

Writing Personal Essays & Opinions Pieces

for the Surrey International Writers' Conference 2007

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Read the essays referred to in this workshop at <http://www3.telus.net/345/essays.html>

Subject - these are all particularly powerful

- Firsts
- Epiphanies
- Transformation
- Ritual
- Current affairs
- Trends

Statement

- This is your view of the topic - the theme
- Love, first tooth, the Iraq War, eating close to home, etc. are topics.
- Love is never enough/ love is enough / love is hard to find / love is everywhere / love is overrated are all possible themes different readers might extract from the same topic. This is the reason so many different essays could be written to commemorate Valentine's Day!

Story

- Without a story, you are just the 'bore at the party'.
- Often you start with a story, then extract the theme from it.
- Your reaction to others' stories (at the coffee shop, in the newspaper, on the TV, etc. etc. can be a launching pad and becomes the theme of the piece.
- Use the elements of fiction - strong characterization, compelling dialogue, clear point of view, evocative scene-setting.

Sensory details help you avoid 'telling' when you should be showing.

- After your first draft, go into your piece and highlight any mention of the senses. Then go in and ramp up the sensory content, making it as relevant to the topic as possible.
- Writers instinctively use the sense of sight. Don't overlook the other four.

Style

- The best time to focus on your use of language is after you've put the first draft on paper.
- Go in and highlight the **verbs** - are they active and specific rather than abstract and generic and watch for all forms of the verb to be (was/were/are/is) and rephrase using a stronger verb, especially at the beginning or end of sentences, paras.
- Test to ensure the nouns are concrete and specific.
- Edit out redundancies, repetition, clichés.
- Read it aloud to hear how it sounds.

Structure

- Think like a camera lens - start in close then widen up, or
- ...start with a wide view, then move in closer.
- Begin with a question, statement, statistic then answer / explain / refute / illustrate it.
- If you begin with a complete scene (see 'story' above), you might turn full circle and end with it.