

Teaching Memoir and the Personal Essay

Humanities Texas Teaching Literature webinar

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Today's agenda

- Introduction
- Part 1: teaching students to analyze personal writing
- Part 2: teaching students to produce personal writing
- Q&A

Four Questions

- What do you like best about teaching personal writing?
- What essays or memoirs do you use in the classroom?
- What do your students like best about reading and analyzing personal writing?
- What do your students like best about writing personal essays?

Key elements of personal writing

- NARRATOR: who is speaking
- CHARACTER: who we are reading about
- PLOT: sequence of events
- VOICE: language and style used by the narrator
- CONTEXT: historical, geographical, cultural, and any other factors that link the story to events outside of itself

James Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son” (1954)

ON THE TWENTY-NINTH OF JULY, in 1943, my father died. On the same day, a few hours later, his last child was born. Over a month before this, while all our energies were concentrated in waiting for these events, there had been, in Detroit, one of the bloodiest race riots of the century. A few hours after my father’s funeral, while he lay in state in the undertaker’s chapel, a race riot broke out in Harlem. On the morning of the third of August, we drove my father to the graveyard through a wilderness of smashed plate glass.

- Who is the narrator? Where is the narrator?
- What is the main concern of this paragraph?
- How are the sentences structured?

Baldwin, “Notes” (paragraph 2)

The day of my father's funeral had also been my nineteenth birthday. As we drove him to the graveyard, the spoils of injustice, anarchy, discontent, and hatred were all around us. It seemed to me that God himself had devised, to mark my father's end, the most sustained and brutally dissonant of codas. And it seemed to me, too, that the violence which rose all about us as my father left the world had been devised as a corrective for the pride of his eldest son. I had declined to believe in that apocalypse which had been central to my father's vision; very well, life seemed to be saying, here is something that will certainly pass for an apocalypse until the real thing comes along. I had inclined to be contemptuous of my father for the conditions of his life, for the conditions of our lives. When his life had ended I began to wonder about that life and also, in a new way, to be apprehensive about my own.

- Who is the narrator? What do we learn about his character?
- What themes do we see prefigured here? What will the narrator learn? How will this essay deal with his relationship with his father?

Joan Didion, "Goodbye to All That" (1967)

IT IS EASY to see the beginnings of things, and harder to see the ends. I can remember now, with a clarity that makes the nerves in the back of my neck constrict, when New York began for me, but I cannot lay my finger upon the moment it ended, can never cut through the ambiguities and second starts and broken resolves to the exact place on the page where the heroine is no longer as optimistic as she once was. When I first saw New York I was twenty, and it was summertime, and I got off a DC-7 at the old Idlewild temporary terminal in a new dress which had seemed very smart

- Who is the narrator?
- What are the narrator's concerns and interests?
- How does the sentence structure convey these concerns and interests?

in Sacramento but seemed less smart already, even in the old Idlewild temporary terminal, and the warm air smelled of mildew and some instinct, programmed by all the movies I had ever seen and all the songs I had ever heard sung and all the stories I had ever read about New York, informed me that it would never be quite the same again. In fact it never was. Some time later there was a song on all the jukeboxes on the upper East Side that went "but where is the school-girl who used to be me," and if it was late enough at night I used to wonder that. I know now that almost everyone wonders something like that, sooner or later and no matter what he or she is doing, but one of the mixed blessings of being twenty and twenty-one and even twenty-three is the conviction that nothing like this, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, has ever happened to anyone before.

Character

- Both: the people they used to be
- Baldwin: I was consumed by rage, the way he was. I am now...?
- Didion: I was overwhelmed by the experience of New York. I am now...?

Plot

- Baldwin: I hated my father's rage and I hated him because of it. When I entered the world I began to understand and then develop that rage. I saw what it could make me do and what it would make others do. Because of this, I came to realize that one cannot allow that rage to take over.
- Didion: Coming to New York was like coming to a magic place, where anything was possible and one could live without consequences and nothing was "irrevocable." I then realized that one can live in this netherworld too long, that when one becomes an adult what once seemed magical comes to feel oppressive.

Plot □ Context

- In many personal essays, “plot” boils down to “here is how a sequence of events caused me to change my mind/feelings about this thing that is important to me.”
- This type of plot must be interesting for at least one of two reasons:
 1. The personal development/change is one that many people share and can relate to
 2. The personal development/change takes place in a context people are interested in (civil-rights movement and experience of racism; being young in New York)

Context

- Baldwin: The civil-rights movement. The psychological effects of racism. The roots of violence in deprivation. Coming to terms with a parent

to bring about such unanimous, active, and unbearably vocal hostility. I knew about jim crow but I had never experienced it. I went to the same self-service restaurant three times and stood with all the Princeton boys before the counter, waiting for a hamburger and coffee; it was always an extraordinarily long time before anything was set before me; but it was not until the fourth visit that I learned that, in fact, nothing had ever been set before me: I had simply picked something up. Negroes were not served there, I was told, and they had been waiting for me to realize that I was always the only Negro present. Once I was told this, I determined to go there all the time. But now they were ready for me and, though some dreadful scenes were subsequently enacted in that restaurant, I never ate there again.

It was the same story all over New York. I had heard that the Negroes

Context: Didion

- Didion: The experience of youth and freedom. The provincial moves to the city and becomes sophisticated. New York City as an abstraction become reality

plausible place for people to live. But to those of us who came from places where no one had heard of Lester Lanin and Grand Central Station was a Saturday radio program, where Wall Street and Fifth Avenue and Madison Avenue were not places at all but abstractions ("Money," and "High Fashion," and "The Hucksters"), New York was no mere city. It was instead an infinitely romantic notion, the mysterious nexus of all love and money and power, the shining and perishable dream itself. To think of "living" there was to reduce the miraculous to the mundane; one does not "live" at Xanadu.

Voice and Rhythm: Baldwin

- The centerpiece of the essay is the funeral scene
- The first sentence of the essay points to it; the last sentence obliquely alludes to it
- The actual scene (paragraph pg 598-600) rises and swells, like oratory.
- It reflects the sound of a funeral oration and becomes the eulogy that he did not want to give his father
- The speaker's anger has shut out the possibility of refuge in God but the funeral forces that possibility in

The real man, whoever he had been, had suffered and now he was dead: this was all that was sure and all that mattered now. Every man in the chapel hoped that when his hour came he, too, would be eulogized, which is to say forgiven, and that all of his lapses, greeds, errors, and strayings from the truth would be invested with coherence and looked upon with charity. This was perhaps the last thing human beings could give each other and it was what they demanded, after all, of the Lord. Only the Lord saw the midnight tears, only He was present when one of His children, moaning and wringing hands, paced up and down the room. When one slapped one's child in anger the recoil in the heart reverberated through heaven and became part of the pain of the universe. And when the children were hungry and sullen and distrustful and one watched them, daily, growing wilder, and further away, and running headlong into danger, it was the Lord who knew what the charged heart endured as the strap was laid to the backside; the Lord alone who knew what one would have said if one had had, like the Lord, the gift of the living word. It was the Lord who knew of the impossibility every parent in that room faced: how to prepare the child for the day when the child would be despised and how to *create* in the child—by what means?—a stronger antidote to this poison than one had found for oneself. The avenues, side streets, bars,

“Metalanguage”

- Talking about what you are saying—takes the reader out of the moment, makes the reader realize they are reading something constructed
- Metalanguage makes us think of the writer as a writer, building this essay. This is fitting because the essay is about Didion becoming a professional writer

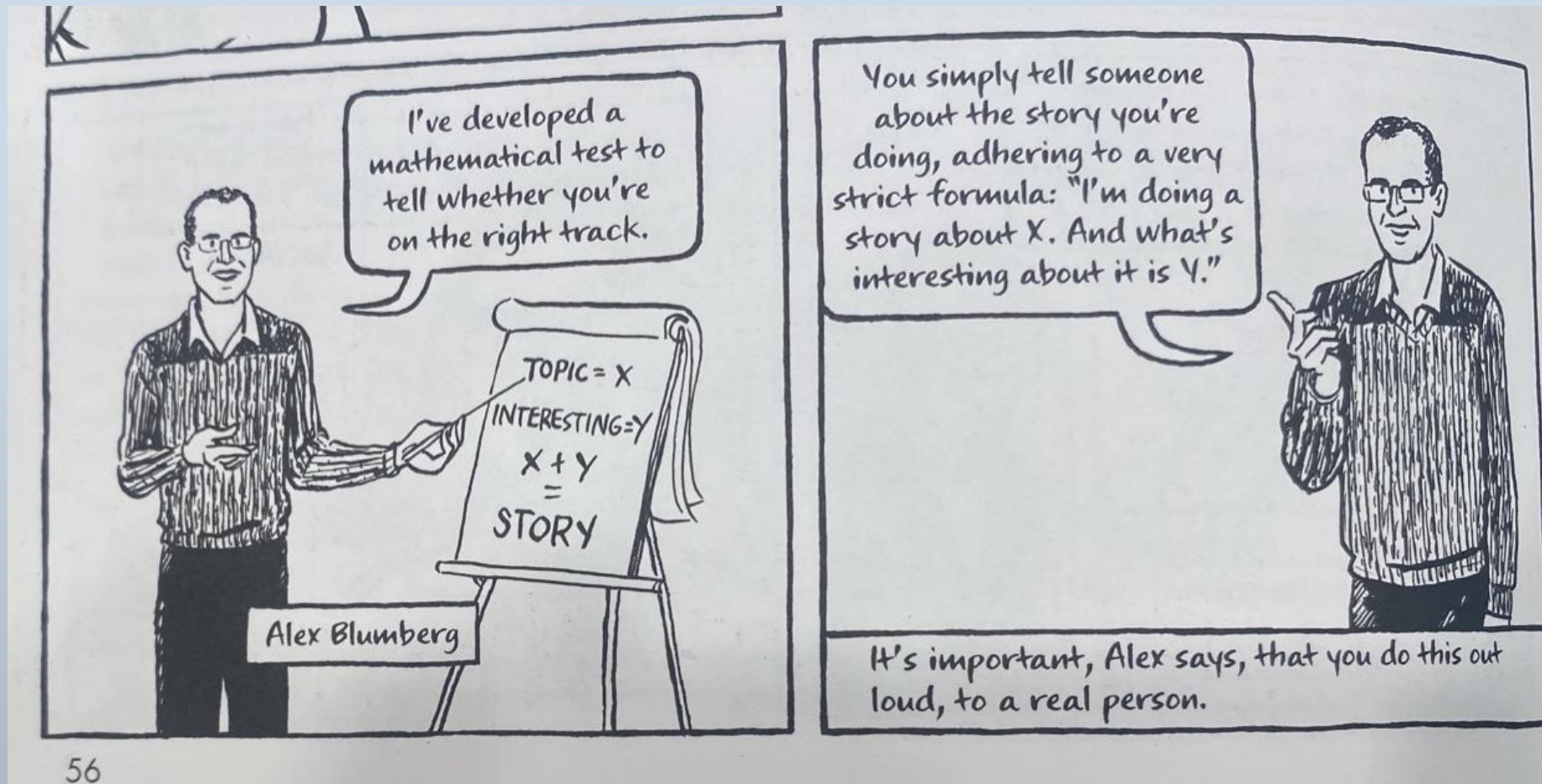
In retrospect it seems to me that those days before I knew the names of all the bridges were happier than the ones that came later, but perhaps you will see that as we go along. Part of what I want to tell you is what it is like to be young in New York, how six months can become eight years with the deceptive ease of a film dissolve, for that is how those years appear to me now, in a long sequence of sentimental dissolves and old-fashioned trick shots—the Seagram Building fountains dissolve into snowflakes, I enter a revolving door at twenty and come out a good deal older, and on a different street. But most particularly I want to explain to you, and in the process perhaps to myself, why I no longer live in New York. It is often said that New York is a city for

The personal essay as social media

- How is a personal essay like a social-media post?
- Provides information the author wants you to know
- “curates” a self for the author
- Suggests a way for the reader to understand the events presented
- Shows a mastery of the genre
- How is a good personal essay NOT like a social-media post?
- Unintentionally revealing
- Opens up ambiguity
- Struggles with the conventions of the genre
- Aspires for permanence, not ephemerality

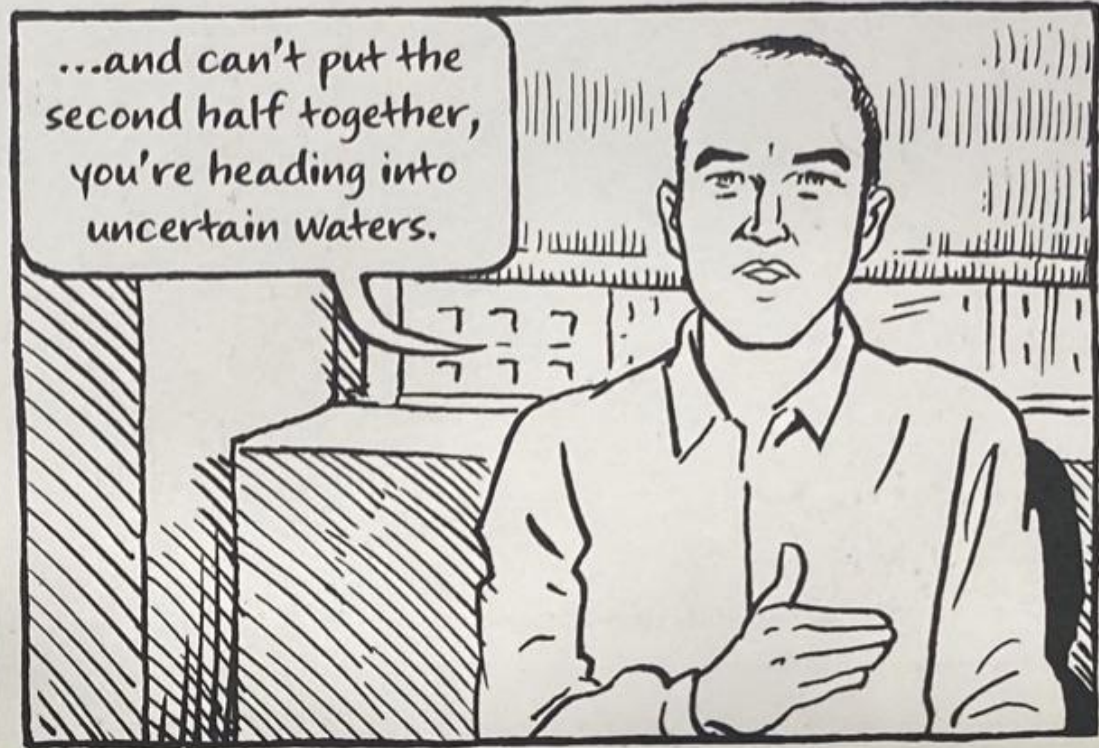
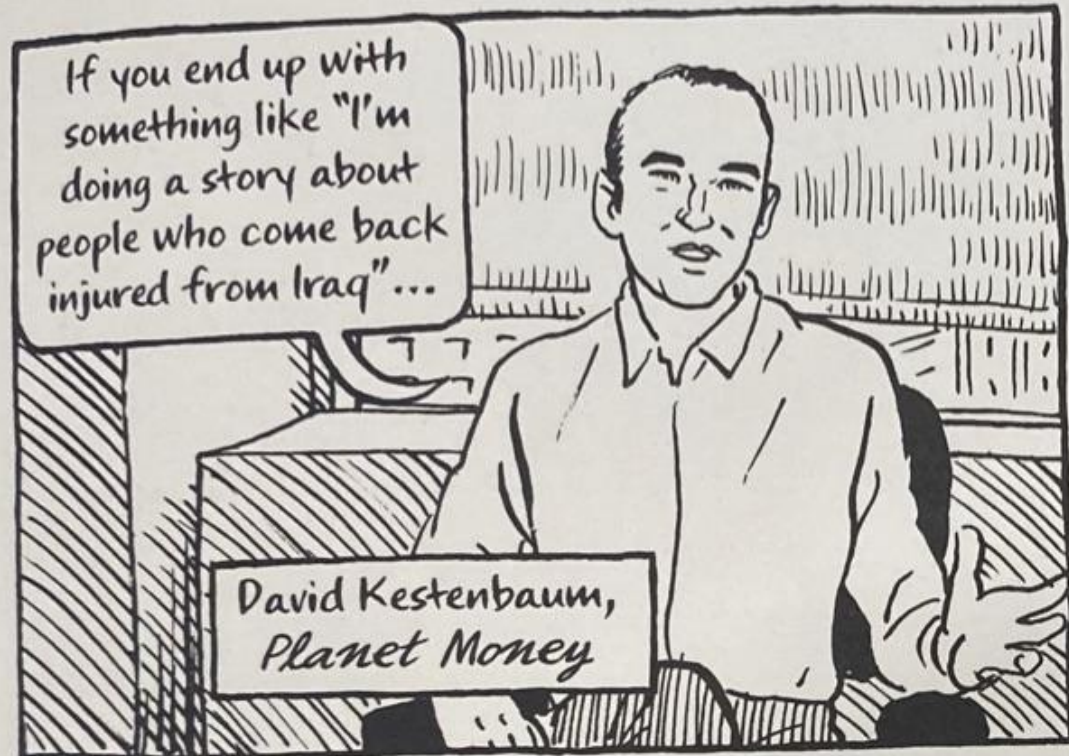
X and Y

- I want to tell a story about X, and it is interesting because Y



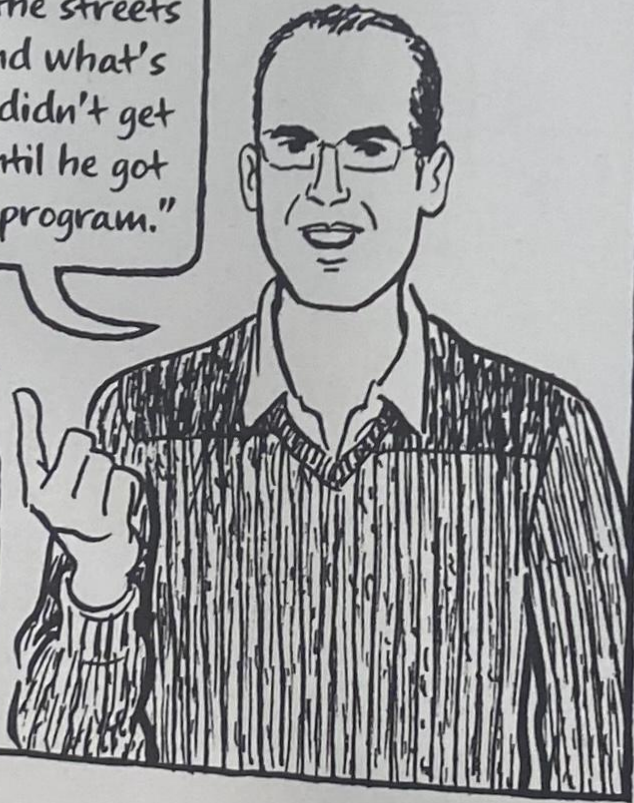
I'm doing a story about X. ← Topic

And what's interesting about it is Y. ← Story



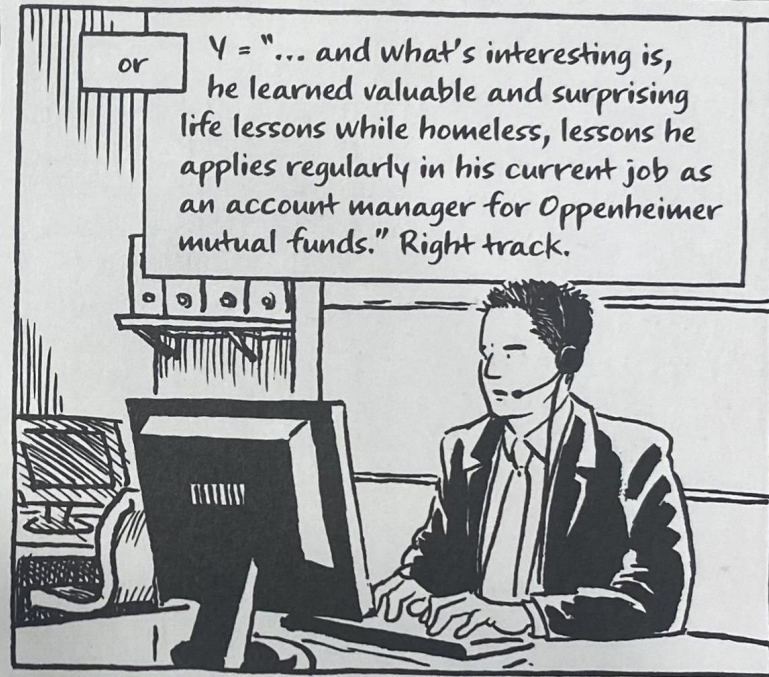
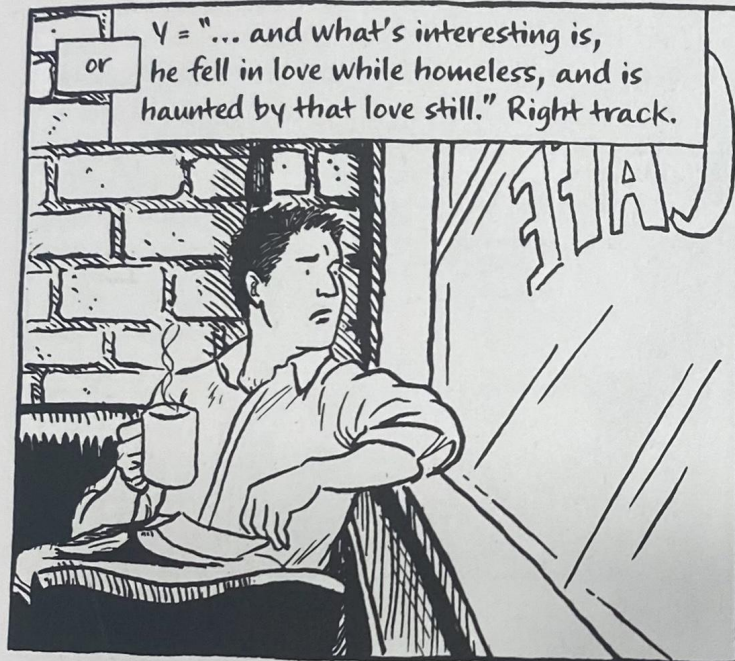
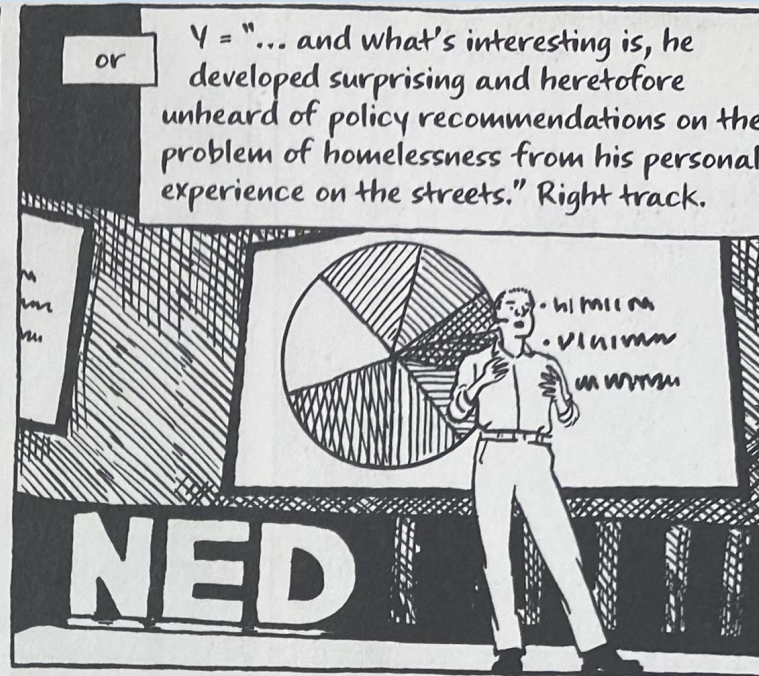
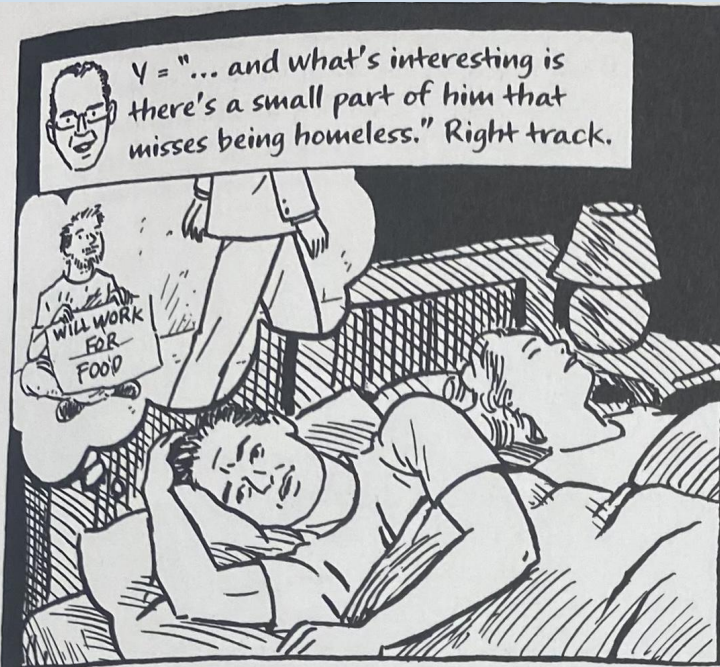
For example, "I'm doing a story about a homeless guy who lived on the streets for ten years, and what's interesting is, he didn't get off the streets until he got into a treatment program."

Wrong track. Solve for a different γ .



In other words, This might be what actually happened, but it's not interesting enough to tell a story about. Keep digging in your research for something more compelling. Such as...





X and Y

- Baldwin: **My experience with the rage that comes from being subjected to racism taught me that one cannot, like my father did, live in rage. *One must accept and understand things as they are, without the blindness of rage, without being complacent, in order to create change.***
- Didion: **Like many others, as a young woman I came from the provinces to the great metropolis and it was magical, like I was told. But the magic ends as I became an adult and had to live in the adult world. *One can live too long in a magic world, and when you do it curdles.***

Using this for student writing

- First: begin with “X and Y.”
- Students want to say X, and they think it is sufficient
- Teachers’ (readers’) job is to help students go from inside their own heads to communicating with an audience: how can you make X interesting to others? What is your Y?
- “The best summer I ever had” – X. “Here is how the best summer I ever had taught me that work can actually be a fun thing” – Y.
- Doing this in groups or with a partner is crucial! Students need to ask “is my Y actually interesting to you?”
- Partners need to say “your Y doesn’t work. HERE is why your X might interest me.”
- We can use this exercise to help students connect their own lives not just to the larger world, but to other people’s experiences

The Focus Sentence

- Once you have your X and Y (topic and why it is interesting), move on to the “focus sentence” as a way to further plan the essay.
- Focus sentence: “I did A because B but C.”
- A = the action, the plot
- B = the character, motivations, beliefs
- C = complications, conflicts, obstacles that give the action meaning and arc

The classic personal essay

- “Here is my experience, and here is how I changed because of it”

E.B. White, “Once More To the Lake”

When the others went swimming my son said he was going in too. He pulled his dripping trunks from the line where they had hung all through the shower, and wrung them out. Languidly, and with no thought of going in, I watched him, his hard little body, skinny and bare, saw him wince slightly as he pulled up around his vitals the small, soggy, icy garment. As he buckled the swollen belt suddenly my groin felt the chill of death.

Description/analysis of a subculture

- “Music Is My Bag,” Meghan Daum

“I am part of a group with its own practices and assumptions and language and I am going to explain them to you.”

I grew up in Music Is My Bag culture. The walls of my parents' house were covered with framed art posters from musical events: The San Francisco Symphony's 1982 production of St. Matthew's Passion, The Metropolitan Opera's 1976 production of Aida, the original Broadway production of Sweeney Todd. Ninety percent of the books on the shelves were about music, if not actual musical scores. Childhood ceramics projects made by my brother and me were painted with eighth notes and treble clef signs. We owned a deck of cards with portraits of the great composers on the back. A baby grand piano overtook the room that would have been the dining room if my parents hadn't forgone a table and renamed it "the music room." This room also contained an imposing hi-fi system and a \$300 wooden music stand. Music played at all times: Brahms, Mendelssohn, cast recordings of Sondheim musicals, a cappella Christmas albums. When my father sat down with a book, he read musical scores, humming quietly and tapping his foot. When I was ten, my mother decided we needed to implement a before-dinner ritual akin to saying grace, so she composed a short song, asking us all to contribute a lyric, and we held hands and sang it before eating. My lyric was, "There's a smile on our face and it seems to say all the wonderful things we've all done today." My mother insisted on harmonizing at the end. She also did this when singing "Happy Birthday."

Thick description

- Larry Woiwode, “Ode to an Orange”
- “I will use words to capture sensory experience in a way that will allow you to have that experience in the way I did”

And the ingenious way in which oranges come packed into their globes! The green nib at the top, like a detonator, can be bitten off, as if disarming the orange, in order to clear a place for you to sink a tooth under the peel. This is the best way to start. If you bite at the peel too much, your front teeth will feel scraped, like dry bone, and your lips will begin to burn from the bitter oil. Better to sink a tooth into this greenish or creamy depression, and then pick at that point with the nail of your thumb, removing a little piece of the peel at a time. Later, you might want to practice to see how large a piece you can remove intact. The peel can also be undone in one continuous ribbon, a feat which maybe your father is able to perform, so that after the orange is freed, looking yellowish, the peel, rewound, will stand in its original shape, although empty.

Personal relationship with language

- Gloria Anzaldúa, “How To Tame A Wild Tongue”
- “I use language in ways that are unique and at times opposed to ‘Standard English’”

I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess — that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for “talking back” to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. “If you want to be American, speak ‘American.’ If you don’t like it, go back to Mexico where you belong.”

“I want you to speak English. *Pa’ hallar buen trabajo tienes que saber hablar el inglés bien. Qué vale toda tu educación si todavía hablas inglés con un ‘accent,’*” my mother would say, mortified that I spoke English like a Mexican. At Pan American University, I and all Chicano students were required to take two speech classes. Their purpose: to get rid of our accents.

Literacy narrative

- Sherman Alexie, “Superman and Me”
- “Here is how I learned to read and what reading meant to me”

At the same time I was seeing the world in paragraphs, I also picked up that Superman comic book. Each panel, complete with picture, dialogue and narrative was a three-dimensional paragraph. In one panel, Superman breaks through a door. His suit is red, blue and yellow. The brown door shatters into many pieces. I look at the narrative above the picture. I cannot read the words, but I assume it tells me that "Superman is breaking down the door." Aloud, I pretend to read the words and say, "Superman is breaking down the door." Words, dialogue, also float out of Superman's mouth. Because he is breaking down the door, I assume he says, "I am breaking down the door." Once again, I pretend to read the words and say aloud, "I am breaking down the door" In this way, I learned to read.

Questions?

- All stories referred to available on the course site, as well as sample assignment prompts

Small group activity

1. Come up with an idea for a personal essay in the “X and Y” format:

I want to write about X that happened to me/that I have been thinking about, and it is interesting to others because Y.

2. Write that down for yourself. Then each person reads theirs to the group.
3. Group members: comment on what could make it more interesting or relevant to others. Formulate your response with “what I might find really interesting about X is Y.”
4. After you have heard the rest of the group’s responses, revise your “X and Y” sentence accordingly.

BREAK AND RECONVENE AS A PLENARY GROUP

5. Take your revised “X and Y” sentence and add to it a focus sentence. “I did/do A, because B, but C.” A is the action, B tells us about your ideas and motivations, and C is the complication or conflict that give the action interest and an arc.
6. Read your X and Y and focus sentence to the rest of the group and ask them for feedback about how (for example) B and C might be related to each other. Revise your focus sentence accordingly.