

Three essential elements of a personal essay essay sample



The personal essay is an expression of the author's feelings, thoughts and experiences. By writing a personal essay and sharing the personal experience, the author is trying to entertain and involve the readers. A variety of stylistic techniques may be used by the author in a personal essay, such as narration, description, persuasion and so on. The voice of a personal essay is very individualistic. Generally, there are three essential elements in a personal essay, which are "honesty", "vulnerability" and a drive towards "self-disclosure". Those three elements play important roles and make a good personal essay.

Sometimes it is difficult to face the truth; it is even worse to write it down, so being honest is very important in writing a personal essay. From psychological perspective, most of the humans have the fear of placing private truths before an audience, and, even have the trouble to interpret their memories. However, it is very necessary for a personal essayist to overcome the fear and be honest to the readers. First of all, honesty brings an accurate perspective of view. The purpose of a personal essay is to telling the author's own experience, therefore, the author can not make a story up by saying it is his/her own experience. Phillip Lopate, in his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, offers the idea that "if the essayist can delve further underneath, until we feel the topic has been handled as honestly, [.....], then at least one essential condition of a successful personal essay has been met"(xxv).

According to Lopate, being honest and keeping the accurate perspective of view makes a good and successful personal essay. Moreover, the author's honesty gives the readers an impression of sincerity, which makes the

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reader have desire and patience to continue reading the essay. By reading George Orwell's personal essay "Shooting an Elephant", which is such a long story that I did not want to read at first, I was attracted and moved by the story. Orwell writes that "[he] was hated by large numbers of people—the only time in [his] life that [he] has been important enough for this to happen to [him]" (35). The readers can easily feel his honesty and wonder why he writes so, so they keep reading the story to find a reasonable answer. Honesty is essential in a personal essay; being vulnerable also holds the balance.

In order to open the author up and lead the readers to find the same feelings, vulnerability is also significant in writing a personal essay. First of all, some vulnerability arouses the readers' sympathy. "Baring the naked soul" can awake the sympathy of the reader (Lopate xxvi). Being vulnerable does not mean the author is poor; the reader may also have the same experience too, which they may not have the courage to speak out. Or, the reader can make some connection between the essay and his/her own life. Not everyone is brave enough to show up his secret. By telling the story with a vulnerable tone, the essayist may lead the read to sympathize.

In "Shooting an Elephant" Orwell describes that when that story happened, he was "young and ill educated" and he "had to think out [his] problems in the utter silence that is imposed on every Englishman in the East" (35). What will the reader think by looking at this? Will the reader consider Orwell was a poor guy and was guilty of shooting that elephant? I don't think so. Instead of considering him as poor, the reader may start to think about the special situation and the social environment at that time. The words "every
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Englishman” tell us that if the story happened to another Englishman in the East, the result might be the same. Some vulnerability is really essential to the personal essay; similarly, self-disclosure is also indispensable somehow.

Distinguished from the detached formal essay by its friendly, conversational tone, the personal essay also has a drive towards self-disclosure, which means self-disclosure is an essential element in a personal essay. Self-disclosure is seen as a useful strategy for sharing information with others. By sharing information, we become more intimate with other people and our interpersonal relationship is strengthened. In the same way, the essayist is sharing his/her own experience with the readers; self-disclosure is a good way to express how the essayist thinks and feels. Self-disclosure deepens trust between the author and the reader and helps the reader understand the essay and the author more.

In Virginia Woolf’s essay “ Professions for Women”, Woolf tells about her story of her own profession. Even though “ it is a simple one” (17), it makes the essay more intimate to the reader. In Orwell’s essay “ Shooting an Elephant”, Orwell tells a true story of himself happened when he was in Burma. By reading his story, the reader can strongly feel his personality and emotion. The words “ grew”, “ immense”, “ deep, low, happy sigh” he uses when he describes the dilemma he faced indicate that it was such an embarrassing situation; the words “ have no intention”, “ shove” and the last sentence “[...] I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool” indicate his personality (37-41). His self-disclosure makes the story more believable and authentic.

As the personal essay is often a free-wheeling device of self-expression, it also has some other elements to perfect it. However, honesty, vulnerability, and self-disclosure are three essential elements in the personal essay. By using these three elements, the author can open them up to the readers and lead the readers enjoy the story and the experience more.