

A Bare-Bones Guide to the Personal Essay

By Rod Baird

I know what you're thinking: not another essay! Relax. This is a different breed—a kinder, gentler essay that resides within the realm of creative writing. There is no mandatory thesis statement, no forced topic sentence or pained conclusion. But it may well be the most important essay you will ever write. Why? Because this is the one that shows colleges who you are. This is the essay to your future.

The personal essay is a free form of writing that begins with a private experience and goes on to share a lesson that you learned from it. It is best if this lesson is a universal one that resonates with the reader.

What makes the personal essay so different from other kinds of writing? Well, for starters, its two distinct parts, the story and the reflection, are fun to explore! The story is the narrative of your experience, full of vivid description and real-life dialogue, bringing your words to life for the reader. In the reflection part, you think out loud about your experience and express an epiphany, or a sudden gratifying conclusion about life, in an original way. The art of the personal essay as a whole shows how you weave your way through the details of this event to realize its uni-

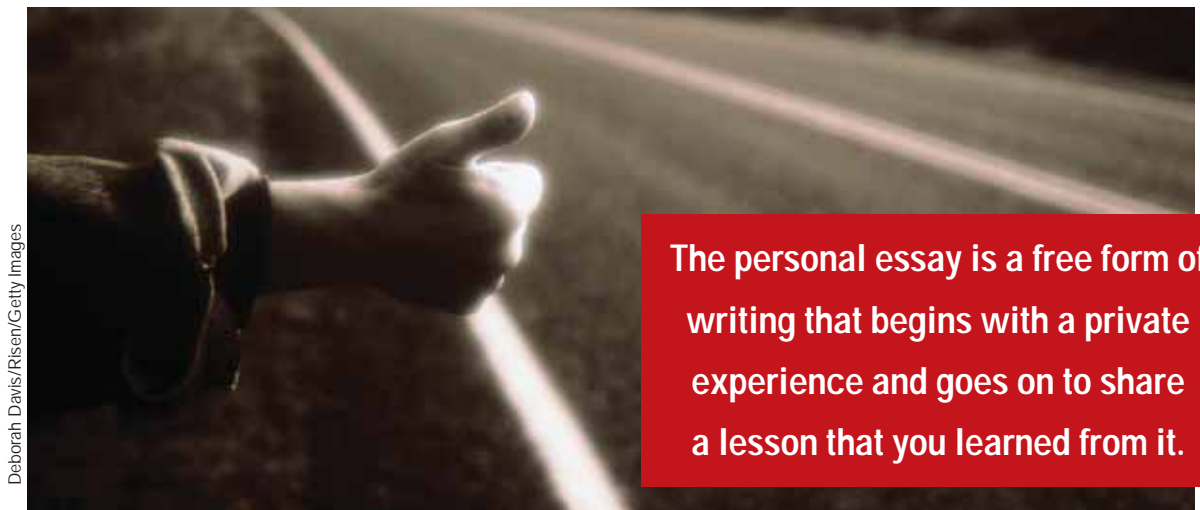
versal significance, thereby revealing its true meaning. And only you can relate this truth to your reader.

It has been said that the personal essay is the older person's genre because it relies so much on memory, insight, and perspective, which we accumulate over a lifetime. But you have memories, too, as well as a keen mind that can make sense of your own experiences as no one else can.

Don't know where to start? Your life is full of stories that itch to be shared. Reach for those memories that you keep replaying in your head, and pick one! Think hard: What does the memory mean? How did it change you? What does your "reflection" say about you that can speak to the rest of us? Now write. Rewrite. Shape. Meditate. Relive. Rewrite again.

The secret of a personal essay lies in the rewriting: The more you write, the more you understand. And each time you do, your lesson—and your truth—will become clearer, both to yourself and to your reader.

As a model, I've included a personal essay about how hitchhiking taught me an important life lesson about freedom. I've annotated it for you so you can see the pattern of weaving together the story and reflection.



Deborah Davis/Risen/Getty Images

Pick a title with some extra meaning.

Hitching a Ride to Freedom

Introduce your story.

During my senior year in high school, I hitchhiked from upstate New York to Florida to visit my grandma. It wasn't that my parents carelessly allowed me to take chances. It's more that they somehow knew interfering might be worse. They simply trusted that things would work out all right, and in the end they usually did.

Include some commentary.

Color your story with details and vivid descriptions.

I went alone because I wasn't afraid not to. Along the way, I found myself deep in South Carolina. The superhighways hadn't been constructed yet, and I was between rides on a backcountry road. As the sun drooped below the tobacco fields, the red soil broiled. Rows of ramshackle buildings leaned against the hills. A couple of curious kids scurried over.

"Where you walking to, mister?" one asked.

"Florida."

"Isn't that a long ways off?"

"Yup."

"You hungry?"

"Starved."

"My mama's got supper cooking. You're welcome."

I shared a meal of rabbit and kale with a migrant farm family.

Now reflect: Why did this happen?

I remember these stories so vividly because they're all mine. You can't forget what you create yourself.

Add dialogue for authenticity.

Much later, I was between rides again—this time in a Georgia bayou. It must have been two or three o'clock in the morning, pitch-dark, not a sign of a car anywhere. I was 17, and cell phones wouldn't be invented for 25 years. The sounds seeping up from the swamp were unlike any I had ever heard. I was in a mess, but whatever happened was up to me. Consequence was how I was going to learn.

Return to your story. Vivid details bring it to life. Then add more commentary.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a pair of headlights appeared. I stuck out my thumb. A sports car flashed by and then braked along the dusty shoulder. It was an MG convertible, my dream car.

"Can you drive a shift?" the hippie-ish driver asked.

"I sure can."

"Take over. I need to get some sleep."

Add more dialogue.

I climbed into the leather cockpit, gripped the wooden wheel, toyed with the glowing toggle switches, and looked up at the unfamiliar stars. While the guy slept, I drove, impossibly happy. A few hours later, as the sun rose and the new day settled like scented red dust over the orange groves, I knew I had crossed into Florida.

Be descriptive. Careful images can become symbols and metaphors.

Finish with the epiphany, the conclusion about life that you've drawn from your experience.

My newfound freedom was like that ride. Thanks to my parents' quiet confidence in me to fend for myself, I had acquired a fearlessness to fail or succeed on my own terms. That would shape my entire life.

Essay This The word *essais*, was coined by the 16th-century French scholar Michele de Montaigne. It means an attempt. Now it's your turn to try to write a personal essay. There is no right or wrong topic. You can write about anything—your first fishing expedition with Dad, your most difficult New Year's Resolution, or the worst day of your life. Tell your story in the first person, using the word *I—I was, I saw, I had, I tried, I feel, I went* . . .