

## Excerpt from “In the space provided: The college application essay”

By Sarah Myers McGinty

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

### Helping students write application essays

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

1. As it isn’t just telling a story that’s difficult — students spend most of their nonclass time in this activity — a September assignment might ask for a specific and vivid retelling of a personal event. Stress the need for detail, but do not allow students to assign a meaning to, or draw conclusions from, their story. This is just a telling, and revisions should stress the showing rather than the meaning.
  - When finished, these narratives should sit in your desk or in the students’ writing folders for several weeks. Authors will mull over their choice of incident, even if in a passive way, and enforced distance of time will generate some disengagement.
  - In October or early November, return to this assignment and provide a photocopy of each student’s narrative to each member of a peer-writing group. Group members should read each other’s incident and then write several thoughts about what they

believe the incident means. The idea is to give the writer five or six possible constructions of meaning for the event.

- From the suggestions, writers set out now to build their own meaning from the story. Time and peers’ contributions should broaden the choices; they also maintain the appropriate passive intervention of the teacher in this particular writing assignment, leaving students free to frame the result in their own words....
  - You must leave students to fine-tune things on their own. You have framed the process, established a distance for them about their material, and encouraged them to look carefully and from a variety of points of view. All this should be a first step toward the reflective mode the college essay requires. The rest must be up to them.
2. An alternative is to ask for a short essay on a topic with built-in reflectiveness:

#### *questions about a change of mind*

- a good friend who isn’t a friend anymore
- something you believed once but don’t believe now
- a decision you’d like to make over again
- a choice you’ve regretted

#### *questions with a built-in double vision*

- a time something or someone misled you or you acted on a misperception
- a time you tried to learn something and didn’t learn it
- something you were but aren’t anymore

### The application essay

High school English departments can do more to help college applicants and all writers. It is, moreover, in the service of their own programs that they show students how able they already are for the task....The application essay is meant to nudge students toward a collegiate frame

*Excerpt from "In the Space Provided: The College Application Essay" (page 2)*

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

Sarah Myers McGinty was English department chair at Milburn High School, New Jersey, and associate director of admissions at Sarah Lawrence College. She is the author of *The College Application Essay* (The College Board, 2004).

This article originally appeared, in slightly different form, in *English Journal*, March 1995. Reprinted with permission of *English Journal*.