

Identity Project Non-Fiction Examples

The following non-fiction pieces were written by students in either my 10 Honors class for their identity projects or in my creative writing class for our unit on personal essay writing. Notice what each says about what it means to be a teenager, and what is revealed about the author's identity in each.

Vignettes

Some people choose to write a series of short descriptive pieces (vignettes) about their lives to show different moments, events, people, etc. that have shaped them.

String Beans by Ashley McCarthy

"I want to help!"

Frying meatballs pop like bubblegum, potatoes rollerskate across the mandoline, chicken cutlets hopscotch: flour...eggs...breadcrumbs...oil.

"You can cut the string beans."

I rip open the plastic produce bag and shake the beans onto the kitchen table, dull butter knife in hand, precise instructions in head. One bean at a time. Just the tips. Don't try to go straight through. Back and forth, like this.

"So why do they call them string beans?"

"Because they look like strings."

"So lima beans look like limas?"

"There's no such thing as a lima."

"So why do they call them lima beans?"

"I should have named you 'So Why.'"

"Why would you name me 'So Why?'"

"Just watch your fingers or you might find a buttered pinkie on your plate." And I laugh the eight-year-old laugh that can make a whole house smile.

At dinner, my plate gives me away. A brown gravy moat and narrow marble rye bridge to a palatial string bean pile. Over my head, hated babble: Barbara Bush, New York Jets, Gulf War, h-o-o-k-e-r-s. *Don't they know that I can spell? H-o-o-k-e-r-s* are in my dad's fishing tackle box.

And then, for just a moment, the babble gives way. "Have you tried the string beans?" one aunt asks another.

"They're delicious."

"The best thing on the table."

"Pass them this way."

And I believe their enthusiasm for the string beans. I fight to keep the corners of my lips from curling and congratulate myself on helping to prepare a vegetable so delicious it that it made the babble cease, made everyone agree. And it is wonderful.

When I Was Princess Kate
by Katie Conklin

When I was Princess Kate, I held the world in the tiny palms of my hands. I danced and tiptoed my way to the top. Looking back, I think it was really my dad who would so gently sweep me off my feet, literally, and gracefully swing me through the air. You could not stop me. And you still cannot. I would pull the oversized pink tutu onto my tiny bottom and flail my legs around as though I were the “prima ballerina.” When he would shuffle, so would I. When he would giggle, so would I. When he would smile, you better believe I did, because I was Princess Kate, which meant I had the world. If only you could have seen me in my days of glory, the days I shall cherish forever—the times when there was no reality to interrupt your innocence and play. Although I am no longer five and have gained a great deal of responsibility and maturity, if you take the time to look deep into my eyes, you will find me still dancing around with my daddy in a sea of blue.

My Buddy
by Michael Kraus

They asked me if I wanted to help carry the casket. I said no.

There was a tent over the freshly dug earth. I was absolutely terrified at the prospect of sitting next to him. I made my way over to the folding chair that I was directed to, and lowered myself down next to his wheelchair. The sickly sweet aroma of flowers was overwhelming.

The minister said what is normally said under the circumstances, but to be honest, I didn't pay much attention to him. I was directing every ounce of my will towards not crying. Had to be strong, *had* to be strong. For him.

While I fought this emotional battle, he was sobbing. His grief baked off of him in palpable sheets, his frail body wracked with sorrow. Our hands met, my young boy's flimsy grip, made strong under the circumstances, and his trembling old man's hand.

I cried.

It was hard to decipher exactly what he was saying, but I managed to pick out a few phrases that broke my heart.

“My buddy...my buddy's gone...I lost my buddy...my buddy...”

My buddy. As I reflect on those words, grasped with the fingers of an impressionable child, I marvel to myself. What a staggeringly beautiful thing to say. It's too beautiful for words. I can only hope that one day I will find someone to love like that.

When the service was over, the minister walked over to the wheelchair and tenderly handed him the crucifix that had been laid on her casket.

He gave it to me. It was as if he was handing her off to me, because he couldn't cope with the finality of her passing.

I still have it. I hold onto that wooden cross, with the inlaid gold and the not-quite-Christ with palms outstretched, like my grandfather's feeble hand held onto mine: for dear life.

He died, not long after.

There's something poetic about that.

Anatomy of a Name
by Kate Royal

If we're speaking technically, my given name is Katherine. According to the Greeks, it means "bright." But whenever I think of it in those terms, I imagine this blinding fluorescent light flickering annoyingly in an empty hallway. I don't want to be "bright." I don't want to be an obnoxious fluorescent beam that you simply cannot escape.

I want to be shadowy, mysterious, mood lighting. I want to be the little oil lamp by the wall on a corner table in the coziest coffee house, with two lovers speaking poetry to each other by the warmth of my slow burning flame. I want to be the twinkly lights that garner the stage in that same shop while an impoverished vagabond wails about a lost love and strums mournfully on his weathered guitar.

And so I am Kate. Familiar, but layered, just as I am. Not only am I mood lighting, but I'm that friend you forgot you had in high school. I'm that musician you saw when you were dating that guy, or the clerk who sold you that book that changed your life. Add the Royal to it, and now I'm the subject of a "Remember when..." statement. I'm that girl you always wished you'd told you loved her. I'm that person who sang that song that you and he danced to, just after he sheepishly declared he couldn't dance.

But the piece in the middle, the Lorraine, is the part of my name that is just for me. The Kate and the Royal are open for interpretation, but Lorraine is my own, and no one else's. It is generations. It is a history. It is all that has led up to my creation on earth. Given to me by my grandmother, Lorraine is the voice of the women who came before me, telling me to persevere and be strong, just as they were. Lorraine is a message that has rippled down through the centuries and now I alone must hold it and hear it.

And I do hear it. I hear it when you speak my name, when I am addressed as Kate Royal. I am no one else, and no one else is me. Nor can they ever be. I am mood lighting, I am a memory, I am the past, present and future. I am my name, because my name is me.

Ohio
by Kristin Watters

Once we went over the small green bridge that welcomed us, I knew we were there. I sat in the car with the window rolled down in the backseat, the wind blowing in my face. I stuck my hands out the window to feel the air. I could smell the salt water; it was a new taste, different from what I was used to. The streets were busy with joggers, people on roller blades, men fishing off of that same old green bridge. Ocean water surrounded me. This was my dad's new home and it would be mine on weekends.

Every Saturday, my dad would take us to the park across the street from his house. We held each other's hands and crossed the street. The streets were always busy. I called this the "ship park." In my whole ten years of living, I never saw a park in the shape of a pirate ship before. We would play the tickle game. Basically it was a game of tag and if he caught my brother or me, we would then be tickled to death. On the concrete of the playground was a painted map of the United States. One day, my dad walked us over to it. Every state was a different color. I would hop from one state to the other.

"New York, Hop.... Pennsylvania, Hop.... Virginia, Hop...Ohio, Hop..."
He told me to stop there.
Ohio.

“What do you think about Ohio?” asked my dad.

I shrugged my shoulders, looked up at my dad, the sun shining in my eyes. He handed me a white photo album, gold lining hugging the rim and corners of it. I walked over to the nearest bench and opened it. Pictures of my mother and father flowed throughout it. From my dad’s first car, to my mom and dad holding hands, to their marriage. Water filled my eyes. I had never seen them both happy, happy together.

I didn’t put the pieces together until he stopped showing up on weekends. He never told us why. I guess he was just afraid to upset us. The map was painted there for a reason. There are reasons for everything.

“New York, Hop.... Pennsylvania, Hop.... Virginia, Hop...Ohio, Hop...”
Ohio.

That’s where he is.
That’s where he left me.

Personal Essays

The personal essay can be written much like a short story with dialogue and narrative; the only difference is that the story is true. Consider what is revealed about each of these authors in these personal essays which have appeared in Tones.

Pancakes by Nina Ngai

Pancakes—is there anything in the world that’s better?

I think not.

This summer, my friends and I dedicated all of our time to this wonderful food. We were obsessed with pancakes. The mere utter of the word “pancake” or “syrup” would make us salivate. With a prize of pancakes, you could make us commit any crime.

And you may ask—why? Why pancakes? Well—why not? They’re fluffy, they’re sweet—they’re perfect! Add some whipped cream, butter, and syrup—and you’re in heaven!

Like I said, we were obsessed, but that might be an understatement.

So naturally, we set out to find the King of all pancakes. I mean, it’s only so long you can go on eating at average Joe pancake shops before you go searching for The One, the Grand Daddy of all pancake restaurants: IHOP—the international house of pancakes.

However, one of the many horrors of living in a (very) small and (very) residential town is that there are no stores (only a post office and a library) let alone an IHOP. So, we set out on a quest. After a few quick searches on the official IHOP site and a couple clicks on mapquest—we were off.

The closest IHOP was approximately an hour away. And for those grand 60 minutes, all we talked about were pancakes. Everything reminded us of pancakes. Ashlee Simpson’s “Pieces of You” changes to “Pancakes for You.” We even made a “honk for pancakes” sign to hang on the back of the car.

We had gone completely insane.

By the time we actually reached IHOP, we were almost crying from anticipation. We even contemplated naming our kids IHOP.

Teenagers reputation of being obnoxiously loud is completely justifiable. Because when we ran into IHOP that day, I think our squeals of joy could wake the dead. I may be exaggerating (a bit) but we certainly terrified the bus load of senior citizens who were innocently enjoying some delectable IHOP.

We ordered every kind of pancake dish available. Chocolate, Banana Nut, Silver Dollars, Blueberry, Strawberry—all of them.

We took pictures with the pancakes, menus, waiters, everything.

It was a wonderful day. I don't think it's possible to explain how amazing those pancakes were. I didn't know food could ever taste that good.

Now, looking back on it, I don't think the type of food really mattered. It could have been jelly beans, celery, anything. It was summer vacation. We were young and stupid.

And it was perfect.

Little Brothers by **Dennis Yanga**

Little brothers: who needs them? They are loud, annoying and they break your things. They ruin projects that you've been meticulously working on for weeks. Worst of all, they get all the attention. Your parents always tell you to play with them, no matter how boring or weird they are. Even more frustrating is that whenever they do something wrong, it ends up being your fault for not supervising them. My little brother Erwin is no exception. In fact, my brother has to be the most annoying brother in the world. The only difference is that he is autistic.

I used to hate my brother. I didn't understand what it meant to be autistic. All I knew was that my brother could not speak English or any other language. Both of my parents gave him extra special attention that neither I nor my sister received. I was angry that he was not "normal" like everyone else's little brother. We could not take him to places "normal" children went. Vacations were rare because it was impossible to take him onto a plane, and getting him to go in a car when he didn't want to was just as complicated. He would sit on the ground with his head tucked underneath his arms, resisting every time we tried to carry him. And when we were able to bring him to places like restaurants, he would have tantrums and make scenes. People would stare at us like we were freaks. I pretended not to be related to my brother when this happened.

My brother was not very playful either. Autistic children often act aloof. My brother would act as if I didn't exist whenever I felt like playing with him. If I tried talking to him, he would look away, avoiding all eye contact. When I tried to give him a hug, he would hide his head in his arms. His facial expressions were so cold and unresponsive that I used to think that he had no soul.

When I was younger, I used to blow out the candles on my birthday cake wishing not for material gifts, but for my brother to get better. And when I went to church with my mom and Erwin, I would pray that he would learn how to speak. It became increasingly difficult to believe in things like prayers and miracles after years of no improvement.

There were many instances where Erwin irritated me. He caused me to do what any other child would do. I told my mother on him. To my dismay, I would never get the satisfaction I desired. My mother would tell me, "He didn't know any better." Sometimes I wished that my brother would die. Careful what you wish for.

In the summer of 2005, my thirteen-year-old brother had a seizure. I remembered seeing him convulsing with his eyes rolled behind his head. It lasted for three of the slowest minutes I have ever experienced in my life.

How I regretted my terrible wish. I was sorry that I had been embarrassed of my own brother. I felt horrible for ever wanting to abandon him during all the times he made a scene. I wanted my brother to know that I was never angry at him. I wanted him to know that I didn't care anymore about being embarrassed, and that I would run around naked in a crowded mall with countless numbers of people watching if it meant saving my brother's life. But most of all, I wanted him to forgive me for being a jerk to him his entire life.

With all the faith remaining inside of me, I made one last earnest wish. I wished my brother would not die that day. And someone heard me.

When we arrived home from the hospital later that night, my brother was very tired. I instinctively kept a close eye on him even though it wasn't necessary. I didn't care about anything

else. All I cared about was my brother. As he fell asleep, I watched him, monitoring his chest rise and fall, making sure he was still alive. For the first time in my life, I felt like a parent, even though I was only fifteen. I didn't want to come close to losing him again.

I used to think I didn't need my brother, but not anymore. My brother may not be able to speak, but I know he needs me too.

An Unexpected Friend by Kate Steinberg

When I was learning to read my mom was determined to instill in me a love and admiration of books. "A book is like a good friend," she would tell me, "and when you finish a good book it is like losing one of your best friends." I never really needed her encouragement to read. I loved books before I ever even read one. I delighted in looking at the pictures and making up my own stories for them, sitting cross-legged in the middle of my pre-school class and tricking some of the more naïve children into thinking I was an expert reader.

As I grew older I read whatever I could get my hands on. My favorite series was "Goosebumps" and every month I would drag my mother to the mall and run to the back of the bookstore, hair flying behind me to get the latest story that R.L. Stine had written. However, despite this love for the written word, I was unable to relate to my mother's statement. Books couldn't be your friends. They couldn't put an arm around you or give you a hug when you were sad. They could not hold the other end of a jump rope or sit on the other side of a card game. They were meant to be read and finished so that you could move onto a new one. In contrast, friendships were something to hold onto; it was socially inept to move from one to the next.

At least this was how I regarded books before sixth grade. Many things happened in sixth grade that I remember. I had a teacher for each subject, I went to school dances, and I was old enough to fight with my sister over who got to sit in the front seat of the car. But the most significant thing about sixth grade to was the impact one book had on me.

I remember the list hung on the wall by my English teacher which detailed challenging books which we should attempt to read for book reports. I wanted to read them all but eventually had to settle for three books since we only did three book reports that year. The first was *Oliver Twist* and I hated it with a passion. The second was *Little Women* and while enjoyable, it left no deep impression on me. The last book I selected was the only one I had never heard of. I ended up falling in love with it.

This book, called *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, was by an author named Betty Smith. Betty Smith is not a Jane Austen or a William Shakespeare or a Charles Dickens. I have heard her most famous novel called a classic but have encountered many well-read minds who have never heard the title. Even my adoring mind does not fully understand the book and its appeal. What I do know is that for a few weeks in sixth grade, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and its heroine, a girl named Francie Nolan were my best friends.

I must admit that my love for the book was far from instantaneous. I had always believed that I was a fast reader but the length of this book intimidated even me. I second guessed my choice but eventually stuck to it for two reasons. The first was that it was about a girl around my age and the second was that the cover was pretty. I did not regret my choice although I sometimes question the reasoning.

In the weeks it took me to read the book I developed a connection with Francie and our lives became entwined. I looked for any similarities I could find between myself and Francie. The only ones I could detect were that we both had brown hair and loved to read. I envied Francie even though her family was poor. I saw the glamour in sitting in a fire escape and reading a book with a cold glass of water and some peppermint wafers by your side even though I wasn't quite sure what peppermint wafers were. I wished I could be smart enough to read a book a day. I even

considered making a star tin bank until I realized my mother would never allow me to nail a coffee tin to the floor. I wanted to collect junk to sell like Francie did but had no idea where one would go to do such a thing. Most of all I wished I was brave enough to not need friends and be content simply with my family and my books.

When I finished the book, I closed the cover with much poignancy. I was proud of how much I had read but at the same time I felt a pit in my stomach. I wanted to cry. Francie had outgrown me and left me behind, and her book had followed suit. It was at this moment that I realized the truth my mother had spoken so many times, and which I had overlooked with what I thought was wisdom but was in truth naivety. I had lost one of the best friends I had ever had. Betty Smith had peered into my soul and played catch with my heart. She had made sure that once I met Francie I would never be the same. Long after I finished the last word on the last page Francie and her world stayed with me.

When I was in sixth grade the two people I looked up to the most were my mother and Francie Nolan. I have told you my mother's opinion of books. Here is Betty Smith's description of Francie and her relationship with books:

“From that time on, the world was hers, for the reading. She would never be lonely again, never miss the lack of intimate friends. Books became her friends and there was one for every mood. There was poetry for quiet companionship. There was adventure when she tired of quiet hours. There would be love stories when she came into adolescence and when she wanted to feel a closeness to someone she could read a biography.”

Is it any wonder, then, that when I consider my friends, in the back of my mind there is always a book with a pretty cover that is about a girl I have everything and nothing in common with?

The Nose by Melissa Potocki

It's all about the nose. You see, every Potocki has the same nose, straight down the middle with a little slope up at the end. Add in the fact that our nostrils get increasingly larger the harder we laugh and you've got a Potocki. To be honest, I used to hate the fact that I was the same as the rest of my family. I wanted to be different. It's all about being unique in my world, and having the same nose as fifty plus people was *no where* near unique. Whenever I met people at family functions, I cringed when they said, “Look at her nose! She's a Potocki alright.” It was more than agitating to hear this. It's here that my usually optimistic nature took a vacation.

I often expressed my dislike of the ‘Potocki’ nose to my relatives and even threatened to get a nose job. Since I was only in my early teens, they all just laughed at me. I didn't understand why they were all content with being similar or even what was so special about our boring nose! I was too stubborn to see the value and meaning that was behind our noses.

It wasn't until this past December that I came to terms with my common nose. After eleven years, there was finally a new addition to the Potocki family. My older cousin Jeanine had a baby girl named Molly. As I first held Molly, an enormous smile crossed my face. I looked up at the few family members surrounding me and said proudly, “Look at her nose! She's a Potocki alright.” The single phrase that once brought me substantial annoyance was now causing an immense amount of joy.

Seeing Molly made me proud to be a Potocki. I finally saw that it's our noses that tie us all together and make us one. Our stubbornness rides along down the middle as our optimism slopes up at the end. And there in our ever-expanding nostrils is the joy that grows with each new nose added to the family.

Seventeen Years of Movement
by Caroline Iosso

I am 17 years of movement. I am a yellow canoe on the Missinaibi River, a white pick up truck bounding down a dirt road in El Salvador. I'm the tube in London, a coach bus full of teenagers in Spain. I am a red car on a family road trip to Florida, to Chautauqua, to Cape Cod. I'm a van with six girls and six hammers in New Orleans, a van full of costumes, props, and eager actors in Texas. I am travel.

I am 17 years of passion. I am fifteen Shakespeare plays, three canoe trips, two literary magazines, four concerts, thousands of spontaneous dances. I am uproarious laughter with my girlfriends, I am debates with classmates over details of the Civil War, I am the tingle in my muscles during downward dog. I'm a thoughtful contemplation, sand between my toes, and discussions of spirituality with my best friend. I am salsa music and the two sweaty hands clasped as we dance. I am poetry, mountains painted with orange trees, a campfire surrounded by tired and hungry 13 year-olds. I am an artsy foreign film, homemade raspberry jam, and the tremble in my voice during Antigonus' last speech. I am a night singing at a local hangout, a night with a beautiful boy's head in my lap, eyes on the stars. I am the bond between 18 gringos, between 10 fabulously insane girls, between a mother and a daughter, two brothers and a sister. I am love.

I am 17 years of dreams. I am new people, new ideas, new visions. I am the perfect one with whom to fall in love, a trip to Greece in my twenties, a class in anthropology. I'm flushed cheeks upon entering a painting class, I'm a giant mountain made of Kit-Kats. I am a day where all I have to do is read, I am a pair of cow girl boots, a beach in my backyard. I'm a road trip through South America, I am a night where I finish my work by four a.m., awake and satisfied. I am a professional dancer, director, singer, activist, actress, professor, historian. I am someone's muse and I am the answer to all the world's problems. I am ambition.

I am 17 years of anticipation. I am the feeling of wanting and waiting. I am the excitement of starting over, the refreshment of new and interesting friends, the fulfillment of knowledge. I'm the sound of shoes crunching on leaves during a college tour, the weight of a thick course catalog in my hands. I am the desire for adventure, for the smell of coffee brewing in my dorm room, the scratch of a professor's chalk as she discusses indigenous rituals of African tribes. I am all of this and I am ready.