

## Foreign Relations

My mirror no longer casted my own reflection. Instead I stared into the eyes of another, another from across the world; it was one of the hardest mental battles of my life to learn to embrace a stranger, an alien from Norway. It was like adopting a puppy: she had needs, and constantly sought attention out of the fear that she would be forgotten. It was a struggle to adjust her to a new world, and her dependence seemed never-ending.

A new foreign sibling claiming my home as her own for a year meant that I had to deal with the fact that I would have to share every aspect of my life with another person attached at my hip. My friends became her friends, even my best friends. My favorite restaurants became her favorite restaurants. My favorite clothes became her favorite clothes. She constantly imitated others and tried to remain in the spotlight. This was difficult. Yet despite all this, she was very loving and kind and imprinted this behavior on me.

We went on trips around the Northeast, even making our way up to Saratoga one sweltering day in August. During the car ride up, we raved about the magnificent spring water that flowed out of the pumps around the city like liquid gold. We stopped at a well when we arrived, and my dad demonstrated how one would drink the sweet water, without ever putting his lips to the spout for the fear that the truly-horrid liquid may reach his taste buds. Under our trance, she bent down and let the water flow to the back of her throat. Her gag reflex engaged instantly as the bitter water wafting the scent of eggs and sulfur made contact, and she immediately realized that we had coerced her into a vile act and she vowed to repay us somehow. Although we never suffered our rightful payback, we were pleased to hear that she would pull the same prank on her parents when they came to visit over the summer.

**Commented [PE1]:** This seems small, but your opening line is important—I recommend making this one short, blunt sentence that opens with a sort of mystical intrigue. Think Bradbury's F451, "It was a pleasure to burn." Short, cut off, instantly captivating in that it presents a contradiction in what we know as the norm—that there is no pleasure in burning (or so we think) and that our mirrors always cast our own reflections (or so yours had, until it didn't).

**Commented [PE2]:** After a short, blunt sentence, follow with the connection of a semicolon to soften the structural flow of the paragraph.

**Commented [PE3]:** I wonder if you might use the opportunity of introducing the specifics of your topic (and explanation of your opening line) to work on show-don't-tell (<https://self-publishingschool.com/show-dont-tell-writing/>). Rather than say, "it was one of the hardest mental battles..." try unwrapping the story and building a picture of WHY it would be a difficult battle rather than tell us outright that it was a difficult battle for you. You can still characterize it for us later if you want to be explicit, but help your reader get there with you. Treat your essay like a movie working along a linear timeline.

**Commented [PE4]:** This might sound silly, but you might want to consider saying "space alien" here, if I'm understanding your use of it correctly (more of an ...)

**Commented [PE5]:** another idea for this sentence: you might want to explicitly state that she was a foreign exchange student to avoid any confusion. You could ...)

**Commented [PE6]:** If you say "It was like," we already know it's a simile, so you don't need to add "in a way" as well. Big lesson coming up: When we speak out ...)

**Commented [PE7]:** See below comment on the Rule of Threes

**Commented [PE8]:** Show don't tell: try replacing this "tell" sentence with one that adds another layer of "show": maybe say "at times, I felt that [explain ...)

**Commented [PE9]:** I'd rework this phrasing; you want to come from a place of learning and growth, but the ...)

**Commented [PE10]:** Consider moving this to one of your later paragraphs about what you gained from the experience/the alien; this paragraph should be where ...)

**Commented [PE11]:** Throwing in some short details makes the story seem more alive. I get the best responses from my "essays are like movies" analogy ...)

**Commented [PE12]:** I'd consider cutting this—make it a surprise when you throw out "bitter water" and "eggs ...)

**Commented [PE13]:** Needs a little reworking/reordering: remember you're telling a funny story and it needs to flow like one! Try this: "As the ...)

**Commented [PE14]:** Maybe "Proud to hear" instead? "Pleased" is always sort of vague and standoffish. It has a Maggie Smith on Downton Abbey vibe.

My house has become a hub for trade between the U.S. and Norway and my world has been expanded beyond my familiar borders. I realize that relationships that challenge you to become a better person are the ones that last a lifetime. We helped each other grow and experience a whole new reality. Hanna was always around to make life a little easier and add a little spunk, she always knew how to make me laugh and was always there to be a comforting aid. I am attempting to live my life in this way, looking at all the positives before gleaning the negatives.

I am so grateful for the knowledge that I gained from the perspective of this alien. She enlightened me on how to always attack the world with a positive attitude and present my best self. I now know how to approach all sorts of new people, interacting with individuals from all different backgrounds and with all different upbringings. I certainly gained enhanced people skills and created a much more outgoing version of myself throughout the year, and I have Hanna to thank.

One trip across the Atlantic will land you in the bustling city of Oslo, Norway: a place where they cross-country ski to school, feast on sheep heads at Christmas time, [redacted]. Although I've never been, I know one thing about the booming metropolis: it gifted me with the experience of a lifetime. I am pleased to know that we will forever have a connection to span across a vast ocean, yet never separating our bond.

**Commented [PE15]:** I like what you're going for, but let's try for something a little more open--maybe "a place for learning and embracing new cultures"?

**Commented [PE16]:** Maybe "beyond the unconscious borders with which I'd grown up that I hadn't realized were so small"

**Commented [PE17]:** I think "easier" may not be exactly in tune with the rest of what you're saying (which is good--you want to show that she added challenge, not ease), so try "a little more vibrant" or something

**Commented [PE18]:** Can you workshop this sentence a little, or the paragraph to mature to what you mean here? You want to be clear about what you mean by "in this way": tell us that in retrospect, the negative aspects of her stay pale in comparison to the positive aspects (but don't use that terribly cliched expression, obviously), that has taught you to actively look for and remind yourself of the positive aspects in any situation.

**Commented [PE19]:** I love the repetition of "alien" as her pseudonym (as long as you clarify)

**Commented [PE20]:** Maybe "embrace" the world? Although the idea of an attack strategy based on positive thinking is pretty cute

**Commented [PE21]:** Try for a more poetic approach--not to say this is wrong, but it leans towards resume speak more than an expression of growth. Ex: "Over the course of our year together, despite its hiccups and hardships\*, I grew into someone who can connect with others more easily and openly and, thanks to Hanna, became a newer, better version of myself."

\*I really like that ear rhyme lol

**Commented [PE22]:** I'm always harping on Julia to try for three examples in situations like these, where you're being poetic in some descriptive sense. It's called the Rule of Three: think "I came, I saw, I conquered," "blood, sweat, and tears," "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," etc. Basically, it's an informal tercet, which is a poem structured with three lines--a way to trick someone's brain into experience a regular ...

**Commented [PE23]:** There's a bit of confusion in this latter half, too--do you mean "...across a vast ocean that could never separate our bond"? Like I said, workshop this--focus on 1) heartfelt and poignant, ...

**Commented [PE24]:** Could you add something here like "it gifted me with the experience of a lifetime [in the form of a loving and kind alien]"? It's an opportunity to reintroduce the subject just before summarizing your bond with them, and putting what's basically an inside ...

**Commented [PE25]:** Consider workshoping this line; they're right when they say your first and last lines are the most important! Don't be afraid to be poetic or get hyperbolic. Turn it situational rather than factual: "I am pleased to know that we will forever have a connection ..."

- Show don't tell: try replacing this "tell" sentence with one that adds another layer of "show": maybe say "at times, I felt that [explain something that is obviously difficult, like "jealous of a life that was mine, but that I wasn't living"]", etc. Think of it as the difference between saying "I was hurt when she said that" and "when she said that to me, I felt as if each word was a tiny needle, pinpricking holes into my lungs until it was impossible to breathe." Dramatic, but this way, we know you're hurting AND you're giving us more "show" than "tell."
- I'd rework this phrasing; you want to come from a place of learning and growth, but the word "imprint" has a subtle implication of not learning, but rather copying or imitating unconsciously.
- Consider moving this to one of your later paragraphs about what you gained from the experience/the alien; this paragraph should be where you explain difficulties, period—then you begin to turn it around when you show the good aspects (in a literal sense, such as anecdotally, as you do), and then you tell us the good parts. Like I said, essays work a little like movies: at first, things suck, period, then they start to turn around and we begin to see the good aspects, then we begin to appreciate the good aspects "out loud," so to speak. You don't want to give us whiplash when you suddenly tell us there's a different side of what's happening, you want to unfold things for us so that we come to the same conclusion as you when you lead us to it.
- Maybe "Proud to hear" instead? "Pleased" is always sort of vague and standoffish. It has a Maggie Smith on Downton Abbey air to it.
- I like what you're going for, but let's try for something a little more open—maybe "a place for learning and embracing new cultures"?
- Maybe "beyond the unconscious borders with which I'd grown up that I hadn't realized were so small"
- I think "easier" may not be exactly in tune with the rest of what you're saying (which is good—you want to show that she added challenge, not ease), so try "a little more vibrant" or something
- I love the repetition of "alien" as her pseudonym
- Consider workshoping this line; they're right when they say your first and last lines are the most important! Don't be afraid to be poetic or get hyperbolic. Turn it situational rather than factual: "I am pleased to know that we will forever have a connection" could be "Whenever I begin to feel alone, it's endlessly comforting to know that I still have in me a little string connecting our hearts across the ocean..." okay, the string part is paraphrasing Jane Eyre, but you get the picture.
- Could you add something here like "it gifted me with the experience of a lifetime [in the form of a loving and kind alien]"? It's an opportunity to reintroduce the subject just before summarizing your bond with them, and putting what's basically an inside joke of some sort of affectionate (or even unaffectionate that \*becomes\* affectionate) repetitious reference that you've had throughout is used a lot to provoke a sense of awww at the end of writing meant to tug at our heartstrings.

## Transcript of in-text comments:

- This seems small, but your opening line is important—I recommend making this one short, blunt sentence that opens with a sort of mystical intrigue. Think Bradbury's F451, "It was a pleasure to burn." Short, cut off, instantly captivating in that it presents a contradiction in what we know as the norm—that there is no pleasure in burning (or so we think) and that our mirrors always cast our own reflections (or so yours had, until it didn't).
- After a short, blunt sentence, follow with the connection of a semicolon to soften the structural flow of the paragraph.
- I wonder if you might use the opportunity of introducing the specifics of your topic (and explanation of your opening line) to work on show-don't-tell (<https://self-publishingschool.com/show-dont-tell-writing/>). Rather than say, "it was one of the hardest mental battles..." try unwrapping the story and building a picture of WHY it would be a difficult battle rather than tell us outright that it was a difficult battle for you. You can still characterize it for us later if you want to be explicit, but help your reader get there with you. Treat your essay like a movie working along a linear timeline: start hopeful and move into the difficulties; build a climax first, then summarize how you feel once we have more details and can say, "oh, I totally felt that, too." HOWEVER, this is only a suggestion—I know word count can be difficult and some writers prefer to be much more explicit & upfront about the characterizations of their stories (Douglas Adams, Pound, etc.)
- Throwing in some short details makes the story seem more alive. I get the best responses from my "essays are like movies" analogy, so imagine anecdotal tellings as visual scenes: we want to see the bright sun overhead and the sweat of August in Saratoga so that we're thirsty for that magnificent spring water, too.
- Needs a little reworking/reordering: remember you're telling a funny story and it needs to flow like one! Try this: "As the bitter water wafting the scent of eggs and sulfur [great description btw] hit her throat, she instantly realized the vile act we had coerced her into committing, and vowed to repay us if it was the last thing she ever did"
- I'd consider cutting this—make it a surprise when you throw out "bitter water" and "eggs and sulfur," but give us a subtle clue by mentioning that he deliberately didn't taste the water himself.
- If you say "It was like," we already know it's a simile, so you don't need to add "in a way" as well. Big lesson coming up: When we speak out loud, we often add qualifying speech fillers (phrases that are both qualifiers AND speech fillers) to soften the intensity and directness of our assertions—something you'll see a LOT more in women than men, because we're taught 1) not to be aggressive, and 2) that our opinion is likely to be wrong, so you should add qualifiers (so to speak, in a way, it seemed to me, etc) to apologize for it as you say it. Okay, feminist rant over. Everyone uses qualifying speech fillers, though, and overall, it's just because we're used to softening our language when we're just talking conversationally. Given that it's a metaphor and "SHE WAS A PUPPY" makes no sense anyway, you do need to establish that it's a simile here, as you do; just watch for the double-negation of following up statements with speech-filling qualifiers and using them in your writing generally, and smash the patriarchy by being as direct and unapologetic as you damn well please. When we write, we don't qualify, we prove.
- See below comment on the Rule of Threes