



Profile Essay

A profile essay is a type of essay that centers a certain person, place, or thing. One of the most common profile essay assignments is one in which the author “profiles” a certain person, offering information about who that person is and why they are important.

A profile essay does not have the same structure as a narrative essay or an argumentative essay. The type of writing for a profile essay is less rigidly structured, and an author can take several different approaches. Here are a few ideas and general guidelines about writing a profile essay.

Tone

The tone of a profile essay is different than other essays. It must still maintain an academic or professional voice, but it is a little more flexible. The second person (“you”) is still definitely to be avoided. However, in certain situations, the first person (“I”) might be acceptable; for instance, in an interview dialog between the profiler (the author) and the person being profiled. Please keep in mind, however, that excessive first person detracts from the person or thing being profiled, and instead puts the focus on the author. The paper is not about *you*.

Organization

There are many ways to structure a profile essay. Here are two main approaches: the chronological format, and the thematic format.

Chronological Format

In an interview format, generally a chronological organization works well. This would mean putting early parts of an interviewee’s life experience first and later parts of their life after. For instance, if an interviewee talks about their childhood and their marriage in the same interview, it would make sense to write about their childhood first. Every paragraph can cover a different section of the interviewee’s life. This is a very linear and simple way to write a profile essay, and it generally works well.

Thematic Format

Another way to structure a profile is to organize it by theme. For example, an interviewee might talk first about their youth in a theater troupe, then about their marriage and kids, and then their rediscovery of theater after their kids grew up. In this case, it would make sense to detail all the experiences with theater in the same paragraph even though they happened in very different parts of the person’s life. In a thematic format, the profile can be organized by types of experiences; perhaps one paragraph can deal exclusively with family matters (children and marriage) while the next can deal exclusively with theater experiences. This format is a good alternative to the chronological format.

Thesis

The core part of any essay is its thesis, and the profile essay is no exception. However, a thesis in a profile essay looks different than the thesis of an argumentative or critical analysis paper. Much of the time, a thesis is presented as an “argument,” detailing a position that the reader can agree with or disagree with. The framing of a thesis solely as an argument is problematic; it would be more appropriate for all essay types to describe a thesis as “the main point” of an essay. This can consist of either an argument, a “moral of the story,” or simply a concise evaluation of the topic.

A profile essay is centered on a topic (usually a person), and thus its thesis should also center on that topic. It should answer the following questions: What’s the point? Why is this profile important? What should the reader take away from the essay?

Here is an example of a profile essay thesis. Note the concise formality and summarization of the statement:

Johnson is one of the most important rock stars alive today because of his unique upbringing and life history, which have left an indelible mark on his passionate, fiery performances and his legendary live performances.

Style

Sometimes profile essays are assigned for a person that the author knows personally, perhaps a friend or neighbor. In these cases, the information on a profile essay will usually be gathered from a personal interview. In an interview format, an essay should somewhat resemble a profile in a magazine. When reading a profile on a celebrity in a magazine like *Time* or *Rolling Stone*, the writer switches off between parts of the interviewee’s life and things they say to the profiler. Here is an example:

Johnson grew up in a poor Los Angeles neighborhood in the midst of the crack epidemic in the 1980s. His experiences from that time still affect his way of life today. “The one thing I learned is that you always have to watch your back everywhere you go.”

Note how the example switched off between paraphrasing and direct quotes. All of the information is from the same interview, but beginning with some paraphrasing and then transitioning into a relevant direct quote helps keep the information feel fresh. This formula can be repeated for the duration of the profile essay.