

Structure of a Personal Narrative Essay

“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?

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.