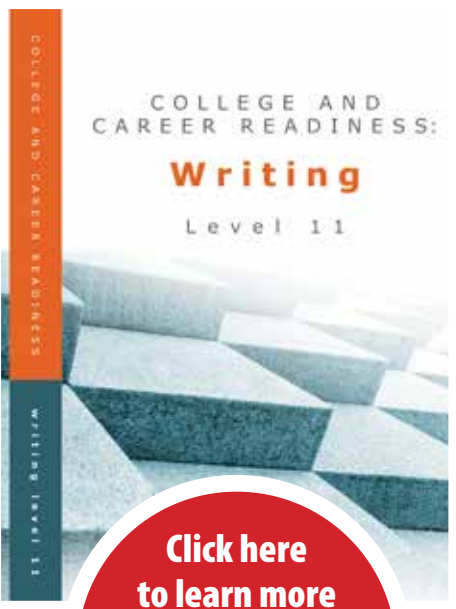




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Level 11

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# PART I :

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## 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 impacts 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

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# ASSIGNMENT 1 :

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## 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 full-time 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:

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### STEP 1: Select a Topic

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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.

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## **STEP 2: Develop a Slant/Angle/Hook**

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### **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 reevaluate 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, since 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 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.

**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 and 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.