

Senior Summer Reading: Personal Essays

Note: You will access these personal essays on MX Moodle; you also find all this information there.

About Personal Essays

We are asking you to read and respond to eight personal essays, with the hope that you will start to become a reader and writer of personal essays yourself—a skill that will help you express yourself effectively in college essays, capture your vision in chapels, compose personal statements, and generally articulate your own sensibility in speech and writing.

In a personal essay, the author uses his own voice (the first person) to comment on himself, others, and/or the world. Because personal essays are “personal,” they always reveal a lot about the writer, even when their ostensible subject is something else; we learn a lot about G. K. Chesterton from his thoughts about drawing with chalk on brown paper or about Zadie Smith from her reflections about a billboard. Personal essays often use a humorous, witty style (“A Piece of Chalk,” “Laugh, Kookaburra”), or they employ a voice rich with the power of sadness/pathos (“The Death of a Moth,” “Sparrow Needy”). In the great tradition of Thoreau, they can comment on man’s relationship to nature (“Total Eclipse”) or focus on man’s relationship to his social world (“Find Your Beach”) or focus on both nature and society (“Once More to the Lake”). They are full of images, and you will find general observations about human life sprinkled here and there throughout. Though personal essays have numerous characteristics in common, there is no set form for them: they are all quite different. As you read, note the different structures and the different voices, and think about which voices and structures you like best and would like to imitate in your own writing (and thinking).

Essay 1 “Once More to the Lake,” E. B. White (1941)

E. B. White (1899-1985), the author of the children’s classics *Charlotte’s Web* and *Stuart Little*, also wrote many personal essays, essays which—with their deft humor, subtlety, and profound observations about seemingly small things—seemed to define the personal essay in the United States in the 30s, 40s, and 50s. He published many essays in *The New Yorker* magazine, for which he was a staff writer. “Once More to the Lake,” his best known essay, is perhaps the most widely anthologized American personal essay.

Essay 2 “A Piece of Chalk,” G. K. Chesterton (1905)

G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936) was a prolific English writer with an incomparably witty style. He published over 90 books, writing with seductive energy and good humor, working with paradox and hyperbole, and advocating wittily for his own religious sensibility.

Essay 3 “Sparrow Needy,” Kenneth McClane (2016)

Kenneth McClane (b. 1951) is a poet and essayist who grew up in Harlem and taught for thirty-four years at Cornell before his recent retirement.

Essay 4 “Laugh, Kookaburra,” David Sedaris (2009)

David Sedaris (b. 1956) is a well-known American humorist; Sedaris has regularly published humorous essays in *The New Yorker* and read his work aloud on NPR. His essays are known for their humorous, self-deprecating take on autobiographical material.

Essay 5 “Find Your Beach,” Zadie Smith (2014)

Zadie Smith (b. 1975) finished her first novel (*White Teeth*) while she was still in college at Cambridge (England); the novel’s publication in 2000 made her famous. Since then she has published four more novels and written numerous essays, many of them, like “Find Your Beach,” for *The New York Review of Books*. Smith is well known, in her essays and novels, for capturing the texture and feel of various aspects of contemporary life—as, for example, she explores the difference between contemporary life in Manhattan and London in this essay’s meditation on an advertisement.

Essay 6 “Total Eclipse,” Annie Dillard (1982)

Annie Dillard (b. 1945) is known for her non-fiction prose about humans’ relation to the natural world, of which this essay is a particularly fine and famous example.

Essay 7 “Why I Write,” Joan Didion (1976)

Joan Didion (b. 1934) is known for her spare and evocative nonfiction, which—with its edgy images, concision, and rhythmic prose—offered a new way of understanding contemporary life: Didion’s essays capture, with their elusive and evocative prose, the sense of fragmentation and disorientation often since noted in contemporary lives.

Essay 8 “The Death of a Moth,” Virginia Woolf (1942)

This essay was found among Virginia Woolf’s (1882-1941) papers after her death and published posthumously. Along with her groundbreaking (and heartbreaking) novels, such as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf published volumes and volumes of lyrical and persuasive essays in her own inimitable voice—including the feminist manifesto, *A Room of One’s Own*. Ironically, she did not herself publish what has become perhaps the most widely anthologized of her essays—“The Death of a Moth.” Given the theme of the essay, it’s an irony indeed that it was published only after her death.

About the Two Responses

Your two responses will be graded together as one double reading quiz: your first response should reflect accurate reading and thinking and should be correctly written, but its organization should be fluid: use a structure that allows you to express the points you wish to make directly and fluidly.

You should email your two responses (in one document) to your SENIOR English teacher after August 1 and by Friday, August 30. When you get your schedule (by August 1), you will learn who your SENIOR English teacher will be. Feel free to write your responses in June or July, and then email them to your senior English teacher in August.

Here is what you should write for your two responses:

Response 1: In a series of observations (800 to 1000 words total), comment, using at least five of the essays, on techniques or moments from which you learned something about how to write a personal essay or what a personal essay is/how it operates. You should comment on a different technique in each essay that you write about, although you may analyze how different authors use the same technique to different effect. Examples of the sorts of techniques you might notice include the use of humor or pathos or the slow revelation of the narrator's character—work out what techniques strike you as being particularly effective or useful.

Response 2: Select an essay that you have NOT commented on but that particularly interests you and that you would like to learn from. In 350 to 400 words, imitate the style and techniques of this essay as closely as possible. Since you are only writing 350 to 400 words, your imitation will only be a fragment, but try to make your fragment so similar to the style of the essay you most admire that a reader might think she was reading the writer him- or herself.