

# Perspective Is Everything

E.B. WHITE, THE MASTER OF THE PERSONAL ESSAY, SHOWS YOU HOW TO WRITE ENGAGINGLY IN THE FIRST PERSON

## Who was E.B. White?

E.B. White claimed to have started writing as soon as he could spell, and that's true: He wrote for about 80 years straight. By the end of his career, he had authored 20 books of prose and poetry in addition to hundreds of essays, sketches, and editorials.

The author was born Elwyn Brooks White in 1899 in Mount Vernon, New York. In 1921, he graduated from Cornell University and promptly went to work as a newspaper reporter. This job required White to move around for a few years, but eventually he ended up in New York, where he became one of the earliest staff writers for *The New Yorker*, the city's great literary magazine.

In his later years, White moved to a farm in Maine, where he spent many hours observing the land and animals. Two of his best-known children's books, *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*, are based on his experiences on the farm, and his best personal essays blend descriptions of the natural world with observations of human habit. The following excerpt comes

from one of White's most famous essays, "Once More to the Lake," in which he describes a visit with his own young son to the camp where he spent childhood summers. The essay demonstrates the power of White's simple writing style and his clear descriptions of the natural world.

## How to Write From Models:

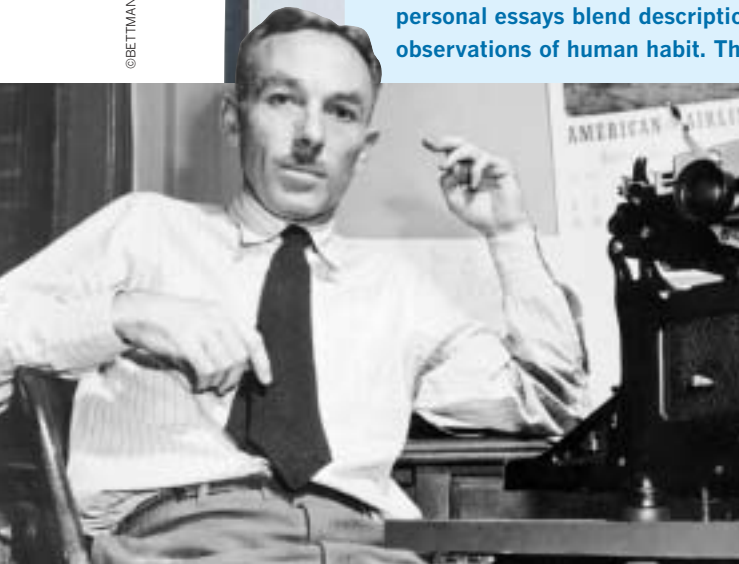
>>READ THE EXCERPT ONCE WITHOUT THE NOTES.

>>READ IT AGAIN, THIS TIME WITH THE NOTES.

>>THINK ABOUT GOING BACK TO A PLACE FROM YOUR CHILDHOOD.

>>USE THE PROMPT AT THE END TO WRITE YOUR OWN PERSONAL ESSAY.

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1. White sets the scene with a clear, simple statement.

(from "Once More to the Lake")

2. This sentence appeals to the senses of sight and touch. It brings an experience to life for the reader.

3. Here, the author shares his thoughts and feelings so that we know what this moment means to him.

We went fishing the first morning. I felt the same damp moss covering the worms in the bait can, and saw the dragonfly alight on the tip of my rod as it hovered a few inches from the surface of the water. It was the arrival of this fly that convinced me beyond any doubt that everything was as it always had been, that the years were a mirage and that there had been no years. The small waves were the same, chucking the rowboat under the chin as we fished at anchor, and the boat was the same boat, the same color green and the ribs broken in the same places, and under the floorboards the same fresh-water leavings and debris—the dead helgramite, the wisps of moss, the rusty discarded fishhook, and dried blood from yesterday's catch. We stared silently at the tips of our rods, at the dragonflies that came and went. I lowered the tip of mine into the water, tentatively, pensively dislodging the fly, which darted two feet away, poised, darted two feet back, and came to rest again a little farther up the rod. There had been no years between the ducking of this dragonfly and the other one—the one that was part of memory.

4. White describes with great precision the physical details of fishing on the lake. By repeating the phrase "the same," he conveys his sense of the present superimposed on the past.

5. In this passage, the fly is the key point of reference that defines the action.

continued →

"ONCE MORE TO THE LAKE" FROM ONE MAN'S MEAT BY E.B. WHITE. COPYRIGHT 1941 BY E.B. WHITE. PUBLISHED BY TILBURY HOUSE PUBLISHERS, GARDINER, MAINE.

I looked at the boy, who was silently watching his fly, and it was my hands that held his rod, my eyes watching. I felt dizzy and didn't know which rod I was at the end of.

6. The paragraph culminates in the author's confusion of himself with his son, which he describes as an out-of-body experience: "it was my hands that held his rod, my eyes watching." These last two sentences make the reader feel "dizzy" too.

## FIRST-PERSON PAST

USE THESE PROMPTS TO WRITE A VIVID PERSONAL ESSAY THAT REFLECTS BACK

**1** Think of a time when you revisited a place familiar from childhood. How was it different from what you remembered? What did you feel being there?

**2** **Reread Note #1.** Be sure to set the scene clearly so that your reader can picture it in her mind.

**3** **Review Notes #2 and #4.** Use sensory details to bring the scene to life. Don't rely solely on images—pay attention to all five senses.

**4** **Note #3.** Don't be afraid to tell your reader what you really think or feel. Be sure to show your reader which is more powerful—

memory, or present experience—and bring your passage to a clear close.

**5** Is there one key element of the place or of your experience that you'd like to focus on? If so, you might want to build a central scene around it or keep coming back to it throughout the essay.

**6** Your reader should finish reading your essay feeling like she knows what it was about. Bring your essay to a close with a final moment of reflection, or with an image that captures the experience.

**>>Your Turn!** We all have memories so strong that they start rushing back to us every time something reminds us of them, flooding us with old emotions in the present moment. Choose one of your strongest memories as the subject of your piece.