

## **A Response to Sarah-Kate Magee**

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Sarah-Kate Magee's essay "College Admissions Essays: A Genre of Masculinity" explores gender-derived elements found in college admissions essays and argues that the genre favors a masculine writing style. Magee begins her essay by saying she had "been skeptical of supposed intellectual or emotional differences between men and women" (116), but she later reveals that her opinion has changed. Her argument is based on the understanding that there are differences between men and women, specifically in writing style. Magee supports her argument with information from Elizabeth Flynn's essay "Composing as a Woman." In this essay, first published in 1988, Flynn states: "The narratives of the female students are stories of interaction, of connection, or of frustrated connection. The narratives of the male students are stories of achievement, of separation, or of frustrated achievement" (576). Magee examines her own and two of her friends' college admissions essays in the light of Flynn's contentions. She finds that, although they are women who value relationships deeply, they each wrote about achievements or frustrated achievements. She explains that this is because "unspoken rules guide a successful essay's focus toward achievements." Her final assertion is that "the unintentional bias in the college admissions essay genre only furthers and perpetuates the suppression of women's own ways of thinking and composing" (121).

Magee is correct in noticing that students—even female students who may, as she and Flynn claim, naturally write about relationships—often write about achievement in college admissions essays. However, she goes too far when she deduces that this imposes a restraint on women's ways of thinking and composing. College admissions offices are not to blame for the content of the essays they are receiving. As Magee herself observes, "The prompts for the genre do *not* preclude a wider variety of approaches. A writer's impression of an appropriate focus for his or her essay does not come from the essay questions themselves" (120). So what, or who, is responsible for the general trend of achievement-focused essays—the achievement-focused university, or the student writers themselves?

There is a spectrum of answers to the question of whether the situation or the rhetor controls the content of the rhetorical output. In the case of a college admissions essay, the context is the applicant's assumptions about what the university values (for example, achievements), and the rhetor is the student, who is writing to persuade the university. Lloyd F. Bitzer, in his essay "The Rhetorical Situation," writes, "The situation controls the rhetorical response in the same sense that the question controls the answer and the problem controls the solution. Not the rhetor and the persuasive intent, but the situation is the source and ground of rhetorical activity" (6). In other words, the situation defines the writing style. Applied to the genre of college admissions essays, this theory holds that applicants write about achievements in essays because that is what the situation calls them to do. College is, first and foremost, about achievements, so an admissions essay should show a desire and an ability to achieve. Magee says that "writing can often be a reflection of self" and that she "expected [her] writing to mirror [herself] as a person and be relationship-focused" (118), but she is denying the particular element of persuasion that is adaptation. When her goal was to make her application appealing to a university, she understood the context of the situation and

adapted to meet the requirements that she assumed the university wanted. She allowed the situation to guide her writing style. This process did not rob her of her femininity; rather, it showcased her intellectual versatility. The writer is adapting to the situation, not changing the elements of her being. This type of adaptation is one viable approach to writing a college admissions essay, but it is not the only option.

The other extreme position of the spectrum on the debate over what or who controls the content is that the rhetor, not the situation or context, holds priority in deciding the content. Richard E. Vatz, in an essay critical of Bitzer, writes, “Bitzer argues that the nature of the context determines the rhetoric. But one never runs out of context. One never runs out of facts to describe a situation. . . . The very choice of what facts or events are relevant is a matter of pure arbitration” (156). According to Vatz, the rhetor decides what to say because the situation is infinitely varying and indefinable. This concept, when applied to the genre of college admissions essays and the women who write them, indicates that women should write what they want to write, with little or no regard for what they feel the situation begs them to compose. If women, for example, were to begin writing about subjects they are passionate about, rather than past achievements, this could become the norm in college admissions essays. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2011, more women than men were enrolled in college (U.S. Census Bureau). Women have the opportunity, because they are the majority, to change what is expected of college students.

I did not write about achievements in my college essay—in fact, I wrote about one of my vulnerabilities rather than one of my strengths. My essay is about my grandfather and my relationship with him. It is even, in a way, a tribute to him. I write about his transition into old age and how it has affected both of us:

My grandpa used to wrap me up in a blanket to roll me down the enormous hill in his backyard (which he mowed himself until a year ago), but now I catch him from falling down the stairs. . . . I long for my grandpa to hold me again, to toss me a ball, to push me on his homemade swing, to help me feed the turtles at Bull Creek, to throw me in the lake, to tuck me in at night, to wake me up with Texas-shaped waffles, to help me cook, to help me build, to help me grow—but those experiences are gone forever. I want it all back. I want the man who was the center of my family to come back. . . . I remember that my grandpa was the most patient and caring man I know, so I will patiently care for him for the rest of our time together.

This essay is entirely focused on relationship, not achievement, and I was granted admission to each of the five universities to which I applied.

My approach may seem extreme to most applicants, so I would like to propose an example of writing for admissions that doesn't hide feminine qualities, but also emphasizes achievement. The example is from Magee, whose friend Rosie wrote in her admissions essay, “I could conquer the world. At seventeen, conquering the world is not wiping out nations and being the newest and most powerful dictator. Conquering the world means learning as much as I can, and pushing myself to be a better, more independent, loving, passionate person” (118). Here, Rosie has indicated her desire to grow intellectually and socially, and she specifically references relationships by claiming that she desires to be a more loving person. “Loving” does not refer to academic achievement nor to any other type of tangible achievement. It refers to what Flynn and Magee say is a tendency usually found in females: the inclination to focus on relationships. Rosie, here, is taking the middle ground between Bitzer and Vatz. Knowing or unknowingly, she encounters the tension between the needs of the situation and her own needs of expression, and out of that tension she produces a kind of writing that Magee has not recognized in her essay. This type of rhetorical invention makes Rosie a desirable, versatile, and all-the-while-female applicant to universities. Colleges have heard

of most high school achievements before, but they haven't heard all unique stories and passions that incoming students have to offer.

### **Works Cited**

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