Narrative and Descriptive Essays: Technique, Topic, and Style

Inquire: Technique, Topic, and Style in Personal Writing

Overview

Personal writing in an academic setting can be tricky. It’s one of the few forms of writing you can turn in where you use the first person perspective. It’s also one of the few forms where you can use informal language in an academic setting. While personal writing is very different from other forms of academic writing in these ways, it also shares distinct similarities with more formal, academic genres. Before you begin writing, it can be helpful to determine these similarities and differences.

Big Question: What is unique about the structure and style of personal writing?

Watch: Writing Your Personal Story

One aspect of humanity that seems to span across cultures is the impulse to tell stories. All the way back to the Homeric epics of ancient Greece and before, we have numerous examples of humans sitting around sharing stories with each other. Even in today’s technology-driven society, we tell a lot of stories. Whether we’re out with friends recounting an embarrassing memory, we have a frustrating coworker, or we had a great vacation, we love to share our stories with others. Some storytellers are, of course, better at sharing these stories than others.

So, what makes a good storyteller? Good storytellers do several things:

- They set up the story in an engaging way that piques the listener’s interest.
- They use powerful and descriptive language that keeps the listener excited.
- They use sensory language that engages the listener.
- They don’t overwhelm the listener with useless details.
- They provide enough information that the listener doesn’t get confused or need additional background.
- They tell stories with purpose that have meaning to the listener.

These are great principles of storytelling, and they are also great principles of story writing. Story writing can, in many ways, be even more difficult than storytelling, since we can watch the faces of our listeners and change our delivery if we see they are losing interest. In story writing, we have to anticipate what our readers will find interesting, since we can’t change it on the fly.

Fortunately, writing personal essays can be very similar to writing academic essays. You begin with a topic, and then you shape you purpose around your audience’s values and needs. Even in terms of
structure and organization, personal essays can be similar to academic essays. The differences are mostly in the kind of language and the kind of evidence we use to support our overall purpose.

Whether you're good at telling stories, or whether you’re better at writing academic essays, it can be helpful to think of their similarities, so you can draw on your writing strengths.

What kind of writing comes more naturally to you? Do you feel confident writing in more structured, academic genres? Or do you prefer writing about your own personal experiences?

Read: Elements and Principles of Narration and Description

Overview: Narrative and Descriptive Writing

Narrative and descriptive writing are two of the most common forms of personal writing, which seeks to illuminate or share a personal experience with an audience by communicating the author’s unique perspective of an occasion, event, or moment.

It is important to note that the point of personal writing is not simply to share an experience with your reader. Beyond that, it should have a purpose or relevance to your audience. Identifying this purpose is a good place to start: do you want to entertain? Do you want to communicate a moral? Do you want to share an epiphany you had during the event?

Good personal writing is almost always tied to a clear and intentional purpose. The difference between narrative essays and descriptive essays is made clear in their names:

A **narrative essay** seeks to narrate a story for the reader. It will have a clear beginning, middle, and end. A **descriptive essay** seeks to describe something, whether that thing is an event, a person, or an item.

Elements of narrative will likely appear in descriptive essays, and description will certainly feature prominently in narrative writing, but the two genres serve distinct purposes.

Basic Elements of Narrative Writing

Narrative writing is, really, not unlike other kinds of more academic writing. It should include an introduction, a conclusion, a thesis, and supporting evidence.

Every piece of narrative writing should have a clear beginning, middle, and end. This sounds like a relatively easy concept, but you would be surprised how often writers who are new to narrative will forget to ease their reader into their story. To begin narrative writing, you should take the time to introduce your reader to the time and place in which the narrative takes place. It can be disorienting to hear a story when you don’t know who or where the characters are.

Early on in your essay, you also need to establish a sort of “thesis” that lets the readers know the purpose of the text — it might help to think of it as a **purpose statement**. This purpose statement will almost certainly not look like one that you would write for an academic essay, but you do need to have an idea of what you want your reader to take away from your text. You can either state this explicitly by saying something like “This experience taught me the importance of friendship,” or you could simply emphasize the theme of friendship throughout your essay to guide your reader to the conclusion on their own. If you opt for this second structure, you should include a more explicit statement of purpose in your conclusion.
You should be certain to take the time to conclude your narrative essay. Think of the times you’ve told a story, and you realize there was no end and no purpose to the story. You might have said or had a friend say "and then I found a dollar," which is the cliché signal that a story lacked purpose. Your conclusion should do this work: tie up the loose ends of your story and reiterate your purpose for your audience. Help your reader feel as though the story had relevance to them.

Basic Elements of Descriptive Writing

Descriptive writing will follow less of an essay-like structure than a narrative essay. It is less important that it has a clear beginning, middle, and end, but it should have a clear purpose.

The purpose of descriptive writing should be communicated in much the same way it is communicated in a narrative essay. Your reader should leave the essay understanding why it was important for you to describe the person, place, or thing you described. Did you learn something about it? Did you learn something about yourself by seeing it? Does it communicate some sort of larger truth?

Descriptive writing should go beyond simply discussing the appearance of a person, place, or thing. It should engage — in a balanced way — all of the reader’s senses: taste, touch, sight, smell, and sound.

Principles of Narrative and Descriptive Writing

Good narrative writing and good descriptive writing share many of the same characteristics:

1. You should use strong verbs and intentional word choice. Avoid “be verbs”: am, is, are, was, were. Instead, use active verbs that communicate ideas and movement.
2. Use sensory details to show your readers your story, rather than tell them. Paint a picture with your words.
3. Use very few adverbs and qualifiers. Avoid words like really, very, sort of, kind of, etc. Say what you want to say as simply and strongly as possible.
4. Important events should appear in the story as they happen, rather than being vaguely referred to in later parts of the story.
5. Writing should be organized. Your writing can be organized chronologically, spatially, or in order of importance.
6. The essay should have a clear purpose that offers value to the reader as well as the narrator.
7. The verb tense stays consistent throughout. If you are talking about the past, stay in the past. If you are talking in the present, stay in the present.

Reflect: What Makes a Story Good?

Poll

When you listen to or read a story, what engages you most?

- A well-described setting
- Well-developed and interesting characters
- An easy-to-follow story
- Rich, descriptive language
Expand: Writing a Personal Essay

Choosing a Topic for a Personal Essay

Choosing a topic for a personal essay is one of those things that sounds far easier than it really is. There are a few ways you can go about brainstorming a topic for a narrative essay.

One method would be to begin by identifying the purpose of your essay and personal stories you have that have shaped your own understanding of that topic. For example, you might decide that you want to talk about the importance of family in your paper. If so, you could scan back over your life in search of events and moments that have shaped your understanding of the importance of family.

Alternatively, you could think of an event you think would make a good narrative or descriptive essay and spend time considering what you can learn about life and the human experience from that event. One way to start generating these kinds of ideas is to list your responses to the prompt, “I don’t know why I remember.”

We all have stories that stick out in our minds for seemingly no reason whatsoever. Perhaps you are embarrassed by the memory, or maybe it is a memory of a pleasant day you passed with family or friends. After you have a list of these memories, you can begin asking, “Why do I remember that particular event, person, or thing so vividly?” If you can find an answer, you are on your way to identifying a purpose for your essay.

Writing an Outline for a Personal Essay

An outline for a personal essay will still look very similar to an outline for an academic essay. You will begin with an introduction. Your introduction will still include a hook that grabs the attention of your reader. Additionally, it will do the work of setting the scene for your reader. In what time, place, or situation do we begin? Who are the major characters? Finally, your introduction will help establish the purpose for your essay, either with an explicit thesis statement or by alluding to your purpose throughout.

Your body paragraphs should move the reader through the story, with clear transitions each time the narrative or description moves forward or backward in time. Additionally, you can think of your body paragraphs as providing supporting evidence for your thesis. You should include details that support the overall purpose of your essay.

Your conclusion should obviously bring your story to an end that provides closure for your reader, but it should also provide the “moral of the story” and remind your reader of your purpose in writing.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

7 Helpful Tips for Writing a Personal Essay

- A article breaking down helpful and simple advice for writing personal essays
- https://www.grammarly.com/blog/personal-essay/
Lesson Glossary

narrative essay: seeks to narrate a story for the reader; it will have a clear beginning, middle, and end

descriptive essay: seeks to describe something, whether that thing is an event, a person, or an item

purpose statement: similar to a thesis statement, but less of an argumentative or persuasive statement; it seeks to guide the reader to understand the point the essay wants to communicate

Check Your Knowledge

1. Personal essays share similarities with formal, academic essays.
   A. True
   B. False

2. Personal essays do not need a thesis.
   A. True
   B. False

   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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