

Teachers Writing Personal Essays

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As I often teach writing to students, I feel that I need my own experiences of writing and publishing in order to have any credibility. Writing and publishing fiction is much easier than many teachers imagine. This short account will suggest how teachers might use some of their experiences to write personal essays.

In the personal essay, writing is a matter of recalling details, and employing some fictional techniques such as scene setting, narrative structure, word play, and hyperbole. After presenting these experiences, the writer makes some observations about life or draws some conclusions.

There are a number of publishing venues in English in Japan for personal essays. One such is the bi-weekly *Tokyo Notice Board* which includes a 300-word article written by readers, and for which a contributor is paid about 3,000 JPY. Another publication is the bi-weekly glossy magazine, *Metropolis*, in which each issue has an 800-word guest column, “The Last Word.” Regrettably, *Metropolis* no longer pays for the essays but *Metropolis* has a print run of 70,000 and a web presence as well, so the article will have many readers.

Like newspapers and periodicals everywhere, they value humor very highly. In one piece I wrote, “Half-price Home: Fixing up Your Life by Fixing up a House,” I recalled the comic incidents in my purchase of a second-house. I described how my neighbor’s runaway cat climbed onto our roof, opened our window, and climbed into our rental apartment, and related the epic five hours

that it took to sign the purchase deal at the real estate office, comparable to “signing the documents of surrender” after a war. Finally, I described the fun one can have in repainting an old house.

We painted the oatmeal-colored walls in our house yellow, ochre, and blue. So, that’s one last reason to get yourself a DIY House. Colour. The next time you’re feeling a little blue, you’ll know exactly what to do – paint the walls a festive red. Or a cheery green. Go crazy.

A personal essay can also create an elegiac mood such as another essay I wrote for *Metropolis*, “The Last Goodbye: The Unique and Moving Experience of Funerals in Japan.” I wished to describe how funerals are handled in different cultures, contrasting some in Canada with those I’d been to in Japan, and arguing that funerals in Japan were more honest and affecting.

I began the piece by hinting at the loss that was to follow. “I always knew if I stayed in Japan long enough, I’d start going to my friends’ funerals. I dreaded those last goodbyes.”

I recreated the shock when I learned of one friend’s sudden death. By repeating the word “never” and through fragmented sentences, I tried to generate more impact.

Stunned, we realized that never again would we laugh at his bad jokes. Never again see him in his big, colorful neckties. And we could never tell him how much we liked him.”

The last part of a personal essay requires a summing up of the experience, perhaps an observation. In this case, I reminded the

reader how I felt funerals in Japan were superior to those in Canada and other countries.

Funerals in Japan remind us that life is fleeting. Worth remembering is a Buddhist saying, *ichigo ichie*. In this context, ‘a once-in-a-lifetime encounter.’ Each meeting with those we love is to be cherished. Losing them, properly mourned.

These examples of personal essays show how to approach writing, by drawing on personal experience. At the same, the writing employs word play, irony, and other effects associated with creative writing.

References:

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