

Mastering the Essay

Lesson 10 – The Personal Essay

Readings

- **"On Running After One's Hat"** (Chesterton)
- **"Transfiguration"** (Annie Dillard) *Please read the introductory notes "The Writing Process" and the essay, "Transfiguration." The final part, "How I Wrote the Moth Essay—And Why," is a helpful reflection on the process of writing a personal essay, and it is recommended, but not required, reading.*
- **"On Keeping a Notebook"** (Joan Didion) Where in this essay does Didion get to "the point"?
- **"Her Pillow" and "Memorial Day"** (Brian Doyle)

PERSONAL ESSAYS

- Are these essays real essays? How do they conform to the rules we have studied for essay writing? How do they break them?
- These essays are examples of personal essays—they are less formal than academic essays, and meant to provide a more individual window into the writer's thoughts and experiences. Note that the "style" of each is also very different and reflects the personality of the author more than other kinds of essays.
- (adapted from AIMS community college) a personal essay is a broad essay that often incorporates a variety of writing styles. Most personal essay assignments ask writers to write about an important person, event or time period in their life. The goal is to narrate this event or situation in a way that the reader can fully experience and understand. This type of writing generally incorporates both narrative and descriptive writing, which are two of the main modes of writing.

Here are some tips on making a personal essay more effective:

- **Focus on detail.** The writer's job is to show, not tell, what happened. Be sure to use plenty of detail to make this happen and avoid overly relying on adjectives. Strong verbs are often better. Don't tell the reader that the sunset was breathtaking; describe it.
- **Incorporate sensory detail.** When describing a particular event, most writers focus on how a place or situation appeared. This is because most of us tend to be sight dominant when using senses. However, the reader can be brought further into the essay by incorporating a variety of senses: sound, smell, touch and taste, in addition to sight.
- **Connect the event/person/place to a larger idea.** As you describe this event, person, place, etc., don't lose focus on the main idea: how the event changed you. This is the thesis of your personal essay, and it is important that you demonstrate how the details come together to create this thesis. Don't get so caught up in narrating the actual event that you forget to also go into detail on the importance of it.
- **Be careful with verb tense.** As you shift from the event itself, which occurred in

the past, and how it has continued to impact your life, be sure to use the appropriate verb tense and keep it consistent. Some writers will describe a past event in present tense, hoping to make the reader feel more involved. This can be done, but doing it well involves great writing skill. No matter what, be sure to keep the verb tense consistent. When in doubt, stick with past tense for the actual event and present tense to discuss the change.

- **Point of view.** In a personal essay, it is all right to use the first person voice (I, me) since you are drawing attention to yourself anyway. However, most of the time it is still best to avoid addressing the reader directly (second person, you)
- **Thoughts and narration.** As we see from these three example essays, the personal essay need not simply be a series of anecdotes—it can also incorporate the writer’s thoughts and musings, as long as they are interesting and worthwhile.
- **Topic vs. thesis.** A personal essay does not need the same kind of thesis as academic essays do. It may have one (e.g. Visiting my grandmother every weekend has not only brought me a more empathetic view of old people—it brought me my best friend!) but it might simply have a general topic (for example, Dillard has a point about the writer's life being a total sacrifice, but she never directly states that.)
- **Citations.** Personal essays don’t need them. All the same, if you quote someone else or reference their ideas, it is best to acknowledge them in the sentence (e.g. “As Charles Dickens once wrote,” or “Jane Austen had the right idea about”

Assignment

Write a personal essay on one of the following topics:

- An experience you had in the last couple of months
- An experience that really changed your life
- Something you’ve noticed that you think most people don’t pay enough attention to
- Something about life that strikes you as funny

There need not be a definite thesis statement, but the reader should be able to get the gist of what the essay is about from the opening paragraph. The essay should have at least seven paragraphs. No citations are necessary, but give credit in the sentence to anyone you may wish to reference.