

## Writing Narrative Personal Essays

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*There is no mystery in writing a personal narrative essays if you follow these easy steps.*

There is very little mystery to writing the personal narrative essay. There is no proper topic for such an essay. An essay can be about a variety of personal experiences. You, the writer, have the right to say what you want about your personal experience. You can write about anything -- Aunt Sally, the funky necklace you bought at a garage sale, the harrowing experience of being stuck in an elevator, the best Christmas you ever had, the worst day of your life. No topic or subject is off-limits; therefore there are endless opportunities to write an essay about your personal, point-of-view of what happened. Often the reason behind wanting to write a personal essay is unclear. Once the writing begins and the events are recorded and recounted it becomes clear that the writer is searching to find the meaning, the universal truth, the lesson learned from the experience. When writing, rewriting and good editing coalesce, a personal narrative essay becomes a beautiful thing. It shows how the past or a memory's significance affects the present or even the future.

We all have stories to tell. But facing a blank page is intimidating. Knowing where to begin becomes a real dilemma. A good place to start is with the word I. Write I was, I saw, I did, I went, I cried, I screamed, I took for granted. I is an empowering word. Once you write it on the page it empowers you to tell your story. That's exactly what you are going to do next. Tell the story. Get it all out. Don't worry about how many times I appears in the text. Don't worry how scattered and unfocused thoughts are. Write however your mind tells you to write. This style is often called freewheeling writing or stream of consciousness. Once the story is all down on paper you will go back and begin to shape the essay into a form that says exactly what you want it to say about your experience. If you're discouraged over what you've written, back away from it. Let it rest. Take a walk. Do something that distracts your mind from writing the essay. Many writers find that even while doing something other than writing, their writing mind continues to work out what needs to be said and continues to uncover the multi-layered associations and voices of what they're writing about.

Personal narrative essays are essentially non-fiction stories, ones that are neatly arranged like a road map that take the reader from point A to point B to point C. In life, and in our own personal experience, things aren't so straightforward as A-B-C. Characters, facts, places, conversations and reporting what happened, where you went, what you saw and what you did isn't always so neatly pulled together. That is your job, as the writer, to pull together all the elements so they bring the reader to the universal truth, the lesson learned or insight gained in your experience. How do you do this? Through re-writing and re-writing.

Each time you redo the story more will be revealed to you. You will get "in touch" with the universal truth. Every rewrite of the story will lead you to the aha! Once you get the aha! the next rewrite will show dramatic improvement. You will be able to arrange events into a chronological sequence that best suits the aha!. When you know the aha! create events, think up examples to better illustrate the theme of your essay. Use the senses when describing anything. Example, "It was a stellar day. The air had a salty tang to it as it blew off the ocean. Little white caps broke not more than twenty feet out then rushed to meet the shore. Above me sea gulls screeched and circled in a cloudless blue sky. The sun was in its Spring zenith". The more descriptive language you use, the more you will place the reader right there in the experience with you. Colorful or hard-driving language are the tools of the essayist.

Essay writing forces you to shape your experience until it can be fully understood by others. Use every tool available in the writing craft. Construct dialogue, use metaphors but most importantly, use language with a wide breadth of sensory detail. If you find yourself getting lost, stop writing. Start reading other essays. Every issue of Reader's Digest always has at least two. Read eight back issues of a magazine with personal narrative essays in their content. By osmosis, you'll get the feel of how essays are constructed. Go back and do the rework on yours. Include dialogue, include examples that best support or illustrate the aha! of the experience you're writing about. Beef up the description of a character. Give them succinct, meaningful dialogue that pushes the reader closer and closer to the aha! of your essay.

The next step is to get feedback on what you have written. If someone close to you or someone really intimate with the experience you've written about says, "Hey, that's not the way it happened," don't worry. Little white lies are serving to drive the aha! of the experience into the mind of the reader. Your truth is embedded in your writing. To enable the reader to visualize or grasp the concept, little white lies are a necessity. Listen to the responses of readers, then go back and rewrite the portions that were unclear to the reader.

Next, have someone read the essay aloud to you or you read it aloud into a tape recorder.

Listen to the flow of words. Listen to where the reader stumbles. Listen where pauses fall. Listen to where the reader runs out of breath. These are all clues as to where more refining or tweaking need to be done. Go back and do it! You are close to sitting back in the chair and saying, "Yes! This is exactly what I wanted to say about what I experienced." It is a beautiful feeling. Work to achieve it.

To recap how to write a personal narrative essay follow these points:

- Write *I* on a blank page.
- Tell the story as it flows from your mind.
- Let the story rest in its scattered, unfocused form.
- Begin rewriting. Shaping events in a way to best suit what you want to say.
- Rejoice when the aha! of your experience is revealed.
- Re-write, re-write, and re-write. Little white lies are okay.
- Use language that is full of words that tap into the senses.
- Get feedback from a reader.
- Re-write.
- Have the essay read aloud. Listen.
- Fine tune and tweak.
- Grin from ear-to-ear when everything on the page reveals the aha! in the experience perfectly.
- And - Kudos on a job well done!