

## **Resisting Commonality on The Common Application**

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### **Introduction**

#### Overview

This unit will provide students the skills that they need to focus on the task of writing a piece of creative nonfiction for a college application. They will work with decoding and analysis to breakdown the language of the provided college application prompts from The Common App.<sup>1</sup> They will use their annotations to determine a purpose for writing and select appropriate pieces from previously generated essays and to create new pieces of creative nonfiction. Students will read and analyze different examples of strong college admissions essays as a model for what their essay should contain. Additionally, they will read other examples of personal narrative for common characteristics of the genre. Students will then work to discover their own writing style and voice to portray an accurate picture of who they are to the colleges. At the completion of this unit, the students will produce three practice pieces of creative nonfiction that could potentially be used in completing the college application process.

#### Rationale

Common Core Standards and the Common Application. Everything in education is geared toward making a uniform commonality among American youth. So much so, that most students are so well-trained by the standards that they lack style, voice, and an understanding of their own strengths as a writer. In all their years of non-fiction “reporting” and analysis, students are stifled in every sense of creativity that might make them anything less than common. As an educational system, we are encouraging students to meet the standard rather than become the standard. Following high school, the students are then shoved into the adult world and are asked to sing their own praises and highlight their strengths in the application process: something they have never been trained to do.

Regardless of whether a student is applying for a job or a form of higher education, students lack the basic skills needed to set them apart from the rest of the pack. They are limited in their ability to display unique, individual skills in a world of commonality. This is not because they lack any exceptional skills; it is because for years we have told them to shove them aside because they have no place in “this particular assignment.” Then comes the time when they are expected to dig into the back of their brains and uncover the wonders of their skills in creative nonfiction: the college application process. Students who have spent the past twelve years responding to rubrics, prompts, and guided

questions are now asked to freely explore and explain a life obstacle which clearly outlines the positive characteristics of their whole person. This poses many problems for students learning under the requirements of standards-based education. This single piece of writing is used to distinguish them as a person, yet many students fail to accurately highlight their writing skills and personality traits. The students are provided with limited guidelines, no rubric, and limited understanding of what they are expected to produce.

In recent years, over 700 colleges have converted their application process to The Common App, making for 28% of the four-year college applications' process. The schools that are not subscribed to the Common App often use subtle variations of the prompts used through this site. As a result, these prompts serve as the vast majority of the college-application process.<sup>2</sup> This site conveniently compiles a generic, electronic student profile which is then pushed out to all selected, subscribing colleges. One of the most convenient aspects of this site is that they release, months in advance, the prompts that will be used for the college application essay in the upcoming school year. Despite the ready availability and convenient accessibility, most students still sit on these essays until the last minute and produce less-than-impressive pieces of writing that barely highlight any real piece of their personal self.

Why do students struggle so much with this writing piece? Because they lack the training and skills needed to respond to the prompt. They do not know how to write about themselves. They have limited experience in nonfiction, limited experience in writing in their own style and voice, and little to no experience in creative nonfiction. They lack the focus needed to select a specific topic in a broad prompt. Many do not even know how to decode what the prompt is asking them to do or the purpose of the essay. Without a rubric and a clearly defined set of rules, students are lost and confused. There is a gap between what we are teaching and what we are expecting them to produce. These students are strong writers and, for the most part, effective problem solvers, but this essay still sets them in a panic. If students were to have the skills to produce a narrative, the ability to decode the prompt, and experience in this style of writing, the college application process might be a little smoother for our students.

Other than just for the college application, narrative writing and creative nonfiction is a genre which these students will encounter for the rest of their lives. It is a style of writing which they consume and produce in mass quantities via social media, Buzz Feed, YouTube, essentially every media-based site they are accessing and creating has an element of creative nonfiction and personal narrative. The students are familiar with the genre in this sense. If you asked a student to write a Tweet about how they are feeling today, they would have it created and pushed out to their followers in a matter of minutes. So we, as teachers, are doing something wrong. This unit will help students draw on their skills as social media users online in order to ensure that their intended meaning is clearly conveyed to their online audience; just as they will ensure clarity in meaning on formal writing tasks.

## Background

In my English 11 Honors course, our curriculum of American Literature is devoted to US Seminal documents and historical fiction; there is nothing in-between. In regards to what they write, students are continuously writing analysis of texts and argumentative papers; however, their ability to record true-to-life information is never addressed. In fact, the only potential nonfiction writing piece is a narrative essay that must be literary based and persuasive in nature-- a myriad of genres that is confusing to explain and even more confusing to produce. A typical example is a narrative based on Arthur Miller's play "The Crucible." Students assume the role of a character from the play and write an a narrative-style story arguing for the guilt or innocence of one of the primary characters. This is the only required piece of narrative writing for the whole school year. In fact, the students are only expected to produce one Narrative for each year, and typically these are based on responses to literature. They have limited experience working with the genre in a classroom setting and often reach the conclusion that Narrative writing and personal essays have no place in the classroom. The lack of experience is evident when grading "The Crucible" persuasive narratives; the students write it the same way they write every other piece. They are unable to translate emotions into words, their tone is inconsistent, they lack necessary transitions to move between events, and the overall purpose of the piece becomes muddled. They do not understand what is required in Narrative writing or even what is expected. In order to address this problem, the essays assigned through this unit will provide a more concise prompt to focus directly on the singular structure of a narrative piece of writing, allowing for greater mastery of the skill. This will ensure a focus which is more directly aligned with the expectations of the Common Core Standards for grade 11 in addition to providing the students with sample pieces to be used for college applications.

This unit focuses on developing an understanding of self and expressing one's unique, individual qualities. The purpose of my unit is to help prepare students for college essays and job interviews. So often, students are provided with critical feedback of their writing; however, they very rarely are able to explain what they did well, why it was done well, and what makes their work significant. Essays are marked with a grade: an arbitrary letter which does little to distinguish areas of strength, weakness, or growth. This can be an issue when applying for college, interviewing for a job, or even working with any type of client. This unit is about reflecting on oneself and experiences that make them special. Throughout the unit, students will learn about style and voice. They will study their own writing style and explore the unique experiences that have helped them become the person they are today. Students will also be expected to analyze the language in a writing prompt to decode the exact expectations. By the end of this unit, students will be able to recount, in great detail, specific moments in their life that contributed to their current understanding of self and clearly explain the impact of these moments in an effort to separate themselves from their peers. Ultimately, students will be producing pieces of

writing that represent a clear representation of who they are. Seeing as how these students are only Juniors in high school, they can either choose to use these essays in applying for college, as practice for writing with the genre, or just as sample pieces to guide them in the future. Regardless, students will gain the skills to generate effective Narratives and, hopefully, will not be as intimidated by the college application process in their Senior year.

This unit will take place during our fourth unit of study in the course, titled “A Troubled Young Nation.” This unit, assigned by the district, explores a difficult time in American history where individuals worked to ensure progress for themselves as well as their country. We read excerpts of slave narratives to gain understanding of the historical content as well as the personal struggle of people of color as they fought for their freedom. We read short stories with a feminist lens to explore the discontent of many women at the turn of the 20th century as they, too, battled for their freedom. As a culminating piece to conclude the time period and tie the themes together, we read the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. This novel tells the story of Janie, a young black girl living in the 1930s, struggling to understand her place in the world. Her grandmother, a former slave, instills a set of values on Janie with which she does not connect personally. In a flashback format, Janie tells her life story of abuse, marriage, love, and freedom to a friend. While the novel is not creative nonfiction, it takes the form of a woman who is recounting on her life experiences and how they built her into the person she is today. As a class, we discuss how Janie does not explain every life experience in her story; she selects specific moments that were the greatest contributors in building her to the strong, confident, single woman she has finally grown to be. This sparks a conversation of author’s purpose and why authors (or in this case, narrators) opt to include one detail over another.

My goal for this unit is for the students to produce three short Personal Essays, which will help them on their college applications the next year. Though the Common Application does have a word limit to the site, students will not be provided with this requirement in my class. The purpose of this unit is to have students produce model pieces which could serve as practice or which could be modified when applying to colleges the next year. Essentially, we are not writing the college essay, but instead determining a purpose for writing and mastering the skill of writing a Personal Narrative. Students will complete two lessons on evaluating the prompts and sample essays in preparation for completing their own essays. The final products will be titled “How it Feels to be \_ Me,” “The Declaration of MY Independence,” and a third essay of their choice.

### Student Population

This unit is for 11th grade Honors students at a Vocational High School. Historically, Hodgson Vo-Tech is not a college preparatory school. Our general population has always

been greatly focused on the career side of our career and college readiness programs. However, recent years have brought a shift of undergraduate interest; particularly, as a result of the state requirement of the SAT as the state assessment.

Honors is the highest level English available to students at Hodgson Vo-Tech; we do not offer AP courses. My honors courses offer a wide diversity of students with varying skill-sets, many of whom have above a 4.0 GPA. The problem is that few of these students have ever had to compete academically with students outside of Hodgson Vo-tech. This provides a false sense of academic security and confusion when SAT scores and college acceptance letters are released. Our students have worked very hard over the past few years, but they are being matched against students who have been working their whole lives to prepare for college. These students struggle with college applications. None of them have private SAT tutors. Only a handful of them take the SATs more than once. Many are the first in their family to attend college and do not have the parental guidance to provide personal assistance in the application process. Few ever attend college tours. Many of them cannot afford the cost of college applications. How can I help them shine in such a competitive system?

I do not push my students toward college nor am I a firm advocate for the current standardized systems used to evaluate college acceptance. However, I am realistic in the sense that I understand that our students are falling short in skills and the ability to meet the expectations of the college application process. It is my job to help the students display a real picture of their academic ability so that colleges have a clear understanding of their potential. As it stands, our students compete against other high school students in sports and for part-time jobs but never academically. Many of them do not even understand that they are falling short in these areas because their grades reflect positive performance. As a result, this information needs to be a part of the curriculum. The students need to see where they are lacking in a classroom setting, with teacher guidance, using measurement systems that they understand. They need to be able to learn the writing skills, learn the drafting skills, and do these things under the guidance of a teacher.

As Seniors, many of my former students come back to me to ask for assistance writing their college essay. I find myself teaching students how to decode a prompt and produce a narrative on my lunch period. I get emails of panic on Friday nights as students stare at the computer screen, devoting hours of precious time to completing this essay, only to produce tears and frustration. And when the January college application deadline arrives, I am in overdrive providing coaching sessions to students who have been staring at a blank screen unable to successfully write for months. Why are we not devoting class time to this? If the students need to know it, and I am going to have to teach it to them anyway, why is it not a required part of our curriculum? I am entirely willing to aid students in the writing process. We conference in person, we collaborate on Google Docs; the students are receptive and willing to devote the time to produce the results.

This tells me that it is not a lack of willpower that is preventing students from successfully completing this assignment; but a lack of basic skill to direct them in the process. And I worry about the students who do not have a teacher to mentor them through the process, or who are too shy to request help outside of the classroom. I am concerned that these students, these perceptive, dedicated individuals, are not providing colleges with an accurate picture of their skillset and their person.

In starting this unit in the Spring of 2017, I piloted a few narrative essays in my English 11 Honors class just to practice on my own, assess students' skillsets, and provide exposure to the genre. This year, I have had three students approach me already to inform me that they will be using the Personal Narratives we generated in class the previous year in their college application. As an educator, this confirmed the need for a Curriculum Unit like this one and justified the time required to develop the skill of narrative writing.

## **Objectives**

In this unit, students will work with decoding and analysis to breakdown the language of the provided college application prompts from The Common App. They will use their annotations to determine a purpose for writing and select appropriate pieces from previously generated essays and to create new pieces of creative nonfiction. They will read and analyze different examples of strong college admissions essays as a model for what their essay should contain. Additionally, they will read other examples of personal narrative for common characteristics. Students will then work to discover their own writing style and voice to portray an accurate picture of who they are to the colleges. At the completion of this unit, the students will produce several practice pieces of creative nonfiction that could potentially be used in completing the college application process. By the end of this unit: students will be able to decode the expectations of a writing prompt to determine a purpose for writing in response to it; students will be able to analyze and explain an author's stylistic (including rhetorical devices, diction, tone) and structural choices in a piece of literature; students will be able to determine and defend an author's purpose; and lastly, students will be able to generate pieces of creative nonfiction in the form of a Personal Narrative Essay.

## **Content**

After determining the framework of the desired outcome of my unit, I had to understand what was necessary to reach my desired outcome of increased success on the Common Application essays. To achieve this information, I had to research several main elements of the Common Application: 1. Understanding of prompt requirements, 2. Evaluation standards, 3. Teaching strategies to increase success. In my research of the history of the Common Application, I located an article by Scott Anderson (2017) the *Huffington Post* titled "The Common App Essay Prompts are Changing; Here's Why it Doesn't Matter"<sup>3</sup>.

This article addressed the new prompts to be released for the 2017-2018 application season. In 2013, the Common Application website released “a brand new set of essay prompts for the first time in years,”<sup>4</sup> which caused concern for many students who had grown accustomed to the standard set of prompts. Now, the prompts will be changing again, but these changes will not cause as much of a disruption as the ones made in 2013. The article served to explain the changes made to the prompts themselves were minor and should not be cause for concern for students. The original prompts were well-received by 91% of applicants as effective determiners for applicant readiness and character traits, so only minor changes would be made to the new set of prompts.<sup>5</sup> In February of 2017, new versions of these prompts were released with modified language and increased options. These new prompts are as follows:

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story. [No change]
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience? [Revised]
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome? [Revised]
4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution. [No change]
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others. [Revised]
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more? [New]
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.[New]<sup>6</sup>

One of the primary changes to these prompts was the change of the word “failure” to “challenges and setbacks” (in prompt number two) to increase student understanding of the prompt guidelines. The changing of the connotation of the phrasing in this prompt is to prevent students from “freezing” upon seeing the word “failure” and struggling to

gauge what the college might deem as a “suitable” failure for displaying character growth. The other prompt revisions were not as significant; however, there were two new prompts added for this year’s applicants. The addition of prompt six invites students to explore anything that evokes their passion or curiosity- opening a pathway to endless creative outlets from sports, to books, to music, to sculpture. The goal of this prompt is that, as passionate individuals, applicants will find greater ease in discussing something outside of the classroom with which they strongly connect. The final addition of prompt seven is an “explicit invitation to write an essay on a topic of your choice, a change that might have some [students] celebrating the freedom to write anything [they] want.”<sup>7</sup> Understanding the purpose of the changes made to these prompts is essential in understanding the motivation behind presenting students with these specific prompts over the endless other possibilities. As a class, we will take time to review these changes.

The next step in the research process was growing to understand not just the content of the prompts but also the instructions guiding each piece of writing. According to Scott Anderson of *Huffington Post* the instructions of the prompt are of equal import as the prompts themselves; however, they often go overlooked. The directions of the essay state:

What do you want the readers of your application to know about you apart from courses, grades, and test scores? Choose the option that best helps you answer that question and write an essay of no more than 650 words, using the prompts to inspire and structure your response.<sup>8</sup>

The purpose of the instructions was evident: to allow the students to individually introduce themselves to the colleges. The smaller question of writing ability and academic merit is a small portion of the essay expectations because both of these things are addressed quantitatively through SAT scores and GPA, as indicated by “apart from courses, grades, and test scores.” These prompts are urging students to seize the opportunity to present themselves as how they are rather than as how they appear, an opportunity that one might think that many students be thrilled to take up. The language of the instructions continues to reinforce the intimation of the prompt by suggesting students “choose the option that best helps you answer that question” and “using the prompts to inspire and structure your response”. The non-threatening wording used should encourage students to approach this process without fear; however, the students are still unable to complete this task without feeling overwhelming pressure and doubting the purity of the prompt requirements and instructions.

### Teaching Strategies

After I managed to figure out what the prompts were asking, I had to determine how I was going to eliminate the pressure and fear associated with college admission essays and determine a way to ensure increased student success. As an educator, I know what I am



looking for when I grade an essay based on the prompt requirements, rubric language, and previous student examples. I combine all of this information as my basis for grading each writing piece. This is a similar process to how college admission counselors select which students to allow into their school; however, the students are provided with any rubric. So begs the question: what *exactly* are colleges looking for in these essays? The next step to my research was to find this information of “rubric-style” requirements or guidelines for the essay and present these to my students as guidance for generating their essays.

In my research, I found an article in *The New York Times* about some Do’s and Don’ts of admission essays from admission counselor, Rachel Toor, titled “How to Conquer the Admissions Essay.” This article indicates ten things that students should avoid on the Common App Essay.<sup>9</sup> These could be beneficial as a handout for the students to help them understand what *not* to do on the essay. The next step was to determine what they *should* do on the essay. This article emphasized the need for students to stand out in a crowd; to write about something that makes an admissions counselor say “hey, you have to read what this kid wrote.” The admission essays are often boring and predictable with stacks of students declaring “baseball=life” and “debate=life”. This is all well and good but it does not stand out or tell the reader about *who* that student is as a person; it is more a reflection of what they like. One tip that is presented is to “choose a topic that you *want* to write about. If the subject doesn’t matter to you- it won’t matter to the reader”.<sup>10</sup> It is important for the applicant to remember that the purpose of this essay is different than many of the others they have produced for school. This essay isn’t for the sake of showcasing skills or getting a good grade but for showcasing who you are as an individual. Rachel Toor suggests that the applicants “reveal yourself to your reader,” “make it personal-be honest, and “say the hardest thing you can.” Lastly, students should not be bragging about their achievements- that is done through other formats. It is more about the process of reaching those achievements: the struggle, the failure, the personal hardships to reaching one’s goal.

At the completion of this portion of my research, it became clear that my job was to help the students understand the prompt, lessen the fear in selecting and approaching a topic, and to assist students in how to write effective personal narratives. The next step was to determine how to approach this with my students and how to incorporate it into an already packed district curriculum schedule. My method was to make this unit work as an enhancement to an already created unit. It would serve as an additional few weeks to approach the topic of creative nonfiction writing.

The second cause for concern was how to incorporate new material in an already overwhelming district curriculum. As it stands, my honors students are already doing five units in 18 weeks with 4 books, historical readings, short stories, and 4 essays and a research paper. I already have had to modify the pacing to get the students caught up with where they need to be in an Honors course, and now I am considering adding material

that is not assigned in the curriculum. So, I opted to incorporate this unit as a smaller subset of a unit already taught in my course. This college narrative unit would occur during “Unit 4: A Troubled Young Nation,” alongside feminist short stories, slave narratives, and the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. Each of these pieces serves to identify an element of human experience from the late 19th to early 20th century. The feminist pieces include “Desiree’s Baby” and “A Pair of Silk Stockings” by Kate Chopin. These two pieces of fiction identify the societal struggle of women to determine an identity in an otherwise patriarchal culture. The narrative pieces— excerpts from “Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass” and “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July”—indicate a similar societal struggle as people of color work to find a voice and a place in American society. Lastly, the culminating piece of the unit is *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. This novel narrates the life of Janie, a woman of color, as she works to find her place in 1930s society. She follows the advice of her grandmother, the advice of the people in the town, the advice of the men she loves, but ultimately learns that the best path her life could take is one she creates for herself. In this story, Janie finally comes of age as a woman in her late thirties to finally understand who she is as a person, what she wants out of life, and how her experiences have led to her personal growth. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, students will explore these elements of Janie’s life and assess how these events have impacted her. We will view the novel as the “college essay” that dictates Janie’s experience and provides the reader insight into her life path.

Despite the breakdown of specific prompts for guiding applicants, there is still so much freedom of choice in the application; particularly through the inclusion of the open-ended prompt. In recognizing this, I wanted to help students determine whether they should write something new or select from something they previously wrote. Additionally, I desired to help students prepare some creative assignments that could serve in preparation for the creative approach to Prompt #7 (topic of choice). In this option, I desired to select and modify some of the pieces that we already wrote throughout previous novel units and explain how those pieces meet the parameters of the prompt instructions. I found two pieces that would meet this criteria “How It Feels to be \_\_\_ Me” and “Declaration of MY Independence”. Both of these writings presented responses that are formatted as creative personal narratives, reveal a snapshot of the student’s passions, and present college level writing ability.

In searching, I found an article by Alice Kleeman, a college advisor, which divides the approach for each prompt into three categories: Academic, Extracurricular, and Personal.<sup>11</sup> She presents several suggestions for analyzing the content of the prompts, drawing out keywords, and determining a direction by asking several questions for each prompt. I decided that presenting the elements of Kleeman’s article would be well-suited as a student activity rather than as a direct-instruction style lesson. My idea was to have the students conduct a close reading of the prompts and draw out “keywords” for each. I would then present my students with a list of “yes” or “no” questions pertaining to each

topic to determine whether they would prefer to take an Academic, Personal, or Extracurricular approach to their essay.

One thing I have learned from teaching is that you can explain essay requirements to students until your face turns blue, but they are still not going to understand what you are looking for until they see a sample. One of the key elements to this unit is analyzing sample essays. Students are going to look at their own essays in “How it Feels to be \_ Me” and “Declaration of MY Independence” to determine what requirements these pieces do and do not meet for the college essays. These are great for the “choose your own topic” option, but they are not very helpful for the others. I am also going to provide them with sample college essays that meet the more outlined requirements of the first six prompts. One such sample essay was praised by *Business Insider* for granting a student admission into seven Ivy League schools.<sup>12</sup> Students will read this essay and generate a profile on the student based on what they read. They will analyze what he did well and how he approached the topic in a way that was unique and personalized.

## **Classroom Activities**

### Lesson 1: Prompt Close Reading and Annotations

The first set of lessons in this unit involve examining the prompts for this year’s Common Application essays and identifying the meaning behind them. In our class, we refer to this process as “unpacking the prompt.” This is necessary for the students to understand the direction, expectations, and desired outcome for the particular assignment. For this portion, the students will be provided with a handout of this year’s essay prompts. For each prompt, the students will need to perform a close reading with annotations. This is a skill with which they have been working all year. Students will underline important information, write notes in the margins, write a question mark (“?”) beside anything that is confusing to them, and circle key words. This ensures that the students are clearly reading every word of the prompt. Below each of the seven provided prompts, students will need to paraphrase, in their own words, what the prompt is asking for. When they have completed their paraphrasing, they will then work with a shoulder-partner (the person next to them) to discuss the requirements of each of the prompts and come to a common understanding. They will also need to pull out a set of “key words” identified in each of the prompts. Many students struggle with this skill as they don’t really understand the concept of “key words.” I always explain it as “what would you type into Google in order to search for this prompt” or “what ‘key words’ or ‘hashtags’ would you use for this prompt. This typically helps to guide students in the right direction for the expectations of the term. As a class, we will then work to “unpack” the meaning of each of the prompts to reach a common understanding of what needs to be done for each of them. They will collaborate to record our findings into a graphic organizer on a Google Docs, for future access. This Google Doc will include a section with the direct quotation of the prompt, the classroom paraphrase, and a place for keywords. It will be

posted on the class website for students to access for this year's assignments as well as for next year's application process.

At the completion of this lesson, students will gain knowledge of the prompt guidelines and produce a document which breaks down the specific requirements for each prompt. Students will have electronic access to this document saved in their Google Drive to make it easily accessible during their senior year. In addition, students will have developed skills in annotation, close reading, prompt analysis, and decoding expectations. They will apply the skills mastered in this lesson in each of their future related lessons as well as in the college application process.

## Lesson 2: Sample Essay Evaluation

As a subset activity to unpacking the prompts, the students will explore several sample college essays as Mentor Texts for the prompts themselves. In doing this, we will approach the texts as we have with every other piece in the course: with close reading and annotation. One of the skills that students develop the most in eleventh grade ELA is the ability to analyze the effectiveness of an argument. The SAT essay prompt requires mastery of this skill as does the Delaware Component V State Assessment.<sup>13</sup> As a result, students spend a large portion of class, analyzing persuasive essays and the strategies used to persuade and direct the audience. Students indicate effective diction to convey a specific tone, they look at logos (logic) to determine the factual information that is presented in the argument, they identify ethos (ethics) to determine the credibility of the speaker, and the pathos (emotion) used to connect with the audience. Students will take these skills used in persuasive units and apply them in their analysis of the sample Common App Essays. Although the all the sample essays are structured as narrative, their underlying purpose still remains the same: to persuade their audience (the admissions team) to accept them into their school. As a result, we will approach them using a similar process. Students will read the texts and determine the approach used in each of the essays. They will indicate whether they felt a personal connection to the author and whether or not they felt a strong understanding of who the author is as an individual

They will respond to the following questions for each of the two sample essays:

1. Summarize the Sample essay.
2. What techniques did the applicant use to build a personal connection with his audience?
3. Was vivid imagery helped you connect to the experience?
4. What is the structure of this essay? What choices does the author make to transition from one idea to the next?
5. What word-choices were most effective in this essay?
6. What did you learn about this applicant based off of this essay alone? Explain.

7. If this essay were in a pile of other essays, would it stand out to you as unique? If yes, explain why. If no, explain why.
8. Which prompt does this essay seem to respond to?
9. Did the applicant tightly respond to all of the elements of the prompt? If not, what is he/she missing?

Students will be provided with two sample essays. The first essay was published in *Business Insider* as a model essay, seeing as how it granted the applicant acceptance to many schools.<sup>14</sup> The *Business Insider* article explores an essay written by high school Senior, Luke Kenworthy, which helped to grant him admission into seven different Ivy League schools. After submitting an essay to other schools for early decision and receiving rejection letters, Kenworthy opted to change his essay topic to something more personal from his childhood. He wrote about struggling to break free from the bondage of an estranged parent. His story is dark and raw and emotional in a way that makes the reader feel the pain Kenworthy felt when he discovered that his mother had been badly beaten by her boyfriend, the disconnect he feels with his emotions as he attempts to decode all of his emotions, and the transition he makes from confusion to understanding of self. This essay begins with a story of a mother and concludes with a story of a boy who found strength in his mother's faults. Students will conduct a close reading and annotate the essay for persuasive and literary strategies. They will respond to the prompted questions to determine the effectiveness of this essay. Following their analysis, we will read the *Business Insider* article explaining the success of Luke Kenworthy's essay. This will serve to demonstrate the importance of the college essay as well as an understanding of what colleges are looking for.

The second sample essay will come from the Johns Hopkins University Admissions website<sup>15</sup>. On this website, Johns Hopkins University posted five sample college admission essays from the 2021 graduating class. Students will select one of the five essays they would like to work with for this assignment. They will read and annotate the essay electronically on Google Docs then respond to the related questions. Following their examination and evaluation of the text, students will return to the website to view feedback directly from the University. On the site, following each essay is a toggle tool titled "Admissions Committee Comments." This tool allows students to view the rationale behind why this essay was viewed as exceptional.

The purpose of this lesson is to provide insight into the world of the college admissions process. In this activity, students are analyzing the essays through the lens of a College Admissions Officer. As a result, they are able to internalize the process as well as decipher between the qualities of strong essays. At the completion of this essay, students will gain perspective of what is necessary to stand out to a college admissions officer. These skills, in addition to the skills learned in "Lesson 1: Prompt Close Reading and Annotations" will be applied in the next three lessons as students begin to generate their own Personal Narrative to be used in the college application process.

### Lesson 3: “How it Feels to Be \_ Me” Personal Essay

This lesson will be the first in a series of three lessons serving to produce three Personal Narrative pieces. At the completion of these lessons, students will have a sampling of three different pieces to serve as practice for future college application essays or to serve as the application essay itself. The first of these Personal Narratives will be titled “How it Feels to Be \_ Me.” The Mentor Texts for this lesson include the novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston, and the personal essay, “How it Feels to Be Colored Me,” also by Hurston.

At this point in the unit, the students will have concluded their reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Students will apply their knowledge of the book to approach Janie’s perspective through the same analytical lens as used in the previous lesson (Lesson 2: Sample Essay Evaluation). Students will respond to the questions from the previous lesson to evaluate the effectiveness of the narrator’s connection with the audience. They will explore the way that she used diction (word choice), ethos, pathos, logos, transitioning, structure, and other choices to convey her story. This will serve as a small warm up piece to prepare them for the next portion of the lesson.

Janie’s experiences in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are loosely based on the life of the author, Zora Neale Hurston. In addition to the novel, Hurston penned an essay entitled “How it Feels to Be Colored Me,” which explored a nonfiction account of some of her own experiences as they connect to Janie.<sup>16</sup> This piece is interesting because it transitions the fictional account of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* into a nonfictional experience for Zora Neale Hurston. In this essay, Hurston describes the moment she first felt “colored”. How this idea had never been a way she identified for her whole life because the color of her skin was just the color of her skin rather than a cultural and physical identifier as it is commonly used in American society. She explains the first moment that someone made her “feel colored” in a way that made her self-conscious of the way others saw her. This defining moment in her life served as a coming of age moment where she began to understand the way that she as a “woman of color” was viewed in the world. The essay provides insight into how society labels and stereotypes “women of color” in addition to the way that Hurston finds her own identity in the term. This creative piece of nonfiction is heavily filled with metaphor in explaining the way that it feels to be viewed as “colored”. Following a reading of this piece, students will determine a single word or idea that serves as their own representation of self. They will use this word/idea to complete the phrase “How it Feels to Be \_ Me.” Students will use this phrase as the title for their second piece of creative nonfiction, as a possible college essay. The essay will mimic the style of Hurston’s essay by presenting metaphor and analogy as support for their identifying term.

Students will be provided sample student essays from previous years as mentor texts to model for generating their work. In the past, students have opted to explore the idea of “How it Feels to Be Incompletely Me” and “How it Feels to Be Feminist Me”. In “How it Feels to Be Incompletely Me” the student acknowledges a recent void in her life following the divorce of her parents. She narrates the way the divorce has served to identify the past few years of her life, leaving her family and her life expectations “incomplete”. This example meets the criteria of the Common App essay prompt through exploring a single moment in the author’s life which she believes is the greatest influencer in shaping her current self. This essay is raw, conflicted, and allows the reader great insight into the author’s personal struggle. The second essay, “How it Feels to Be Feminist Me” takes a different approach to self-identification (Appendix C). In this sample essay, the student mirrors the likeness of Hurston’s essay by embracing a character trait which is regularly viewed as negative by many areas of society. In this essay, the author declares that she is proud of her identity as both a female and a feminist. She works to challenge the expectations of what these terms often assume, and re-define their meaning as they apply to her. Additionally, she narrates through some times in her life when she struggled to embrace the femininity which she now holds so dear. As a college admissions essay, this piece would allow the admissions officers to gain insight into the many life struggles that the author has endured prior to embracing her full potential. The declarative tone exudes confidence and demonstrates an extraordinary self-assurance. The format, content, and tone of this essay ensures that the admissions officer will not forget this applicant’s experience. Students will read both of these mentor texts and evaluate what they learned about the authors based on the pieces.

#### Lesson 4: “Declaration of MY Independence” Essay Revision

As part of a previous unit, students generated a “Declaration of MY Independence.” This is their first exposure to this type of writing in this course. This document is a piece of creative nonfiction that explores personal struggles with grievances and potential solutions. The format of this document is modeled off of the structure of the Declaration of Independence. Students are to select something they are struggling with, explain why they are struggling, what they have done up until this point, and how they can break free of this problem. This writing piece serves to indicate a struggle and show potential growth. For some students, their final product indicated great personal reflection and strength. This could be a potential college essay because it shows variety of writing style, voice, and personal growth. In a separate lesson for this unit, students can go back through their Declaration and determine whether or not this piece tells enough about who they are as a person. They will then make changes to make it better portray insight into their lives. They can make modifications to make the piece more personalized and better suited for the personal narrative style.

#### Lesson 5: Choice Writing Prompt

The third piece of writing for this unit will utilize the resource materials identified in the Alice Kleeman article, “Advice for Students on Topics for the New Common App Essays.”<sup>17</sup> Students will be generating a personal essay based on the Common App essay of their choice. In her article, Kleeman suggests that students approach each topic through three different perspectives: Academic, Extracurricular, and Personal. Students will access the Google Doc from the start of the unit which outlined the requirements of each of the prompts. They will use this to direct their writing process. In addition to the class-generated Google Doc, students will use the Kleeman article to indicate some helpful questions that might be used to guide their brainstorming process. They will first select a topic which interests them the most. Then look at the three subtopics outlined in Kleeman’s article: Academic, Extracurricular, and Personal.<sup>18</sup> They will first determine which subtopic they are most interested in approaching the essay prompt from. Doing so will allow them to focus on specific life events that might best direct them to answer the prompt. They will then be asked to brainstorm which topic they would best like to write about.

For this assignment, students will be permitted to write about the same life event/topic from the previous two essays, if they so choose; however, they will be encouraged to start with the same topic but with fresh language. This will allow them to find fresh wording and a different perspective for the same topic. Students will then be on their own to write a personal essay to meet the requirements of the writing prompt. Unlike the two previous essays, students will not be provided with additional resources to complete this assignment. They will use the skills they have practiced throughout the unit and the materials they have gathered, to guide their responses in this writing assignment.

### Final Product

At the completion of English 11 Honors, students will have three writing pieces which could be used in the college admissions process. They will understand the process of “unpacking” a prompt, determining a purpose for writing, establishing what makes an effective piece of writing and apply these skills in writing a culminating essay on their own with only the Common Application Essay prompt guidelines to assist them. This will serve as practice for their Senior year, when they will be expected to produce a similar essay for the college admissions process. At that time, students may use the resources prepared in class, the examples presented, the products they created or even just the skills that they have mastered to produce a Personal Narrative capable of competing against the admissions essays of even the most rigorous college preparatory students.

### Resources

Appendix A  
*Common Core State Standards*



Though the call for writing pieces of creative nonfiction or drafting college essays is not directly required via the Common Core State Standards, the skills learned through these units are identified as a need. The CCSS skills addressed in this unit include: Writing standards 11-12.3-5 and Reading Standards 11-12.4 and 11-12.5. The CCSS Writing Standards require that students be able to produce a narrative which effectively portrays real or imagined experiences in ways which are enhanced through technique, well-chosen detailed, and well-structured event sequences. In addition, these standards state that student writing should be clear, coherent, and developed. The students will be demonstrating mastery of each of these writing skills in all three of their assigned writing pieces for this unit.

The CCSS Reading Standards addressed in this unit define a need for students to analyze author's choices in relating narrative elements, determine the meaning of unknown words and phrases (including figurative language), and analyze author's choices in structure. Throughout this unit, students will be viewing sample essays and narratives and analyzing the author's choices in composing these narratives. They will then use these observed skills to apply in their own writing by making appropriate stylistic and structural choices to enhance the effectiveness of their writing. As a result, students will work to master the still of writing creative nonfiction in an effort to produce writing which will prove memorable in the college admissions process.

Anderson, Scott. "The Common App Essay Prompts are Changing; Here's Why it Doesn't Matter." *Huffington Post*, February 7, 2017. Accessed December 16, 2017. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-common-app-essay-prompts-are-changing-heres-why\\_us\\_589a3fd5e4b0985224db5b3a](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-common-app-essay-prompts-are-changing-heres-why_us_589a3fd5e4b0985224db5b3a).

This article breaks down the changes made to the 2017-2018 Common Application Essay Prompts. In this article, Anderson reassures his audience that the changes will be minimal and, hopefully, more understandable for the college applicants. Some of the language was changed to make the expectation more precise and prompts were added to encourage more creativity and freedom. I used this article as a personal, teacher resource in my unit for understanding the current prompts and their expectations.

The Common Application, ed. "College is Ready for You." The Common Application. Last modified 2017. Accessed December 6, 2017. <http://www.commonapp.org/search-colleges>.

The Common Application is a website used by students to apply to colleges. Students will use this website as a resource throughout this unit to guide their understanding of the college admissions process.

"The Common Application Announces 2017-2018 Essay Prompts." The Common Application. Last modified February 6, 2017. Accessed December 16, 2017. <http://www.commonapp.org/whats-appening/application-updates/common-application-announces-2017-2018-essay-prompts>.

This website presents the document on which this entire unit was developed. The Common Application website is used in over 700 schools to provide a single, simple location for distributing college applications and essays to multiple colleges. The prompts presented on this website request students to write a Personal Narrative to allow the Admissions Officers insight into their personal lives. This document will be revisited several times over the course of the lesson. Students will annotate the prompts, "unpack" the meaning, and use these prompts to guide their own writing.

Delaware Department of Education, ed. "DPAS-II: Student Improvement Component for 2017-2018." Delaware Department of Education- Teacher & Leader Effectiveness Branch (TLEB). Last modified 2017.

<https://www.doe.k12.de.us/cms/lib/DE01922744/Centricity/Domain/375/2017-18%20Component%20V%20Policy%20Statement.pdf>.

This website contains the requirements of the Component V Delaware State Assessment. Each year of high school, students are asked to write a timed, in-class essay analyzing the effectiveness of an author's argumentative strategies.

Hurston, Zora Neale. "How It Feels to be Colored Me." 1928. In *Elements of Literature*, 898-907. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010.

<http://englishousness.weebly.com/uploads/4/1/9/0/41906519/unit-4---hurston-how-it-feels.pdf>.

This piece of Creative Nonfiction will serve as a Mentor Text in guiding students through writing Personal Narratives. Students will read Zora Neale Hurston's essay on her personal struggle to identify as "colored" in this world and the way that it positively impacted her as a person. Students will evaluate this text then use it as a model for generating their own essays.

Jackson, Abby. "Read the essay that got a high-school senior into 7 Ivy League schools." *Business Insider*. Last modified April 5, 2017. Accessed December 18, 2017.

<http://www.businessinsider.com/ivy-league-admissions-essay-2017-4>.

This article explores an essay written by high school Senior, Luke Kenworthy, which granted him admission into seven different Ivy League schools. After submitting an essay to other schools for early decision and receiving rejection letters, Kenworthy opted to change his essay topic to something more personal from his childhood. This resource is used to demonstrate the impact that the college essay can have on admissions counselors. Students will read this article to understand the background of Kenworthy's story,

in addition to reading his college admissions essay as a Mentor Text for the expectations of what to include on a college admissions essay.

Johns Hopkins University, ed. "Essays that Worked." Johns Hopkins University: Undergraduate Admissions. Last modified 2016. Accessed December 18, 2017. <https://apply.jhu.edu/application-process/essays-that-worked/>.

This website is a compilation of accepted application essays from Johns Hopkins University graduating class of 2021. There are five different essays sampled on the website. Following each essay is a toggle tool titled "Admissions Committee Comments." This tool allows students to view the rationale behind why this essay was viewed as exceptional. This website will be used during the "Sample Essay Evaluation" portion of the first classroom lesson. Students will use the sample essays as examples when composing their own essays. Students will read the selection with a close reading lens, annotate the piece for author's strategies, and respond to evaluative questions on the material.

Kleeman, Alice. "Advice for Students on Topics for the New Common App Essays." College Admission. Last modified February 15, 2013. Accessed December 16, 2017. <http://collegeadmissionbook.com/blog/advice-students-topics-new-common-app-essays>.

This article provides students with an approach to selecting their prompt option for the Common Application Essay. Additionally, it provides guiding questions for three different categories as they relate to the prompts: Academic, Extracurricular, and Personal. This helps students narrow down the selection process and guides them through pinpointing a specific topic of interest for their essay. This resource is used within "Lesson 5: Choice Writing Prompt."

Toor, Rachel. "How to Conquer the Admissions Essay." *The New York Times*, August 2, 2017. Accessed December 16, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/education/edlife/college-application-essay-admissions.html>.

This article provides many tips for producing an effective college application essay. This is not a resource that I will be providing the students; instead, I used it as a personal resource for bettering my understanding of the essay expectations. After reading this essay, I gained the information needed to provide tips to students in an effort to guide them through the writing process.

Notes

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- 1 The Common Application, ed., "College is Ready for You," The Common Application, last modified 2017, accessed December 6, 2017, <http://www.commonapp.org/search-colleges>.
  - 2 The Common Application, ed., "College is Ready for You," The Common Application, last modified 2017, accessed December 6, 2017, <http://www.commonapp.org/search-colleges>.
  - 3 Scott Anderson, "The Common App Essay Prompts are Changing; Here's Why it Doesn't Matter," *Huffington Post*, February 7, 2017, accessed December 16, 2017, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-common-app-essay-prompts-are-changing-heres-why\\_us\\_589a3fd5e4b0985224db5b3a](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-common-app-essay-prompts-are-changing-heres-why_us_589a3fd5e4b0985224db5b3a).
  - 4 Scott Anderson, "The Common App Essay Prompts are Changing; Here's Why it Doesn't Matter," *Huffington Post*, February 7, 2017, accessed December 16, 2017, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-common-app-essay-prompts-are-changing-heres-why\\_us\\_589a3fd5e4b0985224db5b3a](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-common-app-essay-prompts-are-changing-heres-why_us_589a3fd5e4b0985224db5b3a).
  - 5 Scott Anderson, "The Common App Essay Prompts are Changing; Here's Why it Doesn't Matter," *Huffington Post*, February 7, 2017, accessed December 16, 2017, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-common-app-essay-prompts-are-changing-heres-why\\_us\\_589a3fd5e4b0985224db5b3a](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-common-app-essay-prompts-are-changing-heres-why_us_589a3fd5e4b0985224db5b3a).
  - 6 "The Common Application Announces 2017-2018 Essay Prompts," The Common Application, last modified February 6, 2017, accessed December 16, 2017, <http://www.commonapp.org/whats-appening/application-updates/common-application-announces-2017-2018-essay-prompts>.
  - 7 Scott Anderson, "The Common App Essay Prompts are Changing; Here's Why it Doesn't Matter," *Huffington Post*, February 7, 2017, accessed December 16, 2017, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-common-app-essay-prompts-are-changing-heres-why\\_us\\_589a3fd5e4b0985224db5b3a](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-common-app-essay-prompts-are-changing-heres-why_us_589a3fd5e4b0985224db5b3a).
  - 8 "The Common Application Announces 2017-2018 Essay Prompts," The Common Application, last modified February 6, 2017, accessed December 16, 2017, <http://www.commonapp.org/whats-appening/application-updates/common-application-announces-2017-2018-essay-prompts>.
  - 9 Rachel Toor, "How to Conquer the Admissions Essay," *The New York Times*, August 2, 2017, [Page #], accessed December 16, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/education/edlife/college-application-essay-admissions.html>.
  - 10 Rachel Toor, "How to Conquer the Admissions Essay," *The New York Times*, August 2, 2017, [Page #], accessed December 16, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/education/edlife/college-application-essay-admissions.html>.
  - 11 Alice Kleeman, "Advice for Students on Topics for the New Common App Essays," *College Admission*, last modified February 15, 2013, accessed December 16, 2017, <http://collegeadmissionbook.com/blog/advice-students-topics-new-common-app-essays>.

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12 Abby Jackson, "Read the essay that got a high-school senior into 7 Ivy League schools," *Business Insider*, last modified April 5, 2017, accessed December 18, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/ivy-league-admissions-essay-2017-4>.

13 Delaware Department of Education, ed., "DPAS-II: Student Improvement Component for 2017-2018," Delaware Department of Education- Teacher & Leader Effectiveness Branch (TLEB), last modified 2017, <https://www.doe.k12.de.us/cms/lib/DE01922744/Centricity/Domain/375/2017-18%20Component%20V%20Policy%20Statement.pdf>.

14 Abby Jackson, "Read the essay that got a high-school senior into 7 Ivy League schools," *Business Insider*, last modified April 5, 2017, accessed December 18, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/ivy-league-admissions-essay-2017-4>.

15 Johns Hopkins University, ed., "Essays that Worked," Johns Hopkins University: Undergraduate Admissions, last modified 2016, accessed December 18, 2017, <https://apply.jhu.edu/application-process/essays-that-worked/>.

16 Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to be Colored Me," 1928, in *Elements of Literature* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), [898-909], <http://englishousness.weebly.com/uploads/4/1/9/0/41906519/unit-4---hurston-how-it-feels.pdf>.

17 Alice Kleeman, "Advice for Students on Topics for the New Common App Essays," College Admission, last modified February 15, 2013, accessed December 16, 2017, <http://collegeadmissionbook.com/blog/advice-students-topics-new-common-app-essays>.

18 Alice Kleeman, "Advice for Students on Topics for the New Common App Essays," College Admission, last modified February 15, 2013, accessed December 16, 2017, <http://collegeadmissionbook.com/blog/advice-students-topics-new-common-app-essays>.