

College Admissions Essay Conference Script

Henry is a senior and has come after school for help on his college admissions essay. I have never worked with him before.

Part I: Investigate... Listen to the writer and try to understand what he needs.

800 words, really? Oh, cut from 800 words. So...

It was hard.

I bet it was. So how do you feel about your essay?

I like the way it is. I want a—I want a professional opinion.

Okay. So you feel like it's done.

I want to know if it expresses what I want.

So you want me to tell you what I think it says. Because that's important; because you want to know if I got it.

I want to make sure it says what I want it to say.

But otherwise you feel like it's pretty solid.

Part II: I read his essay and answer his question. The essay is just not strong enough to meet his aspirations for very selective colleges. I question to see how willing he is to accept feedback. I question and listen to how he responds.

So what is it about? I think it's about the pleasure you get from hiking, but it's not just the physical pleasure of your surroundings, but the intellectual stimulation of hiking with your friend and talking about important stuff. Is that what it's about? Oh good, I felt like I was taking a test.

What it's really about is that there are kind of two stories or two anecdotes.

What would you say are the two anecdotes?

Well, there's one that's kind of more concrete—this action one.

Getting soaked. Yeah.

And I'm not sure if that's relevant to what I'm saying, other than being about hiking, and then there's another one that's kind of a more vague, generic hike. (This is a critically important move he has made, and most writers will get there if we give them time to tell us what is bothering them about their writing. Don Murray taught me to pay attention to these nudges that something wasn't right in my work. He told me I would likely ask for feedback, knowing something was wrong, and then when he or someone else named it, it would make me mad—and it did—because I already knew it, I was just ignoring the nudge. I want writers to feel that nudge and go after it. That's independence.)

That's a really good read of your own work. And definitely the thing that struck me was what does the rain have to do with this? You're right on with how I'm thinking as a reader.

Part III: Feedback on his draft. Once I see that Henry can see some of what makes his piece ineffective and is willing to dig in to the heart of his draft—the thinking—once I see he is beyond just looking for my affirmation, I start addressing the questions I had as I read. I would not have gone here if his body language, etc. suggested he wanted no help. I could make that choice because he isn't my student and I have a lot of other student in the room to attend to. I also believe that giving a writer feedback on a draft that he is not invested in improving is a waste of time for both of us.

The key for me is, uh, as I read through this first half, I believed you must be with Mike because I know him, but you don't tell me—and I was like, why doesn't he tell me who he's hiking with? That's strange—and then—

I was actually with three other people.

Because the ending is about you and Michael.

I think I'm going to take names out.

I think you can say my friend. I didn't know if it was Dad or --. (Notice how Henry and I are talking about surface details that are pretty unimportant, but sometimes I need to let a student make small moves before he is willing to consider big changes.)

Oh, did I even say friends?

I don't think you said anything. (long pause as we both reread) So it felt like, for as long as we are into the piece, somewhere in here you need to tell me who I'm hiking with—who you were hiking with. (I don't even realize I'm doing this as I'm saying it, but I often refer to a piece of writing as if I'm in it as the narrator—and I explain to students that it is what readers expect from narrative—that we enter the story with the writer.)

And then you have, ‘hiking isn’t an escape or a destination’ and I don’t think you need to say that if you begin with ‘the woods are as powerful a place for me as a temple is for the religious,’ I know this (hiking isn’t about the destination.) Do you know how if you tell me it and then you tell me it *again*—but I love the way you said it the second time. So I would keep it there.

Can you annotate the things you’re saying?

I laugh. I start to write and say out loud, ‘who is--?’—and then say, you know it’s better if you do it because you’ll remember your own writing. (I am also transferring the ownership of revision to him—of what he feels he needs to attend to after listening to me talk. I’m not in control of what he decides to pay attention to.)

Yeah, I can write this down.

So looking at this transition, you’ve got, ‘the woods are as powerful a place as a temple—’ and I wondered if you wanted, ‘it’s *my* sanctuary’—to keep it centered on

Me

Not the whole world should know this, but I know this.

Yeah.

And, ‘when I hike with my friend, we hike directly through a discussion of metaphysics’—this is probably my favorite line in the piece (he smiles broadly) because no one expects that to be the ending phrase, right? That is so unusual. So then I thought, can you—I don’t know if it’s possible—possibly capture a couple lines of it so we hear the dialogue between you. (You’ll notice this is an echo of the conference I just had with Caitlin about her grandfather, in that scenes are built on dialogue, but I teach it differently to Henry. Henry has a very strong sense of writing and excellent skills, he just is missing the heart of this piece and developing it will improve it. He was likely listening in as I worked with Caitlin as well.)

Michael wrote about this once in a piece in his notebook where copied—he was writing about the conversation and I was thinking, “whoa—” and I think, especially since you’re applying to WPI and RPI (Worcester Polytechnic Institute and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute) you’re applying to places that get it, it would be pretty cool.

Yeah, that would be cool so I should—

Which if you decide that this can be cut (the opening section that isn’t important about getting soaked in the rain on the hike) because it is not as important, you could have room for the dialogue.

Yeah. Wow, I was worried to—I was reluctant to cut this because of the length. And I wasn't sure what else I could put with this, but that's a good idea.

(I point to the conversation section) This, though, could be very cool.

I was—I had an interview with an admissions guy at Colby and he was asking me about my hometown, and I mentioned what my essay was about because the essay will ask you what my hometown is like, and I was talking about tourists in my hometown and how annoying they get and I kind of had an epiphany while I was talking to him that may be relative to this, that I find them annoying and I mentioned the worst part of tourists invading the valley was when I was hiking with Tin Mountain and we were summiting Mt. Washington and we were on this trail that went by the Cog Railway and so the fat, happy tourists were bumbling up the mountain on the Cog Railway—

with all the smoke going up—

yeah, and they leaned out the window and they're like, 'Ah, look! Sweaty hikers!' and they were like taking pictures of us and we're like, "Ah, come on."

So were you thinking of putting that in here?

So it was kind of an intrusion—it felt like—I want to share this—but I don't—for some reason I don't like that intrusion.

Oh... what you've just said, though, without this (opening part) and you and Michael having your conversation and those guys interrupt you—can't you see that?

Oh yeah, I didn't even think of that because this is like at a different—we weren't at the same place and time.

I know, but that is creative non-fiction. You could bring the two experiences together. *(He takes the paper and draws an X through the first section—a huge move for a kid who came in 'done.')*

I think this could really be cool because then your sanctuary has been interrupted by these people and you actually, what I feel like your essay says is that if only they knew what it was like to you—you know, they've all got their matching sweatshirts and they're in the Cog Railway and they're chugging up the thing to get the same view, but it's not the same view because you earned it by hiking.

Uh yeah, there's a Bill Bryson—do you know Bill Bryson? A Walk in the Woods? There's a line when he's at the top of Mount Washington and he's worked so hard to get up there and then the fat tourists bumble off the train, roll off the train and into like the tourist

gift shops on the summit of the mountain, and it's like, 'Ah!' and I had the same kind of—I had the same experience.

And they're taking pictures of you? That's very funny. (I look up to see how Caitlin is doing and see I can take another minute to talk to Henry.) And I also see here at the end where you hike above the clouds and then you're looking back saying—

I tried to make this kind of a metaphor—something that came through.

I thought that's what I was thinking you were doing.

Did it come through?

I do.

(He draws.) *So, it's like foggy down here and it's clear at the summit.*

And you have some great lines about “we have a broad view of the land” and “we break out of the clouds”—I love those lines because—

They definitely match the—but I also hope that comes through with college—with essay readers spending like 45 seconds on it.

Yeah, they say a minute to two minutes, right? When I did it? That's how long we spent. We had to read 100 a month.

Do you feel like they'll catch something like that?

Yeah, but I'm an English person so I hear it.

But are they all English people?

It doesn't matter. It's still beautiful. So even if they miss the other layer of it. And um, where's the other one—right here where you're taking pictures—their pictures are different than the ones they're taking of you, so it's a nice little echo in there.

Yeah. (He's writing on his draft.)

I would definitely play with this and come up with another draft. You've definitely got an idea that's wicked cool. (I say to Caitlin--) You need me to come back so you can go? Okay, I'll be right there. (I say to Henry--) Do you kind of know what you need to work on?

(He continues to write.) Uh-huh.

