

Week 20—Step 2 of Personal Essay

This week, you will write the rough draft of your personal essay. Note that this essay should be slightly longer than our last two: 750-1000 words. Follow your outline, but feel free to change it if you come up with new ideas as you write. Each number in your outline may correspond to a single paragraph, but it may also require more than one. Go with your instincts as you write.

The following are instructions for this first draft:

Characters: You are writing about your memories, and those memories naturally include people. Your essay may even be about a particular person, but any essay will include a cast of characters, and your reader will want to get to know them. First, acknowledge who the "main characters" are in your essay. In "The Death of the Moth," we could say the main characters were the narrator and the moth. Woolf took a lot of care to describe the moth very precisely so that we could picture it in our minds. In "Once More to the Lake," the main characters are the father and son. We get to know the father through his memories and his nostalgia, and we get to know the son as being very like his father when his father was a boy. In "Shooting an Elephant," there is a whole crowd of people, but we could say the main characters are the narrator and the elephant. The narrator describes himself in the opening paragraphs; he explains who he is, where he comes from, what he does, and how he feels about it, as well as how other people feel about him. We also get to know him through his weaknesses and his guilt in the rest of the essay. We get to know the elephant through the Orwell's vivid description. Finally, in "How to Drown a June Bug," the main characters are the narrator and her family. Here is an example of Deja Earley describing her father:

My dad threw himself into whatever business endeavor seemed promising—Amway, Consumer Byline, international banking deals, a scripture case company. He came home excited to tell us that the funds of our big break would be coming through "Monday or Tuesday of next week"—it became a standing joke in our family because "next" never switched to "this." No one was more heartbroken about this than my father. He walked into every deal believing it would pull us out of our rut. I don't know why he tried multi-marketing schemes and sketchy endeavors. Sometimes he seems noble to me: the man who could have walked away from his family when it got hard, but didn't. Other times that version of my father seems unforgivably young, naïve.

And here is an example of Earley describing her mother:

My mother once told me that in the early days of their marriage, when my family had struggled with money before, they believed they could change their situation by changing their attitude. She confesses they went to a hypnotist, trying to tap into the powerful forces of their own minds. The hypnotist had had them chart their goals and dreams on a big poster board they kept in their bedroom. As hard as I try, I can't quite imagine my pragmatic parents in the office of a hypnotist, or carefully marking off progress toward a distant goal. I do remember a vestige of

those days. I remember my mother's mantra that she shouted above the roar of the vacuum or as she walked down the hall toward her home office, punching her fists in the air, "We refuse to give up (She stretched the word refuse so it was very long and emphatic.) We will continue boldly, firmly, and insistently (dramatic pause) until our good appears!" Depending on how she shouted the word "refuse," I knew how badly she needed to hear herself say those words.

In the four essays we've studied, the writers' descriptions help us see and understand the characters. We come to feel like we know them. In the same way, you will want your reader to come to know the characters in your essay. Describe the way your main characters look, talk, and act. Reflect on who they are, what they care about, what they want. This applies both to the way you portray yourself in the essay and the way you portray other important people.

Narration and Reflection: Remember that this essay should have a very different structure from our last two essays. This essay should be a combination, a rhythm, of narration and reflection. Narration is when you describe things that happened; you tell a story. Reflection is when you describe what you notice about people and events, what you think and how you feel about them. So in your essay, you describe memories with vivid language to evoke pictures and feelings for your reader, and you also reflect on those memories. Here is an example from "The Death of the Moth" by Virginia Woolf. Narration is in green; reflection is in orange.

The same energy which inspired the rooks, the ploughmen, the horses, and even, it seemed, the lean bare-backed downs, sent the moth fluttering from side to side of his square of the windowpane. One could not help watching him. One, was, indeed, conscious of a queer feeling of pity for him. The possibilities of pleasure seemed that morning so enormous and so various that to have only a moth's part in life, and a day moth's at that, appeared a hard fate, and his zest in enjoying his meager opportunities to the full, pathetic. He flew vigorously to one corner of his compartment, and, after waiting there a second, flew across to the other. What remained for him but to fly to a third corner and then to a fourth? That was all he could do, in spite of the size of the downs, the width of the sky, the far-off smoke of houses, and the romantic voice, now and then, of a steamer out at sea. What he could do he did. Watching him, it seemed as if a fiber, very thin but pure, of the enormous energy of the world had been thrust into his frail and diminutive body. As often as he crossed the pane, I could fancy that a thread of vital light became visible. He was little or nothing but life.

Here is another example from "Once More to the Lake" by E. B. White:

The lake had never been what you would call a wild lake. There were cottages sprinkled around the shores, and it was in farming although the shores of the lake were quite heavily wooded. Some of the cottages were owned by nearby farmers, and you would live at the shore and eat your meals at the farmhouse. That's what our family did. But although it wasn't wild, it was a fairly large and undisturbed

lake and there were places in it which, to a child at least, seemed infinitely remote and primeval.

I was right about the tar: it led to within half a mile of the shore. But when I got back there, with my boy, and we settled into a camp near a farmhouse and into the kind of summertime I had known, I could tell that it was going to be pretty much the same as it had been before--I knew it, lying in bed the first morning, smelling the bedroom, and hearing the boy sneak quietly out and go off along the shore in a boat. I began to sustain the illusion that he was I, and therefore, by simple transposition, that I was my father. This sensation persisted, kept cropping up all the time we were there. It was not an entirely new feeling, but in this setting it grew much stronger. I seemed to be living a dual existence. I would be in the middle of some simple act, I would be picking up a bait box or laying down a table fork, or I would be saying something, and suddenly it would be not I but my father who was saying the words or making the gesture. It gave me a creepy sensation.

And here is another from "Shooting an Elephant" by George Orwell:

But I did not want to shoot the elephant. I watched him beating his bunch of grass against his knees, with that preoccupied grandmotherly air that elephants have. It seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him. At that age I was not squeamish about killing animals, but I had never shot an elephant and never wanted to. (Somehow it always seems worse to kill a large animal.) Besides, there was the beast's owner to be considered. Alive, the elephant was worth at least a hundred pounds; dead, he would only be worth the value of his tusks, five pounds, possibly. But I had got to act quickly. I turned to some experienced-looking Burmans who had been there when we arrived, and asked them how the elephant had been behaving. They all said the same thing: he took no notice of you if you left him alone, but he might charge if you went too close to him.

And, finally, here are a couple of examples from "How to Drown a June Bug" by Deja Earley:

The next year there were no snails in the pink lady plant or june bugs bothering the figs. I paid more attention to them because I felt I had saved them. And we had a new assignment, the most cunning threat yet—we were asked to take on the quarter-sized white moths that feasted on our salad nasturtiums and the leaves of our sugar baby watermelons. The bounty for the moths was an incredible fifty cents. But while my brother went out netting them for hours at a time, I saw it differently than I had the year before. It was strange that something dainty was worth the price of twenty-five junes. And I didn't like the thought of the snails I had stomped and the june bugs I'd drowned. It bothered me that the new pests didn't slime shoes or buzz in my ear, that I often confused the moths with flashes of sunlight, and that they landed like ballerinas on the petals. I didn't like how easily they fled. But I did like that they escaped. After the best maneuvers,

sometimes they still shot out of my brother's net, ready to land and feast again, and I liked them for that. I wanted to save both the watermelons and the white moths. It may not be true that that was the first time the world felt complex, but it seems like it was. Because I couldn't decide whether it was good or bad to exterminate those moths, I never caught one.

I remember we managed to laugh on the day we moved out, joking about the black burn in the linoleum where years before my brother had panicked and thrown down a flaming tortilla. I sat backwards on a dining room chair, and looked through the slats, laughing at my brother. I was experimenting with my emotions, trying to see if I could keep my sister's jokes and the heavy feeling in my mind simultaneously.

In summary, this is what you should turn in by Friday, February 18:

A rough draft of your personal essay, 750-1000 words.

Remember to proofread all your work before turning it in!

Allotment of Points for Rough Draft

Length: 10

Grammar: 5

Organization: 5

Characterization: 10

Narration: 10

Reflection: 10

Total: ___ / 50 = ___% = ___ / 10