

## Essay Helps

A personal essay features life experiences which illustrate an idea. Essayist Edward Hoaglund explains that an essay "hangs somewhere between two sturdy poles: this is what I think, and this is what I am." Your idea—"what I think"—is the core of the essay; it need not be stated explicitly, but it does need to be clear. The style and voice you use in communicating your idea reveals aspects of your self—"what I am."

We are looking for essays which:

Focus on the "local"—people you know, places you've been, things you've experienced.

Use a conversational approach. Most personal essays are "chatty" or "talky," although some may be more formal in tone. Use first person.

Employ effective story-telling techniques (such as blending of scene and summary; imagery and five-sense appeal; characterization; active verb; "show not tell").

Rely on subtle meaning and avoid heavy-handed moralizing.

Feature an authentic voice—this requires honesty about your feelings and ideas. Provide a good "road map" of where the essay is going (or, at least, where it has been).

Use structure to emphasize meaning. You might try coming at your issue from a variety of different angles rather than using a methodical approach.

Consider other points of view. Exploring conflicting ideas may lend depth to your essay's meaning.

Through employing these techniques, you may move beyond merely reporting an experience or evidencing a point to creating insightful, personable literary art. Essayist Philip Lopate emphasizes, "While it is true that historically the essay is related to rhetoric, it in fact seeks to persuade more by the delights of literary style than anything else."

### References:

Edward Hoaglund, *The Tugman's Passage* (New York: Random House, 1982), 25.

*The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate, ed. (NY: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1994), 301.