

Katie faces an important writing task: writing an application essay to Michigan State University. She hopes to enter Lyman Briggs, the university's specialized science college, and she knows that her excellent grades, strong test scores, and service activities are not enough to gain entry. She also has to write a strong essay that reveals her understanding of the values, beliefs, and culture of the school. Katie is less confident about her writing because she knows that the kind of five-paragraph essay she wrote in high school is not appropriate for the task. To produce the essay she needed, she turns to the tools you're using in this course: the TAQ sheet, the P&P Statement, and the Prospectus. Let's look at how she adapts these to her needs.

Katie began by carefully reading and annotating the essay question:

If admitted to Michigan State, you will join a diverse community of students, faculty, staff, and alumni. Please respond to the following hypothetical situation: In your first-semester English course you are assigned a group writing project to be completed within a week. In addition to yourself, your group is comprised of five other students, some of whom are from different countries and/or have different racial/ethnic backgrounds than you. Please explain how your past life experiences will help you effectively collaborate with your group members in order to achieve success on this project.

"Diverse" is a key term. MSU seems to make this something to recognize immediately.

"Community" seems to contrast with the idea of "diverse." The word seems to say something about things that are held in common.

"Group" is another key term: it seems closer to "community" than "diverse." Does this signal some "paradox" that I'm supposed to write about????? The word gets repeated in the next sentence, so it's probably important.

I understand the examples, but they DON'T use sexual orientation.

Sounds like they want personal experiences

This is about the "how" of connecting diversity and community?

Note that Katie's comments reveal that she's interested in what her audience (an admissions officer) considers important, but she is also concerned with how she will deal with the question. Her notes on the questions lead her to use the TAQ sheet that you're using for this assignment. She uses it to expand on the notes that she has already made.

Understanding an Existing Map

Terms/Anomalies/Questions: **THE TAQ SHEET**

Complete Citation: Hey! It's too long to fit in here, so look at the notes I made on the question.

Terms and Phrases

To make its claim, the source uses important concepts. These organize the evidence and make sense out of it. Identify four key terms or phrases that are especially important to the source's claim. Explain why each is important to the source's claim.

1. Collaboration: the term means something simple: working together "co-laboring" on a project.

MSU's question seems to state a value of the school. I suspect that the question is as much to inform the student about what school will be like as it is to get something written.
2. Diversity: again, the definition is simple; something diverse is complicated because the parts of it aren't all the same. America is diverse because of the many races, ethnicities, etc. that make up the country.

I'm interested in what MSU cares about, so I'd say that they are reminding applicants that MSU isn't just like home.
3. Community: a group of people with a shared sense of values . . . who are in the same place.

Together with "diversity" and "collaboration" it emphasizes that there must be some "MSU way" of working and thinking.
4. Group writing project: the phrase explains itself.

This seems to be a specific "case" of collaboration and community. The way that diversity affects collaboration. This seems to be the key to the essay.

Anomalies

An anomaly is something different from the normal pattern: a black polar bear, a talking dog; a blood pressure reading of 190/160. Anomalies are opportunities to make your own claim because they often identify unexplained territories that are worth writing about. List four anomalies from the source. These can be facts, claims, or relations, or information that is being ignored. How was each different from what you expected?

Anomalous Evidence or Claims	What You Expected to Read
The term collaboration seems to be used as a positive thing.	While I do value collaboration, I really thought that I'd be expected to write about my individual strengths apart from anything "social."
The question's focus on "diversity" implies that the school is diverse in terms of ethnicity and race.	I'm not sure that I thought of that as a "topic" or something to talk about.
Is it an anomaly that the question doesn't mention gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgendered students? Can an anomaly be something that's not there?	I didn't really expect anything at all about diversity, so I can't say I had some expectation violated. On the other hand, once I start thinking about the issue, it was part of my own thinking.
A collaborative writing project?!?!?	Um . . . never in my life. I go up on the mountain and come down with my own words. Not really, but that is how I think of writing.

Questions

After you have carefully reviewed the source, ask useful questions whose answer might become your claim. These questions should address the source's assumptions, evidence, thesis, or issues that it ignores.

1. I think I have to start with questions about the question. First, can I be sure that the attitude toward the key terms is really MSU's attitude toward them. Diversity and collaboration are really high values? I guess so, but is writing collaboratively really possible.

2. I keep coming back to the LGBT question and the examples of diversity offered in the question? Aren't sexual diversity and some ethnic diversities (Arab/Muslim) tougher to think about than others? I'm looking for holes in the question where I can say something that goes beyond the usual "yeah, bigotry is stupid."

3. Do writers actually write collaboratively? On one level, it makes sense, but it's not what I learned in high school where "do your own work" was required. So what do you do if you're a scientist? Are there teams of writers? Or maybe a project has lots of people working on it so they all write? Who puts the thing together in the end? How does collaboration really work? My mother is a lawyer, and I don't see her sitting down with somebody else to write? My stepdad writes by himself. Is there some kind of collaboration they do that I don't see or don't know about. This is sort of important because it's so different from high school.

At this point, Katie needs to think about the purpose of her task. She will review what the essay is meant to do. Then, she will name the problem that will be answered in the paper. Again, she turns to one of the tools you use in our class: the Purpose & Problem Statement. Here is her P&P Statement:

Purpose:

I need to write an essay that helps me get into Lyman Briggs College at MSU. To do this, I have to do the usual blah blah blah about punctuation, spelling, grammar. The biggest task is to ANSWER THEIR QUESTION in a way that shows I understand how the university "thinks" so they can see if I'm a good fit with their bigger goal. I'm guessing that the bigger goal has to do with values and beliefs.

Problems

The question asks me to recognize that "diversity" and "community" can be brought together. How can I be part of a school that respects both? My problems begin with the fact that I'm from a small town in the Upper Peninsula that isn't very diverse, so I don't have much personal experience to use. My problems also include the question because I don't see why they don't directly mention lesbian/gay/bi-sexual/transgendered communities. My other problem is that I don't see how you could be writing a "group paper." That's not what I've learned about writing. So . . .

Katie has some promising insights already. She has a bigger idea of diversity than the one in the question. She recognizes the limitations on her own experience. She finds the hypothetical question about "group writing" to be surprising. At this point, she could give up, or she could talk to people. She calls her aunts, uncles, friends, and a former teacher to ask about diversity, community, and collaboration. Her conversations, emails, and thoughts discover the following:

1. Her small town is not diverse, and that can't be changed.
2. She has been aware that it's not diverse because she travels with her family.
3. Her uncle reminded her that his *husband* seems a normal feature of life to her, but that it's not usual for most families to have a gay marriage.

4. Her parents write a lot, and their work requires collaboration. Another uncle publishes a lot, and he always writes with at least one other partner.
5. She may not have a lot of experience with diversity and collaboration, but that's why she wants to be some place like Michigan State.

She looks at her notes, and decides to write a summary of her paper . . . even though it doesn't exist yet. She has read about the Prospectus, and she thinks it's time to put some words down. If she is free to change them, then it's not a problem. She especially likes the idea of "summarizing" a paper that doesn't even exist. She sees it as a no-pressure way to get some of her ideas into writing. Here is her prospectus:

Prospectus

Even though I would like to say that people are just people, they really aren't. Sure, we are all the same species; but we aren't all treated the same. We're all the products of a culture that not only sees differences, but acts on them all the time. The problem is that we're usually not conscious of the things we've learned about race, gender, and ethnicity, so we say or do certain things without knowing it. Such as, telling a woman to go cook for you or watching a black man more closely in a store. What we really need to do is recognize the assumptions we make. I feel that I have noticed these things. I see that everyone experiences the world in a different way. I know that difference matters a lot. Sometimes it can feel like a negative thing, but I see that difference can be a positive aspect as well. Recognizing it can open up the world and let you see all the stereotypes. Once you acknowledge that they are there you have an opportunity to be less controlled by them.

Katie uses her prospectus to create the first draft of her essay. She sends it to an uncle. He takes her work seriously and makes many suggestions:

I think that this should be omitted. Being gay, being black, female, male, Arab, or whatever makes a lot of difference in how we see people, and your essay should say so. We're all the products of a culture that not only sees differences, but acts on them all the time. The problem is that we're usually not conscious of the things we've learned about race, gender, ethnicity, etc.

Our job is to recognize the assumptions we bring to the kinds of difference we see in the world. For example, a black male experiences the world differently than I do (the department store security people don't follow me around), and the difference creates a "dissonance" that lets us each see things that are usually invisible. You might open your essay by saying something like this, and then make a claim that you know that difference matters a lot, and that it's an opportunity to be less controlled by the stereotypes around you. You might then use the stuff about Michael and Huda, and say, "hey, I'm from a little white town in the UP, but the diversity of my family and my friend have always made me a uncomfortable about living in a world without diversity."

Useful opening because you treat diversity as an opportunity. Here, you need to say why it's an opportunity. You might talk about needing to learn how to recognize that dissonance between the things you've grown up thinking and the things that others have grown up thinking. That you're comfortable talking to people, but you expect to find some surprising differences in how to think about academic questions. That's why you're going to college. Right now, you know it's an opportunity, and you assume that the real purpose of going to MSU is to learn what your own version of reality looks like and to learn how others see a different reality.

The differences would open up lots of important questions that need to be answered. A diverse group could develop a thorough response that didn't just reflect the experience of one person from one ethnicity or race or gender. You might also talk about the danger of "managing" diversity, i.e., pretending it's not a valuable force for creative thinking.

I have an uncle who is gay, but to me, he is just Uncle Michael. I work with a black man on my local community gardens, but to me, he is just Toby. I have a friend from the Middle East, but to me, she is just Huda. In other words, people are just people to me.

Though I come from a small town where there is little variety, it has never mattered of what ethnic decent, color of skin, religious belief, or lifestyle a person has. The values that I have been brought up with and developed, have always promoted equality for everyone. If I were admitted to Michigan State University I would have no problem working with people who are different from me. If presented with the task of writing an English paper with a group of five other students, I would simply try my very best to contribute to the group. If the other project members happened to have different ways of life or ethnicities, I would see it as an opportunity.

Conclude with a paragraph that basically recognizes that -- for you -- you want to expand the experience with your uncle and Huda into something that will let you think in smarter ways about the things that interest you. You're drawn to MSU for lots of academic reasons, and perhaps because you come from a small town in the UP, you know that the important part of doing academic work is being able to think in terms outside your comfort zone. The diverse faces you saw and met when you visited MSU would be part of your academic growth because they help create the diverse viewpoints that can be linked to the kind of diverse thinking that creates something worth saying and doing.

I like it when I get to work with, and get to know, people who are "different". It has always seemed like a great chance to expand my understanding of the way others live, their unique backgrounds, and individual values. Hopefully, I also extend this to them. There are many reasons to attend MSU and one is the chance to interact with varying types of personalities.

I have gotten the chance to visit bigger cities and loved the fact that there are all different types of people. Because I have always accepted diversity as important to life, I cannot wait to live and go to school in the place that is full of it. I have visited the East Lansing area and the MSU campus several times witnessing first hand the diversity of people present. I could be more excited about finally living in a place like East Lansing and getting to experience all it has to offer.

I really hope I do come across this type of class project situation if I am accepted at Michigan State University. I appreciate your consideration to be accepted as a freshman at Michigan State University for the fall 2012 semester. I hope that I get to experience the great history of MSU. Lastly, I hope to be the next new and different face on campus.

These last two paragraphs can be omitted. Your conclusion would already be in place (see previous box), and these are much more like the conclusion to a business letter or cover letter for a job application.

Katie uses these comments to begin revising the paper, and she asks for more responses. She does this because she realizes that getting responses is what her mother, stepfather, and uncle do. Then, it strikes her that her married uncles are the diverse experience of her life. She realizes that she *does* have a personal case, and starts to toy with the idea that this experience has made her hungry for a more diverse community than the one she has grown up in. She

does nine (9) drafts of her essay, and finally says what she wants. Here is the final draft of her essay:

If admitted to Michigan State, you will join a diverse community of students, faculty, staff, and alumni. Please respond to the following hypothetical situation: In your first-semester English course you are assigned a group writing project to be completed within a week. In addition to yourself, your group is comprised of five other students, some of whom are from different countries and/or have different racial/ethnic backgrounds than you. Please explain how your past life experiences will help you effectively collaborate with your group members in order to achieve success on this project.

There is little diversity in my Upper Peninsula hometown, but within my family it is a different story. When I visit my uncle and his husband in Chicago, their love and relationship is natural to me, but it also contrasts with many of the attitudes of other people I know. I cling to both my comfort with my uncles and my friendships in Escanaba. The contrasts of these teach me that the bigger world has many different values and beliefs. I will admit that living in a world without diversity has always made me uncomfortable, so MSU offers a world where I can think more about the values that I have been brought up with.

I would like to say that differences in ethnicity, race, gender, and other identities aren't important in "post-racial" America, but that's not really true. We're all the products of a culture that not only sees differences, but also acts on them all the time. The problem is that we're usually not conscious of the assumptions we've absorbed from friends, advertisements, music, films, and the rest of culture. Differences have consequences, and there's no point in pretending that they don't affect the way we see others and how others see us. What we really need to do is recognize the assumptions we make. I know that difference matters a lot. Recognizing difference can open up the world and reveal how much these stereotypes affect our thinking. Acknowledging their existence can limit their control.

Working with a diverse group of students, would elicit differences in how we were thinking about the topic and how to turn those differences into a new kind of insight. The other project members would become an opportunity to connect diversity and academic thinking. Working in a diverse group would bring a lot of different thoughts into the mix and could create a great paper. We could make a thorough response that wouldn't just reflect the experience of one person from one background, but six experiences from six backgrounds. Diversity is one of the best tools for creative thinking because it is tied to understanding that strong ideas are complicated. Understanding diversity as part of both my personal behavior and my academic life would let me grow outside of the box I've grown up in. The diverse faces I saw at MSU would connect my academic and personal growth.