

writing an effective admissions essay

Audience: high school juniors and seniors

Format: lecture and discussion

Class time: 1½ hours

Teacher prep: Create a list of examples of good and bad essay openers. See page 2 for starters.
Have a sample essay ready for students to critique.

Materials

- whiteboard and markers
- ½ sheets of colored paper
- handouts

Four essentials of college admissions essay writing

Examples of admissions essay questions

Writing the college admissions essay (What are colleges looking for? Is an essay going to get you in? What topics should be avoided? What are the “dos & don’ts”?)

Investigate and evaluate your essay

Procedure

1. Welcome all participants and ask them what they’d like to cover in the workshop. Write the suggested topics on the board. Save this list for the end of the workshop.
2. Offer a typical admissions question on the whiteboard. (Example: Why do you want to go to XYZ college?) Have students respond with their first instinctual answer. Talk about whether those instincts may or may not work as the basis for an essay.
3. Review the handout that covers the four essentials of an admissions essay (you, surprise, genuineness, thoughtfulness).
4. Have students critique a sample essay with these essentials in mind.
5. Have students review examples of essay questions and pick one question they’d like to work on. Explain that they’ll typically have a choice of essay questions from which it is very likely that they may be able to use (or adapt to fit) the pre-crafted responses they create today.
6. Have the group get started:
 - Have each student find a partner.
 - Give everyone a ½ sheet of colored paper.
 - Ask students to share with their partners a story about themselves that’s related to, or could answer, the chosen question.
 - As each (“babbling”) tells a story, his or her partner (“listener” or “note-taker”) takes notes.
 - Once each “babbling” is finished (about 10–15 minutes), his or her note-taker reads the notes back so the “babbling” can clarify.
 - After students have reversed roles, have them exchange notes so that each person has a start for his or her essay.
7. Provide students with examples of good and bad opening lines of essays (see below for starters).

- Ask participants to give a thumbs-up or thumbs down to each opening line—would they keep reading or not?
 - Have the group brainstorm the elements that make good opening lines.
 - Give students four minutes to write as many first lines as they can think of for their stories.
 - Have everyone pick one line to share.
8. Closing: Remind students that they now have some possible opening lines, some notes, a paragraph to work with, and some understanding of what admissions staff are looking for.
 9. Check the board to see if all of the listed topics have been covered. If not, make arrangements to talk with the student(s) who mentioned concerns not covered in this session.

Sample opening statements from college admissions essays

I am not a Barbie doll.*

I want to go to college to improve my time-management skills.

I try to spend all my time doing important things.

The week before my second birthday was my introduction to the world of Legos.*

In my family, everyone grows up playing soccer.*

In the back of my dresser sits a set of old, beaten-up plastic polyhedra, lying dusty and unused.*

Your school has great professors, students, and facilities, and I think I could reach my true potential there.

I am pumping my arms, trying to keep my legs moving.*

*from *Accepted! 50 Successful College Admission Essays* (Gen and Kelly Tanabe)



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