

Personal Essay

Mr. Eble, AP Language & Composition

You've already written a *long, linear* literacy narrative based upon your own reading and writing history. You've written a college essay, a *brief* piece in which you sell yourself and your skills to a university based on an experience.

For your next writing assignment, you'll compose a personal essay—a reflective piece in which you mix your own experiences, research, and observations about a specific topic. Consider what we've read in this unit:

- “A Modest Proposal” by Jonathan Swift
- “Serving in Florida” by Barbara Ehrenreich
- “My City in Two Dog Parks” by Brian Trapp
- “Dumpster Diving” by Lars Eighner

Each of these pieces relies heavily upon ethos to build an argument about poverty and economics.

You'll choose a topic with which you're well-acquainted and develop an argument based upon a combination of your own experience, research, and observations about that topic.

The Elements of a Personal Essay

The more you address / flesh out each of the following elements in your essay, the more clearly you'll communicate your ideas and develop your rhetorical goal.

- **Setting:** Place and time—when, where is it?
 - Sequencing is important here; remember that you may flash back, forward or write in chronological order, perhaps with intermittent breaks to broaden your focus (or to narrow it).
- **Persona:** What are some characteristics about you that you want your reader to understand? How do you want your readers to perceive you?
 - Be sure to keep your point of view consistent; remember that because this is a personal essay, you should use first-person pronouns.
 - Remember, too, that you're a character in this story; show yourself and other characters.
- **Tone, Voice:** How do you want readers to feel? Through tone, voice, you can help readers share your reactions to the experiences you are recreating. Craft your essay with vivid descriptions, syntax variations, and other rhetorical strategies to unveil the nature of the events and your reactions to these events.
- **Plot:** Establish plot by a causal linking of events; one event should lead to another.
 - Be sure to show, not (just) tell. You want to provide vivid details (imagery and such) to put the reader in your perspective.
- **Theme:** The dominant idea expressed in the work; it should be expressed in your thesis and developed throughout the body of your essay. Though you're telling a story, your essay should have a **point**.
 - Don't show your cards at the start; an essay like this is a gradual process of revealing, likely leading to some kind of climax / decision point.

Topic Suggestions

Consider that you don't want to choose too broad of a topic / space of time. For example, if you're writing about your experience in a sport, you likely want to focus on one game or practice, not an entire season or lifetime of involvement with that sport.

In deciding what will be your topic, consider the push and pull of the following two elements:

- Write about a topic with which you're well acquainted: You write best about what you know best.
- Write about a topic that you really don't understand well, but about which you have a number of questions. Questions will lead to more space for exploration.

In terms of what you write about... it can be anything.

Consider in planning your topic the following areas of focus:

- Any “first,” such as when you first realized that you had a special skill, passion, ambition, problem; when you first felt accepted or rejected; when you first became aware of some injustice, issue, or altruism.
- Any memorably difficult situation: When you had to make a difficult choice, when someone you admired let you down (or vice-versa), a difficult trip / journey, a sickness, any time you struggled to learn something
- An occasion when your expectations and reality were different
- An incident that challenged your basic values or beliefs
- Any humorous event
- Any event that shaped you (or continues to shape you today)
- An incident charged with emotions

Remember that you should be honest about an event / your life, but you can (with the gift of perspective, time, and poetic license) shape that event and your description of it to fit your writing.

Research / Audience Awareness

You’ll want to do research for your essay in order to bolster your writing and to broaden your perspective and your claim (remember: Ehrenreich shares other workers’ viewpoints; Trapp provides multiple sources as research on urban planning). Be sure that you attribute your sources and connect them clearly to your personal experience and your claim.

You’ll also want to be sensitive to how you portray yourself; you may have an audience in mind, but perhaps you’re writing for a more general audience. Just like any other writing, be sure to develop your ethos and create vivid images and appeals to which your audience can relate on many levels (particularly an emotional one).

With both of these elements, remember: **Don’t rely upon easy answers.** Ambiguity and a lack of expertise are acceptable (even encouraged). Try to stay away from cliché.

Resources

- 1.) *Creative Nonfiction*, an organization dedicated to the eponymous genre of writing, [offers some advice on picturing the personal essay](#) (link)
- 2.) Phillip Lopate’s “Writing Personal Essays: On the Necessity of Turning Oneself Into a Character” (PDF online at my Weebly page)
- 3.) Leslie Jamison, [“How to Write a Personal Essay” from *Publisher’s Weekly*](#) (link)

Due Dates

First Draft of your Essay (Printed for in-class peer review): 10/28 (B2) / 10/29 (A2)

Revised Draft of your Essay (Printed, submitted with rubric found online, post-writing analysis): 11/6 (B2) / 11/7 (A2)

Post Writing Analysis Questions:

- Did you stick with your original topic or did you change it along the way? Why?
- What problems did you encounter during the process of creating the essay?
- List two of the most important changes you made. Why did you make them?
- What part of your essay are you most proud of? Why?

Be sure to type your answers to these questions and to provide specific textual references in them.