

The ART of the personal essay

By Sheila Bender

How to turn a nagging question or a troubling experience into entertaining and insightful writing

IN THE 20 YEARS I have been writing personal essays and helping others develop theirs for publication, I've read thousands of essays and judged thousands more for contests. So many times, the personal essays I've read veer from making personal discoveries and simply report rather than evoke feeling. In thinking about my own writing process and talking with others, I have identified fears personal-essay writers succumb to that endanger their ability to write honestly of their experiences and convey their insights:

Fear of offending others with a personal point of view.

Fear of not having enough interesting experience and insight.

Fear of not being up to the task of exploring experience and using "I."

To overcome these stumbling blocks, I advise writers to:

- Affirm that hunger for self-knowledge drives them to write despite their fears and is more important than what others think of them.
- Believe that writing before they know what they will find leads to insight.
- Trust in the power of words to convey experience rather than judge themselves inadequate for the task.

- Remember that they are the filter for all that they see, hear, taste, touch and smell, so using "I" in their writing is an honest and necessary gesture.

How do successful personal essayists go from these beliefs to turning images of their experience into cohesive, moving explorations that resonate with readers? I believe it is by identifying a persistent question.

For example, my mother recently asked my pregnant daughter if there was a way to test if a woman is carrying triplets. It was her response to my daughter's news about a man who is one of a set of triplets. I had the impression that my mother wondered if my daughter was carrying triplets, though we had all seen the sonogram of her new little boy. My concern that my mother wasn't remembering would force me to sit down and write a personal essay to answer the question: "What effect is my mother's aging having on me?"

I quickly remembered other times she was out of date—wanting to create dance cards for my sweet-16 birthday party, for instance, and thinking that I needed quite an extensive wardrobe to leave for college in the '60s when all I was going to wear were jeans and sweaters. As

I thought about these instances, I remembered the time my sister and I made a trip by train to visit our great aunt and her two sons, who were not much older than we. I remembered the new hats my mother insisted on buying for us to wear because we were going to visit "wealthy New Englanders."

I remembered our excitement at wearing them. And I remembered Aunt Bertha meeting us at the station and saying, "Take those hats off. They look so silly." My essay inquiring about the effect of my mother's aging on me became an essay about the loneliness of feeling like a stranger living in a world where her knowledge was incorrect or couldn't possibly apply.

As soon as I started writing the essay, I worried, "What if my mother reads it? Will she disagree with me? Be embarrassed?" I asked these questions reflexively, even though I knew that if the essay was strong enough in me, I would write it no matter the answers. When writing from personal experience, we must teach ourselves to hold our questions about the impact of our essays until we have finished them. Our first allegiance is to the discovery process and to writing the essay. When the essay is complete, we decide if we want

to publish it. When we are satisfied with a finished piece of writing, we usually feel freer to pursue its publication.

The personal essay is a sharing of our insides with another's insides, to paraphrase William Wordsworth. Most people, even those we have written about, respond to this with caring and delight. I think my mother would be thrilled that I remembered my childhood, and I am sure my description of the hats as something we were excited to wear would make her smile,

even if Aunt Bertha hated them. If she reads my essay, she will be sad, as I am, about her aging, but it is inevitable; we both know and accept that.

As personal essayists, when we aren't worrying about what our topic is or offending people with our writing, we worry we don't have anything of interest to say. But we don't really need an earth-shattering narrative to write the personal essay. Robert Atwan, founding editor of the annual Best American Essays series from

Houghton Mifflin, said in a 1995 interview, "Someone can go around the world and write a boring essay, and someone like Henry Thoreau could walk a mile in Concord and write a fascinating essay. What makes an essay of quality is thought and reflection."

In addition to wondering what others will think and feel when they read our work, we also worry if we are up to the task ahead. Therefore, I combine Atwan's notion with my favorite words from German poet Rainer Maria Rilke:

... Trust in the small Things that hardly anyone sees and that can so suddenly become huge, immeasurable ... [L]ove ... what is humble and try very simply, as someone who serves, to win the confidence of what seems poor: then everything will become ... more coherent ...

In the movie *City of Angels*, the main character, an angel incarnated as a human, lacks the ability to taste and smell. He asks his beloved to describe the flavor of the pear she is eating. She says something like, "Oh, you know, it tastes like a pear." And he says something like, "I want to know what a pear tastes like to you."

In a personal essay, what the pear tastes like to *you* matters. At the same time, your experience has to have meaning for your reader. A personal essay must be both individual and universal.

You may be wondering what you could possibly write about that meets these requirements. Here are two questions to help you identify a deep experience others can relate to:

How is my life not the way it is supposed to be?

What roles have I played in life—successfully or unsuccessfully?

With those questions in mind, it's now time for you to go to work.

Before and After

Use details to pull the reader into your world

THERE IS NO intelligence but in things, the poet William Carlos Williams believed. This is a way of saying that images impart wisdom. And to quote Robert Frost: "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader." Taken together, these quotes mean to me that, to satisfy our readers and do our job successfully, we must use specifics to reach new insights and levels of feeling in ourselves.

Good writing demands that we report what we take in through our senses. As a personal essayist, don't sum up experience; expand it by using your senses.

Problem

Rather than writing, "I sat stiffly at Grandmother Sarah's house," use images that evoke the experience of stiffness.

Solution

I sat in the red overstuffed mohair sofa, my feet not reaching the floor, staring at the white lace of my fancy Sunday anklets above the shiny patent leather of my Mary Jane's.

If you stay in the scene using sensory images, you will probably dis-

cover that the summary word you first used—"stiffly," in this case—isn't entirely accurate. You may find more nuances about the experience as you remember more imagery:

The pudgy fingers of my left hand crumpled and uncrumpled the lace on the sofa arm. ... I noticed dirt under my fingernails.

Problem

Rather than writing, "I stood on the porch looking at poplar trees when my father told me my grandmother was dying," give images a chance to help you.

Solution

I watched the leaves of the poplar trees blowing silver side up in the wind as my father told me my grandmother was dying. The leaves were the silver of my grandmother's hair, and I believed I heard her excited Yiddish words in the sound of the strong wind.

When you write, be sensitive to your experience, no matter how small, and you will find your deepest truths.

—Sheila Bender

1 To write an essay using the first question, start by generating a list of ways you live now that are not the ways you or someone influential in your life (parents, ex's, mentors) thought you would be living. Are you, for example, in an unexpected area of the country or world? Have you chosen a vocation instead of a profession? Did you pass up a promotion? Are you divorced, remarried, with or without children? Do you live with a parent or in a shared house? Are you no longer a budding actor or rock star?

Sometimes it's something you live with that is not the way it is supposed to be: the rain, the snow, the birds out the front door. If you are longing for home, things in your setting will not seem as they should. Sometimes it is our children—are they different than we had imagined they would be?

2 Next, choose one of the ways your life is different than you or someone influential in your life would have imagined. Usually there is one item on the list that will grab your attention over the others.

Now begin your essay with a description of how you or they had imagined your life in that respect, filling in details that show the life. *Provide scenes, setting and dialogue that put readers there with you.*

Now do the same thing with your life as it is. Is life as it is what you want? Is it surprisingly better than you would have imagined? Or do you want to make a change?

Your essay will find its conclusion after you have compared the two lives.

3 For the second question, think about what roles you play in life. Are you a caregiver to an elderly parent, a wife, daughter, single woman, husband, son, star employee, over-

Workout

TO GET HELP in shaping your essays either from experienced writing-group members or anyone willing to read or listen to your early drafts, ask them to answer these four questions about your work:

ONE After listening to or reading my essay draft, what words and phrases remain memorable?

TWO What feelings do you experience from hearing or reading my essay that you think are intended?

THREE What feelings do you have that interfere with the ones the essay is going for? Where in the draft does that happen?

FOUR Where are you curious to know more?

If you listen to responses to these four questions, you will have a great head start every time you revise.

—S.B.

looked support to a network of people, a diabetic, pain patient, sufferer of an anxiety disorder, teacher, student, friend, ex-spouse? What characteristics and functions can you pinpoint as attributes of the role? What anecdotes can you write that will shed light on this particular experience? What can you compare the role to, pointing out differences and similarities? Write about your experiences—pleasant or unpleasant—in this role.

4 Choose the role you wish to define, then start this essay with a scene in which you are in that role.

Give the role a name: for example, mother of adult children. Use anecdotes about successfully or unsuccessfully serving in this role. Maybe you have questions and uncertainties about your position. Your scene should demonstrate your feelings about your role. Be honest in how you present yourself and others.

5 After you have drafts for these essays, you will find it helpful to get response from trusted others. Listen to the ways they react to what you

have written. If they express confusion or disappointment that something was undeveloped, you will know where to clarify your writing. If they have questions, you will be able to expand what you are saying to include more. If they connect especially well with certain parts of the essay, you will feel more confident and perhaps reshape your draft to start with those parts.

So start with questions about an experience and write using images that put that experience on the page. In this way, you will surprise yourself and others by how your essays contain and transmit the wisdom that you've found by both living and by writing about what you have lived. #

Sheila Bender

Sheila Bender is the author of eight books on writing. Her most recent is *Writing and Publishing Personal Essays*. She publishes an instructional magazine for writers at www.writingitreal.com.

writermag.com

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