Notes on Revising the Personal Essay

Main Idea: the main idea of the personal is always the lesson learned or the importance of the essay.

Focus on a brief time span.

Start with an opening hook, something that catches your reader’s attention.

Organization: Chronological order: have a clear beginning, middle, and end.

Remember to show more than you tell by using sensory details to describe what is happening.

Descriptions slow down the pace while dialog speeds up the pace.

Word Choice can be used to pace your personal narrative. The language itself is a means of pacing, like using concrete words, active [voice](https://literarydevices.net/voice/), and sensory information.

**MY WATCH:  
An Instructive Little Tale  
by MARK TWAIN**

*[From "Sketches New and Old", Copyright 1903, Samuel Clemens.  
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(Written about 1870.)*

My beautiful new watch had run eighteen months without losing or gaining, and without breaking any part of its machinery or stopping. I had come to believe it infallible in its judgments about the time of day, and to consider its constitution and its anatomy imperishable. But at last, one night, I let it run down. I grieved about it as if it were a recognized messenger and forerunner of calamity. But by and by I cheered up, set the watch by guess, and commanded my bodings and superstitions to depart. Next day I stepped into the chief jeweler's to set it by the exact time, and the head of the establishment took it out of my hand and proceeded to set it for me. Then he said, "She is four minutes slow – regulator wants pushing up." I tried to stop him – tried to make him understand that the watch kept perfect time. But no; all this human cabbage could see was that the watch was four minutes slow, and the regulator MUST be pushed up a little; and so, while I danced around him in anguish, and implored him to let the watch alone, he calmly and cruelly did the shameful deed. My watch began to gain. It gained faster and faster day by day. Within the week it sickened to a raging fever, and its pulse went up to a hundred and fifty in the shade. At the end of two months it had left all the timepieces of the town far in the rear, and was a fraction over thirteen days ahead of the almanac. It was away into November enjoying the snow, while the October leaves were still turning. It hurried up house rent, bills payable, and such things, in such a ruinous way that I could not abide it. I took it to the watchmaker to be regulated. He asked me if I had ever had it repaired. I said no, it had never needed any repairing. He looked a look of vicious happiness and eagerly pried the watch open, and then put a small dice box into his eye and peered into its machinery. He said it wanted cleaning and oiling, besides regulating – come in a week. After being cleaned and oiled, and regulated, my watch slowed down to that degree that it ticked like a tolling bell. I began to be left by trains, I failed all appointments, I got to missing my dinner; my watch strung out three days' grace to four and let me go to protest; I gradually drifted back into yesterday, then day before, then into last week, and by and by the comprehension came upon me that all solitary and alone I was lingering along in week before last, and the world was out of sight. I seemed to detect in myself a sort of sneaking fellow-feeling for the mummy in the museum, and desire to swap news with him. I went to a watch maker again. He took the watch all to pieces while I waited, and then said the barrel was "swelled." He said he could reduce it in three days. After this the watch AVERAGED well, but nothing more. For half a day it would go like the very mischief, and keep up such a barking and wheezing and whooping and sneezing and snorting, that I could not hear myself think for the disturbance; and as long as it held out there was not a watch in the land that stood any chance against it. But the rest of the day it would keep on slowing down and fooling along until all the clocks it had left behind caught up again. So at last, at the end of twenty-four hours, it would trot up to the judges' stand all right and just in time. It would show a fair and square average, and no man could say it had done more or less than its duty. But a correct average is only a mild virtue in a watch, and I took this instrument to another watchmaker. He said the kingbolt was broken. I said I was glad it was nothing more serious. To tell the plain truth, I had no idea what the kingbolt was, but I did not choose to appear ignorant to a stranger. He repaired the kingbolt, but what the watch gained in one way it lost in another. It would run awhile and then stop awhile, and then run awhile again, and so on, using its own discretion about the intervals. And every time it went off it kicked back like a musket. I padded my breast for a few days, but finally took the watch to another watchmaker. He picked it all to pieces, and turned the ruin over and over under his glass; and then he said there appeared to be something the matter with the hair- trigger. He fixed it, and gave it a fresh start. It did well now, except that always at ten minutes to ten the hands would shut together like a pair of scissors, and from that time forth they would travel together. The oldest man in the world could not make head or tail of the time of day by such a watch, and so I went again to have the thing repaired. This person said that the crystal had got bent, and that the mainspring was not straight. He also remarked that part of the works needed half- soling. He made these things all right, and then my timepiece performed unexceptionably, save that now and then, after working along quietly for nearly eight hours, everything inside would let go all of a sudden and begin to buzz like a bee, and the hands would straightway begin to spin round and round so fast that their individuality was lost completely, and they simply seemed a delicate spider's web over the face of the watch. She would reel off the next twenty-four hours in six or seven minutes, and then stop with a bang. I went with a heavy heart to one more watchmaker, and looked on while he took her to pieces. Then I prepared to cross-question him rigidly, for this thing was getting serious. The watch had cost two hundred dollars originally, and I seemed to have paid out two or three thousand for repairs. While I waited and looked on I presently recognized in this watchmaker an old acquaintance – a steamboat engineer of other days, and not a good engineer, either. He examined all the parts carefully, just as the other watchmakers had done, and then delivered his verdict with the same confidence of manner.

He said: "She makes too much steam – you want to hang the monkey-wrench on the safety-valve!"

I brained him on the spot, and had him buried at my own expense.

My uncle William (now deceased, alas!) used to say that a good horse was a good horse until it had run away once, and that a good watch was a good watch until the repairers got a chance at it. And he used to wonder what became of all the unsuccessful tinkers, and gunsmiths, and shoemakers, and engineers, and blacksmiths; but nobody could ever tell him.

**END**

* **A sense of immediacy:** Although Twain's narrative is couched in the past tense, we sense that whatever is going on is happening in the very recent past or even now, as we speak. This is especially true as he goes from jeweler to jeweler to get his watch fixed. The appalling movement of his watch after each repair feels real to us. Although Twain's story is couched entirely in the past tense, the past tense does not feel past to us in fiction. In fact, short story writers and novelists call the simple past tense the "fictive present" or "fictional present" because when you're reading it, you feel as if you're reading something that is going on – now.
* **The sense of reality:** Although we might sense that Twain exaggerates the erratic movements of his watch and his imagination is often fantastic, we also sense the reality of his condition. There's the shock of familiarity for you. We have heard automobile mechanics and computer technicians spout technical gibberish to us and been convinced that we had to spend lots of money to have our beloved devices brought back to life. Details, details, details. Showing instead of telling.
* **Movement:** Action is indispensable in a narrative essay, the sense of people and things moving through time and space. Close study of short story writers will pay off in the long run here. The non-intuitive device most of them use is knowing that when you want to describe something that happens very fast, your text and your selection of details and descriptions of action must slow down. It would be instructive to reproduce here comedian Eddie Murphy's description of his auntie falling down the stairs – something she apparently did repeatedly, predictably, and without injury. Murphy reproduces all the sounds she makes at every step as his aunt bounces down the stairway, calling upon every saint and deity she ever heard of and pronouncing ruin upon the house and its residents. The bit is hilarious and takes probably a minute or more to describe what must have taken, in reality, only a couple of seconds. All of us, to our horror, know that "slow motion" effect as we slide on an icy road; the trick is to recapture that in our text. Practice by describing such an event or describing the details of eating an Oreo cookie or fig newton cookie. Leave nothing out.
* ***In media res:*** Twain's narrative jumps right into the telling. A Latin phrase, *in media res*, means just that, in the middle of things, and describes the technique by which story writers begin their tale in the middle of the action. Here, Twain picks up the story about his situation after something has already happened to get him to this place and time. Then he will harken back to the beginning, the necessary background. It's an age-old trick to get the reader involved immediately in the action of the story.
* **Quoted language:** There is not much in the way of quoted language in Twain's narrative. Notice, though, how the little bits of conversation with the various jewelers seem to leap off the page – especially at the very end. It's as if another sense has been called into play, as if you suddenly hear as well as see and read. Using quoted language is something that short-story writers and novelists must master before they get very far in their craft. It can be difficult to create this illusion of the spoken voice, but it's worth the effort, as nothing can make an essay feel more alive, faster, than to give your reader a bit of voice. It lends texture, dimension, to your essay.
* **Knowing when to quit:** Twain could undoubtedly have gone on and on with this kind of thing, but he was wise to quit when he did. Knowing when to quit is indispensable, but hard to learn. A good rule to live by: if you think your readers would like a little more, write the little bit more and then delete it before you hand over your text to anyone.