Narrative and Descriptive Essays: Purpose and Organization

Inquire: Introduction to Personal Writing

Overview

Personal writing is nonfiction writing as told from the viewpoint of the writer. It is about how the world we share has uniquely impacted and shaped the writer’s outlook, whether momentarily or permanently.

Personal writing is written in first person. These essays are not merely anecdotal. They are crafted so as to use what might start as an anecdote to lead to an emotional response in the reader.

The two most common forms of personal writing are narrative essays and descriptive essays. Narrative essays focus on telling a story based on the personal experience of the writer. Descriptive essays focus on describing something — an event, a person, an object, an emotion, a memory — based on the personal viewpoint of the writer.

Big Question: How can you learn to write about your viewpoint of the world?

Watch: Telling and Describing

In the TV sitcom Seinfeld, whenever the character George Costanza would break up with a girlfriend, he’d say, “It’s not you, it’s me.”

His statement could also be the watchword for you to follow in personal writing. You could say to the world, “It’s not you, it’s me,” because writing personal essays is about you. It’s about your experiences, your feelings, your opinions, and tastes.

Personal writing is about sharing your unique, individual perspective with readers. This is not a skill you have to acquire. You’ve been sharing your viewpoint in conversations with your family and friends your entire life. From the first time you said, “Ice cream is good,” you were on your way to being a regular essayist in The New Yorker Magazine.

There’s a narrator inside your head that’s always, in a sense, writing personal essays. You’re continually telling yourself about the nature of what you’re viewing and experiencing, describing it in terms that are meaningful to you. Now you’re going to put it on paper.

The two most common forms of personal writing are narrative essays and descriptive essays.
Narrative essays tell a story. The story is about something you did. Even if it’s about something someone else did, it’s still about your viewpoint of what they did.

This is not reporting. Let’s say your topic is an NBA championship game. A reporter writes only about what the players did. A narrative essayist writes about their unique, personal experience watching what the players did. If your perspective of the event is not included, it’s not a narrative essay.

Descriptive essays give readers a detailed sensory description. They’re like painting a picture with words. A brief story may be included to set up the details, but what’s important is the descriptive picture that’s ultimately created.

Instead of telling about an entire basketball game, a descriptive essay might describe, in vivid sensory detail a LeBron James 360°-in-your-face-tomahawk-dunk from your unique point of view.

The question framing a narrative essay is “What happened, and how did it affect you?”

The question framing a descriptive essay is “What’s that like?”

In personal writing, don’t hesitate to use the words I, me, my, and mine, because whether it’s a narrative or a descriptive essay, what ultimately matters is you.

So don’t hold back. Tell us what you think.

Read: Personal Writing: Narration and Description

Overview

Personal writing is a type of nonfiction writing that is based on personal opinions, feelings, and experiences. These essays are not research papers. They are not an exercise in listing facts. Of course, facts can be used in personal writing to support the writer’s opinions and conclusions, but it is the writer’s personal perspective that is emphasized.

To understand personal writing, it is helpful to review the difference between objectivity and subjectivity. Objectivity is universal. It is not influenced by personal feelings or opinions.

A basic example of an objective statement would be, “The sun rises in the east.” This is a fact that has always been and will always be true. No matter how hard someone may try to find one, there is no argument against it.

Subjectivity is individual. Subjectivity is based on or influenced by personal opinions, tastes, and feelings. Personal writing is subjective. Objective statements may be woven into the fabric of the essay, but they are offered either to support the perspectives offered or to help advance the dialogue.

A basic example of a subjective statement would be, “The temperature is too hot today.” What someone feels is “too hot” is entirely of their own opinion. “Too hot” for one person may be the perfect temperature for another — perhaps even too cold for a third person.
An Example of Personal Writing

Here is an example of a paragraph from a personal paper about growing up on a farm:

“I sometimes feel I was raised on a John Deere tractor. My father was a wheat and cotton farmer in Southwest Oklahoma. He regularly took me along with him when it was time to plant the seed, and then again later after harvest when it was time to till the soil. I’d sit in front of him on the tractor, bouncing along row after row on the flat Oklahoma plain. They say that when you’re on the surface of the ocean, the horizon is three miles away. It felt like that on the farm; the landscape was so featureless. Sometimes my father would tap me on the shoulder and point in the distance to a funnel cloud that had momentarily descended. You could see forever.”

You can note in this paragraph that the emphasis is on the writer’s personal experience of being on a farm. That experience is supported by the objective fact of the distance of the horizon on the ocean.

Types of Personal Writing

Two of the most common forms of personal writing are narrative essays and descriptive essays.

The example paragraph above is in the narrative style. Narrative essays tell a story. They portray personal experiences. They allow for creativity in storytelling, and they aim for an emotional connection with the reader.

Descriptive essays are focused on describing something — an event, a situation, a person, a food, a flower. Even though a basic story might set up the description, the emphasis is more on what’s being described than on a series of events. Descriptive essays are also more sensory in nature than narrative essays, meaning they focus on what can be perceived by the five physical senses of taste, sight, touch, smell, and sound.

Considerations When Writing a Narrative Essay

1. What is your thesis?

A thesis is the central, core idea of your essay. It is a (usually) one-sentence statement that summarizes the point your essay is arguing. Once you have a thesis, list several pieces of content that will help you develop your core idea so the reader emotionally shares your experience with you.

2. How should your narrative essay be organized?

You’re telling a story, so use standard plot elements such as characters, introduction, complication, climax, and resolution. If your plot contains within it an enlightening idea or thought-provoking conclusion, all the better. As you’re writing, think about the elements of your favorite movies and books. How do those stories capture and hold your attention?

3. What voice should you use?

This is a trick question. The only voice you should use is your own. Even if you’re telling someone else’s experience, you’re telling it from your perspective. Keep the focus on your voice. Don’t think too hard about your voice. It’s your natural style of writing and uniquely yours by default.

4. What is the quality of your word choice?
The most skillful writers use unique, vivid words in a way that sounds like everyday language. Write it. Think about it. Write it better. Repeat. However, make sure the words you choose are consistent with your voice. If you wouldn’t typically describe someone as *phlegmatic*, then perhaps simply refer to them as *calm*.

5. Are your sentences fluid?

Be conversational, not contrived. Don’t try to make your readers guess what’s going on. Take your readers by the hand and lead them through your experience. To help hold your readers’ attentions, vary the length of your sentences. Read your sentences out loud and listen to their rhythm. If it feels a bit stale, don’t hesitate to rewrite them.

**Considerations When Writing a Descriptive Essay**

1. What senses are evoked by your subject matter?

Write your paper in a way that your reader will feel as if he’s witnessing the events unfold in first person. If you’re writing about the best pizza parlor in the world, it’s taste. If the pizza parlor always features jazz, it’s taste and sound. If the pizza parlor features live jazz and was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, it’s taste and sound and sight.

2. Have you made the right word choices?

When writing a descriptive essay, consult a thesaurus regularly. Zero in on the nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs that will best help your reader truly see and feel the story.

3. Have you thought about metaphors and similes?

Descriptions, whether in narrative or descriptive essays, can pop with the right comparison. Take, for example, Kurt Vonnegut’s simile to describe an army recruiter from Mars in Sirens of Titan: “She wore a frizzy black wig that looked as though it had been nailed to a farmer’s barn door for years.”

4. What’s the mood?

Descriptive essays convey a mood. Your trip to the pizza parlor might be cheerful. Riding a tractor at night might be mysterious. Reading a Kurt Vonnegut novel might be deeply illuminating. Be sure to establish a mood and maintain it throughout your essay. Just make sure the mood is appropriate for the subject matter you’re discussing.

**Reflect: Personal Preference**

**Poll**

Which type of personal essay do you feel most comfortable writing?

- Narrative
- Descriptive
Expand: The Rhetorical Situation

In technical terms, when you’re writing an essay for class, an email to a colleague, even a text message to a friend, you are creating a rhetorical situation.

The phrase itself comes from the word rhetoric, which means persuasive language used in order to change someone’s perspective. Think about the way politicians speak; they want you to see only their perspective without recognizing another side.

The rhetorical situation is the overall context for your communication and includes the following elements: (1) writer, (2) subject, (3) purpose, (4) audience, (5) form, and (6) context.

Personal Experience is the Focus

Remember, in personal writing, not only does your opinion count, it’s the only opinion that counts.

In an op-ed article in The New York Times entitled “The Soul-Crushing Student Essay,” Scott Korb, who teaches writing to first-year college students, describes his exasperation with students who don’t feel their personal experience is important. “One reason reveals itself when someone finally asks the clarifying question: ‘Do you mean we can write with the word I?’”

Yes. Write with the word I. And with the words me, my, and mine. This is the point of personal writing; it is about the personal experience of the writer. So don’t hold back. Be confident that your experience is as important as anyone else’s — because it is — and tell us about it. Think it through from your unique, individual point of view, and then put it on the page.

Your Audience

Even though you’re writing about yourself, you want to keep your audience in mind. You can address your reader directly, if it seems appropriate for your particular topic. It’s somewhat like being a standup comedian. “You know how it is when you can’t find your keys and you’ve got them in your hand?” Feel free to use the words you, your, and yours.

Keep in mind whether the nature of what you’re conveying will be familiar to your audience or if it will seem foreign to them. Eating at your favorite pizza parlor might be a universal experience, but growing up with a parent who’s an astronaut probably involved moments most of us have never considered. Cater to your audience and construct your essay accordingly.

The Purpose of Your Essay

To help you determine the purpose of your essay, ask yourself, “Why have I chosen this particular topic?”

What do you want your essay to do? Do you want to share a unique insight you had while watching 2001: A Space Odyssey? Do you want to describe the way David Bowie’s voice on “Space Oddity” makes you feel? Maybe you want to write about when you went to NASA and tasted the food the astronauts eat in space, and how it changed your mind about what you wanted to be when you grew up. Your essay needs to have a particular directional element that is made clear for your reader. Make sure you establish that direction in the beginning, and then be sure to take your reader there.
Keep in mind that your essay will come from a personal place, but once it’s shared, it could stimulate new thoughts in your reader. So consider what effect you would like to see your essay have on your audience.

The Subject of Your Essay

If you’re writing an essay for school — as opposed to writing for a newspaper or magazine — the subject of your essay will probably be assigned, but it will be in general terms. It’s up to you to determine the specifics you’ll write about.

For instance, you could be assigned to write about a vacation you took. You might write about a trip to the Grand Canyon you were forced to participate in when you were a child. You could describe the agony of riding in the backseat for so many days and putting up with your obnoxious brother when you could have been home playing with your friends. Then, you completely forgot those feelings when you stepped out of the car and saw the canyon. You might write about when you went to Hawaii and ate a ripe pineapple fresh off the tree, and how you’ll never again be able to eat the pineapples back home. Or, if you believe your teacher is game and you’re feeling creative, you might want to express your feelings about Pluto being demoted to a dwarf planet. You could describe how you were abducted by aliens who transported you, defying all known laws of physics, to the edge of the solar system where they showed you firsthand that yes, it really is a planet.

Whatever you choose, make sure it’s something you’re interested in and something you want to tell about and describe for your audience.

And then enjoy finding the perfect words to write about how you — yes, you — see the world we share.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

7 Helpful Tips on How to Write a Memorable Personal Essay
- Further guidelines on writing personal essays
- https://www.grammarly.com/blog/personal-essay/

Personal Essay
- A video overview on personal essays
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=958nb59AmRs

10 personal essays that will teach you how to write
- More examples of personal essay writing
- https://leighshulman.com/10-personal-essays-that-will-teach-you-how-to-write/

Lesson Glossary

thesis: the central, core idea of your essay
narrative essays: essays that tell a story
descriptive essays: essays that describe something
objectivity: a state of being or describing a statement that is universal in fact; it is not personal nor does it have any bias or feelings attached
subjectivity: a state of being or describing a statement that is based on personal biases, experiences, and background
Check Your Knowledge

1. What is a thesis?
   A. the outline of your essay
   B. the main argument you’re discussing
   C. the concluding paragraph of your essay
   D. the evidence supporting your main idea

2. When writing a descriptive essay, you should give your reader…
   A. a sensory experience.
   B. a play-by-play narrative.
   C. a general overview of a topic.
   D. a detailed list of characters.

3. Personal essays are another form of research papers.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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