

## “It Sounds Like Me”: Using Creative Nonfiction to Teach College Admissions Essays

*A high school reading and writing center specialist, Jennifer Wells describes how her creative nonfiction workshops inspired students to attend more closely to their personal experience, voice, and sensory detail in their college essays.*

**I**n our high school’s writing center, and for many high school seniors across the country, the beginning of the new school year means one thing: college applications. Fourteen years ago, when I applied to college, I filled out one application, wrote one admissions essay, attached the scores from one SAT test, put everything together in one envelope, affixed one stamp, and several months later, received one acceptance letter. When I tell this to my high school seniors, they give me the same look as they do when I tell them that I didn’t have the Internet in high school.

Now, my students are applying to multiple colleges, taking multiple tests multiple times, and writing multiple essays for each application. While the college admissions guidebook industry has churned out numerous books and websites telling students what their essays should and should not do (do be yourself, don’t be cliché), most of those are written by former admissions officers, not by writers or teachers of writing, and almost all rely heavily on providing models of top admissions essays. As a result, students who use these books are frustrated because they can repeat the dos and don’ts, they can point to examples of what their final product should look like, but they have no idea *how* to get there themselves.

In grappling with how our writing center could help these students, I discovered that college application essays share many of the characteristics of creative nonfiction, and that by teaching students how to borrow and use elements of creative nonfiction, they are better able to write essays that reflect their experiences, insights, and personalities. Essays that, as one student last year proudly noted, “sound like me.”

### Sometimes We Teach Them Too Well

When our writing center first opened in the fall of 2006, I was struck by how much the students were struggling with the unfamiliar genre. At our school, students get a lot of practice writing literary analysis, research papers, and argumentative essays, but less practice in writing narrative, and even less in fiction, poetry, and journalism. I found that many students had become so focused on developing their authoritative, academic persona that they were hesitant and unsure of how to reintroduce their own voice. I saw essays that had been overly thesaurus-ized, where the excessive use of big vocabulary words overpowered the writer’s voice. There were essays that tried to take on weighty issues such as third-world poverty but did so in broad, vague, often cliché ways. Several essays were about beloved grandmothers but didn’t give enough detail or characterization to tell one person’s grandmother from another. Other students would start to introduce an idea they were excited about but then stop themselves because they didn’t think it sounded “colleegy” enough.

Admissions essays should reveal the student’s voice, personality, and unique way of looking at the world. Since most essay prompts ask students to “Tell us about X and explain what it shows about you,” the essay should tell the story while also showing the student’s reflections on and analysis of that experience. Often, the best essays are ones that tell a big story in a small way: By focusing on a small event, the essayist shows how that reflects something larger. The essays don’t need to be funny, or sad, or controversial, but they do need to engage the reader.

During the same period of time I was mulling over what to do to help students with their drafts, our faculty book club was reading Anne Fadiman’s *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, and at home, I was reading David Rakoff’s *Fraud: Essays*.

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Both authors write nonfiction from the first-person point of view. Both authors have unique voices, voices that can be funny and poignant and thoughtful and incisive, and both authors write themselves into the stories they are telling. It occurred to me that

what these authors were doing—writing creative nonfiction—was not unlike what I wanted from my students’ college essays. Would teaching the college essay as a creative nonfiction essay help students write better essays?

### What Is Creative Nonfiction?

First, I needed to define creative nonfiction in ways that would be accessible to my students. Essentially, creative nonfiction is its own genre. Distinct from fiction and poetry, it is grounded in truthfulness, requires authorial reflection, and reflects stylistic techniques usually ascribed to fiction. It isn’t fiction, because the stories in the essays are true, and it isn’t poetry, though it may be poetic. It isn’t straight journalism, because the author and his or her emotions, thoughts, and reflections are a vital part of the story; the author doesn’t pretend to be objective and unbiased. Creative nonfiction is often found in “personal essays, memoirs, autobiographies, new journalism, and certain traditions of travel writing, environmental writing, profiles, and so on” (Hesse 251).

### How Creative Nonfiction Could Help

Writing on the convergence of creative nonfiction in composition studies, Wendy Bishop noted that “Personal journalism, the varied literatures of fact, and many of the forms of the essay are meditative, offering not certainties or unities but attempts that may provoke or support a reader’s thoughts” (267). If Bishop were right, creative nonfiction could offer students writing college essays a way to explore their experiences in a manner that might give readers insight into the real complexities of contemporary life. In

offering the students a style of writing that celebrates the ambiguity of experience, I hoped that it would enable them to step away from the canned responses I had seen in their early drafts. Yet I couldn’t help but wonder if I would be taking too much of a risk with students’ futures. Would taking a leap away from the safer world of academic writing produce better college essays, or would it be disastrous?

With these questions in mind, I developed a plan: I would offer a progressive series of 60-minute workshops to be delivered in our high school’s writing center, an ideal place to have large workshops as well as one-on-one conferences. The workshops would be grounded in a writing process approach, allowing students to break down the monumental task of writing so many essays into smaller chunks, and allowing the students to spend more time brainstorming, drafting, responding to each other’s writing, and revising than they would if they were left to their own devices. Even though I would be conducting the workshops in the writing center, I would structure them so that my colleagues could also easily adapt them for their classrooms.

As I began developing the workshops, I drew from several texts on writing creative nonfiction, including *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction* by Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola and *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction* by Robert L. Root Jr. and Michael Steinberg, both of which provide models of creative nonfiction essays. To show students how a big story could be told by focusing on small details, I shared Pico Iyer’s “Where Worlds Collide,” as well as excerpts from Jennifer Price’s “A Brief Natural History of the Pink Plastic Flamingo.” To offer an example of authorial reflection and analysis, and to assuage students’ fears of sounding too much like themselves, I gleefully read from David Sedaris’s “The Drama Bug.”

In designing the writing prompts, I found the creative nonfiction exercises in *Tell It Slant* to be enormously useful, as well as the fiction exercises in *The 3 a.m. Epiphany: Uncommon Writing Exercises That Transform Your Fiction* by Brian Kiteley. Additionally, I rediscovered Peter Elbow’s *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*, particularly his “loop writing process,” a series of focused freewriting activities that allow students to circle their topic and explore it from a variety of vantage points.

## Workshops: Getting from Here to There

### Workshop 1: Listing

In the first workshop, we spent a lot of time generating ideas. Some of the listing prompts included the following:

1. List your three favorite foods (be specific—not just cereal, but “Cap’n Crunch before it gets soggy”).
2. List your top five favorite places. They can be exotic or local—Tahiti or your favorite coffee shop.
3. List your top three favorite high school memories (things that happened during high school years).
4. List five things you have accomplished in your life that you are really proud of.
5. Look in your backpack. List and briefly describe some of the things that are in there. Imagine this wasn’t your backpack, but the backpack of an alien. What would you deduce about the alien based on what is in the backpack?
6. When was the last time you laughed so hard something came out of your nose? Tell the story of what happened.
7. Draw yourself talking to your admissions office representatives. In a cartoon bubble above the “you” character, write all the things you want them to know about you. Above their heads, write either what you are afraid of them saying or what you want them to say.

After listing, drawing, and generating, which took about 45 minutes, the students reviewed their lists, and I asked them to circle any words or phrases that jumped out at them. Then, they chose one word or phrase and told a (true) story that was related to that word. I encouraged them to do this in two parts: First, they described what happened, and then they described what they were thinking or feeling at the time the story was taking place, what they thought or felt after, and how they think or feel about it now. This second part got them to start incorporating personal reflection and analysis into their narrative; it was a warm-up, a practice in playing with the elements of creative nonfiction that they would eventually be including in their essays. For example, one student described the times her peers had challenged her about her religion, which doesn’t recognize Western holidays. In the second part, the analysis, she wrote about

how she understood why her friends would be curious, and that she’d learned to be patient and to be willing to explain her religion in a calm, nondefensive way. Many workshops and drafts later, she was able to use these examples to show how her ability to be reasonable in the face of her occasionally unreasonable peers would be an asset in her dream career as a pharmacist.

### Workshop 2: Deconstructing Prompts and Brainstorming Responses

By October, most students had begun to narrow down the schools they thought they might be applying to, so that’s when I asked them to bring in the specific prompts that each school had created. Going over each prompt was critical because students didn’t always do the close reading that they needed to be able to do to understand what the college was asking for. For example, the University of California (UC) 2007–08 application asked, “How have you taken advantage of the educational opportunities you have had to prepare for college?” It was important for my students to understand that this question and others like it were not just asking for a list of educational opportunities, or a description of an event, but a reflective analysis on how those things had shaped them.

Yet, this was hard for them. To help them, we brainstormed possible responses to prompts

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together. I created a double-entry journal (see fig. 1) so that in one column students wrote down specific examples they might use (the story), and in the second column they wrote what those examples revealed about themselves (the reflection).

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This doubled as a great time to troubleshoot cliché responses. For example, when my students first began to brainstorm how they might address the UC prompt above, almost everyone said that they

had prepared for college by taking AP and honors courses. Fine. So had thousands of other college applicants, and unless they explained otherwise, saying they had taken an AP class wouldn't show anything about what they had really learned or about how what they had learned had prepared them for college.

### Workshop 3: Revising for Style

Throughout the workshops, I kept mentioning the "checklist" of the characteristics of creative nonfiction—true stories, told creatively, with an emphasis on the author's voice, and on the reflection/analysis of the events in the story—and pointed out to students when their writing was exhibiting one or more of them. It sounded simple enough, but getting students to put their voice in writing was difficult. Sometimes it meant pushing students to be more transparent about their thoughts: "What were you really thinking when this happened? What did the voice in your head say?" For example, one student was trying to describe how she had learned patience from talking to her best friend and initially wrote, "Audrey talks to me about absolutely anything and everything." I knew this student had a dry, somewhat sarcastic

sense of humor, so I encouraged her to put her true self on paper. She revised and came back with, "Being able to sit through the growing seconds, minutes and days of my life in order to listen to my best friend show that I have the patience to take on just about anything."

In other situations, challenging students to be specific by adding simple sensory details enhanced not only voice but also creativity. An early draft of another student's essay began with, "Walking through the doors of my grandma's house, the aroma of the traditional Filipino foods hits me right away. I can hear the voices of my parents, aunties and uncles gathered around the kitchen joking among them." I pointed out that I had never visited a Filipino household, so I wouldn't know what traditional Filipino foods smelled like. Putting herself in an outsider's shoes, the student expanded on her original description: "Walking through the doors of my grandma's house, the aroma of the traditional Filipino foods hits me right away. The smell of string beans, tomatoes, pork and the saltiness of the soup fill the air. The sound of the rice cooker done and the sound of water boiling make my stomach growl, telling me I am hungry. I can hear the voices of my parents, aunties and uncles gathered around the kitchen, joking and making fun of each other like they were little kids again."

### Workshop 4: Editing for Word Count

Many students were initially paralyzed by the limited word count, so I encouraged them to "draft big," which essentially meant they wrote as much as they could, with as much reflection, analysis, and specific detail as they could, until they had exhausted what they had to say. What I have found both in teaching writing and in my own writing is that often we write our way into knowing what we actually think or feel. By encouraging students to write two or three times as many words as they ultimately were allowed, it enabled them to take more risks, to explore tangents that were sometimes more useful than the original thoughts, and to discover ideas they didn't know they had, or hadn't known how to articulate until just then.

But how to edit? To help them find places they could cut, I had students read their essays aloud to friends (preferably those who hadn't heard it before) and then ask the friends to point out the

**FIGURE 1.** Deconstructing College Essay Prompts

What Stories Can You Tell	How It Shows Something about You
List anything that comes to mind and be specific, even if it seems silly or inconsequential.	List phrases or things each story says about you. Be specific.

most memorable parts. The students knew what parts of the essay stuck out in the readers' minds, and they kept those parts. Lastly, I worked with students to identify paragraphs they could revise by isolating the most essential details, and to identify several sentences in a row with similar subjects that they could combine.

### Workshop 5: Final Edits and Proofreading

In the writing center, we don't "fix" student essays. The goal of most writing centers is to produce better writers, not just put some bandages on a paper to make it better writing. While I couldn't let my students send in essays that had not been meticulously proofread, spellchecked, and read over and over, I also did not want the writing center to be seen as a one-stop proofreading shop. So, I used the final workshop to have students practice several proofreading strategies, including reading aloud to a partner, having a partner read their paper aloud back to them, and reading the paper in reverse, starting with the last sentence and working backwards. For students who had struggled with shifting verb tenses, I asked them to highlight all of their verbs and then go back and check each one for tense and subject-verb agreement. After they had assumed most of the burden of proofreading, I encouraged them to make individual, brief appointments with me so we could give it a final read together.

### Happily Ever After?

By the end of the application season, I was thrilled with what students had been able to craft. I was elated that they had drafted and redrafted—some as many as fifteen times—had taken risks and revealed their own voices in their essays, had analyzed seemingly straightforward prompts, had anguished through editing, and had practiced critical proofreading. Moreover, the students were happy, as well.

Finally, the acceptance letters arrived, and two things happened. The first was not surprising: some students were accepted by their top-choice schools, and some were not. The second thing that happened took me by surprise: several students received handwritten notes from admissions officers indicating how much they had enjoyed reading their essays. Not only did this validate all the hours

my students had invested, but most important, it allowed students to see themselves as writers capable of connecting with their audience. And, as a teacher of writing, I could not have asked for anything more. 

### Note

My father was my first reader and best critic, and this was the last piece he read before he passed away in January; therefore, I dedicate this article to him, with love and gratitude.

### EXCERPTS FROM STUDENT ESSAYS

1. The work I do at Hallmark may be boring, but the customers certainly are not. Hallmark serves a significant number of ornament fanatics who line up outside the store on the mornings of our ornament premieres (which I might add take place in July). The hardcore ornament collectors won't purchase an ornament if its box is dented because it decreases the "value" of the ornament. Other customers have very strange demands. A man once asked me if we had any "humorous sympathy" cards. When I told him no, he seemed perplexed, as if it would be only natural to have a section full of them. At the same time I can't be too surprised by these requests, because we do carry some pretty ridiculous cards, such as "Happy Birthday from the Dog." Not even to the dog but *from* the dog . . . . In life I will come across many types of people, some offbeat like the ornament collectors, and some that are tough to deal with, like the calendar woman. From this experience I have discovered that I have patience, understanding and the ability to find humor in ridiculous situations. Moving forward in life, I know I have Hallmark to thank for that.

2. My life is not made up of big events. I have not created a cure for the common cold and my special award for services to the country is not on its way from the president. I am made up of the thousands of little moments that happen everyday, things that do not necessarily go on one's resume, but hold a great significance for me. I have always had what some would call an obsession with perfection. My friends would often poke fun at me: I could not stand having my pencils and pens facing different directions in my pencil case, and my backpack zipper always has to be closed on the left side. However, in the last few months, I realized that I am overcoming my obsession. A couple of weeks ago when I was getting dressed to go out, I quickly pulled on a pair of socks and only later realized they did not match! Before, I might have taken off the socks and been uncomfortable all day, or demand that I go home to change, but instead I showed my friend the cute, mismatched design and went on with my day. Although this is so small, it was a really big step for me.

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#### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Wells's students completed a genre study, asking themselves, "What kinds of essays are required for college applications?" "A Significant Influence: Describing an Important Teacher in Your Life" offers an idea that could be equally beneficial to writers of application essays. This lesson plan builds on the belief that all of us have had a teacher who has made a profound difference in our lives—someone who made us think more deeply and helped us place our feet on the right path. Perhaps it was a teacher we met in a classroom, but it could have been a coach, a youth group leader, a family or community elder, or a religious leader. In this project, students write a tribute to that teacher who has taught them an important lesson they still remember. The personal essays that students write for this lesson are then published in a class collection and could be used as part of a college application. [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=824](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=824)