

# Writing Center

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## Narration

Believe it or not, we are all story tellers. The only difference is that some of us tell stories better than others.

*“Girl, did I tell you what happened to me at the beauty salon this morning? Well, I was sitting in the chair near the door and Betsy, the beautician – well, you know how she works, honey. She was all over my head, running this hot comb through my hair, when suddenly, the door burst wide open and in comes this...”*

*“Yesterday afternoon, I was sitting in the living room watching Law and Order on the t.v., waiting for mom to return from the super market, when I heard this loud, blood curdling scream, ‘Help...Help...Help me...’ I jumped up off of the sofa and...”*

*“Last night I ran into Uncle Charles and his new girl friend at The Olive Garden and he told me...”*

And, remember the many times during a conversation you interrupt or say, “That reminds me of the time...”

You see, we all tell stories and we tell them for a variety of reasons. We tell some stories merely to share experiences, others to make a point even though the point may be simple; still, other stories illustrate ideas, support standards of conduct, or just to make people laugh. Yet, regardless, we all enjoy telling and hearing stories and we have enjoyed them all of our lives.

A narrative is a story. Narration means “to tell or write about a sequence of events,” and this calls for authorial choice at every turn. Stories do not tell themselves; a “sequence of events becomes a story only when a writer chooses, arranges, and links them” together. Often, a narrative is a brief story included in a longer work to illustrate an idea. For example, an argument calling for the enforcement of safety standards in steel mills might include a story about a worker who lost two fingers because a hot steel bar fell on his hand. Narration at its simplest and perhaps best level means to tell a story even if it is a short story.

Usually, a narrative paper tells a story of a personal experience that makes a point or supports a thesis. The purpose of a narrative paper is to re-create an experience in such a way that your readers can imaginatively participate in it and share it with you. In planning your paper remember that there are two types of narration: the chronological order narration and the non-chronological order narration.

The chronological order narration is usually used with a short narrative and presents events in the actual order in which they happen or could have happened.

Unexpectedly, the alarm clock went off with a roar at five in the

morning, yanking me upright in bed. I yawned sleepily, rubbed my eyes, reached out, punched off the alarm, yawned again, slid back under the covers, and went back to sleep.

However, in an extended narration, adhering strictly to chronological order can lead to a boring succession of “and thens.”

The non-chronological order narration is used in the extended narrative. Here, in order to maintain a lively story and to clarify its meaning, the writer may have to move backward (flashback) to explain the cause of a particular event, or to jump forward (flash forward) to identify the ultimate event.

The ship rocked gently, anchored in the shadow of the cliff. The divers had been down in the deep for a long time, their air supply almost gone, and Joe, pacing the ship’s deck, was worried. Treasure hunting could be, and often was, dangerous yet the rewards were humongous - particularly, if your find was secret. But anchored in this isolated cove he was vulnerable. His brow furrowed as his twitching eyes swept the empty horizon, scanned the skies, searching for the Coast Guard, other ships, drug runners.

Keep the following principles in mind as you write your narrative paper.

- *Limit the subject.* Almost any experience you have ever had can serve as subject matter for a narrative paper *if you tell the story well.* Any experience you can turn into a story can work for you, from getting lost on your way to school to moving into a new apartment. Remember, your goal is to tell a story so dramatically and so completely that your readers can share the experience. This means that you must limit the subject or experience you select; make sure that it is not too broad. For example, a subject such as your summer as a camp counselor is too broad, whereas the afternoon a skunk got into your tent will work. A subject such as your two week vacation in London is too broad whereas the night you were lost and a young woman showed you a short cut back to your hotel will work.

- *Have a thesis.* The experience you narrate is not as important as its significance to you. Why did the experience matter to you? Why do you want to tell about it? Did it change you in some way? Did it make you happy? Sad? Did it lead to a decision? Did you learn something about yourself or about others or about the world around you? Were you disappointed? Did it, perhaps, give you an inkling that it’s great to be alive or that your neighborhood has joys you never noticed before? Any little event in your life can make good subject matter for a narrative paper if you determine the significance of the experience and tell the story well. No matter how ordinary the experience may seem to you, if you determine its significance, your readers will be able to share it with you and will find it interesting.

## *A Night of Violence\**

According to my history instructor, Adolf Hitler once said that he wanted to sign up “brutal youth” to help him achieve his goals. If

Hitler were still alive, he wouldn't have any trouble recruiting the brutal youths he wanted; he could get them right here in the United States. I know, because I was one of them. As a teenager, I ran with a gang. And it took a terrible incident to make me see how violent I had become.

The student essay, "A Night of Violence," tells the painful, but familiar, story of teenage gang members who, after a night of drinking, decide to rob an old person who lived in a nearby high-rise. When the old man fights back, he is viciously beaten and left on the sidewalk for dead. Later, at his home, one of the teens looking back over what he and his friends had just done, realized that *he* had gone over "some kind of line." He realized that his life was on a one-way, downward spiral; that he had to stop it, turn it around, and cease being one of Hitler's "brutal youths."

The significance of your experience, your interpretation of what it means to you, is your thesis. You don't have to state it in your paper but you must know what it is because the significance of the experience is exactly what you want to share with your audience. Also, the thesis is important because it controls the contents of the paper. It helps you decide what to put in the paper and what to leave out.

- *Use specific details.* Specific details support your thesis, gives life to your writing, and keep the story line moving forward. If your story is about your being frightened out of your wits the night you spent alone in your grandmother's old house, it matters that the dark, red curtains were made of velvet so that no light could penetrate them, that cobwebs hung from the ceiling, that the stern eye in the portrait above the mantle seemed to follow you about the room. Remember, a narrative recreates an experience for your readers, one they should be able to share with you.

In *White Tiger*, Maxine Hong Kingston begins her story like this.

When we Chinese girls listened to the adult talk-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves....

The narrator explains how a woman, an expert pole fighter and daughter of a Shao-ling Monk, invented White Crane boxing.

She was combing her hair when a white crane alighted outside the window, she teased it with her pole which it pushed aside with a soft rush of its wing. Amazed, she dashed outside and tried to knock the crane off its perch; it snapped the pole in two. Recognizing the presence of great power, she asked the spirit of the white crane if it would teach her to fight. It answered with a cry that white crane boxers imitate today. Later the bird returned as an old man, and he guided her boxing for many years.

\*College Writing with Readings, Instructor's Edition, Fourth Edition, John Langan, McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., pg. 139

The specific details the author uses here support the thesis, bring the writing alive, and move the story forward.

- *Use language that sounds natural.* Three categories in which language can be placed are pompous, natural, and inarticulate, and readers should always feel that an intelligent, articulate person is telling the story. Consequently, language should sound conversational, the key word being *sound*. Often in conversations with friends, family, or strangers, people are bombastic, they ramble on incessantly, repeat themselves, use such needless expressions as “You know what I mean,” “Yeah, man,” “Well, like, you know.” Listening to a rambling, repetitive narrative is difficult; reading one is almost impossible. Thus, make your writing *sound* natural, conversational, by avoiding the pompous and inarticulate.

Another method of creating a *natural sound* is to use dialogue. It gives a sense of reality to the narrative by helping to set a scene, it also helps to reveal the personality and feelings of the characters in the narrative.

“Hey, Annie. You play Whist, don’t you? Need a fourth man for the game.”

“Sam, you know I don’t know how to play Whist. Perhaps John does. Do you, John?” Anneaus asked. “Then go on. We’ve finished here for tonight.” Anneaus waived him out of the ship’s office. ‘I’ll lock up, come down later, and watch you guys. Might learn the game yet.”

“So, you think you play Whist?” Sam smirked.

“Think?” Fred smiled. “No, I’m positive. My brother taught me,” he glanced at Sam. “He’s a professional gambler.”

Although dialogue can be useful in developing your narrative, do not overuse it. Remember that your narrative must sound natural and tell a story.

- *Give order to the narrative.* The narrative, like most other papers, contains three basic parts: an introduction which includes the thesis statement; the body of the paper which supports the thesis and is organized according to the principle of time, space or logic; and a conclusion which restates the thesis and gives a sense of finality to the paper. In the narrative essay, the three parts are developed differently from that of other papers.

The introduction should catch your reader’s attention, provide useful background information, and set up the sequence of events. While the introduction does not usually include the thesis statement, it can if you decide to place it at the beginning of your essay.

The last inch of space was filled, yet people continued to wedge themselves along the walls of the Store. Uncle Willie had turned the radio up to its last notch so that youngsters on the porch wouldn’t miss a word. Women sat on kitchen chairs, dining room chairs, stools and upturned wooden boxes. Small children and babies perched on every lap available and men leaned on the shelves or on each other.

Maya Angelou, “Champion of the World”

At times, the narrative essay does not have an “Introduction” and begins with the first event of the story.

The body of the narrative essay usually follows the chronological order format when the paper is short. Since you want the reader to share the events as you experienced them, present

them in the order in which they occurred, for example, first this happened, then this, and later something else. It is essential to show the passage of time between events which is accomplished by using transition words and phrases, for example:

*soon, later, during, after, finally*     *at four o'clock, a few minutes later,*  
*on the way back, the next morning*     *After I removed the bullets*

In a longer paper, you would follow the non-chronological order format using flashbacks, which return the reader to events that took place in the past, and the flash forward which jumps ahead in time. Remember, a narrative is like a camera lens that zooms in on an event and makes the readers feel like they can see the details and experience the action.

The conclusion. The writer tells a good story in the “Introduction” and “Body” of the essay, then states the significance of the story at the end. The final paragraph should conclude your essay in a satisfying manner. In some papers, the thesis will appear only in the conclusion. When the main point of the narrative is sufficiently clear within the story itself, the thesis is not stated directly but is (can be) implied. Depending on your essay and your desire for a different type of ending, you might try one of the following

- Make a final observation about the experience or incident
- Ask a probing question
- Suggest a new but related direction of thought
- Reveal a surprising piece of information

In any event, a narrative paper’s conclusion should do what all good conclusions do: give the paper a sense of completeness.

The information in this handout is adapted from Student’s Book of College English: Rhetoric, Readings, Handbook, Fifth Edition, by David Skwire, Frances Chitwood Beam, and Harvey S. Wiener, Macmillan, New York, 1990  
Successful College Writing: Skills, Strategies, Learning Styles, Instructor’s Annotated Edition, Second Edition by Kathleen T. McWhorter, Bedford/St. Martin’s, Boston & New York, 2003  
Writing A College Handbook, Fourth Edition, by James A.W. Heffernan and John E. Lincoln, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1994  
College Writing Skills with Readings, Instructor’s Edition, Fourth Edition, by John Langan, The McGraw Hill Companies, Inc., New York, 1997

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11/26/03