Narrative and Descriptive Essays:
Writing Your Own

Inquire: Sharing Your Story

Overview

Narrative and descriptive writing is one of the most personal forms of writing, as you are sharing stories about your own life. This can make essay writing in this genre difficult, since we are sometimes hesitant to be too critical of stories from our own life. To write an effective narrative essay, you need to begin with a purposeful story. After that, you'll need to be willing to read the story as if you're encountering it for the first time.

Big Question: What is the process for writing my narrative essay?

Watch: Narrating Your Life

We've all been there: staring at a black cursor blinking steadily on the stark white background of a blank page. When you're under the pressure of a deadline, your eyes might go crossed as you stare at the blinking cursor. Where do you start when you're writing an essay?

It can be even more intimidating when the essay is supposed to be about you and your own experiences, especially if you feel like you don't have any good stories to share. This kind of writing that asks you to tell your own story is called narrative writing, and it can be scary.

Narrative writing asks you to be vulnerable and share a personal experience with the world. It does not, however, need to be a heartbreakingly sad story. It does not need to be a wildly exciting story. Essay writers often express frustration when they’re asked to come up with a narrative essay topic because they say their lives are boring. It is important to know, however, that narrative topics do not have to be emotional or tragic or exciting.

Some of the best narrative essays are about mundane, everyday things that happen to a person. What makes a good narrative is whether the writer has a clear reason for sharing the story. You just need to tell a story that includes engaging details and that has a direct impact on your reader. Remember that you are not telling the story for your own benefit, but for the benefit of your reader.

Writing a narrative essay can be broken down into a simple process:

- Find a story to tell
- Choose a purpose to share with your audience
- Identify sensory details to include in your narrative
Write a clear version of events
Revise your essay for clarity, purpose, details, and verb tense

After you’ve completed this process, you should have produced a purposeful and engaging narrative essay.

If you could share one story with the world, what would it be? If you could ask the world to consider one important universal truth, what would you ask them to think about?

Read: Developing Your Idea

Overview
Narrative writing can feel a bit like bearing your soul, and for that reason, getting started can be incredibly difficult. How do you decide on a story from your life that is important enough to be shared with the world? Once you’ve chosen that story, how comfortable are you with sharing the story at all? What elements will you include, and what elements will you exclude? In short: where do you even begin?

Brainstorming with a Prompt
Brainstorming for a narrative or descriptive essay can be difficult, particularly if you aren’t working from a specific prompt. If you do have a prompt, you have a nice starting point. Consider, for example, if you’re writing an essay for an assignment that asks you to tell the story of a time you changed your mind from a long-held opinion. You could begin by making a cluster for each episode in your life that comes to mind when you consider times you’ve changed a long-held opinion. Alternatively, you could do a free-writing session for each of those episodes and see which one seems to generate the most content that would make a suitable narrative or descriptive essay.

What you should look for in these brainstorming sessions is a story that will engage your reader. You can determine this in a few ways:

- Which story seems to be the most entertaining? You want to avoid a “you had to be there” kind of story.
- Which story seems to have the most descriptive detail you can include? If you choose a story from too far back in your memory, you might struggle to include sensory imagery that engages your reader.
- Which story will be easiest for your reader to follow? If you choose a story that requires a lot of backstory or has a lot of characters, you might be taking on too much for a 2-3 page essay.
- Which story do you find most interesting and engaging? This is vitally important. It is so much easier to write over a topic that you enjoy and find interesting. This is probably the most important of the above questions.

Brainstorming without a Prompt
If you have not been given a prompt, it can be helpful to establish one for yourself. One question to consider is this: if you have one chance to communicate some kind of universal truth to a reader, what would you choose? Do you want to talk about the importance of family? Do you want to convince your reader to think before they speak?

You could also simply consider stories that stand out to you from your memory. One freewriting prompt that can be useful for this is to begin with the phrase, “I don’t know why I remember this, but…”. See what stories come to mind that stand out in your memory. These are likely stories for which you will remember
many sensory details. Once you have a fair number of potential stories to choose from, you could consider if you learned any life lessons from these stories that could be applied to a wider audience of readers.

Identifying Your Purpose

Once you have selected an episode to share with your audience, you need to make sure that you have a clearly identified purpose. In the case of an essay for which a prompt has been provided, the general premise has likely been chosen for you. However, you will likely need to expand on the premise provided by your instructor.

To borrow from the example above, your teacher might ask you to write about a time when you changed your opinion of a long-held belief, but that does not necessarily work as an essay purpose. You should seek, in your essay, to communicate some sort of larger truth that is applicable to a wider audience. For example, you might choose to tell a story that has any of the following "purposes:"

- To show your audience the importance of reconsidering long-held beliefs
- To show your audience the value of persuasive language
- To show your audience how difficult it can be to change your mind

You can see how these purposes are less focused on the lesson learned by the writer and more focused on the lesson a reader of the essay should take away.

If you have not been given a prompt that narrows the purpose for you, you have a little more work to do. However, you also have more freedom to share any moral you want with your audience.

Developing a Thesis

If you complete the work outlined in the above sections, you should be fairly close to developing a thesis. Remember that a thesis for a narrative or descriptive essay will look quite different from a thesis for an academic essay. Essentially, a thesis for this genre of writing simply states your moral. You can reference the episode you are recounting, or you could simply state the purpose of your essay. Below are a few examples that respond to the prompt outlined above:

- Thanksgiving dinner after the 2016 election taught me the importance of being willing to reevaluate my long-held beliefs.
- It is vitally important that everyone be willing to reevaluate their long-held beliefs.
- This is the story of how my family learned to reevaluate their long-held beliefs.

You might notice that the language in the above thesis statements is not particularly strong, and that is okay. In the beginning stages of writing an essay, you should focus less on language and more on ideas. You can revise your language toward the end of the writing process.

Reflect: Self as Storyteller

Poll

Do you like telling stories about yourself?
- Yes, I have the strangest things happen to me.
- Yes, I am a great story-teller.
- No, my life seems pretty boring.
- No, I can’t ever seem to tell stories well.
Identifying Relevant Details

After you have developed a thesis, you are ready to begin writing your essay. It can be intimidating to stare at a blank page, though, so where should you start?

One place to begin is to be sure you know where your story will begin and end. A common mistake students make in writing narrative/descriptive essays is to try to write a memoir instead of a narrative. A memoir is a collection of memories that are tied together by a common theme, whereas a narrative is usually comprised of a single memory that is shared to communicate a specific theme with the reader.

Be sure that you are focused on one, specific story from your life. Decide where you want to start that story:

- Do you want to start in the present and reflect back on the story?
- Do you want to start at the beginning of the story as if you’re reliving it?

After you’ve established this, you should decide where you want to end the story. Life is unlike literature: we usually lack tidy resolutions and conclusions to the stories in our lives. You will probably need to make an artificial ending to your story that will provide a sense of conclusion for your reader.

Once you have a beginning and an ending point, you should decide what details you would like to include in your story. A way to generate ideas is to engage in a listing exercise. Since you know that one of the goals of narrative and descriptive writing is to engage the senses of your reader, you could begin writing a list of all the details you remember that stand out to you. For example, if you’re telling a story from Thanksgiving, you might include any of the following:

- The damp leaves you stepped on as you walked into the house, and the absence of the satisfying crunch as your foot hit them.
- The smell of burnt rolls wafting from the kitchen.
- The sound of your uncle snoring in the recliner.
- The loud color-commentary coming from the football game on TV.
- The warmth of your niece’s hug on the bottom of your leg as you walked in.

Once you have a sizeable list, you are ready to write your essay. Try to remove some pressure from yourself at this point; you’re only telling a story. It doesn’t even need to be a good story; you just need to get something down on paper.

Revising

Once you’ve written your essay, it’s time to engage in revision. Try to read carefully back through your paper, as if you’re reading it for the first time. Look first for whether the story makes sense in the order and way it is told. Consider what it would be like to read the essay without knowing the story.

You should also be sure that your purpose is clearly included throughout. You should reference your purpose beyond the thesis statement. Go back through your essay and highlight any passage that helps you prove or support your thesis; this will help you visualize how frequently you reference your purpose. You should aim to include it at least once per paragraph.
Make sure, also, to read through your essay for its ability to engage the senses of your readers. You could assign a different color of highlighter or pen for each sense and go through to underline each time you engage that sense. This will help you visualize if you rely too heavily on any one sense, or if your paper lacks sensory details.

One final pitfall of narrative or descriptive writing is verb tense. Because the story takes place in the past, writers tend to use past tense to talk about the story. However, this is not always the best choice, especially if you’re telling the story as if it’s happening now, as in a flashback. In this case, you would want to use present tense. No matter the structure of your essay, you need to be sure that you provide clear transitions between the two tenses, so your reader knows you’re moving forward and backward in time.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Narrative Essays
- A resource providing additional details on narrative writing
- https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/essay_writing/narrative_essays.html

Types of Papers: Narrative/Descriptive
- A resource providing additional assistance for brainstorming sensory details for a narrative essay
- https://www.roanestate.edu/owl/describe.html

Personal Narrative Examples
- A collection of professional narrative samples
- https://learning.hccs.edu/faculty/kimberly.koledoye/inrw0420/narrative-essay/personal-narrative-essay-examples-1-4

Lesson Glossary

- memoir: a collection of memories that are tied together by a common theme
- verb tense: the tense of a verb communicates when, in time, an event happens
- past tense: this tense signals that an event or action is occurring in the past
- present tense: this tense signals that an event or action is occurring in the present

Check Your Knowledge

1. A collection of memories that are connected by a common theme is a ___________.
   A. narrative
   B. memoir
   C. keepsake
   D. autobiography

2. You will never use present tense in a narrative essay.
   A. True
   B. False
3. The prompt’s purpose is good enough as an essay purpose.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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