

Writer's Digest magazine defines the personal or narrative essay as:

A piece of nonfiction writing that shares an interesting, thought-provoking, entertaining, and/or humorous story for readers that is drawn from the writer's personal experiences.

Phillip Lopate in his introduction to ***The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present***, says this about personal essay:

The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy. The writer seems to be speaking directly into your ear, confiding everything from gossip to wisdom. Through sharing thoughts, memories, desires, complaints, and whimsies, the personal essayist sets up a relationship with the reader, a dialogue—a friendship, if you will, based on identification, understanding, testiness, and companionship. At the core of the personal essay is the supposition that there is a certain unity to the human experience.

Some characteristics of personal essays

- personal, more intimate
- conversational, a dialogue between author and reader
- honest, often vulnerable, creating trust in the reader
- sometimes built on exposure of a weakness in the writer
- universal in the sense that almost everyone can relate to some of what's written
- usually revolves around one topic, theme, or central issue that holds the piece together
- topic/theme/central issue supported by evidence
- incorporates devices of good storytelling, e.g., description, characterization, setting, dialogue, etc.
- can be of any length