

Due Date: March 24, 2021

Grade Value: 25% including Peer-Review

Related Peer-Review: Draft Due March 16; Reviews Due 19

Length: 1250 words, double-spaced, 12pt font in a Word Doc.

Context & Goal

The term “personal essay” can refer to any relatively short non-fiction piece that explores personal experiences, but the best, most powerful/engaging/moving/humours personal essays are public-facing. That is, the experiences the writer explores and the way the write shapes those experiences, connect with a public audience. Personal essays are not examples of self-expression, but of carefully crafted narratives that focus on something readers are interested in. “The Aquarium,” “The Fourth State of Matter,” and “**On Seeing England for the First Time,**” and even the film *Stories We Tell*, incorporate personal experiences into narratives that make connections with anonymous readers/views, eliciting a wide-range of emotions and intellectual engagement. These are not works that resemble private journals or letters, even though they explore private experiences to greater or lesser extents.

In the essays, the “I” who is speaking represents the actual writer, but the narratives are carefully crafted in strategic ways to reach an audience that does not know the author.

The larger issues personal essay writers touch on range from personal loss to identity politics to a search for meaning to homophobia to colonization, but the issues are those many readers can relate to or understand. Some writers spend more time on the impact of ideology and politics (like Kincaid) and some spend more time on private experience (Hemon). In all cases, however, the narratives are reaching 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. This is your goal!

Assignment

Please Note: Readings and lectures will provide insights into how to approach writing a personal narrative--please take note of the lecture materials! Critically reflect not only on the subject matter of the personal essays, but on how they are written, both at the level of the sentence and as a whole. Below are links to a few short, lighter, even humours personal essays for those who are interested in exploring pieces with a different tone than those we have read.

For your personal essays, choose a topic that matters to you and that you have a personal connection with and that you think touches on an issues others can connect with too. Remember that you are not merely expressing yourself, but writing about

something that anonymous readers can relate to. Consider how your experience relates to larger, more collective experiences. Like the non-fiction writers we have explored/are exploring this term, you will write about how common human experience or social issue intersects with your personal experience.

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

Also: consider that your readers are meant to be a general audience and that not all topics may be appropriate for general consumption. If you have concerns in this regard, please speak with your tutorial instructor.

You won't want to provide every single detail of the experience; instead, you will be selective. Your goal is to craft a narrative that engages the reader. Drafting, critically reviewing and revising will be essential for this essay.

You do not have to arrange the facts of experience you write about in chronological order and you can use story-telling techniques. Work to craft engaging, evocative prose by using rhetorical strategies we have examined throughout the course, such as the many rhetorical devices we've discussed and practiced, conscious word choice, description, and shifts in or choices of language registers (conversational, formal). The best non-fiction relies on a conscious use of writing techniques.

As with the rhetoric assignment, there will be a required peer-review session in lecture the week before your personal essay is due.

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, a childhood phase, being bullied, experiencing loss).

Have I found a way or ways to make this experience relevant to a disinterested reader by doing at least one of the following?

- Through my narrative, I have articulated an insight about some aspect of being human—even if the readers haven't had my experience, the insight I offer helps them understand something about a more general human experience and not just my personal experience. I may be explicit about this insight (like Hemon) or implicit (like Beard), but by the end of the essay my reader will understand.
- I have shared an experience that is representative of experiences other people similar to me have had or could have and that a wider audience should know or think about (like Kincaid); for example, explorations of culture, gender, sexuality, age, family situation, ability, relationships with technology,

friendships etc., I have explicitly or implicitly connected my experience to a larger issue.

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

- The writing is free from surface errors.
- There is no unnecessary wordiness, repetition or redundancy
- 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 are 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.
- I have used meaningful, sensory descriptions that help my readers connect to my narrative and see, hear, feel etc., the setting, events, objects, people, etc.
- I have tried to ensure that the diction, images, descriptions, and figurative devices (e.g. 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 (Hemon's repetition of inside/outside & before/after; the way Beard touches on things and returns to them, like plasma and her dog, at various points throughout the essay). Cohesive writing happens at all levels!

Examples of lighter/humours personal essays

David Sedaris, "[Me Talk Pretty One Day](#)"

Scaachi Koul, "[There's No Recipe for Growing Up](#)"

Harrison Scott Keys, "[My Dad Tried to Kill Me with an Alligator](#)"

Jonathan Franzen, "[Liking is for Cowards, Go For What Hurts](#)"

Six Miles

The air feels surprisingly cool and moist after the desert's dry heat, but there isn't enough of it and we pant walking the few steps up to the lodge. We stop to admire the view. It is a ruse but, still, we are rewarded with soaring mountaintops and endless forest. The children who ran by us are at the top of the stairs, their small torsos heaving up and down as they giggle. For the next three days we walk among green-topped giants, rest on warm boulders smoothed by their cool and watery neighbour, hoist ourselves up hillocks that feel like the tops of the mountains themselves. The scent of men's cologne follows us everywhere. It's so strong I turn to look for the misguided urbanite who decided to mask the smell of nature with one from a bottle. I am the misguided urbanite who learns the smell from a bottle is born here in the woods. We are neither mountaineers nor brave; we return each afternoon to shower and rest in our room, supplement our protein bars and nuts with fresh pizza and wine in the park restaurant. We take pictures in front of giant tree trunks, opening our arms to show the expanse of craggy brown between us. We can't quite capture the feeling of standing on the forest floor searching for the covert blue of the sky, the blue that matches her eyes, but we try.

We stop at a layby and take our last crisp breaths, savour the now-familiar scent of the sequoias before we get back into the car. We meander down through the trees until we reach the spot where they begin, the spot where we had seen all those donut-sized black splotches on the road on the way up. The splotches we had peered at until they distinguished themselves from the asphalt and their tarantula shapes became clear. Those we are happy to leave behind. We text photos of the rental car temperature gauge as it rises fifty degrees to 120°F. *What's*

that in Celsius? Really hot! The desert we descend to is an unbroken brown vista with buildings that hide in camouflage until they are right upon us. The scenery reminds us of Radiator Springs from *Cars* and we laugh at our lack of sophistication. She would have laughed, too. Soon, we will drive back through the fields of brown to the ocean and the city where we will board our return flight home, having done what we came here to do.

We have taken these sister trips together for more than a decade; we are not people who have squandered our time together. Sometimes others have joined us: a cousin, a sister-in-law, a daughter, an aunt, our mother. Sometimes one of us hasn't: jobs, finances, pregnancies, and schedules can get in the way. We are a quartet made of two duets—the twins form an incorruptible pair—yet we have operated just fine as a trio when the need has arisen. But it's been three years since our eldest sister died and made the trio permanent. Her death was not tragic as far as deaths go. There was no murder or car accident or plane crash. She wasn't a child, an adolescent, or even a young adult. And we'd had two years to get used to the idea. Two years of phone calls and holidays, birthdays and get-togethers. Two years to make sure she knew how much we loved her. We hadn't taken a sister trip since, for reasons both profound and benign, but I was approaching a milestone birthday and they asked me where I wanted to go.

After she died, our desire to mark our sister's life grew while our ideas of how to do so fell short. Three times we celebrated her birthday and consoled each other on the anniversary of her death. We planted a lilac tree, her favourite, and had a stone carved with her name. We felt disloyal for passing on necklaces that held her ashes, morbid for considering them. Now

that I was reaching the age she would never reach, the one that would forever make me older than my older sister, I knew how we should honour her. Years before, she had been inspired by a popular book about a woman who healed herself from grief and addiction by hiking the Pacific Crest Trail. It is vaguely embarrassing following someone else's path, awkward doing something your sister wanted to do but died before she could, hard to escape the ricochets of sibling rivalry that rattle your brain. Still, I told them I wanted to walk six miles in the Mojave Desert where the author of that book began her trek, where our sister found inspiration, and they agreed.

We drove our rental car to a seedy motel at the edge of the desert. We shoved a chair under the doorknob in our room and slept between scratchy sheets. We woke early, ate a breakfast of scrambled egg substitute and stale muffins in the motel reception area, then used GPS to find the right place. We hoisted stiff backpacks, their price tags still attached, onto our backs. We walked to the wooden trail marker and lifted the plexiglass lid to write in the visitor log, signing our names and then hers. *For our sister, who didn't make it.* It had been cloudless and hot, the barest breeze managing to kick up dust that melded with our sweat to create a roux on our skin. We stopped under gnarled junipers to reapply sunscreen and catch our breath, huddled together in the too-small shadows to hide from the August heat. Three miles in, we reached our destination. The place where the trail widened slightly, where the inspirational author had first pitched her tent. Despite years of family camping trips, our sister had never been much of a lover of the outdoors, hadn't been particularly adventurous or thrill-seeking, either. She had been a pacifist who fantasized about going to a gun range and

shooting paper bad guys dead. A cautious person who imagined herself parachuting out of a plane. A suburban mom who dreamt of a life-changing hike in the Sierra Nevada mountains.

There were no other hikers on the trail, no one to conscript to take a photo of the three of us in the small clearing, so we dropped our packs in its centre and took a picture of them to commemorate the moment. We stood in silence, imagining a different picture, one in which our sister's backpack rested in the dust next to ours, the square they formed mirroring the square of our bodies as we stood together in the shade. Then, when it was time, we retrieved our backpacks and started the return hike. There was an ease between us, a lightness that could only partly be explained by the descending elevation. It had taken us three years and three miles to pay tribute to our sister and these last three miles were for us, the sisters she left behind.

We returned to the car just as the sun reached its most violent spot in the sky. We basked in the A/C and drove to higher altitude and the second half of our trip. There, we would sleep in a rustic mountain lodge surrounded by the world's largest trees. There, we would climb to the edge of rocky outcrops to peer at the limitless valley below. There, we would crystallize our new arrangement. Not three sisters instead of four, but three sisters who carried the fourth among them.