

5P Admissions Essay Conference Script

Caitlin is a senior and I've never met her. She has come to see me after school for help on her college admissions essay.

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

Tell me about your essay.

Okay, so I chose—this is for the Common App (Application) one—it was supposed to be a person who influenced you the most.

Okay.

I chose to write about my grandfather.

Okay. (I'm filling time, waiting for her to keep talking.)

And I just—I had no idea where this was going.

And it's 'the person who's had the biggest influence on you' is the topic. And when you think about the piece, what do you think it needs?

I just feel like it's, like, the typical 'this is the why' kind of essay and I don't know if it should be that way.

You think it needs to stand out more? Is that what you mean by 'typical'?
(It is important that I understand how she reads her own work. I'm letting her know I trust her evaluation of her writing—important for any writer to know—and that her evaluation is more important than mine. This builds an independent stance in writing.)

Yeah.

Is there any part in particular that you like? That is working? (I'm trying to get her to say more about her work.)

Well, I gave like three examples of how he has influenced me, as my body paragraphs and I like how I said that he always used to tell me that I was an independent woman, a strong woman. I don't know.

Part II: I read her essay and decide what to teach her. Then I teach it as quickly and as clearly as I can.

Okay, so do you know how many words this is? How close it is?

(I want to know if she thinks this is 'done' and is at the 'tinkering' stage, not the overhaul stage. I'm trying to get a sense for what I can say to her since I don't know her.)

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So you're really close to where you want it to be length-wise. What I'm struck by when I read it, first, is it's a five-paragraph essay, which is unusual for a college admissions essay.

Is it too long?

No, it's an unusual structure. I'm curious why you chose it.

I don't know, because I'm used to like that format from my other, like, English classes. Normally it's introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion.

That is a really normal way to write an essay about a book or about something. This is asking you to write a narrative essay, which is like an experience that changed you, and so in narrative it should be focused on story—which—it's just a different structure—When you have, "I'm going to tell you about him—he's independent. He was raised in a Christian family, which influenced your values—and taught you a sense of humor and then you kind of end with a conclusion—it's um, you know when you said typical? I think it's the structure more than anything else that would put it in that category.

(I chose this wording carefully. I want to build on what she said to define the problem, but I don't want the 'problem' to feel too big to solve. I could say 'this is the wrong structure for a narrative essay' but I'm not sure I can be that blunt with her, so I say it is unusual, so that I can then teach her another alternative without crushing her.)

Whereas if you—in a typical narrative you have a scene. Do you have writing (class) this semester? (The sad truth is that if she hasn't had Writing (the class) yet, she probably hasn't written any narrative in years. Most English classes neglect the study of narrative.)

I have it next semester.

A scene has three components: voice, details, and dialogue, and it usually is, what we call, a moment in time, like if that camera were on—a snapshot—we're talking about a snapshot where you zoom in, okay? So imagine Grandpa doing something—the key is that you show your readers who he was.

This is a telling essay—I'm going to tell you that he was independent and I use some examples, which is exactly like the way you would talk, which would make sense to me, and then he was a strong Christian and why those things about that, and how it changed

you... and in each case, you present an idea and then you tell—which is the five-paragraph format, but in narrative you have to keep the picture of him in details, like a story, and then through that scene you're going to be able to show us the things about him that affected you.

So what I would suggest is choosing something—like this one where you said 'he would count out how many cups of flour we needed' maybe it's a scene of cooking together—but more than just the one line. Like, "I go to get the flour. Grandpa says..." and that would be the dialogue. And then you'd have all the details—set us up—like how old were you—when did he cook for you—and you put us in that moment—the most important part is zoom in and it's like you expand time, you slow it down and expand this to give us all the details. Then after you've shown who he is, you can kinda bring forth all that he's done for you.

Mmmm—hmmm.

And you don't have to write three separate scenes, you can choose what is—because of the length—what thing can I show my grandfather doing that will give readers a glimpse—somebody like me who's never seen him before, just a glimpse of who he is. Like the way he would talk to you—like I wrote one about my dad and I used, um, "Nice shot, Pookah," because he called me Pookah or Pooh, right? So I used like—so sound like him—I think really hard about him, not like I remember exactly what he said when I hit the golf ball that time, but that's the kind of thing he would say?

Yeah.

The idea with this is creative non-fiction is, keep—the non-fiction part—is keep the center of your grandpa, who he is. It's really important, you know, that he comes across as who he is, but the creative part is if you don't remember what day of the week and you want to add those details to make it a more detailed piece—'it's 4:00 and it's just starting to snow'—you can create those to create a setting that's more compelling. Does that make sense?

Yeah.

Can you work on it while you are here?

I have to get my mom at work at 3, so...

Could you spend maybe even 10 minutes? And then I can come back and talk to you a little bit about it to get you going.

Yeah.

So try—picture him somewhere and then give me every detail that will put me there.

Part III: Feedback on her quick draft. (15 minutes later)

(I read.) Can you feel the difference?

Yeah. (Laughs)

Oh my word. This is a beautiful opening moment. I'm right there—I'm watching the trees sway—and I'm seeing you and Grampy and you're 'kiddo' and his shiny head, right?—so as soon as I see all of that I'm in the moment and you don't have to tell me how important he is—all of this of who he is—he's right there making cookies with you. Now the tricky part is going to be you've got a great opening scene and you want to figure out what parts of this that you still really want to tell other things about him. And make it not all tell from here, and you can do a transition of either, um, 'we baked every Sunday for how many years' or we –you know what I mean? You want to do a fast-forward through time from here to bigger ideas about him. That he made you independent. Right?

Mmmm-hmmmm.

I feel like there's more you have to say about him if you take it from this direction and it may not even come from here—as much from your first draft—but from running off of here to if I were sitting beside you at Starbucks and we were talking about Grandpas, what would you want me to know? And thinking about—(holding her first draft) this one reads like your audience is a serious group of admissions people, right?

Yes.

This one reads (holding her second draft)—like you're sitting down beside your best friend in your pajamas talking about your Grandpa: that's the voice you want. This one reads like a really good writer.

So, do you know what to do next?

Yes.

Are you coming back next week? Because I'd love to look at another draft—and save them both, so we can keep looking at them. Good start!

Thank you.