

Writing a Personal Essay

An essay is a short exposition on a single topic, usually presenting the writer's personal point of view. A personal essay gives the reader an intimate glimpse of the author's experience, thoughts or feelings.

Your "My Turn" essay should be similar in format to the weekly "My Turn" column in NEWSWEEK, in which a member of the public shares an opinion, experience or personal feeling. In some "My Turn" essays, the writers try to persuade readers to take action or agree with a point of view. Other "My Turn" essays simply share experiences, feelings or reflections. The personal experience or observation draws readers into the essay and helps them make a connection with the writer and the ideas.

"My Turn" Competition judges look for direct personal experience and observation with a fresh, original point of view. They want engaging, moving or thought-provoking essays that appeal to a national readership.

When writing your essay, you should follow

a three-part format: the introduction, which includes an engaging lead; the body, which contains the central idea, and a conclusion, which sums up and expands on the main or central idea of the essay.

Within a well-written essay, each paragraph is a group of related sentences that make one major point or express a single idea. Well-written paragraphs share three essential characteristics:

unity: An effective paragraph sticks to the topic. All sentences develop one main idea, which should support the central idea of the entire essay.

coherence: The sentences are presented in a logical order and are linked together in a way that makes it easy for the reader to follow the writer's train of thought.

adequate development: The paragraph includes enough development, such as supporting detail or explanation, for the reader to easily understand its main idea.

All cash winners and honorable mentions in the Kaplan/NEWSWEEK "My Turn" Essay Competition, as well as their teachers, will receive a FREE copy of the new NEWSWEEK Education Program book, "Essay Writing Step-by-Step," published by Kaplan Books.

Official Rules

1) No purchase necessary. To enter, each student must complete the official entry form (or a photocopy) and submit it with two (2) copies of the original essay (500–1,000 words) on a topic of the student's choice, where the student shares his or her opinion, experience or personal feeling.

2) The Kaplan/NEWSWEEK "My Turn" Essay Competition is open to any citizen and/or resident of the United States (and its territories and possessions) who, as of January 1, 2006, is a high-school student intending to attend a college or university following high school. **All other entries will be disqualified.** Prize winners of past Kaplan/NEWSWEEK essay competition(s) and employees of The Washington Post companies, affiliates and subsidiaries are ineligible.

Each student may enter only one essay. The essay must have a title. The essay must be typed or computer-printed, double-spaced and in English. Both copies of the essay must be stapled and the entry form should be stapled to one copy. **Handwritten essays or essays presented in any other way will be disqualified.** Each essay must include entrant's home telephone number, including area code, in the upper right-hand corner of each page. It must be the same number as that listed on the entry form. **DO NOT put your name on the essay.** Essays must be mailed flat in a 9x12 envelope and must be postmarked no later than **March 1, 2006.**

High-school entrants should mail their entries to: Kaplan/NEWSWEEK "My Turn" Essay Competition, 1440 Broadway, 9th Floor, New York, NY 10018. Neither Kaplan nor NEWSWEEK assumes responsibility for lost, late, misdirected,

mutilated, postage-due and illegible entries, all of which will be disqualified. All materials submitted will become Kaplan's and/or NEWSWEEK's exclusive property and will not be returned.

3) Essays must be original and factually accurate, and must not infringe upon any material protected by copyright. Essays will be judged by prescreening groups consisting of qualified Kaplan and NEWSWEEK employees, and then by a final judging panel. The decisions of the judges will be final. Essays will be judged on the following criteria: (1) effectiveness, insightfulness, creativity and completeness (33 1/3%); (2) organization and development of the ideas expressed, with clear and appropriate examples to support them (33 1/3%); and (3) consistency in the use of language, variety in sentence structure and range of vocabulary, use of proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation (33 1/3%).

4) One high-school student will win \$5,000 for the first-prize winning essay, another student will win \$2,000 for the second-prize winning essay, and an additional eight high-school students will each win a check in the amount of \$1,000, which may be used for future educational needs. Winning essays, as well as 10 honorable mentions (the authors of which are not entitled to any monetary or other award), may be published by the NEWSWEEK Education Program. All winners and honorable mentions will receive a copy of the NEWSWEEK Education Program book, "Essay Writing Step-by-Step." In the event of a tie, the essay with the higher score for creativity will win. In the event of a second tie, the tying contestants will be required to submit a new essay on a topic of Kaplan/NEWSWEEK's choice which will be judged

on the same criteria as the original entries.

5) The likelihood of winning will depend upon the quality of all other entries as judged by the criteria stated above. Prizes are nontransferable. All prizes will be awarded. Competition is void where prohibited or restricted by law. Winners will be solely responsible for any federal, state or local taxes. Within 10 days of the date specified in the notification, winners and their parents/legal guardians will be required to execute an affidavit of originality, eligibility and compliance with rules, a release of liability and grant of publication rights, or prize will be awarded to an alternate winner. Winners must provide a street address.

6) All essays and all rights to their publication become the property of Kaplan and/or NEWSWEEK, which may use, edit and excerpt these entries for promotional or any other purpose, including placing them online (e.g., on www.newsweekeducation.com) without attribution or compensation, additional or otherwise. Kaplan and NEWSWEEK reserve the right to use prizewinners' names and hometowns in any advertising or promotional materials relating to this competition without further notification, permission, or compensation to the winners, except where prohibited by law.

7) Winners will be selected on or about June 15, 2006, and will be notified by mail. Winners will also be posted online at www.newsweekeducation.com/myturn. For the names of winners, send a separate, stamped self-addressed envelope by August 31, 2006, to: Kaplan/NEWSWEEK "My Turn" Essay Winners, 1440 Broadway, 9th Floor, New York, NY 10018.

ATTENTION HIGH-SCHOOL STUDENTS

Win \$5,000 FOR COLLEGE

GETTING STARTED:

- Think about a personal experience that has shaped or motivated you as a person. How can you express this experience so it is interesting for others to read?
- Take a few moments to write your thoughts and memories of the experience before you begin organizing your ideas into an essay.
- Read the section "Writing a Personal Essay" in this brochure and several "My Turn" essays in NEWSWEEK as a guide for refining the topic and writing your essay.
- Study the sample "My Turn" Essay inside. Use it as a model for writing an effective essay.
- Show your essay to friends and teachers. Polish your essay and mail it in!

First Prize wins \$5,000!
Second Prize wins \$2,000
Eight more students win \$1,000

Ten winning essays and 10 honorable mentions may be published by the NEWSWEEK Education Program. All high-school students are eligible.

Deadline for entry: March 1, 2006

TO ALL INSTRUCTORS:

Please make photocopies for each student entry. Entries without forms will not qualify for contest.

PLEASE SEND ALL ENTRIES TO:
2006 Kaplan/NEWSWEEK
"My Turn" Essay Competition
1440 BROADWAY • 9TH FLOOR
NEW YORK, NY 10018

KAPLAN

**Newsweek
Education
Program**

www.kaptest.com

www.newsweekeducation.com

2006 Kaplan/NEWSWEEK "My Turn" Essay Competition Entry Form

Follow official rules on back page to avoid disqualification!

Name _____

Address _____

City, state, ZIP _____

Area code and home phone number _____

Title of essay _____

E-mail address _____

Date of birth _____

Name/phone number of parent/guardian _____

School attending _____

Current grade level _____

School address _____

City, state, ZIP _____

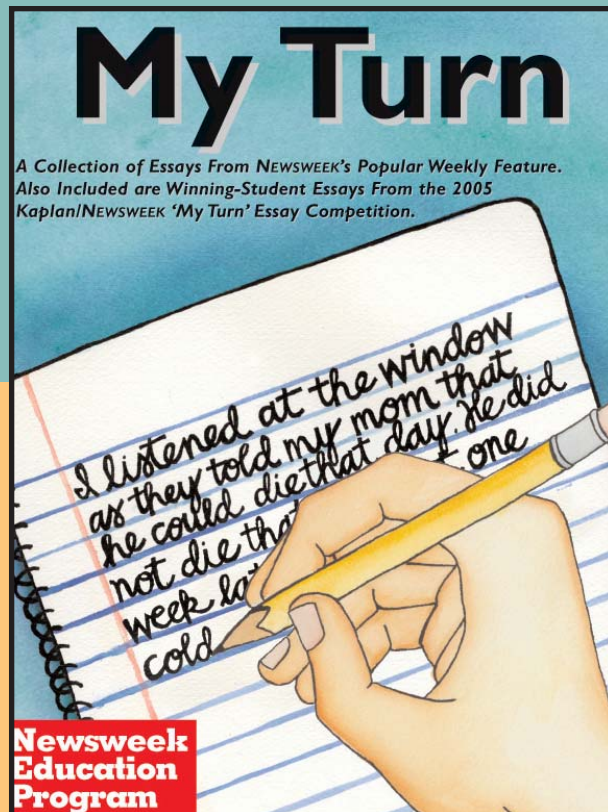
Name/phone number of guidance counselor _____

Name/subject area of teacher who provided this form _____

Parent/guardian signature (students 17 or younger) _____

HIGHLIGHTS OF AN EFFECTIVE ESSAY

- Introduction with a catchy lead-in and clear thesis
- Personal reflections dealing with your own experience
- Link to a “big picture” idea (e.g., an important social issue), which appeals to a wide audience
- An emphatic ending or “kicker”
- An appropriate title



The “My Turn” Essay Collection is a 32-page resource FREE to educators who subscribe to the NEWSWEEK Education Program for their students. For more information on the NEWSWEEK Education Program:

- Write: P.O. Box 919 • Mountain Lakes, NJ • 07046-0919
- Call: (800) 526-2595
- Visit: www.newsweekeducation.com
- E-mail: classroom.service@newsweek.com

- “If I Told You, Would You Want to Hear?” by Julia Kraus is reprinted from the Aug. 29–Sept. 5, 2005 edition of NEWSWEEK.
- This sample “My Turn” essay is a model, not a blueprint or format. However, your essay should include all of the highlights presented here.

Sample Essay

INTRODUCTION

- In your opening, include a “lead” or “hook” to grab the reader’s interest and suggest your purpose and meaning.
- Next, state your point. State how your personal experience links to a larger social context. Briefly define your meaning and suggest your conclusion.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

- Use details to define, support and expand on your experience.
- Use details to help the reader see and feel your experience.

My Turn

If I Told You, Would You Want to Hear?

My friends are curious about the kids who live with me, but I know better than to share their stories.

BY JULIA KRAUS

It’s a normal conversation, really. It’s the first day of 11th grade. I’ve just met my biology-lab partner. He mentions his brother. Then he asks me The Question.

It isn’t earth-shattering. It isn’t even unusual. The Question is: how many brothers and sisters do you have?

After 10 seconds of silence I say, “I can’t remember.” I really can’t. Does he mean how many siblings I have at this moment? Or does he mean every sibling I’ve ever had in my life?

When I left home this morning, I had three siblings. When I come home tonight, I could still have three. Or I could have only two. Or four. And as for all the siblings I’ve ever had, the tally is nearing 250. Foster care is so hard to explain.

Every time someone asks The Question, it ends up becoming a conversation. I could say “two” and have that be the end of it, because I do have two sons-of-my-parents brothers, but that answer is incomplete. I could say, “More than 200,” but that leads to witticisms such as “What do you do, run a sweatshop?” I could just say, “We do foster care,” and lead right into the inevitable conversation. Any way I truthfully answer The Question sparks scores more.

How long have we been doing this? Eight years. Yes, sometimes it’s hard to give them up. No, I don’t usually mind them—I like kids. No, I’m not a foster kid myself. No, I don’t know your cousin Rosie who got put in foster care last year. I couldn’t tell you even if I did know

her. Why? Against the law. No, I can’t tell you stories.

That last thing was a lie. I could tell you stories if I wanted to, if I left off the names of the kids. But you wouldn’t want to hear.

There’s the 3-year-old girl who was stripped, doused with cold water and force-fed. In her front yard. In January.

There’s the developmentally delayed teenage mother who doesn’t know who her daughter’s father is. The young woman’s stepfather swears up and down that it can’t be him because he’s had a vasectomy. Not because he’s never had sex with his stepdaughter.

There’s the 6-month-old boy, eyes goggling almost sightlessly, hooked up to God-knows-what machine, whimpering. He’s been sent to us because he was shaken at a previous foster home, shaken hard, shaken fast, shaken violently until his eyes popped out, whereupon his shaker pushed them back in with his thumbs. His vision will never exceed 20/100.

There’s the 3-year-old boy with eyes swollen shut by a huge double shiner. His two bottom left ribs were broken. He had fist-size bruises on his chin and cheeks. He complained only once, when he was eating. He said his mouth hurt. My mom looked. His teeth were rotted through.

There’s the baby we had for just a day or two. Not long after she went home, her father flew into a temper and killed her. She was less than a year old, I do remember that.

Are you covering your ears? Are you

screaming at me to stop? Good. That’ll teach you to ask me to tell you stories.

I remember being 14 and at a sleep-over. Everyone was talking animatedly about a TV show. “Fill me in, guys,” I said, “I’ve never heard of this show.”

A girl I didn’t know well stared at me. “Never?”

I shook my head. “I don’t really have time to watch TV...”

“You’re pretty naive, aren’t you?” she interrupted. “Pretty sheltered.”

I stared at her. “Naive?”

“I can just tell,” she said, “you are.”

I wanted to scream at her, tell her stories that made her cringe and cry and beg me to stop. Instead, I said firmly, “You’ve never seen a newborn addicted to cocaine. I am not naive.”

I’m not.

I think about them all. Pictures come, nonsequential pictures that tell no stories and give no names. My mother, sleeping in a rocker with our first foster baby. My father, checking the sprinklers in the yard with a toddler clutching his hand. A pair of sad, too-old eyes. A tiny hand curled around my finger.

Sounds come. Cries mainly, terrified, or resigned, or painful, or hungry, or angry. Laughs, sometimes. The sighs of a sleeping newborn. Computerized toddler toys.

Smells come. Formula. Lysol. Clean hair. Spit-up. Diapers. Lotion. Detergent. Dryer sheets. Lemony air freshener.

And names come. Nique. Typani. Zanna. Devonte. Isaiah. Kevin. Leticia. Rosa. Angel. Sometimes the name brings a picture, usually not. I am not naive.

I stopped being naive the day after I turned 9 years old, the day our first baby arrived. I will never be naive again.

See what one question will do?

KRAUS was the grand-prize winner in the 2005 Kaplan/NEWSWEEK “My Turn” Essay Competition. This essay was published in NEWSWEEK’s Aug 29–Sept. 5, 2005 issue.

BIG-PICTURE LINK

- Use details to connect your experience to a larger social context or theme.
- Discuss this “big-picture” issue in ways that appeal to a broad audience.

CONCLUSION WITH A KICKER

- Leave your reader with a clear understanding of your purpose and meaning.
- One method of concluding is to restate your theme and support that statement with a personal example that illustrates your point.

KAPLAN/NEWSWEEK
“MY TURN”
ESSAY COMPETITION
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