

The Power of Authentic Writing: Why College Admissions Essays Don't Have a Rubric

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Abstract: In this first-person narrative, Jorgensen explores the disservice rubrics present to students and encourages teachers to rely on authentic writing opportunities, feedback and conferencing instead of grades and rubrics.

Adam paces the back of the classroom, struggling to come up with an idea. “Do you think I can take a walk around the building?”

“Yes,” I say. “Maybe a change of scenery will help.”

Adam sighs, grabs his notepad and pen, and paces through his stress in our high school’s hallway.

The English teachers at Arrowhead Union High School offer the College Essay Workshop each summer and fall to help senior students understand what college admissions officers desire in a college essay. In these sessions, teachers focus on explaining the principles of writing well, including the components of a compelling narrative. Over a series of days, students plan, draft, write, and receive feedback from multiple teachers and students, and they learn about creating an application with purpose and consistency through exemplars and readings.

In the College Essay Workshop, each student’s stress shows in a different way. While Adam paces, another student finds comfort in procrastination and college essay YouTube videos; another reads excerpts from *50 Successful Harvard Application Essays* while a group of girls discuss life-changing moments.

“I wish there were a rubric for this,” Adam says when he gets back.

I cringe, as he reminds me that students are taught—by teachers of all subjects—that good writing can be accomplished by checking boxes on a list.

“Adam, you don’t need a rubric. You know what you need to do. Write a narrative that shows your positive qualities. Take your best attributes—your humor, helpfulness, and patience—and find a story that illustrates those qualities.” I remind Adam and the 84 other students in the workshop of what they already know: “Good writing is not the five paragraph essay, with the thesis at the end of the first paragraph, followed by three body paragraphs and a concluding re-statement. Good writing isn’t formulaic.” But I know that’s what students learn when each assignment in elementary, middle, and high school comes with a rubric. Kohn (2006), an education author and lecturer, wrote that “research shows three reliable effects when students are graded: They tend to think less deeply, avoid taking risks and lose interest in the learning itself ... [Rubrics] do nothing to address the terrible reality of students who have been led to focus on getting A’s rather than making sense of ideas” (p. 12). In this time of increasing standardization, teachers can still find ways to make both assessment and learning authentic and generative. Authentic writing, with purpose and an audience, is one way to achieve this. Focusing on the process, rather than grades, is another solution.

The College Essay Workshop is a gradeless endeavour. Students attend to gain advice and ultimately produce an essay that stands out in the pile of writing on a college admissions counselor’s desk. Students are nervous, trepidatious, and unsure, and they want a rubric to ease their discomfort. I say, “You’re in control of your own story. You can do anything you want. Your story could be one long extended metaphor. You could write your essay in poem form, or maybe as a graduation speech or even as a conversation. Do something different, something uniquely and innately you.”

Laufenberg (2010), a teacher and expert on learning from mistakes said, “There is no one right answer contrary to many of our rubrics,” and I want my students to know the same about writing. In the college admissions essay, there is no one right way to attack the prompt or compose the essay. Laufenberg said we want problem identification,

creative ideas, originality, and curiosity from our students. And rubrics, she said, stifle; they beg kids to find—and then do—the minimum. With rubrics, she suggested, we aren't allowing our students to fail or innovate. And rubrics give kids excuses for doing less.

There are benefits to rubrics, as an evaluation process is clearly laid out and developed for students. But authentic writing opportunities, like the college admissions essay, find themselves void of such guidelines. So where does this leave our students? Wilson (2007) wrote that “I found that my values shifted as students approached writing in new ways and we talked about their work and purposes. I didn't like how using rubrics prematurely narrowed and cemented my vision of good writing” (p. 62). Of course, our students use rubrics to narrow and cement their view of writing, too.

To break students in the College Essay Workshop of this, I say, “Let's start with some examples.” I show them Justin's essay that was read to all incoming freshmen during the University of Wisconsin-Madison's welcome week. I show them Molly's essay that earned a \$5,000 scholarship. We read Ashley's essay that received a handwritten note from Marquette University's president commending her writing, inviting her to be part of Marquette's freshmen class with a scholarship.

“What are these authors doing? What do you notice about the essays?” I ask. Students instinctively recognize good writing in each essay: “Small paragraphs.”—“Stylistic devices.”—“They all tell an interesting story.”—“I see dialogue.”—“I see characters and a climax.” Then they take their observations and apply similar devices to their own words, sentences, and stories. Perhaps they are creating an imaginary rubric; I suggest they are crafting a personalized definition of quality writing that can be applied in any application.

To improve the students' essays, my co-teachers and I read, comment, re-read, edit, and provide feedback on student drafts. Students and instructors discuss, interact, and collaborate. Because the writing is purposeful and authentic in the College Essay Workshop, students are invested and do A-quality work. The process of producing quality work (be it art, writing, or any other endeavor) can't be reduced to boxes on a

rubric. I realize this when students (either in the College Essay Workshop or in my classroom) ask, “Where’s the rubric?” My students were trained to fill in the blanks and to rely on the teacher to spell out requirements. But I want my students to take risks, to be original and creative—and to not rely on a grid.

Good writing is recognizable. It is thought-provoking, interesting, and engaging. Good writing uses the components English teachers present (metaphors, similes, analogies, symbolism) to make readers think, feel, or act differently. And good writing is possible if we remove the rubrics—and the “one right answer” culture—from writing. Through conversations, mentoring, and conferencing, students can learn to evaluate and apply specific concepts, from language choices to emotion and storytelling.

This is congruent with Mabry (1999), who said that “Standardization of direct writing assessments promotes scoring reliability and facilitates educational comparisons and rankings. However, standardized writing is not good writing, which demands individualized expression” (p. 678). Although a rubric expedites grading, it’s not a successful learning tool. And although some teachers successfully use rubrics to evaluate, Andrade (2000) wrote that “Students may need more intensive work with a rubric if they are to perform better consistently ... Simply handing out and explaining a rubric seemed to help students write better, though improvements were not guaranteed” (p. 13).

As Adam shifts his laptop into his backpack, he clutches his notebook. “I am really excited about my ideas. I know what I want to write about.” Adam struggles with autism and says he will write about how he uses movement to aid his learning.

“I’m really excited to see your first draft and talk about it,” I say.

“Me too,” he says as he walks out the door. “I want to hear what you have to say tomorrow.”

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