**Sample essay assignments**

Sample personal essay assignment:

You are to write an 8-12 page (d.s.) personal essay. Many people have set out to define what a personal essay does, and it is impossible to describe in a paragraph what an essay does. But in short, a personal essay uses narrative (stories), physical description, and philosophical or ethical exploration of subjects or themes. A personal essay also tests, tries, and explores your subjective impressions about some area of interest to you. Generally the subject matter is the writer, but a subjective analysis of something that strikes the curiosity of the writer can also reveal much about the writer. Another definition of a personal essay is an intelligence wandering on a subject. Most of you will write a specific kind of personal essay--a spiritual autobiography, which explores an experience which is still unsettled, still challenges you. It moves from confusion to a tentative resolution. Your essay must include a serious and focused application of some principles of psychology and some material from your psychology readings. On the content pages is a rubric we will use to judge your essay.

All this is very abstract. To learn to essay, you'll need to participate in the class exercises and discussions.

You shouldn't write about something that is so traumatic that you’ll have emotional difficulty. Instead get help from a professional therapist. Distance is helpful in an essay.

Writing Exercises that could lead to an essay (list compiled by Anika Shumway, English Dept., BYU):

* Choose an object and describe it 50 different ways.
* Recall a moment in which you felt a strong spiritual or unidentifiable energy. Describe the scene in vivid detail, with special attention to the senses. Connect that scene to your relationship with your own religious beliefs or lack thereof. Examine how you incorporated that experience into your worldview. (thejohnfox)
* Create a timeline of events depicting your life by using newspaper headlines. Try to focus on events that didn’t involve you directly, but connect them to the pivotal events in your life. (thejohnfox)
* Tell the story of a location. Possibly one that is very close to your heart that you already know well, or a new one that inspires your curiosity. Pay particular attention to your own connection to the location, however small or large that connection may be. (thejohnfox)
* Describe a time in which you expected or wanted to feel a religious or spiritual moment, but couldn’t. What were you hoping would happen? How do you choose to interpret that? (thejohnfox)
* Recall what stressed you out most as a child. Was it the creaking stairs leading to the basement? Or being lost at the store? Explore your current relationship to that stressor. Did you ever move past that fear or anxiety? How do you interact with it now? (thejohnfox)
* What relationship in your life has caused the most pain? Write the key scene in that relationship, when everything was at stake. (thejohnfox)
* How has your identity changed over the course of your life? Write a scene from your teenage years that epitomizes the type of person you were, and then write a scene from recent life that shows how you’ve changed. (thejohnfox)
* What single experience most shaped who you are? Describe the experience in a single, vivid scene. (thejohnfox)
* What physical object or family heirloom ties together your grandparents, your parents, and yourself? Describe this object in great detail, and what it has meant to generations of your family. (thejohnfox)
* Tell the story of the most important person that has shaped your town and its culture (you might have to do some research). How did the activity of that person influence the way you grew up or live currently? (thejohnfox)
* Write about the most pivotal scene in a relationship with someone in your extended family — Uncle, aunt, cousin, grandmother. Describe the tension or happiness you shared, and how that came to affect your relationship from that point onward. (thejohnfox)
* Write about a “missed connection.” (eventmagazine)
* Write about a time you were a fish out of water. (eventmagazine)
* What has community meant to you in the last six months? Or what experiences have you had with your communities since March?
* The Myriad Self ([diymfa](https://diymfa.com/writing/inspiring-creative-nonfiction-through-writing-prompts))

This prompt comes from Dinty W. Moore, respected essayist, editor of Brevity, and editorial member of Creative Nonfiction. His book Crafting the Personal Essay is nothing if not a complete lifesaver. If you’re having doubts about making your real-life narrative sing, this book will dispel them and make you a better writer. The idea I mentioned earlier that there’s only one you writing an essay? That comes straight from this book. To find out which you is writing the essay, fill in descriptors below:

I am a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ son/daughter.

I am a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ eater.

I am a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ friend.

I am a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ when confronted with direct criticism.

I am a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, but most of my friends never suspect this about me.

Next, choose one of the selves above and use that to write about whatever pops into your head. You can also choose a second self while writing. The goal here is that you let the two parts show who you are without forcing them to show your complete identity. You are also in conversation with your many selves.

Possible Essay topics from an interdisciplinary psychology, writing, and literature class:

* Making my own choices
* Distinguishing self from sisters
* The inequity of paying taxes
* My experience with an eating disorder
* On my fear of entrapment
* On being in control
* Pronunciation and being true to identity
* Struggling with perfectionism
* On being caught between two cultures
* Reconciling shame for shabby houses lived in as a child
* What I learned from moving a lot
* Pondered his decision to go back to his mission country (and maintain a long-distance relationship)
* Considered his competitive relationship with his brother
* Meditates on the role of the subconscious in making decisions in his life
* Considers influence of his father’s history on his own life
* Reexamines his own ambition for leadership positions on his mission
* Wonders how to be a pioneer in relationships
* Thinks about the role of sacrifice in becoming the best
* What makes something worth doing?
* Perfectionism and hard work
* How Disneyland helped me make it through hard times
* Gaining faith through questioning faith
* Family history and ADHD
* Self-confidence and OCD
* On being abused as a child

Possible Essay topics from a study abroad program

These assignments were designed by Stephen Tuttle (BYU) for Literature and Landscape, 2015, a program where literature and writing students hiked through the landscapes where British writers lived. Students were to keep a journal and use material from it to write the following 5 longer essays.

**Self-portrait**

The self-portrait is an opportunity for you to write about yourself, what makes you tick, what you want out of life, etc.. It should be written quickly and should not be revised. In the past this assignment has taken students 1 to 1.5 hours, and it’s one of the things you can do on your flight. You are invited to indulge by writing about yourself in an unconstrained manner, spilling your life onto the page. Get it all down. You can keep things in chronological order, but you don’t have to. In fact, we encourage you to disrupt chronology whenever you can.

**Essay #1 – 24 Hours in Scotland (1,000 words)**

Write an essay in which you account for a single 24-hour period of your time in Scotland. You should think about this essay as more than a simple record of sequential events. Instead, look for a narrative that emerges over a single day. Consider the food you eat during that period, the sites you see, the challenges you encounter, and the small pleasures you stumble upon. Your essay should create a portrait of a moment, while also documenting your personal interaction with landscape, literature, and culture. It may also be useful to juxtapose your expectations of a particular site with your first-hand experience. Keep in mind that it is not your responsibility to account for everything that happens during a single day (in addition to being impossible, this would likely be boring). Instead, you will handpick the events, anticipations, reactions, feelings, conversations, and anything else that helps as you write about your personal experience in a place (or series of places).

Draft workshop: Tuesday, May 5 / Final draft: Friday, May 15

**Essay #2 – Tracking the Literary Landscape (1,000 words)**

For this essay, you will write about a place of literary significance that we have visited on our journeys. The place might be a building, a town, a ruin, a path, or maybe an entire region. While it might be useful to choose a location connected to a literary text you already know well, it is not necessary to do so. It’s reasonable to think that you could write an excellent essay about a place you didn’t know existed before you went there. In addition to having literary significance, the place should serve as a site for your personal experience (whether it’s your first visit or your tenth). Additionally, your essay must have a research component. Your research might take many forms, and could include information from pamphlets, placards, books, or websites. Additionally, your research must include at least one living interview subject (who isn’t a member of our group). You won’t need to conduct a formal interview, but you should talk to a person (a docent, a security guard, a local you encounter on a public path) who can give you information about the place.

Draft workshop: Friday, May 22 / Final draft: Thursday, May 28

**Essay #3 – The X of England (1,000 words)**

For your final personal essay you will create a portrait of England by focusing on a single feature of the country that you will encounter many times and in many different contexts. You might choose, for example, to write about the rivers of England, or the birds of England, or the churches of England. What matters is that the feature you choose is one you can be certain to encounter often throughout the program. Practically speaking, natural features and wildlife make good choices, but you are welcome to think about man-made and social features as well. Because this essay will account for the bulk of your time in England, it is important that you commit to your subject early and stick with it. Along the way, you should take careful notes each time you encounter another object that belongs to your chosen set. Take photos of these things. Describe your sensory experience with each encounter. Try to draw what you see. Try to describe it succinctly. Try to describe it at length. Make a catalog. Note the ways your subject changes as you become more familiar with it, and note the way context matters as we move from smaller towns and villages to more metropolitan areas. You are welcome, though not obligated, to use research sources for this essay, and you are welcome to make the writing as personal or as impersonal as you would like. Your task, however you chose to approach it, is to give your reader an overview of England by focusing on one highly specific part of it.

Draft workshop: Thursday, June 4 / Final draft: Friday, June 12

**Final**

The final exam will be an opportunity to reflect on what you’ve learned during this program. Specifically, you will respond, in essay, to a prompt (or prompts) that ask you to consider your experience studying British literature in a cultural setting.