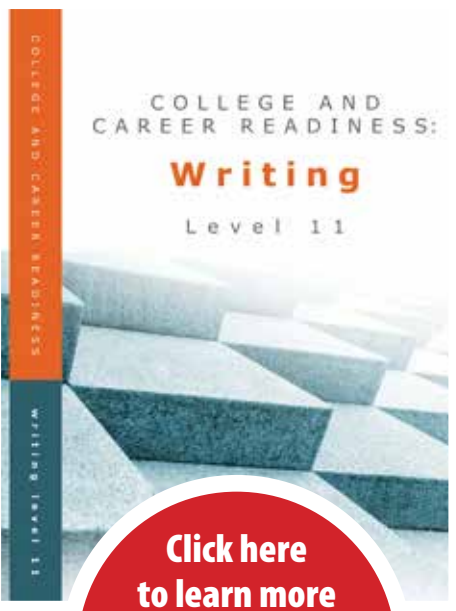




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PART I :

Personal Writing

*[conveying what students have experienced,
imagined, thought, and felt]*

By now, you know that “Personal Writing” is not the same as “Private Writing.” More than anything else you will write in high school, college, or your career, personal essays will have the most notable impact on what schools you attend, what opportunities are offered to you, and what job you end up landing. Your personal writing, whether you write it as part of an application or as an introduction to a prospective employer, does more than represent you.

It should reveal you.

Remember the necessary elements of good personal writing:

- **A point:** Your answer to your reader’s question, *Why are you telling me this?*
- **An angle:** What makes your account of your day at the beach, your first job, the day you got cut from the team, etc., unique—*more meaningful, moving, or memorable* than those of the hundreds of other teenagers who visited beaches, worked first jobs, or got cut from teams?
- **A voice:** Confident...Respectful...Witty...along with your angle, this is what will give your reader a sense of you beyond the mere facts of your narrative.
- **Substance:** Vague generalities and abstract concepts might suggest ideas to your reader, but they will do little to recreate the physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual effects that will make the reader take notice of your account.

And always remember your writing process:

STEP 1: Select a Topic

STEP 2: Develop a Slant/Angle/Hook

STEP 3: Brainstorm, Discuss, Research

STEP 4: Outline

STEP 5: Write Your First Draft

STEP 6: Peer Edit

STEP 7: Final Draft

POSSIBLE STEP 8: Second Edit and Final Revision

ASSIGNMENT 1:

Evaluate a Significant Experience

This is a popular writing prompt on college applications. The key to a notable and effective essay lies in paying close attention to the verb—*evaluate*, not “narrate” or “describe.”

Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.

“Chandra” is a first-semester 11th grader in a large, urban magnet high school. Her ambition is to be the first member of her immediate family to attend college and graduate with a four-year degree. Her ultimate aspiration is law school.

Here is a re-creation of the process Chandra used when she was given the prompt to evaluate a significant experience, achievement, or risk:

STEP 1: Select a Topic

First, Chandra considered the prompt at length, and brainstormed on the most significant experiences that she felt might make an effective and affecting essay.

- Significant experiences: Mom's illness and death? Breaking my arm at soccer when I was fourteen? Encountering a bear in the woods when we went camping?
- Achievements: Winning at the debate finals? Organizing the fundraiser for the Lustgarten Foundation?
- Risks: Losing my Mom? Not having my arm heal properly? Getting eaten by the bear?
- Ethical dilemma: How to deal emotionally with Mom's death? Whether to kill the bear or not?

By considering each topic, she began to narrow her choices:

- Mom's illness and death—still the most significant event in my life. Might move the readers, make them sympathetic to me, but I might come off like a drama queen.
- Breaking my arm—painful, difficult, had to deal with being sidelined and temporarily disabled. But not very unique, not sure what slant to give it.
- Encountering the bear—dramatic at first, we realized not to run or move to attract its attention, then it went away, never even seeing vs. But then what?
- Winning at the debate finals—I worked hard, it paid off, but I might come off as self-congratulating and conceited.
- Organizing the fundraiser for the Lustgarten Foundation—I did a good thing, I raised money for a fine cause, research on the disease that killed my mother. But wouldn't it be better to simply write about my Mom's death?

Chandra narrowed her possible topics to two, writing about her mother's illness and death, and organizing the fundraiser for the Lustgarten Foundation.

STEP 2: Develop a Slant/Angle/Hook

WHAT CAN MY ANGLE BE?

- Mom's death—How do I communicate how this affects me every day? Should this be about how a person deals with the death of a loved one? That's been done. Maybe I should show how this has changed my life forever, how it feels to be orphaned when you're not an adult yet, but everyone expects you to behave like one.
- Organizing the fundraiser—I could give this the slant of taking something back, or taking some revenge against the illness that killed my mother. That might work, or it might sound fake inspirational, phony like that Bette Davis movie.

WHERE DO I BEGIN MY EVALUATION?

- I think I'll begin with how I'm dealing with things now, then show how I got to that place.

Note: This is another early choice, and a strong one, but one that Chandra will need to re-evaluate in terms of how much her essay effectively conveys her point. She will find that, while her voice is strong and individual, she needs to guard against letting her emotional life overwhelm the piece, causing her to lose focus. While she wants to move the committee members and give them an effective window into who she is, she also needs to demonstrate discipline and skill as a writer.

WHAT TYPE OR TONE OF VOICE DO I WANT TO CREATE IN MY READER'S MIND?

- I want to stand out, show my ability to write about serious issues, but I want the essay to be unique, not just about something tragic but about how I react to something tragic, how it affects my point of view. So I'll try as much as I can to write it the way I would say it.

STEP 3: Brainstorm, Discuss, Research

Considering what her angle and tone would be, Chandra decided she was ready to write directly about her mother's death and how it has changed her. She also felt she had some strong ideas about how to convey her feelings and impressions and that she had the opportunity to capture the reader and get a strong evaluation of her writing skills.

Having made this choice, she started then to list the details and nuances that would color her essay emotionally and help make her experiences real to the reader.

- How hard Mom's death was, how much she suffered, what an awful disease cancer is.
- How beautiful she had been before, the silver-framed wedding picture.
- That dumb Bette Davis movie about the woman who dies, how ironic that is when I contrast it with how she herself died.
- The cigarettes I found hidden around the house after she died, how angry I was that she couldn't kick the habit.
- My sister's reaction to Mom's death, how different it seems from my own.

Chandra is not being as detailed as she should be in her brainstorming. She needs to take more time with this part of the process, listing more specific details about her mother, what kind of person her mother was, how she is both like and unlike her mother, the specific ways her sister's reaction differed from her own, etc. The deeper she makes her well, the more choices she will have in writing the first draft, and the stronger her choices will be.

STEP 4: Outline

Chandra has decided to tell her story not in chronological fashion, but to begin with the death of her mother, then proceed to outline its emotional impact on her and how it has changed her outlook.

1. I'll start with the big points in the first paragraph:
 - A. how awful her death was,
 - B. how she suddenly went from young and pretty to old and diseased, and
 - C. how hard it was for me to witness.
2. Then I'll move on to the factual stuff:
 - A. how useless the surgery was,
 - B. how all it accomplished was to make her suffer more, and me as well.
3. Next I'll give my personal impressions:
 - A. how stupid that Bette Davis movie she loved so much really is,
 - B. how ridiculous it is to show death as glamorous and noble when it's really terrible and ugly.
4. That will give a good lead-in to talk about the wedding picture and how beautiful and young she had once been, if it hadn't been for the cigarettes.
5. Then I can tell how she was never able to quit, up to the last day she lived, how I found packs of the things hidden all over the house.
6. I'll end with how little people understand, even my sister, and how uncertain I am now about everything in life.

While Chandra clearly has a compelling story to tell, and an impassioned approach and angle, there are some risks she is taking here that could affect how well her reader will react. The sense of irony and her individual voice are already in evidence, but her emotional reactions seem likely to take her on tangents that might lose points for organization and focus. Also, while her point is to show how this event affected her, her singular focus on her own emotions without much reference to anyone else's might make her appear self-absorbed and self-pitying—which will not win her points with an evaluator.

STEP 5: First Draft

Now, read Chandra's first draft and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. Consider how successfully she responds to the prompt and presents an essay that will be noticed by the selection committee of a large scholarship foundation.

My mother's death was the most horrible thing I have ever had to witness; she was only forty-eight years old, which seems old to a sixteen-year-old like me, but it's pretty young to be dying. You always think of your parents as old, so much older than you—until one of them isn't there, and you realize that a person can be young and old all in the same moment, and the moment passes very quickly.

It was cancer—pancreatic cancer, to be exact—that took her from me and my family. Not an easy death, by any means; she had intense, evil pain that almost never let up, she endured five hours of unbelievably invasive surgery that was supposed to extend her life and didn't, and I know that from the moment she was given her diagnosis, fear was a constant companion.

One of my Mom's favorite movies was a really old black-and-white deal with Bette Davis, where she plays this woman who is dying from cancer. It's called Dark Victory. I can't watch it now, not because it makes me sad, but because it makes me angry. Bette Davis doesn't suffer the way my mother suffered; she doesn't scream out in pain

The first paragraph grabs the reader's attention with a compelling situation and a distinct voice that helps define the viewpoint of the writer and the angle of the story.

This paragraph effectively conveys needed information about the incident, as well as the emotional context for the author. Already, however, the essay begins to lose some focus on the main point, the impact of Chandra's mother's death on Chandra. There is also an instance of awkward usage—“...me and my family” would more properly be phrased “... my family and me.”

This section, while effective, may overemphasize the anger of the author; while it's giving a vivid account of the emotional impact of the event, it misses the opportunity to make the reader understand why the author's mother was important to her, so we can better understand the anger and grief she is feeling. The reference to the film as a "black and white deal" might come across as too flippant, also pushing the reader away from the author's viewpoint rather than causing the reader to embrace it.

The description of the wedding photo with the last sentence, effectively shocks and compels the reader and further defined the author's voice and viewpoint.

Again, while the passion and voice of the writing are compelling, she hasn't yet conveyed a fuller picture of the character of her mother, why she was important and loved, what made her special. We have heard only about the disease, the addiction, and a pretty picture.

or lose so much weight she starts to resemble a skeleton or lose control of her bodily functions. She suffers prettily, in furs and diamonds and satin; then she gets to die prettily, in a gauzy fadeout, talking about meeting death "bravely and finely." The whole thing actually looks glamorous. I can't remember anything brave or fine in how my mother died. I don't blame her for that; no one can be either brave or fine when they're being eaten alive by disease.

There is a silver-framed photo of my Mom on her Wedding Day, and she looks glamorous enough to make Bette pea-green with envy. She's in a beautiful lace dress, simple but elegant; her face is framed by a veil that might as well be a halo, and she holds a bouquet of gardenias. Her eyes shine and glow; the picture is so alive you feel she might start speaking to you from it. She would probably say how excited she is, how wonderful her wedding was, how she is looking forward to the life ahead of her. She doesn't know what's headed for her down the line. If she did, maybe she would have quit smoking.

I can barely remember her without a cigarette, from the time I was little. She did try to quit several times, and even once went for several months without a single cigarette, after my sister and I begged her relentlessly, but she always relapsed. She even smoked after the diagnosis, secretly; she would sneak them behind our backs when no one was in the room with her. I found packs of the evil things stashed all over the house after she died, behind the computer, between the cushions on the sofa, in the kitchen cupboards behind the salt and sugar. I'd tear them up when I found them, destroy them one by one and drop them into the garbage can.



My sister tells me I need to accept what's happened and move on, that I shouldn't dwell on my grief and work on remembering happier times with Mom, and all the good things about her. I know this is true, yet I can't help resenting the statement. It's easy for Deirdre to say that, since she's already moved on to college and the next phase of her life, and she missed much of the really rougher parts of Mom's illness because she had finals at school, and Mom insisted that took preference.

Now I have finals, and tests for college to study for, and Forensics and Drama Club, and basketball; Mom would tell me whenever I was having a tough time with anything to just "put your head down and barrel through." I bury myself in my routine and hope that I can do that. But every now and then, I catch a glimpse of Mom's wedding photo: the lace, the smile, and especially the eyes that can follow you wherever you are in the room. I find myself questioning things a lot more, like God, religion, the random nature of life, and just what it is that we're supposed to hold onto, if anything. I have no answers right now, but I have a lot of questions.

Here the author truly risks losing the empathy of the reader; she is allowing her anger to take her on a tangent, portraying her resentment of her sister and still not giving us a sense of who her mother was.

Chandra offers a bit more of a window on the character of her mother and effectively describes her emotional state and how the experience of her mother's death has changed her. But we are left wanting more of a distinct point, more of why this particular story is unique and important, what meaning it has to the reader, not just the author. While there is, indeed, the beginnings of a powerful essay here, the author needs to focus and refine her work, making sure she portrays not just her emotions, but what fuels those emotions.

Analysis of First Draft

What is this writer's point? The writer effectively shares her emotional journey in witnessing the illness and death of her mother, but *comes up short in terms of bringing the reader to a unique revelation about this experience*—we never get a satisfactory answer to the question "Why this story?"

What is her angle? The author is reaching for an unstinting portrayal of the emotional toll the loss of a parent takes on a teenager, how it changes her view and experience of everything around her, and the difficulty of reconciling oneself to loss.

What type or tone of voice has she created in her reader's mind? The author most definitely has a distinct voice, one that does not shy away from her anger and grief, while recognizing implicit irony and even absurdity. However, while her voice is commendably passionate and brave, *she allows her anger to dominate her writing at times and take the essay on tangents that detract from her point. Her style can also be overly conversational and flippant, which is a risky choice on a college entrance essay.*

What techniques has the writer used to create this voice? There is an unflinching directness, a refusal to pull any punches—as well as an ironic viewpoint—from the first sentence. The portrayal of pain and emotional distress is consistent throughout the piece, as is a strong, vital descriptive ability.

What specific details, facts, etc., make this narrative real? There are several potent examples of strongly observed details, such as the wedding portrait, the hiding of the cigarettes, and the author's reaction to the Bette Davis film. The portrayal of the mother's unsuccessful efforts to quit smoking, especially the hiding of the packs of cigarettes that are later found by the author, also ring true and effectively ground the essay in a recognizable reality.

NOW plan your own essay to the same prompt. You will probably find it helpful to follow the same process by which Chandra arrived at her first draft. Remember that Chandra brainstormed and took notes on several possible topics and developed each of them to see which one would yield the best essay.

Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.

STEP 1: Select a Topic

What experiences lend themselves to a successful evaluation?

What point would you want to make in evaluating each of these potential topics?

Go back and look at Chandra's thoughts in this step. Even in the selection of topics, you need to think about things like an interesting angle and providing sufficient and relevant details.



STEP 2: Develop a Slant/Angle/Hook

What will your angle be?

Where might you begin your evaluation?

What type or tone of voice do you want to create in your reader's mind?

STEP 3: Brainstorm, Discuss, Research

What specific details, facts, etc., will make this experience real and not merely hypothetical?

STEP 4: Outline

Notice that, although Chandra's outline was a bulleted list, the division of topics and the use of single, double, and triple bullets closely resembles a traditional formal, academic outline.

STEP 5: First Draft

Be your own first editor. Go back and look at the scorer's notes and analysis of Chandra's first draft and see if you can avoid some of the first-draft blunders she has committed, especially those concerning clarifying the point early in the essay and selecting only the most relevant details.

STEP 6: Peer Edit

You and your partner might find it helpful to use the same questions Chandra and her peer editor used:

What is this writer's point?

What is this writer's angle?

What type or tone of voice has the writer created in his or her reader's mind?

What techniques has this writer used to create this voice?

What specific details, facts, etc., make this experience real?

STEP 7: Revised/Final Draft

Remember to consider all critiques on your draft from your peer editors and to consider seriously why you are taking or rejecting their suggestions. Validate all reasoning of your final revision decisions with clear, organized explanations. Once you understand your reasoning clearly enough to explain it in your own words, you will have the tools your essay needs to succeed.

Here are Chandra’s peer editor’s comments and analysis, as well as Chandra’s responses. It is important that even if you disagree with a comment, you understand what your editor is saying. You must be able to articulate specifically why you disagree and choose not to make the suggested revision.

- The essay begins strongly, with a fine opening paragraph that quickly defines the significance of the event and tells its impact on Chandra. There is one instance of awkward usage, however: “*which seems old to a sixteen-year-old like me*” needs to be refined somehow, possibly “*which seems old to someone who’s sixteen.*”
- The second paragraph remains strong, giving the reader the factual information, but in an effective, personal voice. There is, however, a missed opportunity to characterize Chandra’s mother, to give us an idea of what kind of person she was and why she was important to her daughter. We’re told she was afraid of her diagnosis, but anyone would be. The reader craves more details.
- The third paragraph, while it nicely defines Chandra’s voice and point of view, again misses an opportunity to define her mother as a character. The detail of the Bette Davis film is nice, and the author’s irony is effective, but Chandra allows her emotional response to drive the paragraph off topic, so that the focus becomes her anger, rather than the ways her mother was special. For instance, why was the Bette Davis movie one of her favorites? What does that say about Chandra’s mother? This would make us feel Chandra’s grief more than her criticism of a classic Hollywood tearjerker would.



- The fourth paragraph has a very fine description of the wedding photo in the silver frame, how beautiful her mother looks, and a nice use of irony in relating the photo to her mother's ultimate fate. But Chandra's description stays on the surface, rather than digging deep; once again, she misses the chance to define the person her mother was, beyond being a smoker with a penchant for old Bette Davis movies, who looks pretty in an old picture. Who was this woman to Chandra? What made her unique?
- The fifth paragraph mostly restates what we already know about the mother's addiction to cigarettes, and what is largely described here is Chandra's anger both with her mother and with her own circumstances. We would feel more for Chandra here if she focused less on her issues and instead made us feel her loss through well-observed details.
- The sixth paragraph seems entirely tangential, and could easily be excised. Chandra introduces her sister, who has not made an appearance in the essay until this very late point. The only information this paragraph relates is Chandra's annoyance with, and possible resentment of, her sister, apparently for not understanding Chandra's grief. At this point, she risks looking self-absorbed and losing the empathy of the reader.
- The final paragraph makes an attempt to bring us to a final point about Chandra's experience and how it has changed her, but it does so ineffectively. Again, she risks losing the reader's empathy, since she devotes a large section to a litany of all the things she must carry on with in the wake of her mother's death; for the first time, a self-pitying tone is implicit. Her final sentence, "I have no answers right now, but I have a lot of questions" is weak and unsatisfying.

Here is Chandra's reaction:

I guess the biggest problem is that I write too much about myself and not enough about my Mom. I need to show who she was when she wasn't sick. I guess I show her only as a dying woman and a pretty picture in a frame and that's not enough.

I should sit and do some free writing on some of the things we used to do together that I loved, like cooking together or taking a "mental health day" when she would call in sick to work and I'd stay home from school, and we'd spend the day together. I should talk about how funny she was, what a clown she could be when she wanted to.

I suppose the last paragraph is pretty weak. I need to make more of a point, something more than just being uncertain about what's ahead. Everyone's uncertain about what's ahead. That doesn't make me special.

Analysis of First Draft

What is this writer's point? The writer effectively shares her emotional journey in witnessing the illness and death of her mother, but comes up short in terms of bringing the reader to a unique revelation about this experience—we never get a satisfactory answer to the question "Why this story?"

My point was that my Mom's death was no ordinary death—it was way too awful, too early, and wrong in so many ways, and that having to witness it has made me a different person. I think I need to be more specific about my Mom, about why she was important and unique and special to me.

What is her angle? The author is reaching for an unstinting portrayal of the emotional toll the loss of a parent takes on a teenager, how it changes her view and experience of everything around her, and the difficulty of reconciling oneself to loss.

Okay, so they like my angle. But I seem to lose them halfway in; maybe I need to be more consistent, not get lost in my own stuff, and concentrate more on Mom but show the positive along with the negative.



What type or tone of voice has she created in her reader's mind? The author most definitely has a distinct voice, one that does not shy away from her anger and grief, while recognizing implicit irony and even absurdity. However, while her voice is commendably passionate and brave, *she allows her anger to dominate her writing at times and take the essay on tangents that detract from her point. Her style can also be overly conversational and flippant, which is a risky choice on a college entrance essay.*

I didn't think I was being flippant, I just wanted to write it the way I'd tell it to someone. I always thought that was supposed to be good writing, but I'll look at it. They don't like it when I get too angry, so I'll tone that down a bit.

What techniques has this writer used to create this voice? There is an unflinching directness, a refusal to pull any punches—as well as an ironic viewpoint—from the first sentence. The portrayal of pain and emotional distress is consistent throughout the piece, as is a strong, vital descriptive ability.

Well, good, they think I have something going for me. I'll just work at staying on point and keeping to the prompt.

What specific details, facts, etc., make this narrative real? There are several potent examples of strongly observed details, such as the wedding portrait, the hiding of the cigarettes, and the author's reaction to the Bette Davis film. The portrayal of the mother's unsuccessful efforts to quit smoking, especially the hiding of the packs of cigarettes that are later found by the author, also ring true and effectively ground the essay in a recognizable reality. But the author should go further, get under the surface of things, and give the reader a feeling of what made her mother a unique person, what made her important to the author.

They like how I give details; I think I probably need to do more of that.

After the peer edit, it's time to write a second draft. In many cases, due to time limitations, this second draft may have to be your final draft. That's why it's so important to make the first draft really count.

Here is Chandra's revised draft. Read it and consider how it is stronger and more likely to make a positive impression on the admissions committee.

Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.

The first paragraph has always been strong; she was right to leave it alone.

This paragraph was effective before, but now Chandra has added a detail that begins to give the reader a more thorough, more vivid picture of who her mother was, and why she was significant to the author. She has also artfully corrected the instance of awkward usage, with "our family" instead of "me and my family" being both grammatically and thematically an improvement.

My mother's death was the most horrible thing I have ever had to witness; she was only forty-eight years old, which seems old to a sixteen-year-old, but it's pretty young to be dying. You always think of your parents as old, so much older than you—until one of them isn't there, and you realize that a person can be young and old all in the same moment, and the moment passes very quickly.

It was cancer—pancreatic cancer, to be exact—that took her from our family. Not an easy death, by any means; she had intense, evil pain that almost never let up, she endured five hours of unbelievably invasive surgery that was supposed to extend her life and didn't, and I know that from the moment she was given her diagnosis, fear was a constant companion. That wasn't how she was used to living; she was used to laughter and joy and loving her family.

There were occasional mornings when she would declare that day to be a "mental health day," meaning we'd all play hooky and stay home from school, while she'd stay home from work. Sometimes we'd go shopping, sometimes we'd go to a movie, or sometimes on a rainy day, we'd stay in and watch old movies on television, which I think was her favorite thing to do. One of my Mom's favorites was a really old black-and-white film with Bette Davis, where she plays this woman who is dying from cancer. It's called *Dark Victory*. I used to love it because my mom did, but now it just makes me angry. I always thought of it as a sickly-



sweet, romanticized portrayal of death, but after watching my mother, I now know the movie to be an outright lie. Bette Davis doesn't suffer the way my mother suffered; she suffers prettily, in furs and diamonds and satin. Then she gets to die prettily, in a gauzy fadeout, talking about meeting death "bravely and finely"; the whole thing actually looks glamorous. I can't remember anything brave or fine in how my mother died. I don't blame her for that; no one can be either brave or fine when they're being eaten alive by disease.

There is a silver-framed photo of my Mom on her Wedding Day, and she looks glamorous enough to make Bette pea-green with envy. She's in a beautiful lace dress, simple but elegant; her face is framed by a veil that might as well be a halo, and she holds a bouquet of gardenias. Her eyes shine and glow; the picture is so alive you feel she might start speaking to you from it. She would probably say how excited she is, how wonderful her wedding was, how she is looking forward to the life ahead of her. She doesn't know what's headed for her down the line. Every day, I wish she could have had some crystal ball; if she did, maybe she would have quit smoking.

The worst part is, I can barely remember her without a cigarette, from the time I was little. She did try to quit several times, and even once went for several months without a single cigarette, after my sister and I begged her relentlessly, but she always relapsed. She even smoked after the diagnosis, secretly; she would sneak them behind our backs when no one was in the room with her. She was strong about everything else; she never overate, she drank alcohol only in extreme moderation, and she had no interest in drugs of any sort. Which made

The improvement here is readily apparent; this paragraph is no longer just about the author, but about how special her mother was and why her loss is so significant.

A small change, but an important one: "Every day I wish she could have had some crystal ball..." helps show the author's love, defining her anger as being against the cancer, not against her mother.

Some very apt changes since the original draft. The focus, rather than being solely on the author's emotional response to the situation, now expresses empathy, as well as implicit frustration and anger. The reader is now more moved by the situation of the author.

A fine refocusing of this paragraph; now the author expresses her frustration at her sister's distance from the situation, without implying a resentment of her sister. Now the paragraph helps define the author's emotional state without implying that she is self-absorbed and unable to recognize anyone else's pain but her own.

The author, instead of being sidetracked by her emotional response, as in the previous draft, has illustrated effectively both her grief and loss, making the reader feel her emotions rather than simply hurling them in his or her face. There is no definitive conclusion, but there is no need for one. She has instead opened a poignant window on her present state and made the reader understand it.

me even more sad and angry that, after she died, I'd find packs of cigarettes stashed away in cupboards, in drawers, behind the computer. Why did this one thing have so much hold over her?

My sister tells me I need to accept what's happened and move on, that I shouldn't dwell on my grief and work on remembering happier times with Mom, and all the good things about her. I know this is true, but it's challenging; while Deirdre means well and loves me, she was away at college, taking finals, and never saw what I saw. She doesn't know how ugly and painful it became; it's not her fault, but she can't understand how it is for me. Maybe I'll be able to explain it to her down the line.

Now I have finals, and tests for college to study for, and Forensics and Drama Club, and basketball; Mom would tell me whenever I was having a tough time with anything to just "put your head down and barrel through." I'm trying to carry on as she would want me to. But every now and then, I catch a glimpse of Mom's wedding photo: the lace, the smile, and especially the eyes that can follow you wherever you are in the room. And I hope they are following me somehow; I have more questions than answers, and I hope that somehow she can give me just a hint or two somewhere along the line.

Analysis of Revised (or Final) Draft

What is this writer's point? The writer gives a genuine, moving account of her mother's death, the pain of witnessing that death, and how it has affected her personally.

What is her angle? The writer provides an honest, unflinching window into the emotional experience of her mother's illness and death, without descending into self-pity or allowing grief and anger to sidetrack the account.

What type or tone of voice has she created in her reader's mind? The author's voice is distinct and individual, with an undercurrent of irony that nicely balances the painful situation she is portraying.



What techniques has this writer used to create this voice? There is still the unflinching directness, but it is now balanced by a more humane and complete portrayal of what made the author's mother special to her. The strong, vital descriptive ability is still evident, but it is now tempered with a greater awareness of what the author's loss actually meant and why it mattered.

What specific details, facts, etc., make this experience real? Again, many fine descriptive elements are apparent, such as the wedding portrait, the hiding of the cigarettes, the author's reaction to the Bette Davis film, and the mother's unsuccessful efforts to quit smoking. However, there is now an evocative, fully rounded portrayal of the author's mother, which lends this essay a genuine feel for the meaning of loss and gives it a truly earned poignancy.

POSSIBLE STEP 8: Rewrite Opportunity

MINI-LESSON 1:

Journal Writing

The simple truth is that journaling is an excellent habit to acquire. Writers' journals provide much more than just a record of the events of their lives, their observations and impressions, and their thoughts and feelings; journals serve as the medium by which writers can begin their creative process, experiment with multiple versions of the same project, even test completely new forms or approaches without fear of audience criticism.

And the fact always remains that regular journal writing provides the same benefits that an athlete's workouts or a performer's practices yield: Journaling helps the writer stay in shape.

Journal as Free-writing Exercise

"Jeff" attends the same magnet school as Chandra. He came to English class having read Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, as assigned. Before there was any class discussion on the play, the teacher instructed the students to write in their journals a response to the following prompt:

What do you believe is the correct relationship between church and state?

Having done journal writing since at least fifth grade, Jeff knows that this does not have to be a “process writing” piece; it will not be graded. It is meant only for his eyes and can serve as a vehicle to start hashing out ideas and creating a bank to draw on for more developed essays. Knowing that he has only twenty minutes, he simply starts writing down his thoughts as they come to him, not worrying about structure or slant at this early point.

Jeff is off to a quick, and good start. He immediately relates the prompt to the play and begins to work out his opinion.

Jeff has the freedom here to debate with himself, without fear of judgment. This is what journal writing is for.

Unconcerned with organization, style, or slant, Jeff can take a critical look at the assigned text, forming his opinion of it and his response to the prompt.

Time has run out, and Jeff’s teacher has begun to discuss Miller’s play. Jeff has had a good opportunity to begin organizing his thoughts on the prompt.

Here is Jeff’s entry:

Arthur Miller certainly thought the church and state should be kept as far apart as possible. That’s plain just from his choice of historical event he dramatizes in the play. The deck is a little bit stacked from the get-go. Of course, the play is really about McCarthyism, so his real point is zealotry, and how dangerous it is when it gets mixed up with politics and power. I think it’s important to stand up for your beliefs and religion, but you shouldn’t be stuffing them down anyone else’s throats. Miller’s a little bit preachy on the subject, so I’m not sure he isn’t a little fanatical on the subject himself. He did have to testify at the hearings himself, so he maybe has an axe to grind. I think there are times when religious institutions should take moral stands on issues; when the Catholic Church said nothing about the Nazis or the Holocaust during World War II, that was an ethical lapse. I don’t necessarily buy that religion should be totally removed from the public debate. But I have to agree that no one religion should hold complete political power over any country.

Analysis of Free-write Journal Entry

What is this writer’s point? Responding to the question about the separation of church and state, Jeff comes to the conclusion that he believes they should be separate, but he has an interesting caveat.



What is this writer's angle? Jeff draws on the text of the play, the experience of the author, and other relevant historical facts to debate and finally define his opinion.

What type or tone of voice has he created in his reader's mind? This is a free-write, so there is no real intentional attempt at tone or voice.

What techniques has this writer used to create this voice? N/A

What specific details, facts, etc., help this writer establish his point? Jeff refers to the play, the personal history of the author, and the role of religion in history.

Journal as Light Practice

Chandra's school is only a few weeks away from its state-mandated writing assessment, so her teacher is having the class practice every day by assigning a journal entry prompt. The intent is to give the student plenty of practice writing in a timed, on-demand setting without creating additional hours of paper-grading for himself.

Chandra is a tennis player and appreciates the value of practicing daily in order to keep in shape, especially during the off seasons. She wants to do well on the assessment, so she does her best to make her journal entries more than free-writes; she wants them to be actual attempts at organized and coherent essays.

Here is one of the daily prompts Chandra's teacher assigned:

Is it ever a mistake for a person to die for his or her principles? Why or why not?

Here is Chandra's response:

There are a lot of things I would die for, I suppose. My country, my family, my freedom. Doesn't everybody feel that? It's what I grew up with. My family is very much a military family; dying for your principles was just an idea we all accepted. We live in a world where evil deeds—genocide, human trafficking, abuse of children and women—are daily events. Somebody has to be willing to put themselves on the line for what they believe in. Why even ask the question?

Chandra starts well; questioning the prompt itself is a good way to develop a personal slant or unique take on the subject.

Chandra is structuring her entry as a debate, looking deeply at both sides of the question and making an interesting turnaround, ending with a provocative question.

Chandra is delving into the subject effectively. She may actually want to rethink ending every paragraph with a question; it becomes predictable and undercuts her effectiveness, and this third question seems a bit facile.

Slipping into vernacular is acceptable for a journal entry, but Chandra will want to be more polished on an actual test essay.

Chandra's use of personal experience is affecting, but she will have to work harder to relate this experience to the prompt.

My cousin went to Afghanistan and lost a leg; he didn't die for his country, but he was ready to. That certainly counts as dying for a principle. But when I think about it, the people who made 9/11 happen thought they were dying for a principle, too. Maybe dying for a principle really is a mistake if you're taking out innocent people with you. There was that Oklahoma City bomber, too, and the Unabomber; they all thought they had a principle at stake, too. What kind of principle makes a person kill children? Maybe the question should be "Is it ever not a mistake to die for your principles?"

When Kevin came home from Afghanistan, he was withdrawn, angry, always snapping at people. He seemed so bitter and haunted and was like a stranger to all of us. You felt pain just to look at him, as if his pain was a cloud that followed him everywhere. Once someone came up to him on the street and thanked him for his service to the country, and Kevin actually cursed the guy out, screamed that the whole war was a scam, and he'd lost a leg for nothing. Looking at Kevin that day, I remember thinking no one should join the army, not ever. Does that mean I really wouldn't die for my principles after all?

I think about my other family members who have done military service, and none of them feel the way Kevin feels about it. They all believe in the principle, service to country and honor and the whole nine yards. Grandpa Jordan was in World War II, and Uncle Jim was in Vietnam; my cousin Lola is a Marine now, and probably deploying to Afghanistan in a month or two. They look at Kevin and shake their heads; his anger doesn't fit into their belief system. I respect them all, but I respect Kevin, too.



So, perhaps it all comes down to the principle you're dying for—you have to choose your principles wisely. You have to make sure they're your own, and not something that's been imposed or indoctrinated into you.

This is a strong conclusion, but it hasn't been entirely supported by what precedes it.

Analysis of Light Practice Journal Entry

What is this writer's point? Chandra begins to make an effective case that dying for one's principles can be a two-edged sword—sometimes admirable, sometimes tragically wrong-headed.

What is this writer's angle? Chandra references history, her family experience, and her own observations.

What type or tone of voice has she created in her reader's mind? The tone is direct but casual, possibly too casual for a more developed essay. Nevertheless, Chandra's openness to debate and probing mind make for an individual voice in the entry.

What techniques has this writer used to create this voice? Starting by debating the prompt itself, Chandra establishes a critical, intelligent, and nuanced tone; however, it needs to be more fully employed in the last two paragraphs.

What specific details, facts, etc., help this writer establish her point? Such details include: historical references to terrorist attacks, her family history, and most especially her uncle's experience in Afghanistan.

Journal as Heavy Training

Sometimes it's simply in your best interest as a writer to treat even a journal entry as if it were an important, high-stakes writing assignment. Remember that the marathon runner does not prepare for the Olympics by casually jogging a few times around the high school track.

“Eleanor” is in the same 11th-grade English class as Chandra. Their teacher, like Maya's last year, begins assigning issue-based journal prompts a few months before they are scheduled to begin their annual research project. This practice helps students think about possible topics and approaches.

Here is one of the daily prompts Eleanor's teacher assigned:

What do you believe is the best way for the United States to deal with its debt, while also trying to revive its economy?

Eleanor knows that most questions like this one ask for both an opinion and factual support. As a person, she may feel that budget cutting and austerity measures are counterproductive and harm economic recovery, but she knows that without expert opinion, case studies, statistics, and so on, her opinion is just that—the opinion of an eleventh-grader. She also knows that she does not have time in the twenty minutes the class has been given to complete this exercise to perform real research and collect actual facts and expert opinions, but she wants to use this exercise as practice for her research project. She thinks a little harder and writes with a little more focus than she normally would on a journal exercise.

Eleanor starts with a bold statement here, and it tips off the reader immediately to her opinion. This is fine in a journal entry, but she would probably want to modulate her tone in an actual essay.

Eleanor has effectively stated her thesis; now she needs to begin backing it up with supporting facts.

Eleanor is now beginning to cite concrete examples that support her thesis, but more specific facts would be needed in an actual essay.

Eleanor knows she has to back her thesis up with hard facts and careful research, or it will be dismissed as a political tract.

Here is Eleanor's response to the prompt:

The current debate in this country over the national debt has been less of a serious conversation on economic policy and more of a political football being fumbled over by opposing teams. While there is little doubt that the nation's debt needs to be dealt with in the long term, in the short term, the fragile economic recovery could easily be toppled by some of the extreme budget cuts being proposed in the polarized political climate. There needs to be a more balanced approach to debt reduction, one that recognizes the need for growth. One needs only to look at history to see what kind of fiscal policy has helped the economy in the past, and what hasn't.

The history of the depression and the economic recession of the 1980s are two major examples of how the nation pulled itself out of economic downturn. It wasn't budget cutting that ended the depression and recessions of the past, but economic stimulus initiated by the government. (Here I would cite the actual facts and figures from my research.) John Maynard Keynes was a great noted economist who would have been opposed to budget cutting in the face of an



economic crisis such as the nation finds itself in. He would have supported instead a broad-based stimulus that included infrastructure repair, supported public sector jobs such as teachers, firemen and police, and encouraged private sector hiring. (I need to actually read Keynes and quote his work to back this up.)

One can also look to the current economic crisis in Europe for an example of what doesn't work. The extreme austerity measures called for in Germany, France and proposed for Greece and much of the rest of Europe have not resulted in a reduction of debt or stabilization of the European economy, but instead have contributed to its crisis. The crumbling of the euro and the popular rejection of austerity measures in the recent French and Greek elections point to the need for a more balanced, holistic approach to solving the crisis.

Economic improvement, whether at home or abroad, cannot be achieved amidst partisan political extremists hurling sound bites and invective. It can't be achieved with a myopic view that values political turf over best practices. It can and must be achieved in an atmosphere of cooperation and collaboration, with both sides willing to compromise some points for the benefit of a higher goal. Debt can and must be reduced, but not at the expense of long-term financial improvement and stability.

She certainly will, but she has nevertheless built the structure of her thesis effectively here.

Eleanor is going out on a limb here; backing this statement up will be harder than in her previous paragraph.

Again, while Eleanor can get away with this in a journal entry, in an actual thesis, she would need to back this broad statement up with examples and facts.

In an actual research paper, Eleanor would need to have laid more groundwork for her rather grand and sweeping statements in this final paragraph.

Analysis of Heavy Training Journal Entry

What is this writer's point? Eleanor's thesis is that economic recovery cannot be achieved while initiating the major budget cuts being called for in the current political climate.

What is this writer's angle? Her angle is that a more balanced approach that includes economic stimulus and long-term debt reduction is the only viable approach.