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**The Makings of a Personal Essay, Really**

**By Jenna Glatzer**

**The Makings of a Personal Essay, Really**

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Sometimes I can be dense when it comes to realizing the potential of my own life experiences as essays for magazines. I, of course, fully believe that everything in my life is newsworthy, but sometimes have trouble figuring out which experiences will hit home with other people.

I recently learned the secret, and it can be summarized in one word: Really?

My friends know that I can talk. I mean, I can talk! Get me on the phone and Im likely to tell you all about my day, from my breakfast to my editors latest comments to my insomnia. I dont inflict my tendency toward verbosity on everyone, but at least a few trusted souls get to bear the brunt of my solitary lifestyle and my need to dish.

Their reactions tell me whether or not I have the material for a marketable personal essay.

My all-time best-selling essay is a simple story about a boy who won a stuffed animal for his little sister in a crane machine. When I saw it happen, I was so touched I almost cried. When I retold it to my mom, the tears welled up again. I got to the climactic momentAnd then he bent down and gave the stuffed animal to his little sister and kissed her on the foreheadand my mom asked, Really? Thats so sweet!

Bing. Really? translates to Thats a great story.

When I tell mom about the new toy I bought for my cat, she never asks, Really? She doesnt press me for details. She probably cant wait for me to shut up so she can hang up the phone and do something productive that doesnt involve listening to my escapades with my cat. But when Ive hit on something that might actually warrant an article, her reaction wont be a simple Mmm-hmm, or Thats great. Itll be a question, or a plea to share more.

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The reactions to listen for, in addition to Really? are: Then what happened? What did you do? How did you (/he/she) react? Tell me more! Thats amazing! Thats so cool!

A few weeks ago, I was talking to Jamie Blyth (Im helping to write his book, Fear Is No Longer My Reality) about how far Ive come in beating my anxiety disorder. One of the things I mentioned was that I used to have an obsessive–compulsive disorder related to food. He wanted to know more. I explained that I went through a two–year phase where I ate nothing but canned foods and other food with really long shelf lives.

Really? he asked.

Oh. I hadnt thought about that phase of mine in quite some time, and had forgotten that it might be intriguing to people whove never experienced OCD. OCD as an overall topic has been done many times, but this detailthe canned foods and my almost deadly diethasnt. It doesnt belong in a how–to

article. It works because of the telling, because of the personal nature of the story. And as I sat down to write it, a beautifully marketable essay formed almost effortlessly.

Think about what details of your story set it apart from similar stories. Countless essays have been written about alcoholism, eating disorders, miscarriage, drug abuse, abusive marriages, finding God, giving birth... that doesnt mean you cant tell your story. You just have to find a unique angle, a new way of telling it, a nugget that people will remember.

The same effortless type of story formed when I told people how Anthony and I bought our house. We fell so in love with it that we kept coming to visit and take pictureswe would sit on the other side of the lake, facing the owners backyard, and just hug and dream of what it would be like to live there.

When it came time to make an offer, we were immediately outbid by thousands of dollars and couldnt match the price. We went to say goodbye to the owners, and they told the Realtor to take it off the marketwe were the people they wanted to live in the home theyd loved for 40 years. They had seen us from their back window all the times we came to admire the house from afar, and they knew we would appreciate the gardens, the greenhouse, the lake. So they took a loss of thousands of dollars because they wanted us to live our dream.

Quick, what was your reaction to that story? I hope it was Thats amazing!, because thats the reaction I got from nearly everyone who heard the story. Within a couple of weeks of moving in, I sold the essay to A Cup of Comfort and sent the anthology to the previous owners of the house.

If someones eyes light up when you tell a story, chances are excellent that theres a market for it. If one person finds it interesting, inspiring, hilarious, or moving, others likely will, too.

Consider your friends and family your test audience. Test out your experiences on them. If they dont press you for more details, either the story isnt there, or you need a more compelling way to tell it.

You can also test by e–mail; send a few friends a note about a recent experience of yours and see

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how many of them react to it. Note, too, how quickly they react. If they respond right after reading it, their interest levels are probably high. If they respond a week later and mention, By the way, that was a nice story, it likely didn't pass the test.

Personal experiences don't need to be earth-shattering to be worthy of print. They just need to be interesting, insightful, and emotion-provoking in almost any sense of the word. Your story may make someone happy, mad, upset, horrified, shocked... as long as you can elicit a strong emotion, you can draw readers. And editors like writers who can draw readers.

Go forth and share your experiences. Personal essays are wonderful gifts to share with the world. Really!

Jenna Glatzer is the editor-in-chief of Absolute Write (

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hundreds of national and online magazines, and her latest book is *MAKE A REAL LIVING AS A FREELANCE WRITER*, which you can find at

. Find out how to get a FREE

editors' cheat sheet with this book!

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## **Using Low Grades As Assets In Admission Essays For College Or Mba School**

**By Thomas Suh**

You are seriously aiming to apply to the college or business school of your choice. You have taken the required tests, and now, you are ready for the grueling application process. In particular, you need to pay attention to the College Admission Essay, or MBA essay as part of your application, since the college admission essay or MBA essay allows you to explain certain weaknesses in your grades. Many colleges and universities still have reservations on admitting applicants whose school records contain grades that they consider low as per their standards. And this is your big dilemma. How to explain your low grades. This is where the College Admission Essay or MBA essay will play a vital role.

In cases where you unfortunately received a bad grade, the best thing to do is to give a valid and genuine reason. Do not ignore it, but address it head on. In the college admission essay or MBA essay you have the golden opportunity to explain your low grades and provide rational reasons on why these grades are not necessarily reflective on your potential as a student. Offer a specific example to explain your side of the issue. For instance, you can say that personal problems (sick family member or unexpected accident) kept you from focusing more on your studies.

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Just try to keep in mind that your aim in your explanation in the admission essay or MBA essay is not to make excuses nor create tall tales to cover the fact that you have a low grade in one or two subject areas. The goal is to emphasize the reality that the bad grade was not because you failed to study but because circumstances were simply beyond your control. Make it a point to stress that it was just a temporary setback and that overall, your school record is still academically excellent, and that you are worthy of admission to the school of your choice. In fact, you may want to explain how such unexpected experiences actually made you into a better person, a more mature and understanding person, who now appreciates life more and is more driven than ever before. Your primary goal should be to convey to the reader that you are a better person as a result of your personal experiences, which in turn make you a better candidate for admission.

Also, remember that different schools place different weights on test scores or grades and may emphasize your college admission essay or MBA essay instead. Rather, they look more into your extracurricular activities since the approach of their program is the total development of an individual. In such cases, lower grades may not be as crucial in the admissions process, but you should still aim to explain them as best as you can, and doing so can best be done in the College Admission Essay or MBA essay.

For more valuable information about the MBA Essay or the Collge Admission Essay, please visit

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