Teaching Students to Read and Write Personal Essays

A Sample Unit of Lessons for Middle School and High School Teachers

Jefferson County Public Schools
Version 2.0
Table of Contents

The following unit offers lessons designed to teach students the skills and strategies involved in writing a personal essay and reading a variety of literary works. This unit is designed for instruction in both middle school language arts and high school English classes. Teachers are encouraged to adapt these strategies and choose a variety of models to suit the needs, interests, and abilities of the students in their own classrooms.

Lesson 1  What is a Personal Essay?
Lesson 2  Who Am I?
Lesson 3  What’s Important to Me?
Lesson 4  Finding the “Life Lesson” in Students’ Experiences: What Do You Know for Sure?
Lesson 5  What Color is Conviction?
Lesson 6  Creating an Instant Version
Appendix  Extensions/Accommodations for ECE and Other Diverse Learners
UNIT: Personal Essay

Kentucky Core Content: WR-H-1.2 PERSONAL WRITING:
The student writes a Personal Essay that is focused on a purpose; communicates with an audience; has evidence of choice and/or suitable tone; shows depth of idea development supported by elaborated, relevant details, has logical, coherent organization; has controlled and varied sentence structure, employs acceptable, effective language; and has few errors in spelling, punctuation, and capitalization relative to length and complexity.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PERSONAL ESSAY:
- It has a clear, focused purpose.
- It may contain a narrative, or storytelling part, that is sequenced chronologically and supports the central idea.
- It employs a natural and usually informal style of writing.
- It includes details and/or persons in such a way as to make their significance to the purpose clear.
- It uses descriptive writing to allow the reader to connect with the writer’s personal experience and reaction to it.
- It uses effective connecting words and expressions, which lead the reader through the experience and the thinking/conclusion reached by the writer.
- It highlights the writer’s reflection on the focused purpose as an essential part of the personal essay.
- It maintains a first person point of view.

SUPPORTING SKILLS:
In order to write a proficient Personal Essay, the student should be able to:
- Narrow topic and focus
- Identify audience and purpose.
- Use pre-writing strategies e.g. brainstorm, visualize, draw, free-write, web, cluster, and other graphic aids.
- Use an individual voice appropriate to the topic.
- Use dialogue effectively when appropriate.
- Use sensory details
- Choose language appropriate to audience and purpose.
- Write a lead that engages the reader and sets the context for the reader.
- Create a single impression of the central idea of the personal essay.
- Place ideas and details of the personal essay in meaningful order.
- Focus on relating the significance of the central topic on the writer’s life.
- Organizes the personal essay into paragraphs.
- Use transitions between ideas.
- Concludes the personal essay effectively.
- Discuss the writing with teacher and others and use their questions, comments, and suggestions to aid revision and editing.
- Add, delete, or change writing to improve organization and support, sharpen focus, achieve clarity, and refine language and sentences.
• Write complete sentences, making subjects and verbs agree.
• Use correct end punctuation, commas, quotation marks, apostrophes.
• Use a variety of strategies to spell correctly.
• Share writing with its intended audience.
• Assess effectiveness of writing based on proficient criteria.
• Reflect on his/her process used in developing the personal essay.
• Produce a published copy that is neat and legible.

TEACHER NOTES:

The Personal Essay is a form of the personal/expressive genre that allows the writer to share personal insights into his/her view of life. It often takes on the perspective of “life lessons learned” through the use of narrative storytelling to share insights and new learning with the reader. Personal Essay writing is focused on a central idea or theme which is supported by a variety of incidents from the writer’s life. Most personal essays take on one of three styles: a humorous commentary, a reflection on an event whose consequences are charged with emotion, or a personal opinion about something serious. Regardless of the style, the writer must maintain focus on the central idea or theme of the essay and its significance to the writer’s own life.

The first lessons in teaching the Personal Essay involve exposing students to the characteristics of the personal essay through the use of student work and professional examples. It is recommended that you begin searching for other examples of personal essays that fit the needs of your classroom. As you search for examples that reflect the three styles of personal essay writing, keep in mind the need to find models that have a clear, focused central idea or theme to use with students. Personal Essays are found in magazines, newspapers, and on-line publications. Another source may be from the students’ own attempts at writing other personal forms. Sometimes a failed attempt at the personal narrative form may end up “accidentally” as a personal essay.

The Personal Essay is NOT a list of events with a “what I learned” or “this story relates to my life” at the end. Lessons included in this unit are designed to help students know and understand the characteristics of an effective personal essay. In order to help students explore topics that are suitable, it is suggested that teachers devote time to developing writing conversations about the things students know about. Several lessons are designed to help facilitate the type of conversations that lead to topic discovery.

Writer’s Notebook. Throughout the unit, reference is made to a Writer’s Notebook (Atwell, 1988). For additional information about this tool, see Teaching Students to Read & Write a Memoir – Teacher Notes.

Conferencing, Revision, and Editing lessons common to all writing forms can be found throughout the Core Content Guide. For specific lessons, refer to the index for both the Middle School Language Arts and the High School English Core Content Guides.
UNIT: Personal Essay

TOPIC: What Does a Personal Essay Look Like?

LESSON 1 OBJECTIVE: Students will identify the characteristics of the Personal Essay

CORE CONTENT: WR-M-1.2 Personal Writing
WR-H-1.2 Personal Writing

VOCABULARY: central idea (theme), significant incident, reflection.

RESOURCES AND MATERIALS: Copies of “The Kindness of Strangers,” “Living the Dream,” “Childhood Pastime,” and “A Hero’s Magic;” chart paper or overhead transparency; copies of the KDE definitions of personal narrative, memoir, and personal essay from the Writing Development Teacher’s Handbook.

TEACHING STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES:

(Teacher Note: Depending on the school schedule, this lesson may extend over several days. The following activities have been divided into two sections and can be combined at the teacher’s discretion.)

Section 1
• Before beginning this lesson review the differences between each of the three forms of personal writing focusing on the key terms that distinguish each form from the other. In addition, reacquaint yourself with the proficient skills lists at the beginning of each Personal Writing Section in the Kentucky Marker Papers and the Personal Essay skills list provided with this unit.

• Begin the lesson by reviewing the definitions of personal writing using the KDE definitions and the enclosed graphic as an overhead or poster. (Note: Cover the list of samples at the bottom of the graphic until after the groups have met.) Point out the distinguishing key words in each form, e.g., event, relationship, and central idea, and discuss how each is used in the different personal writing pieces.

• Plan to put students in groups of three. Each group should receive a packet of personal writing that contains a personal narrative, memoir and personal essay. Use a copy of a personal narrative and a memoir from either the Kentucky Marker Papers or the Writing Portfolio Benchmarks and the personal essay “Living the Dream.” Distribute the packets to the group. Ask students to take turns reading each personal piece of writing and as a group decide what differentiates each piece. As a class discuss what characteristics made each piece unique to its form. Make sure students have a basic understanding of each of the three forms of Personal Expressive Writing.

• Using their Writer’s Notebook, writing folder or exit slips, have students explain what they learned about the unique characteristics of each personal writing form.
Section 2

• Before beginning this section, review the enclosed Personal Essay Skills List included in this unit. Make enough copies for all students to have their own copy and make an overhead to use during the lesson. It is important to be familiar the annotated copy provided so that you can guide students in using the terminology from the skills list. In this lesson you will be modeling how to analyze writing by annotating. Follow the process outlined in the Kentucky Marker Papers: use a final draft and the bulleted list of skills to identify those same qualities evident in the student sample, avoid grading or looking for what is wrong, identify next lessons.

• Remind students of the analysis they completed on personal writing and tell them the focus of this personal writing unit will be personal essays. After distributing the skills sheet, use the transparency to walk students through the language used in the handout. Remember this skills list was written initially for a teacher and some of the language may be unclear for students. As you guide students through the skills list encourage them to make notes on their copy in "student language" for personal clarification.

• Provide copies of "Childhood Pastime" for each student and make an overhead to use for modeling annotating. Read the piece aloud as students follow along with their copies. Encourage discussion that helps all students recognize the characteristics of a personal essay. Focus on using the terms from the skills list by restating student comments in the language used on the list. This leads into introducing the process of annotating writing. Explain the process as outlined above and model how to find a skill from the list in the writing, asking students to mark their copy in the same manner. Use the annotated copy to help you guide the students. Have students complete the annotation by identifying the skills on the overhead and on their own copies.

• Next, ask students to decide what the "next lessons" should be. Remind them that the purpose of the next lesson is not to "fix" that piece, but to add to the student's writing skills for future writing.

• Organize students into pairs. Provide a variety of sample personal essays and instruct students to annotate one or more using the skills list to guide them. Circulate among the students prompting them where necessary. Remind them that examples of some skills can be found over and over, while others, like engaging lead, would only show up once.
EXTENSIONS/ACCOMMODATIONS FOR ECE/DIVERSE LEARNERS:
Using color highlighters for annotating may make identification easier for some students. Choose a variety of essays for the annotating activity. The essay characteristics are much more explicit in some and the skills are more easily identified.

ENRICHMENT:
Professional samples are sometimes more abstract and reflective than student samples and can provide a more engaging activity. Samples can be found in the newspaper, magazine publications, and online.

TECHNOLOGY CONNECTIONS:
Have students complete Internet searches for samples that meet the criteria of the skills list and compile a list of web sites as a resource for others.

ASSESSING THE LEARNING:
- Compare student annotations with the teacher copy to assess level of understanding. Use the assessment to determine what students "know" and "still need to know" in planning future mini-lessons on personal essay writing.
Middle/High School Personal Essay

Lesson
- The importance of the life
- Central idea to emphasize
- Specific details tied to the
- Uses broad reflection and
- From the writer's life
- Supports by using incidents
- Focuses on a central idea
- PERSONAL ESSAY

Personal Narrative
- Includes reflection from the writer
- Includes narrative story
- First Person Point of View - "I"

Peronal Expressive Writing

Developed by Kim Goff and Deanne Gormley
STUDENT SAMPLE
Childhood Pastime

Ever since I remember, I have been fascinated with the job of law enforcement. Dragnet, ChiP’s, Hawaii Five-O, and Columbo were my favorite TV shows. I loved the action, authority, and mysteries like on Columbo. It’s the show about the L.A. Detective, Columbo, the old guy with the humped back, and a cigar; and always seemed to forget what he was going to ask a suspect. These shows were the seed that germinated into my pastime play. As children we all had one. For some, the pastime of choice was coloring, board games, watching TV, or playing with GI Joes. I seemed to have been an exception. My pastime version of “Cops and Robbers” needed only one person, me.

By definition, hot pursuit is were a police officer may legally pursue a fleeing criminal outside of the given jurisdiction, if the fleeing is at all times within view of the officer. My mother was really protective over me, so my jurisdiction was set within my neighborhood block. My block was about one half of a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide. There were two alleys that intersected at the center of my block and divided it into quarters. These alleys were the gateways to my imagination. I had a lot of driveways and plenty of trees to give me cover and element of surprise to stake-out speeders. I’d sit on my bicycle in a driveway and wait, and sometimes continue to wait for quit a long time; That is until an unsuspecting car would pass by. As silly as it seems, once the car would pass I’d gear up my bike and take off after the car. With hair waving, eyes watering, heart racing, and sweat building on my forehead I would chase my speeder until I could chase them no more; I was either at the edge of my “jurisdiction,” or physically exhausted when I would have to stop. I loved it, but my Mom wouldn’t let me out of my block and most of the cars just passed through, so I couldn’t pursue for very long. Boy, was it an adrenaline rush. Now that I think about it, the shortest chase I ever had turned out to be the most memorable.

On a beautiful day in late July of 1991, I made my first actual pretend traffic stop. I was posted in a neighbor’s driveway waiting, and that’s when I heard it - my Mammaw’s Oldsmobile. Then I saw her, in that white hair and sun-flowered blouse, steering that beast of a car into my alley; I planned my attack: She’d pass by and I’d fall behind her with the lights and siren to pull her over and give the ticket for speeding. I had chased a lot of people, but Mamma
was the first to ever stop for me. I pretended that the stop was real and radioed to dispatch the violation.

“One Adam Twelve, I have an Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme, Kentucky passenger plate number GBX-143. My location is 216 1/2 Central Avenue in the driveway”. That address was my house, Mammaw stopped in the driveway. I had watched so many episodes of those police shows that I was almost a professional. But I’ll admit, the uniform was pushing it. I had on red pants, a red and white and green striped collard shirt, flashlight, handcuffs, note pad, cowboy hat, boots, and a pop-pistol. My bike was equipped too, with the Wal-Mart brand police lights and siren and a plastic police baton. I can only imagine what a sight I must have been in her rear view mirror.

I made my approach.

“Ma’am, may I see your license and proof of insurance?”

“Well cutie pie sure, but what is your name?”

“Officer Murray, Ma’am.”

“Officer Murray, why was I stopped?”

“For speeding.” She handed me the license and proof of insurance.

“Thank you ma’am, I’ll be right back.”

The documents were handed over and I returned to my bike to write the ticket. With a crisp tug at my note pad I tore out the hand written ticket and scribbled my signature. I gave Mammaw the ticket and sent her on her way, which was only up the sidewalk to my front door. My mom, the judge, greeted her and I returned to my play.

We never know where life will take us. Maybe it can be determined by our childhood pastime-play-our interest as children. Today, at eighteen, I still want to become a police officer. I’m currently an explorer scout in my local police department, I’m training to become a Military Police Officer, and I will start my college career in the fall of 2003. Sometimes I feel a pride that I’ve had a dream, really a goal, for my entire life, and that is almost a reality now.

Ever so often I am asked: “Clay why in the world do you want to be a cop, when you are so bright and smart with so much potential?” So what do I say, ‘Look here buddy, you don’t know what your talking about’, and come across as a real butt? No, I take the slap in the face and explain that that is where my heart is. You see it’s not the prestige, if you will, or the authority that appeals to me, it’s the public service, community involvement-the idea and feeling
I get from working with and for people. Over the past two and half years I have accumulated over 360 hours of volunteer community service. I have found from my community service that it really takes a bright individual and one with a broad experience and knowledge to be a good community servant. There are so many different types of people with different backgrounds, that as a community servant I have to find some way to relate to them. Having a rich education and various experiences are essential to community service, particularly, in the capacity of police work. So, if you ask me why I’m so adamant about becoming a police officer, I’ll tell you that that is where my heart is, rooted in my favorite TV shows and pastime play.

Kentucky High School Student
(retyped-retaining the original text)
"Professional basketball player for the Los Angeles Lakers, Magic Johnson, has contracted the HIV virus. He was diagnosed as contraction HIV earlier today." The words echoed from my speakers as I drove home from school. I sat patiently awaiting the punchline, but there was none. The broadcaster went on to finish his story as I sat there in amazement of what I had just learned.

"Magic Johnson?" I thought. I immediately saw the life size poster of the pro basketball star that hangs on my nephew's bedroom wall. The denial set in and I was determined the whole situation was a joke. I walked into the kitchen just as Mom was getting home from work.

"Did you hear?" she asked after settling down and putting the groceries away. "You know, about Magic Johnson"?

"Yes, but I thought it was a joke. I can't believe this is real."

"I can't believe it's real..." That was dominant thought that ran through each American's mind as Magic Johnson's news began to spread. This incident brought about fear and anxiety to each and every individual that knew of Magic Johnson. Along with the fear, came an intense hit with reality. The fact that wealthy, famous, all-American, pro-basketball player Magic Johnson could contract HIV and possibly die from AIDS, shows us that everyone is susceptible to AIDS. This is where the seriousness of AIDS comes into play. From the first moment I accepted the fact that Magic had HIV, I knew he wasn't a homosexual or a drug addict. AIDS is a very serious, life-threatening disease that not only affects homosexuals and drug abusers, but AIDS is quickly moving into the heterosexual population as well. Later, the public learned that Johnson had contracted HIV from an affair with a woman. This only proves the point that AIDS can affect every sexually active person in the world.

In a world where heroes don't seem to exist, I feel that Magic Johnson has the potential to be one of the greatest heroes of the nineties. Currently, Magic Johnson is using the publicity from his own problems to educate others on how they can protect themselves. Through lectures, and reading, Magic has informed teenagers and their parents to exercise caution if they (the teenagers) do decide to become sexually active. Magic Johnson has been a role model to many
kids through his basketball career. Although Magic Johnson is facing many trials of his own, he is using his problems and encouraging others not to make the same mistakes he did.

I greatly admire Magic Johnson for his attitude to this whole ordeal. He has such a great, positive outlook on his life, even when his days are limited. Magic Johnson is not a "quitter" and has never been known to be one. Magic Johnson knows there is no cure to the fatal disease he has contracted, but is determined to live his last days to the fullest. The poster on my nephew's wall continues to hang, but now Magic Johnson stands for much more. Darin is too young to understand exactly what happened to Magic, but one day he will realize and become aware of how much Magic has taught him. Whether or not Magic Johnson makes the Olympic team or travels to Barcelona, he is already a hero in the eyes of a true fan.

Kentucky High School Student
(retyped-retaining original text)
STUDENT SAMPLE
Living the Dream

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a man with a visionary dream. In one way or another, his famous oration, “I Have a Dream,” has affected us all. I realized the impact of his dream when I lived in his vision of racial diversity. It was an experience that changed the way I look at the world.

Perhaps one of Dr. King’s most famous quotations is, “I have a dream that my children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” As a young child, I was given the chance to live this dream by growing up in a racially balanced neighborhood.

At the age of six, I moved to Columbia, Maryland. It was a “planned community” that was built in 1968 to encourage unity of all races and religions. In my neighborhood, there were about thirty kids in one block, two bi-racial families, a large Asian Family, blacks, Hebrews, Turks, and whites. Every night the street would be filled with many children of all races, laughing and playing. In the background, parents were mowing lawns, talking, or just taking a break. Frequently, an old Asian grandmother would walk quietly as she traveled from one son’s home to the other at the end of the street. There she would take care of her grandchildren while her sons worked to pay for more Cambodian relatives to come to the United States. My Turkish friend, Amit, who wore a turban because he could not cut his hair, excelled in all sports, and was a neighborhood favorite. Parents in Columbia said, “their children began to see no color.” And, I believe it was true. My friends and I were naturally open-minded and didn’t notice or care about skin color, or didn’t point out kids who were different.

As our friendships grew, we learned to respect different lifestyles. In December, we not only celebrated Christmas, we learned about our neighbors’ religious holidays. My brother and I learned from our American and European Jewish friends all about the meaning of Hannukah. Our black friends taught us about an African celebration called Kwanza. We explained our nativity scene and religious celebrations to our friends, too. At school, we studied about all these holidays, and learned new customs, games, and songs.

Now I realize what a special period in my life that was where the innocence of our youth had not been tainted by thoughts of bigotry and prejudice, and where we focused on “the content
of character” rather than skin color. And perhaps what I lived was what Dr. King visualized when he first announced, “I have a dream...”

Kentucky Middle School Student
(retyped - retaining the original text)
The writer of a competent personal essay demonstrates most or all of the following skills:

PURPOSE/AUDIENCE
♦ focuses on the purpose of maintaining a central idea (theme)
♦ narrows the topic; limits the essay to incidents and details that best communicate the writer’s purpose
♦ uses an individual voice and appropriate tone- humorous, reflective, serious
♦ creates a title that captures the essence of the piece and creates reader interest

IDEA DEVELOPMENT/ SUPPORT
♦ contains a narrative, or storytelling part, that is sequenced chronologically
♦ develops ideas by using relevant supporting details from life experiences
♦ describes emotions, thoughts, and actions to relate the life experience
♦ highlights the writer’s reflection on the focused purpose
♦ employs an informal or conversational style of writing
♦ uses dialogue, indirect and direct, effectively
♦ uses sensory details

ORGANIZATION
♦ writes an engaging lead
♦ places ideas and details in meaningful order
♦ organizes the essay into paragraphs
♦ uses transitions between ideas
♦ maintains coherence and unity
♦ concludes by revisiting the importance of the writer’s experience and the life lesson learned

SENTENCES
♦ writes complete and varied sentences

LANGUAGE
♦ chooses language appropriate to the audience and purpose
♦ writes in first person
♦ uses descriptive language to allow the reader to connect with the writer’s experience and reaction to it
♦ maintains consistent verb tense
♦ makes subjects and verbs agree
♦ employs correct usage

CORRECTNESS
♦ spells correctly
♦ uses correct end punctuation, commas, quotation marks, apostrophes
♦ capitalizes correctly
♦ makes few errors in correctness which do not interfere with the meaning of the piece
UNIT: Personal Essay

TOPIC: Who Am I? (a two-day lesson)

LESSON 2 OBJECTIVE: Students will explore their lives to discover topic choices for personal essays.

CORE CONTENT: WR-M-1.2 Personal Writing
WR-H-1.2 Personal Writing

VOCABULARY: personal essay, vicariously

RESOURCES AND MATERIALS: Paper, fishbowl or basket
Writer’s Notebook/ Writing Folder

TEACHING STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES:
• Write the following discussion prompts, as well as your personal choices, on small strips to be drawn out of fishbowl or basket. There are several extra; select those most appropriate for your own students.

  An achievement/ accomplishment you are most proud of. Why do you consider it an accomplishment?

  An obstacle/ challenge you have overcome. How did you overcome it?

  A skill or hobby that makes you unique from many of your classmates. How did you develop it?

  A time in your life when you tried hard but failed at a task/job/challenge. How could you have been more successful?

  A personality trait/characteristic you have discovered about yourself. Would your family and/or peers say they notice this trait in you?

  A book, movie, or work of art you enjoy(ed). What about it attracted you?

  Something that really bugs you, ticks you off? Why is it a big deal to you?

  The best advice you ever received. How has it helped you?

  A role model, hero or heroine of yours. Why do you admire that person?

  An event that has directly influenced your approach to life. Why and how?

  A favorite/significant childhood experience. Why is it still important to you?
• Divide class into groups of 4 and have students take writer’s notebooks/writing folders to group site.

• Remind class that our best writing grows out of what we know about ourselves, out of what we have experienced either actually or vicariously- through the eyes of others. One way to get seed ideas is to talk with others.

• Draw one prompt, read it to class, and allow 2 minutes for students to make any thinking-on-paper notes in notebook/folder re the prompt. Model your notes for a particular prompt.

• Have each student in group share his/her response to the prompt with other group members, listening for similarities, differences, new insights.

• After no more than 10 minutes, ask students to record their notes about “stories” of other group members-- especially those with similarities, differences, and new insights. To ensure that students get the idea, have a few students share their notes.

• Repeat the process with 2 other prompts.

• Lead students in debriefing session.

    Did any one of the prompts cause you to reflect on something about yourself you haven’t considered before?

    What did you learn about other group members?

    Did any of their responses help you recall similar situations in your life?

    Does anyone have a “story “ to share?

• On day 2, assign students to groups different from day 1. Remind students that they are collecting ideas. Work through 3 prompts in same manner as day 1; there will be several extra so select ones most appropriate for your class.

• Conclude debriefing session by asking students to select 1 of the 6 seed ideas that they are interested in thinking about more.

**EXTENSIONS/ACCOMMODATIONS FOR ECE/DIVERSE LEARNERS:**

**ENRICHMENT:** See High School English CCG, Persuasive Reading and Writing, Lesson 2, “What Really Ticks You Off.”

**TECHNOLOGY CONNECTIONS:**

**ASSESSING THE LEARNING:** Exit slip: Using writer’s notebook or folder, students will write 2-3 sentences describing the seed idea they want to think about more.
UNIT: Personal Essay

TOPIC: What is Important to Me?

LESSON 3 OBJECTIVES: Students will identify what is important to themselves and their peers. Students will make personal connections to topics and peers’ stories.

CORE CONTENT: WR-M-1.2 Personal Writing
WR-H-1.2 Personal Writing

VOCABULARY:

RESOURCES AND MATERIALS: Overhead or Chart Paper
Writer’s Notebook/Writing Folder

TEACHING STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES:
• Begin the lesson with a brief discussion about the importance of writing about what we know and are interested. Remind students that most of the time, personal writing is intended for an audience who has similar likes or interests. With that in mind, these activities will focus on determining what is important to adolescents and teens.
• Ask students to identify what is important to them as a group. Encourage general answers such as “clothes” or “being treated fairly at the store” and try to get an answer from all students. Many times the quiet or uninvolved students provide the best insights for essay development. Have students write the list in their writer’s notebook or writing folder. **The ideas generated here are invaluable later in the year when a student “doesn’t have anything to write about.”
• At this point many students usually have made some personal connections to the list and want to share their story. Before students start to share, model for the students how you make personal connections to some of the topics by making a BRIEF note to the side. A few words or phrases --just enough to jog your memory-- is all that should be written. Give students no more than five minutes to do the same.
• Choose one of your notes to share a brief story with the class. When you are done ask if your story reminded them of a story about that topic. If so, instruct them to jot a note in the margin of their list. At this point you can have students share with the whole class, stopping every few minutes to give students time to make personal connection notes or have students break into groups to share stories and make personal connection notes. The telling and re-telling of the stories acts a great pre-write for many students. Articulating exactly what they mean, answering peer questions, and incorporating comments or descriptions from peers generally leads to richer writing later in the writing process.

EXTENSIONS/ACCOMMODATIONS FOR ECE/DIVERSE LEARNERS:
ENRICHMENT:

TECHNOLOGY CONNECTIONS: Have students input into a database brief summaries of their stories. Maintain and add to the database of topics available to students throughout the year.

ASSESSING THE LEARNING:
• Have students choose one to three stories they have told and complete a brief summary, one to two paragraphs, at the end of the lists in their writer’s notebook.
UNIT: Personal Essay

TOPIC: Finding the “Life Lesson” in Students’ Experiences: What Do You Know for Sure?

LESSON 4 OBJECTIVES: Students will determine what lessons they have learned from a variety of personal experiences identified in previous pre-writing activities and "what they know for sure."

CORE CONTENT: WR-M-1.2 Personal Writing
WR-H-1.2 Personal Writing

VOCABULARY: theme

RESOURCES AND MATERIALS: Construction Paper or Sentence strips
Overhead Transparencies/Overhead Writer’s Notebook/Writing Folder
All Personal pre-writing/brainstorming
Copies of
"What It is Like to Be Different"
"Where There's A Will There's a Way"
"The Kindness of Strangers"
"Empty Nest"
"Living the Dream"
"A Hero's Magic"
A variety of other personal essays

TEACHING STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES:

• Prior to beginning this lesson, review the samples provided in this unit and locate additional personal essays which “fit” your students. Most popular magazines include regular personal essay columns in every issue, e.g., “Full Circle” in Family Circle; “My Turn” in Newsweek; “What I Know For Sure” in Oprah; and “Southern Journal” in Southern Living. Be prepared to help students identify the lessons learned by the writer in each sample. This is also a good place to introduce or remind students that theme is not limited to literary writing. The central idea or the lesson learned from a piece of writing permeates a variety of writing.

• Remind students of all the personal information they have gathered and shared during the “Who Am I?” and the “What’s Important to Me?” lessons by modeling your own and asking students to share. Explain to students that the next step in developing this piece of writing is to identify the “life lessons” or the reflections found in all personal essays. These life lessons can be small (“Moms ARE always right!”) or more global (“Failure is one step closer to success!”). Invite students to look for lessons they learned based on the personal stories they have shared.

• Have students complete a “What I Know for Sure...” sentence strip to be displayed.
As a final activity, divide the class into groups of four. Provide copies of the essays listed in the resources above, plus any others you have found, and ask students to identify what the writer "knows for sure." Answers can also be displayed on sentence strips starting with "What the Writer Knows for Sure….”

EXTENSIONS/ACCOMMODATIONS FOR ECE/DIVERSE LEARNERS:
• Provide quotes for struggling students to use as prompts for personal essay topics.

ENRICHMENT:
• Challenge students to find a quote that captures the essence of the life lesson they have identified from their stories.

TECHNOLOGY CONNECTIONS:
• Encourage students to use search engines to locate websites with appropriate quotes or provide students with a list of websites to search for interesting or engaging quotes.

ASSESSING THE LEARNING:
• Engage students in conversation and explanation about “what they know for sure” to assess level of understanding. Review sentence strips for participation grades.
STUDENT SAMPLE

What It Is Like To Be Different

Being a Caucasian, middle-class girl from the East side of town, I never knew what it was like to be different. I went to school, hung out with my friends that came from about the same background as I, and never had to deal with any sort of discrimination because of my appearance. I was the typical middle school student. Maybe I was a little taller than the other kids, maybe I got a little higher test grades, but people never looked at me and said, "Look at that girl; she is different from us." And I never thought anyone ever would.

I learned how wrong I was as soon as I stepped off the airplane when I arrived in China. When I boarded the plane in Detroit, I had been surrounded by the familiar faces and sounds of America. As I walked through the airport in China, the faces of my mother and father were surrounded by a sea of black hair and foreign dialect. Back home I thought I could blend into a crowd of people and no one would be able to tell the difference between me and any other brown haired girl in the group. Here, I knew there was no where I could hide and not stand out like the one red flower in the center of a bouquet of Queen Ann's Lace.

During the day while my father was at his business meetings, my mother and I would take walks around the small city we were staying in. As soon as we stepped out of the hotel we could feel the eyes focus in on us. Women riding bicycles with their babies in the front baskets, men sitting on the side of the lake fishing, and children playing in their own imaginary world, would all divert their attention from their tasks at hand just to stare at us. Tourists rarely came to this area of the country, and it was obvious from their fascinated stares we received that many of these Chinese people had never seen people from the West in their own town. Though our dark brown hair and peach skin were only a slightly different shade than theirs, our wide eyes and pointed noses were enough to keep them staring all day.

I never knew that the simple action of looking at someone could be so troublesome to the person being viewed. I wondered what it was about me that was so fascinating to them. What was it they saw when they looked at me? Did they view me as an ogre, towering over all of them? Or as someone they would pay money to see in a side show act? I knew they could not be looking at me because they knew that I could hit a home run under pressure when my softball team really needed it. There is no way they could have known I had a true talent when it came to
painting with watercolor or making my baby brother laugh. They did not know who I really was. Their attention in me was based superficially on my appearance alone.

There were days on the vacation when I could not bring myself to go outside and face the gaze of the people of the country. I would stay in my hotel room and flip through the channels on the television until I found a station playing a rerun of an old American sitcom. I gained comfort hearing English and watching people that I could easily fit in with. After ten agonizing days, we finally boarded the plane headed for America and I felt relieved that I once again blended in with everyone else.

I was not until years later that I realized how much my trip to China had really taught me. The constant stares of those who did not look like me showed me what it is really like to be different. It made me realize that there are many people who have to deal with the stares everyday and cannot just take a plane and fly away from the gazes of those who view them as unusual. From my experience I have learned not to stare at or judge others just because they appear different from me. I only wish that every person

Could spend ten days in a situation where they felt out of place so that they could learn, as I did, that people need to be viewed with more that just the eyes.

Kentucky High School Student

(retyped-retaining original text)
STUDENT SAMPLE

Where There’s A Will, There’s A Way

Madame Curie once said, “We must believe that we are gifted for something, and that this thing, at whatever cost must be attained.” I keep these words in mind whenever someone asks me why I do gymnastics. many people find it difficult to comprehend why I have given up so much for this sport. I spend around twenty hours a week practicing, including Friday and Saturday nights. This leaves little time for me to pursue other interests and hang out with friends. But to me, it’s all worth it. Gymnastics has taught me lessons I will take with me for the rest of my life. Above all, I have learned never to give up, because if I want something badly enough, I can find a way to get it. I learned this lesson in the eighth grade, and it has kept me going ever since.

My goal when I was thirteen years old was to win the all around competition in the Kentucky gymnastics meet. The all around score is the sum of the scores on all four events: vault, bars, beam and floor. Three of the events were relatively easy for me, but vaulting gave me a lot of trouble. It was very frightening to me to have run about seventy feet down the vault runway, somehow manage to hit a springboard, and then flip over headfirst onto a block of wood. As a result, I would often run down the runway, freak out, and either just stop or, on worse occasions, smack into the vault. Not only did I miss most of my vaults, but the ones that I did go for weren’t terribly good. I was expected to keep a perfect body position, push off the vault powerfully, and land on my feet without so much as a single step. needless to say, this didn’t happen when I vaulted. In competition, my vault score was usually pretty low. After one particular occasion in which my vault score kept me from winning the all around, I learned my lesson and made a decision.

Up until then, I wouldn’t even go over the vault if I felt just the tiniest bit “off.” I decided that such inconsistency would not be tolerated and that I would go over the vault every time no matter what. This decision made a profound impact on my vault, and allowed me to actually improve it. One decision changed everything, and it really showed. Every day that I was in the gym, I worked harder as my vaults got better. At the state meet, all the work that I had done suddenly came together. That day, I ran, jumped, and flipped with more energy than
ever before. Everything just felt so right. It was almost magical. I did the best vault of my life, and became not only the state champion in the all around, but on vault as well.

The feeling that I got when I stood up on the podium and accepted my medals made me realize that it was all worth it. All the late nights I had spent at the gym, every drop that I had sweated, every tear I had cried, were all worthwhile just to make this moment happen. It wasn’t really about medals, or even winning, though. It was about setting a goal, and achieving it.

That’s why gymnastics is worth it to me. I know that if I can set a goal, and work hard at it, I can do it. This philosophy has paid off not only in gymnastics, but in school and in life. I have made the decision that I will never let myself give up. There is always a reason to try just one more time. To capture a dream and never let it go.

Three years later, I am still doing gymnastics. Every time I think I want to give it up for good, whether it is because I am frustrated, scared, hopeless, or just plain tired, I remember how I gave my all then and I remember where it got me. And although I have learned and forgotten many lessons in the past three years, I will always hold onto this one. I have learned that if I set a goal and give it everything I have, no matter what, then and only then will I be able to get it. If I keep my dreams in mind, then I can control my own life. This is a good lesson for anyone to learn. Just hold on, never let go, and you will get what your heart desires.

Kentucky High School Student
(retyped - retaining the original text)
UNIT: Personal Essay

TOPIC: What Color Is Conviction?

LESSON 5 OBJECTIVE: Students will use art to tap into emotions connected with the concept of conviction.

CORE CONTENT: WR-M-1.2 Personal Writing
WR-H-1.2 Personal Writing

VOCABULARY: conviction

RESOURCES AND MATERIALS: Chart paper
Crayons/markers/paints
Drawing/watercolor paper
Writer's Notebook/Writing Folder

TEACHING STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES:
• Explore the use of symbols in our culture, e.g., various road signs, peace sign, various commercial products, etc. Record examples on chart paper.

• Discuss the role of color in our understanding of some symbols. For example, what do some colors say to us? Record student responses on chart paper.

• Explain that symbols are often powerful reminders of convictions we share.

• Discuss the meaning of conviction in general and as it applies to the individual students' lives. If you used the lesson "What Do I Know for Sure?" you can refer to the sentence strips created by the class for examples.

• Explain that because art sometimes give us a new way of seeing a place, situation or person, it is a valuable tool to use as we explore ideas for our personal essays.

• Encourage students to think of a visual representation or symbol that represents conviction in their lives or something they know for sure. This will be easier for some students than for others, so it would be helpful to have at least one example on hand to share.

• Give students paper and colors. Instruct them to create with color the symbol they associate with conviction. Again, this may be a conviction in general or a more specific example they've already considered in other prewriting experiences.
• Remind students that symbols are generally simple and to the point.

• When finished, have students articulate descriptive language related to their art. For example, you may say, "Describe the feelings that are evoked by this image," or "Think of a time or times when you've felt this way." In the Writer's Notebook, students will record the feelings, etc. associated with conviction.

• Debrief this activity by inviting students to share their artwork and the way this activity has enhanced their understanding of conviction in their lives. Have students return to their Writer's Notebook and reflect on the topic they are considering for their personal essay. Ask students, "Is your conviction about your topic as strong as you thought it was?" Revisit "What You Know for Sure" and look for places to add language that emphasizes your convictions.

EXTENSIONS/ACCOMMODATIONS FOR ECE/DIVERSE LEARNERS:

ENRICHMENT: Students could display their work with a copy of their writer's notebook entry for a gallery walk. Challenge students to find a symbol that could be used in their personal essay as a connecting thread.

TECHNOLOGY CONNECTIONS:

ASSESSING THE LEARNING: Observation of the writer's notebook entry and the artwork.
UNIT: Personal Essay

TOPIC: Creating an Instant Version

LESSON 6 OBJECTIVE: Students will gather information specific to the selected topic that will lay the groundwork for writing their essays.

CORE CONTENT: WR-H-1.2 Personal Writing

VOCABULARY: bias

RESOURCES AND MATERIALS: Index cards
Writer's Notebook/Writing Folder

TEACHING STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES:
After students have selected a topic for their essays, giving them additional prewriting time with a specific focus will provide some of the think time needed to create a focused essay that is well-supported.

Peter Elbow (Writing with Power, 1981) suggests "the loop writing process." The idea is that students take a voyage out or away from their specific topic with a series of notebook entries and then that they bring those individual pieces together on the voyage home making connections that support the central ideas of their essays. The following is an adaptation of that process.

These activities are designed for use over multiple class periods.

- Discuss the importance of adequately supporting the central idea with appropriate details.

- Give each student six index cards.
On the first card, students will write their first thoughts on the topic. This is basically a free writing activity without judgement. Students may want to refer to some of the prewriting entries they completed in earlier exercises.

   The second card is for students to record any biases or assumptions they have related to the topic. Examples may include statements that begin with "Everybody always…" or "People never…" This is an important step because it encourages new ideas and insights.

Next, have students consider a scene that they associate with the central idea. Focusing on one moment in time, students will record all the sensory details they can remember.
Encourage students to think about people who are connected to the central idea they've selected. On the fourth card, describe in detail one or two of these people.

On the fifth card, ask students to imagine a dialogue between himself/herself and someone with a different point of view. This helps further clarify the writer's conviction. Finally, ask students to consider how the pieces recorded on the first five cards are connected to the central idea--the life lesson they learned. On the sixth card ask students to write a statement that summarizes that learning experience.

- After students have prepared the note cards, have them pair with a partner. Each student will use the note cards to frame an oral presentation of the story behind the personal essay for his/her partner.

- The listening partner will share any questions that are raised in regard to the story. The writer can then note these questions for consideration.

- After both have shared their stories orally, each student will write an "instant version" of the essay in their writer's notebooks. The purpose is to get an initial draft on paper while the conversation and the questions raised are clear in the writer's mind.

- Next steps should include returning to the prewriting, samples/models, and the rubric for personal essay to determine areas for concentration as the drafting/revision process continues.

**EXTENSIONS/ACCOMMODATIONS FOR ECE/DIVERSE LEARNERS:**
Use tape recorders to record conversation between partners and to record the individual "instant version."

**ENRICHMENT:**

**TECHNOLOGY CONNECTIONS:**

**ASSESSING THE LEARNING:** Observation of group work, note cards and entry in writer's notebook.
Extensions/Accommodations for ECE and other Diverse Learners

Students with disabilities may require additional accommodations. 
Refer to IEP (Individual Education Plan)

Organize and Structure

- **Establish routines to insure that students have consistent opportunities to process information and to maintain an effective learning climate.**
- Activate prior knowledge with a written or verbal review of key concepts at the beginning of class.
- Present the agenda for the lesson and task expectations verbally and in written form.
- Establish well-defined classroom rules. Have students model and rehearse behavioral expectations.
- Set clear time limits. Use a timer to complete tasks.
- Utilize student’s peak learning times to teach important lessons.
- Use verbal/nonverbal cues and frequent breaks to keep students focused.
- **Plan and organize classroom arrangement to minimize disruptions and enhance efficiency.**
- Allow adequate space for effective traffic patterns, furniture, and equipment.
- Arrange classroom to limit visual and auditory distractions.
- Provide preferential seating (near teacher, good view of board, special chair or desk) to increase attention and reduce distractions.
- Keep student’s work area free of unnecessary materials.
- **Display and use visuals, posters, objects, models, and manipulatives to increase memory, comprehension and establish connections to core content. Examples include….**
  - Mnemonic devices such as COPS (Capitalization, Organization, Punctuation, Spelling).
  - A model of the final product before beginning an experiment, project, lab, etc.
  - Posters of steps for specific learning strategies (open response, writing process, formulas).
    - Use varied student groupings to maximize opportunities for direct instruction and participation.
- Use of one-on-one and small group instruction for students who require additional support.
- Carefully consider student abilities, learning styles, role models, type of assignment, etc., when grouping students for cooperative learning and with peer partners.
- Collaborate, co-teach, or consult with ECE, Comprehensive Teachers, etc.
- **Prior to instruction, design and organize content to strengthen storage and retrieval of information.**
- Design instruction that incorporates a multi-sensory approach (visual, auditory, tactile/kinesthetic) to insure that all learning styles are accommodated. Include demonstrations, simulations, hands-on activities, learning strategies, and mnemonic devices.
- Identify and focus on information critical for mastery. Determine the content students need to know (vs. what is nice to know). Organize instruction around the big ideas.
- Design an agenda showing exactly what the students will learn.
- Sequence presentation of content from easier to more difficult.
• Prepare study guides, a copy of class notes, or graphic organizers ahead of time. Allow some students to use partially completed copies during the lesson.
• Provide simplified versions of books and materials with similar content.
• Design specific management procedures to insure acquisition of content and task completion using…
• Planners, agendas, assignment sheets, homework/personal checklists, folders, notebooks, and/or parent notes.
• Written as well as verbal cues/prompts, color-coding, symbols, picture clues.

Instruct Explicitly

• Present and pace explicit instruction to reinforce clear understanding of new concepts and make connections to prior learning.
• Teach, model and rehearse learning strategies pertaining to the content of the lesson including organizational guides, cooperative learning skills, and memory/mnemonics devices. (KWL, Venn Diagrams, SQRW = Survey, Question, Read, Write, etc.).
• Introduce new concepts by clearly connecting them to prior knowledge using key vocabulary, chapter review questions, agenda, syllabus, etc. Present in both written and verbal form.
• Present assignments/directions in small steps/segments.
• Use short phrases, cue words, and signals to direct attention (my turn, your turn, eyes on me).
• Adjust the volume, tone, and speed of oral instruction.
• Frequently monitor students to enhance memory, comprehension, and attention to content.
  • Use frequent and varied questioning strategies. Target higher order thinking skills.
  • Call on students by name. Restate student responses. Provide positive and corrective feedback.
  • Use and model ‘think aloud,’ self-questioning, problem solving, and goal setting techniques.

Reduce

• Condense main ideas and key concepts to avoid overload and allow for developmental mastery.
• Modify requirements of assignments based on information critical for mastery.
• Provide clear, visually uncluttered handouts/worksheets.
• Adapt assignment and test formats. Use alternate modes such as short answer, matching, drawing, true/false, and word banks.
• Break tasks into manageable segments. Adjust duration of instruction and independent work.
• Reduce redundancy and unnecessary practice.
• Use activities that require minimal writing. Avoid asking students to recopy work.
• Adjust amount/type of homework and coordinate assignments with other teachers.
• Provide credit for incremental learning.
Emphasize and Repeat

- Use repeated practice/targeted cues to increase retention of essential concepts and to develop ability to monitor own learning.
  - Provide frequent, but short, extra practice activities in small groups.
  - Have student read/drill aloud to self or peer partner.
  - Highlight text or use coding methods for key concepts.
  - Use bound notebooks and/or learning logs to store vocabulary, facts, references, and formulas.
  - Allow students guided practice and test taking strategies before assessments.
  - Frequently restate concepts/directions using short phrases.
  - Use computer activities, games, and precision teaching drills for practice activities instead of worksheets.

Motivate and Enable

- Enhance opportunities for academic success to remediate faulty learning/thinking cycles and to reduce failure.
  - Create unique learning activities including skills, posters, clay models, panoramas, dramatizations, etc. (see textbook manuals for alternative activities).
  - Offer students choices of topics/projects and alternative methods to demonstrate knowledge (oral tests/presentations, illustrations, cooperative groups, etc.).
  - Allow flexible timelines for assignment completion, homework, and testing with retakes.
  - Consider the students learning styles when designing extent of involvement in a learning activity.
  - Extend time for students to process ideas/concepts, which are presented in lectures/discussions.
  - Use technology such as taped text, word processors, scanners, and audio feedback software.
  - Provide spare material and supplies.
  - Provide personal word lists/spelling aids for written assignments.
  - Adjust grading procedures to reflect individual goals, only correct answers, and percent of completed work. Allow extra credit projects to bring up grades.

- Enhance opportunities for behavioral success to reduce frustration and confusion.
  - Increase positive comments and student interactions (make 3 positive statements for every one negative statement).
  - Use positive and specific verbal/nonverbal praise. Provide immediate feedback.
  - Review rules regularly. Provide varied rewards and consequences.
  - Maintain close physical proximity to students especially during independent work sessions.
  - Alert students several minutes before transitions occur.
  - Use personal contracts and goal setting which match the student’s needs, interests, and abilities.
• Teach self-monitoring skills using progress charts/reports. Gradually wean students from artificial incentives.
• Maintain regular communication with parents.

References

Adapted from *Student/Staff Support Teams*, Phillips, McCullough 1993 and *Collaborative Strategies*, Mall (2001)