

What Stories Do I Have? - Writing a Personal Narrative or Memoir

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”

- Socrates

Tell a Story:

A narrative essay is a story written about a personal experience. Writing a narrative essay provides an opportunity to get to know and understand yourself better. One of the best ways to reveal who you are is to write about how you became aware of something, gained a new way of seeing the world, a new insight. While such awareness can occur for apparently unexplainable reasons, it most often happens when you encounter new ideas or have experiences that change you in some way. During the process of writing a narrative, you will learn ways to articulate personal experience to inform and entertain others. Narratives provide human interest, spark our curiosity, and draw us close to the storyteller. In addition narratives can do the following:

- Create a sense of shared history, linking people together.
- Provide entertainment. Most people enjoy a thrilling movie or an intriguing book.
- Provide psychological healing. Reading or listening to the narrative of someone who has faced a life crisis similar to one you are experiencing can help you through a crisis. They can also help the writer deal with the crisis.
- Provide insight. Narratives can help you discover values, explore options, and examine motives.

Essential Questions:

Authentic Voice

- What stories do I have?

Narrative Coherence

- What makes an effective story?

Communal Relevance

- How can I engage a reader with my stories?
- What essential human qualities do my stories illustrate?
- What can I learn from other people’s experiences?
- How can I use my own experiences to teach others?

Revision

- How can I most effectively listen to and read other people’s stories?
- How can/should I use reader feedback to make my writing more powerful?

So what is the difference between a narrative and a memoir?

Personal narrative	Focused on a <i>significant event</i>
Personal memoir	Focused on a <i>significant relationship</i> between the writer and a person, place, or object

“Don’t tell us that the old lady screamed. Bring her on and let her scream.”

- Samuel Clemens

Characteristics of Narrative Writing:

Narrative essays describe specific experiences that changed how you felt, thought, or acted. The form of a narrative is similar to a story in that it describes how your character is feeling by “showing” through his/her actions, rather than by coming right out and “telling” your readers. However, a good narrative isn’t just an entertaining story, but has a point to make, a purpose to convey. In writing a narrative essay, your purpose is not to merely tell an interesting story but to show your readers the importance and influence the experience has on you. This experience may be used as a springboard for reflection.

A GOOD NARRATIVE HAS

1. AUTHENTIC VOICE
2. NARRATIVE COHERENCE
3. COMMUNAL RELEVANCE.

Purpose and Audience

Personal narratives allow you to share your life with others and vicariously experience the things that happen around you. Your job as a writer is to put the reader in the midst of the action letting him or her live through an experience. Although a great deal of writing has a thesis, stories are different. A good story creates a dramatic effect, makes us laugh, gives us pleasurable fright, and/or gets us on the edge of our seats. A story has done its job if we can say, "Yes, that captures what living with my father feels like," or "Yes, that’s what being cut from the football team felt like."

- A personal narrative presents important changes, contrasts, or conflicts and creates tension, so consider: Do you grow from change? Is there a conflict between characters? Is there a contrast between the past and the present?
- A personal narrative focuses on connections between past events, people, or places, and the present, so consider: How relevant is the event today? How relevant will it be in the future?
- A personal narrative makes a point, communicates a main idea or dominant impression. Your details, specific scenes, accounts of changes or conflicts, and connections between past and present should point to a single main idea or dominant impression for your paper as a whole. While not stating a flat “moral” of the story, the importance of your memory must be clear to your reader.

Structure

A narrative relates events in sequence by creating specific scenes that are set at actual times and in actual places. Show, don’t tell, and re-create an event by setting it in a specific time and space. There are a variety of ways to structure your narrative story. The three most common structures are: chronological approach, flashback sequence, and reflective mode. Select one that best fits the story you are telling. The key is making sure that your organization is both interesting and logical.

Methods

Show, Don't Tell

Don't tell the reader what he or she is supposed to think or feel. Let the reader see, hear, smell, feel, and taste the experience directly, and let the sensory experiences lead him or her to your intended thought or feeling. Include detailed observations of people, places, and events. Showing is harder than telling. It's easier to say, "It was incredibly funny," than to write something that is incredibly funny. The rule of "show, don't tell" means that your job as a storyteller is not to interpret; it's to select revealing details. You're a sifter, not an explainer. An easy way to accomplish showing and not telling is to avoid the use of "to be" verbs and include more active verbs.

Let People Talk

It's amazing how much we learn about people from what they say. One way to achieve this is through carefully constructed dialogue. Work to create dialogue that allows the characters' personalities and voices to emerge through unique word selection and the use of active rather than passive voice. Use actual or re-created dialogue to reveal the character

Choose a Point of View

Point of view is the perspective from which your story is told. It encompasses where you are in time, how much you view the experience emotionally (your tone), and how much you allow yourself into the minds of the characters. Most personal narratives are told from the first-person limited point of view. If you venture to experiment with other points of view, you may want to discuss them with Miss Burke as you plan your piece.

Tense

Tense is determined by the structure you select for your narrative. Consider how present vs. past tense might influence your message and the overall tone of your piece.

Tone

The tone of your narrative should set up an overall feeling. Look over the subject that you are presenting and think of what you are trying to get across. How do you want your audience to feel when they finish your piece? Careful word choice can help achieve the appropriate effect.

The 5 W's of the Personal Narrative

- WHO** Who was involved in the incident? How are they connected/related to you? What should the reader know about these people in terms of both objective/factual details (age, appearance, social/economic status, family relationships, background) and subjective/emotional details (beliefs, values, emotions, identity)?
- WHAT** What led up to the incident? In what order did the stages of the incident occur? What effect(s) did the experience have, both immediate and long-term? What details must be included to convey the drama or intensity of the experience to someone who was not there?
- WHERE** How many locations were involved? How much description of each location will the reader require? Which details will convey the scene?
- WHEN** At what time of day and/or year did the event occur? Of what significance was the time, day, date, season and/or year?
- WHY** What caused the incident? Did anything foreshadow what was to happen? Did more than one factor contribute? Was one person or thing more responsible than others? What conclusions can you draw from considering why the incident happened?

Planning Your Narrative:

To plan a narrative, your job is:

1. Select an incident worthy of writing about.
2. Find relevance in that incident (writers might ask themselves what about the incident provided new insights or awareness)
3. To create and use details that will make the incident real for the readers.

Good stories occur everywhere and can be told about anything. They are as likely to occur in your own neighborhood as in some exotic locale. Potential stories happen daily; what makes potential stories actual stories is putting them into language, recounting them, orally or in writing. Good stories are entertaining, informative, lively, and believable; they will mean something to those who write them as well as to those who read them. Subjects for good essays have no limits. You already have a lifetime of experience from which to choose, and each experience is a potential story to help explain who you are, what you believe, and how you act today.

Objectives:

Your objective is to write a narrative essay with authentic voice, narrative coherence, and communal relevance. You will demonstrate your ability to:

1. give order and meaning to a memory presented in narrative form
2. put the reader “there” through effective use of concrete language and showing detail
3. use clear and articulate prose
4. revise, edit, and proofread

Assignment:

Recreate in narrative form a memory of a significant event in your life. Choose an event that will be engaging for readers and that will, at the same time, tell them something about you or about someone who is a significant part of your life. Tell your story dramatically and vividly, giving a clear indication of its autobiographical significance.

Sources:

Student and professional models

Specifications:

Essay must be at least 3-4 typed pages unless otherwise approved by the teacher, double-spaced, and in MLA format.

Unit Requirements (these are the things you will be graded on):

- Writer’s Notebook
- Process: Drafts + Evidence of Revision: Personal Narrative Heuristics, PQPs, etc.
- Final draft of personal narrative
- Participation in *all* class activities

Deadlines:

Rough Draft Due for Peer Edit(s): _____

Final Draft Due: _____