

Personal Essay: Courage

Teacher Guide

The Personal Essay writing task invites students to write about a time in their lives when they acted courageously. The resource includes activities for topic brainstorming and analyzing mentor texts, and a range of guided revision activities.

As described by Dr. Jessica Singer Early in her book, *Next Generation Genres: Teaching Writing for Civic and Academic Engagement*, the turning point is, “a narrative essay describing a turning point in an individual’s life when they learned something important about who they want to be, what they value, or how they want to participate or act in the world” (1).

Lesson Sequence Overview

Lesson One	Lesson Two	Lesson Three	Lesson Four
<p>Choose a Topic</p> <p><u>Goal:</u> Students will choose a topic.</p> <p><u>Materials:</u> Writer’s Notebooks</p>	<p>First Draft</p> <p><u>Goal:</u> Students will try out writing multiple possible leads and write a first draft.</p> <p><u>Materials:</u> Writer’s Notebooks</p>	<p>Revision Approaches</p> <p><u>Goal:</u> Students will try out several writing strategies that they can use when they revise their next draft.</p> <p><u>Materials:</u> Writer’s Notebooks</p>	<p>Next Draft</p> <p><u>Goal:</u> Students will write a revised draft.</p> <p><u>Materials:</u> Writer’s Notebooks, one-to-one devices to type drafts</p>

Lesson One: Choose a Topic

Students are introduced to the assignment and begin brainstorming topic ideas with a quicklist activity.

Lesson Focus: Support pre-writing and create a process writing environment

Goal: Students will choose a topic and write multiple possible leads.

Materials:

- Writer's Notebooks or Google Docs

Activities:

- Have students open their writer's notebook to a blank page and number from 1-11. Share each prompt below (also on slide 4), and have students jot down their responses.

1-2: Events from your life when you faced a physical challenge

3-4: Times when you faced an emotional challenge

5-6: Experiences when you felt afraid

7-8: Times when you wanted to stand up to someone

9-10: Times when you wanted to stand up for someone

11: One other life event, moment, or experience you are thinking about right now

Note that the quicklist strategy is designed to generate a bunch of possible topics. It is meant to be done quickly and it might be helpful to let students know there is no wrong answer; the idea is to get down as many ideas as possible. If they can't think of an item, it is fine to just skip it and move on. They can always come back later to add additional items.

- Provide students with some quick, low-stakes opportunities to get feedback from peers on their potential topics. For this peer feedback process, students will trade their quicklists to get peer feedback on topics, review their own quicklist to do the same, and choose three items to write a one sentence summary about. It's likely that students will need a model of turning a list item into a summary sentence, so it would be helpful for

you to model this first with a couple of items from your own list. You can give students these prompts:

- a. Take a minute to finalize your list.
- b. Trade your list with a partner.
- c. Read your partner’s list, and put a * next to the items that sound the most interesting to you. Hand list back to the author.
- d. Read through your own list, and consider your partner’s feedback. Put a * next to any additional items you might want to use as the topic of your essay.
- e. Finally, get up and meet with a different partner.
- f. Take a few minutes to conference about your ideas. What did your peer pick? What are you thinking about?
- g. Try to narrow to a topic.
- h. Now, choose three items and write a one-sentence summary about each one.

Here are a few examples of quicklist items turned into summary statements:

Item #	Item	Example Summary Sentence
#1	Moving	I thought moving would be the worst thing ever, but it turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me.
#3	Park chase	One time my brother, sister, and I were chased through the park by a guy with a 2 X 4.
#5	Stranded in Lincoln, Nebraska	When I was 8 my family got stranded for a week in Lincoln, Nebraska.

- Once they have written their summary statements, give them time to get another round of feedback from a different peer. Based on the whole process, and all the feedback they received, prompt students to choose the topic they think they will write their turning point essay about.
- Have students complete their exit tickets and collect them to review before the next class period so you can support any students who haven’t yet chosen a topic to write about.

Lesson Two: Write a First Draft

Writing multiple leads from questions supports students in understanding that, as a writer, they get to try multiple approaches and make choices about what to use in their writing.

Lesson Focus: Teach writing strategies and create a process writing environment

Goal: Students will try out writing multiple possible leads.

Materials:

- Writer's Notebooks or Google Docs

Activities:

1. Have students take out their quicklist and summary statements from the day before. Let them know that today they will go through a process for writing some possible leads, or opening sentences, and they will get started with the first draft of their essay
2. Take students through a process for generating questions they can turn into leads. Once again, model this process yourself with your own writing before giving students time to complete the process themselves. For this process, they will start from a new page in their notebook and write one sentence that summarizes the topic they have chosen. Then, they will pass their paper to peers in several different ways to generate some questions they will use to write 3 possible leads.

Here is a possible sequence you can use with students here:

- Choose the topic you would like to write your turning point essay about.
- Write the sentence that summarizes the essay on the first line. Pass the paper to the left. Write three questions you have about the story statement in front of you. Try to write open-ended questions. Repeat.
- Take the paper you have in front of you, go meet with someone else in the room, trade papers, add three more questions.
- Return to the author—consider the list of questions and add any others that are worth exploring in your essay

*adapted from *After THE END: Teaching the Art of Creative Revision*
by Barry Lane

3. Next, students will try out writing multiple leads for their essay. This might be a good time to remind students about the importance of writing from abundance and making choices as a writer. Use slide 9 to walk students through the process of writing 3 different leads. They will choose three sentences from the list of questions their peers wrote and write three possible leads, each several sentences long. Set a timer and give students 5-7 minutes per lead. As with the other steps, model this first with your own topic.
 - Read your list of questions.
 - Choose the three questions that have the most compelling answer.
 - Begin telling the story by thoroughly answering each of those questions. Write three leads (one per question) that are several sentences long.
 - Trade your leads with a partner. Partner, read the leads and mark the one you like best.
 - Find a different partner and trade leads. Repeat the process.

Before they start drafting, remind students of the writing task:

Write an essay about a time you acted courageously.

- Give students time to complete a first draft by choosing one of the leads they wrote, and picking up from there to write a complete draft. It's up to you to decide the length of time you will give students to draft, based on your specific teaching context. Depending on the needs of your students, and the length of your class periods, you may need to give students time to finish their drafts in the next class period.

Lesson Three: Thoughtshots and Snapshots

The think aloud is a guided process for showing students some of the key elements of a narrative.

Lesson Focus: Try writing with snapshots and thoughtshots.

Goal: Students will practice revision to include details.

Materials: writers notebook

Activities:

1. Introduce students to the definitions of “snapshots” and thoughtshots, as described by Barry Lane in *After “The End”: Teaching and Learning Creative Revision*.
 - a. **Revision Approach #1: Snapshot**

As a writer, you have a magic camera that you can point at the world and create snapshots that contain smells and sounds as well as colors and light. A snapshot is when you choose a moment in time, zoom in, and describe all of the aspects of that moment using as much detail as possible.
 - b. **Revision Approach #2: Thoughtshot**

Give insight into what you, or other characters in your story are thinking. It is stepping back from description of what something looks like to reflection on what is going on. You may consider, what was I thinking then? What do I think now?
2. Model your own process for analyzing the first several paragraphs of a text (it can be one you created, a student example, or a personal essay from anywhere else. As you model, record your "think aloud" on the text and encourage students to follow along and make notes so they can use them as they annotate with a partner, and then on their own.

For this think aloud, model a close-reading using 2 colors of highlighters:

- Color #1: Snapshots
- Color #2: Thoughtshots

3. After modeling a couple paragraphs, invite students to jump in and share their responses for the next several paragraphs. Make notes on the projected copy as they are sharing. Work together to highlight the snapshots and thoughtshots in the paragraphs.
4. When they seem ready, have students work with a partner to highlight the rest of the essay.
5. To synthesize what students noticed in the mentor text, create an anchor chart (digital or paper) to gather students' responses to the question: What makes a good personal essay?
6. Guide students through the steps in trying to revise their essays for snapshots and thoughtshots. Remind students of the definitions of Snapshot and Thoughtshot from the previous lesson. Have them work with a partner to identify places in their where they might try snapshots and thoughtshots. Give them time to write a few of each.

- a. Trade papers with a partner

Partner

1. Read through the entire draft.
2. identify 3 places in their essay where they could add a snapshot: label them with an *
3. identify 5 places in the essay where they could add a thoughtshot and label them with a #

Author

1. Consider the suggestions from your partner and decide where you would like to try adding snapshots and thoughtshots.
2. In the next available writing space, write at least 2 snapshots and 3 thoughtshots that can be added to your writing later on.

7. Provide students with the definition and example of Exploding a Moment on slides 20-22. Have them work with a different partner to identify potential places to “explode a moment.” Give them time to write an exploded moment.

Revision Approach #3: Exploding a Moment

This revision strategy will help you focus in on and emphasize the climax of your story. Exploding a moment involves identifying THE moment in your story and then slowing down time—writing about that moment in slow motion in order to emphasize all aspects of the moment. So, you will pick a moment in the story that may have only lasted a few seconds but you will describe it in “slow motion”.

8. Give students time to complete the exit ticket. Collect and review the exit tickets for evidence that students are ready to revise.

Lesson Four: Write a Next Draft

Students draw from the mentor text, anchor chart, and revision approaches to write a next draft of their essay.

Lesson Focus: Create a process writing environment

Goal: Students will write a revised draft that integrates their learning and writing from the previous lesson.

Materials:

- Writer's Notebooks or Google Docs

Activities:

1. Let students know that today they will have the opportunity to write a next draft based on the thinking and writing they have done in the last two lessons.
2. Have them take out their first draft and their revision approaches.
3. Give them time to write a next draft. Depending on the needs of your students, and your specific teaching context, you might provide them with specific guidelines for how many revision approaches they should include in their next draft.