



Narrative Essay

A narrative essay tells a story by relating the events of the story in an organized way so that it proves a point.

Narratives in College Writing

Narratives Prove a Point

College writing uses narratives to prove a point by telling an event in logical order. For example, in a narrative essay about a camping trip, your purpose may be to show how camping can turn into a disastrous event.

Don't Just Tell the Story

Instead of just telling the story, choose the details and organize the specific events of the story so that they will support your thesis. For the above example, you would select the particular details from your trip that show *why* camping can turn out disastrously.

Types of Narrative Organization

Chronological Order

A narrative may present events in the exact order in which they took place. Chronological order moves from the beginning to the end, from first to last.

Begin with the Middle or End

In writing fiction or a personal account, a narrative may begin with the middle or end of the story for variety. Then, the events that led up to that particular point in the story may be presented.

Flashbacks

A narrative may also begin with the present and use a series of flashbacks, which interrupt the present in order to tell about past occurrences or events, to tell the story.

Make Your Narrative Interesting

Use Detail

You want your reader to see what you are talking about, so use vivid details and give specific information, such as the time of day, precise dates, and exact locations.

Vary Your Sentences

Be careful not to begin every sentence the same way. Also avoid using sentences that use the same pattern; instead, use a variety of sentence structures.

Instead of: *We woke up in the middle of the night. We found our campsite flooded. We packed up our belongings and moved.*

Try: *In the middle of the night, we awoke from a deep sleep to find our campsite flooded with water. Unfortunately, we were forced to pack up our belongings and move upstream as quickly as possible.*

Use Dialogue

You can use dialogue to help develop characters and to make the narrative more interesting. A reader would rather hear specific people speak rather than read about them.

Use Consistent Verb Tense

Be sure to keep verb tense consistent so that the reader can understand the time sequence. There are times, however, to shift tense in order to reflect a time shift in the narrative; for example, when using flashbacks, the verb tense may shift from present to past tense.

Use Transitions

Words and phrases that connect not only help organize time sequences, but they also help your readers know the order of the events, and they indicate time changes. Some examples of transition words are *first, second, next, meanwhile, immediately, earlier, after, finally*.

Basic Structure of a Narrative Essay

Introduction

State the thesis here. (See the UWC flyer on Thesis Statements for more information.)

Body

Present the series of events that make up the narrative in a very clear and organized manner.

Conclusion

Bring closure to the story; restate your thesis here.

Example of an Informal Outline for a Narrative Essay

Introduction: Thesis statement-Due to unusual circumstances, what I expected to be a relaxing camping trip with my family actually turned out to be quite a disastrous event.

Stage 1 of the trip: My entire family ended up getting separated for hours while hiking the winding mountain trails.

Stage 2 of the trip: While canoeing, my brother caused our boat to capsize, leaving both of us soaking wet in the frigid water.

Stage 3 of the trip: Much of our food supply was ruined by raccoons and mice, causing us to look elsewhere for nourishment.

Stage 4 of the trip: In the middle of the night, we awoke from a deep sleep to find our campsite flooded with water.

Stage 5 of the trip: When my father locked the keys in the car, we were forced to hike to higher ground in order to find transportation home.

Conclusion: Overall, the unexpected chain of events truly turned my family's trip into quite an unusual experience.

As you expand your informal outline into a personal narrative, be sure to include vivid details to help develop the story and transitions that signify a shift from one stage to the next.

The creator of this handout consulted *Patterns for College Writing: A Rhetorical Reader and Guide* by Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell. 7th ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.