

Admissions Essays: Making the Ordinary Extraordinary – Lesson Plan

Grade Level: 12

Suggested Duration: 1 hour or 1 class period

Target Audience: Students who need help identifying strengths and unique traits to showcase in the admissions essay

Video: “How I Got Here: Gabe”

§110.34. English Language Arts and Reading, English IV (One Credit)

(b) Knowledge and Skills

(13) Writing/Writing Process. Students use elements of the writing process (planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing) to compose text. Students are expected to:

(A) plan a first draft by selecting the correct genre for conveying the intended meaning to multiple audiences, determining appropriate topics through a range of strategies (e.g., discussion, background reading, personal interests, interviews), and developing a thesis or controlling idea;

(B) structure ideas in a sustained and persuasive way (e.g., using outlines, note taking, graphic organizers, lists) and develop drafts in timed and open-ended situations that include transitions and the rhetorical devices used to convey meaning.

In this video, we see that Gabe applies to and attends Rice University, a highly selective university. For many university admissions departments, student essays can be the key to standing out from a pool of similarly high-achieving applicants. In this lesson, students explore qualities or stories that set them apart from other applicants and could form the basis of their admissions essays.

Student Objective: Students will identify unique perspectives to showcase in response to an ApplyTexas or Common Application essay prompt.

Lesson Preparation: While preparing for this lesson with your students, make sure to watch the “How I Got Here: Gabe” video first. This video shows Gabe’s selectiveness in his college choice and how his career success is a direct result of his success in a school that met his academic needs.

Teacher Direction: Play the “How I Got Here: Gabe” video for the class or student.

Ask students to recall which universities Gabe was considering. Remind them that he narrowed his choices to four schools: Rice University, Southern Methodist University, Texas A&M, and the University of Tulsa.

Ask students to volunteer qualities that they think Gabe might have needed in order to be accepted to Rice. The list should include ideas like: strong high school grades, AP classes, recommendation letters, persistence with an extracurricular activity, community service, and a good college essay.

Project the following Rice Undergraduate Admissions Statistics onto the screen:

- Rice Undergraduate Admissions Statistics:
https://futureowls.rice.edu/futureowls/Freshman_Profile.asp

Possible Teacher Dialogue (directed to students):

Let's have a look at Rice's undergraduate admissions statistics. What stands out to you about the admission criteria?

Note that only 15% of the 18,236 students who applied are actually admitted. If there are only 2,784 spots available for incoming freshmen, what do you think those students had to do to set themselves apart from the rest? One way to make sure that the admissions office notices your application is to write a strong student essay about your unique perspective.

Now, don't panic—not every 16- or 17-year old has a story about a life-changing event. Today, we're seeing how we can take regular events in your lives and write about them to showcase your unique perspectives.

Hand out the “Karla’s Story” worksheet and ask the class to work together in pairs to brainstorm responses to the questions.

Possible responses for question #1 include: staying focused, honoring family, following directions closely, being emotionally resilient, forgiveness.

Possible responses for question #2 are: serving as part of a team in sports/clubs, keeping your word to classmates when working on group projects, following through with tasks in extracurricular activities, forgiving a fellow student for shirking duties on a group project or extracurricular activity.

Discuss the responses to all four questions from the worksheet as a whole class. Then, ask students to think about their own experiences to come up with story ideas.

Possible Teacher Dialogue (directed to students)

Karla took an ordinary, mundane experience of a grocery trip and turned it into a potentially extraordinary life lesson. This story could make the basis for an excellent college admissions essay. Now, think about seemingly mundane events in your own life. Is there one that taught you a lesson or gave you a new perspective on things? Please share with a friend.

After students have discussed story ideas with partners, ask students to share their partners’ ideas with the class. This will prime students for the next writing activity: unique stories to share.

Hand out the My Story worksheet. Display the following webpage on a large screen for the whole class to see:

- Bad College Essays: 10 Mistakes You Must Avoid:
<http://blog.prepscholar.com/bad-college-essays>

Possible Teacher Dialogue (directed to students):

Before we get too far into brainstorming essay ideas, let's have a look at this web page about bad college essays. Just in case you were considering revealing something too personal or perhaps even offensive, take a moment and look through these descriptions of what topics to avoid.

Point out a few obvious topics to avoid that are mentioned on the Bad College Essays webpage, like:

- writing about how much you love your boyfriend or girlfriend,
- past illegal or immoral actions,
- fictional stories about yourself,
- personality flaws.

Scroll down to the bottom of the page to Example Essays #1 and #2. Suggest that students read through these on their own time to see good examples of essays that needed editing and how they were improved. The link to this website is at the bottom of the Your Story worksheet.

Now that students have seen what to avoid, encourage them to write down a list of ideas that range from little failures to everyday learning experiences or activities, including perhaps some of the ideas they mentioned earlier to their partners. List the following ideas on the board as inspiration: arm-wrestling or playing a board game with a family member, learning how to apply eye make-up, throwing a Frisbee, mowing the lawn, filling the gas tank.

Have the students work independently to complete their responses to the My Story worksheet.

Close the lesson by inviting students to share their topic choices.