

What is a Personal Essay?

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

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

	How to Write in the Personal Essay Genre
Selecting a Topic & Gathering Ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 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. ● List the top 2-3 experiences that best fit the description of your current assignment. ● Then, next to each experience, jot down important details, words or actions that describe the experience/memory. ● Types of details: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sensory: What you saw, heard, smelled, tasted or touched. ○ Reflective: What you thought or felt about the experience. ○ Actions: What you did or experienced. ○ Dialogue: What people said to each other. ● It may be helpful to write about each experience by finishing these sentences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ (The experience/memory) makes me feel... ○ (The experience/memory) causes me to... ○ (The experience/memory) concerns me because... ○ (The experience/memory) has taught me... ● 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. ...)?
Organizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Since narratives are usually told in chronological order, you can use a timeline to organize your details.

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

Why and when to use a personal essay?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Personal Essay genre is profoundly respected among published writers because it is <i>authentic, vulnerable and poignant</i>. It allows your reader into your life. 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. 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.
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	Desired Characteristics of a Personal Essay
Authentic Voice	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.
Narrative Coherence	Most often covered in literary settings, the feature of narrative coherence regards the business of telling stories well:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● vivid description,● controlled and appropriate pacing,● subtle transitions,● lively dialogue, and● rich character development. <p>A personal essay generally relates a story and a lesson learned; thus, if the storytelling fails, the whole essay usually fails.</p>
Communal Relevance	<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 <i>in order to communicate a larger truth to the reader</i>; 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>