

Higher English: A Personal Writing Essay

A personal writing essay is one of the writing choices that can be made for the Higher folio. Most personal writing focuses on a personal experience and thoughts and feelings about it. The advantage of choosing to write a personal experience essay is that you can use your own experiences as the subject.

The SQA criteria is:

Reflective writing will aim to interest or give pleasure, rather than simply convey information; it will concern itself usually with a single idea, insight or experience and will include reflection on knowledge, thoughts or feelings engendered by it.

The main requirements of the reflective essay are that it will:

- *be genuinely contemplative; its personal tone, for example, may be confidential, amused, concerned, indignant*
- *communicate to the reader a clear sense of the writer's personality*
- *not merely offer the product of reflection, but engage the reader in the writer's process of reflection through a distinct authorial voice or stance*
- *where more than one idea, insight or experience is involved, through the writer's treatment give unity to these.*

Whatever your choice for personal writing, whether you focus on a single idea or an experience, it is important that your essay is personal, conveys your personality and is structured and well-written.

Basic Features

All writing reveals something about the author. As readers, we can become very aware of the writer's personality in a poem or novel although in scientific writing the writer's personality is a much smaller part of the writing. In personal writing, your personality is a major part of the writing. The writing is more informal, familiar, and generally finds a balance between information and entertainment.

Identifying features of personal writing

- the pronoun 'I' is nearly always used
- it is based on your own life
- it focuses on feelings, perceptions and beliefs
- the organisation is less structured than in formal essays
- the style is individualistic and often colloquial

Choice of personal writing

Most students choose to write an essay about personal experience but there are other choices that can be made. You can write about:

- likes and dislikes
- yourself
- what you want to do in the future
- what you have done in the past and reflect on it

Whichever you choose, the structure of your essay, and the quality of the writing, will determine whether you get a high mark or not.

Writing the essay

When you write your essay try to:

- vary your sentence structure
- vary your choice of words
- pay attention to details - details are important
- write the senses - what is seen, heard, tasted, smelled, touched
- use techniques - simile, metaphor, onomatopoeia

Writing about experiences/Reflecting

Some of the most interesting writing you can do is writing about an experience and then reflecting on what that experience means to you now. Your writing should be full of descriptions - what you saw, heard, smelled, tasted, felt and thought - and should also convey the growth of your personality from what you valued and believed before, to what you value and believe as a result of the experience.

Whatever experience you choose to write about, your essay will be better if you have had time to reflect on the experience sufficiently and can convey that in your writing.

You can describe the event and then add your reflection at the end but we have found that the best personal writing 'weaves' reflection through it - you reflect on parts of the event as you go along - before adding a final reflection.

Basic writing about an experience and reflecting on it

Basic guidelines:

- capital letters to start sentences
- full stops to finish sentences
- sentences to make sense
- make clear the experience is in the past
- keep tenses correct
- informal language

Example:

I remember when our class was writing in a short story competition. We had been asked to write about aliens coming to our hometown which was only a small village. Being a boy and keen on all things to do with space, I was really enthusiastic. I started it that night. I had a computer game, for the now ancient ZX Spectrum, called 'Head Over Heels'. The heroes of this game were two creatures that could join together or separate. One could only move by flying and was called 'Head'; the other would move by running and was called 'Heels'. They were to be the two heroes of my story, along with myself.

At home we had tables. I got one out and started to write. I sat for a long time. It may have been hours, but since, in those days, minutes felt like hours, it was probably more like an hour and a half. I can't imagine it being more than that. Time now goes a lot quicker and as I get older it gets even faster.

(The rest of the story would tell about the events that followed but would include reflection by the adult writing about the childhood experience.)

- the experience is described in the first person 'I'
- the past tense is used to describe the experience
- some points are made in the present tense, so there is a mix of how things were then and thoughts about that, and how things are now with thoughts about that
- the present tense is used when the narrator speaks in the present

Effective writing about an experience and reflecting on it

Here, pay more attention to the language and techniques you use. Again, you describe an experience that happened to you and interweave it with reflections on changes in you as a result of the experience.

Effective guidelines:

- words are carefully chosen and are varied
- sentence structure is varied and conveys writer's personality
- important changes/emotions highlighted and commented on
- emotions/ideas from the past compared to the present
- evaluation/judgements about compared feelings/thoughts
- deeper understandings conveyed
- conclusions about the past and, possibly, the future, made clear
- informal language

Although the guidelines make many points, this type of personal writing, the reflective essay, is about the past - emotions, thoughts, actions - and the present, so much of the writing should come naturally.

Example:

I was about to perform my dance routine for the first time on stage. I was so nervous; I could not stop shaking. I looked down at my legs, dressed in tights, and they were vibrating. I couldn't help it, and I thought everyone would notice. Fear before a performance can be good or it can be very bad. I've experienced both. Now I think there are two types of nerves: the first type heightens your senses; you experience the nerves but you feel that this is preparing you so that you will be at your peak in the performance. You are like a harp that quivers at the most delicate touch. This is exciting and helps me believe in myself.

The other type, though, is horrible. It is like being on the rack. Your muscles tighten and drain your confidence. you have a growing sense of failure, like black clouds across the sky. Well, this is how I felt at that moment. I had performed many times before but this time I'd been feeling tired and did not practise as much as I should have. Instead of practice giving me confidence, the lack of practice had the opposite effect. This is something I would never do now. I peered round the curtain at the side of the stage: it seemed like everyone was watching me alone.

- more use of simile and metaphor
- an awareness of the feelings then along with understanding now

The Conclusion

In a reflective piece of writing the conclusion is very important.

The conclusion should:

- sum-up the experience
- show thought about the experience
- (possibly) make statements about the future

Here is the conclusion to the above reflection.

Example:

At the time I thought the world had caved in. I felt absolutely humiliated and a complete fool. The feelings at the time were like a thousand pins pressing in on me at once, creating a huge amount of panic. My thoughts, instead of allowing me to take control, screamed in my head Why did I try something I had never practised before? I had hoped for a miracle. Nightmare. Yet now I don't feel that way. I feel almost grateful, in a way, for that awful experience. The feelings were so intense for years afterwards that I never forgot this lesson: practise. I always practise hard now before a performance. It has become so much a part of my preparation. I know if I practise, then all will be well. I know if I don't then I'll be on that rack again. My rule now is until I can do it perfectly time after time, then I haven't practised enough. So I do more. I learned that night that I wasn't good enough not to practise. I couldn't just do it. I had to work. This lesson opened the door to all the great moments that came later with my dancing career. I went further than I thought because I saw that practice made me better - so I practised more! I believe, rightly or wrongly, that failure has been my best teacher. And that evening was its greatest lesson.

- a variety of literary techniques is used
- feelings and thoughts are described and reflected on
- lessons are taken showing growth of personality

Advanced writing about an experience and reflecting on it

For advanced writing the rules are the same. You just do it all better. Try to create an atmosphere for your account and make insights. Reflective writing can be very subtle. It can build to points that then become interesting to reflect on.

The example below is longer than one you might write, but it is a good example of a piece of reflective writing that creates a mood. The main idea, the passing of time, is never clearly stated, yet the piece itself is a subtle reflection on time passing and things changing.

Ultimately a personal piece of writing, certainly a reflective piece of personal writing, will take an incident(s) in a person's life and then reflect on it and draw conclusions about that person, then more reflection will see conclusions being drawn about what it says about being human. So, from a small holiday, we can learn about an incident; gain deeper insight into the person involved in the incident; and then what it means to be human.

Here is an example of reflective writing by E.B. White called Once More to the Lake (full essay). This example carefully 'weaves' the reflection into a the story that is told in great detail. It is an enjoyable piece in itself and it allows you to get a strong sense of a reflective tone.

One summer, along about 1904, my father rented a camp on a lake in Maine and took us all there for the month of August. We all got ringworm from some kittens and had to rub Pond's Extract on our arms and legs night and morning, and my father rolled over in a canoe with all his clothes on; but outside of that the vacation was a success and from then on none of us ever thought there was any place in the world like that lake in Maine. We returned summer after summer - always on August 1st for one month. I have since become a salt-water man, but sometimes in summer there are days when the restlessness of the tides and the fearful cold of the sea water and the incessant wind which blows across the afternoon and into the evening make me wish for the placidity of a lake in the woods. A few weeks ago this feeling got so strong I bought myself a couple of bass hooks and a spinner and returned to the lake where we used to go, for a week's fishing and to revisit old haunts.

I took along my son, who had never had any fresh water up his nose and who had seen lily pads only from train windows. On the journey over to the lake I began to wonder what it would be like. I wondered how time would have marred this unique, this holy spot - the coves and streams, the hills that the sun set behind, the camps and the paths behind the camps. I was sure that the tarred road would have found it out and I wondered in what other ways it would be desolated. It is strange how much you can remember about places like that once you allow your mind to return into the grooves which lead back. You remember one thing, and that suddenly reminds you of another thing. I guess I remembered clearest of all the early mornings, when the lake was cool and motionless, remembered how the bedroom smelled of the lumber it was made of and of the wet woods whose scent entered through the screen. The partitions in the camp were thin and did not extend clear to the top of the rooms, and as I was always the first up I would dress softly so as not to wake the others, and sneak out into the sweet outdoors and start out in the canoe, keeping close along the shore in the long shadows of the pines. I remembered being very careful never to rub my paddle against the gunwale for fear of disturbing the stillness of the cathedral.

- the main idea is signalled in the opening paragraph
- atmosphere is created through attention to detail and choice of words
- there is reflection throughout and the author's personality comes through

Writing about yourself

In Personal Writing, when you write about yourself you write about yourself with the kind of detail and accuracy an author might devote to his most important character, a journalist might devote to the personality of a famous politician or a doctor might devote to a detailed analysis of a patient's body.

Before you write, try to look at yourself in a calm, dispassionate way. It can be entertaining and always interesting.

We have divided the way that you can write about yourself into three separate categories – Basic, Effective and Advanced.

Basic writing about yourself

Basic guidelines

- capital letters at the start of sentences
- full stops at the end of sentences
- separate paragraphs on face/body/personality/friendships etc.
- 'I' and 'my' in your description
- informal style

Example:

I have a very round face. It is a bit like the moon, except I have very red rosy cheeks. My eyes are quite rounded too. My eyebrows are brown and the arch very slightly over each of my eyes. They do not join in the middle. I have freckles, but not too many, and they are mainly around my eyes. My hair is brown and I keep it short. I sometimes gel it into a spike. My nose is not very big and a bit like a button. I have a dimple on my chin. My chin isn't too sharp either but it is there and doesn't just disappear into my neck! My ears are about medium size. They don't stick out too much and I like them.

(The rest of this piece would examine different aspects of the narrator - moods, different sides of personality, friendships, etc.)

Effective writing about yourself

Effective guidelines:

- follow Basic guidelines
- vary words
- vary sentence structure
- pay more attention to details

Example:

My forearms have blood vessels which stand out as blue lines from the elbows to the fingers. People who play in music bands tell me that they are the sort of forearms and hands that should play a guitar as they look very dramatic. My fingers are quite slender: I have often thought that they would be good for playing either guitar or piano. My arms are covered in fair, brown hair and my skin is quite pale but it tans easily and quickly becomes a light brown. I don't have lots of muscles but I am a little bit bulkier than the some of the distance runners that might be seen in a marathon. I have noticed a slight curving of my shoulders and feel it is linked to poor posture which I have never done anything to improve on.

→ variety in wording and sentence structure, with attention to detail, makes this an effective piece of writing

Advanced writing about yourself

This combines the features of 'Effective writing about yourself' with:

- a skilful structure,
- a greater vocabulary,

- more variety in sentence and paragraph structure
- greater use of language techniques
- a skilful creation of tone

The following piece of writing is a good example of Advanced writing. It is taken from a self-portrait written in the seventeenth century by Francois, Duc de La Rochefoucauld.

Example:

I am of medium height, supple, and well-made. My complexion is dark, and fairly uniform; I have a high and tolerably broad forehead; eyes dark, small, and deep-set, eyebrows dark and bushy, but well shaped. I find it difficult to describe my nose; for it is neither snub, aquiline, thick, nor pointed, at least to the best of my belief; all I can say is that it is big rather than small, and somewhat too long. My mouth is large, the lips usually fairly red, and neither well nor ill modelled. My teeth are white and tolerably even. I have been told at times that I have rather too much chin; I have just been examining myself in the looking glass to ascertain the truth, and I am not quite sure what to think of it. As for the shape of my face, it is either square or oval; which of the two, I should find it very hard to say. My hair is black and curls naturally, and is, moreover, of such length and thickness as enables me to lay claim to a handsome head.

My normal expression is somewhat bitter and haughty; which makes most people think me supercilious, though I am not the least so really. I have a very easy bearing, in fact, rather too much so, as it leads me to gesticulate too freely when speaking. This, frankly, is what I think I look like and will, I believe, prove to be not far from the truth. I shall be equally faithful to fact in the rest of my portrait; for I have studied myself closely enough to know myself well, and I shall lack neither the courage to mention unreservedly any good points I may possess, nor the sincerity to acknowledge my faults with frankness.

In the first place I will speak of my temperament. I am inclined to melancholy, to such an extent that for the last three or four years there are scarcely three or four occasions on which I have been observed to laugh. But if my melancholy were the result of temperament alone, I think it would prove mild enough and easy to bear; it is due, however, to so many other causes, and so vexes my imagination and dominates my mind, that either I brood in silence, or else I give very little attention to what I am saying. I am very reserved with strangers, and not particularly open with most of my acquaintances. I am aware that this is a failing, and I would do my utmost to correct it; but as my somewhat gloomy expression tends to make me seem more reserved than I really am, and as it is not within our power to rid ourselves of faults of expression which are due to the natural cast of the features, I imagine that, though I should succeed in improving my inner disposition, I should still not fail to show the outward tokens of imperfection.

I am intelligent and not afraid to say so; for what is the use of affectation? In my opinion too much circuitry and delicacy in speaking of one's good points conceals a measure of vanity under a show of modesty, and is an adroit way of securing a reputation for more merit than one claims.

Personally, I am content to be thought no more handsome than I claim to be, no more amiable than I depict myself, no more intellectual or sensible than I am. I repeat then that I am intelligent; but my wit is marred by my gloomy disposition: for though I possess a fair mastery of language, a good memory, and a clear head, I am so much obsessed by melancholy that I often express myself indifferently.

My sympathies are with the good and I have a generous disposition, and so keen a desire to be in all respects a man of honour that my friends can give me no greater than by frankly pointing at my faults. Those more intimate acquaintances, who have at times been kind enough to give me some hints in that direction, can bear witness that I have always accepted them with the greatest delight conceivable, and with as much humility as can be desired.

I am fond of my friends, and that in such fashion that I would not hesitate for a moment to sacrifice my own interests to theirs. I make allowances for them; and I endure with patience their ill humour; but I am not lavish with display of my affection, nor am I rendered uneasy by their absence.

I am by nature little given to curiosity concerning most of the matters which excite that passion in other people. I am very secretive and no one has less difficulty in respecting the confidence of others. I am very particular to keep my word: I never fail to do so, whatever be the consequences of my promise, and I have throughout my life a rule to which I admit no exception. I observe towards women the strictest politeness, and I believe I have never said anything in the presence of a woman which would cause her pain: they display a charm which is never found in our sex, and besides, they seem to me to indicate their meaning with greater lucidity, and give a more pleasing turn to their observations. As for light amours, I have in the past indulged in these to some extent; but now I do so no longer in spite of my youth.

You can see that in this piece there is **an overall structure with each paragraph focusing on a slightly different aspect of the writer**. A **broad vocabulary** has been used and there is **variety in sentence structure** (colons, semi-colons) and **in paragraph length**. The emotionless tone of the narrator emerges from the writing and this, along with the significant attention to detail, and use of language techniques, for example, metaphor and alliteration, makes this an impressive piece of personal writing.