

Introduction to Narrative

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of narratives. We will discuss how to read for them in an academic perspective, including understanding the different types of narrative and the different purposes they are used for. We will also cover narrative arcs, and how understanding them can help you as a reader and writer.

Our discussion breaks down as follows:

1. What Is Narrative?
2. Personal Narrative
3. Personal Narrative: Examples
4. Narrative Arc
5. Narrative Arc: Examples

1. What Is Narrative?

In composition, **narrative** basically means story. If you recall, narrative writing is writing that's driven by story, so it makes sense that story writing is writing that's driven by narrative. For the most part, the two terms can be used interchangeably.



TERM TO KNOW

Narrative

Story

In the realms of academia, you're most likely to encounter personal narrative, which is the form of storytelling that relies on the writer's personal experiences and memories. There are other kinds of narrative, such as fiction, but today's lesson will focus on personal narratives.

2. Personal Narrative

There are several different types of personal narrative:

- Autobiography
- Memoir
- Life writing
- Creative nonfiction

Of these, autobiography is probably the most familiar term. It means telling the story of one's own life. In contrast is memoir, which is writing that's focused on and primarily about memory.



The difference between the two is that a memoir isn't necessarily the story of the writer's life, but a story. Thus, a writer can have more than one memoir, such as one about childhood and another about the death of the writer's mother to cancer. Writing a second autobiography, however, would be redundant.

Life writing is a more general term -- similar to memoir, but not necessarily focused on the writer's life.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If, for example, a close personal friend to a recently deceased rock star wrote a book about that star's later years, it wouldn't be a memoir, and it wouldn't quite be an autobiography, but it would count as life writing.

Creative nonfiction is an even broader term encompassing all three categories and more. Technically, the only requirement for creative nonfiction is that it be true, in some sense of the word. Essays are creative nonfiction, as are just about anything besides poetry or fiction that you're likely to find in a composition course. Modern creative nonfiction also makes use of the stylistic elements of fiction, often incorporating narrators and non-linear narratives, metaphor, and hyperbole. It's a broad term, because the nature of nonfiction is broad, and many writers are constantly working to stretch the term.

We write personal narratives for many reasons. Chief among them is reflection -- simply taking the time to collect and present one's thoughts and memories -- as well as education, wanting to teach readers something. We also write to record memories, or to share meaning or insight that our experiences have given us. What these purposes have in common is that the writer has a story and wants to tell it.

3. Personal Narrative: Examples

Let's look at a few different kinds of personal narrative. The first selection is a short passage from the autobiography of Ulysses S. Grant:

"Having made an alternate choice of two different arms of service with different uniforms, I could not get a uniform suit until notified of my assignment. I left my measurement with a tailor, with directions not to make the uniform until I notified him whether it was to be for infantry or dragoons. Notice did not reach me for several weeks, and then it took at least a week to get the letter of instructions to the tailor and two more to make the clothes and have them sent to me. This was a time of great suspense. I was impatient to get on my uniform and see how it looked, and probably wanted my old school-mates, particularly the girls, to see me in it."



What do you think was Grant's primary purpose here? You already know that this is autobiography, or the telling of one's life story, but is there another purpose? Does Grant seem to have been trying to teach us anything or share any insight or meaning? Perhaps not, at least not in this section. His primary goal seems to have been to record the facts of his life and perhaps to reflect on them.

As a form of contrast, consider this short paragraph taken from an essay titled "Of Experience" by Michel de Montaigne, a 16th century statesman and writer who had often been credited as being one of the first, if not the first, essayist. The language itself can be a bit difficult, so read carefully to get a real sense of what Montaigne is trying to say and do with this excerpt:

"How often, and, peradventure, how foolishly, have I extended my book to make it speak of itself; foolishly, if for no other reason but this, that it should remind me of what I say of others who do the same: that the frequent amorous glances they cast upon their work witness that their hearts pant with self-love, and that even the disdainful severity wherewith they scourge them are but the dandlings and caressings of maternal love; as Aristotle, whose valuing and undervaluing himself often spring from the same air of arrogance. My own excuse is, that I ought in this to have more liberty than others, forasmuch as I write specifically of myself and of my writings, as I do of my other actions; that my theme turns upon itself; but I know not whether others will accept this excuse."

Compared to Grant, Montaigne seems much more interested in conveying his thoughts and insight. Though the material can be hard to penetrate, it should be fairly clear that Montaigne was trying to reflect not only on what he's done, but *why*, and what that means in the broader world. Unlike Grant, who seemed most interested in simply telling the story of what happened to him, in this selection we see Montaigne thinking on the page, musing, perhaps ironically, about his tendency to muse too much when he's writing. Both selections exemplify the range of material that personal narratives can work with.

4. Narrative Arc

Despite the huge variety in types and purposes of personal narratives, one thing they all have in common is a narrative arc of some kind. An arc, in the context of writing, is a structure or sequence of events, and all narratives have one. Multiple events occurred, and multiple events are told, though there are different strategies employed by different writers to achieve different effects.

It's important to note the different parts of a narrative arc. Please keep in mind that not all arcs will include each aspect, and not always in this order, but a standard chronological narrative arc would be presented as follows:

- **Exposition.** This functions as introductory material grounding us in the story's situation.
- **Rising action.** This follows exposition, and is when the important events in the story begin to transpire.
- **Climax.** The events lead ultimately to a confrontation or, more common in academic narratives, an important realization or moment of clarity.
- **Falling action.**
- **Denouement.** This is where the last strings of narrative are tied back together bringing, a writer hopes, a sense of closure to the readers -- or at least of closing to the piece.

5. Narrative Arc: Examples

Let's take a look at a couple of very different narratives. Given the time and space constraints, we won't be looking at a complete arc, but each example should give you a sense of the pacing of the whole narrative as well as the chronological assumptions the writer was working under. The first is a paragraph taken from *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, who wrote 1,600 years ago. As you read this, look for how the events are laid out:

"But while in that my 16th year I lived with my parents, leaving all school for a while (a season of idleness being interposed through the narrowness of my parents' fortunes), the briers of unclean desires grew rank over my head, and there was no hand to root them out. When that my father saw me at the baths, now growing towards manhood, and endued with a restless youthfulness, he, as already hence anticipating his descendants, gladly told it to my mother. But in my mother's breast Thou hadst already begun Thy temple, and the foundation of Thy holy habitation, whereas my father was as yet but a Catechumen, and that but recently. She then was startled with a holy fear and trembling; and though I was not as yet baptised, feared for me those crooked ways in which they walk who turn their back to Thee, and not their face."

Besides the language, it seems pretty straightforward, right? One event causes another, which causes another, leading us, we can only assume, to another later event. This is the general format most personal narratives will take, but you should also be prepared for non-linear narrative structures, which have become more commonplace in the ever-changing genre of creative nonfiction.

Take this next piece, for example. It's the majority of a very short narrative about losing a child. The language should be much easier to process than St. Augustine's, but read it thoroughly, and as you do, try to piece together the chronology. As hinted, this one doesn't play by the usual rules:

"Father is standing at the doorway to a blue-painted room, looking into the quiet of it.
Before that, he paced the hallway, going by and by the door, the closed door to a room that he could imagine was not empty.
Before that, Mother shared with him a quiet dinner, of leftovers heated only on the outside.
Before that, Father drove Mother home, just the two of them with slow jams on the radio that neither would change, with nothing sitting on the back seat where neither would look.
Before that, Mother and Father watched, him from the bedside and her from the bed, as the Doctor's and Nurses' tones of voice changed, their backs bent over a plastic tray with raised walls which neither Mother nor Father had noticed before, though they'd been in the room with it for hours, the Doctor's hands busy around a plastic bottle of air, pumping silently."

Could you tell what was unusual about the chronology? It's backwards. This is the kind of narrative that starts with the most recent event -- the father standing and looking into the empty room -- and cycles backward in time from there, taking us back to the quiet dinner, to the drive home, and finally to the hospital room where, as it would become more clear in the later and/or earlier parts of the narrative, their son was stillborn.



THINK ABOUT IT

What would you say about the effect of the structure? How does it change the telling of the story? If the narrative arc were not reversed, what might have been different? As with many aspects of writing, the answers should come from you, since you, as the reader, are the purpose and the effect of the writing.



SUMMARY

Today we learned about narratives, which is another word for story. We learned about the different kinds of personal narratives -- autobiography, memoir, life writing, and creative nonfiction -- and how they can serve different purposes. We also learned about narrative arcs and explored a couple different ways to use them.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall



TERMS TO KNOW

Narrative
story