

W-10 Personal Narratives

Narratives are stories, and we read and tell them for many different purposes. Parents read their children bedtime stories as an evening ritual. Preachers base their sermons on religious stories to teach lessons about moral behavior. Grandparents tell how things used to be, sometimes telling the same stories year after year. 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-10a Key Elements of a Personal Narrative

A well-told story. Most narratives set up some sort of situation that needs to be resolved. That need for resolution makes readers want to keep 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 country, you might describe the gnarled apple trees in your backyard and the sound of crickets chirping on a spring night. Similarly, dialogue that lets readers hear your father's sharp reprimand after you hit a ball through the back window 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 mat-

ters to you, or how the narrative supports a larger argument. You may reveal its significance in various ways, but try not to state it too directly, as if it were a kind of moral of the story. A story about the lasting impression of a conversation with your grandfather about the novel he started but never finished would likely be less effective if you were to end by saying, "He taught me to value creative writing."

W-10b 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 then choose one that you think will be interesting to you and to others—and that you're willing to share with others.

Generating ideas and text. Start by writing out what you remember about the setting and those involved, perhaps **BRAINSTORMING**, **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.

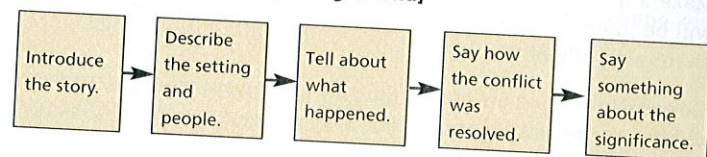
Think about the key people. Narratives include people whose actions play an important role in the story. To develop your understanding of the people in your narrative, you might begin by describing them—their movements, their posture, their bearing, their facial expressions. Then try writing several lines of **DIALOGUE** between two people in your narrative, including distinctive words or phrases they used. If you can't remember an actual conversation, make up one that could have happened.

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 two friends; both contain action, movement, or change that the narrative dramatizes for readers. Try narrating the action using active and specific verbs (*pondered, shouted, laughed*) to capture what happened.

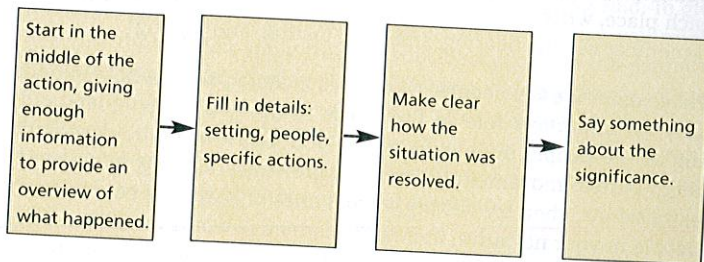
Consider the significance. You need to make clear why the event you are writing about matters. How did it change or otherwise affect you? What aspects of your life now can you trace to that event? How might your life have been different if this event had not happened?

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 of the action and continuing to the end. You might also start in the middle—or even at the end.

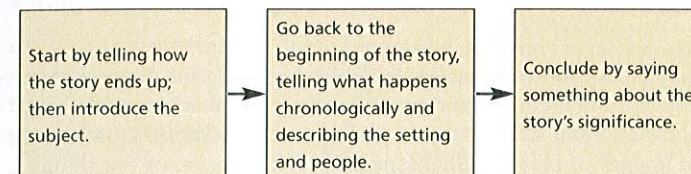
[Chronologically, from beginning to end]



[Beginning in the middle]



[Beginning at the end]



» **SEE W-1** for help analyzing your writing context. See **W-3** for guidelines on drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading your narrative. To read an example narrative, go to www.norton.com/write/little-seagull-handbook.