



CHAPTER 8

Narration

In this chapter you will

- identify the strategies for writing a narrative paper
- identify a topic and write your own narrative paper
- analyze student narrative essays
- explore narrative writing in the world around you
- analyze narrative writing by professionals

"Last night, as I was driving home from work, I stopped for the light at Fifty-fifth and Main. I was just sitting there minding my own business when, all of a sudden . . ."

"You'll never guess what the kids did today."

"That reminds me of the time . . ."

We all tell stories, and for many reasons. Usually we tell stories just to share our daily experience with others. Frequently, however, we tell stories to make a point. At other times, we tell stories that illustrate ideas. A pastor, for example, does not merely say that repent-

tance will bring forgiveness; he reads the story of the prodigal son from the Bible. Or we tell stories to make people laugh. Whatever the case, we enjoy telling and hearing stories, and we tell and hear them all our lives. So the assignment to write a narrative paper should be one that most of us will enjoy.

A **narrative** is a story. To *narrate* means "to tell, to give an account of." Narratives take many forms. A novel is a narrative. So is a short story. A biography is a narrative because it tells the story of a person's life. Historical narrative traces events over time. Often a narrative is a brief story included in a longer work to illustrate an idea.

A **narrative paper** tells a story, usually of a personal experience told therefore in the first person, that makes a point or supports a thesis. The purpose of a narrative paper is to recreate an experience in such a way that your readers can imaginatively participate in it and share it with you.

However, narrative is not limited to first-person tellings. You can find third-person narratives in many academic sources such as histories of events and people's lives. Most biographies and novels contain third-person narrative elements. But largely, narrative focuses on personal experience, and its vehicle of expression is in the first person (see "Writing in the Third Person" in Chapter 2).

Writing Your Narrative Paper

As you plan and write your paper, keep the following principles in mind.



TIPS for Writing a Narrative Essay

- **Limit the subject.** Almost any experience you have had can serve as subject matter for a narrative paper.

But you must limit the subject, and in a narrative paper, time usually determines the limits of your subject. Your goal is to tell a story so dramatically and so completely that your readers can share the experience. A subject such as your summer as a camp counselor, therefore, is too broad—unless you want to write a book. But you could tell about the time a skunk got into your RV. Even one day in the city provides too much material for a complete and dramatic story. But some part of that day—the hour you spent watching a pair of cardinals in the park teach their baby how to fly—can make a good story. It's probably no exaggeration to say that the subject cannot be too limited.

- **Have a thesis.** The specific experience you narrate is not as important as its significance to you is. Why did the experience matter to you? Why do you want to tell about it? Did it change you in some way? Did it embarrass you? Did it make you happy? Sad? Was it thrilling? Frustrating? Did it lead to a decision? Did you learn something about yourself or about others or about the world around you? Were you disappointed? Any little event in your life—even taking out the garbage—can make good subject matter for a narrative paper if you determine the significance of the experience and tell the story well. In an essay that appears later in this chapter, Pat Melia shows the reader the excitement she experienced as a nurse in helping to save a patient's life.

- **Use specific details.** In every chapter of this book, we urge you to use specific details because they give life to your writing, and the narrative paper is no exception. If your story is about being frightened out of your wits the first time you spent a night alone in your aunt's hundred-year-old house, it matters that cobwebs hung from the ceiling, that no lamp in the room was bright enough to illuminate the corners, that the stairs creaked and the wind moaned. Remember, a narrative re-creates an experience for your readers. In most cases, you can make your readers feel what you felt if you use specific details. What you learned in Chapter 6 about descriptive writing will help you considerably here and elsewhere when you need to marshal concrete sensory language.

A word of caution, however. The details you use, like everything else in your paper, should support your thesis. Extraneous details, no matter how vivid, always feel like padding and frustrate readers.

- **Identify time, place, and people.** Most narratives benefit greatly by telling readers as soon as possible where and when the story takes place. Although Jarrett David Lee Jackson identifies the precise date—month, day, year—of his narrative (he has an important reason for doing so, as you will see when you read his essay later in this chapter, we're not recommending that level of exactness as an important aspect of your story. Rather, the month and time

of year alone are sufficient in drawing the reader into the events. Phrases like “on a blustery November morning” or “one warm Sunday afternoon last spring” make it easy for readers to set the scene in their minds.

Also, you should not skip identifying where your story takes place. There’s a magic in naming places—and people as well—and readers respond to their specificity. In the selection from “Se Habla Español” in this chapter, the writer names exact places with which the reader can easily identify: “We’d been on vacation in Washington, D.C., visiting the Smithsonian, the Capitol, and the home of Edgar Allan Poe. In the Volkswagen on the way home. . . .” Without naming, the sentences are duds: “We’d been on vacation and visited many interesting places. In the car on the way home . . .”

In this chapter’s student essay “Saving a Life”, by the second sentence we know the time—one December morning—and place of the narrative—State Hospital. The names of key players in the story—Mrs. Carter, Dr. Marino—also help bring us into the moment directly.

- **Use language that sounds natural.** Your readers should feel that an intelligent, articulate friend is telling them a story. The language of a narrative, therefore, should sound conversational, which means you should avoid two extremes—the pompous and the inarticulate.

As, for the first time, I entered the portals of the edifice that housed my new employer and donned the attire specified for my position, I felt apprehensive.

Like, man, that first day, ya know, was like . . . well, when I put that waiter’s jacket on, ya know, I was scared.

Try, instead, something like this:

I was nervous that first day on the job. When I put on my white waiter’s jacket, my hands trembled.

These sentences sound natural, and they give a conversational tone to the narrative.

Another way to give a natural sound to your narrative is to use direct quotations when appropriate (see “Quotation Marks” in the Handbook at the back of this text).

“Are you having a good time?” she asked.

“Not really,” I replied, “but I don’t want to spoil the party for you and the kids.”

Direct quotations give a sense of reality to the narrative, sometimes by helping set a scene. Direct quotations are also good for revealing the personality and feelings of the characters in your narrative. Don’t feel, however, that you must fill your paper with them. For example, “Se Habla Español” by Tanya Barrientos contains few direct quotations, but the narrative sounds natural and dramatic.

- **Introduce your narrative.** Your introduction may set the scene for the narrative:

Nurses have to face many boring tasks on the job, such as counting out pills, changing bedpans, and answering patients' families' complaints. One exciting December morning, though, on my job as a nurse at State Hospital, I helped keep a patient alive.

—Pat Mella, "Saving a Life"

Sometimes an introduction gives the background—the facts that led to the experience being narrated:

In 1969, I was a senior on the Luther Burbank High School basketball team. The school is on the south side of San Antonio, in one of the city's many barrios. After practice one day our coach announced that we were going to spend the following Saturday scrimmaging with the ball club from Winston Churchill High, located in the city's rich, white north side.

—Rogelio R. Gomez, "Foul Shots"

Indeed, sometimes a narrative paper doesn't even have an introduction. In this case, the writer simply begins with the first event of the story:

"There's a gun at your back. Raise your hands and don't make a sound," a harsh voice snarled at me. I raised my hands.

Despite these many options, your narrative no doubt will benefit from an introduction that leads to a thesis statement. In a narrative essay about a day as a volunteer worker on a collective farm, the writer opens with this introduction:

The day starts when I rise at four in the morning and fumble in the darkness for my work clothes. I remember to take my blue sunhat. Dawn has not yet broken over Kibbutz Ein Zurim. Yet I know that the members of this Israeli commune are beginning their tasks this fall day. Today, the picking of pears with a steel ladder and plastic basket awaits me; inexperienced, I am both excited and worried about the job.

Note how the writer builds successfully to her thesis. The first three sentences set the scene for the reader, and we can in our minds join the writer as she wakes early, dresses, and worries excitedly about the day ahead of her. The thesis promises that the body paragraphs will show us both the excitement and the worry that she feels.

- **Sequence your body paragraphs.** The body of the narrative paper also differs from that of most other papers in that its organization usually requires a chronological approach. True, it is possible to begin with the present and then portray an earlier episode:

As I sit in my soft leather easy chair that I keep in front of the fireplace this time of year and gaze at brightly burning pine logs, I remember a Christmas ten years ago when I was not so comfortable.

But the heart of the narrative—what happened ten years ago—should proceed chronologically. Since you want your readers to share the events as you experienced them, you must present the events in the order that they occurred: First this, then that, and later something else. And you should let your readers know, by means of transitions, what the chronology is. Transitions are, of course, important to any piece of writing, but the kinds of transitions that indicate the passage of time are essential to a narrative paper:

then, next, soon, later

at four o'clock, a few minutes later, on the way back, the next morning

After I removed the bullets . . .

I must have been asleep a couple of hours when a shout awakened me.

- **Conclude your narrative.** Finally, the narrative's conclusion as well is different from other conclusions. In some narratives, the thesis of the paper appears for the first time in the conclusion. The writer tells a good story in the introduction and body and then states the significance of the story at the end of the paper:

At last I admitted to myself that the raccoons had won. I was tired of getting up in the middle of the night to gather the garbage they scattered about the backyard. I was tired of trying to find a garbage can that they could not open. I was, in fact, tired of the country. As I crept wearily back to my bedroom, *I knew the raccoons had taught me a valuable lesson: I did not belong in the country; I belonged in a high-rise apartment in the heart of the city.* And that's just where I moved two weeks later.

At other times, when the main point of the narrative is sufficiently clear within the piece, the conclusion may imply the thesis without restating it, or it may take up other ideas stated or hinted at in the narrative. In the essay "Se Habla Español" later in this chapter, you might state Barrientos' thesis like this: "I am a natural born Guatemalan living in America who feels alienated from my heritage because I never learned my native language, Spanish." Note how her conclusion, which she spreads over three paragraphs (the last two only one sentence each in length), generalizes from her own life to those of others who may be in the same predicament:

There must be other Latinas like me. But I haven't met any. Or, I should say, I haven't met any who have fessed up. Maybe they are secretly struggling to fit in, the same way I am. Maybe they are hiring tutors and listening to tapes behind locked doors, just like me. I wish we all had the courage to come out of our hiding places and claim our rightful spot in the broad Latino spectrum. Without being called hopeless gringas. Without having to offer apologies or show remorse.

If it will help, I will go first.

Aquí estoy. Spanish-challenged and *pura* Latina.

should pro-
ie events as
er that they
1 should let
y is. Transi-
nds of tran-
ve paper:

ng

ne.

well is dif-
e paper ap-
story in the
at the end

d of get-
d about
ould not
ny bed-
ig in the
at's just

ently clear
estating it,
the essay
tos' thesis
feels alien-
age, Span-
aragraphs
er own life

should
'strug-
listen-
ourage
'broad
ving to

- **Consider your audience and purpose.** Imagine the person who will read your narrative. Does she need further information about the setting and time of your story? Will you need to define any specialized vocabulary? Note in the introduction to the essay about picking pears (page 145) how the writer subtly defines the Hebrew word *kibbutz* as "this Israeli commune"—some readers might not know what a kibbutz is. If your purpose is to draw a serious conclusion from your narrative, be sure that your point is clear.
- **Revise your drafts until you're satisfied with your paper.** Try to find as many readers as possible for the early drafts of your paper. Reread Chapter 6 for many tips on how to revise your essay. Work with fellow classmates; pay careful attention to your teacher's recommendations; ask your readers about how you could improve your essay. Is anything unclear to your reader? Does your draft need more details? Are the details arranged clearly?
- **Proofread carefully.** Don't hand in a final draft unless you've checked carefully for your own typical errors, especially run-ons and fragments. Watch your use of upper- and lowercase letters in identifying places by name.
Remember also that the conclusion for a narrative paper should do what all good conclusions do: give the paper a sense of completeness.

ASSIGNMENT: NARRATION

MyWritingLab

Write a narrative essay about a memorable event. Be sure that your reader can follow the sequence easily. Make use of vivid and concrete sensory details and images. If you are having trouble deciding on a topic for your narrative paper, you might find it helpful simply to choose one of the following proverbs, quotations, or commonsense statements and then write a narration supporting or attacking it.

1. Money can't buy happiness.
2. Money is the root of all evil.
3. I never met a man I didn't like.
4. If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen.
5. When the going gets tough, the tough get going.
6. You can't tell a book by its cover.
7. If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.
8. There's no such thing as a bad child.
9. Nobody knows the trouble I've seen.
10. A penny saved is a penny earned.
11. Small children, small problems; big children, big problems.
12. Spare the rod and spoil the child.
13. "The course of true love never did run smoothly."
14. Good fences make good neighbors.
15. A stitch in time saves nine.

STEPHEN CRANE

I Saw a Man Pursuing the Horizon

I saw a man pursuing the horizon;
Round and round they sped.
I was disturbed at this;
I accosted the man.

"It is futile," I said,
"You can never—"
"You lie," he cried,
And ran on.

FOR WRITING OR DISCUSSION

MyWritingLab

1. What is the sequence of events in this poem? Why can you consider it a narrative?
2. Who is the speaker in this poem? What does he see a man doing? What does he try to tell the man?
3. What do you think Crane means by the word *horizon*?
4. What would you say is the main point of the poem? Do you agree with it?
5. Write a narrative essay about your trying to convince someone to do something that the person ultimately refused to do.

STRATEGY CHECKLIST: Writing and Revising Your Narrative Paper**Plan the paper.**

green
Box

- ☐ Have I used prewriting to explore ideas for a subject?
- ☐ Have I thought about my purpose for writing—that is, will my narrative make a point?
- ☐ Do I have my audience clearly in mind?
- ☐ Have I limited my topic?
- ☐ Have I considered using an outline to organize my ideas?

Write a first draft.

greenbox

- ☐ Have I established a clear thesis to state the topic and express an opinion?
- ☐ Have I supported my thesis with concrete sensory details?
- ☐ Have I used natural-sounding language in quotations from people I'm writing about?
- ☐ Have I established a clear sequence of events?

Revise and edit the paper.green
Box

- ☐ Does my introduction capture the reader's attention by setting the scene or providing background?
- ☐ Do my body paragraphs develop the action of the narrative in a clear sequence of events?
- ☐ Have I used transitions when necessary to link events in time?
- ☐ Does my conclusion tie together the points of the narrative by returning to the thesis in some way?

Proofread the paper.

green box

- ☐ Have I checked carefully for correct punctuation of dialogue?
- ☐ Have I proofread for grammar, spelling, and mechanics?

CROSSCURRENTS

MyWritingLab

Two essays in this chapter—"You Don't Look Indian" by Greg Sarris and "My Father's House" by Jarrett David Lee Jackson—deal with relations between parents and children. How do the ideas in the selections relate to each other? What do you think Sarris would have said to Jackson?

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

In groups of five students each, compare and contrast the two student pieces, "Saving a Life" and "My Father's House" as models of narrative essays. Use the "Strategy Checklist: Writing and Revising Your Narrative Paper" as a touchstone for your comments.

MyWritingLab

Visit Ch. 8 Narration in MyWritingLab to test your understanding of the chapter objectives.

An e
represe
mary na
it belon
a reptile
crime; a
eral Mo
relies al
port the
this kind
you for
have to
Near
heavily
as an ir
ideas—a
ity to id
example

To co
tions.
twent
Georg

Similarly

Histor
the res
can de
level a
liquid
Second
on his
strong
Whitel
princip
greate
work i