

Writing About What You Know How to Do or to Make|

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There is a difference between a how-to article and a how-to personal essay: When you write a personal essay using the how-to-form, you are writing about how something is done or how something is made because you want others to appreciate the process you are writing about. You want them to understand not the process alone, but how the process of making or doing a particular thing has affected your life. You want them to learn that doing or making it may affect their lives.

Any instructional writing, personal or otherwise, involves paying attention to:

- The steps in the process you are describing
- The order in which the steps must be performed
- The special terms you need to understand for success
- The tools required to do the process
- The variations allowed in approaches
- The signs that show a desired outcome has been achieved

This system of organization is similar to that of a narration essay because it contains sequence much like narration contains chronology. It contains description because you must evoke both stages in the process and objects – including the five senses. In addition, it can contain little stories, called anecdotes, as a way of describing any of the steps.

In addition to these six characteristics, any how-to essay must make clear what you are really telling your readers while you are also telling them how a particular thing is made or done.

Some of the most thought-provoking essays explain step by step how to do something we actually wish we didn't really know how to do: how to fall in love with someone who isn't right for us, how to lose our hard-earned savings, how to destroy the environment, how to lose a boyfriend or girlfriend, how to have practically no friends, etc.

We can write to help someone we care about avoid doing what we have done. Sometimes we write about how to make something because we think others will want to make it for themselves someday. Sometimes we write a how-to for someone who had meaning in our lives to say thank you to them and to show them they were influential. No matter why we are writing or to whom we are addressing our thoughts, we also write to understand our own experience more deeply.

I suggest two choices for this essay: one takes the form of a letter. You can look at some student samples I'll hand out to you; we'll take a close look at them. The other can take the form of an essay written in a magazine. Remember the two narrative essays from the "Home and Garden" section of the newspaper? They were both about yards. One faced Minnehaha Creek and talked about the benches there. But it was about much more, really. The other related the story of a woman's neighbor whose yard was a garden, but was also a recluse who avoided the world. Both had important purposes in their stories;

both talked about being neighbors and getting in touch with people. They both used storytelling, description, comparing and contrasting, and figures of speech to make their points. This next essay does all of that, too. There will be more than just directions in this essay. What will it really be about?

You'll have plenty of time. Incorporate storytelling, description, and persuasion, even poetry of a sort (choose your words and phrases with care – be finicky). It should be at least three pages in length – maybe more, but not much less.