

Allie Novakovic-Emberson

Feedback Letter: Personal Essay (Untitled)

Dear [Author],

Throughout your personal essay, I was refreshed to see one's humanity explored through the realistic lens of a person's growing and evolving mind. Your choice to focus on this personal, identity-based subject is really captivating and allows readers to gain insight on their own thoughts and beliefs as they navigate their way through the piece. From the beginning, the main personae being shared has a very clear voice. Readers quickly understand that, just like many of us growing up and finding our path in life, she can be unsure of herself and often gets stuck in a negative pattern of thoughts in her head. I think narrating the piece in this distinct voice makes the anecdotes and evolution of her feelings compelling to follow, and many people can relate to a lot of the elements she considers when concluding what it means to be good or bad.

As I read, I connected with the narrator's rapid fire inner thoughts that caused a morality/identity crisis within her. We are all guilty of working ourselves up in our head and wondering if others remember the bad we did. We also often wonder if we have been good to the one's around us. Struggling with our internal emotions and wanting to feel useful is relatable, so it is nice to see these growing pains acknowledged on the page. I also really love the structure of this piece, and since it reads just like the Instagram post we can play along with the "rules" of the game alongside the narrator. This adds a nice structure of events and sequence of thoughts that this person goes through to understand how she feels about her own sense of morality. The intimate details shared by the narrator, such as her disdain for furries (aw c'mon, are catgirls okay at least?), as well as the dullness that sometimes consumes her thoughts when depression

takes over, are details that really aid to knowing and understanding her personality. The narrator's experiences often contradict the claims of the Instagram post, and this really makes us wonder if the test is accurate at all. Though not all of her answers are clear-cut, she really does seem to be "good" overall, even if she has made mistakes in her life. Through these contradictions, we are able to see how vague and one-sided the qualifications to "being a good person" really are; Not passing judgement, always being consistent, and never finding yourself in a bad mood are all robotic and inhuman traits as they stand. To be a nice person, really, is to assess every situation you find yourself in and judge it accordingly. You add credibility to the piece by also including many interesting and often funny scenarios that relate to the questions, like the situation about the narrator judging her friend for drinking milk and having an awkward encounter with a man at the grocery store that led her to wanting to help him. These incorporated scenes explore the narrator's life and set of routines that define how she views goodness in the world. It is a really fun perspective to follow someone who is honest about the fact that sometimes they have to lie to their parents and imagine themselves cracking open their skull to avoid the daily stresses of being alive – it makes us feel less alone in these thoughts that are often rarely shared with others in fear that we will be seen as a bad person. Through the recreation of these haunting thoughts, the story effectively conveys that although we are hard on ourselves, it really just pays off to try your best in life.

As you continue to polish this essay moving forward, I also thought of some suggestions that you can consider as you finalize your thoughts. I found myself enthralled by the scenes you have included in the piece, especially that of the situation at the grocery store, along with the sudden wave of anxious and sad emotions that the narrator felt as she realized all the homework that still had to get done when she already felt so defeated. The scenes are painted vividly, and

readers feel for the narrator, hoping that she will be able to realize the potential we know she is capable of. I suggest adding in more of these anecdotal situations to sell who the character is at the core. For example, the paragraph under the fourth question explains the way the narrator compliments others and how she loves making someone's day with a genuine compliment. Instead of *telling* us about this trait (which may cause her character to come off as prideful), this would be a suitable place to throw in a situation where she actually did make someone's day with a compliment; by expressing imagery of the stranger's gratitude, perhaps through their body language or reactions to the comment, and/or adding in more dialogue to break up the chunks of summary telling us about this interaction, can be the simple but effective change that gives the audience more of a chance to be deeply moved by this moment she is describing in a more whole and natural way.

You also have a lot of vivid sentences throughout the essay, and I think you still have room to include more to really show *how* these deep feelings overtake her and the personification of what that feels like through the use of more imagery. I often think of depression and anxiety like some sort of looming monster or beast, so if there has ever been a time where those dark feelings had a visual presence in your mind you should share that to deepen the emotional impact of those thoughts on the page. For instance, rather than the narrator explaining simply how she is "questioning [her] self-worth" or "as [she] read through the slides, [she] tries to match [her] own experiences to them," you could instead explain the actions of swiping through posts and seeing the page, her eyes widening, chest tightening, that tunnel vision you sometimes get when you are lost in thought. If any of these ring true to those situations, we would be able to see the discomfort she feels rather than just be told of it. Even when you share the conversation about judging your friend for drinking milk, I would love to know about her facial expressions or body

language when she reacted to those comments, how it made her feel, and how that overall contributed to how the narrator feels about her actions towards others. I think the imagery of your brain being vacuumed by your mom is a testament back to the beginning of the piece where the narrator is lying in bed, overthinking. It really adds in the element of being unsure of yourself, life, and existence. Her thoughts flow endlessly, and the descriptions of these types of emotions are the most compelling part of the piece. Thus, if there is additional existential information you could visualize and explore, it would really elevate people's ability to relate to those same feelings and fears.

Considering the importance of this imagery, it may also be interesting to consider reframing your point of attack to start the piece off with more of an immersive feeling set within the narrator's thoughts. I appreciate the way the beginning flows to talk about stumbling across the Instagram page, what it looks like and entails, and hearing the narrator's thoughts on the whole idea. However, you may also want to consider if the narrator's dark inner thoughts should be a through-line throughout the piece, and if you could add more imagery of her existential thoughts before she even finds the posts. By beginning the piece in a whirlwind of anxious thoughts, readers will immediately be sucked in to figure out why this character is feeling how she does and what caused that spark of stress inside her. Or, of course, you can keep the first paragraph as a brief explanation of the post and her thoughts and have more room for diegesis and memories shared within the following pages to come. In all, pushing the personae's confliction surrounding her inner kindness will really sell the idea that the human brain can do good things while still struggling with negative thoughts. For instance, the memory of the grocery store situation can be evolved past exploring a time she went the extra mile for someone, into the narrator overthinking if the man was annoyed, if she was wasting too much of his time,

that his sick wife would be unimpressed, etc. as this triggers an example of the narrator spiraling into thought about her overall motives and contribution to others. Of course, it is nice that she shares the times she really was proud to help others, but I think this piece resonates more because she doesn't know that balance of goodness yet and she is simply figuring it out.

Finally, I would suggest doing more research on general aspects of mental health that relate to the narrator, as well as adding more information and substance to the weight of the piece's dark side. Though it's a bit morbid, you could explore just a few sentences of others in the world who have experienced the same vivid suicidal thoughts and what that meant for their mental stability, maybe with statistics, as this adds even more credibility to the topic of mental health in the piece. Of course, it is a personal essay and your own experiences with the topic are highlighted most, but I feel like adding more emphasis on the battle with mental health might root the essay into this pressing subject even more. This would additionally help others in the world who have gone through the same things, so that you can really nail the point that: we are all human with layers and differing emotions, and that being good is not one size fits all. By showing more research about how people live with mental illness and the struggles they have had, this piece would feel even more informational and reassure people that they are not crazy for their sometimes-excessive thoughts.

Overall, the message of this piece brings forth the idea that, to be a good person with bad thoughts is fairly equivalent to the idea of "actions speak louder than words." Throughout the piece, the narrator is working hard to make everyone else see a version of her that sometimes isn't true. Sure, she is compassionate, respectful, consistent, and complimentary, but she can also have every dark thought pass in and out of her brain like it's nothing. But still, does being a good friend, daughter, and person really rely on hiding the parts of yourself that exist in your head just

as much as the positive thoughts? I think this is interesting to think about and watch the narrator uncover about herself throughout. Of the suggestions I made above, I hope some of them can be helpful as you continue working through this piece. I really enjoyed everything you have shared so far, and I'm eager to see the direction you take these ideas moving forward.

All the best,

Allie