

This I Believe Invention Exercise

What is a Personal Essay?

Published writers often speak of the Personal Essay genre with profound respect for the authenticity, vulnerability, and poignancy that comes from allowing readers into their lives. As readers and writers, if we believe in certain shared strands of meaning that hold all of humanity together, these commonalities are often articulated through the stories of our lives. After all, though our individual narratives vary widely, the themes are often the same: romance, family, growing up, nature, spirituality, neighbors, home, war, and death, for example. These common experiences often create a sense of community, and the personal essay can yield moments of profound clarity as the writer and the reader share complex understanding through local turns of phrase.

In school contexts, the personal essay is often thought of as a starting place for writers—a first assignment that allows students to begin with what they know before moving outward into research writing. Many teachers might tend to view the genre as simple, unobtrusive writing that flows easily, far less complex than rhetorical analyses or responses to literature. However, many composition scholars disagree with this view, validating the multivalent forces at work in this genre—a writer seeking to reveal, to communicate with an intended audience, to express the importance of the revelation, to invite common truths, and so on.

Others might believe that a young person has little to say through narration that would appeal to a larger audience; after all, doesn't communal relevance come only through lived experience and maturity not generally found in adolescence? Such relevance is absolutely present, albeit different in significant and refreshing ways. A young writer on the cusp of adulthood is embedded in a tangle of experience and emotion that most readers have left behind; to capture this moment and to enable others to re-experience the germ of its beauty represents a serious challenge that rewards writers and readers alike.

Thus, in moving toward a list of desired characteristics for a personal essay, it seems we could address the following points:

Authentic voice. The writer must create a narrative persona (or stance) that the reader believes authentic, or else the text risks coming off as trite or condescending. Voice is a difficult feature to discuss in writing, but readers can describe the stance a writer is taking as they react to a given style, dialogue, and point of view; they must choose whether to believe or identify. Thus, writers must seek to reveal true experiences, moments of relevance, and believed lessons learned; else, write fictional accounts as if they believed them to be true.

Narrative coherence. Most often covered in literary settings, the feature of narrative coherence regards the business of telling stories well: vivid description, controlled and appropriate pacing, subtle transitions, lively dialogue, and rich character development, for example. A personal essay generally relates a story and lessons learned; thus, if the storytelling fails, the whole essay usually fails. The same elements of narration that we celebrate in studies of canonical literature can be studied and applied to student narratives.

Communal relevance. At the end of the essay, the reader has the right to ask “So what?” and have it answered. A writer does not merely tell a story for personal reasons, but in order to communicate a larger truth to the reader; the story is the vehicle on which this truth, often metaphorically, rides. The personal essay argues, in a way, that the beauty associated with being a human can often best be expressed through the sharing of stories. Thus, there often appear two distinct sections of a personal essay: narrative and comment. Sometimes they are neatly divided, with an immediate lapsing into a story with brief comments at the end, but such segmenting is not always the case. Other writers will choose to comment along the way, interspersing authorial intrusions into the narrative to call attention to pertinent ideas.

Whatever the format, the reader understands the reason and the importance of the story beyond its aesthetic appeal.

- Where do you most often read first-person narratives?
- What features do they share?

Look at this essay and listen: Eve Birch, “The Art of Being a Neighbor”
<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102961694>

Break into groups and discuss the success of the essay using the criteria of personal writing.

- Does essay create an authentic voice? Which sections of the essay strike readers as truthful, either intellectually or emotionally?
- Does essay reflect narrative coherence? What element of storytelling does it successfully introduce?
- Does essay conclude with some communal relevance? How should essay balance between communicating meaning and preaching?
- Spend some time talking about what you might do for your credo assignment. This is (hopefully) what you will grow into your *This I Believe* speech. But first this small writing.



In the time we have left, please read carefully the Credo Assignment and begin thinking and writing. This is due next class.