

Writing a Personal Essay for *BYU Studies*

Personal essays submitted to *BYU Studies* should deal with subjects, ideas, experiences, and reflections that Latter-day Saint readers would find religiously relevant or engaging. This is not to say that these essays should deal explicitly with scripture or doctrine, but they should resonate with or artistically communicate ideas or experiences about LDS values, concerns, or interests.

What a personal essay is.

A personal essay is an anecdote (or more than one) from your life that is connected to an idea. The goal of a personal essay is to use an experience as a vehicle to explore a larger theme or question. A personal essay differs from a simple personal narrative in that it is driven by ideas rather than by images or stories. Consequently, even though these devices may be present in a personal essay, they are less prevalent than in a personal narrative.

What a personal essay is not.

A personal essay is not just a story, although a story usually provides a framework for the ideas presented. A personal essay is also not a sermon, although it may contain profound spiritual insights. If you let the ideas weigh too heavily, your writing will become dogmatic and preachy. A personal essay is more subtle in the way it presents its central ideas. For the same reasons, a personal essay is not a book report or a research paper, even though ideas from a book or information gleaned from research may play a central role in the essay.

A personal essay's basic structure.

Structure is perhaps the distinguishing feature of a personal essay. The writer must somehow impose meaning on seemingly unconnected events. This is accomplished by creating movement in two directions—horizontally and vertically.

The first step in writing a personal essay is to select an experience from your life that you can examine and draw meaning from. This experience will be the horizontal element, and generally it will begin and end the essay.

The second step is to identify the central question or theme you wish to explore in your essay. Exploring this question or theme provides the vertical movement. The following questions might help you identify vertical elements that can add support and structure to your horizontal narrative:

- Why is this experience significant to you?
- Have you had other experiences that are in some way related to the one you have decided to explore? What idea connects them?
- Does this experience answer philosophical or spiritual questions for you?
- How has this experience influenced your personality or feelings?

Combining horizontal and vertical movement.

The personal essay has been likened to a bridge. A well-designed bridge reaches from point A to point B using supports that rise from the level of the road. In a well-designed personal essay, the horizontal story also moves from point A to point B and is supported by vertical pillars, or ideas. To achieve a rhythm and harmony in your essay as it moves horizontally, find logical places in the narrative to attach these vertical pillars. Not all essays are alike, of course. Essays may differ, for example, in both the length of their horizontal movement and the frequency and height of their vertical supports. Some are largely narrative with subtle vertical movement. Others may include a very brief narrative framework that introduces a long and elaborate treatment of the central idea.

Beginning and ending the essay.

As you consider the experience that will provide horizontal movement for your essay, ask yourself how you can relate the experience so that it creates both a beginning and an ending. You might tell half of the story at the beginning, then tell “the rest of the story” at the end. Perhaps you can relate the entire story at the beginning of your essay, then echo or mirror certain elements of the story at the end. Some writers choose a more subtle approach and select one important word or phrase from the opening that they repeat or refer to at the end. Regardless of how you choose to connect the beginning and ending of your essay, it is important to avoid an ambiguous, preachy, or clichéd ending. Use concrete language tied to the experience.

Show rather than tell.

Personal essay writers can learn from good fiction writers. They don’t just tell about what happened. They show. This is important for the narrative elements of a personal essay. Let’s look at an example to illustrate the difference.

Show: Once my brother Karl and I were at the dentist waiting for my mom in the waiting room. A couple of older ladies walked in and settled themselves in the two chairs next to Karl. “How are you, young man?” said one. (People like Karl. He has an honest face.) Karl murmured a reply and the two old ladies started to converse discreetly. A look of intense pain came over Karl’s face as he looked over at me. “Marilyn! I have a problem!” he hissed.

“What?” I hissed back.

“I can’t really say!” he whispered.

“Then tell me later,” I said, laughing.

“It needs to be solved before we leave!” breathed Karl urgently.

“Then *what* is it?” I said.

Karl leaned closer. “That lady is . . . sitting . . . on . . . my . . . *toothbrush!*” he howled silently.

(From Marilyn N. Nielson, “Reality through Reflection,” *BYU Studies* 44, no. 1 [2005]: 155.)

Tell: Once my brother Karl and I were at the dentist waiting for my mom in the waiting room. A couple of older ladies walked in and settled themselves in the two chairs next to Karl. One asked how he was. He murmured a reply, but when the two old ladies started to converse discreetly, a look of intense pain came over Karl’s face as he looked over at me. One of them, he whispered, was sitting on his toothbrush.

Inexperienced writers tend to get so caught up in their own feelings that they forget the reader. The goal is not to inform the reader about how you feel but to make the reader feel those emotions. Show, don't just tell.

Use conflict rather than crisis.

Understanding the difference between crisis and conflict can spell the difference between an ordinary essay and an outstanding one. A crisis is an event, usually some sort of emergency. Generally, if you focus on a crisis, your essay will aim at presenting a resolution. A conflict, on the other hand, is a clash of wills or a difficult moral choice. Presenting the reader with a conflict will encourage introspection, an exploration of values, or an examination of choices. Consequently, it engages the reader more than a crisis does.

Focus.

One temptation that can dilute the force of your essay is to try to do too much. If you have too many questions or ideas to explore, the reader may find it difficult to discern your true message. Focus on a single theme, even if you have to toss aside a favorite experience or some dazzling insights that may be peripheral to your central idea. Don't get distracted. Focus, focus, focus.

Give the reader a gift.

A personal essay is your gift to the reader. When you give a gift, you think about what the receiver needs, not what you need. A writer who thinks of self first is like the husband who gives his wife a skill saw because he thinks she'll enjoy all the things he can make with it. Focus on the reader. Pull something truly significant from your life, package it in an appealing manner, and give it freely. In writing, as in business, your primary aim should be customer satisfaction.