

When given any ambiguous project prompt, or for that matter, any project that requires an ounce of creativity, I aim to be personal. My writing becomes that medium through which I can explore personal questions and confusions, and through the process arrive at an answer. It's therapeutic in that I talk at my blank piece of paper until something sticks – until I uncover some nugget that I have not yet explored and that I want to explore. My writing is mostly all personal, and if the writing is in itself not personal, my process is very personal. That is why even when I am forced to write under strict guidelines, my writing still screams “me.” With my writing, I find personal ties. I form puzzles. I link the unlinkable. I am honest and reflective. I am me.

But I wasn't always that way. Flashback to eighth grade and my early high school years and I was a thesaurus addict. I always wanted to be my smartest self, and I thought, if I used elevated vocabulary I would sound smarter. My ideas were strong, but excessively complicated by wordy sentence structure, SAT vocabulary and synonyms – lots of synonyms. My teachers returned my papers with red ink in the margin: *confusing sentence structure*. Guided by my self-induced pressure for that 4.0, I tightened my prose.

I learned to articulate a point of view and prove an argument. In my AP English Language class I wrote:

“Through this piece and his other works, Defoe implicitly suggested ways to correct the British political society. Defoe’s works demonstrate the power of political idealism to expose political injustice” (on the topic of Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe).

Nailed it. Concise. To the point. Arguable. Provable. Boring. Very, very boring. Well argued, but non-unique.

I was constrained by the topic of the essay. My writing, just like my digestion of the subject matter, was dry, without personality, without voice. Though the subject matter was creatively disengaging, my process was unique. I took research from a million sources, found quotes and worked backwards. I read through the quotes and grouped them according to relatedness. Working from the quotes and from my understanding of the text, I formed my argument. I then puzzled together an essay that was highly convincing and proved my thesis. I constructed an argument. I didn't think up an argument and find support. I worked backwards, finding support first and building up an argument from small detail.

I got an A on the piece; I wrote a well-written and well-supported paper according to my AP English teacher's standards. I too considered my grade a mark of top-quality. It was enough to keep my 4.0 intact. But I knew at the time and I can say now with certainty that I never again returned to this piece – certainly not for a pleasure read. I knew exactly what I needed to do to get that A. And I did it. But I failed to find any larger purpose for my assignment. I failed to see its personal relevance. I didn't leverage my interest in law to connect my emotion to the piece. I was constrained by Academia and its rules of thumb:

-In an “essay,” we don't use “I.”

-In an essay, we want objectivity. This is not an opinion essay and as such, you shall be an objective author.

I followed the rules, and I was rewarded for it.

I was used to it too. In fact, following the writing rules was all I knew. That's why finding the ideal topic to write about for my college application essay was an extraordinary struggle. For the common application essay, I could write about anything. I remember thinking, ok, what the hell should I write about. I'm pretty average. I don't do any one thing that really makes me stand out. I am not a genius in any one category. I don't have a sob story to tell with some grand theme or punch line that comes at the end.

I felt lost. I didn't have an assignment prompt, and I didn't have a clue. I didn't have a book or a theme or research to guide my thinking. I wasn't thinking yet. I saw a college advisor to help me with the process. From a series of free write exercises, she prepared a long series of questions for me to further explore, only fittingly, in more free writes. The process seemed onerous and unnecessary, but seeing no other option, I thought about her questions.

- 1). Discuss your role as middle sister. How are you not like the typical middle sister, and what are the misconceptions regarding middle children?*
- 2). Discuss your independence, where it derives from, and what you have learned by doing things on your own. Are there any drawbacks to being so independent?*
- 3). Tell me about your passion for music. How do different songs or types of bands reflect different aspects of your personality?*
- 4). Discuss debating - why it's important to you, and why you're good at it. Discuss the competitive edge in you that comes out when you engage in debate. How do others perceive female debaters; tell me a story about how you and your debating partner kicked butt against the guys. To what do you attribute your oratory skills?*
- 5). Tell me about your love of family; provide stories or "slice of life" experiences that reflect your background. Discuss the "down-to-earthness," love, and "purity" you feel from your mother's side of the family.*
- 6). Explore in some detail why you play the role of psychologist with your friends. Discuss your sense of yourself as being balanced.*

I didn't really *know* the answers to most of the questions. But I tried to think deeply and pull from varied experiences to draw the most three-dimensional image of myself. I started to realize that there is something here. What if I just wrote about myself? If I dug deep and thought about myself and the forces that make me, me. Doing this type of essay would require that I find a true personal voice. I slowly began to realize I didn't need to do the cookie-cutter college application essay "my grandma was the most amazing women and she taught me X, Y, Z." I like wit. I like personality. I like sarcasm. I like writing that sounds like I speak. And I could do that in my common app, entitled "Kook."

"On the bus to the annual Ivy League tournaments, flush-faced, briefcase-clutching debaters frantically file their thousand papers... As I firmly shake the hands of my competitors, I switch on my game face: slightly squinted, fierce eyes, a stiff mouth, and chin held high... I make eye

contact with the judge the entire time in order to convince him or her.

At home, I do my convincing differently. My mother celebrates me as the “balanced” one among a family of worriers. My demeanor is softer: I wear ripped jeans, a white t-shirt, my hair in loose waves, an open smile. I exert a calming presence within my family, however in my bright red, cozy, and Zen-like bedroom, I unreservedly rock out, alone with my guitar in front of the mirror. I’m not the holy first born nor am I the cherished baby of the family. I fall in between: the middle child...I am the strong-willed daughter who self-advocates, the high-achiever, the fierce debater, the nurturer of sisters, and the personal psychologist to friends. A balanced kook.”

I now look at my common application essay, and I still feel just as proud as I remember feeling that first time I read it back to myself upon completion. I knew some people would hate it. It wasn’t the traditional college essay admission counselors would read. It wasn’t what I was told to write. It wasn’t a sob story, or an experience that taught me some sort of grand lesson. It was just me. All of me.

It’s tangential. It’s eclectic. It’s a series of short anecdotes and thoughts that are modpodged together. It’s my thoughts. Read it once, you get the gist. Read it a few more times and you see this essay is an art. It pulls from varied experiences, from varied dimensions of my character, and from varied emotions to make a statement about me, the whole me. With each paragraph, I paint another layer of myself – until you get a 3-D, real, authentic portrait of me. I write myself to life. I am the fierce and un-intimidated debater. I am the balanced middle sister of three girls. I am a daughter of the most loving parents. I am human, and so is my family. I am well rounded. I am reflective. I am me.

When given the flexibility to write about anything in the entire world, I wrote about me. This interest in personal stories and honest self-reflection followed me closely to the University of Michigan. Conveniently, my first year writing course in the Lloyd Hall Scholars Program was centered on the topic of the identity. One of our first assignments was to use George Ella Lyon’s poem “Where I am From” as an inspiration or model to draft our own “Where I am From” poem. I digested this prompt as an opportunity to metaphorically explain the peculiarities of my family and me, the intricacies of my family and my upbringing.

To generate the content for this poem, I looked through old pictures, reflected on funny memories, watched home videos and talked with my family. I brainstormed things that were unique to my family and memories that we collectively cherish. And then I pieced together diverse thoughts in a loosely related stanza structure.

*I am from no limitations
From sharing chewed gum, lollipops, and drinks
Free-flowing advice and questions
Even awkward moments and regrets*

*I am from dialogue, discussion—a family of words
Proverbs, and opinions, even the occasional cliché
Teeth are not tools*

*You are your own best advocate
It's never too late to do the right thing

I am from a family of most rare form

Although the intent was to create a hyper-specific poem unique to my family, conversations with a certain writing teacher confirmed that this poem was generic. It could have been written by anyone and for any family. My execution lacked specificity and therefore, it lacked potential impact. My hope for this piece *was* to create this lasting impact, a truly specific piece to my family, but one that all families could relate to on an emotional level.

The next year, I had the unique opportunity to repurpose my “Where I am From” assignment. With my second take on the assignment, I wanted an increased level of specificity. I wanted to create an assignment that would be intensely personal and honest. Ironically, my process was very similar the second time around. I read through my initial rough draft from the previous year and identified strong themes that I wanted to explore. When brainstorming, rather than focusing on emotions or family sentiments, I tried to identify specific snapshots into my life. I then grouped various experiences, identifying common threads and themes that link the specific examples. This allowed me to discover new ground and synthesize or link distinct ideas into related stanzas.

*I'm from scarlet nails on a treasure hunt, a tickled X on my back
And from my dad's hums to U2's MLK that slant my eyes to a hushed black
I'm from butterfly eye-ball kisses and Eskimo nose rubs
And stained cheeks from lipstick kisses from my Bubs*

*I'm from embroidered jean overalls and bright red velvet bows
Mostly I'm from nakedness, a preference I have yet to outgrow
I'm from this bed is fit for five and hands warmed in the tuck in my mom's thigh
With three daughters and developing breasts, our family showers my dad quickly denied*

*I'm from chip clips and jump rope, our makeshift ropes-course on our backyard swing set
And from Danielle's knee as leverage and Ali's push as I climbed my way to the safety net
I'm from modeling shoots and MTV cribs on vacations with the family
I'm from Tia and Tamara and we are family, I got all my sisters with me*

*I'm from my mom's verbal instruction with a tampon in her hand as I cringed in disgust
With a new excuse for my teen moodiness, my family's responses had to adjust
I'm from your bronzer makes you look orange and from your eyeliner is way too black
I'm from tuck in your boobs; they'll give your dad a heart attack*

*I'm from Skinder car rides and road trips that end in near fatal nudges and hair yanks
I'm from Deerfield's fifth grade play, the scratch on my face I have my sister to thank
I'm from driving Pop-Pop's golf cart and from cruising the stick shift into Bambi the deer
I'm from get back out there; driving is not something you can fear*

*I'm from tough times do not last, tough people do
As I convulse in the hospital bed, plugs wired to my brain with glue
I'm from their body heat as my closed eyes cross with flashing lights
And from Danielle's gift, nail clippings, delivered to me for a funny snack late night*

*I'm from a family of superstition, right, left, blow a kiss, step right foot on the plane
And from three knocks on nearby wood or your scary thoughts you will have to contain
I'm from don't call this fine, I don't want fine but only great
I'm from working with parents that always, yes always, causes riot and debate*

*I'm from sisters on either arm as they hoist my drunken body up two flights of stairs
And from my dad chuckling as my mom cries, Michael, hold her hair!
I'm from we are proud of you for the person who you are
And I'm from in our eyes, you're always a star*

A Skinder-original. A family masterpiece and treasure. This piece is unique to my family and touches on intimate moments and memories. It tells a story, a story of adolescence and growing up. It has larger lessons and themes. It conveys a loving and warm tone. It truly is a story of my family, but it is applicable to any close-knit family. All families have dysfunctional times and intimate moments like those described in the poem.

Because this piece was so explicitly linked to my writing from the previous year, I was really able to see my personal growth as well as my growth as a writer. My improved poem is evidence that I have grown in my ability to reflect on an intimate and deep level. To convey emotion is tough, but doable. To convey authenticity in writing is more challenging. I believe the level of honesty that is apparent in my writing illustrates that I am a confident and honest writer who wants to be authentic and real with my audience. Writing is the medium through which I can honestly, without filtration, expose my soul and mind to a reader. Through a series of revisions, a series of talks with my teacher Ray and long process reflections, I improved my poem from a well-written and generic poem to a masterful family treasure.

For my capstone project, my final writing project at the University of Michigan, I wanted to leave a mark on a community beyond just my family. I wanted to involve my peers and spark a larger conversation. To come up with a topic for my project, I re-read my old work and identified trends in my writing or recurring themes. It became apparent that when I am given the flexibility to write about anything in the world, I most often write about the self, in some form or another. I am the daughter of a social worker; I have always been fascinated by people's stories and why people are the way they are. I have explored these themes in my own personal work. I realized that the common thread behind my favorite writing is the concept of identity. It was with this nugget of insight that I began brainstorming more seriously a concept for my project. I thought of ways in which I could speak to my peers about this idea of identity construction; I landed on the topic of social media. In my Capstone project, you will see my exploration of the Self as it is tied to social media. This piece is meant to be a final product of my identity explorations. My Capstone website will serve as lasting evidence of my interest in and commitment to learning more about the Self.

My maturity in my writing reflects a newfound ability to find personal relevance in all that I do and all that I write. The pieces of writing that I revisit the most and the pieces I imagine are best perceived by others are those that are intensely personal, introspective, and meaningful. They aren't necessarily the pieces that are written most technically accurate or the pieces that I spent the most time researching, but rather the writing that I feel a connection to. Throughout my years writing, as I experienced more creative license with my work, the more comfortable and confident I have grown in my ability to expose myself through writing. My writing screams "me" because it is about me, and uniquely me. I have started to look backwards. I have learned to pull from old experiences and connect them to current struggles and strengths. I have come to understand why I am the way I am. I can think, analyze, reconsider and revise. My relationship with my writing is honest. I now write with specificity and personality, because I have realized that all people appreciate authenticity. I am proud of both my processes and products.