

## Writing a Personal Narrative Essay

Have you ever laughed at a friend's account of a funny or embarrassing moment? Have you ever been moved by a family member's story about a sad or touching event? We hear people recount tragic, silly, or important events in our own lives. Today we are going to begin writing a personal narrative, a true story about something which happened to us, or something we witnessed.

### Pre-Writing

Pre-writing, or essay planning, is an important first step to writing which cannot be skipped! Pre-writing involves everything from thinking of an idea, planning out how you're going to present that idea, to writing parts, or the whole, to get that idea on paper. All of this occurs before you write your final draft.

#### 1. What do you write about?

A personal narrative can be funny, sad, or might simply tell a story explaining something about you. Our whole lives are made up of different settings, characters who float in and out of our lives, and more plots than you can shake a stick at. EVERYTHING is a possible story when you're writing a personal narrative. Choosing one out of the many possibilities is usually the hard part of pre-writing. Here are some possible ways to come up with ideas:

- Objects – Look through your pockets, purses, bags, junk drawers, or photo albums to recall specific experiences
- Lists – Brainstorm and write a list of words or incidences which pop into your mind
- Listen to others – Spend some time telling stories to other students. Sometimes other students' stories might remind you of something specific in your life
- Reading stories – Often fiction reminds us of real-life events. This is because writers often pull things from their own lives for inspiration

#### 2. Select One to Write About

Look over the ideas you have come up with. Narrow your possibilities down to two or three possibilities. Freewrite on one or more of them to discover how much you have to say. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Which of these incidents had a lasting effect on me?
- Which would I change if I could?
- Which one made me feel an emotion I could share?
- Which incident taught me something important?

Choose one idea/topic to write about

#### 3. List Your Goals

Why are you writing this? Yes, it is for a grade in your English class, but there has to be other reasons as well if you want your story to be a good one. Once you've selected a topic, decide what your goal for this essay is. Here are a couple of possible goals:

- To describe an important personal experience
- To describe an insight into a person's feelings (or your own)
- To get others to think about similar experiences in their own lives

Write down your goals:

#### 4. Identify Your Audience

Who is this story for? For this assignment, you should think of your peers as your audience. Write your narrative as if you will be sharing it with the class.

## 5. Explore Your Story (Parts of a Story)

Before you begin your rough draft, review some of the key elements of your story. Remember that all stories have characters, settings, plots, and themes. What are yours? Consider the following:

- **Characters:** Think about the people in your story. Try to recall as many details about them as you can. You might want to jot down a brief description of each one to keep them clear in your mind. What did they say? What did they do? How old were they? How were they dressed?
- **Setting:** Think about the time and place of your narrative. Be sure to describe the setting in detail if it is important to the action of the narrative.
- **Plot:** You will know what your basic plot – or related sequence of events – is before you start drafting, because you are telling about something that really happened. Remember that in many narratives, the speaker often faces and relates some sort of conflict. What is the conflict in your story? What is the climax? How are things resolved or concluded?
- **Theme:** Does your story have a message or a lesson you want the reader to learn? A life-lesson you can pass along might be appropriate for your story, and should be included

## 6. Writing

Now it is time to begin writing your rough draft. Remember that this is just a draft. You shouldn't try to make it perfect yet. You'll have time to make changes later. As you begin drafting, think about using some of the following strategies to make your narrative a strong one.

- **Description:** Descriptive details that appeal to the sense can make your narrative more real for a reader. Consider the 5 senses and how they could affect your story
- **Dialogue:** Using dialogue can help you recreate events, reveal what characters are like, and present information in a dramatic manner. Keep in mind that your narrative will be more effective if you clearly convey to readers why the incident is important to you

## 7. Take a Break and Review

After you complete your draft, put it aside for a while. Then reread it when your mind is fresh, or ask your peer readers to respond to it. Ask the following questions of yourself, and of your peer readers:

### Questions for self

- Does what I've written match the story in my head?
- Have I found a focus for my story, or does it just wander?
- Have I set the story in a place and time that helps my reader understand more about the events?
- Am I close to achieving any of the goals I set for myself? Have my goals developed or changed?
- Why is this narrative meaningful to me? Does this come through in the story?

### Questions for Peer Readers

- What do you think the narrative is about? Summarize it for me
- Did you have any trouble following the events in my story? If so, where?
- Why do you think I chose to tell this narrative?
- What did you want to know more about?
- What words or phrases were most effective?
- Which characters or events were most vivid?
- What were some of the things you were thinking about as you were reading?
- Did the beginning capture your interest? Did the ending bring the narration to a satisfying conclusion?

After you have reviewed your essay – and/or had others review it for you, look at the reactions that you and your peers had. Keep in mind that while your peers can give you very valuable feedback, you are not bound by their comments or suggestions. It is up to you to decide what changes to make to your narrative, if any. Now is the time to **review, problem solve, and proofread your work**. Make the changes, and if you have to, go through the review process several times until it seems to be its best. **Make sure the final draft is clean from any errors, and type it up and turn it in.** Good job! 😊