

## What is a Personal Essay?

(adapted from *Writer's Inc. Write for College Handbook*, pages 139-149)

	<b>Defining the Personal Essay Genre</b>
<b>Personal Narrative</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Re-creates a specific experience or event in your life (funny, frightening, life-changing encounters, etc. ...).</li> <li>● Uses sensory details, specific action, and revealing dialogue to bring the experience to life.</li> <li>● Should engage the audience to share in your experiences (cause them to feel what you felt in the moment you are describing)</li> <li>● Often shows what the writer/speaker learned from the experience.</li> </ul>
<b>Personal Essay</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Shares the details of a specific event or time in your life, emphasizing what you learned from the experience.</li> <li>● Part recollection + part reflection.</li> </ul>

	<b>How to Write in the Personal Essay Genre</b>
<b>Selecting a Topic &amp; Gathering Ideas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Brainstorm using a pre-writing activity that helps you recall incidents in your life you think are worth sharing/fit the definition of a personal essay.</li> <li>● List the top 2-3 experiences that best fit the description of your current assignment.</li> <li>● Then, next to each experience, jot down important details, words or actions that describe the experience/memory.</li> <li>● Types of details:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Sensory: What you saw, heard, smelled, tasted or touched.</li> <li>○ Reflective: What you thought or felt about the experience.</li> <li>○ Actions: What you did or experienced.</li> <li>○ Dialogue: What people said to each other.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● It may be helpful to write about each experience by finishing these sentences:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ (The experience/memory) makes me feel...</li> <li>○ (The experience/memory) causes me to...</li> <li>○ (The experience/memory) concerns me because...</li> <li>○ (The experience/memory) has taught me...</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Don't forget to decide on the tone you will use: How do you want your audience to feel when you are done presenting (sad, humored, reflective, grateful, amused, etc. ...)?</li> </ul>
<b>Organizing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Since narratives are usually told in chronological order, you can use a timeline to organize your details.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Your opening should grab the audience's attention, the middle should recreate the experience, and the ending should reflect on it.</li> </ul>
<b>Writing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hooking the audience: Start your narrative right in the action. Doing so will immediately help get your audience's attention.</li> <li>Keeping the audience interested: Let the audience feel as if the experience is unfolding right in front of them. (This is where showing via sensory, action, and dialogue details comes in.)</li> <li>Keep in mind "Showing vs. Telling"</li> <li>After getting a first draft down, revise your work using the following questions as your guide: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does my writing/words reveal the importance of the experience?</li> <li>Have I organized the details/words effectively?</li> <li>Does my tone fit my topic?</li> <li>Did I choose the best possible words to convey my message and engage my audience?</li> </ul> </li> <li>Make revisions where necessary.</li> </ul>

<b>Why and when to use a personal essay?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Personal Essay genre is profoundly respected among published writers because it is <i>authentic, vulnerable and poignant</i>.</li> <li>It allows your reader into your life.</li> <li>It is widely believed that humanity is connected together by shared strands of meaning, and these commonalities are best articulated through stories of our lives.</li> <li>Themes of <i>romance, family, growing up, nature, spirituality, neighbors, home, war and death</i> are common experiences that, when shared, can create a sense of connection, community and understanding between the writer and his or her audience.</li> </ul>
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	<b>Desired Characteristics of a Personal Essay</b>
<b>Authentic Voice</b>	The writer must create a narrative persona (or stance) that the reader believes authentic, or else the text (speech) risks coming off as trite or condescending. Voice is a difficult feature to discuss in writing, but readers can describe the stance a writer is taking as they react to a given style, dialogue, and point of view; they must choose whether to believe or identify. Thus, writers must seek to reveal true experiences, moments of relevance, and believed lessons learned; else, write fictional accounts as if they believed them to be true.
<b>Narrative Coherence</b>	Most often covered in literary settings, the feature of narrative coherence regards the business of telling stories well:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● vivid description,</li><li>● controlled and appropriate pacing,</li><li>● subtle transitions,</li><li>● lively dialogue, and</li><li>● rich character development.</li></ul> <p>A personal essay generally relates a story and a lesson learned; thus, if the storytelling fails, the whole essay usually fails.</p>
<b>Communal Relevance</b>	<p>At the end of the essay, the reader has the right to ask, “So what?” and have it answered. A writer does not merely tell a story for personal reasons, but <b><i>in order to communicate a larger truth to the reader</i></b>; the story is the vehicle on which the truth, often metaphorically, rides. The personal essay argues, in a way, that the beauty associated with being human can often best be expressed through the sharing of stories.</p>