

The Basics of Narrative Writing

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about narratives from an academic perspective, including the types of narratives you will encounter and how to read them. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Personal Narratives

1a. Types of Personal Narratives

1b. Samples of Personal Narratives

2. Narrative Arc

3. Narrative Elements

3a. Voice

3b. Point of View

3c. Characterization

3d. Detail

1. Personal Narratives

In composition, a **narrative** is a piece of writing driven by a story. For the most part, the terms "narrative" and "story" can be used interchangeably.

While there are other kinds of narratives, including fiction, the type you are most likely to encounter in the realm of academia is the **personal narrative**. A personal narrative is a composition that relies on the writer's personal experiences and memories.

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, or 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.

**Narrative**

A piece of writing driven by a story.

Personal Narrative

A type of narrative that relies on the writer's personal experiences and memories.

1a. Types of Personal Narratives

There are several different types of personal narratives:

- 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. Memoir is similar, but it is writing that is 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 in general. 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 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 nonlinear 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.

1b. Samples of Personal Narratives

Let's look at two different kinds of personal narratives. 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 schoolmates, particularly the girls, to see me in it.

What do you think Grant's primary purpose is here? You already know that this is an 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 be 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 has 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 insights. Though the material can be hard to penetrate, it should be fairly clear that Montaigne is trying to reflect not only on what he's done, but why, and what that means in the broader world.

Unlike Grant, who seems most interested in simply telling the story of what happened to him, Montaigne seems to be 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.

2. 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. 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:

1. Exposition: This functions as introductory material grounding us in the story's situation.
2. Rising action: This follows exposition and is when the important events in the story begin to transpire.
3. Climax: The events ultimately lead to a confrontation or, more commonly in academic narratives, an important realization or moment of clarity.
4. Falling action: Here, the story begins to move toward the final conclusion.
5. Denouement: This is where the last strings of the narrative are tied back together, bringing a sense of closure to the readers, or at least to the piece itself.

Take a look at the following paragraph taken from *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, written 1,600 years ago. While this short excerpt won't show a complete arc, it should give you a sense of the pacing of the whole narrative as well as the chronological assumptions the writer was working under. As you read this, pay specific attention to 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 nonlinear narrative structures, which have become more commonplace in the ever-changing genre of creative nonfiction. In fact, some narratives work in reverse by starting with the most recent event and cycling backward in time from there.



TERM TO KNOW

Narrative Arc

A structure or sequence of events in a piece of narrative writing.

3. Narrative Elements

There are four main elements of narrative, used in both personal and fictional narrative writing. Let's look at each in a little more detail.

3a. Voice

Voice is the unique way in which writers express their writing style. It is something that enables readers to recognize a work as having been written by their favorite writer the moment they begin to read it. Even experienced writers can only partially control voice; beginning writers must work to discover it.

In the following passage from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Thoreau writes about his relationship to nature. You'll get a strong sense of the style in which he writes—his voice—even if you haven't read his work before now.

The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature—of sun and wind and rain, of summer and winter—such health, such cheer, they afford forever! and such sympathy have they ever with our race, that all Nature would be affected, and the sun's brightness fade, and the winds would sigh humanely, and the clouds rain tears, and the woods shed their leaves and put on mourning in midsummer, if any man should ever for a just cause grieve. Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?



TERM TO KNOW

Voice

The unique way in which writers express their writing style.

3b. Point of View

The point of view in a personal narrative is that of the writer. However, even though a writer of a personal narrative is limited to her point of view (unlike a writer of a fictional narrative), she can make use of retrospection and reflection.

To understand how this can be accomplished, read this excerpt from the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, written by Frederick Douglass. Look for the ways in which Douglass uses his perspective as an older man to recall and reflect on his youth.

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek.

Even though the "I" in a personal narrative refers to the writer, that writer can tell the story from other points of view. The young Douglass and the old Douglass are not the same person in this account (even though, in other ways, they are). They observe, feel, and interpret experiences and events in different ways.

3c. Characterization

Characterization refers to the people within a narrative. Characters must be portrayed in sufficient detail so that readers will feel as if they are reading about people they know (even though they almost certainly don't know them).

The following passage describes how a group of children respond to a strong, handsome boy named Pierre, and his classmate, Antoine.

Guided by instinct, the other children hung about Pierre and willingly accepted his leadership; by instinct also they avoided Antoine, repelled by a feeling of chill, as if from the neighbourhood of a reptile, and shunning him unless to profit in some way by their superior strength. Never would he join their games without compulsion; his thin, colourless lips seldom parted for a laugh, and even at that tender age his smile had an unpleasantly sinister expression.

After reading the preceding paragraph, you should have some idea of what it is like to be Antoine. Consider that, just a page or two later, readers are informed (in grim detail) how Antoine murders Pierre. Would your reaction to Pierre's murder be different if you hadn't been given a humanizing glimpse into Antoine's lonely childhood?

3d. Detail

Relevant detail is included in a narrative to gain the focused attention of readers. Focused attention is achieved when writers include the events or things that readers must know in order for the narrative to make sense to them. In other words, relevant details are those which aren't just relevant, but are necessary to the narrative.

Read the following excerpt from the introduction of *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*.

This obscure family of ours was early in the Reformation, and continued Protestants through the reign of Queen Mary, when they were sometimes in danger of trouble on account of their zeal against popery. They had got an English Bible, and to conceal and secure it, it was fastened open with tapes under and within the cover of a joint-stool. When my great-great-grandfather read it to his family, he turned up the joint-stool upon his knees, turning over the leaves then under the tapes.

In this paragraph, Franklin writes to his children about the early history of their family. He describes how they had to conceal their religious practices from the authorities in the years before the family emigrated to America. It conveys a sense of his love for his country, and the zeal with which he would defend it.

Now, read this passage, which occurs a page or so earlier in Franklin's *Autobiography* (i.e., before the previous passage about the Bible). Do you notice any differences?

John was bred a dyer, I believe of woollens, Benjamin was bred a silk dyer, serving an apprenticeship at London. He was an ingenious man. I remember him well, for when I was a boy he came over to my father in

Boston, and lived in the house with us some years. He lived to a great age. His grandson, Samuel Franklin, now lives in Boston. He left behind him two quarto volumes, MS., of his own poetry, consisting of little occasional pieces addressed to his friends and relations, of which the following, sent to me, is a specimen. He had formed a short-hand of his own, which he taught me, but, never practising it, I have now forgot it.

Even without reading the later chapters of the *Autobiography*, it should be clear which of these two passages contain details that readers must know. It's likely that readers don't need to know that Franklin's Uncle John was a dyer (probably of wool).



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about narrative writing in academic contexts. The most common form of narratives is **personal narratives**, which are narratives focused on an author's personal experiences. There are several **types of personal narratives**, including autobiography, memoir, life writing, and creative nonfiction, which can serve different purposes.

After looking at **samples of personal narratives**, you can see how the authors' perspectives are the focus of this type of writing. Finally, you explored the concept of the **narrative arc** and how it is used to describe a sequence of events, as well as the impact of the four **narrative elements: voice, point of view, characterization, and detail**.

Best of luck in your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Narrative

A piece of writing driven by a story.

Narrative Arc

A structure or sequence of events in a piece of narrative writing.

Personal Narrative

A narrative that relies on the writer's personal experiences and memories.

Voice

The unique way in which writers express their writing style.