

Personal Essay Examples

SAMPLE PERSONAL EXPERIENCE ESSAYS

The following Graduation Writing Proficiency Examination essays were written by HSU students during a regularly scheduled GWPE. Except for the elimination of cross-outs, the essays are reproduced here exactly as written. Insofar as possible, the essays were chosen to represent the entire range of possible scores. (No essay received a score of One on Essay Topic I.) The majors represented by the authors of these essays are, in alphabetical order, Art, Biology, Business Administration, Environmental Resources Engineering, Fisheries, Geography, Geology, Industrial Arts, and Resource Planning and Interpretation.

PERSONAL-EXPERIENCE ESSAY PROMPT

You have 45 minutes to write on the following topic.

A distinguished essayist once wrote: "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested."

Write an essay in which you:

Describe a book that has strongly affected you.

Explain how your reading of this book changed your outlook.

Tell why you think this book had such a profound effect on you.

SAMPLE ESSAY SCORE: SIX

During my third year of college I became acutely aware of the Womens Rights Issue. I made an attempt to re-examine many of the cultural norms that I had previously accepted as just being "the natural order of things." One of the paths I took to expand my awareness of the female psyche involved women's literature. That is why I spent one weekend of my life in bed--crying, laughing, feeling sometimes confused, and often, incredibly angry and distraught. On that rainy Humboldt Friday night I had decided to read "The Women's Room."

The author, Marilyn Fridey, describes the lives of several women from the 1950's to present. These women are nothing out of the ordinary. They either go to college and then get married, or they get married without bothering about the pretense of college--after all, they know that college is only a way to find more economically promising husbands. Myra, the main character whose life is traced throughout the book vaguely wonders why she is not content cooking pot roast, scraping shit from the baby's diapers, and picking up her husband's dry cleaning. Her only solace is the neighborhood of women who share concerns over coffee in the afternoons.

They wonder why Katherine, a Catholic woman who has 9 children and an alcoholic husband, committed suicide. "She had a normal life, they thought, she just should have talked her husband into using birth control." As for the rest of the women, including Myra, their lives, fears, disappointments and yearnings, were much more subtle, yet equally suicidal in their quiet desperation.

Many years down the road, Myra's life finally changes. Her husband has "made it", the kids have grown, and life is easy economically. Myra has a nervous breakdown. Once recovered, she divorces, and becomes a graduate student at Yale. Though painful and difficult, it is here that she comes to terms with herself, realizes her potential, and learns to live with herself--not necessarily happily--but at least honestly.

After I finished the story of Myra's world that Sunday evening, I woke up in the middle of the night sobbing uncontrollably from a terrible nightmare. Though I couldn't remember the dream, I came to a profound realization. Myra's life was my mother's.

Most of my life I had revered, respected and admired my father for going to college, being intelligent and worldly, having power and control. In short for being a man.

My mother always seemed too "wishy-washy", easily trodden upon, overly dependent because she had chosen the role of HOUSEWIFE, MOTHER. I rebelled against the tradition, and feared wearing those chains someday. Consequently, I strove to be like my father.

Until this book, I never realized how much more courage it took for a person to live within a stifled role, and find contentment by living through other people. During that night of crying I understood my mother for the first time--I respected her inner strength, compassion, gentleness.

Ever since then, my relationship with my mother has evolved, and we are very close. I will probably never adopt the role in life that she chose to take, but I now respect her for her life, and understand the reasons why she made those choices. Reading of Myra's evolution as a female changed the way I feel towards myself, my feelings and compassion for my mother, and provided me with a much more sensitive view towards the lives of many women in our society today.

Comment: Clearly a well-written, superior essay. Each of the three parts of the topic is covered and well developed, with considerable detail provided. Despite an occasional lapse in the use of the possessive and a few other matters, the paper is strong in mechanics. Sentence structure is sophisticated and effective.

SAMPLE ESSAY SCORE: 5

Through the ages of 8-15 I was an avid reader of pleasure books. The majority of the books were mysteries such as Nancy Drew or the Hardy Boys. Books about animals were avoided because they usually had a very sentimental theme, and I was very emotional when it came to animal suffering. When I was approximately 10 years old I read a book titled Misty & Chatlenaque. This book was about a young horse that was stranded on an island. It had been on a horse-trading ship when the ship wrecked on the rocks. Misty went through several adventures where wild dogs tried to kill her, horse traders tried to capture her (and beat her in the process), and the sea tried to swallow her.

A little girl who lived on the Island found Misty and tried to protect her from the wild dogs and horse traders. The story was told from the horse's point view, and the agony and terror Misty went through passed on to me. I felt as if it were me who was being chased and beat.

A girl at the age of ten is influenced by the things she sees and reads. Years after reading the book I had the notion that horse ranches were terrible to horses. I also felt that horses were very human in the sense that they could think, feel, understand, and have emotions.

Whenever I passed by a horse who was behind a fence I had to stop and feed it, talk to it, pet it, and feel sorry for it. Every horse had that "Misty" look in its eyes, and I felt it was "crying out to me". After reading Misty and Chatlenaque, horses became more than just an animal to me. They became something I could relate to and sympathize with. I myself was a lonely child who felt neglected (even

though I wasn't) and "penned". While reading the book I felt the horse and I were one. Years later I felt like horses and I had something in common and could relate to each other.

Now, I know horses do not understand what I say to them, but I still stop and talk to them as if they were human. I feel that if I had not read that book eleven years ago I wouldn't feel as attached to horses as I do now. To this day, I refuse to read another horse book or watch a horse movie that looks like it might be "emotional" or "sentimental".

Misty & Chatlenaque is still a very prominent book in my mind, and details of it are remembered frequently. It has had the profound effect of altering my view of horses and will probably remain in my memory for life. The book also had the effect of making me not want to read those kinds of books again. Their emotional impact was too great on me so I only read mysteries and school books. To this day I have my reservations about reading an emotional book, especially if it pertains to animals.

Comment: A very competent paper, nearly free of mechanical errors but lacking the coherent development of the superior essay. It is also occasionally repetitious and a bit unfocused at times. (The correct title of this book is Misty of Chincoteague.)

SAMPLE ESSAY SCORE: 4

In the summer of 1981 I worked for the Army Corps of Engineers on the Warm Springs Dam Project. Much to my objections I was to spend the entire summer living alone, without my wife, since she had obligations to keep in Eureka, California.

The project was located 7 miles southwest of Cloverdale, Ca., in an area which is essentially agricultural. Housing in the area was very scarce and the lodging which could be found was either too expensive or unsuitable. By my own preference, I decided it would be nice to camp out in the woods for the entire duration of the summer.

At first the evenings after work were hot but beautifully peaceful. It didn't take long though until I found my self bored to death looking for something to do besides play solitaire. How did the people in the early days of our world stand life without television. I was forced to find some other means of entertainment which just happened to be reading.

The only reading material which was at my camp was a book left there by my wife on her last visit entitled "The Stix Complex." This book to most of the world I'm sure has no great literary value, but to me, it was the greatest entertainment I had ever found. I realized that in the reading of a book, ones own imagination can bring out much more detail in a story than television ever could.

I don't feel that it was the specific book that struck me so much that summer, and it probably could have been any book. I realized that we expect to be entertained by television and movies so much that we forget that we can entertain ourselves to a much higher degree. I still watch television, but I now read much more for enjoyment.

Comment: Although this essay addresses all three aspects of the topic, development of them is thin. The writer devotes most of the essay to describing his situation and passes rather quickly over the book itself and its effects on him. Still, despite a few mechanical flaws, this is clearly a competent piece of writing.

SAMPLE ESSAY SCORE: 3

I was strongly affected by a book I read called Never Cry Wolf. The book describes a remote animal behavior study, located in a mountainous region of northern Canada. The purpose of the study was to observe the animal behavior of wolves in their natural environment. The study was conducted by a wildlife biologist, working for the Canadian government.

Up until the time I read the book, I had the impression that wolves were among the meanest creatures on the planet. I may have received this impression from childhood fairy tales that were told to me. After reading the book several times, my impression of wolves had changed. I no longer viewed wolves as mean creatures, but instead viewed them as primarily passive creatures. Their intent was not to harm, but to survive.

Animal behavior became a primary interest of mine after reading the book, Never Cry Wolf. Although, I am not a wildlife major, I have assisted in a wildlife study on wolves. I would have never gained this experience if I had not read Never Cry Wolf. The knowledge I gained from the book has opened my eyes to nature.

Comment: While no parts of the topic are omitted, treatment of them tends to be superficial. The writer provides very little supporting detail. Considerable repetition is present because of the predominantly simple sentences used. (Note, for example, how the three opening sentences can easily be combined into one: I was strongly affected by a book I read called Never Cry Wolf, which describes the behavior of wolves living in their natural environment in the mountains of northern Canada.) Spelling is also weak.

SAMPLE ESSAY SCORE: 2

The purpose of this essay is to describe my personal experience; that of a particular book which has greatly affected me. This book is Sweet Thursday by John Stienbeck. This book has greatly affected my overall outlook on life in general. Sweet Thursday changed the way I think about myself and others. Also, it has changed the way I feel about my own career.

The main character of the book was Doc. Doc had a very profound outlook on life, which I found quite interesting. He gave his career all of his attention yet still felt an emptiness inside. This was because he was without a meaningful relationship with a woman. I too feel this emptiness, but because of Sweet Thursday I am able to understand what it is. This understanding gives me hope when career goals are overwhelming.

Comment: Although this essay does not ignore the question, it treats it very poorly. The essay is both thin in content and lacking in development. The writer uses repetitious simple sentences rather than more sophisticated sentence structures which would combine and properly subordinate thoughts and eliminate the repetitions.

<http://www2.humboldt.edu/gwpe/node/162N>