**The Narrative Essay**

"Don't tell us that the old lady screamed. Bring her on and let her scream."  
-Samuel Clemens  
  
**Purpose of a Narrative Essay**  
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 faced a life crisis similar to one you are experiencing can help you through the crisis. They can also help the writer deal with the crisis.  
Provide insight. Narratives can help you discover values, explore options, and examine motives.  
  
**Characteristics of the Narrative**  
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 had on you. This experience may be used as a springboard for reflection.  
  
A good narrative: involves readers in the story.   
1. It is much more interesting to actually recreate an incident for readers than to simply tell about it.  
2. Relates events in sequence.   
3. The creation of specific scenes set at actual times and in actual places. Show, don't tell. Re-create an event by setting it in a specific time and space.  
4. Includes detailed observations of people, places, and events.   
5. Do you recall sights, sounds, smells, tactile feelings, and tastes? Use actual or re-created dialogue? Give actual names of people and places.  
6. Presents important changes, contrasts, or conflicts and creates tension.   
7. Do you grow from change? Is there a conflict between characters? Is there a contrast between the past and the present?  
8. Is told from a point of view--usually the author's point of view.  
9. Focuses on connection between past events, people, or places and the present.   
10. How relevant is the event today? How relevant will it be in your future?  
11. 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.  
  
**Planning the Narrative Essay**  
  
To plan a narrative, your job is:  
First, select an incident worthy of writing about, second, find relevance in that incident (writers might ask themselves what about the incident provided new insights or awareness), finally, dredge up details which will make the incident real for 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 then as well as to those who read them.  Subjects for good essays have no limits. You already have a lifetime of experiences 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. When beginning, you might want to ask yourself:  
  
1. Did you ever have a long-held belief or assumption shattered? Can you trace the change to one event or a series of events?  
2. Is there a particular experience that you observed that has had a profound influence on your life?  
3. Is there a person that who has greatly influenced you?  
4. Is there a decision that you had to make, or a challenge or an obstacle that you faced?  
5. Was there ever a moment in your life when you decided to reform, to adopt a whole new outlook?  
6. How would you characterize your attempt? (Successful? Unsuccessful? Laughable? Painful?)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | [Narrative and Descriptive Composition Patterns](http://ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/composition/narrative.htm) Good discussion of the descriptive details required for an effective narrative.  Includes examples of narrative essays by Jeffrey Taylor and Mark Twain. |
|  | [Washburn University Writing Center Handout on Narration](http://www.wuacc.edu/services/zzcwwctr/org-narration.wm.txt) |
|  | [Writing Skills: Narrative Essays](http://www.factmonster.com/homework/writingskills4.html) Basic explanation of narration includes a sample essay. |
|  | [Descriptive Detail](http://writing.colostate.edu/references/processes/ddetail/index.cfm) Excellent explanation of descriptive detail in writing including the uses of descriptive details and various types. |