Exploring Rites of Passage

Purpose: This assignment should help you to reflect critically on a specific experience and why it is significant to you. It should help you to practice focusing on specific details (a good essay will paint a picture in the reader's mind), to develop your thoughts in a logical manner, and to make connections between separate issues (i.e., what is the event, and why is it significant to you?).

Assignment: Reflect on an event from your past that you consider to have been a life-changing experience. Write an essay in which you describe what events transpired and how they were life-changing for you.

Ways to Proceed: First, find an event that sticks out in your mind. Usually—but not always—something that is very vivid in your memory will also hold great significance for you. Next, try to picture characters and scenes exactly as they happened. Did Aunt Viv eat all the artichoke dip? Did Uncle Frank get falling-down drunk? Details are important! Your readers will never know your story as well as you unless you use your words to paint a clear picture in the mind of the reader. Consequently, if s/he fails to see an event clearly, s/he will likely fail to see why it is so important to you. After finding a suitable event, do some prewriting (brainstorming, clustering, or freewriting) to generate your ideas. Make sure that you do prewriting for both the description of the event and for your examination of why the event was a significant rite of passage for you. Next, place your ideas into a cohesive outline to organize your ideas. After you have organized your ideas, begin a draft in which you attempt to capture the essence of the event as well as why the event was important. Again, specific details are important, but make sure you balance details of the event with analysis of the event's importance. After drafting your essay, give yourself some time—a day or so—and then come back and revise your writing, paying special attention to the organization and logic of your essay. Does it make sense? Do things happen in your essay the way they really happened (i.e., in a chronological order)? Did you explain why this event was an important "Coming of Age" event? Finally, make sure that you do a spell check and grammar check before handing in your essay.

One of the best ways to demonstrate how an event was a life-changing moment for you is to SHOW the reader how you have changed. In order to do this, you may need to tell the reader what you were like before the event occurred. In other words, you may wish to organize the body of your paper in a chronological fashion so that you: (1) describe what you were like before the event (2) describe the event itself and (3) describe how you act now after the event has happened. Such a pattern of organization will serve to show your reader how you have changed. For instance, IF you (1) used to drive with reckless abandon, but then you (2) got into a really bad accident and spent six months doing physical therapy to recover from the accident, so now you (3) drive like an old lady coming home from church, THEN you will have shown the reader how you changed, which is, after all, a better way of letting the reader know how you are different as a result of this given event.
Caution: Be very careful when you choose the experience that you plan to write about. This should not be strictly an autobiography—make sure that you are demonstrating why this event is so important to you. The fact that your parents got a divorce might be very vivid in your mind, but unless you can show the reader how it has continually influenced your life or what you may have learned from the divorce, you are not fulfilling the purpose of this assignment. Remember, this is supposed to be a "Coming of Age" event. As such, your views should be different after the event than they were before the event. Also, the assignment is to describe one event in your life; sometimes a divorce can drag on interminably. How can you successfully describe this event and explain its significance in a mere three to four (3-4) pages?

Criteria for Evaluation: Your essay should be at least four (4) pages in length. It should be typed, double-spaced, with one inch margins (top, bottom, right, left), and use a 12 point standard font (e.g., Courier New, Arial, Garamond). Your essay should generally conform to the MLA style of essay formatting. Your essay will be graded according to how well you narrate and describe your event (remember to show activities and feelings, don't just tell about them!) and how well you analyze the significance of the event. Moreover, your essay will be graded on how well you construct a Thesis-Driven essay. Special attention will be paid to: (1) how well you construct an Introduction that leads up to (and introduces) your Thesis Statement; (2) how well your Thesis PREDICTS the topic of your essay, CONTROLS the overall scope of the paper, and OBLIGATES you prove a certain line of reasoning in your paper; (3) how well you construct individual Body Paragraphs that (a) present/explore ONE specific topic in the paragraph and (b) relate back to your Thesis; and (4) how well you construct a Conclusion that restates (without repeating) your Thesis.

Good Luck on this assignment!