know I need to focus my story to make it fit the purpose of the piece.” Victor explained that he quickly decided to write about feeling “trapped in my White skin” because he had always felt conflicted about being Latino and having very pale skin when all of his Latino friends have much darker skin. He shared, “I have more to say about this than anything else. I thought about what I wanted to write ahead of time and as I began brainstorming, more ideas came to mind and I knew I had a good match.”

### **Pre-Writing**

The research and teaching team encouraged students to take part in pre-writing and invention work to see if their initial topic ideas were a good fit (Day 3). Invention work is a step writers often take part in before formally drafting. For example, writers often brainstorm, prepare outlines, and collect and read materials related to their topic. The research and teaching team first modeled various brainstorming strategies, including mapping, webbing, outlining, or listing ideas. Then students chose one or two of these techniques to practice. Jenissa, for example, was torn between topic ideas so she quickly scribbled two lists. Her first list was titled “Social Worker (CPS)” and included the following quick phrases: “bad experience on the rez [reservation]” and “they [Child Protective Services] don’t help like they need to.” Her second list was titled “Baseball” and included a list of five key words: *practice*, *team*, *dad*, *pitching*, and *support*. She said she was torn between an extremely personal and heart-wrenching experience with abuse and, as she described it, “a much safer and more generic memory about playing baseball with my dad.” Jenissa said she needed to figure out which topic felt most compelling to her as a writer. She also wanted to learn more about what a college admission officer would rather read. As the workshop progressed, however, Jenissa abandoned both ideas, along with a few that followed, to write instead about her relationship with her grandmother. She said the pre-writing “allowed me to try out ideas until one stuck.”

Yobi used mapping and listing as forms of pre-writing. Unlike Jenissa, he knew immediately what he wanted to write about, but he wanted to experiment with different ways of thinking about the topic before drafting. The center of his map included his topic, “Mom’s death,” and he drew bubbles and arrows out from these central words to include key phrases to help him think about this life experience. He wrote, “Because I couldn’t cry I no longer felt anything” and “I was eight.” Below his map, Yobi created a list of 10 key words and phrases to help him think about the impact of his mother’s death on his life:

- a. the death
- b. the feelings
- c. why I couldn’t cry
- d. why I couldn’t feel anything for a long time
- e. how I look at life now
- f. how I treat women
- g. how I treat my grandma and elders
- h. why I’m so sensitive
- i. how I protect myself
- j. who changed my way of life after the death.

During a writing conference, Yobi explained how mapping and listing not only helped him focus his topic but also served as an outline for his future essay.

### **What We Learned**

After analyzing students’ preliminary topic ideas and writing from the first few days of the workshop, the research and teaching team found that many had powerful life experiences to share; however, the writing did not exhibit many of the genre elements necessary to share these experiences effectively with a college admissions officer. Many of the initial essays were incomplete and lacked detail, description, and focus. As we reviewed the initial drafts, we anticipated the writing would be rough because students had not had time to revise and polish the pieces, but these writing samples gave us one way to gain a sense of students’ needs and pinpoint specific strategies we could focus on to support their writing. For example, Rodrigo’s 11-sentence, three-paragraph essay about the positive influence of his father began with the following lead: “In my life my dad has influenced me greatly. His teachings of working hard, progression, and never giving up has served me well up to this point. It has shaped and molded the person I am today.” While Rodrigo’s love and respect for his

father were clear, his lead did not have the elements of a strong opening. It lacked a powerful quote or a series of questions or a compelling anecdote.

Many of the essays also lacked organization and audience awareness. Gisele's essay, for example, focused on the struggles and the triumphs she faced working and attending school full-time to pay for gymnastics lessons her unemployed parents cannot afford. Although the topic was intriguing and the essay included important details, the 20 essay sentences comprised a single paragraph. Phrases such as "when I'm hit with some obstacle" and "so being myself I found a job during the summer" illustrated the essay's inappropriate, informal tone. The issues the research and teaching team uncovered in Gisele's essay are emblematic of the issues discovered in the student essays as a whole, and suggested a need to discuss the importance of the key genre elements and teach them explicitly.

### **Getting to Know the Audience**

After analyzing the students' initial essays, the research and teaching team decided to devote a class to understanding audience and purpose as a step toward successfully executing this real world, gate-opening genre (Day 4). Writing scholars such as Barry M. Kroll (1981) and José Brandão Carvalho (2002) have emphasized the importance of audience awareness and deemed it one of the major markers that separate novice from experienced writers. One aspect of what marks the college admission essay as a "gatekeeping" writing task for many students is that the audience is unknown.

**Addressing Preconceived Notions.** In the skill lesson on audience awareness, students responded to a set of brief brainstorming questions asking them to think about the rhetorical situation for the college admission essay, meaning the audience, purpose, topic, and context for this genre (see Figure 4.1).

As students completed their brainstorming questions, many said they imagined the audience of college admission officers as "old," "conservative," and "White." Cody, a highly verbal student who always sat in the front row, blurted out, "I've never thought about who ends up actually reading these essays. I just assumed they would wind up in some file somewhere." Lindsey, a quiet student, raised her hand to share, "When I think of college admission officers, I think of White men. I never picture anyone who looks or thinks like me." On her questionnaire, Lindsey wrote that her audience would most likely be a "42-year-old, upper-class, male professor with a Ph.D., and Caucasian." She also stated that this unknown reader would expect her to be "smart, well-rounded, and world-

FIGURE 4.1. Thinking About the Rhetorical Situation for the College Admission Essay

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1. Purpose: What is the purpose of writing a college admission essay? Explain.
  2. Genre: How would you categorize the college admission essay as a type of writing? (e.g., fiction, autobiographical story, news article, review, letter to the editor, rhetorical analysis, criticism, persuasive essay). Explain.
  3. Audience: Who do you imagine is the audience for the college admission essay? Describe using details (e.g., social class, age, gender).
  4. Topic: What do you plan to write about? Why is this topic important to you and why do you think it will be important your audience?
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ly.” Many students pictured “men in suits and ties with white hair and glasses” reading their essays with a critical eye.

Once students shared their preconceived notions of the audience, the research and teaching team talked about the role of college admission officers and the purpose of the college admissions office. It was not possible to provide a concrete description of the admission officers, since they are diverse individuals and little information about them as a group is released publicly. However, the research and teaching team did tell students that their audience would most likely be employed by the university, highly educated, older than they are, and invested in recruiting and accepting new students who best exemplify the school’s mission.

**Understanding Context.** The research and teaching team also wanted students to understand how many post-secondary institutions are similar to businesses seeking new customers. Our goal was to show students how universities provide information about what they value through their promotional materials and how this might offer some insight into the school’s mission and expectations for students.

The research and teaching team showed students examples of college admission websites so they could see how schools advertise themselves. They noticed the kinds of photos, quotes, and documents schools use to promote athletics, campus life, diversity, and quality education. Some of the sites include:

- a. University of Texas (<http://bealonghorn.utexas.edu/freshmen/>)—contains detailed information on everything from life in Austin, where the school is located, to profiles of current students
- b. University of California at Berkeley (<http://students.berkeley.edu/admissions/index.asp>)—lists its acceptance statistics and the average SAT score average and GPA of incoming freshmen

- c. Emory University in Atlanta (<http://www.emory.edu/home/prospective/index.html>)—offers a number of quick links to the university’s social media pages to help students get acquainted with the school community.

Understanding a college or university’s context, student body, size, academic programs, and recreational activities is a way to gain insight into the school’s culture and community, and for the purposes of our workshop, it served as a way to give students a sense of agency when writing the admission essay. Rather than thinking of their audience as “people we can’t relate to,” “judges and critics,” or “old and conservative and not at all like me,” students gained more confidence and voice regarding the writing task when they realized that as students, they were the customers writing for real people.

Many students had never thought about finding a school that was a good fit with their values, culture, academic and social goals, and financial means. Understandably, many likened success with the application and acceptance process to a shot in the dark. Mariah said, “I never realized that I can make choices about the kind of place I end up going. I didn’t really think I had a say in this until now.” Her comment highlights the importance of demystifying colleges’ and universities’ similarities and differences, students’ role and influence in the admission process, and the fact that they are writing an essay for a real audience.

### **Lesson Results**

As students started brainstorming topics and drafting their second essays in the first weeks of the workshop, the research and teaching team reminded them to think about audience and purpose. After reading the working drafts of students’ essays, the research and teaching team noticed how some students made decisions about topic choice, voice, and their overarching theme based on audience awareness. For example, Maritza’s initial draft describing her mother’s impact on her life began as follows:

My mother, Maria, is the person that has influenced me. She is a big part of my life and I’m really glad to have her. She influenced me by telling me about her life and not letting me go through the things she had to go through. She never had the opportunity to finish high school until she got older she went to take classes to finish it. She had showed me and encouraged me to never give up my education because without it my life would be full of struggles.

Maritza initially felt her first topic was important and compelling, but after participating in the audience awareness workshop, brainstorming ideas, and talking to classmates, she realized she wanted to expand upon her topic to show the way her mother's influence has led to her academic accomplishments and participation in extracurricular activities. After having a chance to think through and receive feedback on her original ideas, she realized that expanding her topic to share her academic accomplishments and extracurricular interests would help address the university audience and purpose more explicitly. She wanted to attend Brigham Young University and she realized that the academic enrichment programs she had participated in all connected well to the mission of the university:

How many different ways can you get into a university? Many people just focus on their grades but not me. I've always been told "Maritza, you're a very smart girl and you can get far." Those words motivate me to try to get into a university. I didn't focus only on my grades though. I always signed up for programs that will help me get into a university. Right now I am in the Hispanic Mother Daughter Program, the AVID Program and also the Reach Program. All three of these programs have showed me different ways to achieve my goals.

While some students, like Maritza, chose to change topics as a result of the skill lesson on audience awareness, most expressed how the lesson made them feel more confident in the topics they had selected. Gladys explained how growing up with overprotective parents has influenced her:

I realize I shouldn't feel embarrassed writing about my topic because it reflects who I am. I am going to write about how my family has sheltered me and kept me from taking part in activities with my peers my whole life and how this has shaped who I am as a student, young woman, and person.

## **KEY GENRE ELEMENTS OF THE COLLEGE ADMISSION ESSAY**

As mentioned, students worked on the second working draft of the essay while receiving instruction—specifically, several skill lessons on key genre elements of the college admission essay. Jessica and Sara derived these elements by collecting and examining as many examples of this type of

**FIGURE 4.2. Key Genre Elements of the College Admission Essay**

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1. *Selecting a strong writing topic:* Consider personal experiences, issues of importance, or influential individuals while taking into account the expectations of college admission officers.
  2. *Writing for the appropriate audience:* Consider the unfamiliar audience of college admission officers.
  3. *Writing an effective introduction:* Consider effective techniques for a lead, such as beginning with a powerful quote, a series of questions, or a compelling anecdote.
  4. *Using description:* Use vivid details to show, not tell, anecdotes from life events.
  5. *Writing the “So What?”:* Step outside the narrative to emphasize the significance of the particular topic and lesson learned. Share why the story represents the writer’s unique interests and potential contributions to a university community.
  6. *Making outside connections:* Embed outside texts, events, or ideas; explicitly reference outside sources.
  7. *Writing an effective conclusion:* End on a powerful and memorable note to stand apart from other applicants.
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writing as possible prior to the workshop. A thorough review of successful examples of college admission essays provided insight into some of the most common features of this type of writing. After an extensive on-line and book search, Jessica and Sara collected 50 examples of college admission essays from college students who had applied and been accepted to colleges and universities in Arizona, Maine, California, Texas, Oregon, and Washington. These essays were read and coded to find specific elements and repeated patterns used for this genre. Several elements emerged from our analysis (see Figure 4.2).

These genre elements became the instructional focus of the workshop. The working draft of the essay served as an opportunity for students to take part in a process approach to learning about this genre (Atwell, 1987; Singer, 2006). For this draft, students were guided through different steps of writing an admission essay from invention to drafting to revising.

### **Writing a Successful Introduction**

One of the first genre elements taught in the workshop was the introduction (Day 5). As part of the opening questionnaire, which students filled out at the beginning of the workshop, many expressed concerns about “how to get started” and how to “format” their essays. Students

**FIGURE 4.3. Lead Options and Directions for Using Them**

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**Option 1**

Question(s) or dialogue: Ask one or a series of questions to catch readers' attention. Examples of question stems include: Do you remember \_\_\_\_? Did you know \_\_\_\_? Have you ever thought about \_\_\_\_? Or start your essay with an action or dialogue that immediately takes readers into the story you want to share. Keep in mind: The questions and dialogue should relate to your topic.

**Option 2**

A compelling anecdote: Open with a small story that personalizes the essay topic. It may introduce who you are as a unique individual, pose the thesis or dilemma that controls your argument, or provide insight into your interests and values.

**Option 3**

A powerful quote: Begin with a quote from a conversation, song lyric, poem, statistic, or historical fact, or an old saying. Make sure the quote is not a dictionary definition or a cliché. Once you select the quote, be sure to show readers in the opening paragraph that follows the quote how it relates to your overall message.

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also worried about the rhetorical situation; they feared that they might not be able to write well enough for college admission officers. Explicit teaching of the introduction helped allay some of their fears.

**Consider Effective Techniques for a Lead.** The research and teaching team first provided sample introductions from the set of essays Jessica and Sara had collected and analyzed prior to the study to determine key genre features for the workshop. In the samples, many of the writers used particular strategies to begin their pieces, and the research and teaching team wanted to make these transparent for students. Students also had the opportunity to practice these strategies in their writing, so after the team shared these models with the students, students were then given three possible strategies to practice, along with tips for approaching these different leads (see Figure 4.3). Students were also reminded that successful leads are almost always brief and work to set up the essay topic.

Enrique practiced all three options and decided the lead that seemed “the most natural and just clicked” was the one he had begun with a quote from Tupac Shakur:

“Through every dark night there is a brighter day.” This famous quote by Tupac Shakur is one I live by. I look up to many famous people who have been successful despite starting out with nothing.

I like reading quotes and motivational speeches from Tupac, Michael Jordan, and Donald Trump because they all found ways of overcoming hardship. It has always been a challenge for me to focus on school work being the youngest male in a Mexican family with six kids and with two parents who have very limited schooling. My dad has a second grade education and my mom a sixth grade education. Both of my parents went to school in Mexico and came to the United States as very young adults. Even though my parents did not stay in school and despite many challenges I have faced, education has become a big part of who I am.

Students were given multiple opportunities throughout the workshop to practice writing and revising the college admission essay introduction, and expressed enthusiasm after learning this genre element. In a post-workshop interview, Victor explained to Jessica that learning new strategies for writing an introduction made a big difference in his overall writing. Below is a brief excerpt from his interview:

*Jessica:* What did you find most useful about the overall college admission essay workshop?

*Victor:* The lesson on how to get started in my essay helped me the most. Sometimes I have a hard time getting started and I have a hard time ending, but my middles are usually all right. I am tired of my basic way of writing. I always write papers using “First of all, second of all . . .”. I want to learn to mix it up. Until now, I have always started and ended my writing using a formula my teachers had given me. I don’t like formulas. It feels too forced and basic. I liked having more freedom and choice to try different ways of getting started. Formulas are so square. I am not square. It is important to have options. No one has ever shown me these writing options before.

In an informal conversation after the skill lesson on introductions, Victor shared how he felt the skill lesson gave him “ways to help my ideas flow.”

**Lesson Results.** By learning ways of approaching the introduction to this genre, many students’ leads showed marked improvement. Consider Carola’s introduction to her initial essay. She simply listed several areas of academic interest and then briefly described her interest in reading:

Some of my academic interests are reading, English, and science. I enjoy reading during my free time because I sometimes get so

involved in the book and I forget where I am. Other times it feels like the story is real. I like to read all sorts of books from fantasy to non-fiction. As long as it's a good book, I'll read it.

After Carola had participated in the skill lesson on writing an effective introduction, she used vivid description to help introduce her father's impact on her personal growth:

It seemed like he was always in a bad mood. When he had a bad day at work he would let steam out on us, when we hadn't done anything to deserve it. It was as if we could never make him happy. He always found ways to yell at us and make us feel bad. My dad never seemed to feel proud of me and I remember the many nights I cried myself to sleep wishing I didn't have a dad.

Carola not only switched the focus of her essay in this revised draft, but her writing became more fluid, descriptive, and compelling. She made the shift from listing her interests in a general and impersonal way to diving into the difficult story of her relationship with her father.

Izzy's first introduction, like Carola's, was more general than personal:

My mom has had a positive influence on me. I am the youngest of three children and probably the one who spends the most time with our mom. I am the only one to have lived with her after she and my father got divorced. I appreciate every moment I spend with my mom because I know when it is time to move out on my own I will never find as much love and care as she has given me.

After the skill lesson, Izzy revised her introduction to reveal how she grew up in a challenging environment but thrived because of her mother's love and support:

Most homes have a father, a mother, and children living under one roof. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case for me. After my mom and dad got a divorce, I lived only with my mom. I have lived this way for about twelve years now. For those first nine years, my dad never tried contacting us. At first I didn't know why, but as I got older I didn't care anymore. I was happy just having my mom around. Many people think I need a father figure in my life, but that wasn't necessary for me. My mom filled both sets of shoes.

Izzy's revised introduction illustrates growth in a number of ways. First, every sentence in her first introduction other than the first began

in with “I” and provided little to no detail. The second draft incorporates more sentence variety and more personal connection. In the revised introduction after the skill lesson, Izzy lets her reader in on the reality of growing up with a single mother and having little to no contact with her father. Her introduction established her connection to her mom, her growing independence, and her strength as a young woman. The skill lesson gave students strategies to more effectively tell their stories. Next, the research and teaching team taught a brief skill lesson reminding students of the importance of using description in their writing (Day 6).

### Using Description

In many of the students’ initial essays, they “told” about significant people or events in their lives, but they did not “show” these using description. For example, Jenissa discussed the importance of family, but offered few details. She wrote,

Ever since I can remember I have always been around my family. Growing up around them has definitely influenced me. They are always there when I need them, they are constantly teaching, and having younger members I learned responsibility.

Although Jenissa’s love for her family could make for an interesting essay topic, the research and teaching team wanted to help her move beyond summarizing to make her essay stand out from others.

In this skill lesson, the research and teaching team provided students with multiple examples of college admission essays as well as poems and nonfiction pieces that either modeled effective use of description or emphasized the importance of using this strategy in writing (Hillocks, 2006; Lamott, 1994). The research and teaching team also used a lesson from Chapter 4 of Hillocks’s (2007) *Narrative Writing*, on incorporating detail and figurative language. In this chapter, Hillocks explains that “the most important quality of effective stories is concrete detail. Specific details allow readers to see scenes in their own minds as they read” (p. 43). Hillocks emphasizes how writing with description can be challenging for young writers because the process of incorporating descriptive language into writing requires a number of steps and key decisions:

Writers have to remember or imagine what it is they want to portray, search their memories for words to do it, arrange the words in effective syntax, evaluate the effort by comparing it with the vision in their mind, perhaps search for additional or different words or different ways to use them, write those down, and evaluate the effort again. (p. 43)

**FIGURE 4.4. Using More Description**

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Descriptive writing is all about the difference between showing and telling in your writing.

*Telling:* The car is parked in front of the house.

*Showing:* The red, convertible sport car, with the new rims and fresh paint, is parked comfortably in front of the two-story house with the huge front yard.

The best way to work on descriptive writing is to ask yourself questions based upon your senses:

What can you see?

What can you taste?

What can you smell?

What can you hear?

What can you touch?

Then ask yourself questions that help you add vivid language. You can even make comparisons. Use as many similes or metaphors as possible.

What color is it?

What does it look like?

What does it remind you of?

What can you compare it to?

***Practice***

Try expanding on these sentences:

The girl cried.

The horse kicked the man.

The iPod played a song.

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The research and teaching team wanted to give students a chance to learn the different steps Hillocks refers to in the above quote for incorporating description into their college admission essays. Arturo taught a short skill lesson on writing with description and invited students to practice using the five senses in their writing (see Figure 4.4).

Many students, like Jenissa, said they had taken part in lessons about using description in their writing in prior English classes; however, Jenissa also said in a writing conference with Jessica that it was helpful to “be reminded through this skill lesson that this kind of detail needs to go into the college admission essay because I had forgotten to add any details in my first draft.” Jenissa used strategies from the skill lesson to retell her story with more detail. She wrote about learning to heed her grandmother’s advice after she passed away:

I can still picture her standing in front of the old comforting house in the red hills of New Mexico. The day I got the news she was in the hospital, I didn't know what to think or how to react. I sat on my bed in my room frozen with shock. I knew traveling eight hours to Santa Fe, New Mexico would surely affect my schoolwork. What I didn't know was just how much. Slowly my grades started slipping and my attitude towards school was no longer positive.

After taking part in the skill lesson on description, Jenissa's essay began to take shape. She added more descriptive language such as "comforting house" and "red hills of New Mexico," and she also focused her essay for clarity. She decided to write about her grandmother specifically rather than her family in general. Another student, Victoria, wrote her initial essay about her aunt, and, in it, she summarized a story about her childhood naptime: "My aunt used to take naps with me in the afternoons when I was young and I remember wetting the bed. She simply comforted me and never grew angry or upset." The description of the same story in Victoria's final essay was more nuanced and fluent:

I lay there scared and embarrassed. My aunt cuddled up next to me. I hesitated to move. I was afraid my aunt would wake up angry at me for wetting the bed. Just when I thought my nap couldn't get worse, my aunt's blue eyes darted open. At first I thought she looked mad, but a smile slowly crept across her sweet face.

Victoria crafted her sentences to provide the reader a clearer picture of her aunt's reaction and comforting presence. Revisions such as these allowed students to more eloquently portray life experiences through their essays.

### **Writing a Successful "So What?"**

As Thomas Newkirk (1997) argues in *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, when students write personal statements or narratives, like the college admission essay, they are performing their identity in a way they think the audience will engage with or relate to. This means there must always be a point in the essay where the writer steps away from the story and speaks directly to the reader to make a case in the narrative for why he or she should gain admission to a college or university. Jessica called this the "So What?" section of the essay.

To explain this element to students, the research and teaching team told them that this was the part of the essay where, as writers, they need-

ed to move back from the story and describe the lessons learned or the reason the story resonated in their lives. The “So What?” is the place in the college admission essay where the writer must do more than share personal experience: They must connect to an outside audience (see Figure 4.5). This is also a place in the essay where the writer shifts from telling a story to persuading the reader why the story matters. The “So What?” skill lesson invited students to answer a series of questions to reflect upon and articulate the overarching message in their essays.

***Explaining Why Your Story Matters.*** Making this rhetorical shift was challenging for students. Many had experience writing personal stories in their English classes, not writing why these experiences mattered to others. In fact, students told us time and again that it was hard to believe that their stories would have meaning for or make a difference to anyone beyond family members. This was a place in the workshop where the research and teaching team chose to slow down and take the time to conference with students individually to give suggestions for reflecting on their lived experience with certitude.

In a writing conference, Gabriela shared her initial essay, which described the positive influence of her coworker, Guillermo, at an animal shelter. Gabriela’s piece focused on Guillermo’s story of hard work and persistence; therefore, the reader gained no understanding of Gabriela as a person or why Guillermo made a difference to her. In her conference, Gabriela shared how she had struggled her entire life with low self-esteem and paralyzing shyness. She explained how Guillermo was the first person she had spent time with who was outgoing, independent, and content. It became clear that Guillermo had served as a model for Gabriela, helping her see that she could begin to trust herself and her own voice. Taking time to conference gave Gabriela a chance to articulate aloud what she was hoping to get across in her writing and helped her realize she had left out important information. She returned to her essay and added details to the conclusion of her essay to show how her friendship with Guillermo had changed her perspective:

Guillermo has taught me to accept myself, which has raised my self-esteem. I am no longer painfully shy at the shelter and enjoy talking to the new volunteers and workers. Guillermo has shown me that everyone is different and that our differences do not matter. What matters is learning to accept yourself.

Another student, Richard, wrote the first part of his essay about the positive impact his girlfriend has had on his life. Although he attempted

**FIGURE 4.5. Skill Lesson: Finding Your “So What?”**

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**Step 1**

Spend 5 minutes reviewing all of the notes, outline, and brainstorming you have written so far. Let your head swim with information.

**Step 2**

Clear your desk of everything but a notebook. Remove all your notes and sources. You won't use these while doing the rest of this exercise. Trust that you'll remember what's important.

**Step 3**

Fast write about your topic for 8 minutes. Explain how your thinking about this topic has evolved. When you first thought about this project, what did you think? Then what happened, and what happened after that? What were your preconceptions about your topic? Have they changed? If so, how?

This is an open-ended fast write. Don't let the writing stall. What questions do you have about writing a college admission essay? What ideas do you have? What do you want help with?

**Step 4**

Skip a few lines on your page. Write “Moments, Stories, People, and Scenes.” Now fast write for another 5 minutes. This time, focus on more specific case studies, situations, people, experiences, observations, and so on that stand out in your mind about your essay topic. Keep writing for the whole 5 minutes.

**Step 5**

Skip a few more lines. For 10 minutes, quickly write a dialogue between you and someone else connected to your essay topic—a friend, a teacher, someone with an opposing perspective. Don't plan the dialogue. Just begin with the question most commonly asked about your topic, and take the conversation from there, writing both parts of the dialogue.

**Step 6**

Finally, skip a few more lines and write “So What?” in your notebook. Now spend a few minutes trying to summarize the most important thing you think people should understand about your topic based on what you've learned so far. How has this experience impacted you? What can you tell your reader about yourself that they need to know to understand the person you are? Distill these comments down to a paragraph. This may be hard, but it's important. Remember, you can change your mind later.

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to share his enthusiasm and deep love for her, his piece lacked cohesion and a clear purpose: “Now you might ask how one girl who isn’t even a member of my family changed my life? Well my best friend has had the biggest influence on my life.” Through the “So What?” skill lesson, Richard began to “make a case” to the college admissions panel. After the lesson, he focused on the role his girlfriend has played in helping him further his education:

She has helped me and pushed me in school. She has encouraged me to do things I thought I couldn’t do. She has done what my family has failed to do, which is to encourage me to continue my education. She made me take high level classes and set goals and accomplish them.

Gabriela’s and Richard’s essays are excellent examples of how students used the “So What?” skill lesson to focus their essays and share the ways their life experiences have had an impact on their personal character. The skill lesson on writing your “So What?” gave students an opportunity to step outside of their experience and reflect on why it not only mattered to them, but why it could matter for a broader audience. This was a challenging step for many of the students in the class. Both Sarah and Dan pointed out that their students often struggled to articulate in their writing the way personal experience has shaped them or, as Sarah stated in a conversation, “to share in their writing how what they have learned in the past has changed them in some way and propelled them forward.” This reflective step was challenging because it required them to slow down, reflect, and make sense of their stories for a real audience.

**Concluding the Essay.** Along with teaching students how to make this move in their essays as a way of showing the lessons they have learned, as well as the attributes and beliefs they have to offer a college or university, the research and teaching team also provided further tips for ways to successfully conclude their essays, including:

- a. expand upon the broader implications of your essay topic
- b. consider linking your conclusion to your introduction and reiterating introductory phrases to establish balance
- c. redefine a term used previously in your body paragraphs
- d. frame your topic within a larger context or show that your topic has a widespread appeal
- e. avoid summarizing the body paragraphs
- f. leave readers with a strong impression.

Akeelah chose to write her essay about the birth of her younger sister, who has Down syndrome. In her initial draft, Akeelah described the birth of her younger sister and her initial excitement about having a new sister as a playmate:

She was finally here! My six-year old self has been waiting nine long months for the sister I never had. I have a younger brother, which is great except he's a boy and he and I share the same birthday with two years in between us. A sister is something different, she's someone you can relate to and share everything with, and I was ready.

She went on in the essay to share her surprise when she learned her sister was sick. In her initial draft, Akeelah ended the essay by stating that her new baby sister was born with Down Syndrome and that this surprised her. After taking part in the "So What?" skill lesson, Akeelah centered her final essay on the birth of her younger sister, but she incorporated a "So What?" into the concluding paragraph to share what she has learned from this relationship:

My youngest sister has Down Syndrome. She was born with fluid in her heart and lungs and she survived the unimaginable. I cannot even think of what life would be without her. She may have a mental disability, but she could fool anyone. Against the odds, she has taught me the power of self-confidence, truth, and an overall love of life. I've heard people say that the developmentally disabled are sad stories for people, but I think they might be the most beautiful inhabitants of this planet. My sister holds no grudges, is carefree, and loves life unconditionally. Without Alenah, I never would have understood anything about people with special needs and I would not have the same goals I have today. I hope to one day become a teacher who works with individuals with special needs, like my sister, so I can make a difference in their lives. I am grateful to know and understand another world is so pure and joyful that I could have never encountered without Alenah.

Before the skill lesson, Akeelah's essay shared a powerful narrative revealing her love and acceptance for her sister; however, it ended without giving the reader insight into how she had changed as a result of this relationship or how the relationship had shaped her future goals and aspirations. In the revised version, she makes the shift from a personal

narrative to making a case for why her story adds value to a college or university and to our society. This is an example of a move young writers need to practice to write successful college admission essays.

## CONCLUDING THE WORKSHOP

Writing samples are embedded throughout this chapter as a way of exhibiting the growth that took place in students' writing at different stages of the college admission essay workshop. Juana is just one student whose writing improved dramatically from her initial essay to her final. Her first draft, in which she reflected on a powerful life event, lacked a clear message and was only a paragraph in length:

One life experience I have learned from was when I lived with my dad. He lowered my self-esteem and confidence. Whenever I tried to please him, he found a way to get mad. He never made an attempt to build a father-daughter relationship. Everything about me seemed to disappoint him. He always had something rude to say or he would order me around. If I didn't do what he wanted a bigger conflict would build. We never had time to be a real family.

Because of her growth as a writer and her desire to understand this real world, gate-opening genre, Juana was able to write a strong final essay. Rather than focus on a general description of her relationship with her father, she focused on a specific life event that taught her lessons about life and about her personal character. Juana's essay is one example of the impact this workshop had on students and their writing. Her final essay illustrates the important stories students chose to write about and the ways in which they incorporated the knowledge gained from the skill lessons into their college admission essays.

When I was younger I remember my dad as being an alright dad. He wasn't the best, but he wasn't the worst. He would take us to the park and buy us ice cream. We always had a lot of fun. But then as I started growing up I noticed that he was always in a bad mood. He would see us playing in our yard and say "instead of being here messing around go clean or help your mom." We would do as we were told but be very unhappy. He could never ask us nicely. He always had to scream or yell at us. My dad had a party supply business and my sister and I helped him every weekend.

When customers asked if we were his daughters he would say, “No, they’re just people that get in the way.” He was ashamed of us. My sister and I felt so humiliated. We would not talk to him, which he always thought was funny. I would cry on our way home from the store because I felt like he hated me. He always found a way to hurt my feelings.

One day my younger sister, Sarah, bought my little sister a gray hamster named Dody. My dad was home that day and saw the hamster and started yelling. “Why didn’t you guys tell me you were buying a hamster? We already have enough pets! We need to make decisions together!” My dad was yelling at my mom about having a hamster as a pet. “Mario, let’s go to the room and talk this out,” my mom told him. My sister and I were playing with the hamster when we heard a noise in the other room that sounded like someone had been slapped. We heard my mom yell, “Don’t hit me!” and my sister, Sarah, ran to my mom’s room. I couldn’t believe my dad had slapped my mom. He had never done anything like that before and it was then I knew his anger was serious. My sister called the police. But when they arrived at our front door my mom didn’t tell them the truth. She was too afraid. We all lived in fear of my dad.

The following week, my sister and I had had enough. We decided to move to our aunt’s house. The next day my mom and little sisters followed in our footsteps. It felt surreal not having my dad breathe down our necks waiting to yell at us. That day was the worst and best day of my life. We could finally act like the kids we were and we didn’t have to worry about getting in trouble. It felt like freedom.

There are days when I wonder why I have the unlucky fortune to end up with a cruel dad. But, I always remember my grandma’s saying, “God only gives you as much as you can handle.” Her words remind me to believe in myself and to remember I will always have the strength to handle life’s challenges.

Juana’s writing helps to illustrate the kinds of positive changes that took place in students’ pieces. After taking part in the skill lessons, her message, length, and word choice improved and moved closer to fitting the genre expectations of a college admission audience. Her final introduction grabs the reader’s attention by diving right into a description of her father’s anger. The essay incorporates detail and dialogue to paint a picture of who her father is and how his mood swings impacted her. Juana’s conclusion shares a lesson learned and suggests how the tumultu-

ous relationship with her father has molded her into a strong and resilient young woman. Her writing growth in this essay helps illustrate the power of embedding this kind of real world, gate-opening writing workshop into the secondary curriculum.

## **EXTENSION ACTIVITIES AND PROFESSIONAL RESOURCES**

One of the underlying goals of the college admission essay genre and an outcome of our work at Libertad is improving access to college, particularly for student populations who have been historically denied opportunities to gain admission and pursue higher education. Ultimately, this means identifying, developing, and including other workshops in the curriculum that integrate instruction on the details of the college application and admission process. However, it also is important to reinforce the learning that has taken place in the workshop via extension activities. A few possible activities include:

- a. taking a field trip to a local college so students can tour dorms, classrooms, and libraries and meet with college admission counselors
- b. showing students how to search for colleges and their admission requirements on the Internet, as well as providing a tutorial on how to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)
- c. offering guidance on responding to scholarship essay prompts and on applying to different colleges, especially those with daunting application packets
- d. connecting with teachers and faculty in other disciplines and bringing them into the workshop (e.g., school counselors who can offer hands-on workshops to help students find the college that is a “perfect” fit or technology/computer teachers who can show students how to search for college scholarships online)
- e. providing additional time in the computer lab so students may fine-tune their admission essays and essays for scholarship applications
- f. invite admission officers from local colleges and universities to speak to students about their expectations  
invite students from local colleges and universities to talk about the college admission process and college life.

Teachers may extend their thinking and learning about the college admission essay genre by exploring professional resources. The following resources, which are cited throughout this book, may be used as a starting point to understanding some of the genre's purpose and audience:

- a. Harry Bauld's (2005) *On Writing the College Application Essay: Secrets of a Former Ivy League Admissions Officer*
- b. Edward B. Fiske and Bruce G. Hammond's (2009) *Fiske Real World College Essays That Work*
- c. Alan Gelb's (2008) *Conquering the College Admissions Essay in 10 Steps: Crafting a Winning Personal Statement*
- d. The Harvard Crimson's (2010) *50 Successful Harvard Application Essays: What Worked for Them Can Help You Get into the College of Your Choice* (3rd ed.)
- e. Sarah Myers McGinty's (2006) *The College Application Essay* (Rev. ed.).

Although these resources helped the research and teaching team gain insight into some of the perceived expectations of college admissions panels, it is important to note that only one of these texts (Bauld, 2006) was written by an actual college admission officer. Although these guidebooks include helpful suggestions, they should not be used as a template or recipe for writing the college admission essay, especially for teachers working with ethnically and linguistically diverse student populations who are not well represented in the essay examples included in the books.

## SUMMING UP

Because real world, gate-opening writing is tied to real contexts and audiences, it provides rich opportunities for students to learn about academic, professional, and civic activities that they may have never experienced in their young lives. By embedding real world, gate-opening writing into the secondary curriculum, teachers may do much more than just teach the skills and strategies associated with particular writing forms. They may provide instruction and opportunity for students to read, research, engage with, and reflect upon the contexts where writing takes place. The college admission essay is one kind of writing that is a part of a larger, real world context—the college application process.

If the goal of secondary English teachers is to open the doors of access for all students, then demystifying the many facets of the college admission process—including researching colleges and universities that make

a good “fit” for students, filling out financial aid forms, taking the PSAT and SAT exams, applying for scholarships and student loans, taking college preparatory courses in high school, seeking letters of reference, and applying early decision—is worthy of time and attention. It is important to connect and build upon instructional units and to expand the curriculum beyond single tasks, such as writing the college admission essay, into broader themes that students can relate to and benefit from.

This workshop gave the research and teaching team an opportunity to understand the importance of exposing students to powerful writing genres like the college admission essay. It not only is a useful kind of writing, but it also signals to students the importance of learning about academic and professional writing that can open the gates of access to a world beyond high school. This workshop did not give all students perfect writing skills and access to higher education. In fact, as described in the next chapter, many aspects of the teaching and research of this curriculum were challenging and nuanced. Our teaching and research were continually influenced by the real world complexities of working in a school. If educators want to shake up the imbalances and inequities in schools, then we must be willing to take on challenging research and teaching projects, like this one, to ensure that students are exposed to the kinds of writing that have a real impact on their success in college, the workplace, and beyond.