



Weaving Personal Experience into Academic Writings

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11 WEAVING PERSONAL EXPERIENCE INTO ACADEMIC WRITING

Marjorie Stewart

OVERVIEW

“Warp and Weft” uses the metaphor of weaving to demonstrate one way of using personal and narrative writing within academic essays. Rather than debate whether narrative is appropriate for academic writing, it addresses the question of when is it appropriate and how it can be done effectively, focusing on helping writers decide when the use of personal experience is appropriate for their purpose, how to make personal experience and narrative pull its weight in the essay, and how the ability to incorporate personal experience can translate into the ability to incorporate research.

The essay is structured as an example of the use of personal experience as well as a how-to guide. “Warp and Weft” contains a discussion of three students who incorporated narrative in their essays in three ways: as a structural frame, as an example when the research topic and personal experience overlap, and as a tool for discovery. Students will benefit from the peer-written examples as well as the use of the personal in the essay itself.

Like many students, I worked my way through college with a retail job.* I was luckier than many of my classmates: I found a job at a hip little boutique called Rebecca: A Gallery of Wearable Art in the trendy part of town. We carried many styles of hand-made clothing, jewelry, and accessories, but our most important merchandise was that made by Rebecca herself. Rebecca was a weaver who made hand-woven clothing and scarves. Her loom took up half of the back room and she wove while I waited on customers. When one fabric came off the loom, Anne, the

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seamstress, would begin to cut and sew while Rebecca set up the loom for the next design. She created her patterns then transferred them into a computer program that told her how to thread the yarn onto the loom to produce the pattern. She threaded the warp, the yarn that runs lengthwise, onto the loom. The weft (formerly known as woof) was placed on bobbins that fed the shuttle. The act of weaving was moving the shuttle with the weft through the warp to create the weave.

So what, you might well ask. So what does this have to do with writing?

Many of you have been taught not to use the word “I” in your academic writing; not to include anything that does not directly relate to that mysterious thing called a “thesis statement;” and not to include anything personal in your writing. The opening of this essay has broken all of those so-called rules – it contains a personal story, told in the first person, that at first glance seems unrelated to the topic of writing. However, in this essay, I – yes, “I” – am here to help you step away from those rules and to use personal stories effectively in your academic writing.

The first consideration is whether using personal narrative is appropriate for your project. My story of working in Rebecca’s shop is useful here – it is intended to attract the attention of the readers and to establish and explain the extended metaphor of weaving. However, if I were writing an essay for my art history class about the evolution of weaving techniques and equipment, my story would seem out of place, as I only have experience with one step in that evolution, and that experience is of an observer rather than a participant.

Your composition professor will likely talk to you about the rhetorical situation of any piece of writing. Stated simply (perhaps too simply), the rhetorical situation – the writer, the audience, and the purpose of the writing – affects the way the message is presented. In my hypothetical art history essay, the narrative would confuse the reader as to the purpose of the project and distract from the actual message of the paper. Often in writing classes it seems that your audience is specifically your professor and secondarily, perhaps, your classmates. Given the essays you will read about in this chapter, imagine the larger audiences that the student writers might have been addressing. Consider carefully whether personal narrative belongs in papers you are writing for history, biology, or business classes.

In addition to your specific rhetorical situation, of course, you should always comply with your professors’ guidelines for each assignment. “No first-person narratives” is a clear statement that personal stories are not appropriate in that classroom.

However, once you have established that your narrative is appropriate for your purpose and audience, what next? It is my purpose to help you incorporate narrative effectively, and to do that, I will use examples from three of my students in a first-year course, a course designed to help writers bridge the gap between high school and college writing. I am also using the example of this essay itself. Consider my story about Rebecca. I am using her weaving, her design of warp and weft, as a metaphor for the kind of writing this essay is going to talk about. I will also use the story as a frame – talking about weaving in the introduction, the conclusion, and perhaps in the transitions.

PERSONAL STORY AS FRAME

Using a personal story as a frame for your essay can be an effective way to draw your reader into your ideas and then to help them reinterpret those ideas in the end. Perhaps, like me, you're working in a retail job. Perhaps it's in a big box store instead of my artsy boutique, and you're wondering if you'd be happier somewhere else, or you're thinking, please, hand-woven clothing? You sell electronics, important, functional electronics.

Just as I began with the story of my time at Rebecca, Lynn Z. Bloom began a conference presentation with a story from her classroom, and then commented, "Such stories, even brief ones, make us want to hear more, and to tell our own right back. They get us where they live. All writing is personal, whether it sounds that way or not, if the writer has a stake in the work" (1). One of my goals in telling the story of Rebecca is to make you want to hear more, and to make you want to tell your own. The human mind is a giant filing cabinet of stories, and when you hear one, you go to the appropriate file drawer – in this case R for Retail Employment – and pull out your own.

There are many stories in that drawer, however, and it's important that you choose the right ones. Because my metaphor of writing as weaving is central to my topic, I haven't included lots of other great stories that came out of my time at Rebecca. I didn't talk about the great gyros we used to get from Mike and Tony's across the street, or about how the changing nature of the neighborhood made Rebecca worry whether she had chosen the right location for the store, or about the great artists who came in for trunk shows of their work. I focused on the loom, the weaving. And as the framework for this essay, I consider the story of the loom to be the warp, the yarn threaded on the loom in advance. I will thread my shuttle with the examples of my students' writing and weave them through.

The first example, Callie Harding's "The Life of a Choir Director's Child," does the opposite. Her topic – the need for better education about religion in America – is the warp, and her childhood stories are woven through to show the reader how this topic became so important to her. Her stories give the readers context and help them connect with her.

PERSONAL STORY AS CONTEXT

Telling a personal story can help your reader understand why you are writing about the topic you have chosen, and why you have come to care so deeply about it. Callie's childhood experience of travelling from church to church where her parents worked as choir directors gave her an understanding of many religions, and she uses those stories to show how that has helped her be a more compassionate, thoughtful, and sensitive person.

Her paper starts this way:

When I was a child, I didn't spend much time on playgrounds or with the backyard swing set. I didn't look forward to dance class or soccer practice every week. Instead, most of my time was spent in the pews of a church with a My Little Pony figure that was weaving its way through a jungle of hymnals and pew Bibles. My playground was a cathedral with the somewhat harmonious voices from the volunteer choir echoing off the stone floor over the magnificent pipe organ. At the front of the choir was either my mother or father . . . Yes, I was the child of choir directors. (Harding 1)

Callie goes on to explain that her family moved from a non-denominational Christian church to a Jewish synagogue; the First Church of Christ, Scientist; a Catholic Church, and finally, a small Lutheran church. "What religion are we?" she asks. This is how she tries to answer her question:

My mother spent a while with the Hindu faith before marrying my father and converting to Mormonism. We are also deeply into our Native American background and practice their cultural and religious ceremonies. Add the fact that we had many friends from many religions and cultures and you can tell that I had one of the most openly religious households on the block. (Harding 1-2)

Callie then moves very nicely into her research on how to encourage religious tolerance through education. She contrasts her experience in a fundamentalist Christian high school to a school district in Modesto, California where all ninth graders take a semester-long world religion course.

She writes about the importance of helping all children understand and celebrate diversity of religion and points to her own experiences as an example of the positive effect this has on them. As part of her research, Callie interviewed her mother about her diverse upbringing. While her mother called it a “happy accident,” she also explained to Callie how she stood up to her very Mormon father to make sure Callie and her sister were free to find their own beliefs.

As I was studying Callie’s essay, I took three highlighters and circled each paragraph: pink for Callie’s personal story; yellow for Callie’s presentation and discussion of her research, and green for the information from her interview with her mother. This is the result:

- Paragraphs 1-3 – Callie’s personal story
- Paragraphs 4-6 – discussion of research
- Paragraph 7 – Callie’s story
- Paragraphs 8-9 – discussion of research
- Paragraph 10 – Callie’s interview with her mother
- Paragraph 11 – Callie’s story
- Paragraph 12 – Callie’s interview with her mother
- Paragraphs 13-14 – Callie’s personal story

It wasn’t until I did that exercise with the markers that I realized how smoothly Callie had incorporated the three elements of her writing. As I’ve done in this essay, Callie framed her story with the personal. She also used it within the essay to focus and reflect on her research findings. Marking your essay the same way can help you see if you have the right balance between the personal and the more traditionally academic portions of your paper.

While Callie used her personal stories to provide context to the issue of religion in education, she also used her own background to show herself as an example of someone for whom a broad religious education proved beneficial. In “A Life Lost,” student Melynda Goodfellow used her personal story as an example.

PERSONAL STORY AS EXAMPLE

Melynda chose to write about teen suicide, certainly an important topic, but one that far too often leads to a patchwork of statistics and distant narratives, more a report than an essay with heart. Sadly, Melynda had

reason to care deeply about her topic: her cousin Jared killed himself with an overdose of prescription pain medication.

Melynda started her essay with a simple story of a typical Friday night, getting ready to go the high school football game, where her brother would be playing in the band. This night, however, was special, because her cousin had just moved into town and her boyfriend would be meeting him for the first time. Choosing to open with a typical activity – going to the football game – but giving it special meaning was particularly effective for Melynda. I encourage writers to ask themselves the first Passover question: Why is this night different from all other nights? This is the question asked by the youngest child at the beginning of the Seder to start telling the story of the Passover. It also serves the beginning writer well: If this night, this football game, isn't special in any way, then it isn't the story to use in your essay. Melynda's football game is different from all others because her cousin will be there to meet her boyfriend.

Although the atmosphere is festive, Melynda shows us with foreshadowing that this is not a typical Friday night lights story. She writes that Jared moved because “he wanted to get away from the lifestyle that he was living back home. He wanted a kind of fresh start.” She connects herself to the characters of her brother and her cousin through the band: she had been in band, her brother is performing with the band at the football game, and her cousin is excited about returning to school and joining the band himself. Throughout the narrative part of her essay, Melynda shows Jared as sad and desperate, yet looking forward to his fresh start.

Melynda tells the story in a straightforward, chronological way from the evening of the football game through her cousin's death and funeral. Her use of personal experience is different from mine and Callie's because the majority of her paper is that narrative. The structure of her paper is very different: where Callie went back and forth between the story and the research, Melynda began with the story and introduced the research at the end. The first three pages of Melynda's six-page essay are the story of her friendship with Jared that fall, and how she becomes his confidant. Pages four and five are the story of how she heard of his death. It is only at the end of her essay that she introduces the statistics that show that suicide is “the third leading cause of death in people ages 15 to 24” (Goodfellow 6). Her conclusion, shortly after that statistic, reads:

I never in a million years would have thought something like this would happen in my family. I knew that mental health problems run in the family, but I believed everyone knew where to get help. We knew that suicide wasn't an option and that we had each other

if nothing else. As tragic as it may sound, this event brought our whole family back together. Any quarrels or grudges anyone had seemed to dissipate that day. Ironically, one of the things that Jared wanted the most was for the family to just forget their differences and get along. (Goodfellow 9)

This ending refocuses Melynda's readers on the personal meaning of the impersonal statistic.

In his book *Living the Narrative Life: Stories as a Tool for Meaning Making*, Gian Pagnucci writes, "I think, actually, that stories can help us get at the truth even if there isn't a firm truth to be had." (51) And in *Writing to Change the World*, Mary Phipper says:

Research shows that storytelling not only engages all of the senses, it triggers activity on both the left and the right sides of the brain . . . People attend, remember, and are transformed by stories which are meaning-filled units of ideas, the verbal equivalent of mother's milk. (11)

Melynda works at getting at the true story of her cousin's death, making meaning of it, even though there is no firm truth or solid meaning to be had there. The truth she arrives at, however, is more powerful than the "just the facts" approach because the story lingers with her readers in a way statistics can't.

Another thing Melynda does that makes her essay different from mine, and Callie's, is her inclusion of dialogue. I think she makes especially good use of it in her essay, something that is often difficult for writers at all levels. Here she shows us how she learned of Jared's death:

"What is it?" I said when I picked the phone up.

"It's about time you answered your phone! I've been calling you for over an hour," my mom said.

"Well?"

"It's Jared. He's in the hospital. He overdosed."

"Oh, my God . . . Is he okay? I'll be right there. I'm leaving work now."

"No. Don't come here. There's nothing you can do. He's dead."
(Goodfellow 4)

Recreating dialogue can be challenging – a year after her cousin's death, can Melynda be certain that these were the exact words that she and her mother spoke? Probably not, but she can show her readers the tension in

the moment – her mother’s anger that she didn’t pick up, her desire to be with Jared, and her mother’s postponing of the awful news. Dialogue also can be used to pick up the pace of the story – the light look of it on the page helps readers’ eyes move over it quickly, getting a lot of information from a few carefully-chosen words.

There are significant structural differences between Melynda’s essay and Callie’s. Callie’s is split almost evenly between personal experience and research; Melynda’s is about 85% personal story. The third student, Ethelin Ekwa, uses personal story in an even larger portion of her essay, which is entitled “Ethelin Ekwa: An Autobiography.” Although the title might lead you to believe that the essay is only, or just, or simply, personal narrative, Ethelin uses the story of her life to explore her ethnic heritage, her life as a single mother, and her determination to make the most of her artistic and musical talents. She tells the story of her life as a way of understanding her place in the world at the time of the writing.

PERSONAL STORY AS DISCOVERY

Ethelin’s essay can be seen as an example of Donald M. Murray’s beliefs about writing: “We write to think – to be surprised by what appears on the page; to explore our world with language; to discover meaning that teaches us and may be worth sharing with others we write to know what we want to say.” (3). Although my students always write multiple drafts of all of their essays, Ethelin wrote more than usual – at least four significant revisions before the final draft that she submitted in her portfolio. She was a frequent visitor at our writers’ center as she worked through the paper. Somewhere in an intermediate draft, she found her frame: a quotation from Ani Difranco’s song “Out of Habit:” “Art is why I get up in the morning.” That idea led her Ethelin to her conclusion: “I cannot imagine a day without the ability to create in unconventional ways” (Ekwa 9). In the eight and a half pages in between, she tells the story of her life.

In Callie and Melynda’s essays, there is a very clear separation between personal experience, research material, and the writers’ commentary on those elements. The weaving, to continue the metaphor, is done in larger blocks of color. Ethelin’s essay has a more subtle pattern. Every paragraph contains some detail of her life – where she was born, who her parents were, where she lived – but also has a reference to her life-long desire to be an artist. She talks about her work as a writer and poet; as a singer and musician; and as a photographer and visual artist.

Ethelin's background is intriguing – her parents moved from Cameroon, West Africa to France and then to Texas, where she was born, the youngest of five children. She has lived in Europe and Africa, and she went to school in France and Cameroon. Here is how she introduces herself in the second paragraph:

My birth name is Ethelin Ekwa. I am also known as Obsolete by my artist friends and as Krysty by my close personal friends. I am an artist, a mother, a photographer and a lover of all things. I am an American-born citizen with Cameroonian and French origins. I am 30 years old and I currently reside in North Braddock. (Ekwa 1)

Ethelin's identity is tied to her arts from the very beginning, and every story from her life is wrapped around those arts. When, at 22, she becomes a single mother, her priorities change, but she never gives up: "When I got pregnant, I put singing, painting, and drawing on hold . . . I had more pressing matters to take care of and there just was not time for art" (Ekwa 3). Soon, though, she tells us that she made a new friend who introduced her to digital photography, and by the time her daughter was two years old, she had her own photography business up and running.

While Melynda chose one special night to tell about at the start of her essay, Ethelin chose many events from her life, all of them important, life-changing events. Reading Ethelin's essay, I can almost see Rebecca's shuttle flying back and forth across the loom, the turn at each side another event that pulls Ethelin back into the world of art. When the weaver turns the shuttle at the edge of the warp, the weft creates a finished edge that prevents the fabric from fraying or unraveling called a selvage. The turns in Ethelin's story create a sense that her life, which is sometimes unplanned and chaotic, still has something that keeps it from unraveling, and that something is her artistic nature.

TYING UP LOOSE ENDS

The examples from my students' essays can help you understand how to use personal experience in your academic writing. But how do you know when to use it? When is it acceptable and appropriate? Gian Pagnucci asserts, "Narrative ideology is built on a trust in confusion, a letting go of certainty and clarity that can ultimately lead to understanding" (53); that stories have a "piercing clarity" (17), and that "the drive to narrate experience is, if not instinctive, then at the very least quintessentially human"

(41). He also warns that the academic world is not always welcoming of personal experience. I know many of my colleagues are not willing to trust in confusion – their entire careers, and even their lives, have been built on the quest for knowledge and certainty.

If your composition professor has asked you to read this chapter, it's a pretty safe bet that you may use personal experiences in your writing for that class. Even in that setting, however, there are times when it is more effective than others. Using the examples of the essays I've quoted from and the guidelines given in the beginning of this chapter, here are some tips on when to use your personal experience in your essays:

- When, like Callie and Melynda, your experiences have inspired a passionate opinion on your topic
- When, like Ethelin, your personal experiences constantly point back to your central idea
- When, like me, your personal experiences provide a strong and extended metaphor for your subject
- When, like all of the writers, your personal experience provides a structure or framework for your essay

The expression “tying up the loose ends” comes from weaving and other fabric arts. When the yarn in the shuttle is changed, the new yarn is tied to the old at the selvage. Those threads are later woven into the fabric so that they don't show, and so that the connection is tight. When your rough draft is done, it's time to take the fabric off the loom and make sure your weave is tight. At that point, ask yourself these questions to be sure you are using your experience appropriately and effectively in your essay:

- What percentage of your essay is personal experience, and how does that match up with the nature of the assignment? Callie's essay was written in response to an assignment that required more research than the one Ethelin was responding to, so it included less personal writing.
- Have you included only the personal stories that directly relate to your topic, your attitude towards your topic, or your controlling idea?
- Are your selvages tight? Do the moves you make between personal story and research and analysis make sense, or is the fabric of your essay likely to unravel?

- Is the resulting pattern appropriate to your project? Are you working in large blocks of color, like Callie and Melynda, or the subtler tweed of Ethelin's essay?

I started this essay in Rebecca's shop and tried to weave the metaphor inspired there through this essay. In the process, I realized another advantage to using personal stories in academic writing: I hadn't thought about Rebecca and Anne, about Mike and Tony's gyros, about the bright creative atmosphere in the gallery and in the neighborhood for a long time. Accessing those stories from the filing cabinet in my brain was inspirational. My stories from Rebecca are mostly fun or funny. Your stories, like mine and the writers quoted here, are a mix of light and dark, funny and serious. I encourage you to open the file cabinet and find the stories that will make your readers remember similar times.

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TEACHER RESOURCES FOR WEAVING PERSONAL EXPERIENCE INTO ACADEMIC WRITING BY MARJORIE STEWART

OVERVIEW AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

This essay is useful for faculty teaching the research-based essays that are frequently the concentration in a second semester composition course in a two-term first year writing sequence. Instructors who encourage a personal connection to the research topic will find this essay helpful in guiding students as to when and how they might use their personal narratives in their academic research essays.

The questions below are designed to stimulate discussion and to move students from thinking academically about this genre to delving into their own lives for experiences they are inspired to research and learn more.

Often the attitude towards personal narrative, held by teachers and students alike, is that it is a beginning genre and an ice breaker that is designed as a stepping stone to real or more important ways of writing. This essay instead subscribes to the theory that personal narrative is, as Gian Pagnucci says, “if not instinctive, then at the very least quintessentially human” (41). My experience working with students on this kind of essay is that they are eager to both tell their own stories and to research the issues that inform those stories.

QUESTIONS

1. Marjorie Stewart claims that our minds are filing cabinets of stories. Do her stories, or the stories of her students, remind you of stories of your own? How does this chain of stories help us make sense of our experiences?
2. Has there ever been a time when you wanted to include personal experience in a writing project but were discouraged or forbidden to by an instructor? Why did you feel the story was important? What might have motivated the instructor?
3. Are their personal stories you are eager to include in an essay? What about stories that you would be uneasy revealing? How do you, and how do other writers, decide which stories they wish to share?
4. Work with an essay, either assigned in class or one you are familiar with in which the author uses personal experience. Compare it to an article on the same topic with no personal writing. Which do

your respond to more, and why? Does the personal writing help you understand the writer, or does it get in the way of your intellectual understanding of the topic?

ESSAY RESOURCES

If you have a favorite example of a well-mixed narrative research essay, by all means, use it. If you are using a book with good examples, you might assign one as companion reading to “Warp and Weft.” I also recommend many essays published as creative nonfiction, especially those from The Creative Nonfiction Foundation, at creativenonfiction.org. One of my favorites is “Rachel at Work: Enclosed, A Mother’s Report” by Jane Bernstein, published in *Creative Nonfiction* and anthologized in their collection *True Stories, Well Told*.