In the Space Provided: The College Application Essay

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*The English Journal* is currently published by National Council of Teachers of English.

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The guidance department suggested it was the profundity of the topic that drove students to write clone essays on divorce, death, ethical puzzles, and "how the fall of the Berlin Wall changed my life." Parents assured me it was modesty that got in the way. (I thought of May Fridays in the student parking lot and decided modesty wasn't the problem.) Could it be that the standard language arts curriculum failed to prepare writers for their first real assignment? Admittedly, the personal essay is not at the heart of most secondary school language arts curricula. A long history of animosity between personal and academic writing—a false dichotomy—views the personal essay as emotional self-indulgence. Many seniors graduate believing they must never write "I."

But why didn't students see the parallels between the personal essay and the academic essay of argument? Organization, analysis, and the use of evidence can prove that Dan Cody shaped Gatsby's life. The same skills can show how 100 corn seedlings or a chance to coach youth soccer make you an applicant of interest. I talked to seniors about how to apply well-developed writing skills to the application question. Some saw the parallels; others did not. I thought more about their lament, "I've never done anything like this before!"

THINKING OBJECTIVELY ABOUT SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES

Time and reflection have brought me to the belief that it is neither the questions nor the writing skills that make the application essay a mighty challenge. Rather it is the level of thinking required that causes so much trouble for the writers and so much fatigue for their audience in Admissions. The true challenge of the application essay is the demand it makes on young writers to think objectively about subjective experience.

The voice of disengaged reflection is unfamiliar to most 17-year olds. When Wordsworth defined poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquility," he knew that per-
sonal experience becomes art when it passes out of an embedded condition in the subjective moment. Emotion becomes poetry only through the distance of recollection and objective reflection. While familiar to the likes of Wordsworth, however, the separated voice of objective reflection is neither the daily practice nor the academic habit of high school students. When seniors say, "I've never done anything like this before," they may be very correctly describing the voice the essay requires of them.

Students willing to write about Gatsby or the Congress of Vienna (because there is always the teacher, the text, or the Cliffs Notes if you don't know what to think), find no Cliffs Notes for the application essay. You have to think for yourself about yourself, and the reflective order of consciousness requires distance and dislocation many aren't ready to muster. High school students are barely ready to sit in judgment at the table of voices on topics like the New Deal or Melville's themes. It's harder still on their own lives: They've just begun to construct their lives, let alone the meaning.

So students turn to what common wisdom suggests is the right answer: death, divorce, confrontations with politics or nature. And, as one might predict, the result is very common. The real assignment for all high school students is to move away from the voices of other authorities to their own voice as author, authority.

Thus, the application essay demands a developmental stage not all students have reached. Jean Piaget, William Perry, Lawrence Kohlberg, and more recent educational theorists like Carol Gilligan and Robert Kegan, see this as an issue of cognitive development. Like asking 3-year olds to make volume/number distinctions or 7-year olds to make moral judgments, a personal voice evaluating and judging one's own experience is a skill of one level of consciousness not possible for thinkers at a different level. The work of Gilligan and Mary Belenky speaks of a woman's search for voice, but the concept works for developing students, as well.

College work—and the application essay is the first evidence of this—requires students (often, as the young people claim, for something like the first time) to speak for themselves, or as Pat Hoy says in "Shaping Experience, Creating Essays," "to step outside their experience and make sense of it" (Nancy Kline, ed. 1992, How Writers Teach Writing, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 76). Thus to say to seniors, "Tell us about yourself," is to ask them for what Mary Belenky calls "constructed knowledge" (Belenky et al. 1986, Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind, New York: Basic Books, 130). To find such a voice, to construct knowledge, a writer must first find the distance and separation that frees one to speak; this separation—temporal, spatial, or cognitive—lets us sift and construct meaning in our lives.

Colleges, then, are asking, forcing, students to be reflective in medias res. Writers must find their own voice and use it . . . under pressure. Unfortunately, high school students have neither the distance of time nor the break college itself becomes.

HELPING STUDENTS WRITE APPLICATION ESSAYS

How can we help? Certainly all language arts teachers have a stake in preparing their students for the writing tasks before them. Nor do I discredit the value of assuring students that an application essay is similar to other work in their school courses. But assigning a lot of "Tell us about yourself" themes or talking about the parallels between personal and academic writing—while not without value—won't fully bridge the gap. What follows are my suggestions for how to help students over the cognitive hurdle and into the required unembedded condition of reflection about their application topics. These suggestions should help young writers construct a self for the space provided.

1. As it isn't just telling a story that's difficult—students spend most of their non-class time in this activity—a September assignment might ask for a specific and vivid retelling of a personal event. Stress the need for detail, but do not allow students to assign a meaning or draw conclusions from their story. This is just a telling and revisions should stress the showing rather than the meaning.

When finished, these narratives should sit in your desk or in the students' writing folders for several weeks. Authors will mull over their choice of incident, even if in a passive way, and enforced distance of time will generate some disengagement.
In October or early November, return to this assignment and provide a photocopy of each students' narrative to each member of a peer-writing group. Group members should read each other's incident and then write several thoughts about what they believe the incident means. The idea is to give the writer 5 or 6 possible constructions of meaning for the event.

From the suggestions, writers set out now to build their own meaning from the story. Time and peers' contributions should broaden the choices; it also maintains the appropriate passive intervention of the teacher in this particular writing assignment, leaving students free to frame the end result in their own words. Models now may be used, but the more accessible and modest, the better. Nothing saps confidence like reading Orwell.

There is a wonderful joy in the act of collaboration this assignment engenders. It's you against "them," the external judges, and you really can act like a coach here. You must leave them to fine-tune things on their own. You have framed the process, established a distance for them about their material, and encouraged them to look carefully and from a variety of points of view. All this should be a first step toward the reflective mode the college essay requires. The rest must be up to them.

2. Another alternative is to ask for a short essay on a topic with built-in reflectiveness:

questions about a change of mind
- a good friend who isn't a friend any more
- something you believed once but don't believe now
- a choice you've regretted
- a decision you'd like to make over again

questions with a built-in double vision
- a time something or someone misled you or you acted on a misperception
- a time you tried to learn something and didn't learn it
- a time you were glad to be a girl (boy) and a time you weren't
- something you were but aren't any more

As Hoy writes: "I find that if I can get them [students] to separate themselves from their own experiences—to reflect on themselves, to create an 'I' in their text who is different from the writer creating the texts—if I can do that at the beginning of the composition process, everything else falls into place more or less naturally" (79).

THE APPLICATION ESSAY

Colleges use the application essay as a piece in a puzzle, a piece that William C. Hiss, vice president of administrative services and dean of admission and financial aide at Bates College, says gives "a sense of the quality and freshness of the applicant's mind." It should be a fully personal piece, unique to the writer in topic and style. But too many seniors waste the opportunity, not because they want to default and not because they cannot write, but because they are just beginning to achieve the quality of mind required. Hiss is right in saying the essay reveals the applicant's mind. But the mind revealed is often unready for objective reflection. Embedded in the events of their lives, seniors drift toward maudlin topics of loss and distance (divorce/death) without the voice of individual self-definition needed to see the meaning of these experiences.

High school English departments can do more to help college applicants and all writers. It is, moreover, in the service of their own programs that they show students how able they already are for the task. But we all need to stop rolling our eyes about the miserable results of some of these assignments and notice the difficulty of reflective regard.

The application essay is meant to nudge students toward a collegiate frame of mind. A little help in framing the challenge, applying known skills, developing a voice of objectivity, and working on the revision of vision will make Thanksgiving Monday a safer and easier holiday for teachers, the March reading season more pleasant for admission counselors, and April 1 a happier day for students. We are all working together in the business of teaching, learning, and growing, encouraging applicants to disengage from adolescence and move into the sense of reflection and voice that college and adult work require. This transformation takes place in the space provided...either on the application page or, later, in the quad. But it begins in the secondary classroom.

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