

The Top Five: What Makes a Great Red Book Essay?

1. “The first person.”

At the Harvard Alumni Association Class Report Office, we request that all essays be written in the first person. This is not to say that creative license shouldn't factor into your essay! What we don't want are dry write-ups of the third-person variety, which are generally more suited for a book jacket or a job interview. Of course, there are things about your life that you might prefer not to share, but focusing on the things you do want to share and getting to the heart of the “I” is always the goal. These books represent a unique opportunity for self-reflection, and the best essays, no matter how brief, find a way to explore the inner life of the author. In short: remember that your fellow alumni really do want to know how you feel as much as they want to know what you do.

2. A little adventurousness goes a long way.

Don't be shy! If you feel that a certain format suits your voice better than a string of conventional paragraphs, please feel free to explore other options! Some of the best essays we read grab our attention right away with their formatting. We've published dialogues, all types of creative lists, original haiku, and song lyrics, among other creative works. Think of the narrative space as a blank canvas for you to use. Think outside the justified paragraph block.

3. History: the intersection of personal and cultural.

Although it's said to be impolite to speak about politics at cocktail parties or on first dates, we hope that, if you are so inclined, you might break that rule for the Red Book. Many of our best alumni authors take time to comment thoughtfully on their moment in history. What are the cultural and historical moments that you view as defining or transformational for your generation over the past five years? How have those moments intersected with your personal life? Go ahead and voice your concerns and your hopes; we're looking forward to hearing you speak about your times.

4. A strong sense of place.

Maybe you live in a town or city that's completely different than the place where you grew up. Maybe you feel stuck in the shadow of the place where you grew up. Maybe you love to travel and feel that “roots” are overrated. Maybe you're living abroad for work and feeling homesick. Whatever your current scenario, tell us about it in as much detail as you can. No matter where our essays arrive from—and they arrive, literally, from all over the world—many of our best essays find the heart of things in describing the places, the streets, the trees that surround them. Or those of the places their authors daydream about instead.

5. Change, change, change.

Consider how many things change in just one year or even five to fifty. Some things change for the better and some things change for the worse, to be sure, but really: could you ever have imagined some of the things happening to you now? Five, ten, twenty years ago, did you envision yourself where you are? Our best alumni authors have a way of exploring the theme of change in a unique, personal way—some with humor, some with poignancy, and always with focus and an innate sense that the forces of change binds us all.