

# WRITING A NARRATIVE ESSAY

A narrative is a sequence of events arranged to time. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. In very general terms you can think of the **beginning** as the presentation of a problem that happened to someone, or to a group of people, or even to a whole town or country. The **middle** deals with the deepening of this problem - call it a dilemma or complication. And the **ending** projects the results whereby the dilemma is solved satisfactorily or tragically. The ending returns to a situation of relative stability. Five things must be clearly understood about narration:

1. Narration is not a bare recital of the events. It does not appeal simply to the reader's understanding. Rather it attempts to project the events so that the reader experiences them imaginatively. He puts himself into the events. He is not outside them but within them.
2. A narrative is an imaginative presentation of events from which a reader experiences an illusion of reality.
3. A narrative must make some kind of point. The reader must reach some kind of satisfying conclusion that grows out of the events. The experience the character undergoes has to have a purpose.
4. All the events of a narrative reach one definite conclusion or point, which must be satisfactory and believable for the reader.
5. Whenever a hero faces a dilemma, there has to be something at stake in its solution.

Narration does not concern itself with reasons so much as with a string of events, which a reader can experience as his own. A narrative writer has to see **events** happening, not just **circumstances**, or he should see them both. If he is to appeal to a reader's imagination, if he is to get a reader into the action itself, he should try to project events.

### Sample Narrative Essay

I was once upon a time a very shy boy, but I overcame my shyness about five years ago on my first date. I was actually afraid to ask a girl to my first high school's homecoming dance, but it was a feat that I had to accomplish. I didn't have any trouble finding a girl. I met a sweet girl at my cousin's birthday party just two weeks before the dance.

Now that I had found a girl to take, another problem was to call her on the phone and ask her if she would like to go with me. I hesitated a night or two, but finally I got the courage to call her. I dialed the number, and luck was with me. Her line was busy. The next day my friends at school asked me if I had a date for the dance. I told them without any hesitation at all that I did.

I didn't want them to think I was a sissy. And that night, I called her. This time her phone was not busy. I actually asked her, keeping in mind how I would look if I were not seen at the dance after I had told my friends I had a date. She accepted my invitation nonchalantly, and after I hung up the telephone, I completely forgot the meaning of the word "shyness".

As it stands, this anecdote is amusing but there are ways of increasing its effectiveness. It is an autobiographical incident but recall the general form of the short story: an individual faces a dilemma; the dilemma is presented first in terms of a beginning that must accomplish a number of things for the reader; the middle provides background for the circumstance and deepens the dilemma; and a conclusion is arrived at that is satisfying to the reader.

As you did in developing a short story, first discover the real chronology of events. List them:

1. Shyness is the basic condition.
2. The approach of the homecoming dance.
3. The needling of friends who have secured dates.
4. The discovery of the "sweet" girl.

5. The delay in calling her.
6. Calling the girl - and the relief of a busy signal.
7. Bragging to friends of having a date.
8. Being forced by this lie to telephone the girl.
9. Being accepted and overcoming shyness.

Except for the first statement, these are all events so we need not convert circumstance into events. If he does not overcome his shyness and get a date for the dance, he is going to be plagued by his friends. Lurking behind this, however, is the possibility of losing self-confidence and self-respect. So something is at stake here also.

**Circumstances** - John is raised as an only child. **Event** - It is a father-and-son banquet when the boy is in the third grade. It takes place at his grade school. All the other fathers have two or more sons. John is aware of this. His father asks him at one point why he remains so silent. John is embarrassed at his silence and shyness. His father is angry with him. John wishes he had other brothers to absorb some of his father's attention.

If you can find nothing at stake in a narrative, then the dilemma facing the hero is not deep enough. It must be expanded so that something of importance becomes a real issue in the narrative.

Remember that a narrative usually begins with the presentation of a problem or dilemma. The beginning not only presents a dilemma facing a recognizable character, but also it tells us whose story it is. It locates us in time and place. It tells us what kind of story we are reading. It gives us an idea as to the age of the main character. In many ways it anticipates the ending.

### **Steps to Writing a Narrative**

1. In order to formulate a story, work from a very brief narrative passage which contains something important at stake and which illustrates some definite conclusion (something that your hero learns, something he had not known before.)

2. Before you can take this gem of a story and write a rough draft narrative, write out the true chronology of what is happening. Remember you must make each step an event rather than a circumstance. Keep each step brief; focus on a concrete event. The events you choose must be key events - that is, they must illustrate a character facing a dilemma. In order to concentrate on the narrative you want to tell, you must be able to state rather precisely what sort of person your character is and what kind of dilemma he faces.
3. With the steps you have listed, work back from the last step to the point where the best beginning for your story may be found. You will find that once you have discovered the best place to begin your story, the other steps will more or less arrange themselves in your mind, particularly if you recall that the middle of your story deepens the dilemma of the character and forces him to make some attempt to solve it. Ordinarily, the middle presents some background to the dilemma that the protagonist faces so that the reader can understand how the character came to be confronted with the problem. It leads not only to his attempts to solve but also to a situation of anti-climax in which he appears either to fail or succeed. When this happens in a story, the hero then learns something that he had not known before. Out of this realization, he makes the final discovery, which solves his dilemma.
4. Having decided upon what step to begin your story, write a rough-draft narrative. In the rough draft narrative it is to be hoped that you did not construct sentences with dialogue. When you first write a story, it is best to confine yourself to the narrative simply because your scenes requiring dialogue are more difficult to write and go much slower than narrative passages. Write your rough drafts quickly, and get to the conclusion with as much impact as you can muster. Afterwards, there will be plenty of time to go back and put into scenes the dialogue needed in a story.
5. The short story makes use only of significant dilemmas. To distinguish that a dilemma or complication is significant, something of importance must be at stake in its resolution. If the dilemma you choose to write about does not suggest something of importance at stake, exaggerate upon it until it acquires this importance. All complications in short stories should be significant, but it is not necessary that they all be emotionally serious. Some dilemmas are pleasant ones; others are tragic; still others are amusing. The emotional range of complications is as wide as humanity.

**Dilemmas are of three basic types:**

- a) those that the protagonist can solve
  - b) those that the protagonist cannot solve and must accept as a condition of existence
  - c) those that destroy the protagonist.
6. A finished narrative will contain mainly narration - but the really significant moments of the story will be put into action. Discover the places in the rough draft which require being put into action rather than narration. And to help you, you must first know what is meant by a "scene", for a **scene** is always done in action. A scene occurs at a particular time, in a particular place, and revolves around the dramatic conflict of the story.

A scene may be in dialogue or in the unspoken thoughts of a character; it concerns the dramatic conflict of the narrative; and it takes place in one place and at one definite time.

To discover the centre of dramatic conflict in your story, state what your story is about in this fashion:

*What does the protagonist want, or want to do, and what prevents him from satisfying his desire?*

As you rewrite your rough draft, remember its final purpose is to lead to the real significance of your story. Rework your rough draft narrative, indicating what parts of it need to be put into scenes, and in general making it a more clearly focused story.

7. After writing your story, examine it critically to see whether or not you can improve it.
- a) If the **dilemma** of a story is too easily solved, is solved by someone other than the hero, or is solved by accident or chance, the story will be weakened.
  - b) The chief **character** has to be readily recognizable. He cannot be enormously complicated since the dilemma he faces is actually a test of his outstanding traits. Thus the chief character must ordinarily belong to some recognizable group.

- c) The **setting** is important as a way of stating or suggesting the nature of the dilemma. It frequently helps to characterize the protagonist, and in some stories, the setting can be the antagonist.
  - d) The **descriptions** of the story must be imaginative and "real". They must evoke a response on the reader's part of credibility, of "reality".
  - e) The **weakness or strength** of a story can be determined at its moment of truth. Stories ordinarily bring the protagonist to a confrontation with himself at this point. Change is suggested, sometimes change of a very powerful sort.
8. In the last revision of a story, an author has to cut out excess material. Each word has to play a role.

The writer has to be careful that he does not substitute his own redundant experience for what should stand independently as fiction. The system is an extension of time. Stories ordinarily take place within a limited time span. A warning signal in stories will be the transitional phrases such as, "A few months passed..." or, "And a year or two passed." When this happens, the story line sags. The writer has to see his protagonist as a character in the story and not as himself experiencing the events of his own life.

9. We now have to find where to begin the anecdote. Since it is quite short, and is primarily expository in purpose, there is no reason why it cannot begin as a direct statement of the dilemma and its consequences. Otherwise, told as narrative, the best beginning would probably be step 7 in which the narrator brags to his friends about having a date for the dance when he, in fact, does not. This step would satisfy all that we need to know at the beginning.
10. Since we already have a rough draft to evaluate, we should also consider where there should be scenes rather than mere narrative. Recall, too, that scenes are in action, and the only justification for using an event in a scene is that it occurs at a moment of dramatic conflict. The conflict in "I Overcome Shyness" is primarily in the narrator himself. What he wants to do is in conflict with his shyness. He wants to date the "sweet" girl, he wants to go to the dance, and he wants to prove to his

friends that he is no sissy. He would not be in conflict, however, were it not that his friends egg him on. And he would not be in conflict were it not for the girl he desires to know but of whom he is afraid. Thus, when he confronts his friends or tries to talk to the girl, we have the moments of conflict in the anecdote. These should be in the scenes. In looking at the steps in the chronology, these scenes would occur in steps 3, partially in 4, in 6, in 7, and in 8. Incorporate these changes in the anecdote.

### **I Overcome Shyness**

"Hey, you gotta date for the dance?"

I looked up and swallowed. It was Tom, and with him was Jack, and beside him was Bill. They were all looking at me with smirks. The dance they were talking about was the Freshman Homecoming Dance in two weeks, and I knew why Tom was asking. It was because he and the others, my friends, thought I was too shy ever to ask a girl to go along with me. The trouble was, they were right, and I had not asked a girl, and in fact I was scared silly of them - but who would admit this to his friends?

"Sure," I said. "Of course." I answered just as though I had been asked if I had good red blood in my veins.

"Yeah?" Tom said, lifting an eyebrow and looking both surprised and skeptical. He swept a meaningful look at Bill and Jack. "Who with?"

"She's a girl," I said hotly.

"Are you positive?" Tom said. He had crew-cut hair, blue eyes, and a few pimples on his forehead. Also his cheeks were covered with a light fuzzy down.

"Yeah," I said nonchalantly and clammed up. In a couple of minutes they went down the high school hallway and left me to my thoughts.

And so on...