**In-Class Write: A Personal Note – A Remembered Place or Event**

**Monday, September 11, 2017**

Write an essay about a significant event in your life. Select an event, focusing the essay on telling something about you. The event may be one that, for example, influenced you in a special way, revealed a characteristic of your personality you suddenly recognized, or challenged your values or beliefs. Tell your story dramatically and vividly, giving a clear indication of its autobiographical significance.

**Purpose and Audience**

In this essay, your audience (your teachers) will want to know a little about you so that you may inform and/or entertain them with something about the world or life you see. Overall, your essay should reveal your understanding of the significance of a place or event.

**Your essay should consist of the following basic features.**

**1) A well-told story:** An essay about a remembered event should tell an interesting story. The author must shape the experience into a story that is entertaining and memorable. And the story must be put into a plot that consists of beginning, conflict, rising action, climax, and ending.

**2) A vivid presentation of significant key people and scenes:** Please re-create the scene with vivid language and specific details, and leave readers with a dominant impression. Use specific objects with real names. Use dialogue if necessary.

**3) An indication of the event's significance:** Show the important scenes and people from the writer's point of view. Tell how the writer feels and thinks of them as s/he recalls the experience. Explain something about the event's importance and meaning.

Careful there--this type of essay isn't just "What I Did On My Summer Vacation (In 500 Words or Less)." The autobiography demands more of you than a rehash of last year's trip to the beach. In an autobiographical essay, you're asked to share something *significant* about your life; you're asked to dig through your past and find out who you are. And you're asked to reshape your experience through words.

**Autobiographical Significance**

"*But nothing important has ever happened to me!*" Not true. An instance doesn't have to be a watershed to have impacted your life in some way; significance does not necessarily equal seriousness. The incident you choose can matter because it's funny or tragic or uplifting or edifying; it can matter because it's just plain weird. What's crucial here is that the incident matters to you, and you are able to explain why the incident matters to you.

**DETAIL: People, Places, Things**

Your autobiography isn't *only* about you. Often, there will be other people (or animals or even furniture!) involved, as in an essay detailing your relationship with a family member, friend, co-worker, teacher, pet, or childhood rocking chair. Or perhaps the other "characters" in your autobiography are actually places: your hometown, a place you've traveled, a natural scene, or a favorite spot. Still, other autobiographies focus on events or phases in your life. Do you have a fond memory of pick-up basketball games in your childhood neighborhood? What about those three angst-filled years you spent wearing braces? Or

**Speaking of Detail . . .**

As the writer of your autobiography, you have a distinct advantage over your readers: afterall, you were *there*. You have sole access to all of the memories, images, and emotions which weave the context of your story. To write an effective autobiography, then, you'll need to share that context via details. By using details, you can convey a sense of people, places, and events in such a way that your readers feel as if your experience is their own.

**Tips for using details:**

***Use the 5 senses.*** Sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch can work to weave your memories into a story that is immediate and vibrant. If your readers are able to, in effect, locate themselves within the scene you're describing, your piece has a good chance of making an impression. Don't simply say, "My grandmother's kitchen was warm and cheery" and let that be the end of it. Tell us more. What color were the walls? What did the kitchen usually smell like? What kinds of objects were lying on the counters, refrigerator, or stove? What kind of treat could you expect to find if you went into the kitchen on a given baking day?

***Use metaphor and simile.*** Metaphor and simile--saying one thing is "like" another--make for more specific images, which, in turn, will convey the uniqueness of your subject to your audience. "The sky is blue" is quite different from "The sky is a washed-out blue, the clouds bleached and frayed like a faded pair of Levi's."

***Use precise words.*** Precise words convey the most vivid sense of your experience. For example, calling a waterfall you're writing about "beautiful" won't tell your readers nearly as much as words like "roaring," foaming, " or "crashing"; it's not as specific.

***Use caution.*** Using details can be tricky. While a lack of specifics most certainly leads to a lackluster autobiography, there's another danger: *irrelevant detail*, otherwise known as "detail overkill." When writing about an event like a high school graduation day, to use a popular topic for an autobiography as an example, it may be tempting to describe everything that happened that day chronologically. What results is an essay that reads, "This happened. Then this happened. Then this happened. After that, this happened." In an essay like this, most readers will have trouble understanding the significance of the subject.

***Focus*.** Irrelevant details often lead to a lack of focus. Without a sense of what's truly important in the essay, readers may be left saying "So what?" at the end of the paper. For example, in the graduation day essay, you might choose to focus on the graduation ceremony itself, the reactions of family members to the new graduate's accomplishment, or the party afterwards. There's usually not room, however, in the standard autobiography assignment, to include all of these without sacrificing a depth of description.

***Storytelling.*** Unlike most argumentative or analytic essays, the autobiography doesn't necessarily have to follow a point-by-point progression. Think about movie storylines. Often, a director will choose to tell the story in flashbacks, or to weave in flashbacks with current action. Others may use different voices: the narrator telling the story as a child, as a teenager, as an adult. You may have your own ideas for presenting your subject. Find the storytelling strategy that will most effectively highlight your topic.