

NARRATION — AND THEN...

Telling a story, or narrating, is one of the most appealing and natural ways to convey information. Every time you tell a joke, trade gossip, invent a ghost story, or tell a friend what you did on the weekend, you are narrating. In both speech and writing, telling a story can be the most direct way to make a point. If your idea or opinion was formed by your experience, a clear account of that experience will often help people to understand and even to accept your point.

Choice of scope: Time stretches infinitely toward both the past and the future — but where does your narrative most logically begin and end? Include only the part or parts that best illustrate your point. If facts about the past or future are needed, sketch them in with a few words of explanation.

Choice of details: Which details will contribute to the main point? Reject the trivial ones and seek those that represent your dominant impression or idea. Which details are most vivid? Reject the weak ones and select those that help the reader to see, hear, feel, smell, or taste — in other words, those that most encourage the reader to *experience* the events.

Choice of connections: Readers like to be “swept along” by a narrative. How is this effect achieved? Partly by an economical use of words, and partly by the use of time signals. Like road signs for the motorist, the words, “at first,” “next,” “then,” “immediately,” “suddenly,” “later,” “finally,” and “at last” show the way and encourage progress. Use these words, and others like them, wherever they fit. Choose carefully, making the right signals to help build your effect.

Writing About Myself

My traffic accident
 The day I learned to be honest
 My moment as a sports hero
 The day I learned to recognize people
 of the opposite sex as equals
 My visit to the dentist
 My brush with the law
 An occasion when I surprised myself
 My first date
 The day I learned to like (or dislike) school
 The day I was a victim of prejudice
 The day I learned to tell the truth
 The day I got lost
 The day I realized what career I wanted
 My escape from another country
 The day I realized I was an adult

Writing About Others

A BRUSH WITH DEATH
 A RESCUE
 AN INCIDENT OF SEXISM
 A CATASTROPHE
 AN EXAMPLE OF CHARITY IN ACTION
 AN ASSAULT
 AN HISTORICAL EVENT
 A MAJOR FAILURE OF COMMUNICATION
 AN IMPORTANT EVENT IN THE LIFE OF A CHILD
 AN IMPORTANT EVENT IN THE LIFE
 OF AN ELDERLY PERSON
 A VIOLENT INCIDENT AT A SPORTING EVENT
 A PRACTICAL JOKE THAT BACKFIRED
 AN ALARMING MOB SCENE
 A SUCCESS IN THE LIFE OF TEACHER

Source: *The Act of Writing* by Ronald Conrad

Personal Narration Notes -- 075/110

A Personal Narration Paragraph/Essay

- 1) A personal narration is an account of some event that has occurred in your life, some experience you have had -- for example, an embarrassing job interview; a proud moment as a high school athlete; a frightening childhood encounter with a vicious dog.

- 2) Narrow down your topic for a paragraph or an essay:

Don't try, for example, to write about your entire vacation to Hawaii; instead write about one incident during this vacation -- going to a luau, surfing for the first time, or learning to hula.

Choose an event which spans a short period of time so you can cover it in depth in a paragraph or a short essay.

- 3) Write in first person (I) -- the use of "I" makes your narration a "personal" one.
(Note: Your instructor may also allow third person point of view.)
- 4) Cover at least four elements in your paragraph/essay:
- a) setting (place, surroundings)
 - b) characters (people involved)
 - c) plot (the action, the details of the event)
 - d) significance -- the main point or impression you want to convey.
- 5) Be certain that you have a strong topic sentence or thesis statement that expresses an opinion or clear main idea (unless your instructor makes this optional).

To arrive at a topic sentence or thesis statement in a personal narrative, ask yourself: "What did this experience mean to me?" Try using a fill-in-the-blank approach:

- 1) My first attempt at water skiing was very _____.
(The word you use to fill in the blank is the opinion word in your topic sentence. It could be "disastrous," "gratifying," etc.)
- 2) I really _____ the tour of Chinatown in Chicago last summer.
(Your opinion word could be "enjoyed," "disliked," etc.)
- 6) Observe clear chronological (time) order in your narration.
- 7) Sometimes a background sentence is necessary to "set-up" the narration, to take the reader quickly to the "heart" of your story. Such a sentence usually appears first in the paragraph or essay and indicates the "who, what, when, where, or why" of the narration.

EXAMPLE: Last winter my sister Joan and I spent two weeks in Florida.
While there...

NOTE: This is not a topic sentence or thesis, but rather a "lead-in" sentence. Your topic sentence or thesis would follow this lead-in sentence. (In an essay, other types of lead-in sentences may also be used.)

- 8) Don't forget to include transitions wherever necessary in your narration. Since you're using chronological order, your transitions will often be time transitions:

after leaving the house
when we first arrived
in the morning
later that day
after an exciting afternoon
during the evening
that night
as soon as we got home, etc.

- 9) If the actual words of a person in your paragraph are important, use dialogue (direct conversation) with quotation marks.
- 10) Write as concretely as possible -- use names, specific details, pictorial description, etc.
- 11) Sample OUTLINE of a personal narration essay (outlining can also be used with a paragraph assignment):
- I. Introduction: When I was in the second grade, I allowed my friends to persuade me to play a prank on my teacher. This early traumatic experience taught me that there are right and wrong times for humor. (OR: This experience proved to be one of the worst of my childhood.)
 - II. Body: Setting up the prank was very exciting. I spent hours collecting roaches and spiders.
 - III. Body: I arrived at school an hour early with a jar filled with dozens of hideous, crawling insects. I put them in place.
 - IV. Body: The reaction of Mrs. Jackson and the class. My getting caught! I never knew exactly how Mrs. Jackson figured out who was responsible for the "bugging," but somehow she did.
 - V. Conclusion: After this escapade, I reserved my sense of humor for my friends only and vowed that I would analyze a situation carefully before jumping into it.

NARRATIVE ESSAY

A **narrative essay** is an essay that *tells a story about a specific event or experience*. Narratives have a point, and the narrative (story) is used to **convey the point**. A narrative includes all the key events of the story, presented in time order. The narrative essay is more than just a listing of events; it often **uses descriptive and sensory information** to make the narrator's point and to make the story real for the reader. Consequently, narratives are often subjective rather than objective.

NARRATIVE ESSAYS ARE USUALLY WRITTEN FROM ONE OF TWO POINTS OF VIEW:

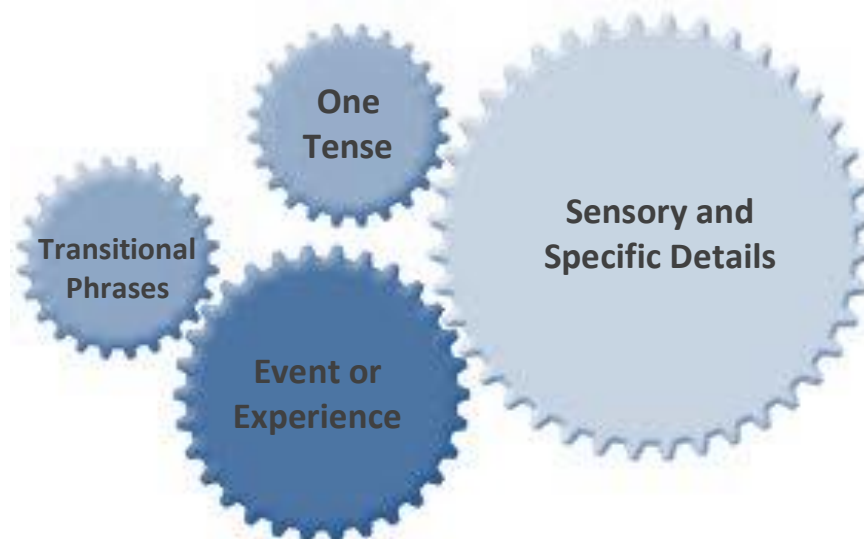
- *First Person (speaker)*: Uses personal pronouns such as *I, we, me, my, mine*
- *Third Person (person spoken about)*: Uses personal pronouns such as *she, he, it, they*

KEY COMPONENTS OF A NARRATIVE ESSAY

1. Some significant event, experience or relationship provides the organizing focus/idea
2. Sensory and specific supporting details that give the reader a close-up of the events, experience or relationship (*e.g. scenery, season, scents, sounds, dialogue, etc.*)
3. Events or activities in time sequence (*i.e. Beginning, Middle, End or Aftermath*).
4. Unified: everything in the essay refers to the central idea or focus
5. Written in one tense (*usually past tense*) and from one point of view (*first or third person*)
6. **Transitional phrases** that help the reader follow the sequence of actions

EXAMPLES OF TRANSITIONAL PHRASES

After a short time	Afterwards	As long as	As soon as
At last	At length	At that time	At the same time
Before	Earlier	Of late	Immediately
In the meantime	In the past	Lately	Later
Meanwhile	Now	Presently	Shortly
Since	Soon	Temporarily	Then
Thereupon	Until	When	While



A FEW QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN WRITING A NARRATIVE ESSAY

Beginning (establishes the point and the tone)

1. Why was this event or experience so important or memorable?
2. Why were you involved?
3. How did you feel at the beginning of the event or experience?

Middle (focuses on the events in time sequence)

1. What happened during the event or experience?
2. Was there a climax or very dramatic moment?
3. How did you feel during the event or experience?

End/Aftermath (reiterates/confirms the significance of the point)

1. What was the result or conclusion?
2. What did you like or dislike about this event or experience?
3. How did you feel after the event or experience?
4. What did you learn from this event or experience?

NARRATIVE OUTLINE

- I. Introduction
 - A. Lead-in: Background information that sets the tone and draws the reader in
 - B. Tie-in: A sentence that connects the lead-in with the thesis statement
 - C. Thesis: Sentence which states why this experience was so important or memorable
- II. Body
 - A. Details about the **beginning** of the event or experience
 1. Specific supporting ideas, details and examples
 2. Sensory and descriptive details
 - B. Details about what occurred **during** the event or experience
 1. Specific supporting ideas, details and examples
 2. Sensory and descriptive details
 - C. Details about what happened in the **final** stage of the event or personal experience
 1. Specific supporting ideas, details and examples
 2. Sensory and descriptive details
- III. Conclusion
 - A. Reiterate: Rephrases the thesis
 - B. Review: Summarizes your main supporting ideas
 - C. Reflect: Indicates the significance of the experience
 - D. Wrap-up: Leaves the reader with a deep and powerful last thought

NOTE: *Each paragraph should focus on one specific aspect of the event or personal experience instead of skimming over a series of events.*

Portions of this handout were taken from Philip Egger's *Process and Practice: A Guide for Developing Writers* and the "Study Guides and Strategies" website (<http://www.studygs.net/fiveparag.htm>).

“Narrative” is a term more commonly known as “story.” Narratives written for college or personal narratives, tell a story, usually to some point, to illustrate some truth or insight. Following are some tools to help you structure your personal narrative, breaking it down into parts.

Introduction

The “Hook” Start your paper with a statement about your story that catches the reader’s attention, for example: a relevant quotation, question, fact, or definition.

Set the Scene Provide the information the reader will need to understand the story: Who are the major characters? When and where is it taking place? Is it a story about something that happened to you, the writer, or is it fiction?

Thesis Statement The thesis of a narrative essay plays a slightly different role than that of an argument or expository essay. A narrative thesis can begin the events of the story: *“It was sunny and warm out when I started down the path”*; offer a moral or lesson learned: *“I’ll never hike alone again”*; or identify a theme that connects the story to a universal experience: *“Journeys bring both joy and hardship.”*

Body Paragraph

“Show, Don’t Tell” Good story telling includes details and descriptions that help the reader understand what the writer experienced. Think about using all five senses—not just the sense of sight—to add details about what you heard, saw, and felt during the event. For example, *“My heart jumped as the dark shape of the brown grizzly lurched toward me out of the woods”* provides more information about what the writer saw and felt than, *“I saw a bear when I was hiking”*.

Supporting Evidence In a personal narrative, your experience acts as the evidence that proves your thesis. The events of the story should demonstrate the lesson learned, or the significance of the event to you.

Passage of Time Writing about the events of your experience using time chronologically, from beginning to end, is the most common and clear way to tell a story. Whether you choose to write chronologically or not, use transition words to clearly indicate to the reader what happened first, next, and last. Some time transition words are *next, finally, during, after, when, and later*.

Transitions In a narrative essay, a new paragraph marks a change in the action of a story, or a move from action to reflection. Paragraphs should connect to one another. For example, the end of one paragraph might be: *“I turned and ran, hoping the bear hadn’t noticed me”*, and the start of the next might be: *“There are many strategies for surviving an encounter with a bear; ‘turn and run’ is not one of them.”* The repetition of words connects the paragraphs. (What does the change in verb tense indicate?)*

Conclusion

The Moral of the Story The conclusion of a narrative include the closing action of the event, but also should include some reflection or analysis of the significance of the event to the writer. What lesson did you learn? How has what happened to you affected your life now?



Personal Narrative Sample Paper

Name _____ Date _____

The title lets the reader know what the story is about.

My First Talent Show

To set the scene, the writer includes details about where the story took place.

Standing backstage, I could feel my heart thumping in my chest. "Just relax," my friend Jenny whispered. "You're ready for this." I nodded. Jenny was right. I'd been practicing my song for the school talent show for six weeks. Still, picturing an audience packed with kids, parents and teachers made me want to run out the door.

In the introduction, the writer describes what happened first.

"Too late for that," I thought, as Mr. Peterson announced my song. Jenny gave me a nudge, and suddenly I was on the stage. Standing in the spotlight, I grasped the microphone and belted out the lyrics. I heard my voice pour through the speakers and fill the room. "It's going well," I thought to myself. "Don't mess up."

The writer includes details about what he or she was thinking.

The writer includes details about what he or she saw, heard, smelled or felt.

I looked out at the sea of faces. The auditorium was dark, but I could see hundreds of eyes staring back at me. The smell of candy bars and popcorn filled the room. "I hope Jenny is saving some for me," I thought, as I started the chorus one last time.

The writer describes what happened next.

The writer includes a detail that shows how he or she felt about this experience in the end.

As I finished the song, the audience began to clap. "Yeah, Katie!" one kid yelled. "You rock!" screeched another. I took a bow and walked offstage with a smile plastered across my face. "How many days until next year's talent show?" I asked Jenny.

In the conclusion, the writer describes what happened last.

Personal Narrative Essay Model

Promises Are Not Meant to Be Broken

The anecdote, or "little story," in the introduction provides background information for the narrative essay. The last sentence is a modified thesis statement that outlines the three consequences of the decision.

My heart leaped with excitement! My hero (a.k.a. my dad) was taking care of my older brothers and me. At the very least, this meant chocolate marshmallow ice-cream cones and maybe even the privilege of staying up past 8:00 P.M. Clean, polished, and properly p.j.'d, I plastered my charming five-year-old smile on my face and politely begged to watch *Wagon Train*, a show that ended at 9:00, with my brothers. To my great delight Dad caved in but made me promise to go to bed at 8:30. Happily I crossed my heart and pledged to do as I was told. Little did I know that later I would face a decision that would fill me with doubt, cause me to disobey my dad, and lead me to suffer the unhappy consequences.

Along with *The Lone Ranger*, *Wagon Train* promised to become one of my favorite television shows. Filled with western frontier action, the trials and tribulations of America's early pioneers kept me and my siblings on the edge of our seats. Right in the middle of a dramatic showdown, my oldest brother told me it was 8:30, time for me to go to bed. Although a small voice whispered, "Remember what you promised Dad," a louder voice shouted, "Hide somewhere so you can see whether Cookie gets scalped!" Back and forth, up and down my conscience seesawed. Doubt clung to me like a wide strip of Velcro.

The first body paragraph relates to the first point of the modified thesis statement. It uses some dialogue, vivid verbs, and figurative language.

A clincher sentence summarizes the information.

The second body paragraph shows the narrator chooses the wrong path, the second point in the modified thesis statement.

“Bang!” The battle against the Indians began, and I was hooked. Pretending to head toward bed, I stealthily crept behind the stairwell wall. From there I had a clear view of the television, yet no one in the living room could see me. Propped up against the wall with my teddy bear in hand, I made my fateful decision: I would watch the rest of the show.

Totally enthralled by the action, I failed to see my dad enter the living room and head toward the stairs. Before I could zip into my room, Dad, red-faced and angry, appeared at the bottom of the steps. With a quivering voice he declared, “Sue, you must never, ever break a promise. I counted on you to keep your word.” Immediately the tears welled up and trickled down my cheeks. I had disappointed my hero, and, even worse, I had disappointed my best moral self. Slowly my father continued, “I think an appropriate punishment would be to go without watching TV for an entire week. And that means no *Wagon Train*!” In the end, the prospect of not seeing any of my favorite shows did not bother me nearly as much as the thought of letting down my dear old dad.

The third body paragraph illustrates the consequences of the narrator’s decision, the third point in the modified thesis.

The conclusion shows what the narrator learns from making her decision.

When I was just five I learned a valuable lesson from an extraordinary teacher: my dad. After disobeying him one night and suffering the natural consequences of my actions, I realized how important it is to keep a promise. To this day if I promise to do something, you can bet your bottom dollar that I will do it.

Outlining Your Narrative

Try applying this structure to your own writing: write sentences for the corresponding elements of your introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion in the space provided below.

Introduction:

Begin your paper with a “hook” that catches the reader’s attention and set the scene . Where is the event set? What time of year? How old were you when this happened?	
State your thesis : what you learned, or how the event is significant to you.	

Body paragraphs: *write three significant moments from the beginning, middle, and end of the event.*

Para. 1: Beginning Action	Topic sentence: Detail 1. Detail 2. Detail 3.	Note: Don’t forget to “Show, Don’t Tell” : List sounds, smells, sights, tastes, and textures that you remember. Your experience is your “evidence”. Use transition words to mark the passage of time .
Para. 2: Middle Action	Topic sentence: Detail 1. Detail 2. Detail 3.	
Para 3: End Action	Topic sentence: Detail 1. Detail 2. Detail 3.	

Conclusion:

Analyze and reflect on the action of the story, including how the events are significant to you.	
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Writing Strategies to Consider

First Person vs. Third Person Narratives are a mode of writing in which writers often use first person perspective (“I saw”, “I did”). Check with your instructor to determine whether you can use “I” when telling your story.

***Verb Tense: Reporting vs. Reflecting** The events of most narratives are told in past tense: “As I hiked, I felt the warm sun on my back.” Use present tense when reflecting on the events: “Now I know how unprepared I was”. Notice the change in tense in this sentence as the writer reflects on the past event, from the present.

Name _____ Date _____ Section _____

Personal Narrative Essay Editing Sheet

Yes	No	Focus
___	___	Does the story clearly relate to the essay topic?
___	___	Does each detail and paragraph relate to the topic?
___	___	Are there any sections, parts, or sentences that need to be removed because they do not relate to the topic?

ORGANIZATION

Introduction

___	___	Is there an attention-getting opening?
___	___	Does the introduction include background information about the topic?
___	___	Is there an identifiable main idea or modified thesis statement in the last sentence of the introduction? Remember, in a narrative essay the writer may not be able to outline the three points.
___	___	Does the introduction work? Does it relate to the body of the essay?

Body

___	___	Are there at least three paragraphs?
___	___	Does each body paragraph develop one main idea presented in the introduction?
___	___	Are the paragraphs arranged in a logical order?
___	___	Does one sentence relate to another?
___	___	Are there smooth transitions between paragraphs? Does one paragraph flow into another?
___	___	Are there transition words? (Circle these.)

Conclusion

___	___	Does the conclusion/ending effectively and naturally end the narrative essay?
___	___	Does the conclusion show what was learned, stimulate additional thought, or pack a powerful punch?

Name _____ Date _____ Section _____

Yes**No****Content**

- ____ Are there lots of specific details related to making the decision or choice?
- ____ Does the reader learn who, what, where, when, why, and how from the content?
- ____ Do the details paint a vivid, clear picture of what happened?
- ____ Is any dialogue or conversation used?

Usage (Conventions)

- ____ Are all sentences complete?
- ____ Is every paragraph indented?
- ____ Are all words spelled correctly?
- ____ Is proper capitalization used?
- ____ Is punctuation correct?
- ____ Is the grammar correct?

Style

- ____ Does the story sound serious, amusing, or frightening? In other words, can you identify a tone or mood?
- ____ Are the sentence beginnings varied? (Highlight the first four words of ten sentences to check this.)
- ____ Do you know how things look, feel, and sound? Are your five senses involved in the story?
- ____ Are the sentence lengths varied (short, medium, and long)?
- ____ Are there powerful adjectives? (Highlight at least four.)