WRITING A NARRATIVE / An Annotated Example

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Lydia’s Story
JAN BRIDEAU

JUST BEFORE LEAVING LOUISIANA I met a small, slender black woman. She was in her sixties, with her short gray hair neatly tucked up inside a kerchief. Let’s call her Lydia. An internist and I had traveled to a rural town’s shelter housed in the VFW hall, the temporary home of seventy-some people.

Entering the large VFW hall, we were struck by the chemical odor of a cleaning solution so strong that it seemed toxic. The hall had no windows; only fluorescent lighting illuminated the large space. Coming from the hot, humid weather outdoors, we found the inside uncomfortably cold from air conditioning. The cackle of a television set was the only sound. There were several rows of cots and mattresses with a few people lying on them. Most of the shelter residents had left for the day, to work or do errands, but they were expected to return later. A local official told us that two adult residents needed medical care.

One of these was Lydia, who had an abscessed tooth. Lydia was soft-spoken but eager to have her tooth examined. It turned out that she had been unable to chew on the affected side for several months. She hadn’t been able to afford $25 for an x-ray, and she didn’t have medical insurance; the pain, she told us, waxed and waned. Her cheek was quite tender, and it appeared that the tooth should be extracted. To address her immediate need, we started her on a course of antibiotics and made a note that a dentist should see her soon. The internist asked where she lived and if she knew how her family was doing.
Lydia told us that she lived alone in her home, located in the Eighth Ward in New Orleans, adjacent to that city’s devastated Ninth Ward. As the first storm raged, she knew to avoid windows. (Interestingly, she never used the names “Katrina” or “Rita” when speaking about the hurricanes. She, like many people I met, referred to them as the “first storm” and the “second storm.”)

Lydia took a sleeping bag into her windowless hallway. She slept on the floor for two nights. Then, one morning, she woke to find that her feet and the sleeping bag were soaking wet, and there was standing water throughout her house.

When she opened the front door, the whole street looked like a river, and water poured in. She described it as “rushing like the Colorado River.” She knew that if she went outside, she would be swept up in the current and drown. There was no one in sight.

She was unable to shut the door against the brown rushing water. Horrified, she tried not to panic. Seeking higher ground, she climbed on top of her dining room table. It, like most of her furniture, had been handed down from her grandparents. The table was bulky and heavy; normally, it took three men to move it. But as the water continued to rise, the table started moving.

then rocking—and Lydia knew she was in trouble. She managed to climb up on her kitchen counter, but that soon became precarious as well. The water continued to rise quickly, and the water pressure was so strong that water spurted out of the kitchen sink like a fountain. Terrified of drowning, she kept reminding herself to think clearly.

The thing to do, she decided, was to find the highest spot in her one-story house. Lydia climbed off the kitchen counter and waded through the deep water, dragging a small kitchen stool behind her. She positioned the stool in front of her linen closet, propping one foot on the stool and the other on the doorknob; then she climbed to the top shelf of her linen closet. She described the shelf area as about three feet wide and about a foot and a half tall. Crouched there, she watched the water continue to rise. Her ceilings, she knew, were twelve feet tall. The water rose to above her height, then to above six feet, finally to about seven feet. (She could estimate numbers, she said, because she had gone to nursing school long ago. Eventually, she had to leave nursing because she cried over her patients’ conditions too much, and they ended up consoling her.)

Lydia waited, cramped on the top shelf of the linen closet, until the water finally began to recede. When we asked if she got hungry or thirsty, she said that she didn’t remember feeling that way. Her tongue became dry and her lips were cracked, but she only was aware of being terrified of the water. When the water receded to about five feet, it was five days later. She was finally able to come down from her perch. The water was up to her chin.

She tried to open the back door near the linen closet. But the wood had swollen from the water, and it wouldn’t budge. She knew that the windows were probably swollen shut, too. Then she remembered that she’d never closed the front door because of the strong current. She moved through the water, out the front door, and onto her front porch. She couldn’t recall how long she waited alone in the water, holding onto a porch post and screaming for help. Eventually, a far neighbor with a boat rescued her and took her to a larger rescue boat. Then that boat dropped her off at an overpass where, in the sun and the heat, she and a large group of other people waited without food or water.
At some point, a small van drove up and stopped directly in front of her. A female driver, dressed in scrubs, jumped out. The van was loaded with medical supplies, and there was room for only one person; she ordered Lydia to get in. The woman told Lydia that she worked in the emergency room of a local hospital and was soon to become a physician. She drove Lydia to a shelter.

As Lydia was telling us her story, I heard strength and resolve in her voice. She was proud that she had “kept her head,” which had saved her life. She knew that she didn’t have a home to return to, that everything in it was probably destroyed. There was, however, a reason for her to return home one last time. She needed to get back to that linen closet. There, on the top shelf, was her family photo album. It was the only thing Lydia thought might have survived the water. It would be the only thing from her past that she could take with her on her new journey.

For me, the enormity of the double hurricanes became clear only after witnessing so many people left without homes. Everywhere we traveled in Louisiana, there were countless people in shelters that had once been a hotel, convention center, sports arena, school, church, YMCA, and, yes, the VFW hall where I met Lydia. It was my privilege to meet and serve them. But it’s Lydia’s story that stays with me most, probably because it represents the essence of hope and determination in the face of terrible adversity.

**REFLECT.** Analyze a short nonfiction narrative that you find in a magazine or on a website. Look at the list of five characteristic features of narratives on p. 16 and annotate the essay to point out these features, using Bridgeau’s essay as a model. Then look at your annotations and the parts of the text they refer to and evaluate how well your chosen narrative illustrates the characteristic features. For example, is the setting clearly described? How vivid are the details?