ELEMENTS OF A PERSONAL ESSAY

A personal essay is usually based on personal experience through which you have grown or changed. Unlike formal writing, a personal essay does not have to prove anything.

CENTRAL THEME

This is the main point or idea behind the narrative. The narrative may be about a unique event, but the theme is a universal truth to which anyone can relate that informs the narrative.

EPIPHANY

An epiphany is a moment of sudden realization or awareness of the truth. An "aha!" moment in the essay. A personal narrative may contain multiple epiphanies in varying degrees.

SUSPENSE

Try to write in a way that keeps your reader wanting to know what will happen next. If your readers already know how everything is going to turn out in the first paragraph, why should they continue?

CLIMAX

As with fiction, a personal narrative works towards a climactic event, a turning point, or moment of action to which the narrative builds. This is the highest point of tension in an essay. Sometimes the climax can also result in a moment of epiphany.

SELF-HONESTY

Effective personal essays will reveal moments of vulnerability or weakness. Honesty is key, even if that honesty is revealing or a little hard to admit. Remember you're in charge of how much you reveal, and you should not violate another person's privacy by revealing sensitive information about him or her.

DESCRIPTION

Create the sensory images and emotions of your experience so that your reader knows what you saw, felt, and thought. Staying rooted in concrete detail is the best way to accomplish this.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

The people in your narrative, especially yourself, need to come alive and seem like real and interesting people. Using dialogue or mentioning a quirky character trait goes a long way in creating a three-dimensional character. Not every person who shows up in your narrative will require characterization.

CHRONOLOGICAL ORGANIZATION

The organization is chronological, with events occurring in a particular sequence. Sometimes writers play with time by starting at the end and then backtracking, but some form of time is usually the organizational principle.