DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 367 982 CS 214 252

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| AUTHOR | Paley, Karen Surman |
| TITLE | The College Application Essay: A Rhetorical Paradox. |
| PUB DATE | 18 Mar 94 |
| NOTE | 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994). |
| PUB TYPE | Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Admissions Officers; *Audience Awareness; *College Admission; *College Applicants; Higher Education; Protocol Analysis; Student Attitudes; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Evaluation; Writing Research; Writing Strategies |
| IDENTIFIERS | *Rhetorical Strategies; *Writing Contexts |

ABSTRACT

An informal study explored the dynamics of the task of writing college application essays, which urge self-revelation but are judged by omnipotent admissions committees. Four students in the top 17% of their class of 194 in a predominantly white suburban school completed think-aloud protocols as they drafted a response to an application question from a school of their choice. A copy of each essay was sent anonymously to four participating admissions officers--three representing private schools in the east, the midwest, and the west, and one representing a state school in the northeast. Admissions officers were tape recorded as they responded to the essays. Essays were not sent to admissions officers at schools where the students intended to apply for admission. In student protocols the percentage of reflections on any aspect of the rhetorical problem--audience, presentation of self, or purpose--ranged from 23% to 50%. Three of the four students did not acknowledge any concern regarding how open to be. They worried instead about their ability to differentiate themselves from the applicant pool. Analysis of admissions officers' responses indicated that oversensitivity to spelling, punctuation, penmanship, and length may be a sign of class bias. Findings suggest that successful essayists are able to compromise with a kind of rhetorical counterparadox that precludes a surrender of power and that balances the forces who call for self-exposure and those that "devour" the results. (Six notes are included. Contains 13 references.) (RS)

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# The College Application Essay: A Rhetorical Paradox

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**Acknowledgments**: I would like to thank Patricia Sullivan, Thomas Newkirk, Susan Wall and Paul Lewis for their suggestions as this project unfolded.

the same - different - the same attributes
different yet the same as before
(HD, "Tribute to Angels")

## The College Application Essay: A Rhetorical Paradox

Hundreds of thousands of high school seniors grapple each fall with probably the first piece of consequential writing of their lives -- the college application essay. The essay questions cause a considerable amount of anxiety in these students who often cope with the exigency by procrastinating until there is no time to proofread, never mind receive feedback and revise. Behind this task avoidance is the paradoxical nature of the exigency itself. Reacting to questions which urge self-revelation, students may wonder just how much to reveal about themselves. There may be a sense that omnipotent admissions committees are providing them just enough rope for a hanging.

Not knowing whom the audience is or what it really expects from them, college applicants are put in an awkward position when asked to expose private aspects of the self. For the most part, students are addressing an "'invoked' audience ... called up or imagined by the writer" (Ede and Lunsford, 156). I will argue that the "invitation" to share a personal narrative with an invoked audience that has decision-making power over them is, in reality, a mandate that subjugates and perhaps even humiliates the student.

## The Contradictory Context

College applicants are predominantly asked to address "open-ended personal topics" (Smagorinsky, 1991, p. 35) which are usually some stated or implied version of the question, "Tell us something about yourself we do not already know from the rest of your application."[1] For example,

• Describe a risk you have taken. (University of New Hampshire)

• How would you describe yourself as a human being? What quality do you like best in yourself and what do you like least? What quality would you most like to see flourish and which would you like to see wither? (Bates College)

Compliance requires an act of soul baring. The questions feel intrusive. The student is basically asked to eradicate the boundary between subject and institution. Responding to such essay questions involves a *willingness* to comply with directions in spite of the fact that doing so may involve a certain amount of discomfort. One admissions officer I interviewed advised applicants, "Be willing to take an emotional risk in terms of relaying information. Try not to put up screens between you and the reader."

Advice that precedes some open-ended questions does not appear to acknowledge the emotional risk.

• We encourage you to relax as much as possible when you work on your essay. (Stanford University)

• Allow your unique voice to be clearly expressed, rather than falling prey to the temptation to tell us what you think we want to hear. (Amherst)

• There are no right or wrong answers in this section. We simply want you to be yourself. (Colby)

As I perused over three dozen college applications used in the fall of 1992, and read the kind of advice meant to be encouraging, I was reminded of the directions once given by the Ohio Department of Education for its eighth grade writing test.

> Sometimes people write just for the fun of it. This is a chance to have fun writing. (qtd. in Newkirk, 1979, p. 6)

The rhetorical problem of the student applicant is reminiscent of the untenable paradox inherent in the relationship between a psychoanalyst in training and his training analyst.

> The personal analysis of a future analyst is an important part of his training. In the course of his analysis, he is supposed to come to grips with at least those major neurotic personality trends that might interfere most seriously with his work. ... On the one hand, he is expected to be completely spontaneous and truthful in his communications with his trainer; on the other hand, he knows that if his spontaneity is not yet of the right kind, his training analyst cannot recommend his graduation. (Watzlawick et al, 1974, p. 71)

The applicant's autobiographical statement must also be "of the right kind" for the admissions committee to unlock the gate to the university.

## Design of Study

In order to explore the dynamics of this task environment, I conducted an informal study involving four students and four admissions officers.[2] The students were in the top seventeen percent of their class of 194 in a predominantly white suburban school. The admissions officers represented three private schools in the East, the Midwest, and the West, as well as a state school in the Northeast. During the summer prior to their senior year in high school, I asked students to do thinking-aloud protocols as they drafted a

response to an application question from a school of their choice. A copy of each of their essays was sent anonymously to four admissions officers who agreed to participate. They responded to the essays as they read them for the first time in taped telephone interviews. The protocols and interviews provide some evidence of the socio-cognitive processes of the writer and the audience and of how well the two are in sync. My hypothesis was that the students would be rhetorically constrained by the paradox inherent in the task, i.e. the need to self-disclose to a powerful invoked audience.

## How Problematic is the Injunction to Self-Disclose?

In the student protocols the percentage of reflections on any aspect of the rhetorical problem -- audience, presentation of self, or purpose-- ranged from 23% to 50%.[3] For example, one student said, "First I need to think of something that the admissions people are going to like..."

However, only Student #4 directly raised the rhetorical paradox I forecast.

> I'm kind of wondering how honest you should be in these autobiographical essays. Should I include negative stuff about myself or should I just try to keep it positive? I mean you're only human. I'm sure the admissions officers know that but it's hard to write something about that.

Student #4 resolved the problem by writing a fictional essay that was at once perceived as the best written, the most creative, and, according to three of the four admissions officers, the least revealing of self. The question she answered was, "Write page 103 of your future autobiography." Here is an excerpt.

> As I leaned over to peer through the microscanner, a splintering crash echoed across the lab, immediately followed by a string of obscenities. An anxious hush of quiet descended over the room. Myself and two of my colleagues rushed over to the scene of the accident while the rest of the crew waited painfully in their places, bracing themselves for bad news....By this time, I had been in the lab for seventeen hours of the day, trying to make some headway in my area. ... Life outside the lab seemed to be taking the back seat lately.

Responder #3 called it "a failed essay question" because it elicited neither expository writing nor self-disclosure. Responder #1 declared, "I have never really found that essays that deal with the future have been successful for me as far as finding out about the student."[4] Yet the characteristics of the implied author constructed by this same responder included: "diligent," "interested in science," "very interested in research," "takes the work really seriously," "works really hard," "expected to achieve," "reads a good deal," "creative," and "hoping to make an impact." He also observed that the essay "shows off the writing well."

Responder #2, who represented the university with the most stringent admission standards, was the only one to resolve the conflict between creativity and self-disclosure.

> You learn something about this person. You know they like biology. They actually know something about biology. [T]hey also have a sense of style and a little dramatic sense. So, while it's not as *confessionally revealing* as any of the other three [essays], it's not opaque in the sense that we have no clue about this person. *The person has rather indirectly told us something about themselves* and it's interesting. (emphasis added)

The failure of the essay to be "confessionally revealing" is what was problematic for the other readers, yet they were able to acknowledge the student's diligence, commitment, and good writing ability. How much more does an admissions officer really need to know about a student? Is it because these qualities can only be inferred from a piece of fiction that the readers are troubled? Are they uncertain as to whether the real student actually conforms to the model of a hardworking citizen? Most of the responders seemed dissatisfied with a perceived lacuna between the creative writing sample and the student's personality, as if the self in an expository essay would be "real." It would appear that, behind the friendly suggestion to relax and open up, lies an imperative to self-disclose.

## The Rhetorical Urge to Stand Out

Three of the four students did not acknowledge any concern regarding how open to be. In fact, rather than be constrained by the injunction to open up, they worried instead about their ability to differentiate themselves in the applicant pool.[5] There was a total of 28 protocol statements indicating that uniqueness was a rhetorical purpose. Here the students invoked audience matched the addressed one. Admissions officers valorized essays they felt to be unique, but what is "the right kind" of unique self to project to admissions officers?

Speaking of the cover letters of job applicants, Alan France writes,

> The "voice" of the applicant, like the mask of a "persona," shields the self ... and thereby enables it to conform to the authority of impersonal corporate hierarchies, paradoxically without abandoning its "authenticity" and autonomy. (p. 600).

The persona must "'both *fit in* and *stand out*'" (qtd. in France, p. 600). In the same way, the "unique" selves constructed by the college applicants must not be challenging to the university. While seeming to be providing unsolicited advice on word choice, Responder #3 was particularly revealing in this regard.

> A pretty good example is the essay I got from a kid who wrote, "I don't lean so far to the Right as to offend the Left, nor so far to the Left as to alienate the Right." Now "offend" and "alienate" mean essentially the same thing, but the ability to write whatever he wrote in the first place, and then to vary the vocabulary in that way, is very telling. And every kid knows what offend means and certainly every teenager knows what alienate means. This kid was not using a Thesaurus but had enough variance in his vocabulary that it was not at all a plodding piece to read, and I think that's important.

The responders' enthusiasm regarding the student's lexicon works to conceal what he feels about the student's political stance, one that neither "offends" nor "alienates" because *it* is "plodding." It is conceivable that he may have been as pleased with the content of the statement as he was with the word choice.

Similarly, a student AIDS activist was perceived to be "a good human being" for her efforts to educate her peers in a school play. Would she have been perceived in the same way by admissions staff if, for example, she had written about helping to organize demonstrations at the State House for more money for AIDS research? Would the response have been as congenial if, instead of simply presenting herself as "a good human being," the student revealed other qualities such as those mentioned by Susan Wall: "'political astuteness and awareness, critical thinking skills, the ability to ask hard questions and challenge a majority -- in other words, those traits which could become

problematic if turned against the institution'" (qtd. in Reeves, 37). Instead, these two students wrote unchallenging statements for an audience they invoked with accuracy.

## The Error of Our Ways or the Mea Culpa of Composition

Another contradiction in the imperative to relax and write openly is that the response to errors in mechanics is not quite as amicable as the directions are. In her study of the assessment of secondary school students, Janet Emig (1971) concludes that the emphasis is on the "accidents *rather than the essences of discourse* -- that is, spelling, punctuation, penmanship, and length rather than thematic development, rhetorical and syntactic sophistication, and fulfillment of intent" (emphasis added, p. 93). The present study indicates that oversensitivity to such accidents may be a sign of class bias. One representative from a prestigious Eastern school put it quite bluntly.

> Mechanics can provide warning signals of disadvantaged backgrounds, where the conversation at home is not about political debates but about the World Wrestling Federation. Sentence fragments make us nervous about a kid. (personal communication, October 30, 1992)

For this admissions officer, mechanics are clearly an indicator of class.

Essay #1 was extremely useful in evoking commentary on the "accidents of discourse." According to my analysis, it contains 22 words that are either typos or misspellings, 9 punctuation errors, and 5 grammatical errors. Here is an excerpt with four errors.

> I very rarely got in fights at school because their really were not all that many bullies on the play ground. However, I do remember getting into a stick fight with

> a great big forth-grader. He was picking on a friend of mine named Nelson, who was from Nigeria....The bully was calling him "niger" and said his nose was different and blacks weren't as smart as whites.

Despite all the advice about self-disclosure, there was very little affirmation from the admissions officers of this student's willingness to fight racism in elementary school. Responder #2, representing the school with the most stringent admissions criteria, illustrates an observation by Wall and Hull (1989). "We are taken aback when we recognize the vigor with which readers denounce certain usages, certain errors or constructions" (261). After responding to all four essays, Responder #2 voluntarily returned to the first one and said,

> I would be interested in the person who wrote the first essay as long as somebody could sit there and let an *English teacher slap him in the face* and say, "Pay attention here. You're writing to somebody. You're not just keeping a journal. You're allowed to use the dictionary. It's an open book test. Go back and correct this and I want *no* mistakes on the second draft."

This admissions officer, who also teaches *humanities* courses in the same university, responded to Essay #1 with a confluence of the most negative and the most positive affect. He was angered and frustrated by being distracted from a potentially sophisticated and well-written essay by a "childish" lack of proofreading. Unlike the first reader who chose not to talk about the errors, it never occurred to Responder #2 that he could focus his response on the content of the essay. His reading of the text allows him to judge the "self" of the writer based on his mechanical errors. As John Clifford might put it, syntactical and orthographic inaccuracies do appear to "interpellate subjects into clear relations of power and authority" (Clifford, p. 47).

## The Application Essay: Freewrite or Mannered Prose?

In conclusion, I have tried to demonstrate the difficulty of composing a college application essay by examining a contradiction in the task environment. Students are asked to compose as if the product were no more than a freewrite conducted in an English class, "never stopping to ponder a thought" (Macrorie, 1985, p. 18). Admissions officers tell applicants to relax and reveal themselves. However, writing produced under mandate can never be free from social constraints. Furthermore, since the directions in the application do not spell these constraints out, the students must invent them. They are almost worse off than the prisoners in the Panopticon. While they may know *when* they are being watched, they do not know why.

Successful essayists seem to be able to compromise with a kind of rhetorical counterparadox that precludes a surrender of power. The excerpts that follow were taken from an essay written by a racially mixed student who was accepted under the early action program of a highly competitive midwestern school.[6]

> I love the United States and consider it the greatest country in the world. Yet ... [h]ow can I be proud of a country that established itself by robbing the Native Americans of land that only they had the right to, and then tried to wipe out their civilization? ... Today the United States is very different from the infant nation of two hundred years ago. This country has acknowledged its mistakes in regard to the treatment of Africans and Native Americans and is trying to find a way for all of us to live together in peace and harmony.

One wonders what the Admissions Committee at this school would have decided had the student not qualified his criticism of the United States. Compare it to the intense ambivalence in Toni Morrison's essay (1991) "A Slow Walk of Trees."

> ...I suffer from racial vertigo.... [M]ost of us [Afro-Americans] are plagued by a sense of being worn shell-thin by constant repression and hostility as well as the impression of being buoyed by visible testimony of tremendous strides. (p. 70).

This student's rhetorical counterparadox worked because he successfully navigated the waters between Scylla and Charybdis, the forces who call for self-exposure and those that devour the result.

There is a potential for humiliation involved in being compelled to trust an unknown audience with personal material to which they will respond either, "Yes, you are welcome here" or, "No, you are not welcome." The applicant who is refused admission cannot help but *feel rejected* because the self s/he has been called upon to project has been declared unworthy. The requirements of the task environment leave the student with no alternative but "to take it personally," since the person is what was projected. What they write is the conflicted product of the imperatives to relax and open up issued by authorities who can exclude them.

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[1] These and subsequent examples were gleaned from the applications and catalogs of 37 colleges, including both private and state schools. The sample consists of eight Ivy League or "little Ivy" schools, ten others from the East, five from the South, five from the Midwest, six from the West, and three technical schools, two from the East and one from the West. I also conducted preliminary telephone interviews with twelve admissions officers at different schools located throughout the country.

[2] Admission officers were interviewed as follows: #1 on July 30, 1993, #2 on August 3, 1993, #3 on August 12, 1993, and #4 on August 16, 1993. Student conferences were held as follows: #1 and #2 on July 20, 1993, and #3 & #4 on July 15, 1993. The students were assigned numbers chronologically based on when their revised essays were turned in.

[3] The protocol of student #1 consisted of only twelve lines, and six of these related to rhetorical purpose. If his protocol is excluded, the range of emphasis on the rhetorical problem is 23% to 32% with an average of 27%. The individual figures were: student # 2 -- 17 out 73 lines (23%), student #3 -- 25 out of 78 (32%), and student #4, 55 out of 220 (25%). Student #4 had the lengthiest protocol because she decided to drop her first essay topic.

[4] Because I did not want to influence future real life decisions, I enlisted admissions officers from schools other than the ones students intended to apply to. Thus, students were responding to essay questions not used by the schools participating in this research.

[5] Since all four students were first introduced to the college application essay by the same teacher in their junior year, it is quite likely that he planted an idea that may also be embedded in the thinking of secondary teachers on a national level, a construct of what admissions officers are looking for.

[6] This essay was one of several sent to me by admissions officers during the first phase of this project in which I studied applications and interviewed a dozen staff members.