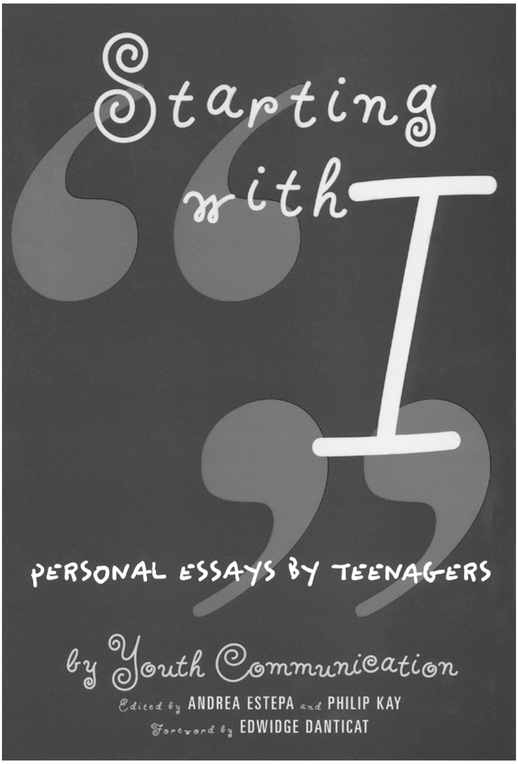
A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO

Youth Communication's

Starting with I

PERSONAL ESSAYS BY TEENAGERS

by Andrea Estepa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by Youth Communication
Edited by ANDREA ESTEPA and PHILIP KAY
Foreword by EDWIDGE DANTICAT

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INTRODUCTION

Starting with "I" is a collection of essays by young people, aged 15 to 21. It contains memoirs, portraits of people and places, opinion pieces, and social commentaries. Each story grew out of the author's reflections on a personal experience.

One way to engage students in the writing process is to encourage them to use writing to better understand and communicate their own experiences, observations, interests, and opinions. If students are allowed to choose essay topics directly related to their personal concerns, they are more likely to write with enthusiasm and to produce writing that is distinctive and interesting to read.

This anthology will provide your students with a variety of models by writers their own age. It will expose them to different modes of expression and broaden their understanding of what an essay can be about. It will demonstrate the value of writing in different styles, depending on their goals and intended audience. It will also show them how writing can help them get to know themselves better.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

WHAT IS A PERSONAL ESSAY?

In his introduction to the anthology, *The Art of the Personal Essay,* Phillip Lopate writes that the personal essay "depends less on airtight reasoning than on style and personality" and that it "tends to put the writer's 'I' or idiosyncratic angle more at center stage" than any other genre of writing. The personal essay also has a confessional quality, a "drive toward candor and self-disclosure," as Lopate puts it.

Questions for Discussion. (It's often a good idea to have students free-write their responses to the questions before the discussion begins.)

- What do you think of when you hear the word "personal"? What does it mean to you?
- What are some subjects that you consider "personal"? [Make a list of your students' responses on the board.] Do the different answers have anything in common?
- Think of a time when someone told you something you considered "personal." What was it? Did the information s/he shared or the fact that s/he chose to confide in you affect how you felt about her/him? How?

Some of your students may identify the personal with the secret or unspoken. People often say something is personal when they don't want to talk about it, when they find it embarrassing or shameful, or when they think others won't approve of it. Point out that some of the essays in this book are about subjects that some people don't feel comfortable talking about—even with family members or close friends (child abuse, homosexuality, losing your virginity, having a relative who has AIDS). Point out that people have written about most, if not all. of the subjects they said they considered personal. Then ask your students:

- Why would someone choose to write about something like that?
- What are some of the positive things that might come out of writing about something like that?
- What are some of the negative things that might come of it?
- Did you ever write about something that was hard for you to talk

about, e.g. in a journal or in a letter? Was writing about it easier than talking about it? Why? How did you feel after doing the writing?

Personal also means, simply, "of, relating to, or affecting a person." Point out to your students that to say something is personal does not necessarily mean that it's private or secret. Many of the essays in this book describe commonplace, everyday events. They are personal because they are about experiences, people, and places that have affected the authors' lives. Make sure your students are aware of some of the more routine subjects addressed by essays in this collection—getting a haircut, going shopping with one's mother, working at McDonald's, moving into a college dormitory. Ask them why they think someone would choose to write about this kind of topic. Are the reasons for writing about something "ordinary" different from those for writing about something "unspeakable"? What are the differences? Is there any overlap?

HANDLING SENSITIVE ISSUES

The purpose of the writing assignments in this guide is not to force students to reveal their deepest, darkest secrets but to help them improve their writing by focusing on the subjects they know best—their own lives. However, as the essays in *Starting with "I"* demonstrate, some young people will want to use their writing to grapple with sensitive, often painful, subject matter. Each teacher will have to make her/his own decision about the degree to which s/he wants to encourage (or discourage) her/his students to write about subjects like abuse, sexuality, suicide, etc. Reading and writing assignments can be tailored accordingly.

Whatever approach you take, you and your students should establish some ground rules before diving into this material. For example, how will you handle questions of confidentiality and privacy? You should ask your students if they have any questions/concerns about this (for example, there might be information that they're comfortable sharing with a teacher but not with their families or classmates). You should also make any concerns you have known to them. If there is any kind of information a student might share in a personal essay that you, as a teacher, would not feel comfortable keeping to yourself, you should make that clear up front. (Some examples might be: If a student writes about being abused, you are required to report it to the authorities; if a student expresses suicidal feelings, you would want to inform her/his parents and the school guidance counselor; etc.) If there are any subjects that you feel are inappropriate for a school-based assignment (e.g. sexual activity, drug use), you should make that clear. And if you plan to ask students to share their writing with each other—by reading it aloud, handing out copies, or doing peer editing in pairs or small groups—you should tell them that in advance. And, when discussing the essays in the book, you and your students should keep in mind that there are probably people in your class who share the experiences that the writers describe, even though you may not know about it—e.g., gay students, students who have been abused by their parents, students who have someone in their lives with AIDS, etc.

EDITING AND REVISING

Having your students revise their work is probably the best way to help them improve their writing. All of the pieces in *Starting with "I"* were revised a number of times in collaboration with an adult editor. The editor would read a writer's first draft, then respond with questions, comments, suggestions, and corrections. Editor and writer would then discuss the story, the editor's responses, and the writer's reactions to the editor's comments. The writer would then revise her/his story. The process would then be repeated until both writer and editor were satisfied with the piece and felt it was ready for publication. In a classroom situation, you will probably want to limit the number of revisions to one, two, or three.

When editing your students' work, there are a few different areas you will want to address with your comments.

1. Content. What is the story? Is there a clear focus and does the writer stick to it? Does the writer provide all the information you need to understand the experience or opinion being discussed?

2. Organization. Does the story have a beginning, middle, and end? Does the beginning give you a good idea of what the story is going to be about and make you want to read on? Does one section lead to the next in a logical way? Does the order in which events or pieces of information are introduced make sense? Does the pacing feel right or do some sections of the story feel too long while others feel undeveloped? Is there any repetition?

3. **Storytelling elements.** Does the writer include dialogue, description, examples, reflection? Is the tone appropriate for the subject matter?

4. **Grammar, spelling, punctuation.**

If you're going to have your students do more than one revision, you might want to address different areas each time. For example, it might be better to have your students focus their energies on story development first and have them correct grammar and spelling in a later draft.

You may also want to ask your students to edit each other's work. You can pair them off and have them exchange stories, divide them up into small groups that discuss each member's work, or run the whole class as a writing workshop, devoting one period a week to discussing students' pieces. Whatever format you choose, you'll want to develop some guidelines your students can use for evaluating each other's stories. Discuss the concept of "constructive criticism." Comments like "It was boring" or "I hated it," even if they express the reader's honest opinion, are not going to help the writer improve her/his story. Ask your students, instead, to think about what made them react the way they did and how the writer might address their concerns. For example, something might be boring to read because it's repetitious. If a reader points that out, the writer can respond by doing some cutting and reorganizing.

Also, since the stories will be about personal subjects, it's important for your students to understand that they are there to critique what the authors have written, not the authors themselves. The stories may be personal, but the critiques should not be personal attacks. For example, if they feel the author of "Climbing the Golden Arches" is trying to convince them that working at McDonald's is a great job, but the experiences she describes don't back that up, that's a legitimate criticism and they should discuss what she could have written that would be more convincing. A comment like "only dorks work at McDonald's," on the other hand, would be a personal attack, not constructive criticism. Likewise, a comment like "Gay people are freaks" would not be a legitimate criticism of a story like "I Hated Myself."

Tell your students that they are going to have to revise their stories and ask what kind of feedback they would find useful. Discuss their suggestions and then come up with a list of questions or points they should address when critiquing each other's work. Some possibilities are:

- Does the beginning make you want to read the story? If so, how does it do that? If not, can you think of a better way to begin it? Is there another part of the story that could be moved up to the beginning?
- Does the story stay focused on one topic? If not, what parts don't belong?
- Is each part of the story fully developed? Do any parts raise questions that aren't answered? Is it too short, too long, the right length?
- Does the story have enough specific examples, descriptions, details? Are there places where these things should be added?
- What was your favorite passage in the story? What made it stand out?
- What was your least favorite passage? How could it be improved?

Remember, you should always let your students know in advance whether or not they are going to be expected to share their work with the rest of the class, a peer editor, etc. If you plan to run the class as a workshop, with the whole class reading and critiquing assignments on a regular basis, you might give students the opportunity to pick which of their pieces they want to share or to let you know in advance if they want to write about something they don't feel comfortable sharing with the group.

A list of books that contain model personal essays and helpful tips on teaching writing is included at the end of this guide.

PUBLICATION

The writers whose essays are included in *Starting with "I"* originally wrote their pieces for *New Youth Connections*, a teen-written publication in New York City. Knowing that their work was going to reach an audience was a great motivator for them, particularly during the lengthy process of revision. For this reason, you might try making some form of publication a goal of your class. Your students can submit their stories to outside publications—like a school or community newspaper or teen-oriented magazine. (Opinion pieces, commentaries, or memoirs that address an issue or problem currently in the news have the best chance of getting published this way.) Or you could produce an in-house publication to distribute around your school. It doesn't have to be fancy—you can photocopy the pages and then fold or staple them together. You might focus your publication on one genre—opinion pieces, memoirs of childhood, descriptions of favorite places. Or a theme for a publication might emerge over the course of the semester if you find that your students are doing their best writing on a particular subject, like family relationships or first love or favorite hobbies. Again, confidentiality may be an issue in some cases. Some students may not want their work published or may only feel comfortable publishing certain stories anonymously—make sure to discuss these options with them.

GETTING STARTED

WRITING ASSIGNMENT: PERSONAL WRITING IN REAL LIFE

Many of your students will already have experience with personal writing, in the form of letters or journal entries. Use that as a bridge to the writing of personal essays by asking them to:

- Write a letter to a friend describing the most significant thing that's happened to you over the past week and why it's important.
- Write a letter to someone you don't see very often (a pen pal, a relative who lives in another town, a friend who moved away) describing something that you do every day.
- Write a letter to someone close to you (a parent, a sibling, best friend, boyfriend, or girlfriend) telling them about something that's going on in your life that they don't know about.
- Write a journal entry describing what you did yesterday. Include the dialogue from at least one conversation you had and describe at least one place where you went in detail.

COMPONENTS OF A PERSONAL ESSAY

Most of the essays in this book, particularly the memoirs and autobiographies, are narratives that describe an experience or series of events that holds special significance for the author. But these stories are not written in a simple "this happened, then that happened" fashion. They include a variety of elements that are designed to capture the reader's interest. These are: anecdotes (little stories), scenes, description, dialogue, and reflection (the author's thoughts about what the experience means).

Have your students read and annotate one of the memoirs or autobiographical essays in this collection, identifying the different components. Ask them to identify their favorite descriptive passage and favorite piece of dialogue. Ask them to explain why they liked the passages that they chose and what these passages add to the story as a whole.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Capturing the Way People Speak. Ask your students to pick a place where they can hear people talking—at home or school, on the bus, in a restaurant or store, in a park or playground. Tell them to eavesdrop on a conversation between two people and write down exactly what they hear, word for word—just the dialogue, no description. Tell them not to correct the conversations—people rarely speak in complete sentences using perfect grammar and they often use slang or profanity. Doing this exercise will help your students develop an ear for the way real people speak and identify dialogue that is interesting and expressive.

Observing and Describing a Person. Ask your students to pick a place where they can observe another person, unnoticed, for a period of at least ten minutes. During that time, they should be writing down the answers to the following questions about their subject: What is the person's physical appearance? What is the person wearing? Approximately how old is the person and how can you tell? What is the person doing? Does the person have any distinctive habits, behaviors, or mannerisms (e.g. bites nails, cleans glasses on shirt, gestures with hands)? Your students should then write a detailed description of the person they observed.

Describing a Place—from Memory and from Observation. Have your students pick a place that they are very familiar with—at home, in school, or some other place that they visit regularly (e.g. workplace, hangout, friend's house). In class, ask them to write a detailed description of the place from memory. When they think about it, what do they see? Collect what they've written and then ask them to visit the place and write another detailed description of it based on observation. Return the first piece, the one written from memory, and ask your students to compare the two pieces and write down their reactions. What differences do they notice? Which piece do they think better captures the place they were describing? Why?

MODES OF EXPRESSION

MEMOIR AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Reading Assignment. Have your students read several of the essays that are listed under the Memoir and Autobiography categories in the Index to Essays by Form at the back of the book.

For each story that they read, have them think about and discuss the following:

- **The Beginning.** The first few paragraphs of any story need to capture the reader's interest and give the reader some idea of what the story is going to be about. Ask your students to think about how and where the author chose to start the story they've read. Could the story have begun any other way? Ask them to suggest some alternative beginnings. Do they think the author made the right choice? Why or why not?

Example: The author of "My First Love: Too Much, Too Soon" begins with an anecdote about being introduced to Roger, the young man who would later become her boyfriend. But she could have started the story with an anecdote about when she first noticed Roger ("One day when I was in seventh grade I noticed a boy staring at me while I was sitting on the front steps of the school, talking with my friends…") or with a statement summarizing what the story is going to be about ("Roger was the first boy I ever loved and the first boy I had sex with. We met when we were in seventh grade…").

- **Structure.** How is the story told? Is it a straight narrative summarizing a series of events—first this happened, then that? If not, what are the components? Ask your students to break down the story they've read into its component parts: description, conversation/dialogue, anecdotes, reflection. Are events summarized or are scenes described in detail? Ask them to identify their favorite quote or description and talk about what it adds to the story as a whole. Also: Is the story written in chronological order? Or does it move back and forth between the past and present? How does the order in which events are laid out influence their impact on the reader?

- **Pacing.** Ask your students to think about how much time and space the author devotes to different parts of her/his story. They will notice that several years may be summarized in a few sentences while a conversation that lasted five minutes may fill a page. Which events and experiences does the author devote the most attention to? How do these choices help communicate the author's ideas about the significance of her/his experiences? Do they make the story more or less interesting to read?

For example, in "Home Is Where the Hurt Is," Zeena Bhattacharya covers ten years of her life in two sentences: "For the first ten years of my life, I lived with my grandparents in Calcutta, India. I didn't know my parents at all." Later, Zeena devotes seven paragraphs to an incident that lasted only a few minutes—an encounter with a woman who was beating her child. What do these choices tell the reader?

- **Suspense.** Since the authors are writing about events in their pasts, they know how their stories are going to turn out. Do they intentionally withhold information or try to keep the reader guessing about what's going to happen next? How and why do they do that? In "Dream Girl," for example, Rance Scully keeps us wondering about whether he will ever actually meet the beautiful girl who lives across the street. The author of "My First Love: Too Much, Too Soon" has us relive her anguished internal debate over whether or not she should have sex with her boyfriend before letting us know her decision. On the other hand, David Miranda begins "I Hated Myself" with the straightforward statement, "By the time I was eleven, I already knew I was gay and I hated myself for it" instead of describing the emotions and experiences that led to that knowledge. Is one approach better than the other? Does it depend on the subject matter?
- **Description.** Ask your students if there were any people, places, or objects described in the piece they read that they could see really clearly in their minds. Have them read aloud the passages that left the strongest visual impression. Why did the author choose to describe these things in such detail? How do these descriptive passages influence their feelings about what's important in the story?
- **Point of view.** Is there more than one "I"? Has the author's point of view about the events described changed over time? How do you know? Can you distinguish between the younger "I" in the story and the older author who is looking back on an earlier self? How are they different?

Writing Assignment. After reading and discussing several of the memoirs/autobiographical essays collected in *Starting with "I,"* ask your students to write one of their own. Ask them to pick an event or experience that has special significance for them. Here is a list of suggested topics that work well.

Suggested Writing Prompts

- A person (friend, relative, teacher, coach, employer, etc.) who has played a significant role in your life. [See "Brotherly Love," "My Father: I Want to Be Everything He's Not," "Saying Goodbye to Uncle Nick."]
- An especially stressful period in your life. [See "Home Is Where the Hurt Is," "I Hated Myself," "Growing Into Fatherhood."]
- Something that happened that changed your self-image—either a physical change like losing weight, getting your hair cut or getting a scar, or an internal change that occurred because of accomplishing something significant or coping with a difficult experience. [See "A Shortcut to Independence," "Tired of Being a Target," "A Designer Addiction," "A Rap Fan's Alternative."]
- An important first—first trip away from home, first friend, first date, first love, first job, first day of high school, etc. [See "My First Love: Too Much, Too Soon," "Climbing the Golden Arches."]
- A major change in circumstances—moving to a new neighborhood, transferring to a new school, getting a new family member (e.g. new baby, stepparent). [See "Antigua: Almost Paradise," "Moving into the Mainstream," "Dorm Life Is Heaven."]
- A way in which other people's expectations have influenced how you think about/judge yourself. [See "Color Me Different," "Asian by Association," "Single and Lovin' It," "I Hated Myself."]
- A place you have strong feelings about. [See "At Home in Coney Island," "A 'Nice' Neighborhood…Where Nobody Knows My Name," "Antigua: Almost Paradise."]
- Something you did that made you proud of yourself. [See "Climbing the Golden Arches," "Moving into the Mainstream."]
- A time when you stood up for something you believed in or made an unpopular decision, in spite of opposition from friends or family. [See

"A Shortcut to Independence," "Becoming a Vegetarian: A Matter of Taste," "My Road Doesn't Lead to College."]

- An especially frightening or upsetting experience. [See "Saying Goodbye to Uncle Nick," "Revenge in the Hood: A Deadly Game."]
- A conflict between yourself and your parents based on generational or cultural differences. [See "A Shortcut to Independence," "How to Survive Shopping with Mom."]
- An experience that left you with a great sense of loss. [See "Brotherly Love," "Saying Goodbye to Uncle Nick," "Antigua: Almost Paradise," "My First Love: Too Much, Too Soon."]
- An important rite of passage—an event or experience that made you feel like you weren't a kid anymore. [See "Brotherly Love," "A Shortcut to Independence," "Climbing the Golden Arches," "Growing into Fatherhood," "Dorm Life Is Heaven."]
- Something about yourself that makes you feel different from the people around you, like an outsider. [See "I Ain't Got No Culture," "Color Me Different," "I Hated Myself," "What Would You Do If I Was Gay?," "Becoming a Vegetarian: A Matter of Taste," "A Rap Fan's Alternative," "Moving into the Mainstream," "My Road Doesn't Lead to College."]
- Something you love to do or dread doing. [See "How to Survive Shopping with Mom."]
- The time when you were the happiest, saddest, angriest, or most afraid you've been in your life.

You can assign everyone in the class the same topic (their individual essays will still be quite different), give them several topics to choose from, or do the following exercise in class to help students find the topic they're most interested in writing about.

Read each of the above prompts aloud to the class. Pause after reading each one and ask your students to think of a response. Tell them to jot down a few words that will remind them of their answer later on. (For example, a response to "an especially stressful period in your life" could be "When Mom was in the hospital" or "When my best friend told me she wanted to kill herself and I didn't know what to do.") After you've gone through the whole list of prompts, ask students to read over their responses and think for a little while about each one. Then ask them to pick one as the subject for a memoir.

COMMENTARY WRITING

A commentary differs from a memoir because it focuses less on describing events and more on interpreting them. In a commentary, a writer will connect a personal experience or observation to a larger social issue or trend. The writer doesn't have to pretend to be an expert on her/his subject, s/he just has to explain what s/he thinks about it and why. Unlike an opinion piece, in which a writer expresses a strong point of view and tries to persuade others to share it, a commentary can be a broader exploration of the author's feelings about her/his subject. For example, "The 'N' Word: It Just Slips Out" would be an opinion piece if Allen Francis was arguing that the "N" word should never be used or that it is acceptable to use it. But his piece is an examination of who uses the word, why they use it, and the different types of significance it has depending on the context in which it is spoken. Allen doesn't feel comfortable taking a definitive stand, either pro or con. But he still makes it clear that this is an important issue that both he and his readers need to think about.

Reading Assignment. Have your students read and discuss some of the pieces listed under the category Commentary and Criticism in the Index to Essays by Form. Ask them to consider some of the following questions:

- What's the author's main point? Is it stated or implied?
- Why does the author care about this? What does s/he intend to achieve by writing about it? What audience is s/he trying to reach? What impact does s/he want the story to have? Was s/he successful with you? Why/why not? Is there anything s/he could have done to make the piece have a stronger impact on you?
- What's the tone of the piece (e.g. shocked, angry, sarcastic, tongue-in-cheek)? What words or phrases help you to identify the tone? Why would the author have chosen to write in this tone? Would another tone have worked as well or better? Does the tone change over the course of the piece? Where? To achieve what effect?
- Have your students mark places throughout the story where language or word choices are especially significant or vivid. How does the choice of words add to or detract from the author's ability to express her/his point of view? Ask your students to read aloud some of the

phrases that struck them and then re-state them in different language. Does changing the wording lessen the impact?

- What examples are offered to illustrate/support the author's point-of-view or areas of concern? Where do the examples come from (personal experience, observation, interviews, research, etc.)? Were they convincing? If so, why? If not, why not? What would be more convincing?
- Does the author compare and contrast? Does doing this help get her/his point across?
- Underline any questions posed by the author. Are they rhetorical questions (statements disguised as questions)? Are they answered within the piece? Or are they real questions that the author doesn't have an answer to? How does the inclusion of questions in this kind of piece affect you as a reader?

Writing Assignment. After reading several pieces of commentary, ask your students to write one of their own. Their pieces should explore a personal experience that caused them to grapple with a problem, re-think an earlier assumption, recognize a contradiction in their own thinking or behavior, or develop a strong point of view about a particular issue, problem or trend that they've observed in society or in the media.

Suggested Writing Prompts

- Your insights into a societal problem based on personal experience. [See "A 'Nice' Neighborhood…Where Nobody Knows My Name," "Revenge in the Hood: A Deadly Game," "My Lebanese Passport," "Tired of Being a Target," "A Designer Addiction."]
- Your feelings about how a group that you identify with (e.g. based on sex, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, a shared interest or taste) is depicted in the media or stereotyped in the larger society. [See "Yo Hollywood! Where Are the Latinos At?"]
- How you gained a new understanding of members of a group that you don't belong to as a result of a personal experience. [See "A Girl Takes Control."]
- An analysis of a current trend in fashion, popular culture (music, movies, television, advertising), sports, slang, eating, etiquette, or social-

izing, explaining why you approve or disapprove. [See "A Designer Addiction," "A Rap Fan's Alternative," "Yo Hollywood! Where Are the Latinos At?," "The 'N' Word: It Just Slips Out."]

OPINION WRITING

In an opinion piece, the author presents an argument in support of her/his position on a controversial topic. Opinion pieces are written in support of a cause (e.g. requiring students to wear school uniforms, raising the minimum wage, banning the use of cartoon characters in cigarette advertisements), to encourage people to take specific actions (vote for a candidate, boycott a product, stay in school), or to criticize an existing policy (students should not have to go through metal detectors at school, students should be allowed to go outside the school building during their lunch period, smoking should not be allowed in any public place under any circumstances). The author of an opinion piece supports her/his position with evidence that might include examples and anecdotes from personal experience, statistics and quotes from authorities, comparisons, etc. The author also acknowledges the opposing position and tries to respond to the objections her/his readers might have to her/his argument. S/He employs a tone that s/he thinks will be effective with her/his audience (rational, passionate, sarcastic, playful, angry, ironic, etc.).

Reading Assignment. Have your students read several of the essays listed under the Opinion category in the Index to Essays by Form. You can also encourage them to read opinion pieces, editorials, and columns in local newspapers and magazines.

Most opinion pieces share some basic elements that you can discuss with your students: 1) presenting the issue and its significance, 2) asserting an opinion on the issue, 3) backing up the opinion with examples, analogies, statistics, personal experiences, 4) acknowledging the opposing position and making a concession to it, and 5) anticipating and countering the potential objections of readers.

Ask your students to look for those elements in the opinion pieces they read and to consider the following questions about each piece:

- What is the author's position?

- What evidence does s/he offer in support of her/his position? Where did s/he get it (personal experience, observation, interviews, research, etc.)? Was it convincing to them? If not, what could s/he have used that would have been more convincing (statistics? expert testimony?)
- Does s/he introduce readers to alternative points of view on the issue? Does this strengthen or weaken her/his case?
- Does s/he ever say anything to contradict herself or undermine her/his own argument?
- How would you characterize the tone of the story? Is it sarcastic, playful, angry, whiny? What words or phrases set the tone? Have students read aloud the passages that they think best capture the tone of the piece. Why do they think the author chose this tone? Is it appropriate to the subject matter? Would another tone have worked better? Is the tone consistent throughout or does it change?
- Who is this piece addressed to? How does the author want to influence them? What impact does s/he want this piece to have? Have your students underline and then read aloud the passages that give them a sense of the desired impact. Was the author successful in achieving it? Why/why not?
- Based on reading this, ask your students what they know about the author. Make a list. Does what they know about her/him influence their reactions to the piece? How? Why?

Writing Assignment. After reading several opinion pieces, ask your students to write one of their own. Suggest that they write about a controversial issue about which they have already begun to form an opinion, preferably one to which they have a personal connection. If there is an issue that is currently being debated in your school or community, suggest that they write about that. If they have trouble coming up with a topic, suggest that they think about what has recently made them say: "That isn't fair!" or "They shouldn't be allowed to do that" or "I can't believe they make us..." or "Things would be great if people would just..." or "Why doesn't someone do something about..." When they're done, you might encourage your students to submit their pieces to the school paper or the opinion page of a local newspaper. You could also ask them to summarize their strongest points in the form of a "letter to the editor" of your local paper.

PORTRAITS

Because *Starting with "I"* is a book of personal essays, the portraits collected in it are based on the writers' direct experience of their subjects—observations, conversations, shared experiences—and the insights they've developed into their subject's character as a result. Unlike most of the profiles that appear in newspapers and magazines, these pieces are not based on interviews and research but on pre-existing relationships. The subjects are people who are close to the writers—usually friends or family members. (Teachers, neighbors, bosses, co-workers, or local "characters" would also be good subjects for this kind of piece.) The writers do not pretend to be unbiased. And, since these are essays, not biographies, they each focus on a specific aspect of the subject's life.

Reading Assignment. Have your students read several of the pieces listed under the category Portraits in the Index of Essays by Form. Then discuss the following questions about each piece:

- How would they describe the author's relationship to her/his subject? What parts of the essay give them this impression?
- What adjectives would they use to describe the subject? What parts of the essay suggest these adjectives? [As they respond to both of these questions, ask them what the author states directly—e.g. "My brother Adolfo was the only one who made time for me…We'd hang out in parks and watch movies together. He'd play stupid Ken and Barbie with me" ("Brotherly Love"), or "My father was what you would call a playboy. He had a son with one of his mistresses and a daughter with a second mistress" ("My Father: I Want to Be Everything He's Not")—and what's shown or implied through description and dialogue.]
- What are some of the things the subject does that have a big impact on the author? For example, in "My Father: I Want to Be Everything He's Not," Troy's father makes Troy and his brother help decorate the hall for his wedding but doesn't include them in the ceremony or sit with them during the reception. In "Saying Goodbye to Uncle Nick,"

Josbeth's uncle, who has AIDS, takes her out for ice cream and then grabs her spoon, uses it, and gives it back to her, clearly expecting her to continue eating with it. What do these actions tell you about the person's character?

• Is there a physical description of the subject? How important is it to the story as a whole? For example, there is no physical description of the father in "My Father: I Want to Be Everything He's Not," of the brother in "Brotherly Love" or of the mother in "Shopping with Mom." This could be because the authors don't care very much about how their subjects look, that their appearances don't play a role in the relationships. On the other hand, Josbeth Lebron does describe her uncle's physical deterioration as he dies of AIDS in "Saying Goodbye to Uncle Nick" and Rance Scully describes the beauty of the girl across the street in "Dream Girl." You could argue that the physical appearances of these subjects are integral to the stories the authors have to tell. How would the reader's response to these pieces be affected if there was no physical description?

• What does the author learn from her/his subject? Something about the kind of person s/he wants to be or how s/he wants to live? Something about the way the world works?

Pre-writing Exercise

To get your students thinking about what goes into writing a portrait of someone they know, do this exercise in class. Tell them to pick someone who's been important in their lives, who they know well and might want to write about. Tell them they don't have to commit to writing an essay about this person at this point. This is just a warm-up exercise to get them thinking. Then ask them to answer the following questions about the person, giving them about five minutes to respond to each one in writing.

1. Think back over your relationship with the person you've chosen. Make a list of experiences the two of you have shared, e.g. the beach last summer, tenth grade math class, big fight in the kitchen, staying up all night and watching the sun rise, etc.

2. Pick one item from the list you just made and describe it in more detail. Where and when did it take place? Who else was there? What was the physical environment like—any details about the way things looked

that you can remember? What did you talk about? What was your mood at the time?

3. Make a list of places where you have been together with this person.
4. Write down a conversation with this person that stands out in your mind. Get down as much as you can remember of the dialogue between the two of you.
5. Make a list of things this person has done that you admire.
6. Make a list of things this person has done that you disapprove of.
7. Describe a time when this person made you happy.
8. Describe a time when this person made you angry.
9. Describe a time when this person hurt your feelings.
10. What adjectives come to mind when you think of this person? Make a list.

Writing Assignment. Ask your students to write a profile of someone they know well. Before beginning, ask them to identify a focus for the story. For example, "My Father: I Want to Be Everything He's Not" focuses on the subject's failings as a father; "Saying Goodbye to Uncle Nick" focuses on the subject's illness and how this affected his relationship with the author. Tell them that they should include the elements that the questions in the pre-writing exercise try to draw out—important experiences that they've shared with their subjects, conversations they've had, examples of things the subject has done that give an idea of what s/he's like and what's important to her/him or that explain the author's feelings towards her/him.

PLACES

The places described in the essays in this anthology include an airport ("My Lebanese Passport"), a fast food restaurant ("Climbing the Golden Arches"), a college dormitory ("Dorm Life Is Heaven"), a New York City neighborhood ("At Home in Coney Island"), a foreign capital ("Chinese in New York, American in Beijing"), and a Caribbean island ("Antigua: Almost Paradise"). Like the portraits of people, the essays are based on the observations and experiences and memories of the writers. Some of the places are large, some are small; some are familiar to the authors, others have just been seen for the first time. Point this out to your students and suggest that they can write this kind of essay about any place that has special meaning for them, from their bedrooms to the local mall to a foreign country they visited once on a vacation.

Reading Assignment. Have your students read several of the essays listed under Essays of Place and Travelogue in the Index to Essays by Form. Have them discuss the following questions about each piece:

- Why did the author choose to write about this place? What is its significance in the author's life? Have your students read aloud passages that support their answers.
- Look at the passages of physical description. What kinds of things has the author chosen to describe in detail (e.g. the colors of fruits and vegetables in "Antigua: Almost Paradise," the kinds of debris found on the beach and boardwalk in "At Home in Coney Island")? What kind of mood or feeling do these descriptions create? How did they contribute to your general image of the place?
- Look for examples of comparison and contrast (e.g. between dormitory life and home life in "Dorm Life Is Heaven," between Antigua and New York City in "Antigua: Almost Paradise"). What specific aspects of the places are compared? Does the author highlight similarities or just differences? What does the author achieve by comparing two places?
- Who are the people who "inhabit" the place that is being described? How do descriptions of people and their activities contribute to your understanding of the place and what's special about it?

Writing Assignment. Ask your students to write an essay about a place that means a lot to them or that they have particularly strong feelings about.

Suggested Writing Prompts

- What you like or don't like about the place—apartment, house, dormitory, neighborhood, city—where you're currently living. [See "A 'Nice' Neighborhood…Where Nobody Knows My Name," "Dorm Life Is Heaven."]
- A place that changed the way you see yourself, gave you a new

image of yourself. [See “Chinese in New York, American in Beijing,” “Climbing the Golden Arches,” “Dorm Life Is Heaven.”]

- A place that you miss, feel nostalgia for. [See “Antigua: Almost Paradise.”]
- A place that makes you feel like an outsider. [See “My Lebanese Passport,” “A ‘Nice’ Neighborhood…Where Nobody Knows My Name,” “Chinese in New York, American in Beijing.”]
- A place that you have an unusual perspective on. [See “At Home in Coney Island,” “My Lebanese Passport.”]
- The experience of moving from one place to another. [See “Antigua: Almost Paradise,” “My Journey Home,” “A ‘Nice’ Neighborhood…Where Nobody Knows My Name,” “Dorm Life Is Heaven.”]

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