

# AP English Language & Composition

## Then & Now: The Strangers in Your Photos

Through memoir, writers represent and make sense of selected life experiences. Consider this excerpt from Annie Dillard's introduction to *Modern American Memoirs*:

Memoirs offer a powerfully fixed point of view. From a picket in the past, the retrospective narrator may range intimately or intellectually across a wide circle of characters and events. The memoirist may analyze ideas or present dramatic scenes; the memoirist may confess, eulogize, reflect, inform, and persuade. By convention, memoirists tell true stories about actual people. Their tones may be elegiac, confiding, scholarly, hilarious, or all of these...

Dillard concludes her remarks by citing Charles Wright, who asserts that memoir writers celebrate "all the various things that lock our wrists to the past."

The "picket" in your past is not staked as far down life's road as Don Murray's, Annie Dillard's, or Tobias Wolff's. However, you *do* enjoy the perspective of a person who stands at the boundary of adulthood, one whose childhood, however "wonderful and terrible" it might have been, is receding. You have earned a perspective.

### *Writing Task:*

For this piece you will write a memoir of your own. Like Murray's essay, your piece will relate to a particular photograph (or, if you wish, a sequence of photographs) in which you appear. The text you fashion needs to be purposeful and lead your reader somewhere.

Reflect upon the photo then write. Use details, memories, perceptions, and ideas that can be gathered up then *purposefully* arranged. Where does your photo (or do your photos) take you? Reach beyond an image's edge toward other memories, details, sensations, situations, and moments that have left traces in your head and your heart.

### *As you plan, write and revise:*

- \* A question: how do the above remarks by Dillard and Wright relate to your work? Consider how your reflections on other readings this year inform your concept of memoir.
- \* Keep message and purpose in mind. What do you want the reader to get out of reading your piece? What do you leave in? What do you take out?
- \* Get the words right; diction matters. Choose words that will make a difference as you shape your piece.
- \* Be particularly mindful of how your piece opens and concludes. What kinds of choices have you made in connection with those portions of your essay?

You will confer with me and with your peers.

Please consult the scoring guide during your work. *Date due:*

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### Then and Now: The Strangers in Your Photos

#### Personal Memoir Scoring Guide

##### Rhetorical Purpose

- 4 The piece is clearly purposeful, featuring insightful (perhaps even profound) observations and thoughtful commentary.
- 3 The piece is consistently purposeful; meaningful observations and comments are evident.
- 2 The piece's purpose is hard to discern; memories may be simply collected and described without sufficient effort to make sense of them.
- 1 The piece's purpose fails to emerge; events or circumstances may merely be recounted without any attention to their importance.

##### Substance & Strategy

- 4 The piece is carefully fashioned, drawing on memory, sharing anecdotes and reflecting in order to convey a deep appreciation of the meaning of experience.
- 3 Not just anecdotal, the piece is developed and conveys an appreciation of the meaning of experience.
- 2 The piece shares memories and anecdotes, but does not sufficiently connect them with an appreciation of the meaning behind experience. Development may be lacking.
- 1 The piece is unacceptably brief and undeveloped.

##### Diction & Details

- 4 Superior word choice is evident; details, imagery, description, and narration help create a powerful commentary and portrait.
- 3 Effective word choice is evident; specific and effective concrete details, imagery, description, and narration sufficiently convey a view of the author.
- 2 Words are chosen with insufficient attention to their effect; the piece's details, imagery, description, and narration inadequately convey a view of the author.
- 1 Words are carelessly chosen; the piece's details, imagery, description, and narration are shallow and fail to generate a view of the author.

##### Lead & Conclusion

- 4 The opening engages the reader, suggests and connects with the piece's subject and occasion, and establishes a clear direction. The conclusion accents or embellishes the purpose of the piece.
- 3 The opening brings the reader into the piece, provides some sense of the piece's subject and/or occasion, and sets the piece off in a direction. The conclusion aptly punctuates the piece.
- 2 The piece opens without establishing much direction / focus, or hinting at content / subject / significance. The conclusion seems largely unrelated to the piece as a whole.
- 1 The piece opens without detail, direction, or focus. The piece merely stops.

##### Writing Process

- 4 Abundant evidence of steady, high quality work exists in the form of preliminary drafts; purposeful conferences were held.
- 3 Solid evidence of steady work exists in the form of preliminary drafts; preparation for writing conferences was evident.
- 2 Preliminary drafts and efforts to revise may have been half-hearted or incomplete; preparation for writing conferences may have been lacking.
- 1 Preliminary drafts have been sketchy or simply not produced. Student failed to prepare for writing conferences. The piece shows little if any attention to performance demands.

##### Correctness

- 4 Any errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and usage are rare and insignificant.
- 3 Errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and usage are few and do not distract the reader or detract from the piece.
- 2 While errors in correctness do not interfere with overall sense of the piece, they are frequent enough to distract the reader.
- 1 Errors are so severe that they interfere with clarity and sense.

##### OVERALL GRADE:

*Additional comments appear below, on piece, or on back.*

AP Language  
Mr. Sans  
10/13/15

*avoid passive voice*  
*Creative Title?*

The Stranger in the Photo is me

In this photo, an image is portrayed of myself at my fifth birthday party. At this point in my life nothing was a worry, and everything came so simple. With no obstacles I had to face or go up against; it was just the normal life of a five year old, and since then everything has changed.

*great verb usage*

The boy has gone through things in life and experienced things that shaped and carved him into me today. He can look at the guy he grew up to be and reflect on these decisions, but he will always remember who he was and the different man I am today because of it.

*Avoid repetition*

Since this picture was snapped, life has changed drastically. It's hard to say whether life changed for the better or worse, but the only one who can tell is the one in this picture... the stranger to myself now. One this that has changed in life is the emotional state from the person in this photo, to me now. Back when I was 5 years old life was full of only joy, happiness, and excitement. Today, I reflect on those emotions and realize I'm much more full of mixed emotions more than my old self ever was. Another change between the boy in this photo and myself now is appearance, this boy is a little kid that couldn't nearly fill my shoes now, or even come close to filling out my shirts or pants. Another difference between this boy and myself is the opinion we have of others. Back in the life of the boy it was easy to judge someone and they always had the favor to be liked since a little boy doesn't know much better than to judge based on first thought. All of these difference exist for one reason, and that reason is the experiences both of us have come across, and lived to see.

*be specific*

*edit*

*add a bit more description*

*blc?*

*better reason?*

Experiences change lives, and carve someone into a wiser or more aware person. An experience can lead you to realize new things, learn from mistakes, and most importantly they

*✓*

✓  
lead you to new experiences. The boy in this photo had only experienced little events in life such as birthday parties, baseball games, and christmas; and those experiences are what causes me to look back at experiences from then on... and realize how much has changed and why. The boy in this photo never had to experience the divorce of his parents, if he did maybe he ~~wouldn't~~ have the smile on his face that he has, or maybe his father wouldn't be standing with him just barely in the corner of the picture. The new me has experienced this, and the new me knows how to deal with the divorce, and I can stand here and smile still after it because I've gone through other upsetting things in life rather than just the divorce. That little boy never had to experience a heart break of a girl, or a death in the family like the new me has. That little boy would look up to this new me and be able to say he's proud of the guy he grew up to be. Maybe you can say the change is for the better. There are experiences though that are the same that keep me to be the way that boy in the photo was 11 years ago. Playing basketball with my father, and winning sports games or even losing them, fighting with my siblings and loving them to death... these are all things the boy and myself have always done, and keep me to look back at this photo and remember who that boy is and what he stands for.

Good use of concrete examples

Overall, the boy in this photo can look at who he has turned into today and realize I can be a stranger to him, or a more developed and open minded guy. The life he lived led him to make decisions and experience what it was that led me to be who I am today, and both of us then and now can look at each other and say we're proud of the decisions we've made, since they all are for a reason and led us in the right direction in life.

Creative use of expression! However you need to expand this into a more substantial argument!

## The stranger in the photo is me

by Donald M. Murray  
BOSTON GLOBE CORRESPONDENT



The author in England, 1944.

I was never one to make a big deal over snapshots; I never spent long evenings with the family photograph album. Let's get on with the living. To heck with yesterday, what are we going to do tomorrow? But with the accumulation of yesterdays and the possibility of shrinking tomorrows, I find myself returning, as I suspect many over 60s do, for a second glance and a third at family photos that snatch a moment from time.

In looking at mine, I become aware that it is so recent in the stretch of man's history that we have been able to stop time in this way and hold still for reflection. Vermeer is one of my favorite painters because of that sense of suspended time, with both clock and calendar held so wonderfully, so terribly still.

The people in the snapshots are all strangers. My parents young, caught before I arrived or as they were when I saw them as towering grown-ups. They seemed so old then and so young now. And I am, to me, the strangest of all.

There is a photograph of me on a tricycle before the duplex on Grand View Avenue in Wollaston I hardly remember; in another I am dressed in a seersucker sailor suit when I was 5 and lived in a Cincinnati hotel. I cannot remember the suit but even now, studying the snapshot, I am drunk on the memory of its peculiar odor and time is erased.

In the snapshots I pass from chubby to skinny and, unfortunately, ended up a chub. Looking at the grown-ups in the snapshots I should have known.

In other snapshots, I am cowboy, pilot, Indian chief; I loved to dress up to become what I was not, and suspect I still am a wearer of masks and costumes.

It would be socially appropriate to report on this day that I contemplate all those who are gone, but the truth is that my eyes are drawn back to pictures of my stranger self.

And the picture that haunts me the most is one not in costume but in the uniform I proudly earned in World War

II. I believe it was taken in England from the design of the barracks behind me. I have taken off the ugly steel-framed GI glasses, a touch of dishonesty for the girl who waited at home.

My overseas cap with its airborne insignia is tugged down over my right eye, my right shoulder in the jump jacket is lower because I have my left hand in my pocket in rakish disregard for the regulation that a soldier in that war could never, ever stick a hand in a pocket.

The pockets that are empty in the photograph will soon bulge with hand grenades, extra ammunition, food, and many of the gross of condoms we were issued before a combat jump. This GI item was more a matter of industrial merchandising than soldierly dreaming — or frontline reality.

The soldier smiles as if he knew his innocence and is both eager for its loss and nostalgic for those few years of naiveté behind him.

I try once more to enter the photograph and become what I was that day when autumn sunlight dappled the barracks wall and I was so eager to experience the combat my father wanted so much for me. He had never made it to the trenches over there in his war.

When that photograph was taken, my father still had dreams of merchandising glory, of a store with an awning that read Murray & Son. I had not yet become the person who had to nod yes at MGH when my father asked if he had cancer, to make the decision against extraordinary means after his last heart attack. When this photo was taken, he had not yet grown old, his collars large, his step hesitant, his shoes unshined.

Mother was still alive, and her mother who really raised me had not died as I was to learn in a letter I received at the front. The girl who wrote every day and for whom the photo was taken had not yet become my wife, and we had not yet been the first in our families to divorce two years later.

I had not yet seen my first dead soldier, had not yet felt the earth beneath me become a trampoline as the shells of a rolling barrage marched across our position.

I had no idea my life would become as wonderful or as terrible as it has been; that I would remarry, have three daughters and outlive one. I could not have imagined that I actually would be able to become a writer and eat — even overeat. I simply cannot re-create my snapshot innocence.

I had not had an easy or happy childhood, I had done well at work but not at school; I was not Mr. Pollyanna, but life has been worse and far better than I could have imagined.

Over 60 we are fascinated by the mystery of our life, why roads were taken and not taken, and our children encourage this as they develop a sense of family history. A daughter discovers a letter from the soldier in the photograph in England and another written less than a year later, on V-E day. She is surprised at how much I have aged. I am not.

I would not wish for a child or grandchild of mine to undergo the blood test of war my father so hoped I would face as he had not. In photos taken not so many years later I have a streak of white hair. It is probably genetic but I imagine it is the shadow of a bullet that barely passed me by, and I find I cannot enter the snapshot of the smiling soldier who is still stranger to me, still innocent of the heroic harm man can deliver to man.