

W-11 Personal Narratives

Narratives are stories, and we read and tell them for many different purposes. Parents read their children bedtime stories. Preachers base their sermons on religious stories to teach lessons about moral behavior. Grandparents tell how things used to be. College applicants write about significant moments in their lives. Writing students are often called on to compose narratives to explore their personal experiences. This chapter describes the key elements of personal narratives and provides tips for writing one.

W-11a Key Elements of a Personal Narrative

A well-told story. Most narratives set up a situation that needs to be resolved, which keeps your audience reading. You might write about a challenge you've overcome, for example, such as learning a new language or dealing with some kind of discrimination.

Vivid detail. Details can bring a narrative to life by giving readers vivid mental images of the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures of the world in which your story takes place. The details you use when **DESCRIBING** something can help readers picture places, people, and events; **DIALOGUE** can help them hear what is being said. To give readers a picture of your childhood home in the city, you might describe the mouthwatering aromas from the street vendors on your block and the sounds of a nearby pick-up basketball game. Similarly, dialogue that lets readers hear your father's stern reminder after you forgot to lock your bike can help them understand how you felt at the time. Depending on your topic and your **MEDIUM**, you may want to provide some of the details in audio or visual form.

Some indication of the narrative's significance. Narratives usually have a point; you need to make clear why the incident matters to you or how it supports a larger argument. You may reveal its

significance in various ways, but try not to state it outright, as if it were a kind of moral of the story.

W-11b Tips for Writing a Personal Narrative

Choosing a topic. In general, it's a good idea to focus on a single event that took place during a relatively brief period of time:

- an event that was interesting, humorous, or embarrassing
- something you found (or find) especially difficult or challenging
- the origins of an attitude or belief you hold
- a memory from your childhood that remains vivid

Make a list of possible topics, and choose one that will be interesting to you and to others—and that you're willing to share.

Generating ideas and text. Start by writing out what you remember about the setting and the people involved, perhaps **BRAIN-STORMING**, **LOOPING**, or **QUESTIONING** to help you generate ideas.

Describe the setting. List the places where your story unfolds. For each place, write informally for a few minutes, **DESCRIBING** what you remember seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling.

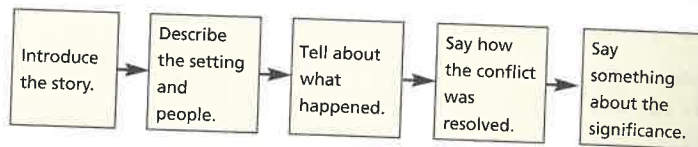
Think about the key people. Narratives include people whose actions play an important role in the story. To develop your understanding of the people in your narrative, you might begin by describing them—their movements, their posture, their facial expressions. Try writing several lines of **DIALOGUE** between two people in your narrative, including distinctive words or phrases they used.

Write about what happened. At the heart of every good narrative is the answer to the question "What happened?" The action may be as dramatic as winning a championship or as subtle as a conversation between friends; both contain movement or change that the narrative dramatizes. Try narrating the action using active and specific **VERBS** (pondered, shouted) to capture what happened.

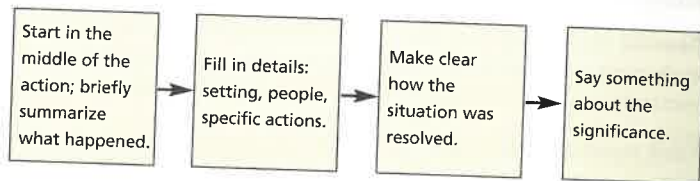
Consider the significance. You need to make clear why the event you are writing about matters. How did it change or otherwise affect you? What aspects of your life now can you trace to that event? How might your life have been different if this event had not happened?

Ways of organizing a personal narrative. Don't assume that the only way to tell your story is just as it happened. That's one way—starting at the beginning and continuing to the end. You might also start in the middle—or even at the end.

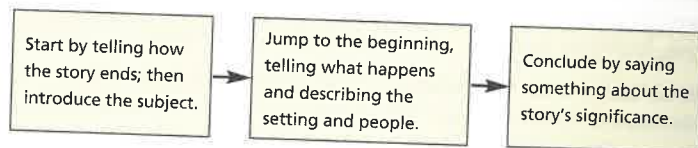
[Chronologically, from beginning to end]



[Beginning in the middle]



[Beginning at the end]



» **SEE W-1** for help analyzing your writing context. See **W-4** for guidelines on drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading. To read additional examples of narratives, go to digital.wwnorton.com/littleseagull4.

W-11c Sample Personal Narrative Essay

MOHAMMED MASOOM SHAH

One Last Ride

A nominee for the Norton Writer's Prize, this personal narrative was written by Mohammed Masoom Shah while he was a student at St. John's University.

College Point, Queens. They called it "Garbage Point." I didn't agree with that for a while because it was home, but when I turned sixteen, I looked at College Point differently. Sure, it wasn't Compton or Chicago, but as in any city, it was easy to slip up if you hung out in the wrong places. I was still sixteen when a family member I'll call "T" shot up heroin right in front of me. He was driving, and I was unlucky enough to be in the passenger seat beside him; I was in for a rough ride.

It was ten o'clock on a summer night. We were double-parked on 14th Avenue, right by College Point Boulevard. T went across the street to grab some "snacks" from Walgreens, leaving me alone in the car. Just seconds after he left, I heard a blaring truck horn behind me, the driver growing increasingly impatient by the second. "Move the f---ing car!" he shouted. I still didn't have my permit at the time, so I just sat there listening to the cacophonous mix of deafening horns and explicit language, wondering what was taking T so long. Eventually, he came out holding a bag and exchanged a few colorful words with the truck driver. Then we were on our way home—or so I thought.

T pulled in to a quiet alleyway on 13th Avenue and pulled his keys from the ignition. The hum of the engine was the only noise within a mile radius, so when it stopped, all I could hear was the eerie whistling of the wind. There was a broken pause between the moment he shut off the car and the moment he reached for what was in the bag. At this point, I knew there weren't any snacks in there. His hands were trembling, and I tried reading his face, searching for what was troubling him. He avoided making eye contact, as if he was ashamed of what he was about to do, but it had to be done regardless. He reached into the plastic bag and pulled out a needle, a syringe, and a latex glove.

••• Sets up a situation to be resolved. What will happen next?

••• Vivid detail brings the story to life: the hum of the engine, the whistling of the wind, T's trembling hands.