

Module 3 Assignment Bundle and Instructions: The Personal Essay

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

*DUE DATES AND GRADE VALUES

Personal Essay:	DUE: March 3 (15%)
Composing Reflection:	DUE: March 3 (5%)
Peer Review:	In class: Feb. 17 (2.5%)

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, I ask that you zoom in on and write about a particular 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 about yourself or the world around you. 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 generation).
- Your personal essay should convey “a point” and, as always, include a “take-away” for the reader. 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.

- You will incorporate one – or two – quotations into your essay to help support and advance your “argument”. The quotation MUST come from one of our readings (September – February) or from any of the quotations available on the weekly slides.

Course readings, lectures, and tutorials 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 (Rubric):

- 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 carefully selected what to include in my story and what to leave out?
- Is the order of events and points organized in a way that makes sense for my purpose?
- Have I crafted a title that intrigues my reader and offers a meaningful ‘in’ to my essay?
- Have I considered how best to balance ethos, logos, and pathos for the purposes of my essay?

- Have I consciously chosen which language register or registers work best for my essay?
- Have I crafted my sentences consciously and carefully?
- Have I used some sentence-level rhetorical devices we have studied in this course with intention and purpose?
- Have I avoided stock phrases, jargon, and clichés?
- Have I used sensory descriptions that help my reader connect to my narrative and see, hear, feel my experience?
- Have I 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?
- 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?
- Is my writing free from surface errors?
- Is my writing free of major sentence mechanics errors?
- Does my writing have rhetorical force?

I look forward to reading your papers.

A Million Yellow Birds

“The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (King, 2003)

Everyday is a story. I believe that eventually stories become currency. Taking King’s words a small step further, I am also of the opinion that once we get to a certain point in our life our story is what validates our existence. It is the proof we carry that we have lived, continue to live, and want to live further. To each their own. What I mean by that is, no one will ever hold on to the same story as another, even those who were standing right by us shoulder-to-shoulder will end up with a different form of that currency unique to only them and yours unique to only you. Here’s part of mine.

“Wake up! Wake up!” My cousin, Junaid, violently shakes my body. As my eyelids begin to let go of each other I can start to assess the situation. I’m tired and groggy, my body refuses to move but once I see my cousin's face that all begins to change. He’s sweating – profusely to be exact. His chest rises and falls as he continues to gasp for air. I can almost hear his heartbeat smashing up against his ribcage. He stares at me intensely with deep brown eyes as wide as I’ve ever seen them. His entire body seems to be noticeably vibrating. Having seen all this my initial instinct is fear and dread. What went wrong? Who’s been hurt? Is everyone okay? Just as I begin to ask myself these questions, I notice something. A smile. His crooked teeth peer out of his mouth to greet me. A welcome sight for once. I’m now realizing that Junaid was not panicking, he wasn’t scared or worried even in the least. I’m now seeing for the first time in my life what it looks like to witness someone experiencing what can only be described as pure ecstasy.

I’m now being led up the stairs towards the rooftop. I can feel the sting of the cold stone steps every time my bare feet make contact with them. As I get closer to the top the spicy aroma of the evening chai gets stronger as it drifts through the heavy Lahore air. I can hear the chatter of an innumerable number of aunts and uncles as their voices flirt around the sound of songs being sung by a yet unknown group of women. I’m now standing on the rooftop and my eyes begin to widen just as Junaid’s did before me. I see them now: a million yellow birds in the night sky swimming in perfect harmony. Or at least that’s how they seemed to me. I run towards my mother, the only person who would have all the answers to all my questions. Just as I approach her she starts to read my mind as per usual as she says, “آج بسنت ہے” (Today is Basant!).

Basant, the kite festival – the welcoming of the spring season. A time of birth, of life, of renewal, of rejuvenation. In a region where tragedy often becomes the norm, Basant is a splash of golden yellow paint on a dark gloomy canvas. Everyone celebrates in their own way. Some choose to spend the day shopping in the bazaar, others will choose to become lost in conversation with their loved ones; but nearly everyone regardless of age, gender, or any other discriminant will take part in decorating the sky with their kite.

What a memory that is. It doesn't feel the need to intrude into my mind's space everyday or every week or even every month for that matter. But when it does choose to present itself, express itself from inside the annals of my memory, it does so with a certain strength and vigour that few memories can invoke.

It is memories precisely like this one which inspire me to write. Not always because I am asked to but because I want to – or perhaps even... need to.

Unfortunately, my relationship with the pen and paper has been tumultuous to say the least. In the early stages of being taught to write it felt like being given an instruction manual. Apparently, I absolutely needed to have an intro paragraph, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. The foundation of a supposed "*proper*" essay. To be frank, even as a 12-year-old boy I was able to glean that to write in this fashion was an entirely, utterly, and mind numbingly useless endeavour. I never wanted to see another blank page in my life.

Naturally, one might ask how I turned back towards writing despite expunging it from my life all those years ago. The answer is within a story. The story is a natural and pure being. Unauthorized by humankind it exists without permission. Free from any error or doubt, all its flaws are what make it truly one of a kind. It forever inhabits the minds of those who'd dare to listen.

You see, writing is no more a choice than it is to decide what city you are born in. I must write to find myself. To find the truest version of myself. To find my past, my present, and my future, I must write.

I stand now in a field of green grass behind a complex of town homes halfway across the world here in Windsor, Ontario. My hands are being pulled into the sky. The thin twine begins to burn my skin but I don't care. My mind has gone numb to any noxious sensation as my sole focus remains on one object. It floats above me, free from the pull of

and higher
and higher
and higher

it lifts my sorrows up into the sky as it flies higher
gravity

The kite is a wondrous thing. Such a simple and rudimentary object feeds joy into this world both directly through the fibres physically connecting me to it as well as indirectly through the gusts of wind it sends down upon any who happen lay eyes on it. It does not discriminate nor does it pick favourites. It is simply itself and nothing more.

Many years have come and gone after that night in Lahore, but the kite speaks to me now just as it did then. It tells me that everything is going to be okay and I firmly believe it. Finally, with a soft whisper it caresses my cheek and reminds me of a childhood that I once

had – no, I *still* have; perhaps not in the physical sense but it is still here, somehow, somehow, somewhere deep within me. As the sun begins to set and my mother beckons to me once more, I know I must go now.

I let go.

And I pick up my pen; it is simply itself and nothing more.
I write my story.

Reference

King, T. (2003). *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. House of Anansi.