

# Writing A College Essay Using Elements of a Mystery Story

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## **Overview**

Many secondary students need to include an essay with their college, associate, and/or trade school applications or for scholarship opportunities. This essay must capture who they are while demonstrating their winning traits, what-I-learned-through-experience lesson, or how-attending-your-school-will-help-me-achieve-my-future-goal. While the assignment is a real world application that should motivate the most recalcitrant student, adding the writing elements of a mystery story will unlock students' imagination and add excitement to this task. Through this unit, students will learn how to write standout essays by including the mystery story elements of—dialogue, active verbs, voice, pacing, and many more. The exercises in this unit pack the extra bonus of making students better academic writers while having fun with the mystery genre.

Ideally, this assignment should be incorporated into the first weeks of school for the timing of application deadlines. This is a bonus as having students write and share personal essays early in the academic school year allows a class to easily solidify and generates a student-centered environment immediately. This will create a community of writers and learners that will last through the year.

Other important writing elements students will learn in this unit are: learning to independently write for their particular need, maintaining a word limit and still telling the full story, and new methods for effectively participating in a writer's workshop. Many of these elements are advanced writing techniques and can be utilized throughout the academic year.

## **Rationale**

Students love to write a personal essay, but many do so in a flat, unappealing voice. They do not use dialogue, setting may be vaguely alluded to, stories tend to drag, characters are minimally drawn, and often the ending is hastily tacked on. Adding to these writing woes is the surgical necessity of including additional work in order to keep in-line with curriculum pacing. Why bother adding personal essays in your classroom?

Especially in an 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade English class, where the schedule is constantly being disrupted for school visits, class meetings, interviews, meetings with counselors, financial aid officers, etc. The reason is simple. Students need to write this type of essay for college applications, other post-secondary institutions, and scholarship opportunities.

Before beginning work on this unit, I recommend looking at the applications and writing prompts of schools located in the Pittsburgh vicinity, and the “Common Application” on line, as most schools require an essay, but some are misleading as they state an essay is not necessary. However, in the fine print the school notes that in order to be eligible for any scholarship or award, an essay must be included in the admission application packet.

There are many different prompts for schools, but basically they can be divided into four categories. Each is individually addressed below. Therefore, before students begin to draft their essays, I recommend scheduling a class period in a computer lab to allow them to search on-line the admission applications for the schools in which they are interested. The majority of schools have their application package available on-line to be viewed or printed. Also, do not forget to contact your high school’s guidance office. They have most schools’ information on-file, and will be able to supply brochures, applications, and often application fee waivers.

### General Assignment Guidelines

Before teaching this unit, I suggest deciding the assignment guidelines and rubric for grading. I suggest allowing two options. The first option is for those who want to use the opportunity for an application prompt. Students can choose this option as long as they supply a copy of the application with the prompt and its guidelines. The assignment can be adjusted to fit the prompt’s needs in topic and length, but the writing must follow the instructions as taught in the unit. The second option is for those not using the assignment for an application. The assignment’s requirements default to selecting one of the four most common prompts (see below for delineation) and writing an essay of not less than 250 words or more than 1,250 words using the elements taught in this unit.

The rubric I used is provided as Addendum A of this unit. The rubric was created using the website RubriStar, which is a free site for creating rubrics. If you choose to create your own, I recommend using the “Writing/Research” option, and then selecting “6 + 1 Writing Traits.” This option has the most categories available. Another alternative is to use the Pittsburgh Public Schools new personal narrative rubric available through the District’s website.

### General Application Tips

Before writing, students should realize that the basic premise behind all school admission prompts is: who is this student? In *Real College Essays That Work*, Edward B. Fiske writes that on an application essay, “You are by far the most interesting possible topic.” Kaufmann, Dowhan, and Dowhan echo this sentiment by quoting an admission officer as

stating, “It is through the essay that the admission officers reading the application will feel they have truly gotten to know you. You must develop your own voice and tell YOUR story, not the story you think the reader wants to hear.” It is important for students to realize that all the information they have already provided does little or nothing in setting them apart from the mounds of other applicants. Their name, address, schools attended, GPA, etc. has only provided pieces, and says nothing about the whole individual. Therefore, their essay will separate them from the hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of applications sitting in a pile. This does not mean that the students’ essays have to be worthy of a Pulitzer Prize, just interesting, well written, and about them.

What are good character traits for students to show in their essays? They want to know if the students:

- \*want to learn
- \*appreciate and have a sense of humor
- \*are a well-adjusted person
- \*are attentive to details
- \*can commit to something (have passion)
- \*have drive
- \*realize they have much to learn
- \*are giving individuals and not introverted
- \*want to be challenged
- \*think about others, and are not selfish individual (Friske 10-11).

Other general advice for essay prompts: one, stick to the question. As with any assignment, not answering the question will give the student a low or failing mark. Not a good idea when there will not be a second chance.

Two, as the how-to-book *100 Successful College Applications* states, “When you write your essay, consider simply telling a story. I can think of few college application essay topics, including the weightiest, that don’t provide the student with an opportunity to tell a story.” Listing facts, statistics, or trying to impress by using all SAT language does provide a realistic picture of you like a story can. Think of the admission officer wanting to be entertained. Your story should make her laugh, teary, thrilled, excited, happy, or simply compelled to read all the way through the essay. Stories grab people. Disjoined facts or a list of all your accomplishments do not.

Three, the mechanics of the essay must be perfect. This is the time to take advantage of anyone who is a good proofreader. Learn how to use the spelling and grammar check functions included with the computer’s word processing program. This is also the time to use all the proofreading tools teachers have taught students through the years such as reading their own papers out loud to themselves and really paying attention to a teacher’s edits.

Four, (I feel this is probably the most important tip.) Students must show themselves positively in their essays (EnglishClub.com). A student should not dwell for

three quarters or even one eighth of her essay on how she was a queen bee, but now she no longer acts this way. Any negativity should be excised and the student should instead concentrate on how she spearheads a group to prevent such behavior in girls.

Five, students need to research the school or schools to which they are applying. Just having a name or because their cousin goes there, should not be the reason they are applying. If the student cannot visit the school, make sure they at least have looked at the school's website. Many have virtual tours and all have mailbox loads of information they are willing to send out on their school.

Finally, a good place to start is to have students peruse the website "The Common Application" (<https://app.commonapp.org/index.cfm>). This site is the result of undergraduate colleges standardizing the application process. Now over 298 undergraduate schools accept this application either in place of their school's application or in conjunction with a supplement available through the website. The site lists six essay prompts which are addressed below.

### Common Prompts On Applications

Most schools use a variation of the following four prompts: describe something that happened to you that proved significant in your life; who is the most influential person in your life and why; discuss an issue that is important to you; and what are your future goals in life. "The Common Application" lists an additional two, which are: "A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you, and topic of your choice. The following is a quick breakdown on how adequately to address each of these prompts.

*Describing something that happened to you that proved significant in your life* is the most common prompt. It is also the most difficult for some students as they cannot think of anything significant to write. The keys to this question are: 1. The event does not have to be something big or traumatic, just important to the student, and 2. Remember to write an entertaining story. An event that is significant for a student can be learning to tie his shoes, getting a puppy, going to a first dance, and anything else that the student can make come alive to the reader.

*Who is the most influential person in your life* also includes the questions that have the student pick a historical figure or fictional character to write about. EnglishClub.com notes, "This type of question attempts to learn more about you through the forces that have shaped you." (Lesson One, 2) A big error made with this prompt is students discuss the person and not themselves. Students should show how the person has influenced them and traits or characteristics they want to achieve (or do already) emulate. Also EnglishClub.com cautions against using a parent as this is done ad nauseam. Again, however, it all depends on how you tell your story.

*Discussing an issue that is important to you* does not mean that a student should detail how they would end the Iraq conflict or discuss how the Hurricane Katrina victims can or should have been helped. Why not? First, according to William K. Poirot, a former college counselor for Brooks School, “These essays tend to come across as much more pompous than their authors intend, I suppose, because it is unlikely that a high school senior is going to make the definitive statement on a major topic” (100 Successful 16). Also Fiske advises students to stay away from topics that are “hot” as they will become overused by everyone else, and these essays will immediately be placed into the deep pile of being another one of those (18). Englishclub.com offers the best advice for this type of prompt “you need to stay personal...[and] write about both sides of the issues to show that you can think objectively and logically” (2). Students must relate the prompt to themselves and realize that by discussing this issue it says a lot about them. They also must be careful about offending the reader, so, stay away from religion, politics, and controversial subjects like abortion.

*What are your future goals in life or how can attending the school make a difference.* To me, this is the hardest question to tackle as it lends itself the least to interpretation besides the obvious of having a student place themselves four, ten, or scores of years from now looking back. I am sure there are many other ways to interpret this prompt, but the advice from Englishclub.com, while sparse, is helpful. First, know the school in order to write about its strengths in your area of interest, and second, stay truthful, do not sound cocky or groveling (3). Knowing the school will afford supports in the essay, and voice in the piece must be strong in order to tell about the student.

One of the prompts available on the “Common Application” site—“Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you”—whew! This prompt can be attacked like the future goals one above. Caution students not to sound whiny or complaining. Make sure students’ stories (remember using a story is the best way to answer any prompt including this one), exemplifies positive traits in the students, and shows what they can bring to the campus. This might be a good time to go into details about a poetry club they started or the charity work/function they coordinated or assisted with. This is not the time to vocalize sexual preference, or feel that just because you are a \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank), you should be admitted. A good idea is to focus on how you overcame any adversity, and have gone forward in your life.

Having a free topic choice can be disastrous for some, and welcome to others. In the application essay books I read, I discovered that several of the pieces chosen as excellent examples were cartoon panels. Using this prompt for art, music, or theatre-based schools can be a wonderful idea. However, as the editors of *100 Successful College Application Essays* point out, the work submitted must exemplify or provide a creative picture of the individual. Any creative work should be limited to the material (a sheet of paper) that is commonly required. Finally, stress to students, who choose this route, that the end product must show their qualities, and not merely demonstrate that they can draw well.

## Story Elements Necessary to Make Students' Work Come Alive

Anyone can tell a story, but to make the story come alive, the writing tools of dialogue, setting, using active verbs, pacing, suspense, and showing-and-not-telling are imperative. These elements not only make a personal story come alive, they are also excellent to use in other types of writing as well. Therefore, teaching these skills will benefit your students in all aspects of their academic careers.

These elements are individually divided into sections below. Included in each section is an explanation of the element and at least one exercise that can be used in the classroom to aid in its instruction. Note that these sections rely heavily on the work, *Writing Mysteries* edited by Sue Grafton. If possible, having students read the book is optimal or at least the chapters on the various elements.

### Dialogue

Dialogue is defined in *Writers Inc.* as “the conversation carried on by the characters in a literary work” (Sebranek, Kemper, and Meyer 254). This definition lacks in not giving dialogue the credit it is due. Good dialogue lets your characters speak for themselves in their own unique way, allows for the creation of mood, will pick up the pace of the story, can convey information quickly, and will provide authenticity. Bad dialogue, meaning poor word choices, lengthy responses, attempts at dialects, and mixing up who speaks like what, will turn readers off (Elkins 129). However, only a handful of writers like Richard Wright in *Black Boy* are able to use almost all dialogue to tell a story. To be effective, dialogue and narrative prose should both be used. However, rules are meant to be broken, especially in an application essay where creativity counts. Although creativity cannot take over if the story does not work.

I have found three exercises that are effective for teaching story dialogue. The first is a classic one in which students are assigned to unobtrusively record a conversation between two people. They are to write only the spoken words as best as they can. This will allow students the chance to witness dialogue in action, without any description of movements or setting. After several students have read their dialogues, discuss what the assignment has shown them. Many times they will see that people tend to talk disjointedly or at each other, but not to each other. Dialogue in stories is much more focused. To introduce this exercise, the teacher can play a tape recording of two people having a conversation. When the assignment is due, the teacher can play a section of a play's dialogue to begin showing how literary dialogue differs from narrative dialogue.

A second exercise, which can be easily assigned for homework, is from Art Peterson's *The Writer's Workout Book*. Students are to create a dialogue in which they explain something to “an inquiring space alien” (28). Students can create their own topic, and/or the teacher can list topics for the students. The following are some topics suggested by Peterson, as well as, those I have added: why do earth women wear high heels (Peterson has a sample of this topic in the book), why are some people in your

country very wealthy and others very poor, why are there so many heavy people, why are so many people thin, why is smoking cigarettes O.K., but not marijuana, why are some drugs only legal if you buy them, why do so many people lie, and why do only women have children (28). To scaffold this assignment, pick a topic and write the dialogue with the class.

A final exercise showing how dialogue can propel a story is from a City Theatre Young Playwrights Teacher Workshop. This exercise was presented by Barbara Gamrat during our PTI seminar. I have redesigned the form and it is Appendix B of this unit. The exercise has two students create a scene in which there is a minor disagreement between the two characters. The characters are kept to a limited word response throughout the exercise. The important point of the exercise is to demonstrate that saying less can be better. Too often dialogue can become lengthy and will weigh down the action. This assignment can be done as a classroom exercise. Time, though, is needed not only for the students to complete the exercise, but also to have them present it.

### Active—Emotion Verbs

Using active verbs, especially ones showing emotion, are critical in composing an excellent piece of writing, but even more so in an application essay. Students need to show themselves to their reader and what easier way than with the correct pegging of their feelings. As Susan Davis Lenski and Jerry L. Johns simply state in their book, *Improving Writing K-8*, “Adding emotions to stories can make the difference between a mediocre story and an interesting one” (243). This is exactly what a student is striving to do in an application essay.

Lenski and Johns provide a very simple exercise for having students tap into active emotion verbs. They recommend simply writing “sad, happy, and mad” on the board and with the students, actively create lists of other words to express the feelings. While this activity may seem too young for high schoolers, I disagree. Our PTI class did a similar exercise thinking of “cooking verbs” such as mix, beat, whip, sauté, etc. It proved to be a fun and effective way of emphasizing the need of using more powerful verbs. A variation on the emotion exercise for students can be to start a list, and have the students come up with an additional number as homework. The following day, students can report discoveries and a class list can be made. The list would be excellent for students to consult throughout the year.

This exercise is from Peterson and it is titled, “Think Verbs.” Peterson writes, “Powerful verbs can make a more powerful writer.” The exercise calls for students to pile on verbs in a sentence. An example he gives is from a piece reporter Linda Ellerbee did for a seven-year-old playing baseball for a major league team, “Impossible dreams die hard. Like cartoon characters, they can be pulverized, poisoned, punctured, stomped flat, flown up, gut shot, cut into little pieces, dropped from high places, bludgeoned with a blunt instrument, fried to a crisp, boiled in oil, and buried at sea; and still they come back alive, whole, and grinning like homemade sin” (168). Peterson gives some sentence starters for this exercise. They are: “To be a high-school student is to be...”, “Good (or

bad) things happen to those who \_\_\_\_\_. They can be...”, and “Because I have \_\_\_\_\_, I have been...” (168). At the ellipses, is where the verbs can be piled on. This exercise can be either assigned for homework (after a demonstration) or as a beginning class assignment.

The following exercise is another of Peterson’s “Playing With Words” activities. I recommend using this only for more erudite classes. The exercise is called “Juggle Parts of Speech.” Have students turn a noun or adjective into a verb, and use the new word in a sentence (232). My example is—using the word “book,” I added an “-ing.” The result is: I am booking for a trip to Ireland, and he is booking the pyramids. As Peterson notes, Shakespeare did it and look what happened to his words.

One final note on teaching students to use active verbs—do not forget to have students read the sports pages in newspapers and magazines. Sportswriters are pros at using active verbs in their stories.

### Setting

In *Writing Mysteries*, author Julie Smith expounds wonderfully on the importance of setting. Unfortunately, and fortunately, students writing application essays cannot afford to dwell on setting unless it will play a prominent part in their piece. Smith’s advice, though, works well in allowing students to place their story quickly and to extract the most out of a setting. Students should be reminded that setting includes place, time, and weather.

In an application essay, much like flash fiction or poetry, make sure students take advantage of the fact that words and certain places evoke scores of feelings. Places like New York City, Miami, the Grand Canyon, and Wal-Mart are strong enough to become a character in a piece (Smith 49), and more generic names of places like home and town have built in sensors for the reader.

One piece of setting that is important in an application essay is time. The reader should have a clear idea of when the student’s story took place or the age of the student when it occurred. Having a student compose a beautiful story about flying alone for the first time, but leaving out the age when it occurred, could cause confusion.

A classic way to have students ensure they have put in setting details that they need—use the journalism six. Reading the first paragraph, can students list who, where, when, what, how, and why.

### Cliches

To put it simply: Using clichés is verboten.

Peterson has a wonderful exercise that allows students to transform tired, old clichés into vibrant new phrases that can capture students’ individuality. The exercise is

called “Alter a Cliché.” For the first part of the exercise, students take a cliché such as “one foot in the grave,” and alter it by changing a word or two to suit their use. The phrase can become, “one foot in the trenches,” “one foot in the champagne,” or “one foot in the land of the living.” Peterson provides several examples, from famous and non-famous individuals, that can be used for demonstration. My favorites are: “Truth is more of a stranger than fiction,” by Mark Twain and “Time wounds all heels” by Groucho Marx (228).

For the second part of the exercise students use their new cliché in a paragraph that clearly shows its meaning (229). Note the use of “one foot in the land of the living” in my example:

My parents have always been “Dead Heads” meaning they follow the rock group Grateful Dead’s tour whenever possible. While at one time they may have adhered to the typical Dead Headers wardrobe of 1960s psychedelic, tie-dyed apparel with hair that has not seen a comb or scissors in fourscore years, and driving a mystery van like Scooby-Doo and gang, I never witnessed it. Instead, my parents have more than one foot in the land of the living. My dad drives a BMW SUV, and wears everything Polo. As for my mother, well, Paris Hilton would be envious of her clothes.

## Pacing

Pacing is the flow of the events in a story. Most students will be able to understand pacing through recall of the Freytag Pyramid. Unfortunately, the Freytag Pyramid only allows for the building of one peak or grand climax. Novels, typically have several peaks of varying magnitude, but they must also have valleys. As Phyllis A. Whitney in *Mystery Writers*, notes, “There can be a strong buildup to a dramatic scene, after which we must allow for a letdown, a rest, before we start building up all over again” (139). While novels can afford to have many peaks and valleys in the work, a short story, which is what students are writing for application essays, generally cannot. Students, though, must use intense pacing in order to let their stories flow well and to capture the interest of their reader.

The exercise I recommend for pacing in this unit is titled, “Headline News” created by Erin Ciccone. Students create a headline for a personal story, such as “First Date Success” or “Boy Scores Winning Goal.” Then students have three (3) minutes to tell their story. Afterward, the students write their story (25-27). This exercise works well for this unit as it can help students remember stories, allows for focus and organization, and makes them think about condensing their story immediately for time.

## Voice

To me, voice is the writer’s unique or personal manner of written expression. For a more succinct definition, I will use Aaron Elkins’ from *Writing Mysteries*. He states, “A character’s voice is the distinctive way he or she speaks: vocabulary, cadence, tempo,

slang, subject matter, tone, and any other aspect of speech.” While an author will develop a different voice for every character in a work, students must use only one—theirs—in an essay. Also they must use first-person narrative style, which needs the “I” and “me” in their writing. School admission officers want to learn character traits and personality clues about the person whose essay they are reading, and not more cold facts.

Ideally, students have been keeping a journal, diary, or learning log in class as keeping a journal, even if only writing for five minutes every day or so, is the optimum way for someone to develop their distinct writing voice. If not, have students begin journaling every day throughout this unit. Hopefully, you can continue to have the students write in their journal throughout the year. Journal writing not only is instrumental in developing voice; it will help students’ flow in writing. Also as students become accustomed to writing journal responses, the moans about making them write at other times will lessen considerably.

### Plagiarism

I recommend having a discussion on what constitutes plagiarism because students will be reading classmates’ work and essays on the Internet and from the essay guidebooks. Students can use an idea of an essay, but not any part of someone else’s essay. Remember to caution students that even using an idea, such as looking in the mirror to see themselves, can be overdone. This is particularly true if the essay idea is from a guidebook. Students need to think how many other people have read the example, and unless they can create a totally original framework; it is best not to use it.

The experts state that any sign of plagiarism in an essay, and the applicant will receive a “Sorry, but…” letter. There will not be a second chance.

### Show Don’t Tell

If you have not already taught this element in writing 1,000 times now is the time to do so. A good example of how important showing and not telling your reader involves murder. Years ago, radio could say that a character had been killed. Occasionally they could even have someone shout, “No!” and cry, “Uggghh!” as it happened. Early movies and television allowed audiences to glimpse the dead body, and it was really daring when someone was murdered and the audience saw it silhouetted. Later, the murder victim could be stabbed or shot, dramatically clutch the wound, and fall down. Today’s audience wants to see the murder in slow motion, ogle the bloody body, and watch the autopsy. This has become a “buyer beware” time as even after a death some characters come back to life. (Remember “Dallas.”) Students are writing for today’s audience, who needs to see it all unfold before them. They do not want to be told. This is perfect for an application essay, where students need to show themselves.

Smith, in her chapter on setting, notes several simple ways to incorporate showing. She emphasizes, “Use ordinary description, but go beyond it as well—give us feelings, sounds, tastes, smells, metaphors, impressions, opinions. As in all writing, show

don't tell. Involve all five senses. Above all, give us strong images. Don't tell us it's a pretty day; show us the sun glinting through a violet canopy of jacarandas" (55). By the way, I had to look up what a jacaranda was. Smith did a wonderful job of placing the reader.

A wonderful exercise to use for showing and not telling is also a classic brainstorming activity. Have students think of an adjective that describes them. They need to think of stories that exemplify the adjective. If they come up with more than one adjective, fine. Have them repeat the exercise with each adjective. Students can also use the stories they have remembered as ideas for their essay.

## Metaphors and Similes

Using metaphors and similes—(metaphors are the connection of two unlike things without using “like” or “as” to create a powerful and unexpected image, and similes have the same function, but use “like” or “as.”) Fiske notes that when students use metaphors and similes in their essays, it “shows a student’s ability to do big-picture thinking. If you’re ever at a loss for what to write, think of analogies that apply to your life. Exploring such comparisons through simile or metaphor can transform mundane events into interesting ones” (8). Two examples of using metaphors and similes that show such a range are, comparing a trip to the Galapagos Islands to Columbus seeing America for the first time, and school is like a chocolate chip cookie with nuts.

Peterson details three exercises that can aid in using metaphors and similes. The first is brainstorming about how things have changed since you were young. Look at cartoons, a favorite toy, hair, telephones, sports, music, playing, and even computers (23).

The second exercise has students think about popular figures from history to cartoon ones like Disney characters. Think about the traits they exemplify (Peterson 151). An example is using the cartoon character of Tweety Bird, who has the traits of tiny, yellow, clever, coined the slogan, “Thought I saw a puddy cat,” and is loved by all (including Sylvester, who is always trying to eat him.)

The third exercise uses a classic anecdote as a springboard. Think of Odysseus trying to journey home for twenty years, or the continual battle between Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd (which thankfully Bugs always wins) (Peterson 152-3). Beginning with a classic allusion allows for immediate recognition from the reader, and can help students find their unique way of showing themselves.

## Titles

To use or not use a title: that is the question I had difficulty in trying to decide when I first taught this unit. At that time, I did not require one even though my writer’s training kept nagging me that every piece should be given a title. I was afraid of word count, and since reading the “How-To-Write” books and many essays, I recommend not having titles. The main reason is true to my original fear of using precious words, when

there is a tight count. (Also note that when entering essays through websites, many cursors suddenly freeze and will not allow additional typing at that point. Thus, rigidly enforcing a word count.) My final reason is that none of the examples I read used them.

### First sentences

Several of the essay guide books I read for this unit had a separate chapter listing the first sentences of the best essays in the work. While every writer realizes the importance of having an intriguing opening, this is even more important when you are limited to 500 words or less. Fiske notes that while many of the opening lines he includes in his book are “straightforward—proof that it is not necessary to dream up a catchy opening in order to write an excellent essay” (327). He then states in the next line, “But many of the openings do have flair” (327). What better way to immediately capture the reader, then with the first words on the page. Things that work well in this case are: a quote—from literature or a song, a line of dialogue (literature or one from the student’s story), or a simple statement work well.

While I could not find a definite exercise for this element of writing, Peterson does address this by looking at what he terms “Expertly Made Beginnings” (90). He lists ten opening lines from diverse works such as *Peter Pan* to *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. His example lead me to look at the opening lines of works I knew my students had read, and as Peterson says to do, study them. I recommend looking at the list he put together as well. The others he included were: *Flowers for Algernon, 1984, Call of the Wild, The Metamorphosis, Fahrenheit 451, The Great Gatsby, The Hound of the Baskervilles, and Jane Eyre* (90).

### Workshops

Since this unit should ideally be taught in the beginning of the school year, this is also the perfect time to begin training students to function well in small group and workshop settings. The workshop suggestions that function well for this unit are from a 2001 article titled, “Everything I Know About Teaching Language Arts, I learned at the Office Supply Store,” written by Kathleen O’Shaughnessy in the National Writing Project’s journal, “The Quarterly,” which is also available on line and in the book, *Breakthroughs: Classroom Discoveries About Teaching Writing.* Her ideas include:

- \*passing drafts around to several students. The writer can attach Post-it notes with questions about their draft. The readers add their own Post-it notes with responses.

- \*Swap drafts. This means exchange your first period’s drafts with your third period’s drafts. Continue using small groups to read and discuss the drafts. After discussing the pros and cons of the piece, the students write a letter to the author/student, whose paper they have critiqued.

## Miscellaneous Writing Exercises

While researching for this unit, I discovered the following two writing exercises, that while they do not fit into the unit as I crafted it, were too good to not share.

### *Adding Sound For Creativity*

Have students independently create a list of “wonderful-sounding words.” Words like stumbling, pulverizing, ludicrous, mockingbird, rollicking, chiffon, and luminous. After they have generated their lists, create a class list by writing them on the board or large poster board. Students then write lines or a poem using the words, or any other words they have generated. The purpose of the exercise is to have words, not normally combined, come together (Bauman and Peterson 162-3). The exercise allows students to not only enjoy the sound of words, but also encourages creativity. Using the words I generated above, I created this sentence: The mockingbird rollicking on the chiffon sang ludicrously loud.

### *Tagging Powerlines*

Powerlines, according to Kathleen O’Shaughnessy in *Breakthroughs*, are short, very effective descriptive phrases. She notes that, “a characteristic of a powerline is the ability to move a reader with a clear mental image (189). Examples are: “The cookie popped the bird smack-jab in the chest!” (189), and from J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, You could tell old Spencer’d got a big bang out of buying it (7). O’Shaughnessy has the students throughout the year tag powerlines in their reading. Students should be periodically encouraged to create their own

## **Objectives**

Students will create an original, publishable non-fiction writing piece that can be used for an application essay or as part of their portfolio. This essay will be written with a word limit of 250 to 1,250 words, and follow a prompt specified by the school of their choice. This will allow for a real world experience, which is optimal in a learning environment.

Students will participate in writing workshops that can be utilized throughout the school year. While using a workshop setting is not unusual, the alternatives to a standard workshop format will allow students to be more accountable in the setting.

Students will explore advanced writing elements such as: voice, pacing, setting, and dialogue through the many exercises offered in the unit. This will allow students to succeed in their writing, and thus in the assignment.

Students will look at application essays deemed exemplary by experts in the field. By looking at these essays, students will be able to generate ideas and gain valuable modeling experience.

Students will examine events in their lives and make value judgments on what character building trait or traits they learned through the experience. They will then learn how to effectively write about their experience in a succinct and creative way.

## **Strategies**

One of the most important aspects of this lesson will be to take a real world need of the students and enable them to use the classroom as a springboard to meet it. This can be accomplished by allowing students to spend time in surfing via the Internet the schools that interest them. Students will be able to take virtual campus tours, look at the courses offered, ask questions of the admission staff via instant message options many schools now offer, and view on-line admission forms. Another resource is your school's guidance office, which has hard copies of almost every college's admission information. The guidance office staff are always willing to work with students, especially in groups, on topics such as applications, scholarship offers, financial aid planning, SAT and ACT testing, etc.

This unit will begin using large group instruction and quickly pare to students working independently or in small groups. The small group work will occur when students are workshopping their pieces. This will also be most the difficult part of the unit for a teacher due to the need to listen and not take over discussions, yet encourage proper workshop etiquette among the students. Accomplishing these goals will require rules. The rules can be determined in advance by the teacher or discussed and decided upon by the students with the teacher's final approval. Time and overall student demeanor will determine the course taken in your classroom. General rules for conducting a student workshop are listed in the "Classroom Activity" section.

While the unit is geared to creating a personal story for students to use for applications or scholarship opportunities, the stories can also be submitted to either the school's literary journal, create an on-line journal, or a venue especially created for the assignment. This publishing option would allow for all students to be excited about the work, and again, allows for a real world option.

One area of research I particularly enjoyed for this unit was the multiple writing exercises. These exercises enable students to learn solid writing tips, while working on the assignment. The exercises also can be revisited again in the year as reinforcement. This is one of the requirements of the exercises I chose—that they could be used again, and were not simply one-timers. I wanted to be able to refresh students' skills without having to take a lot of time to demonstrate the lesson.

## Classroom Activities

**Day One**—Introduction of assignment. Students will be given the complete assignment specifications through an assignment sheet and a copy of the grading rubric. After students have reviewed the paperwork with the teacher, they will begin examining examples of application essays either from last year’s class work and/or from the “How-To-Write” books. They will begin the writing process through a brainstorming activity such as those listed under the “Metaphor/Simile” section of this unit. **Homework**—Have students prepare for the assignment by looking at the Common Application site and at least two schools of their choice. They should write the names of their school choices in their journal along with an entry concerning their fears/excitement about taking this step toward the future.

**Day Two**—Class should be held in a computer lab. Students will review the Common Application site and at least two other school sites of their choice. Students will pick one school’s application and prompt for the assignment. **Homework**—Assign an additional brainstorming activity such as recording a conversation or Alien being interviewed as listed in the “Dialogue” section of the unit. After students have completed the work, they should write their immediate thoughts about the experience in their journals.

**Day Three**—At the beginning of the class, have students report on their homework assignment. Discuss what they learned about dialogue from the assignment. If students seem unable to properly explain why dialogue is important in a story, or how to write it, use the “Young Playwright’s Dialogue” Sheet, which is Appendix A of this unit. Transition into looking at the divisions for the prompts and how to write to them. It is recommended to have essay samples for each type of prompt. Go over what the schools are looking for in the essays. Brainstorming activity—have students list character traits of themselves and think of stories from their lives that exemplify the adjective. For further details, go to “Show Don’t Tell” section. Note: the brainstorming activity can be assigned for homework.

**Day Four-Day Five**—drafting days. You will need to decide if the students should be in a computer lab for one or both of these days. Before students begin to work independently, take a survey of what prompts students are going to be using. Also, it is recommended starting each day with mini-lessons on topics such as those listed under “First Sentences” and “Active—Emotion Verbs.”

**Day Six**—Review elements that constitute a good application essay. Have students use the Revising Checklist, which is Appendix C, to see how well their papers work. **Homework**—Students must be able to turn in a draft tomorrow.

**Day Seven-Day Eight**—First day, students work in small groups critiquing papers. Second day each student should be responsible for writing or helping to write an editing letter to another student. **Homework**--all letters must be finished. .

**Day Nine**—Return of critiqued papers with their letters. May want to schedule a computer lab day. Have students write a journal entry on how they feel about the remarks made concerning their work. Students should begin revisions.

**Day Ten**—Open with “Alter Cliché” mini-lesson. This will allow students to think freshly about words and phrases for their redrafting. **Homework**—All students should have a second draft to turn in tomorrow.

**Day Eleven**—Again workshop of pieces, but this time within the class period. Provide Post-it notes for authors to ask questions about their work, and for readers to respond. Every student should have at least one paper critiqued by the end of class. If possible, allow students to read additional papers for critiquing. Papers returned to authors.

**Day Twelve**—One last computer lab day for editing. Students will now be responsible for turning in a finished paper within two to three days. They should also complete a reflective journal entry on their work.

#### Works Cited

ApplicationsOnline LLC. The Common Application. 2007. 20 April 2007. <<https://app.commonapp.org/index.cfm>>.

This is the site where students can do one stop shopping for their college applications. Good place to start.

Bauman, Amy, and Peterson, Art, ed. *Breakthroughs: Classroom Discoveries About Teaching Writing*. Berkeley; National Writing Project, 2002.

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<<http://www.englishclub.com/writing/college-application--essays/index.htm>>.

An on-line help site dealing with most aspects of completing college applications.

Fiske, Edward B, and Hammond, Bruce G. *Real College Essays That Work*. Naperville: Sourcebooks, 2006.

The essential guide on how-to write a college essay.

Grafton, Sue, ed. *Writing Mysteries: A Handbook by the Mystery Writers of America*. Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest Books, 2002.

Well-written text on the elements of a mystery story from masters of the genre.

Kaufman, Dan, Dowhan, Chris, and Dowhan, Adrienne. *Essays That Will Get You Into College*. Hauppauge: Barron, 2003.

Book includes tips on writing an essay, but its power lies in the many sample essays that constitutes the majority of the book.

Lenski, Susan Davis and Johns, Jerry L. *Improving Writing K-8*. Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt; 2004.

A good text to aid in scaffolding assignments for all levels of students.

Peterson, Art. *The Writer's Workout Book: 113 Stretches Toward Better Prose*. Berkeley: National Writing Project, 1996.

A masterful book full of writing exercises that are well-explained, but also tested in a classroom.

Quintessential Careers. "Writing the Successful College Application Essay." 23 April 2007 <[http://www.quintcareers.com/college\\_application\\_essay.html](http://www.quintcareers.com/college_application_essay.html)>.

Not a huge site, but offers good tips on writing application essays.

RubiStar. <<http://rubistar.4teachers.org/index.pgh>>.

Free on-line site that allows for the customizing of rubrics.

Sebranek, Patrick; Kemper, Dave; and Meyer, Verne. *Writers Inc.: A Student Handbook for Writing and Learning*. Wilmington: Houghton Mifflin; 2006.

An excellent text to use for teaching writing in a middle school or high school classrooms.

#### Annotated Reading List For Students

ApplicationsOnline LLC. The Common Application. 2007 20 April 2007. <<https://app.commonapp.org/index.cfm>>.

This is an excellent place to start as the Common Application is accepted by 298 colleges and professional schools.

Fiske, Edward B, and Hammond, Bruce G. *Real College Essays That Work*. Naperville: Sourcebooks, 2006.

If you are only going to look at one guidebook for application essays, I recommend this one.

Gelber, Alexis, and Mack, Melissa. *The 2007 Newsweek-Kaplan College Guide*. Newsweek, U.S.A., 2007.

Published yearly, this guide packs information on what the hot topics are to study in college, how an admission counselor reads all those essays, "America's 369 Most Interesting Schools" etc. Plus it includes a full sample college admission test.



APPENDIX A—RUBRIC

**PERSONAL ESSAY RUBRIC**

CATEGORY	4	3	2	0
<b>Introduction (Organization)</b>	The introduction is very inviting, and keeps the reader riveted.	The introduction is interesting. Reader's attention is maintained.	The introduction, but reader could become disinterested.	There is no clear introduction. Difficult to maintain attention.
<b>Pacing (Organization)</b>	The pacing is well-controlled. The writer knows when to slow down and elaborate, and when to pick up the pace and move on.	The pacing is generally well-controlled but the writer occasionally does not elaborate enough.	The pacing is generally well-controlled but the writer sometimes repeats the same point over and over, or spends too much time on details that don't matter.	The pacing often feels awkward to the reader. The writer elaborates when there is little need, and then leaves out necessary supporting information.
<b>Grammar &amp; Spelling (Conventions)</b>	Writer makes no errors in grammar or spelling that distracts the reader from the content.	Writer makes 1-2 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.	Writer makes 3-4 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.	Writer makes more than 4 errors in grammar or spelling that distracts the reader from the content.
<b>Transitions (Organization)</b>	A variety of thoughtful transitions are used. They clearly show how ideas are connected.	Transitions clearly show how ideas are connected, but there is little variety.	Some transitions work well; but connections between other ideas are fuzzy.	The transitions between ideas are unclear or nonexistent.
<b>Adding Personality (Voice)</b>	The writer seems to be writing from knowledge or experience. The author has taken the ideas and made them "her own."	The writer seems to be drawing on knowledge or experience, but there is some lack of ownership of the topic.	The writer relates some of his own knowledge or experience, but it adds nothing to the discussion of the topic.	The writer has not tried to transform the information in a personal way. The ideas and the way they are expressed seem to belong to someone else.
<b>Conclusion (Organization)</b>	The conclusion is strong and leaves the reader with a feeling that they understand what the writer is "getting at."	The conclusion is recognizable and ties up almost all the loose	Conclusion is flat.	No conclusion or very disjointed.

Comments \_\_\_\_\_

Total Points \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX B—NEW YOUNG PLAYWRIGHT FORM

**Collaborative Writing Using Natural Dialogue Rhythms**



Since plays are meant to be heard, and not read, rhythms are extremely important. They can establish mood, build tension, heighten conflict, or expand characterizations. In this exercise, we will create rhythms by requiring specific lengths of dialogue.

1. Find a very small conflict or disagreement.
2. Use only two characters ("A" and "B"). Do not worry about how richly developed they are. Concentrate simply on two distinct voices. For example: The characters could be a Mother & Daughter. The daughter has just come home an hour after her curfew and the mother confronts her at the door. They disagree about the fairness of the curfew.
3. Follow the rules for the amount of words to be used in each line of dialogue. (Contractions count as one word: can't, won't, she's, etc.)
  4. The dialogue must be written in pairs. Each playwright will write dialogue for only one character. Do not discuss the dialogue, simply pass the paper back and forth and write the next line until you are finished.
  5. Do not worry about a logical resolution (solution of the problem). End the dialogue on the last line no matter where you are.

\*\*\*\*\*

Conflict or Disagreement: \_\_\_\_\_

Character A: \_\_\_\_\_ Written by Playwright One: \_\_\_\_\_

Character B: \_\_\_\_\_ Written by Playwright Two: \_\_\_\_\_

A: (two to four words) \_\_\_\_\_

B: (two to four words) \_\_\_\_\_

A: (two to four words) \_\_\_\_\_

B: (two to four words) \_\_\_\_\_

A: (two to four words) \_\_\_\_\_

B: (two to four words) \_\_\_\_\_

A: (two to four words) \_\_\_\_\_

B: (two to four words) \_\_\_\_\_

A: (two to four words) \_\_\_\_\_

B: (two to four words) \_\_\_\_\_

A: (one to two words) \_\_\_\_\_

B: (one to two words) \_\_\_\_\_

A: (one to two words) \_\_\_\_\_

B: (one to two words) \_\_\_\_\_

A: (one word) \_\_\_\_\_

B: (one word) \_\_\_\_\_

A: (one word) \_\_\_\_\_

B: (one word) \_\_\_\_\_

A: (twenty or more words) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

B: (twenty or more words) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

A: (four to six words) \_\_\_\_\_

B: (four to six words) \_\_\_\_\_

A: (four to six words) \_\_\_\_\_

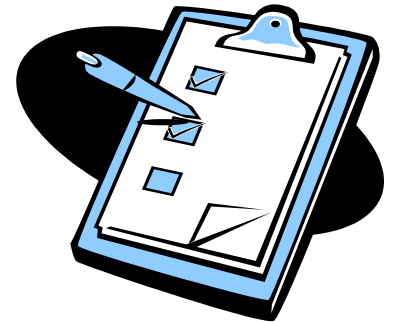
B: (four to six words) \_\_\_\_\_

A: (two to four words) \_\_\_\_\_

B: (one to two words) \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C—ESSAY CHECKLIST

### REVISION CHECKLIST



In this draft have I.....

\_\_\_\_\_ Made the corrections on my paper? If not, explain why not & where.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Taken at least one area and expanded upon it? What section & why this section?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Had someone check the mechanics of my paper? Record the name of the person below.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Tried one of the editing tools of either reading my paper aloud to myself or had someone read it aloud to me? (If someone read the paper to you, indicate below the person's name.)

\_\_\_\_\_

Write a reflection about your work so far on this paper. Think about your revising process, what is the strongest part of your paper, if you are dissatisfied with any area, and/or the overall experience in writing this piece.

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