Write Your Ticket to College: A Genre-Based College Admission Essay Workshop for Ethnically Diverse, Underserved Students
Author(s): Jessica Singer Early, Meredith DeCosta-Smith, Arturo Valdespino
Reviewed work(s):
Source: Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, Vol. 54, No. 3 (November 2010), pp. 209-219
Published by: International Reading Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40961527
Accessed: 04/01/2012 16:00

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

International Reading Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy.
Write Your Ticket to College: A Genre-Based College Admission Essay Workshop for Ethnically Diverse, Underserved Students

Jessica Singer Early | Meredith DeCosta-Smith | Arturo Valdespino

From this workshop I learned not to be afraid or embarrassed to write about my life. I discovered that writing opens a door to the reader and we, in a way, let them into our lives. (written reflection, Gladys, 12th grade; all student names are pseudonyms)

One of the most important ways that secondary students succeed in the everyday written work of school is by mastering high-stakes genres like the college admission essay (Donovan & Smolkin, 2006). It is important for students to be exposed to authentic, gatekeeping writing genres (Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007), which are too often omitted from the secondary writing curriculum, leaving students to manage on their own or rely on support from family members. If low-income minority students who want to attend college are not provided writing instruction related to high-stakes genres, and if they do not have access to writing sponsors to support their acquisition and practice of these genres, they are then placed at a disadvantage in their transition from high school to college (Ball, 2006; Ball & Ellis, 2008). Secondary schools must work to demystify gatekeeping writing forms for underrepresented populations, so these students can develop necessary writing skills to gain admission to colleges and universities.

In this article, we share stories from two classroom communities that practiced an authentic, gatekeeping writing task through a genre-based writing workshop on college admission essays. The workshop took place during the fall semester of 2008 with two senior classes at an urban public high school in the southwestern United States. The school’s student body comprises grades 10–12 with 2,217 students: 42% Caucasian, 40% Hispanic, 10% Native American, 6% African American, and 2% Asian (Arizona Department of Education, 2008). Forty-one high school seniors (19 boys and 22 girls) from two separate and regularly scheduled, tracked senior English classes participated in this workshop. These classes were offered to underperforming students in the school and were labeled “regular English.” Students were sorted into these classes based on poor performance on statewide literacy assessments and low grade-point averages. Despite their underachievement, all 41 students
reported plans to attend four-year colleges or universities after graduating from high school.

Twenty-nine of the 41 students self-identified as Hispanic/Latino (71%). Latino students in this study were all first- or second-generation Mexican Americans. Six of the 41 students identified themselves as Anglo (15%), 3 as Native American (7%), 2 as African American (5%), and 1 as Asian American (2%). All of the students come from low-income households, and the majority of the students will be the first in their families to graduate from high school or attend college. Further, many of the students had been previously classified as English learners, but none were taking part in English learner programs at the time of the workshop.

To take a close look at the impact of a genre-based workshop on writing college admission essays, we framed two questions to guide our thinking and help us notice patterns in student outcomes:

1. How does teaching a six-week writing workshop using explicit teaching of college admission essay genre features improve ethnically diverse, underserved students’ ability to write these texts?

2. What is the impact of explicit teaching of genre features on ethnically diverse, underserved students’ confidence in writing college admission essays?

Why Teach College Admission Essays?

College-bound high school students typically write college admission essays during the first semester of their senior year as part of the college application process. For many colleges and universities, the admission essay is the only opportunity to learn about applicants on a personal level. The University of California (UC) system, for example, requires a personal essay as part of its application process. The UC application checklist emphasizes the essay’s importance: “The personal statement is an important part of your application for admission. The University uses it to learn more about you as an individual” (UC, 2009, para. 4).

The relative magnitude of admission essays has increased recently, as large numbers of colleges and universities have opted not to require admission test scores. In 1993, only 14% of colleges considered the essay to be of “considerable importance,” but by 2006, 28% of colleges considered the essay to be a significant admission factor (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2008). Currently, 413 colleges and universities around the United States use a common application, including an admission essay requirement with a standardized prompt (The Common Application, n.d.b).

As part of our preparation for the workshop, we collected 50 sample college admission essays from students who applied and were accepted to colleges and universities throughout the country the previous year. We read the essays to find specific components used for this genre. In our coding of the sample essays, we found repeated patterns, including strong writing topics, audience awareness, compelling leads, use of dialogue and description, accounts of powerful lived experiences, an ability to connect outside information (i.e., characters from texts or world events) to personal values and interests, and lessons learned from these experiences.

Getting to Know Our Students

As former high school English teachers and coauthors on this project, we have years of experience working with diverse, low-income secondary students in Oregon, Indiana, and Texas. Now, in our current work as writing researchers and teacher educators at a public university in a major urban center in the Southwest, we have continued our commitment to providing underserved secondary students with writing skills necessary to gain access to postsecondary institutions and scholarships. We are also interested in building bridges between high schools, colleges, and underserved students and their communities. Based on our own teaching histories and research interests, and with the assistance of two high school English teachers, we created a six-week genre-based workshop on writing college admission essays, which took place two or three days a week for six consecutive weeks during the fall semester of 2008.

Our university maintains a close research and mentoring relationship with the high school where these workshops took place. Through our professional development, teacher training, and National Writing
Project programs, we have formed a bidirectional relationship with the high school and, more specifically, its English department. This connection allowed us to begin a conversation with the two classroom English teachers. After establishing this relationship, we decided to collaborate, prepare, and teach the college admission workshop. Prior to the workshop, the research team observed multiple classes, attended two department inservice meetings, and met with the teachers multiple times during the summer to prepare for the workshop. The classroom teachers were generous in allowing us access to their students and curriculum. Each teacher chose different roles in the workshop process. One took on an observational role, while the other chose a participatory coteaching role. On the days the workshop did not take place, both teachers taught their regular senior English curriculum. Both classes were studying Hamlet at the time our workshop took place.

**Collecting a Writing Sample**

On the first day of the workshop, prior to instruction on the genre, we asked students to write a predraft 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 Common Application essay prompt is open-ended and allows students to choose from six essay topics: (1) a significant experience, risk, or ethical dilemma; (2) an issue of local, national, or international concern; (3) a significant person; (4) an important character from a text; (5) a personal experience that represents diversity; or (6) a topic of choice. We wanted to collect an early writing sample to gain an understanding of students’ strengths and weaknesses in writing this genre.

**Repeated Themes and Common Misconceptions**

After reading students’ preliminary writing samples, we found that many of the students had important life experiences to share. In fact, we were struck by the powerful and deeply personal stories. The majority of the students in both classes chose to write about obstacles and hardships they had overcome in their young lives. Many of the students were first-generation immigrants and chose to write their families’ immigration stories. Some students wrote about coming from extended families and described their roles serving as full-time caregivers for younger siblings and cousins. Other students described immense pride in their cultures despite challenges they faced due to prejudice and racism. Dyani wrote about her ultimate goal: attending college and “living the life as a Diné” (Navajo). She said she has “learned so much from how our kinship clan system works, customs, stories/prayers, language, and livestock and nature” and, ideally, wants to balance two cultures by living the “American way and Navajo way.”

Another repeated theme found throughout the essays was the positive influence of mothers. Students described how their mothers had sacrificed greatly, so they could go to school. Hector wrote about the sacrifices his mother made when he was a young child living in Mexico:

> For eight months we lived in a hollow house, eating beans and tortillas everyday. My mother went to work at a jalapeno processing factory nearby. She left at six in the morning and returned at eight at night, with her delicate hands swollen, you could not distinguish her nails from her fingers.

Other topics included caring for grandparents or disabled parents, dealing with painful divorce, and overcoming abuse or other forms of trauma.

Although students’ topics were compelling, we noticed that their writing did not exhibit the necessary skills to share these experiences effectively for a college audience. Many of the preliminary essay samples were incomplete and lacked detail, description, and focus. 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.” Although Rodrigo’s love and respect for his father were clear, his lead did not have the fluidity and details needed to separate his story from other students’ stories about their parents. Other students struggled to include dialogue that could engage their audience.

The majority of the students in both classes chose to write about obstacles and hardships they had overcome in their young lives.
Only 4 of the 41 initial essay samples referenced outside texts, and none incorporated dialogue. Furthermore, many of the essays lacked a sense of audience and organization. For example, Jenna wrote about the struggles and triumphs she faced as a gymnast who had to work to pay for coaches’ fees after her parents lost their jobs. Although the topic was intriguing and included important details, Jenna’s 20 sentences were formatted into a single paragraph and took on an informal tone. Phrases in her essay, such as “when I’m hit with some obstacle” and “so being myself I found a job during the summer,” along with the formatting issues we uncovered, suggested a need to discuss the importance of organization and audience awareness.

**Pre- and Postworkshop Reflection**

Before and after the writing workshop instruction, we asked students to complete a pre- and postworkshop reflection that included a series of 15 questions asking the students to report their ability, skills, and sense of confidence associated with writing college admission essays. The reflection required students to note their confidence with particular genre elements of a college admission essay, specific writing tasks, and elements of the writing process. In their responses to the preworkshop reflection, many students shared their fears about writing admission essays. They expressed concern about sounding “unprofessional,” and many felt their life experiences were inconsequential and “unworthy” or “not impressive enough for college admissions officers.”

Students also reported feeling anxiety about writing at the “college level” for a distant, unknown audience. Marco, for example, stated that he was uncomfortable writing “what colleges want to hear.” He stayed after class the first week of the workshop to share that he “did not know how to turn his resume into an essay,” as he assumed this was what colleges wanted. Adelais worried about “writing life experiences” because she felt hers might sound too personal or difficult, while Flora said she wanted to “improve my skills when writing about myself.” Fears about sharing life stories for a college-level audience were common, and students reported a lack of confidence in writing the different parts of a college admission essay. We took all of this information into consideration to create a genre-based writing workshop (Singer, 2006; see Figure 1).

**Figure 1  College Admission Essay Workshop Schedule**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 1</th>
<th>Day 1 (Monday)</th>
<th>Introduce the study, pass out permission forms, and explain and administer writing self-efficacy survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Day 2 (Wednesday)</td>
<td>Collect preliminary writing sample using a Common Application prompt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>Day 3 (Monday)</td>
<td>Introduce skill lesson: Getting to know your audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Day 4 (Wednesday)</td>
<td>Introduce skill lesson: How to choose a topic; distribute examples of model essays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 3</td>
<td>Day 5 (Monday)</td>
<td>Introduce skill lesson: Writing effective introductions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Day 6 (Wednesday)</td>
<td>Introduce skill lesson: Using dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 4</td>
<td>Day 7 (Monday)</td>
<td>Introduce skill lesson: Using description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Day 8 (Wednesday)</td>
<td>Introduce skill lesson: Sharing your “so what?” text and conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 5</td>
<td>Day 9 (Wednesday)</td>
<td>Guide writing conferences and revision; typing in the computer lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Day 10 (Monday)</td>
<td>Introduce skill lesson: Revision and peer review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 6</td>
<td>Day 11 (Wednesday)</td>
<td>Introduce skill lesson: Writing effective conclusions; guide writing conferences and revision; typing in the computer lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Day 12 (Friday)</td>
<td>Have students participate in final read-around; administer postessay using a Common Application prompt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Day 12 (Friday)</td>
<td>Administer posttest writing self-efficacy survey; introduce undergraduate panel from the university; hand out workshop completion certificate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
College Admission Essay Workshop Overview

In total, students wrote three separate essays: an initial predraft, an instructional draft developed as part of the curriculum unit, and a third and final draft. Students wrote the first draft during the first week of the writing workshop, prior to instruction. They received writing workshop instruction on the second, instructional draft. For this essay, students chose from three topics all worded similarly to the Common Application prompt. The topics were all open-ended and required students to write about personal experience. Students worked on the second essay during the course of the six-week writing workshop, during which they were guided through several skill lessons on particular elements of the college admission essay.

In the daily workshop sessions, we wanted to focus on the specific genre elements of college admission essay writing, so we consciously chose to use the term skill lessons instead of minilessons to describe the instructional segment of each writing workshop session. We wanted to avoid characterizing these lessons as mini because they were often complex and time-consuming. The skill lessons in the six-week workshop were (a) selecting a strong writing topic, (b) writing for the appropriate audience, (c) writing an effective introduction, (d) adding dialogue, (e) using description, (f) stepping outside of the narrative to place emphasis on the significance of the topic and lessons learned, (g) making connections with outside texts, events, or ideas, and (h) writing effective conclusions.

During the six-week workshop, students were given time to revise and type their instructional essays, as well as time to take part in feedback sessions with peers and instructors. The second essay served as an opportunity for students to take part in a process to learning about this genre (Atwell, 1987). Students were guided through different steps of writing admission essays, from invention to drafting to revising. Most of the 55-minute class sessions consisted of seven workshop steps: (1) a skill lesson to introduce and define the genre element (e.g., see Figure 2), (2) the use of models and examples, (3) an opportunity for students to practice skill(s), (4) an opportunity for students to share their writing with partners or the whole class, (5) an opportunity for students to practice skill(s) again as part of a college admission essay project in progress (instructional draft), (6) an opportunity for students to receive feedback from peers or instructor, and (7) an opportunity for students to revise.

These steps did not necessarily take place in this order in each session, and some of the steps took longer than others some days, depending on the skill lesson and the students’ needs. Also, some of these steps sometimes overlapped. For example, in many of our skill lessons, students turned to a partner to share work in progress and were provided with opportunities to read model texts. Although each of the workshop sessions were structured in this way, we tailored and revised

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 2 Skill Lesson: Finding Your “So What?”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1 Review all of the notes, outline, and brainstorming you have written so far. Let your head swim with information. (5 minutes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2 Clear your desk of everything but a piece of paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3 This is an open-ended quick-write. Writing quickly about your essay topic, tell the story of how your thinking about this topic has evolved. When you began thinking about this topic, what did you think? Then what happened, and what happened after that? What were your preconceptions about your topic? How have they changed? (8 minutes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4 Skip a few lines, then write the heading “Moments, Stories, People, and Scenes.” Focus on specific situations, people, experiences, observations, and so on that stand out in your mind about this essay topic. Keep your pen or pencil moving. (5 minutes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5 Skip a few more lines, then quickly write a dialogue between you and someone else connected to your essay topic. (5 minutes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6 Finally, skip a few more lines and write these two words: “So What?” Now, summarize the most important thing you think people should understand about you based on what you’ve written 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. (5 minutes)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
lessons to fit students’ needs, used examples of successful writing strategies, conferenced with students, and continually revised and altered our curriculum to address students’ questions, strengths, and concerns.

**Writing Introductions**

One of the first genre elements we taught in the workshop was the introduction. In a questionnaire students filled out prior to the workshop, many expressed concerns about “how to get started” and how to “format” their essays. Students also worried about the rhetorical situation; they feared that they might not be able to write well enough for college admissions officers. Explicit teaching of the introduction genre element helped to allay some of their fears (see Singer, 2006, for workshops on introductions). We provided students with examples of essays that used particular strategies, such as beginning with a powerful quote, a series of open-ended questions, or a compelling anecdote.

Students were given multiple opportunities throughout the workshop to practice writing the college admission essay introduction, and many students expressed their enthusiasm after learning this genre element. Cody said he learned useful strategies for how to approach his introduction: “Start off the essay with either a question or dialogue in the beginning paragraphs.” Another student, Ramiro, said he learned how to “open up to my audience in a new way and how to grab my reader’s attention and keep them entertained.”

By learning ways of approaching the introduction for this genre, many students’ leads showed marked improvement. For example, in Juana’s first attempt at writing an introduction in her initial essay sample, she related several areas of academic interest in a list-like format. She then went on to briefly describe 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.

In a later attempt at writing the introduction (final draft), after Juana had participated in the workshop on writing effective leads, 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 seemed to never feel proud of my sister and I. I remember the many nights I cried myself to sleep wishing I didn’t have a dad.

Not only did Juana switch the focus of her essay in this revised draft, but also her writing became more fluid and descriptive.

The predraft introduction of another student, Izzy, included a general overview of why she appreciated the role her mother had played in her life:

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.

When Izzy returned to the introduction in her final draft after the explicit genre lesson on compelling leads, she revised to reveal how she grew up in a challenging environment but thrived because of her mother’s love and support. She wrote about the way her mother served dual roles as both mother and father:

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.
Using Dialogue and Description

Another skill lesson that we taught during the six-week workshop was how to incorporate dialogue and description into the college admission essay. In many of the students’ preliminary writing samples, they wrote about significant people or events in their lives, but they did not “show” these events using description or dialogue. For example, Jenissa’s predraft essay discussed the importance of family, but there were few details and little description in her writing. 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.” While her love for her family could make an interesting essay topic, we wanted to help Jenissa move beyond summary and, instead, provide anecdotes and description to separate her story from those of other applicants.

In this workshop, we provided students with multiple examples of college admission essays, poems, and nonfiction pieces that either modeled effective use of dialogue and description or described the importance of using these strategies in writing (Hillocks, 2007; Lamott, 1994). Jenissa used strategies from the workshop to retell her story in her final draft with clearer focus, dialogue, and detail. Rather than writing about her family in general, she decided to write about her grandmother and 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 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 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.

Jenissa concluded her essay by discussing how just “another lecture” about hard work and success from her grandmother became so much more after she passed away; it became advice that she learned to appreciate and live by, and ultimately helped her find success once again.

Before the workshop, some students summarized or reported information about their topics rather than describing them compellingly for the reader. For example, Victoria wrote a predraft essay about her aunt and relayed a story about a 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.” After the workshop, Victoria’s final draft description of her naptime became 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 eyes darted open. At first I thought she looked mad, but a smile slowly crept across her face.

Victoria crafted her sentences to provide the reader a clearer picture of her aunt. Revisions such as these allowed students to eloquently portray life experiences through their essays.

Writing Your “So What?”

The third genre element that we taught emerged from a repeated pattern we found in our earlier reading of effective college admission essays: a turn toward the end of each essay where the writer steps away from the narrative to share how or why the story is representative of his or her unique interests and potential contributions to a university community. We called this genre element the “so what?” section of the essay. We explained to students that this was the part of the essay where, as writers, they needed 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 not only share personal experience but also connect to an outside audience (see Figure 2).

Richard wrote a predraft essay about his girlfriend; however, although he made attempts to share his enthusiasm and deep love for her, the ideas lacked fluency and did not make his point clearly. “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?” workshop lesson, Richard began to make a case to the college admissions panel. After the workshop,
he focused his final draft on the role his girlfriend had 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.

Richard and his classmates’ “so what?” texts developed over the course of the writing workshop. For example, in Juana’s first essay, she relayed several interests and reflected briefly on a powerful life event. However, her piece lacked a clear message:

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.

Her final, exemplary essay incorporated the “so what?” lesson by centering her writing more on her difficult relationship with her father and what she learned from him:

There he was again, in a bad mood. 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 seemed to never feel proud about my sister and I. I remember the many nights I cried myself to sleep wishing I didn't have a dad.

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 Dobby. 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 essay is an excellent example of how students used the “so what?” workshop lesson to find a focus and share, more specifically, the ways their life experiences have impacted their personal characters.

**Improving Students’ Confidence**

During the first week of the workshop, we encountered unexpected resistance to our teaching. The classroom teachers told us they noticed more behavior problems and disruptions than usual. Although students’ behavior could have been a direct reaction to working with unfamiliar teachers, written reflections and conversations with students suggested that they
were feeling anxious about the college admission essay and the application process. In turn, we met with the classroom teachers multiple times over the course of the first week to talk about ways of building trust and creating a safe learning community.

One way the classroom teachers suggested we could address this concern was by acknowledging students’ anxieties and fears associated with applying for and going to college. For example, we spent half of one workshop session answering students’ questions about the college admission essay and the admission process. Students wanted to go to college but were worried they would not have the money to pay for tuition. Other students did not know if they could balance their studies with full-time jobs and family responsibilities. Undocumented students were concerned that their status would get in the way of their chance to receive a postsecondary education.

Because college admission essays are an authentic, gatekeeping genre with high stakes attached, it made sense that students had real concerns connected with this writing task. To address these issues, we also provided the students with pamphlets describing undergraduate scholarships and examples of financial aid packages. We invited a multiethnic panel of undergraduates to come to class one day to answer students’ questions and address some of their fears. Toward the end of the workshop, after the students had each written a rough draft of their instructional essays, we also held individual writing conferences with each of them. In these conferences, students met with their classroom teacher and at least one of us to receive detailed feedback and revision suggestions on their essays. These conversations helped build a connection between the teachers and the students and gave them another opportunity to ask questions about their writing and the college admission process.

In a questionnaire given to students at the end of the workshop, Gloria wrote, “I never thought my writing was good enough to get into college even though I have always gotten good grades. But now, I feel more confident.” Jacqueline could not hide her growing pride in her writing: “You guys made me feel confident about my writing and that I am able to go on in life to accomplish anything.” Raymundo reflected on the difference in his confidence before and after the workshop: “I feel more comfortable in my writing abilities—much better than how I felt before the workshop.”

One of the classroom teachers commented on his students’ improved writing skills and increased confidence. He explained,

I think my students really expressed their experiences well in their essays. In fact, many of them ended up using their college admission essays [final drafts] to apply for scholarships and a number of them actually won based on their essays. It turned into a positive cycle. Once a few students found out they had won then everybody started to get excited.

Greater reported writing confidence suggests that teaching the genre elements of the college admission essay may have a powerful and important influence on underserved students’ writing confidence and may even influence students’ interest in other gatekeeping writing tasks like scholarship applications.

**Lingering Questions: Preparing Students for the Future**

This workshop points to the value of embedding the college admission essay genre into the secondary language arts curriculum. The focus of high school English courses has traditionally been on teaching literature, literary response, and grammar (Hillocks, 2008) rather than writing authentic, gatekeeping genres (Purcell-Gates et al., 2007). When high-stakes writing tasks are included in the secondary English curriculum, they are generally taught in advanced placement or college-preparatory courses that too often exclude low-income, minority students because of systematic tracking and sorting in schools (Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997). Our findings suggest that teaching the college admission essay genre at the secondary level is valuable, particularly for preparing ethnically diverse, underserved students for the college admission process. Furthermore, this workshop has shown the importance of teaching genre elements as an instructional approach for this authentic, gatekeeping writing form.
We do not want to portray this curricular unit as a panacea that erased all student fears regarding the college admission process or as a quick fix for getting ethnically diverse youth from underserved communities into college. However, exposing high school writers to a genre-based writing curriculum not only increased the quality of their college admission essays but also increased their confidence in writing this genre. This finding has direct implications for secondary English teachers.

First, it suggests the need for teachers to monitor students’ writing growth as well as their subjective beliefs about specific writing tasks (Pajares, 2003; Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007). Ethnically diverse youth from underserved communities not only need to gain access to the authentic writing skills and strategies necessary to succeed at writing high-stakes genres like college admission essays, but also they benefit from believing they are capable of succeeding at these important writing tasks (Hackett, 1995). English teachers may easily measure students’ self-confidence associated with particular genres and writing tasks by incorporating pre- and postinstruction reflections into the instructional process (Hansen, 1998). Next, this finding suggests that exposing students to authentic, gatekeeping genres at the high school level may help them feel more confident in tasks necessary to progress toward postsecondary schooling. The use of a genre-based writing curriculum with a focus on students’ confidence about writing tasks in the classroom may be a successful tool to supporting low-income, minority students’ access to postsecondary education.

After the workshop, we were left with lingering questions about ways of extending and improving on this workshop. First, we wondered whether our writing workshop had an impact on students’ college application choices. Studies could expand this curriculum to include instruction on the college application and admission process, and our workshop could also be enhanced by following students through their first year of college to trace the number who go on to pursue postsecondary schooling. Next, important themes found throughout the essays were the importance of students’ personal and family lives and the hardships they faced. We wonder how writing curriculum development at the secondary level can work to acknowledge and validate students’ extracurricular and family lives and how their stories will be received by college admissions officers.

Early in the workshop, we considered molding students’ topics to fit more closely with what we thought college admissions officers want, but then we realized that we had preconceived notions of what is valued in a college admission essay based on our personal subjectivities and backgrounds. We reminded ourselves that research has shown the importance of acknowledging and honoring the many different funds of knowledge young people draw from when they produce written texts (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). As we worked to open the doors of access for these students, we made a conscious decision not to alter their topics and to honor their stories and lived experiences.

Teachers, curriculum specialists, and college admissions officers must develop an understanding of the rich resources that ethnically diverse youth from underserved communities have available outside of the classroom and the value of bringing this to the teaching of writing. Beyond inviting students’ home lives into the classroom, this project points to the need for expanding the language arts writing curriculum to include more real-world and authentic writing tasks, such as the college admission essay.

References
S. Graham, & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Handbook of writing research* (pp. 131–143). New York: Guilford.


---

**Editor Search Open for the Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy**

The International Reading Association invites applications from qualified members for the position of editors of the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*. This prestigious editorship functions as a two-person team consisting of either two coeditors or one editor with one associate editor. These volunteer positions have a term of five years: The first year overlaps with the current editorial team, and the subsequent years constitute the volumes for which the new editors provide material.

- **Editor search opens:** October 1, 2010
- **Application deadline:** November 30, 2010
- **Terms:** July 1, 2011, to July 1, 2016
- **Volumes:** 56 through 60, publishing September 2012 through May 2016

The *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* is the leading peer-reviewed journal for teachers of older learners. The journal reflects current theory, research, and practice in support of effective literacy instruction. Its readership includes middle school, secondary, and postsecondary classroom teachers; university researchers and scholars; literacy consultants; administrators; and policymakers. Qualified applicants must be recognized experts in the field of literacy education of learners in this age group and in professional development of pre- and in-service teachers; they must also demonstrate a commitment to translating sound research to practice.

For further information and application instructions, visit [www.reading.org/General/Publications/Journals/JAAL/JAALCallForEditors.aspx](http://www.reading.org/General/Publications/Journals/JAAL/JAALCallForEditors.aspx)