

# The Rhetoric of College Application Essays: Removing Obstacles for Low Income and Minority Students

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## Abstract

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*Recent research on the college application essay has shown that essay prompts are misleading, and that the expectations of admissions officers remain largely implicit. These studies have not, however, examined how essays written by low-income, ethnic minority students are scored by admissions officers. For this study, forty-two seniors at a low-performing, urban high school received instruction in persuasive argument and the concept of the rhetorical situation and were informed of the implicit expectations of admissions officers. Students who received instruction wrote college essays rated significantly higher by admissions officers than essays written by students in a control group. These results suggest that students who are unfamiliar with postsecondary culture may be at a particular disadvantage when it comes to inferring the expectations of admissions officers unless these expectations are made explicit. Implications for the college admissions process are considered.*

A recent survey by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (2011) found that 60% of four-year universities place “considerable importance” or “moderate importance” on the college essay (p. 22). This importance is growing: in 1993 only 14% of universities surveyed rated the college essay of “considerable importance,” but by 2010 this number had risen to 27% (p. 23).

The Common Application for Undergraduate College Admission, which is used by nearly 500 universities in 46 states, tells prospective students that “the personal essay helps us become acquainted with you as a person and student, apart from courses, grades, test scores, and other objective data,” and a popular “how-to” guide reassures high school students that “almost

any college or university you apply to wants to know more about you than your grades or test scores can tell them" (Kashner, 1999, p. 18). Although it is neither a paper that a teacher will grade nor a written response that a testing agency will score, the true nature of the college essay is not an invitation to write for someone who really wants to know a student better. It is, rather, a high-stakes competitive writing task that can make the difference between college acceptance or rejection.

More problematic than the false reassurances given to students about the nature of the task, is the misleading nature of college essay prompts themselves. Most prompts ask applicants for personal narratives, but the essays actually function as arguments that make a case for the applicant's potential as a college student. To put this another way, college essay prompts ask for a type of discourse that rhetoricians, following Aristotle, call "epideictic," which means the writer or speaker celebrates an individual for a sympathetic audience. In reality, however, college essays function as "deliberative" rhetoric, meaning the writer/speaker must garner the vote of an audience that is at best indifferent and, at worst, skeptical.

The lack of transparency surrounding the college essay complicates the admissions process for all applicants, but what is particularly troubling is that it widens the achievement gap between low-income, ethnic minority students and middle-income White students. As Early and DeCosta-Smith (2011) have pointed out, students from underrepresented groups seldom enroll in for-profit college preparatory courses that provide specialized instruction in the college application essay. This exemplifies what Graff (2007) termed "our undemocratic curriculum," which favors those students "with some already acquired academic socialization that enables them to detect the tacit and unformulated rules of the academic game" and leaves outsiders "feeling that they somehow lack the mysterious quality possessed by the high achievers" (p. 129).

College readiness has become a focus of secondary instruction, but, of course, college *preparation* does not guarantee college *acceptance*. Demystifying the college essay is a small but important step toward increasing access to desirable four-year institutions for students who do not understand how "the academic game" is played.

### The College Application Essay

The college essay has received relatively little scholarly attention, perhaps because it is not a component of the high school curriculum. Other high-stakes, college preparatory writing tasks that fall outside high school curricula, such as the writing sections of the SAT and ACT, ask students to draw on their reading and studies and thus may resemble the sort of academic writing taught in school. The college essay, on the other hand, calls for a

type of writing that hardly seems academic: a deeply personal narrative written for a complete stranger with no clear standards of assessment.

Two of the three studies that have examined the college essay affirmed that it represents a conflictive rhetorical situation masquerading as a peaceful one. Paley (1996) collected think-aloud protocols from applicants as they composed essays and from admissions counselors as they responded to them. She concluded that the college essay is a "rhetorical paradox" in which "an imperative to self-disclose . . . is mystified as an invitation" (p. 86) and "the imperative to write openly and in a relaxed manner . . . conceals a deep concern for mechanical correctness on the part of admissions counselors" (p. 96). Vidali (2007) interviewed three college students with learning disabilities who made the potentially risky decision to self-disclose about their disabilities in their essays. Vidali argued that application essays put "universities in a powerful position to evaluate whatever it is they are *looking*, but perhaps not clearly *asking*, for" (p. 621). Admissions counselors actually seem to discourage students from examining the rhetorical situation of the essay too closely, as exemplified by the first piece of advice on the "Hints & Tips" page of the University of Texas at Austin's admissions website: "Don't tell us what you think we want to hear."

Paley (1996) and Vidali's (2007) studies have contributed much to understanding the rhetorical situation of the college essay, but their participants seemed already marked for success. The students in Paley's study had taken Honors English and were in the top 17% of their class; Vidali's participants were already in college and thus had proven their ability to write a successful essay. The question remains how less qualified students who are still unsure in their senior year of high school whether they will attend college, cope with the task of writing a college essay. This question was the focus of Early and DeCosta-Smith's (2011) study of 41 low-income, ethnic minority high school seniors who received explicit instruction in the genre features of the college admission essay. The researchers collected 50 examples of successful college essays and distilled five generic elements from these essays. High school students who received explicit instruction in these genre conventions scored significantly higher on their essays than did a control group. These findings demonstrate the effectiveness of making the implicit expectations of the college essay the focus of explicit instruction, but the findings are mitigated somewhat by the fact that the raters had never been admissions counselors. Furthermore, raters used the copyrighted "6 Trait Rubric," which is designed to assess writing in general rather than a specific rhetorical task. An ecologically valid assessment of college essays requires that they be scored by actual admissions counselors applying the same criteria used in the admissions process.

## Methodology

The setting for this study was a low-performing, urban high school in the Dallas-Ft. Worth Metroplex area. See Table 1 for demographic information about the school. The study used a quasi-experimental, nonequivalent, posttest-only design. Random assignment was not practical because students were already grouped in separate classes. Forty-two students in two different classes participated in the program that paired them with my college class. A control group of 47 students from two other classes (led by a teacher not involved in the study) completed the school's standard college essay unit.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Information*

Ethnicity	
African-American	27%
Asian/Pacific Islander	5%
Hispanic	36%
White	31%
Other	1%
Economically Disadvantaged	50%
At Risk	61%

*Source: Texas Education Agency*

## Materials

All students wrote on Essay Topic A on the ApplyTexas Common Application, which is used by 61 four-year universities in Texas, including all public universities. Topic A was selected because it is the only topic required by every university that requires an essay. The prompt reads: "Write an essay in which you tell us about someone who has made an impact on your life and explain how and why this person is important to you." This prompt closely resembles option 3 ("Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.") on the Common Applica-

tion for Undergraduate College Admission. There is no word limit for the ApplyTexas essay.

## Procedure

All senior English teachers at the high school taught the same unit on the college essay, which consisted of about two weeks of classroom instruction using a packet containing various worksheets and “how-to” guides available on the Internet (e.g., EssayEdge.com, Kashner, 1999). Students participating in the high school/college partnership received this packet, but on four class days when they would have been reviewing these materials, I instead visited their classes to discuss how they might take a more richly rhetorical approach to their essays. On day one, I explained the concept of the rhetorical situation—defined as the interrelation between the writer, topic knowledge, language, and the audience—and how to use it as a framework for understanding the texts we read and write. On day two, I discussed how to construct a persuasive written argument that draws on the shared values of writer and audience.

On day three, we applied the concepts of the rhetorical situation and persuasive argument to the students’ college essays specifically. First, I asked students to consider that the exigence described by their how-to guides—admissions counselors wanting to know more about them beyond grades and test scores—was not entirely accurate. Instead, colleges required essays in order to have an additional data source by which to assess applicants in relation to each other. Second, I made sure that students understood that, at least at the large state schools in Texas to which most were applying, their audience would in all likelihood be a recent college graduate with little formal training in the assessment of writing. Also, this person would read hundreds of essays in a single admissions cycle. Third, I pointed out a rather obvious constraint: although the prompt asked applicants to write about someone who had influenced them, that person was not the one applying for admission. Thus, students needed to walk a fine line in answering the prompt accurately while conveying as much information about themselves as possible.

Finally, I explained an additional constraint: students would be writing a personal essay that made a public argument. This meant that simply choosing the most influential person in one’s life, and describing the most important reasons for that influence, might not make for the most persuasive argument with an admissions counselor. We brainstormed values that admissions counselors likely possess, and I encouraged students to think of people—not necessarily their parents—who might have imparted these values to them. We also discussed how to provide evidence in a personal essay through the use of anecdotes and specific experiences.

After each meeting with the high school students, I described our activities to my college students in order to illustrate how one might apply a rhetorical approach to composition in the high school classroom and to prepare them to peer review the high school students' essays. Once the high school students had completed drafts of their essays and submitted them for peer review, I instructed my college students to look for ways the high school students could strengthen their arguments. In particular, I emphasized two questions: (1) Has the subject of the essay influenced the writer in ways that would appeal to the values of admissions counselors? (2) Does the writer offer sufficient evidence of this influence in the form of specific anecdotes, experiences, achievements, etc.? After my students had completed their peer reviews and submitted them electronically to their partners, I visited the high school students for a fourth and final time to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their drafts, review previous lessons, and introduce strategies for revising globally and for rhetorical effectiveness. Once the high school students had completed their revisions, the teacher de-identified their essays and the essays from the control group, mixed the essays randomly, and submitted them to me.

## Scoring

The essays were scored by two admissions counselors at UT-Austin. One rater earned a business degree from UT-Austin and has been scoring admissions essays for four years; a second rater earned a psychology degree from UT-Austin and has been scoring essays for two years. Admissions counselors at UT-Austin complete a yearly norming session and score about a thousand essays per year. Essays are rated on a 4-point scale. Ratings were averaged when discrepant by only one point. Four essays were eliminated from the data set because their ratings were discrepant by two points, and no reliable adjudication method was available.

## Results

### Scores of Essays

Table 2 presents the mean scores and standard deviations of the admissions counselors' ratings of both groups' essays, as well as the results of a *t*-test used to analyze the scores. The essays of students who participated in the high school/college partnership were rated significantly higher ( $p < .01$ ) than the essays of students who completed the high school's standard college essay unit.

**Table 2***t-Test of Ratings of Students' College Essays*

Group	Mean Score	SD	df	t	Significance
HS/College Partnership (n = 42)	2.43	.74	87	-3.33	$p < .01$
Comparison (n = 47)	1.98	.53			

## Analysis of Essays

I devised my plan of instruction for the experimental group based on my own suspicion that the college essay is a persuasive argument masquerading as personal narrative, but I did not confirm this suspicion with admissions counselors beforehand. In a follow-up interview with one of the counselors in this study, however, he confirmed that counselors were trained to look for "effective rhetoric, reasoning, argumentation." I then asked this counselor to identify essays in the study that exemplified the most common rhetorical strengths and weaknesses of essays he reads in his daily work. What follows is an analysis of the exemplars selected by the counselor. Due to space constraints, I have limited my analysis to excerpts from the selected essays.

According to the admissions counselor, the most common misstep in the essays he reads is an overreliance on pure description. As an example, he selected the essay of Morgan (all names have been changed), a member of the control group who wrote about her grandfather. Morgan's essay opens as follows:

I call him "poppy." He is a tall, big-bellied man with brown eyes and a shock of black hair. He only wears shirts with a pocket in front so he can carry pens and a toothpick, and he always wears suspenders to hold up his slightly baggy pants. I'm never sure what he's thinking because he is so adept at hiding his emotions, but when something needs to be said he doesn't hesitate to speak his mind. Maybe it's succinct, maybe it's a long lecture, but it always carries an important point.

The counselor praised the vividness of Morgan's descriptions, but stated bluntly: "I don't care what he looks like. Make an argument that he impacted you." It should be noted that nowhere in the prompt are applicants asked to "make an argument." Rather, the prompt asks only for description ("tell us about someone") and exposition ("explain how and why this person is important to you"). While it is true that Morgan's essay failed to address the second half of the prompt, the counselor's main critique of her essay was

based on his expectation of a persuasive argument that is never mentioned in the prompt.

One problem with overly descriptive essays, according to the counselor, is that they tend to focus too much on the person who influenced the writer and not enough on the writer himself or herself. As the counselor put it, "it [the essay] had better be about the impact and not about the person making the impact." This was the main problem with the essay written by Peter, a member of the control group who wrote about his mother:

Like many African American children, my sister and I were raised by my mother only. Before we were born she was shot and survived a drug overdose, but she got her life together and made all the sacrifices in order to do what was best for my sister and me. As I grew older, I watched a single black woman enroll in college after twenty years away from school, and she graduated from the University of Texas at Arlington this past January.

The admissions counselor remarked that Peter's mother "sounds like an amazing woman, but the writer doesn't say enough about *himself*. What kind of a person is *he* as a result of his mother's influence?" Whereas the counselor faulted Morgan's essay for omitting an element never mentioned in the prompt, his critique of Peter's essay suggests that applicants should *contradict* the prompt. After all, the prompt directs students to "tell us about someone" other than themselves. The expectation, however, seems to be that students will not take the prompt at its face and will instead make themselves the main, if covert, subject of their essays.

Whereas Morgan and Peter emphasized description over exposition, other students made the opposite mistake, focusing on how and why someone impacted them without sufficient description of that person. To illustrate this common tendency, the counselor chose the essay of Nina, another member of the control group, who wrote about her two best friends:

I never thought I would find two people who would accept me for who I am until I met Cooper and Will. They taught me always to be myself and not to change just to please other people. They have always been loyal and have never judged me, and I have learned that I can be myself and not worry about what other people think. They accept me for who I am and do not expect me to be anyone else. I have never been so comfortable around anyone else outside my family. These boys are my family.

The counselor criticized Nina's essay because "the writer just keeps saying on the surface what these fellows do, and I would like to know about just *one* specific time when they helped the writer or gave advice." Nina clearly



recognized that she needed to explain why her friends are important to her, and she attempted to meet this goal by asserting again and again how her friends make her feel about herself. Certainly Nina failed to address the first part of the prompt, but what is interesting about the counselor's critique is that he expected her to provide *evidence* for her assertions, i.e., specific examples of her friends' actions. It hardly seems obvious that the best way to explain why someone is important to us is to tally their deeds, as opposed to, say, simply describing how we feel about them or how they make us feel. More to the point, the counselor expected specific anecdotes, even though the prompt makes no mention of them.

Because the essay prompt asks applicants to describe someone and explain why that person is important, it is understandable why some students err on the side of too much description or too much exposition. Less obvious is why students would write an overly narrative essay, but this is another common misstep, according to the admissions counselor. As an example, he cited the essay of Lisa, another student in the control group who wrote an essay about the death of her brother. Lisa's essay opens as follows:

One summer day on June 5, 2009, I was sitting alone in the living room. I could hear my mom talking on the phone, her voice rising: "Calm down, Kayce, please CALM DOWN!" I walked ear-first toward her bedroom. I pushed open the door to see my mother staring at me with wide eyes. "Lisa, um, Rob was in an accident." Mom went pale. I could tell from her face that Rob wasn't okay. He was gone.

The counselor commented that the essay produces a "compelling narrative, highly dramatic and moving," but he went on to state why it came up short: "Clearly the loss of her brother was a traumatic event, but it's not clear how he *influenced* her as a person." Lisa's misreading of the prompt might be attributable to the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), a state-mandated exam that students must pass to graduate high school in Texas. The writing portion of the TAKS consists of a single personal narrative. For example, a recent exit level exam asked students to respond to the following prompt: "Write an essay about a time when you helped another person" (2009, p. 20). At struggling high schools such as the one in this study, English teachers require students to practice repeatedly the type of writing they will do for TAKS, and it could be that Lisa simply transferred these skills to her college essay, which asked for a personal essay somewhat reminiscent of TAKS prompts.

So what were the features of successful essays in this study? One of the few essays to receive the highest possible score was written by Oliver, a member of the experimental group who wrote about his father. One of the strengths of Oliver's essay, according to the counselor, is that he supports his description of his father with specific anecdotes. For example:

It wasn't just that my father was around when a lot of my friends didn't have a father, he reached out to those kids. When we were fifteen Clay, Anthony, and Sam started dealing and banging. When my father found out, he confronted them and said, "I don't want to see you boys going in and out of jail." Then he went and talked with hardcore UTG members and told them straight-up that these kids were going to have a better life.

The counselor commented on this passage in particular: "This is a good example of making an assertion and then backing it up with specific support. He could have just *told* me that his father was courageous, but instead he *showed* me." Once Oliver had established his father's character, he went on to describe his father's influence in terms of Oliver's own accomplishments, citing specific examples and connecting them with his college potential:

It was that kind of courage and leadership that influenced me to stand up for what is right and not be afraid to stand up to my friends and teammates . . . This past fall I was named a captain of the varsity football team at ---- High School. This has taught me how to talk to people but also how to listen and respect their opinions. . . I look forward to being a student leader on your campus.

The counselor summarized the effect of Oliver's essay as follows: "I get a clear sense of who his father is and why he would be an influence, but I also see *how* that influence is made manifest in the student." The key difference between Oliver's essay and those mentioned earlier is that he makes claims about his father and himself that he supports with specific examples. In other words, Oliver makes an argument.

The counselor did select one essay from the experimental group that exemplified a common flaw. Dennis wrote about how his grandfather stepped in when Dennis's father was imprisoned and taught him various life skills that are often passed from father to son:

My father was sentenced to life without parole when my mother was pregnant with me, so Paw Paw has been the father figure that so many young black men need in their life . . . When I was 16 Paw Paw showed me how to shave without getting razor bumps all over my face . . . He showed me how to operate and maintain the lawn mower, get it at the right setting so you get a nice looking lawn that's not too long but not so short you kill the grass . . . Yes, he had "the talk" with me because he didn't want me to become a father while I was still a kid myself.

The problem with Dennis's essay, according to the counselor, was not that he failed to make an argument, but rather that the influence he described

seemed irrelevant to academic success and college life. The counselor contrasted Dennis's essay with that of another student in the experimental group, Rachel, who wrote about how her grandmother's career as a nurse had influenced her own decision to become a healthcare professional:

One day I will work in a hospital as a nurse. Most people don't care for the smell of cleaning solution, recycled air, and hospital food, but to me it feels like home because this is where my grandmother worked as a nurse . . . . My grandmother inspired me to join Health Occupations Students of America. Being able to observe surgeries, births, and other procedures has only strengthened my resolve to follow in my grandmother's footsteps and become a nurse.

The counselor rated Dennis's and Rachel's essays similar in terms of the quality of their arguments, but he rated Rachel's essay higher overall because it related her grandmother's influence to her own college plans. Although students in the experimental group were encouraged to emphasize those qualities in themselves that admissions counselors value (e.g., determination, maturity, self-discipline, and curiosity), there is nothing in the essay prompt itself that suggests some influences are more valuable than others. Dennis simply took the prompt at its face and wrote about the person who had made the biggest impact on him.

## Discussion

The results of this study suggest that students may write more effective college essays if they develop a rich understanding of persuasive argument and the rhetorical situation. Prior to my intervention, none of the students in this study had been introduced to the concept of the rhetorical situation, and, not incidentally, they had not considered the type of people who read college essays and the assessment criteria they apply. Instead, students were prepared to approach the college essay as they would any other academic writing task, attempting to produce some static, ideal text.

Rhetorical scholars such as Geisler (1994) and Haas (1994) have found that students often perceive reading as a monolithic activity that consists mainly of decoding texts and writing as an attempt to produce ideal, error-free texts. These perceptions hinder students' development as readers and writers because they fail to see texts as discursive acts that must be adapted to different situations. Geisler's and Haas's work focused on the reading and writing of academic texts, but students may also apply notions of an ideal text to personal essays. For example, the seemingly personal essay required by the TAKS is in fact a test scored by an anonymous examiner who determines whether students graduate high school. (Some teachers have confided to me that they encourage students to fabricate personal experiences if this will help them write better essays, which attests to how impersonal

“personal” essays can be.) In the current study, Lisa in particular seemed to approach her college essay in the same way as she would the TAKS test, writing a personal narrative about an influential experience. Students from the experimental group, on the other hand, learned to make arguments specifically tailored to the values of admissions counselors, which led to significantly higher scores.

Teaching students to analyze the rhetorical situation of college essays is particularly important because, as this study and those of Early and DeCosta-Smith (2011), Paley (1996), and Vidali (2007) demonstrate, college essay prompts can be misleading. In the current study, the most significant disjuncture between the prompt itself and the expectations of raters had to do with modes of discourse: the prompt asked only for description of an important person and explanation of that importance, but raters expected an oblique argument in favor of the writer’s admission. Morgan and Peter, in particular, failed to infer the deeper purpose of the college essay; they relied on description and exposition only, and their essays were downgraded accordingly. As a member of the experimental group, Dennis received instruction in persuasive argument and did make a strong case that his grandfather had influenced him. Dennis failed to infer the type of influence valued by raters, however, and so his essay was rated less effective. In contrast, successful writers like Oliver and Rachel (1) made claims about themselves and the people who influenced them, (2) supported those claims with specific examples, and (3) connected these influences to their own college readiness: three rhetorical moves critical to the success of their essays that the prompt did not explicitly request.

Part of the problem with college essay prompts is that they are brief and open-ended. Such prompts appear to offer students greater freedom, but this freedom is only as good as admissions officers’ openness to textual diversity. A writing task that appears to be open-ended but is in reality scored according to fairly strict criteria favors students who have deciphered what Graff (2007) has called the “unformulated rules of the academic game” (p. 129). In an important ethnographic study of student writers, Nelson (1990) found that struggling writers revert to the same “individual production systems or strategies” (p. 388) again and again if not given explicit instructions, whereas successful writers are able “to size up a writing situation and adapt their goals and approaches” (p. 388) in the absence of explicit instructions. The students in this study illustrate how the lack of explicit instructions in college essay prompts, which can be frustrating for any high school student, is particularly problematic for students who are unfamiliar with postsecondary academic culture. For example, compare Dennis to the more traditionally qualified students in Paley’s (1996) and Vidali’s (2007) studies. Paley’s and Vidali’s participants struggled with their essays, but they also demonstrated a certain amount of rhetorical savvy. They mentioned repeatedly their need to appeal to admissions counselors, and they were well aware of their need

to stand out from other applicants. Dennis lacked even this basic awareness of the rhetorical situation. He simply followed the prompt's instructions by describing how his grandfather taught him to shave, operate a lawnmower, and stay in good physical shape. From an admission counselor's perspective, these skills do not obviously translate to college success, but from Dennis's perspective, there was nothing in the essay prompt to indicate that some impacts might be more valuable than others.

Academic acculturation is perhaps the most elusive component of college readiness because it resists formal instruction. Students from under-represented groups often lack insider knowledge of postsecondary culture, which makes it all the more difficult to read between the lines of college essay prompts. By making the rhetorical situation of the college essay more transparent, we can help level the playing field for all students on this important component of college admissions.

### Conclusion

A major implication of this study is that unless postsecondary institutions are more transparent about the criteria they use to score college essays, they may unintentionally continue to favor applicants who are academically socialized over those of similar aptitude who are simply less familiar with academic culture. Of course high school teachers need not wait for colleges and universities to change. Teachers can contact admissions counselors at schools to which their students commonly apply and ask about how counselors are trained to score essays, what specific criteria are applied, how many levels of performance comprise the rating scale, etc. They can then teach their students to tailor their essays to the specific expectations of particular institutions. This may seem like the worst kind of "teaching to the test," but in fact it exemplifies the sort of rhetorical analysis that students should apply to any writing task: learn as much as possible about the audience and its expectations, study the discourse conventions of the particular genre, and consider how to come across as knowledgeable and credible. The importance of such rhetorical awareness may in fact be the most significant implication of the current study because it applies to academic writing in general. Only through careful attention to the values and expectations of academic discourse communities can students move from "outsider" to "insider" in those communities, and thus a lesson on college essays may equip students with the rhetorical knowledge needed to earn admission to college and thrive once they get there.

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