

Editor's Note

Sometimes, making an essay interesting can be difficult, especially if it is a personal prompt and you're not used to (or comfortable) writing about yourself and using the first person. How does Nicole Arentzoff create suspense in "Keeping it Personal"? What strategies does she use to make her essay interesting? Some things you might look for are specific details, elements of contrast, and vivid narration. Consider her stylistic choices: things like italics, paragraphs, word choice, and sentence length. What kind of persona does she create for herself? How do you react to this persona? In some ways, she's taking stylistic risks. Do you think these pay off for her?

She concludes: it's important to "put a little of myself into every essay I write." Do you agree with her? When is it appropriate to include the personal? When is it appropriate to use "I" in your essays? When is it most effective? Here, does it make the audience feel as though a close friend is sharing conversation or does it push the audience away?

Keeping it Personal

Nicole Arentzoff

The grass crinkled under my pink sneakers as I cringed at the thought of getting those shoes, my most prized possession, smudged up from the wet grass and abundant mud that surrounded us. *This is so dumb*, I thought to myself and I still recall how angry I was about being forced to parade around the field, looking for something to inspire me. *Why couldn't we just write about a book, or our favorite movie like all the other classes?* It was 9th grade and much to my dismay, the topic of the week was essay writing.

I never really struggled in writing, but I certainly didn't enjoy it either. After all, it was usually the same routine; the teacher passed out an essay prompt followed immediately by loud sighs and muffled complaints from the class room, after which we would all inevitably wait until the very last moment to complete the assignment. My papers always received the coveted marks of either an A or a B, but something within me never fully appreciated or cared about those grades. Why couldn't I indulge myself in writing out my deepest fears, thoughts, or desires onto paper? What was preventing me from, as William Wordsworth would say, "Fill[ing] my paper with the breathings of my heart?" No. I would never be that passionate about writing. It just wasn't in the cards for me; I was not an essay writer.

Our assignment was titled “The Calm after the Storm”. The instructions were relatively simple: go to the football field and write about whatever you saw. Unfortunately, the night before it had poured rain from every inch of the sky and the weather man had told us that “a new record might be possible.” It looked awful outside, and the air clung to a thick scent of recently dampened foliage. This led me to one question, *why was I outside looking for beauty on an unsightly plot of land and being forced to write about it?* A prompt sounded far more favorable to this, and I began to let my mind wander about what the possible repercussions would be, if I simply failed to complete this assignment. As I heard the verbal complaints and agitated groaning, I knew that my classmates were thinking the same thing. Then, the teacher said something that inadvertently caught our attention. “Look for something that reminds you of yourself!” What could he possibly mean? Was he comparing the class to a puddle of mud, or rather, did he want me to confess to being similar to large patch of torn up grass? This added detail to the essay assignment definitely complicated the situation.

I sat down on one of the bleachers and idly bit the top of my pen cap, universally signaling that I was “stuck,” or couldn’t think of anything to write. As I glanced around, I noticed that most of my classmates were in the same predicament. There was a general feeling of resentment directed towards our teacher, who seemed to have a rather smug grin on his face. I looked up and randomly noticed a tree that had managed to survive the storm. It looked rather plain, and stood in a clearing of torn up grass patches and bits of bushes. Its long trunk supported the leafy branches that extended in every direction. It seemed to be the only one in that general clearing that hadn’t lost a limb or a branch to the merciless wind. I started to think about that tree, and my mind was pulled in a million different directions.

How old was it?

Where did it come from?

Had someone planted it?

How did it survive the night without any casualties?

I grabbed my pen, and began writing. Within a seemingly ordinary object, I found my inspiration.

My essay quickly developed from something describing a tree to a narrative about my life, and how the decisions I made have helped me stay strong and brace the storm. From the disappointment of losing my favorite uncle to the pains of moving to a new state and leaving everything behind, there has been a lot of rain in my life, but like the tree, I have gotten through with all my limbs and branches intact. By staying positive and exerting all my effort into every endeavor, I have found that life is much sunnier and easier to handle. I reflected on how void of emotion my other writing

assignments had been, and it's now obvious to me why I never enjoyed English class. For years, I had tried to coast by on doing exactly what was asked of me, rather than taking the time to actually put a little bit of myself into my writing. Essays are not that much different than anything else, and when you pour yourself into it, you reap what you sow.

After turning that paper in, I felt a sense of fulfillment that I had never experienced before from anything academic. Could it be that I was actually proud of my work? Perhaps, or maybe it was the feeling that I had actually succeeded in connecting with something outside of my comfort zone. For once, I was turning something in that had a little touch of Nicole in it, rather than a paper completely void of any emotion. I had never discussed my personal life in any assignment, but the tree I discovered that day on the football field inspired me to open up. I received an A on that paper, but I didn't really care. Nothing would match that high I had experienced after reaching the epiphany I felt that day.

While there won't always be something to spark an immediate inspiration, it is important to keep all of my writing personal, and put a little of myself into every essay I write. Even the monotonous research papers that high school and college level teachers demand require some margin of opinion or original thought. After my first quarter at Cal Poly, I've seen that too often, students turn in dry, cookie cutter replicas of whatever the assignment is. There's no passion between the lines, and there's no sense of who the author is within the words. These essays aren't interesting to read, and people can instantly perceive when the writer is completely apathetic about their subject. I received an A on the paper, but I didn't really care. Nothing would match that high I had experienced after reaching the epiphany I felt that day, sitting on the football field, looking for something to write about, but discovering myself. The most important lesson I learned from this assignment is one that has stayed with me throughout my academic career, to always strive to keep it personal.

Nicole Arentzoff is a history major.