

Assignment: You will write a narrative essay illustrating a pivotal event in your life.

Before you begin: Read Lopate: “Writing Personal Essays: On the Necessity of Turning Oneself Into a Character”: HO

Elements of a Personal Narrative

The more of each element a narrative essay addresses, the more likely that narrative essay will be effective in communicating the writer's point and effectively developing the essay's rhetorical goal.

- **Setting:** Place and time –where is it? Be sure your reader can see where the action is taking place.
- **Persona:** What are some characteristics about you that you want your reader to understand? How do you want readers to perceive you? Describe your behavior in order to convey these points.
- **Tone and voice:** How do you want readers to feel? Through voice and tone, you can help readers share your reactions to the experience you are recreating. Craft your paper with vivid descriptions, syntax variations and other rhetorical strategies to unveil the nature of the events and your reactions to these events.
- **Plot:** You establish the plot by a causal linking of events. One event should lead to another.
- **Theme:** The theme is the dominant idea expressed in the work. It should also be expressed in your thesis/controlling idea and developed in the body of your essay. Do your best to make it clear to your reader. As with any essay, your narrative essay **must** have a point (thesis).

Burke’s Pentad

Perhaps the best invention strategy for a narrative essay is Burke’s Pentad, which takes into account that every human action is influenced by five elements: act (what), scene (where, when), agent (who), agency (how), and purpose (why).

- Act is anything that happens or could happen or is the result of a completed activity.
- Scene is the setting or background of the action.
- Agent is the person or force responsible for or influenced by the action.
- Agency is the method that makes a thing happen.
- Purpose is the reason or motive for the action.

As noted in the invention reading, these elements are useful because they can be used to analyze events, arguments, characters, or audiences--anything involving human interaction.

Burke’s Pentad Taken Further

Answering these questions will give you considerable detail for a narrative essay. Develop the answers as fully as possible and you will go a long way toward completing your narrative essay.

- What are you doing?
- How did you become involved?
- What are you trying to accomplish?
- How will you accomplish these goals?
- What obstacles do you face?
- What action are you trying to take?
- What other actions are possible?
- How does the setting, the time of the event and the others involved in it affect your actions?

Narrative Topic Suggestions

Perhaps the most important choice you will make is how much "real time" your essay will take one. In general, the less time covered in the essay, the narrower the essay's focus. For instance, rather than writing about a vacation, focus on the highlight or lowlight. The narrower the focus, the greater the likelihood of a high level of detail. An appropriate amount of time to cover ranges from just a few seconds (excellent narrow focus) to a few minutes (very good narrow focus) to a few hours (good narrow focus) to a day (workably narrow focus). Taking on any more time than a day will leave the essay with a broad focus that will be difficult to develop with high level of detail.

- Any "first," such as when you first realized you had a special skill, ambition, or problem; when you first felt needed or rejected; when you first became aware of some kind of altruism or injustice.
- Any memorably difficult situation: when you had to make a tough choice, when someone you admired let you down, when you let someone down, when you struggled to learn or understand something.
- Any occasion when things did not turn out as expected.
- Any incident which challenged your basic values or beliefs.
- Any humorous event, one you still laugh about, perhaps one that seemed awkward or embarrassing at the time.
- Any event that shaped you in a particular way, making you perhaps independent, proud, insecure, fearful, courageous, ambitious.
- Any incident charged with strong emotions such as love, fear, guilt, anger, embarrassment, frustration, hurt, pride, happiness, joy.

Deciding on a Topic

As a rule – work on the small rather than the large. The smaller, more focused your topic, the greater your chances of developing it well. It is also more effective to develop a small point well than to cover a large point in a superficial fashion.

Things to Keep in Mind

Point of View: A consistent point of view is important.

- Because this is a personal narrative, first person is appropriate. You might want to attempt a "stream of consciousness" narrative where you express the action as it happens as in *The Catcher in the Rye* or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. If done well, "stream of consciousness" is extremely effective.
- Sequencing: chronological, flash back, flash forward, combinations of the two. Be aware of what you are doing in regard to this.
- Setting/scene: where it happens. Showing your reader where the action takes place will strengthen the essay a good deal.
- Character: you are active in the story; make your motivations clear.
- Plot: relationship of the events in the story leading to the climax. There should be clear cause and effect relationships between each stage of the narrative's action.
- Action: how you move the plot along

Narrative Advice: Choosing an event

Write out answers to the questions below using as much detail as possible. If you get plenty of detail, you have chosen a good topic. If you can't answer many of these questions thoroughly, then considering a new topic may be a good idea.

Questions to ask yourself when choosing a topic

Don't just answer these questions with a "yes" or a "no." Begin to make a list of details that these questions evoke.

- Can you recall specific details about the action, scene, and people? Begin writing those details now.
- Can you tell what happened from beginning to end? Begin writing those details now.
- As a fragment of your life story, does this event reveal anything important or interesting about you? Explain how this is so.
- Do you feel comfortable writing about it? Explain why.
- Will it arouse reader's interest, curiosity and interest? Why do you think this is so?

Questions about Specific Sensory Details

- Can you see what you need to see in your mind's eye? Imagine your event as if as if it were a photograph or video tape. Write down what you are "seeing." Do that now.
- List specific objects you see. Keep only those that are important.
- Sounds: what do/did you hear as your study your memory of the picture? Quiet or noisy? Make a list of all sounds important to your narrative. Develop this list as fully as possible.
- Smells, tastes, textures: Are there any that are important to the story? If so, make a list and provide details that make it clear these details are important.
- Recalling Key people: List those who played more than a casual role in the story. Describe these people. Recreate conversations as needed.

Recalling Your Feelings at the Time

- What was your first response to the event? What did you think? How did it make you feel? What did you do? Describe those actions.
- How did you show your feelings? Describe those actions.
- What did you want those present to think of you, and why? Explain.
- What did you think of yourself at the time? Explain.
- Did you talk to anyone during of just after the event? What did you say?
- How long did the feelings last?
- What were the immediate consequences of the event for you personally? Explain.

Exploring Your Present Perspective

- How do you feel now about the way you acted at the time of the event? Was your response appropriate? Why or why not? Explain.
- Looking back, how do you feel about this event? Do you understand it differently now than then? Explain.
- What do your actions at the time of the event say about the kind of person you were then? In what ways are you different now? How would you respond to the same event if it occurred today? Explain.
- How would you summarize your current feelings? Explain.
- Are your feeling settled, or do they still seem to be changing? Are you sure of your feelings about the event, or are you ambivalent? Explain.

Answering each of the above questions should provide you with a good deal of specific sensory detail to include in your narrative essay. If you cannot answer these questions well enough to generate considerable detail for your essay, then you should consider working with another topic.

Showing Instead of Telling

How to Show instead of Tell

1. Good narrative reveals rather than explains – provides reader with actual experience, not merely with concepts and outlines of events.
2. As you write a scene, imagine that it unfolds before you, step by step. Then write down what you experience--what you see, hear, touch, smell and/or taste. Fill in gaps that you are fuzzy about.
3. Reveal character (yours as a writer and those in the text) through actions and tone, not by telling about them.
4. Remember that very little in the world is static and silent – including stationary objects. Floors creak, screen doors fly open and shut in the wind, smoke rises from chimneys and so on. Describe any motion you can realistically attribute to what you are showing.
5. Read each of your drafts carefully, aloud. If you can't experience a scene as if you were reliving it, work on it some more.

Self Evaluation: Remember to include the self evaluation responses with your final draft.

1. Did you stick with your original topic or did you change it along the way? Why?
2. What problems did you encounter during the process of creating the essay?
3. List two of the most important changes you made. Why did you make them?
4. What part of your essay are you most proud of? Why?