



Jessica McCaughey

Personal Essay Prompt

The Essay

This assignment provides you with a venue to practice writing for exploration, discovery, and reflection, while at the same time practicing writing in the unique genre of the personal essay. Personal essays offer us the chance to write about ourselves, as well as allowing us to grapple with the larger implications of objects, relationships, and experiences. Finally, this personally essay assignment specifically allows you to consider the ethical and scientific dilemmas of memory in creative nonfiction that we have discussed this semester, make these difficult choices in your own work, and explore that process in the form of the memo or rationale below.

In choosing a subject or story, I encourage you to be creative. You might choose to write about a major event or trauma, or you may choose to examine some event or relationship that is “smaller” (or weird, or funny, or confusing). You should consider where you’ll start and end—in the beginning? The middle? Or a far away? You might use humor, or maybe not. As we’ve seen in our readings, there are no hard and fast rules in writing creative nonfiction, but you should consider what pieces of writing struck you over the course of the semester, and why.

You’ll want to work hard to avoid the cliché. Amazing essays exist about favorite stuffed animals, grandparents, weddings, and first loves, but there are far more essays on such topics that are not particularly compelling. This is because most of what is said is expected. For example, while a story about a watch your father gave you on your birthday is fine, a more unique story—one that is less expected—is more likely to be engaging and to genuinely show insight into your personality, perspective, or background. In brainstorming, you might consider experiences or conversations that did not end “neatly,” meaning that an exploration in writing about the experience would be unexpected. For instance, you might consider a friendship you had that was unlikely, or a strange job that you enjoyed but did not expect to, a distinct travel experience, or a passion that doesn’t seem to mesh with the rest of your personality (I’m thinking of a great essay I read by a woman in her late-20s about her secret obsession with the band Hanson, of “MMMBop” fame).

The most successful personal essays usually contain both some element of storytelling *and* reflection. As you’ve learned, one of the biggest difficulties in writing a successful personal narrative is choosing what to put in vs. what to leave out—the details. Because the assignment requires that you synthesize description and analysis, you’ll need to pay particular attention to clarity and organization.

Finally, you should consider the fictional techniques we examined in the creative nonfiction works this semester (imagery, dialogue, narrative arc, etc.) and how you can most effectively utilize them, as well as how you will determine what kind of persona you want to portray in your essay.

Grading Criteria

In grading the final, revised version of this essay, I'll be looking for a mix of writing-centric and memory-related elements.

An "A" personal essay will also include:

- A non-cliché hook (this is particularly important in personal essays)
- A unique topic
- A distinct voice (one that has something to say beyond the cliché ideas so often present in personal essays)
- Clear organization (though not necessarily chronological organization)
- Correct grammar and proper punctuation
- A consistent tone, or one that shifts purposefully and appropriately
- A discerning eye when it comes to cutting irrelevant information
- A mixture of both storytelling and reflection
- An indication of something larger about the writer (his or her values or personality, opinions or family history, for example), rather than simply a snapshot of the writer in a specific situation
- Use of fictional techniques discussed in class (think scenes, dialogue, imagery)
- A distinct, consistent persona throughout the essay
- Appropriate transitions between ideas
- A compelling conclusion that (likely) does not rest on moral or ethical judgments (reread some of the essay conclusions we've read this semester and examine what conclusions were most effective to you)

Memo/Rationale

The accompanying memo will examine the choices related to the truth or memory of your piece—essentially it will walk us through the answers to the questions we've been examining all semester, specifically in the context of the difficult choices you made in writing essay. You can think of it as a "What it was like to write this essay" essay.

You may consider discussing how you developed your persona, how you made decisions about what details to leave in or out, or how you addressed issues of time. You might directly address the reliability of your own memory. How confident are you in the details? Did you speculate or embellish? Why or why not? Did you use the "perhapsing" method or portray speculation as fact? Are there elements in your essay that are not "precisely" true? Or details that get at an emotional truth, rather than a literal one? Most importantly, why did you make these decisions? What impact did your choices surrounding memory have on the piece as a whole, and are you left with any lingering discomfort about how you handled potential inaccuracies? The memo will not address each of the questions above, but should be a short, focused exploration of the choices you made in your essay.