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WRITING WHAT MOVES YOU



**WRITING THE PERSONAL  
ESSAY: How to find the story in  
you – and sell it**



## LESSON ONE

# You Are an Essay Writer

What is an essay? How much do I have to share? Where do I start? And will I make any money? You'll get answers to these questions and more in your first lesson of *Writing the Personal Essay: How to Find the Story in You — and Sell It!*

Whether you've written hundreds of essays or none, let me assure you that you are an essay writer! Writing letters, describing your home remodeling project to your best friend, recounting your two-year-old's foray with toilet training, and journaling are all forms of essay.

## What Makes a Story An Essay?

A personal essay is about creating intimacy between you and your reader. You're confiding in your readers, sharing part of yourself with them, and revealing your truth. The best essayists have a conversational tone that makes you feel like you're in the same room with them—like they're speaking directly to you.

At its core, a personal essay has a universal theme. The essay operates on two levels—the personal and the universal. The best essays make this connection so subtly that the reader is touched by the story and “gets” the theme without being hit over the head with it.

In an essay about coming to terms with dating a widower, I rattled off the countless questions running through my mind so the reader could feel my insecurity.

*If he had to pick one of us, whom would he choose? After we die, will he want to be buried next to her or me? Will we spend eternity as a trio?*

That's a much more effective strategy than saying, “I felt insecure,” which doesn't show the reader what was really running through my mind. If I provide the details—if I spell out what feeling insecure looks like for me—I invite the reader to stand in my shoes.

Unlike a short story, which has a recognizable arc, essays follow a more intuitive path. Follow that path and theoretically, you'll have a work of art. The thing is, the path isn't straightforward. There are many forks in the road, many opportunities to back away and go in a different direction, and even more chances that you'll stop mid-expose and retreat into the safety of your self-protective shell. Even worse, at the end of the path, there are no guarantees that you'll find your way. You may be left with nothing more than a set of meaningless notes.

In *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate says, “The essay form as a whole has long been associated with an experimental method. This idea goes back to Montaigne and his endlessly



suggestive use of the term *essai* for his writings. To essay is to attempt, to test, to make a run at something without knowing whether you are going to succeed.”

He goes on to say, “There is something heroic in the essayist’s gesture of striking out toward the unknown, not only without a map but without certainty that there is anything worthy to be found.”

I feel this way almost every single time I begin a new essay. Years ago, I wrote a piece that went through at least a dozen different versions. It was critiqued by writers groups, workshopped in essay classes, put aside for months and re-visited, but try as I might, I just wasn’t able to find the story. And that’s okay. Maybe I’m not ready to wrap my arms around that story just yet. Maybe I’ll never be ready. That’s okay, too. Not every essay you write or start will make it to publication. Some essays are just an exercise in self-discovery, which is a gift in itself.

So what’s the magic formula? Here’s the tough part: There isn’t one. Every writer is different and each one of us has to find our own path to success. I can’t tell you what will work for you, but I can tell you what works for me—and I can give you several tools to help you find your way. Some of them will work for you. Others won’t. Your job: Take what works and leave the rest behind.

## Show Me The Money

You should know going into this class that unless you’re David Sedaris, Lena Dunham, or Joan Didion, you’re not going to become rich on essays alone. In fact, none of the aforementioned essayists rely on essay for their income. David does dozens of appearances every year and he makes money off of CDs and speaking engagements. Lena is an actress, author, screenwriter, producer, and director. Joan writes books.

Me? Most of my income comes from health and nutrition stories for websites and magazines. I write content for several health care clients, such as Cedars-Sinai and Henry Ford and I teach “The Fundamentals of Healthy Living” at a local college ) to keep things interesting. After all, it’s tough to be creative with essay if you can’t pay your bills. But, despite those revenue streams, the sale of an essay (even at just \$250) is more rewarding to me than a huge feature story at a big-name magazine. Why? Because the editor was interested in sharing MY story with his/her readers. In a way, you’re sharing a piece of yourself.

Unfortunately, as sweet as the sales are, the rejections are equally devastating. Essay writing is not for the thin-skinned. Markets are dwindling. Space within publications that run essays is diminishing. And there’s a lot of competition out there (more on markets in class six).

Years ago, I went to a writer’s event in Orange County to hear Martin Smith, Editor in Chief of *Orange Coast Magazine*, speak. The man is brilliant. He is also very funny. And his advice still holds today.



One of the handouts he gave to attendees was called “Eight Things I Know Are True About Writing.” Number 8: “If you plan to quit your day job to write full time, make sure you are independently wealthy or have married well.” I’m not sure I agree when it comes to writing, as I know several writers (myself included) who make a very good living. But I agree with Marty whole-heartedly if you intend to write essays and essays only.

## **Finding Your Story**

How you experience the world is different from anyone else. If you ask 10 people to write about their first experience at Disneyland, you’ll get 10 different accounts. Similarly, if I ask each of you to write about falling love for the first time, I’ll get a set of very different experiences.

If you read essays from two different people—one who looks at the world through rose-colored glasses and a second who looks at the world through blue glasses—you’ll get two different stories. Neither might be better or worse than the other, but they are inherently different. That is the beauty of essay. You get the opportunity to write a story through your lens. A story that is unique to you. Your frustrations, joys, pains, humor—these are all unique to you—but also universal because we all experience those emotions. Your job: Connect your experiences to your readers’ emotions.

Coming at a topic, mood, or emotion from all angles will eventually take the reader closer to the heart of the issue. At times you may feel like the essay is veering off the path, or losing its way, but you’re actually eliminating the extraneous stuff and zeroing in on your target.

Follow your own thoughts and you may end up contradicting yourself within the piece. That’s okay. Human nature is defined by conflict. It might even make your essay more compelling. The process of finding your truth, picking a viewpoint (or not), is what makes essay so interesting—and real—for your reader. The secret to great essay writing is to get rid of your inner critic and just write.

In this workshop, I would like you to think about the personal essay as a cathartic exploration of yourself—an opportunity to do some basic research on YOU. In a way, it’s like putting together a puzzle, conducting a science experiment, and/or analyzing your own personal philosophy. Whether or not you’ll arrive at something meaningful is always a crapshoot. Sometimes I go back to an essay years later and that’s when I find the real story. Getting enough distance from a situation can allow you to go deeper in your exploration and uncover other possibilities, even deeper truths.

If you’re determined to stay safely on the surface of your story, essay might not be the right form for you. To write essays, you have to put your whole self into it—your biggest hopes, greatest fears, and deepest regrets. You have to be ready to let yourself go and know that the more of yourself you bring to your writing, the better essayist you’ll be.



If nothing else, essays are cathartic, especially those about relationships. They're a form of therapy; a method for discovering your own truth; a way to find your true story—the one you may be hiding not only from the world but from yourself, too! Through essay, you discover more about yourself, answer questions you didn't know you had, and reveal feelings that you don't always want to examine or acknowledge.

## Speak Your Truth

Often, the plot of a personal essay, its' conflict and drama, is about seeing how far the essayist is willing to go in terms of dropping his/her defenses and sharing the deepest levels of his/her psyche with the reader. Let's face it, some of the information essayists share in this form are things they would probably never say out loud—even to their best friends. The essay is compelling because it shares a truth that most of us, at least in our day-to-day lives, would rather keep under wraps. It addresses conflict within marriage, anger at our parents, resentment toward our children and sadness from regret.

If you go deep into a topic and share your experiences as honestly as possible, then you've met at least one essential element of a personal essay. Often these truths reveal themselves in a sort of crescendo, delving deeper as the essay goes on. In my second Newsweek piece, I come to terms with my feelings about my husband's late wife. In writing that essay, that truth, I had to be willing to write things that I would never say out loud. The longer version of the essay included the following excerpt:

I walked toward her gravestone carrying a gigantic sunflower. Brandon had a dozen peach roses. Peach. Not red. I'm sure the color wasn't a conscious choice, but like any normal, red-blooded woman, I read into it (and by normal I mean not the saintly type up in Heaven). Red is for love, right? Peach. Peach is for something other than passionate love. Something like friendship, maybe. Or gratitude. Or maybe just non-passionate love.

When I shortened the piece for Newsweek, the editor cut those graphs ... but writing them took me to a deeper truth, a truth I was happy to keep hidden. They were a confession that on a deep personal level I wanted Brandon to proclaim his love for me was more intense than his love for his late wife. In my twisted mind, which I share with the reader, I claim that his choice of rose color provides me with that confirmation. Even though I'm grateful that those graphs didn't get published, I also recognize that I should be proud of myself as an essayist for "going there." My challenge to you: Go There!

Some vulnerability is essential to a good personal essay. Vulnerability, in itself, is a universal theme. It's human nature. If you're self-assured, confident, narcissistic, and perfect, chances are, your readership will be non-existent. People want to read something that's relatable. Even if they haven't been in your exact circumstances, they can always relate to your emotions—if you share your story well.



My favorite example of this is an essay by Kayt Sukel. She gave me permission to share her essay with you as it was published in the Boston Globe.

## **Widow for a Day**

*With my husband fighting in Iraq, I can't help but imagine the worst.*

**By Kayt Sukel**

Funerals always remind me of my father's funeral. So when I received an invitation to attend the memorial service for two soldiers killed in action during the same Iraq deployment in which my husband was participating, my first inclination was to respond, "No, thanks." But, knowing my attendance was expected, I reluctantly put on my funeral best and made my way to the chapel.

The usher seated me up front, instead of in the inconspicuous seat I coveted in the back. There, I had not only a clear view of the soldiers' photos, leaning against the traditional military mourning sculpture of boots, rifle, and helmet, but of their friends and family, prostrate with grief. But as the chaplain started to talk about these two men, I didn't think of my father. Instead my mind wandered to a possible future where I would bury my husband.

It began innocently enough. At first, I wondered if my son, currently fixated on photos of his father, would commandeer the display photo as his own. Should I let him? Then, the eulogy. How would I be mentioned? And music! Would the chapel's choir be able to handle a song like the Grateful Dead's "Ripple" with dignity? Or would traditional music be best? I'd have to insist on a Catholic chaplain. But though my husband is Catholic, I am not, so a full Mass would be out.

Before I knew it, I had the whole event planned, right down to what food I'd serve after the service (those barbecue meatballs, definitely) and what shoes I would wear (flats, for comfort). And then I teared up, thinking of how hard it would be to remain stoic, how lost I'd be when it came time to explain it all to my son, how lonely I would be on my own.

When I realized just how far I'd gone, I felt ashamed. I had spoken to my husband that morning. It seemed wrong to start grieving for a man who was alive and well -- especially sitting so close to those suffering a real loss, who no longer had the luxury of anticipatory grief. But I couldn't help it.

Later, I confessed to a few other military wives. I expected some backlash but found only commiseration.



"That's nothing," said one. "When I was sitting there, I decided the only way I'd let the chaplain talk at my husband's service was if he let me write it."

Another admitted: "I bought a funeral dress already. It's a strapless black dress with a jacket. With the jacket, it's very Jackie O funeral. But without the jacket, I could always dress it up and wear it to a formal." She shrugged as if she had said too much. "It was on sale."

Yet another piped up about a company that makes diamonds out of cremated remains. "I've always wanted a diamond necklace," she said. "We can't afford it now. But I think my husband would like that he could finally give me one if it came to that."

We went on to compare notes on how we'd tell our children and whether the commissary offers a funeral discount (it doesn't). We picked apart past services as the affianced might do before a wedding, discussing what worked well and what didn't.

I know it sounds tasteless. After all, what kind of person mentally plans a funeral for a husband she adores? But I found the conversation freeing. By concentrating on those nitty-gritty, what-if details, I was able to confront what had been gnawing at me since the start of this deployment -- the worst does happen to the men and women in my husband's profession.

I hope I will never have to attend another soldier's memorial service. But if I must, I will recognize my planning for what it is. A strange balm of sorts to help me weather the coming months with a little more ease.

I do know I need to find a balance between being prepared and feeding an unhealthy obsession over what could happen. So I was relieved when I walked right past a display of black sheaths without a second glance during my last trip to the mall. But try me again if they go on sale.

Kayt Sukel is a freelance writer originally from New England. She lives on an Army post in Germany with her husband and son.

Kayt's essay brings me to the sticky issue of "how much are you willing to share?" In *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate asks: "Is it a paradox that personal essayists are often excruciatingly frank (on the page), yet protective of their privacy? Richard Rodriguez, for instance, is a master of



the confessional tone, yet tells us that his family calls him ‘Mr. Secrets,’ and he plays a hide-and-seek game of revealing himself.”

I definitely fall into the secretive category. I have written about sexual abuse, major surgeries, body image issues, failed relationships, post-baby sex, parental regrets, and the list goes on. Yet, when I went under the knife to remove a massive adrenal tumor, only my immediate family and my professors knew about the procedure (I was in graduate school at the time). The sexual abuse? I didn’t share that with anyone until I was well into my 20s—and then only family and two close friends.

In some cases, publications will allow you to share these “truths” under a pen name. So at least for the purposes of this class, “go there.” You may come across a publication that is willing to work with you while giving “you” a different byline.

## The Nitty Gritty Truth

There are many instances in essay when you’re relying on memory unless you keep a very detailed journal. You might wonder if your memory is accurate? If you’re really getting the truth right? Did you eat PB&J that day, or was it grilled cheese?

There have been scores of controversies about the standards of truth for memoir. And yet, truth, at least on some level, is subjective. Ask three people to recount what happened during a showdown at a bar, and they’ll all have slightly different versions of their truths. Still, there is a huge difference between telling the truth as you see and experience it, and fabricating a story.

Do your best to tell the truth. That might mean corroborating facts with others, checking dates in your day planner, or going online for weather reports. But it doesn’t mean changing your perspective of the events.

"It's not the truth of history; it's the truth of memory" - Mary Karr

Learn [how memories change over time](#), and why that's okay, even in Memoir.

Listen to [Mary Karr on The Art of Memoir](#)

## Avoid the Rant

Some writers use essays to express a moralistic stand, rant about a controversial issue, or vent about a family member, friend, or editor. Don’t. If you take a stand on an issue and run it into the ground, chances are, you’ll lose your readers the moment they get your point.

Great essayists challenge readers to adopt their stand without stating it outright. Give your readers a new way to look at the issue by sharing part of yourself, showing them your experience, and you may, indirectly, change a viewpoint.





I've read essays that have challenged my personal beliefs—authors who present their case for having an open marriage, for abortion, or for releasing sex offenders. While I may not adopt their views, I certainly have a better sense of the big picture. I walk away with a greater understanding of those different views. I relate on that universal, human level with their experiences.

In one essay titled “My Son Molested” by anonymous, the author details her experiences as the mother of a child convicted of child molestation. The beginning of her essay:

Every Wednesday afternoon I find a seat in a windowless basement room, in a circle of 25 people. The chairs are metal, hard and cold, and the level of discomfort far more than physical. There are eight teenage boys and two therapists, and all the rest of us are parents and grandparents. We are bewildered, we are depressed and we are all consigned to this room for months. I am sick for hours beforehand and a day or more afterwards, unable to sleep in peace, to eat, to hold a casual conversation. These boys, including my son, are sex offenders. We, as their parents, are complicit in crimes hard to explain or define. Recently I asked my 14-year-old son what he's learned from the painful events of the last year, and he said, “I've learned sex is bad. I don't want to think about it anymore.”

She goes on to explain that her son confessed to molesting her other son, who is several years younger. The day after she found out about his indiscretions, her older son was arrested at his school without warning and put away in jail. And yet, no one asked about her younger son. She writes:

Between my two sons, there was kissing, there was touching, there was oral contact (“sodomy”). There was a lot of looking. There was no penetration, no force, no threats. They are several years apart in age and the contacts occurred over several weeks. My youngest son confessed in tears that he'd enjoyed it, and was very sorry he'd gotten his brother in so much trouble. I have finally confided in a few friends this past year, and each one has asked me to explain, as though I knew, the difference between molestation and childhood sex play.

“Lord, my brother and I did more than that,” one friend said, and went on to describe it. “What's the fuss about?” asked another. “Too bad you don't live in Europe,” a well-traveled friend said in sympathy.



Later in the essay, she describes the societal view of a “sex offender,” and how she can’t reconcile that with her young son standing before her:

I get into a discussion of the death penalty with a friend of mine, a friend who loves both my children and knows nothing of what has happened to us in the past year. "But surely, some people should die," she says, with great heat. "Child molesters should die, don't you think?"

As someone who was molested when I was 5 years old, I might have been that friend ... but after reading her essay, I’m not so sure.

As an essayist, you must be able to examine and pass judgment (on yourself and others)—or at least dialogue about it as “Anonymous” did above. She tries to reconcile her feelings as the mother of a “child molester” who is only 14—and her views that child molesters (in general) should be locked away.

## Consider Writing Your Own Humiliation Essay

Sue Shapiro is a prolific journalist, author of *The Byline Bible*, who swears by what she calls [the humiliation essay](#).

**Pro Tip:** "Writing is an act of courage. That's true at any age. But maybe we have to take an extra deep breath when we begin what feels like a daring venture later in life. Fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty ... it's never too late. Life is filled with large and small renaissances all the way to the end." - Sue Monk Kidd

## What Comes Next?

Journaling can be a powerful tool in the essayist's toolkit. Next week, you'll learn how to journal your way to a salable essay.