

writing tips

SERIOUS ANSWERS TO ODDBALL QUESTIONS:

How to Use Personal Experiences in Essay Writing



By Cara Howard, Staff Writer

When writing for tests like the ACT and SAT, and numerous admissions essays, your key to success may lie in your own experiences. But how do you use everyday incidents to make yourself stand out from the crowd? Easy. Draw from events that helped you grow, and don't forget the details.

KEY Magazine interviewed Hillary Carlip, known for her talents using personal experiences in her work. The author, once featured on Oprah, recently released her memoir, *Queen of the Oddballs*, wherein she shares the pivotal moments of her life:

"My dad and Dr. Levenson tackled my brother in the driveway, where they held him down and forcibly maneuvered him into the backseat of the doctor's car. My mother stood motionless with her hand stuck over her open mouth, a statue of fear. I clutched the book of Zen quotes I was holding as if I could manually force the lessons of enlightenment into my horrified body."

Hillary Carlip certainly has an extraordinary life, which has included delivering singing telegrams, performing on *The Gong Show*, and starting a rock band of "ex-cons." A proven master of translating her experiences through writing, Hillary offers **KEY** readers advice on taking life's everyday events and turning them into captivating stories.



KEY: What types of memorable events did you include in your memoir?

HC: Getting suspended from the third grade for smoking on the school playground while imitating Holly Golightly from the movie *Breakfast at Tiffany's* ... Being a headline-making teen activist, professional juggler and fire eater, [among many others]!

KEY: How do you bring details of these events to life for the reader?

HC: Description is crucial. Show what happened rather than tell what happened. Describe from the senses – include smells, sounds, tastes, visuals. Colors, textures, images. Take the reader there with you.

KEY: How do you decide what is most engaging for readers?
HC: No matter how specific your stories are to you, it's good to look for underlying universal themes so readers can find something of themselves in your work – something relatable.

KEY: Is it necessary to approach writing with a set goal in mind?

HC: Goals are like having a map, and it's often good to know where you're going and when you've arrived. But I also think it's very important to let writing flow without imposing anything that could stop that flow.

KEY: What inspired you to recount your own experiences?

HC: My life has been full of crazy adventures and escapades ... I felt like I had stories to tell that would not only be entertaining and humorous, but also hopefully moving – inspiring people to live fully and to embrace and celebrate their uniqueness.

For more information on Hillary Carlip, please visit www.queenoftheoddballs.com.

[KEY]

HILLARY'S TIPS!

How to Use Personal Experiences Effectively:

- Figure out what's unique and different about you.
- Find a new, interesting way to tell your story.
- Every effective piece has an underlying universal theme: Find your universal theme!
- Dig deep and let yourself bare all.
- Be honest.
- Let the story tell itself; be open, and it will come to you. Go back to fix it up later.
- Start in one place and end elsewhere with a personal revelation.
- Be sure to convey the lesson learned without saying, "This is what I've learned."

