

Writing Personal Essays: The Basics

Before you write an essay for the contest, you may need to be reminded of the basics of essay writing. A good indirect method for reviewing these is to read three or four essays from your literature book or from previous volumes of *Writers' Ink* and identify the similarities and differences among these pieces of writing. A more direct method is to review the mat

What is an essay? The following is the official definition of the term essay for purposes of the *Writers' Ink* contest, along with the questions that judges use to evaluate essay entries in the contest.

The essay is a short work of nonfiction, written in prose (sentences and paragraphs), in which the author explores some subject from a personal point of view for the purpose of sharing with readers the author's perspectives, insights, experiences, opinions, etc. on a specific subject. The writer may use poetic devices such as sensory language or figures of speech, but the emphasis is on the message more than on the medium.

- a. Has the writer demonstrated a strong sense of purpose and audience?
- b. Is the essay unified around a clear thesis?
- c. Is the essay well organized? Does the organization of the essay grow out of the relationships among and between subject, purpose, and audience; or does the essay appear to have been poured into an artificial structure?
- d. Is the essay developed with specific, well-chosen supporting material?
- e. Is the style in which the essay is written appropriate to the writer's purpose and audience?
- f. Has the writer chosen words and combined them into sentences and paragraphs logically, accurately, and concisely?

A dictionary definition. The *Random House Dictionary* offers a more succinct definition: “a fairly brief piece of nonfiction that tries to make a point in an interesting way.”

Two Basic Types. Essays may be divided into two basic types: philosophical and personal. In a philosophical essay, the writer explores, often in a rather formal style, a high-minded moral, religious, or political topic that tends to take a broad look at the world for the purpose of seeking truth that has universal application and appeal. Ralph Waldo Emerson was this kind of essayist. In the personal essay, the kind that students are encouraged to write for the *Writers' Ink* contest, authors tend to write about everyday topics from their own experience in their own voice without the burden of trying to impart universal truths to the reader but with no law against it either. More often than not, the personal essayist is pleased to entertain readers if not to inform or inspire them.

Language Choices in Personal Essays. In terms of style, modern personal essayists tend

toward the informal in their use of language, what might be called a conversational style. Essay writers feel free to use first person pronouns (I, me, my, myself, mine, we, us, our, and ourselves) and second person pronouns (you, your, yours, yourself, yourselves) rather than just the third person pronouns that characterize formal style (one, oneself, he, him, himself, she, her, herself, it, itself, they, their, them, and themselves). They also avoid long sentences, passive voice, and the kind of long words (like *multi-syllabic*) that make writing sound stuffy and stiff. However, style is a very individual thing, so it varies a great deal from one essayist to the next and even from one essay to another by the same writer. In any case, an essay's style should fit well with the topic, the purpose, and the intended audience.

How Essays Are Built. In terms of structure, the essay has three parts: a beginning (introduction), a middle (body), and an ending (conclusion). A short essay might consist of just three paragraphs, one for each of these parts; or each part of a longer essay could have multiple paragraphs.

Paragraphing is mainly a courtesy to the reader to divide the text into sections to make it more readable and to make its organization more obvious. Long paragraphs tend to intimidate readers, and excessively short paragraphs can give readers a bumpy ride. Seek a happy medium between the two extremes. Dialogue is the exception to this general rule: when you are recreating a conversation between two people or among three or more, start a new paragraph each time the conversation shifts from one speaker to the next. This makes it easier for readers to keep track of who's speaking.

All of the parts of the essay should support one main idea. This gives the essay coherence; that is, the parts all contribute to the whole. No fair chasing rabbits or otherwise straying from the topic, unless the purpose is to confuse readers. Most essayists like to state the main idea directly somewhere in the essay; usually one sentence, this is called the thesis statement. It sometimes appears in the introduction, sometimes at the end (especially in narrative essays or those that tell a story), and sometimes in the middle. George Orwell buried his thesis in the middle of "Shooting an Elephant," but he was such a good writer that readers had no trouble figuring out his main idea. Some professional essayists are such good writers that they can leave out the thesis statement without losing or confusing their readers. Student writers should always write a thesis statement as a part of the planning process (called pre-writing) and should probably include this sentence in the final draft of the essay.

Choosing Topics. Students sometimes balk at writing an essay because they think nothing that has happened to them is worth sharing with a community of readers or that the things they feel strongest about are too personal to share. These are legitimate concerns that even professional writers face. However, part of the beauty of the essay genre is the freedom it gives writers. By definition, an essay is a personal expression on the topic, so there is no expectation on the part of readers that the essayist must deliver an in-depth treatment of the subject or a scholarly discussion complete with a works cited list of sources or even a wise pronouncement based on years of experience. Mostly, essay readers want honesty. They want to read essays that explore some aspect of our common humanity in a way that makes them chuckle with recognition or sigh with relief that there is someone else out there who has been through a similar trial, struggled with the same insecurities, or wondered about the same mysteries. That's why the best essay topics come from everyday life: the function of sweat during football practice, the problem of choosing friends when you've moved to a new place, the power of the

words, “I’m sorry.” Students searching for the right essay topic have only to look around at their own world, their own neighborhood, and their own lives. Because human nature is the same across time and space, the essayist who reveals his or her own humanity on paper is bound to have an audience.

Topic Development. To develop their topic into an essay, students have nine basic options. Following each definition is a sample paragraph on the broad topic of weddings. Notice that an essay may employ only one of these development strategies or a combination of several.

1. Narration - to narrate or tell a true story to illustrate the essay’s thesis

My cousin’s wedding was a comedy of errors. Her maid of honor tripped as she walked down the aisle of the beautifully decorated church sanctuary and involuntarily uttered a profanity that everyone could plainly hear. The best man threw up during the exchange of vows, and the groom passed out before he could say, “I do.” During the reception that followed, my cousin’s veil caught on fire when she brushed too close to a candle, and her chivalrous husband doused her with the contents of the punch bowl. Fortunately, they can laugh about it three years later.

2. Description - to describe the subject by creating a word picture for readers to visualize

My cousin’s wedding was a misguided study in blue and pink. The church sanctuary was filled with a fortune in pink roses and blue mums that were specially dyed for the occasion. The wrought iron arbor above the altar was festooned in pink and blue ribbons that resembled a carnival booth. The large brass candelabrum on either side were filled with pink and blue candles and emitted a rosy light that reflected off the garish pink and blue satin gowns worn by the bride’s maids and the putrid blue tuxedos with pink ties worn grimly by the groomsmen. The groom himself had had the good sense to wear a dignified black tux but had submitted unhappily to a boutonniere of the trademark colors at the last minute.

3. Process Analysis - to explain how to do something or how something works

Planning a wedding requires attention to detail, nerves of steel, and a great deal of patience. First, you must poll all of the primary players in this little drama and determine their preferences as to the exact date and time for the rehearsal, the rehearsal dinner, the wedding itself, and the reception. Then you must force a decision on where each of these functions will take place and then reserve each of these places as far in advance as possible. Next, you need to recruit and reserve the minister, the musicians, the florist, the caterer, the photographer, and any other auxiliary staff that may be needed. As you make these initial arrangements, take good notes; and confirm every reservation in writing to make sure everyone understands when and where they are expected to perform their various roles.

4. Comparison/Contrast - to discuss the similarities and/or differences between two topics

Although my sister’s wedding and my cousin’s wedding both included a candle-lit sanctuary, an exchange of vows, a wedding cake, and a reception, there’s where the

similarities end. My cousin's family is quite wealthy, so when their little girl decided to marry into a socially prominent family in Colorado, they staged an elaborate wedding. In terms of the size of the wedding party, the size and stature of the guest list, the decorations, and the quality of the reception, my cousin's wedding was much more spectacular (and expensive) than my sister's.

5. Division/Classification - to explain the subject in terms of a classification system in which a series of categories are defined and illustrated according to a single principle of division

Based on how much they cost, weddings may be divided into three basic categories: cheap, moderate, and expensive. My uncle's second wedding would fall into the first category. It was his bride's third marriage, so neither of them was interested in making a big production out of it. They were married in my grandparents' living room with only a few family and friends in attendance. Price tag: \$300. My sister's wedding was moderately priced because she opted for eloping to Las Vegas, where they rented one of those garish wedding chapels but spent most of their money on the honeymoon. The price was closer to \$3,000. My cousin's wedding in Denver was a major social event with hundreds of guests and a large wedding party of six maids and six groomsmen. They had a nice reception with an orchestra and champagne, and a horse-drawn carriage took them from the church to a limo that whisked them away to the airport for their honeymoon trip. Price tag: approximately \$12,000.

6. Cause/Effect - to explore a subject in terms of its causes and/or effects

Society requires the wedding because it requires a stable marriage to make sure that children have a nurturing environment in which to live and learn and grow. A good wedding is the cornerstone of a healthy society because it begins a lasting relationship between two people who are much more likely to stay together and provide home and hearth for not only their children but also for their extended family and for their friends. The cause of this exchange of vows that we call the wedding is necessity, and the results are all of the things that stave off chaos and poverty and child abuse.

7. Definition - to write an extended definition of the subject

In Western culture, the wedding is a major social event as well as a ceremony that publically signifies the highest level of commitment that a couple can make to each other. The focus is on an exchange of vows between the bride and groom, but it is also attended by showers, parties, receptions, and sometimes months of planning. Legally, it marks the beginning of the marriage relationship with all of its obligations and benefits.

8. Example - to develop the essay through a series of examples that show how the subject operates or reveals itself in the world of experience

The most lavish weddings tend to be associated with royal families. When Prince Rainier of Monaco married Grace Kelly, a princess of sorts from Hollywood, the wedding was quite a production. When Prince Charles married Diana Spencer, the Windsor family

spared no expense in making sure the wedding staged in Westminster Abbey in London was spectacular. The wedding of Princess Alexia of Greece to Carlos Morales Quintana was also a grand occasion with an equally grand price tag.

9. Analogy - to shed light on a subject by comparing it point by point to something that does not belong to the same class of things

A wedding is like a simmering stew that the wedding planner has to keep her eye on to make sure it does not burn or boil over. The ingredients are a nervous groom, a dubious bride, soon-to-be-in-laws who don't like each other, bride's maids and groomsmen who don't know where they're supposed to stand or what they're supposed to do, and a host of other characters who may do something at any minute to spoil the broth. The wedding planner has to keep stirring the mixture with a steady hand and a lot of patience.