

Learning Targets

- Identify and evaluate the effectiveness of the organizational elements of a personal essay.
- Analyze how a writer uses details, events, and character actions to craft an effective narrative.

Before Reading

1. In Chapters 14 and 15, Krakauer breaks from his 3rd person account of McCandless's biography by inserting a personal narrative essay. Krakauer's account of climbing Devils Thumb, which presents a significant personal experience in which learns about his own skills and inner strength, offers a professional model of the personal essay you will be writing in Embedded Assessment 1. Most personal essays are structured to include three essential elements:

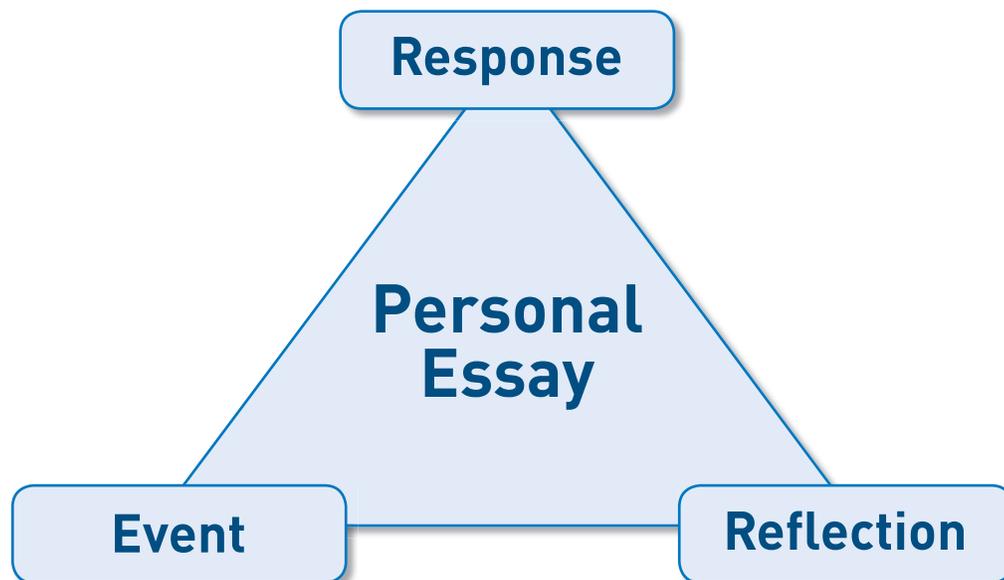
Event or Incident: The author describes some incident or set of circumstances.

Response: The author describes his or her feelings and thoughts concerning the encounter at the time when it was happening. This is the initial response, without the benefit of reflection.

Reflection: The author reflects on the incident. This reflection usually occurs some time after the event or incident. In the reflection, the author will often transition from describing a situation unique to him or her to a discussion more universal in nature.

LEARNING STRATEGIES:
Skimming/Scanning,
Graphic Organizer, Marking
the Text, Close Reading,
Brainstorming

My Notes



A Personal Perspective

My Notes

During Reading

2. As you reread the following excerpt of Krakauer's climb, highlight the text with two colors: one for sentences that reveal his responses at the time and a second for those that present reflection on what was learned as a result of the experiences.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon Krakauer (b. 1954) started climbing mountains at age 8. He has chronicled his experiences in two best-selling books: *Into the Wild* and *Into Thin Air*. He wrote *Into Thin Air* after a failed expedition to climb Mt. Everest. The book earned a nomination as one of the finalists for the Pulitzer Prize.

Biography

From Into the Wild

by John Krakauer

Literary Terms

Coherence is the quality of unity or logical connection among ideas. It is achieved by the clear and orderly presentation of ideas in a paragraph, text, or presentation.

1 My suspicion that McCandless's death was unplanned, that it was a terrible accident, comes from reading those few documents he left behind and from listening to the men and women who spent time with him over the final year of his life. But my sense of Chris McCandless's intentions comes, too, from a more personal perspective.

2 A youth, I am told, I was willful, self-absorbed, intermittently reckless, moody. I disappointed my father in the usual ways. Like McCandless, figures of male authority aroused in me a confusing medley of corked hurt and hunger to please. If something captured my undisciplined imagination, I pursued it with a zeal bordering on obsession, and from the age of seventeen until my late twenties that something was mountain climbing.

3 I devoted most of my waking hours to fantasizing about, and then undertaking, ascents of remote mountains in Alaska and Canada—obscure spires, steep and frightening, that nobody in the world beyond a handful of climbing geeks had ever heard of. Some good actually came of this. By fixing my sights on one summit after another, I managed to keep my bearings through some thick postadolescent fog. Climbing *mattered*. The danger bathed the world in a halogen glow that caused everything—the sweep of the rock, the orange and yellow lichens, the texture of the clouds—to stand out in a brilliant relief. Life thrummed at a higher pitch. The world was made real.

4 In 1977, while brooding on a Colorado barstool, picking happily at my existential scabs, I got it into my head to climb a mountain called the Devil's Thumb. An intrusion of diorite scripted by ancient glaciers into a peak of immense and spectacular proportions, the Thumb is especially imposing from the north: Its great north wall, which had never been climbed, rises sheer and clean for six thousand feet from the glacier at its base, twice the height of Yosemite's El Capitan. I would go to Alaska, ski inland from the sea across thirty miles of glacial ice, and ascend this mighty nordwand. I decided, moreover, to do it alone.

A Personal Perspective

My Notes

12 I tried left, then right, but kept striking rock. The frost feathers holding me up, it became apparent, were maybe five inches thick and had the structural integrity of stale corn bread. Below was thirty-seven hundred feet of air, and I was balanced on a house of cards. The sour taste of panic rose in my throat. My eyesight blurred, I began to hyperventilate, my calves started to shake. I shuffled a few feet farther to the right, hoping to find thicker ice, but managed only to bend an ice ax on the rock . . .

13 Awkwardly, stiff with fear, I started working my way back down. The rime gradually thickened. After descending about eighty feet, I got back on reasonably solid ground. I stopped for a long time to let my nerves settle, then leaned back from my tools and stared up at the face above, searching for a hint of solid ice, for some variation in the underlying rock strata, for anything that would allow passage over the frosted slabs. I looked until my neck ached, but nothing appeared. The climb was over. The only place to go was down.

14 Less than a month after sitting on the summit of the Thumb, I was back in Boulder, nailing up siding on the Spruce Street Townhouses, the same condos I'd been framing when I left for Alaska. I got a raise, to four bucks an hour, and at the end of the summer moved out of the job-site trailer to a cheap studio apartment west of the downtown mall.

15 It is easy, when you are young, to believe that what you desire is no less than what you deserve, to assume that if you want something badly enough, it is your God-given right to have it. When I decided to go to Alaska that April, like Chris McCandless, I was a raw youth who mistook passion for insight and acted according to an obscure, gap-riddled logic. I thought climbing the Devils Thumb would fix all that was wrong with my life. In the end, of course, it changed almost nothing. But I came to appreciate that mountains make poor receptacles for dreams. And I lived to tell the tale.

16 As a young man, I was unlike McCandless in many important regards; most notably, I possessed neither his intellect nor his lofty ideals. But I believe we were similarly affected by the skewed relationships we had with our fathers. And I suspect we had a similar intensity, a similar heedlessness, a similar agitation of the soul.

17 The fact that I survived my Alaska adventure and McCandless did not survive his was largely a matter of chance; had I not returned from the Stikine Ice Cap in 1977, people would have been quick to say of me—as they now say of him—that I had a death wish. Eighteen years after the event, I now recognize that I suffered from hubris, perhaps, and an appalling innocence, certainly, but I wasn't suicidal.

After Reading

3. Following style of the personal-essay graphic organizer on page 287, create a web that shows (a) details of the event, (b) examples of Krakauer's responses at the time of the climb, and (c) his reflections following the failed attempt.

Writing Prompt: Defend, challenge, or refute the following statement: Krakauer is more of a transcendentalist than McCandless. Be sure to:

- Begin with a clear central claim.
- Support your response with specific textual evidence from Krakauer's account of McCandless and/or his personal account in Chapters 14–15.
- Reference specific tenets of Transcendentalism to logically support your position.

Check Your Understanding

How would creating a web of this type help you to successfully write a personal essay?

WORD CONNECTIONS

Roots and Affixes

The word *hubris* refers to excessive pride or exaggerated self-confidence. The word comes from the Greek word *hubris*, originally meaning "presumption toward the gods."