

Writing a Personal Narrative

A narrative is a story. In writing a narrative essay, you share with the reader some personal experience of your own in order to make a point or convey a message. You may choose to tell how your grandfather influenced your desire to become an orthodontist, or perhaps you'll relate the story of the time you didn't make the cut for the basketball team. Whatever story you tell, your purpose is to share with others some experience that has taught you something or changed you somehow.

Remember that narration is more than just description. Your essay should be descriptive, but it should also emphasize the significance of a particular event, object, or person.

There are several components of an effective narrative. The following are some things to keep in mind when writing your essay:

Focus

Narrative effect is the main point of your story—the moral, the message, the insight you offer. Without a specific *narrative effect*, your essay is merely a series of unconnected events. If you are unsure what your main point is, you might ask yourself, “Why am I telling this story? Why should someone else be interested in reading about my experience?” In addition, you must decide whether to reveal your point *explicitly* (stated directly) or *implicitly* (suggested but not stated).

Development

Details add depth and color to your narrative. If your essay consists merely of dry facts, readers quickly grow uninterested. You can describe things through the methods of *scene* and *summary*. In the *scene* method, use very detailed, evocative description to immerse the reader in the situation or place you describe. Your goal is to make the scene come alive for the reader. Usually narratives are based on one or two key scenes. Reserve in-depth detail for these key scenes, and fill in the rest of the story using the method of *summary* (giving a brief synopsis of events).

Organization and Coherence

The narrative consists of three basic parts: The *orientation*, at the beginning of the essay, establishes the setting, characters, and other essential elements of the story. The *complication* involves rising conflict that leads up to the climax (the point of highest action in the story). Then, in the *resolution*, the conflict is resolved and the *narrative effect* is revealed or suggested.

Your narrative also needs a *time structure*. You must decide whether *chronological time* or *psychological time* best suits your story. In *chronological time*, events are described in the order in which they happened; in *psychological time*, events are described according to the connections between them, as they might be arranged in someone's memory. The techniques of *flashback* and *flashforward* can also be part of your narrative's time structure. Use *flashback* to recall an event from the past that has a significant impact on the present. Use *flashforward* to jump to the future and show a possible outcome for the events in the present. Both of these techniques, if used well, can contribute greatly to the effectiveness of your narrative.

Style

Style supports content in your paper. A good narrative doesn't just tell an interesting story; it tells it in a way that engages the reader. Therefore, it is important to consider the following points as you write:

- Don't simply list details. Your details should all work together to give a *dominant impression* of whatever you are describing. Decide before you start what impression you want to convey to the reader. For instance, if you are writing about the very first time you got a speeding ticket, you probably want your reader to get an impression of fear, anxiety, and possibly guilt. Focusing on this impression, like *narrative effect*, gives your essay purpose.

- The language you use is very important. First, use *concrete nouns* and *active verbs*. Don't put your reader to sleep by getting caught up in wordy sentences and vague descriptions. This means that you should favor "blue, 1989 Honda Civic" over "car," as an example, and strong, active verbs over weak ones, as in the following examples:

Weak (form of *be*): A dog in the road *was* the cause of the 1989 Honda Civic hitting the school bus.

Weak (passive voice): The school bus *was hit* by the 1989 Honda Civic as the car swerved to miss a dog in the road.

Better (active voice): The 1989 Honda Civic swerved to miss a dog in the road and *hit* the school bus.

In other words, use clear, precise language that keeps your reader's attention. Also make use of *sensory language* (language that appeals to the senses), especially when you are writing a highly detailed scene. Don't just tell us that spring was in the air—describe how the sun felt on your skin, how the birds sang in the trees, how the dew sparkled on the grass. Make the reader see, smell, hear, feel, and taste the scene you're writing.

Finally, use appropriate *metaphors* and *similes*. Figurative language can add to your narrative by suggesting to your reader how you felt in a particular situation. For example, to say that the police officer who gave you that first ticket was "really tall" doesn't convey the sense of terror you felt as well as "he towered over me like Mt. Everest." *Metaphors* and *similes* can be very helpful in revealing your *narrative effect* to the reader.

- Decide which *point of view*, first-person or third-person, works best for your narrative. Most personal narratives are written in first-person, but third-person can be effective as well. First-person tends to be more subjective, but using both *objective* and *subjective description* appropriately is important with either *point of view*. When describing something *objectively*, leave out your feelings about the subject. For example, you might describe a house as "old," "dark," or "tall" to present a literal picture of the house to the reader. In *subjective description*, emphasize your feelings toward the subject, which usually involves stronger, more vivid language. The same house might now be "decaying," "grim," and "foreboding." An effective narrative will probably use both types of description.
- Use *artistic license* sparingly. You may need to exaggerate certain details to get your point across, but remember that you are writing an academic essay, rather than fiction. Your narrative must be grounded in reality.

Throughout our lives, we learn things from our experiences. What's more, we can learn from the shared experiences of others, and this is the purpose of a narrative essay. To help others benefit from our knowledge, however, we must present it in an understandable format, which means paying attention to focus, development, organization, coherence, and style. This may seem like an intimidating task, but taken one at a time, these elements are manageable. Use this handout as a guideline while you write and as a checklist afterward. Happy writing!