

The Narrative Essay

Telling a Story



Often one of the very first essays assigned in a composition class, a narrative essay is an essay that tells a story. Usually, a narrative is a personal essay that describes a particular event in the writer's experience. If you're writing a personal narrative, you might write about a particularly memorable trip to the beach, for instance – or your wedding day, or the birth of your first child. In any case, don't neglect the writing process: plan your essay before you start writing it.

Choosing a Narrative Topic

Choosing a topic for a narrative essay is a matter of picking an event in your experience and thinking of how you can describe it well. There are two important things to remember when choosing a narrative topic:

- **The topic should be a *specific* event.** A narrative is not an entire life story. It is an essay-length reflection on a specific event in your life. It should be an event about which you can tell a detailed story (rising action, climax, resolution) within the 2-4 pages of a typical narrative essay.
- **The topic should evoke some strong emotion in you.** You need to pick a topic to which you have some emotional connection. Perhaps you have strong feelings about your wedding day, or the day your team won the state championship. Or perhaps you have strong emotions when you think of a car accident you had. The emotions do not have to be pleasant ones; they just need to be strong and felt keenly enough to put into words.

Dominant Impression

One of the key purposes of writing a narrative essay is learning how to establish a dominant impression. It's an exercise in tone – but unlike a purely descriptive passage, it pairs tone with action. The dominant impression you establish is how you want readers to feel when they read your narrative.

This is why it's so important to choose a topic to which you feel very emotionally connected. That emotion is what you will use to frame your essay. If, for example, your narrative is about the time you nearly missed your own graduation and had to rush to make it on time, your dominant impression would likely lead you to describe the event in frenzied tones with particular focus on how frantic you felt at the time. How you choose to describe the story – and even *what* you choose to describe, to a large extent – will be determined by the dominant impression.

Organizing the Narrative

As with any essay, a narrative needs to be well organized. This means you need to outline the essay before you begin writing it. Some people claim they do better simply by freewriting, but a narrative essay should not be written spontaneously.

Narratives written without any sort of outlining tend to ramble and lack unity. Your narrative can be planned and divided in many ways, but the important thing to remember is that you need to plan and outline your essay so that you'll have clear points of transition while still maintaining unity.

A common mistake that people make when writing narratives is that they ramble: that is, they have a clear starting point for the narrative, but the flow gets muddled by off-topic side-points, irrelevant details, and a general lack of direction. This mistake can be easily avoided simply by taking a few moments to consider what you want to write about before you start writing it. Usually, your narrative will take the form of a five-paragraph essay. As with any essay, the introduction will include some statement to get the reader's attention, a few necessary background points, and a clear thesis statement. The conclusion will look back at the essay and summarize how the events of the narrative had affected you.

The body of your essay will typically be three to five paragraphs, and this is where careful planning is required. The important thing is to divide your essay into clear points organized chronologically (that is, in order of when they happened), but leave yourself room for clear transitions. The best way to organize is also the simplest:

- **Before:** start by describing the process leading up to the main event. For instance, if you're writing about your wedding day, your first body paragraph might be about the morning of the wedding when you were preparing, getting dressed, and checking on all of the arrangements.
- **During:** continue by hitting the high points of the action and describing the main event. For example, here is where you would talk about the actual wedding ceremony.
- **After:** lead into the conclusion by giving some resolution to the action and beginning to let things wrap themselves up. You might reflect on the success of the wedding while describing the reception, for example.

Chronological Order and Transitions

A narrative takes place within a specific timeframe, starting at the earliest events in that timeframe and ending at the latest. This is known as **chronological order**: telling of events in order of when they occur. With a narrative, chronological order is the most natural way to organize the story you're telling. This applies to all levels of the essay, not just the big picture. This means that transition words and phrases are very important throughout the entire essay – not just between paragraphs.

Of course, it's important to use strong transition sentences between your main paragraph points (continuing with the wedding day example, for instance, you might start a new point with something like, "With all of the preparations complete, it was finally time for the wedding to begin"). However, using chronological transition words *within* your paragraphs is also very important because it helps your reader keep up with the timeframe without getting lost.

It also keeps the narrative flowing smoothly. Just little transition words like *then*, *later*, or *after that* can make a big difference in how a paragraph flows. Of course, those little transition words aren't a good way to move between main points (you need complete sentences for that), but they do make the sequence clearer between one detail and the next.

Verb Tense

The other thing that keeps the narrative's boundaries properly defined is being sure to use the correct verb tense. Since a narrative typically recounts events that happened at some earlier time in the writer's life, the narrative voice should be primarily in *past tense*. Sometimes people make the mistake of trying to write a narrative in present tense, but this is usually not correct.

- WRONG: "It's the day of my wedding, and all of the arrangements have been made, but I'm very nervous."
- RIGHT: "It was the day of my wedding, and all of the arrangements had been made, but I was very nervous."

The only time you should use present tense in a narrative is when you are looking back on the events and reflecting on them (usually in the conclusion). Even then, you still need to include some kind of transition. For example, "Ten years later, I still think of that day sometimes, and I still feel just the same way about him now as I did back then."

The present-tense reflection on the past-tense events of the narrative can be a very effective technique for concluding a narrative essay, but it only works if transitions are applied between past and present.

Other Writing Center Resources

- The Writing Process
- Using Description
- Verbs

Further Reading

- "Narrative Essays" (Purdue University Online Writing Lab)
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/685/04>
- "Structure of a Personal Narrative Essay" (Santa Barbara City College CLRC Writing Center)
<https://www.sbccc.edu/clrc/files/downloads/StructureofaPersonalNarrativeEssay.pdf>