

Assignment Bundle and Instructions

This assignment has three components: A Personal Essay, a Composing Reflection, and a Peer Review.

(Please upload these three components separately in the appropriate assignment site).

*DUE DATES AND GRADE VALUES

Personal Essay:	DUE: February 23 (15%)
Composing Reflection:	DUE: February 23 (2.5%)
Peer Review:	TAKES PLACE IN LECTURE on February 9th (Due for uploading Feb. 23)

Essay Length: 1000 words, 12 point font.

Personal Essay: Instructions

To what are we tied; and by what are we seized?
Judith Butler

What realizes itself in my history is not the past definite of what was since it is no longer, nor even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future perfect of what I will have been for what I am in the process of becoming.
Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*

It's a detail that can transform your life.
Yann Martel, *Life of Pi*

The term “personal essay” can refer to any relatively short non-fiction piece that explores personal experiences, but many of the best personal essays are public-facing. That is, the experiences the writer explores and the way the writer shapes those experiences connect with a public audience. These narratives reach outward, to the readers, and the readers should feel that they have gained insight not just into a private experience, but also into a larger, more common experience.

The Norton Reader, an anthology of some of the best non-fiction writing, describes the genre of the personal essay as follows:

Focusing on a significant personal experience in the writer's past, the personal essay draws out the meaning as the writer tells the story and reflects on the experience. Sometimes a personal essay is called a memoir or autobiographical essay. Its key features include a dramatic event or a tension/conflict; vivid details and narration; and an interweaving of narration and reflection on and interpretation of the essayist's experience.

Melissa Goldthwaite et al, *The Norton Reader*

For this essay, we ask that you zoom in on an experience that had an impact on you, that transformed you in some way, that challenged your assumptions about something in the world, urged you to think differently. The experience could, for example, be associated with an event, an object, a place. The event could be historical, something in the news, a turning point in your life, a fork in the road, an obstacle; the object could be something on your desk, a family heirloom, a photograph, a quotation, a mathematical equation, a word, a song lyric, a blade of grass; the place could be a building, a campus, a landscape, a café, a room, a page.

In writing your personal essay, think closely with the work of the non-fiction writers we're exploring this term – or even the writers we've read so far. Consider, as they have, writing about how fundamental human experiences or larger social constraints intersect with your personal experience.

As you write, work with these principles:

- Write from a first-person perspective and keep in mind how and why this personal experience could be relevant to your audience.
- Your personal essay should convey “a point.” To figure out what the point of your story is, imagine your reader asking, “why are you telling me this?”
- Show, don't tell: Use metaphor, description, and vivid imagery to tell your story. Avoid general statements, arguments, and in general, telling your audience what to think. In short, focus on the *how*, more than on the *what*.

- Pay attention to your use of language and word choice. If you want your personal essay to “move” your audience, you need to spend some time playing around with words and exploring the expressive potential of language, beginning with the title. For instance, which essay would you like to read? “A Significant Event That Changed My Life”? or “My Dad Tried to Kill Me with an Alligator” (Harrison Scott Keys).
- You do not have to arrange the facts of experience you write about in chronological order and you can use story-telling techniques and work to craft engaging, evocative prose by using rhetorical strategies we have examined and practiced throughout the course, by using conscious word choice, description, and shifts in language registers. The best non-fiction relies on a conscious use of writing techniques.

Readings and lectures will provide insights into how to approach writing a personal narrative.

Please note: You do not have to find a “serious” subject to write about. You can write about joyful, humorous, or exciting, or quirky experiences and connect with readers just as successfully as those who choose more “serious” subjects.

Personal Essay Check List

Have I focused on one event or experience? The experience may have occurred over a period of time (e.g. coming into adulthood, experiencing loss, being bullied).

Do I have a clear idea of what I am trying to accomplish, what my purpose is, what insight I want my audience to take away from reading my essay?

Have I built the necessary tension and/or conflict into my personal essay?

Have I found a way to make my experience matter to my readers? Have I articulated some insight about being human – even if the readers haven’t had my experience? Does the insight I offer help them understand something about a more general human experience and not just my personal experience?

Have I shared an experience that is representative of experiences other people like me have had or could have and which a wider audience should know or think about? Some things that are relevant to others include explorations of culture, gender, sexuality, age, family situation, friendship, ability, relationships with technology, nature etc.

Have I asked myself “why does this experience matter? Why should it matter to others? Why should my readers care about the significance of my experience?”

Have I revised, edited, and proof-read my essay carefully?

- The writing is free from surface errors
- There are no major sentence mechanics errors
- I have carefully selected what to include and what to leave out
- The order of events and points is organized in a way that makes sense for my purpose

Does my writing have rhetorical force?

- I have crafted a title that intrigues my reader and offers a meaningful ‘in ‘ to my essay.
 - I have considered how best to balance ethos, logos, and pathos for the purposes of my essay
 - I have consciously chosen which language register or registers work best for my essay
 - I have crafted my sentences consciously and carefully
 - I have used some sentence-level rhetorical devices we have studied in this course. I have not used these randomly, but with intention.
 - I have avoided stock phrases and clichés.
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 - If relevant, I have used sensory descriptions that help my reader connect to my narrative and see, hear, feel my experience
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- I have tried to ensure that the diction, images, descriptions, and figurative devices (eg. metaphors, analogies, similes) are consistent and even interconnected, recalling how the authors of the personal essays I have read use these devices in ways that resonate with each other and/or build on each other
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- I have had fun writing

My (Dis)connected Identity

The fusion of deep blues, faint greens, and pale greys creates an air of mystery. These colours represent the depths of the unknown. The scattered splashes of black and white create a chaotic atmosphere. These splashes represent feelings of emptiness. The big white focal point symbolizes a cyclical void of vast and unknown territories. The complex layers and textures that surround the void move every which way to create unidentifiable shapes and objects. All these elements come together to create something that is ultimately beautiful. At the time, I saw the construction of my painting as a way to free my mind from the shackles of life's stressors. But at this very moment, as I sit here in front of my painting, I understand that it reveals something about me that I've been repressing for years. In the darkest, most unknown corners of this painting lie my identity and all that it could have been. Here rests the part of me that I have neglected and ignored and have only recently come to terms with.

When I think of paintings, I tend to imagine beautiful images of sunsets, oceans, and nature. These images embody something, they have an identity. We are told that they convey real messages. However, I do not personally connect with these types of paintings. They are so concrete; they are set in stone. They reflect one set image that represents only one narrative. The creators of these paintings tell them exactly what they have to be. At this point in my life, abstract paintings are much easier to connect with. Abstract paintings are open to interpretation. They reflect multiple narratives rather than just one. They morph into the multiple stories of their creators, conforming to even their most unusual ideas. They are not told what to be, they simply just are. I can now say that I'm proud to see my identity in the identity of an abstract painting, but this was not always the case.

For most of my life, I have been searching for something that I didn't even know was lost. I was craving being a part of something meaningful: part of a group that accepted me wholeheartedly for who I was. I also wanted so desperately to know who I was and who I was going to be, but instead, I felt an empty void within me. I thought that everyone had their set identities like concrete paintings do. I was never able to find that group or that concrete, painting-like identity, and although I am now learning to live with this ambiguity, it affected me greatly when I was younger.

I remember the day I learned to stop talking. I woke up one morning knowing that life would never be the same. I remember going to school — as a still very innocent 6th grader — fearful of what others might think of me. Two homemade pressure-cooker bombs were detonated at the annual Boston Marathon, and the news told us that the culprits were from the Middle East. This incident followed the 9/11 attacks, where we were told that the perpetrators were from the Middle East; the multiple attacks in France, where we were once again told that they were Middle Eastern; and the attacks in Germany, England, and even Canada. The fact that the culprits were Middle Eastern made all of us Middle Easterners out to be bad people. The news always insisted that these “terrorists” were from the Middle East. They would tell the story of my people in a way that distorted our image. A way that created a false perception of who we truly are. Because of this, my classmates would often call me a terrorist. A suicide bomber. They would call me these names during class and on the playground and while we were having lunch and during afternoon announcements and in the hallways. They told me that my parents were terrorists and that my ancestors were terrorists. I of course knew that this was not true, but it made me utterly embarrassed of my heritage. It made me dislike myself because who I was upset and disgusted others.

I am Assyrian. My parents were born in Iraq and moved to Canada with their families when they were teenagers. I am lucky to have been born in Canada because my parents suffered greatly while living in Iraq. Though while Canada opened its borders, it did not open its heart. Being Middle Eastern in this country, a country that does not care about its people's stories has been difficult. It has been difficult for me to be proud of my heritage because this country has continuously made me so ashamed of it. I was stuck between wanting to know my culture and being afraid of others knowing that I was a part of it. I wanted to know who I was, but how could I find myself when I could not even accept this one part of who I was? I began trying to conform to the standards that everyone else was conforming to.

Throughout my childhood, I searched desperately for something that I could cling to, an identity that I could become. I stopped being proud of my culture and instead wished that I was someone else, someone that people would be proud to know. I tried to conform to the dominant culture that existed predominantly in Canada. I tweezed my eyebrows to their thinnest state, I dyed my hair blonde, I bought the palest foundation I could find. I rid myself of all the characteristics that would associate me with my heritage. I stopped speaking my language. I silenced myself to mimic the tendencies of those around me because I wanted to blend in, but even then, I was not happy. There was a void in me that could not be fulfilled. This void led me to avoid everyone and everything I loved. I learned to stop talking to people because people imposed silence upon me. I searched, I stopped, I silenced. I was quickly losing myself to the world while simultaneously loosening myself from it. I disappeared into a different place, one of safety and escape.

I was empty, I was isolated, I was angry; but most of all, I was exhausted. Exhausted from living my life as someone I knew I was not and I knew I would never be. Exhausted from

pretending that my life, the life that I had been falsely manufacturing, was something that I enjoyed living in. Exhausted from pretending that I knew my identity, that I was like a realistic painting, when in fact I was an abstract one. Exhausted from believing that my true identity was something inferior, something disgraceful.

And that was when my cousin got shot. Everything I once believed about myself after internalizing what my classmates said about my heritage was eradicated. The very country that creates false narratives about my ancestors also contains violence within it. You see, violence exists within every country, within every nation, but we cannot look at these violent acts from an oversimplified perspective. We cannot create a narrative about an entire culture based on the act of one person. There is violence in Canada daily, but does that make all Canadians bad people? Narratives are tricky, but one thing I do know is that they are like abstract paintings. You cannot create generalized narratives about different cultures because they are forever changing shape; they cannot be looked at or discussed through only one lens.

After my cousin passed away, I learned all of this. I learned that I could not deal with his passing alone. I learned that I needed someone to tell me that everything would be alright. At that moment, I realized that life was bigger than the stories people had imposed on me. I realized that I see myself in the abstract painting I created. I learned that I should never allow the world to silence me. I decided that I should not let the “single story” (Adichie 1) that all Middle Easterners are terrorists get to my head. As Chimamanda Adichie argues, we are all more than the “single story” (1) told about us. Single stories are often based on incomplete stereotypes and ideas. They reflect only one set image of something just as concrete paintings do. The void that once existed within me is now gone, and although my identity is still a bit chaotic, I am slowly starting to understand that this is okay. I am slowly starting to accept the multiple layers within

my identity that I was once repressing. I am now proud of my culture rather than ashamed of it because the “single story” (Adichie 1) does not define who I am, or who Assyrians are as a nation. Identities are not set in stone; they will be eternally mysterious, sometimes even unidentifiable, but therein lies their beauty.

Works Cited

Adichie, Chimamanda. “The Danger of a Single Story.” 2009, pp. 1