WRITING A NARRATIVE / A Roadmap

Choose a topic that matters—to you, and to others

Whether you write a narrative for personal reasons or in response to an assignment, choose your own topic or work with an assigned topic, try to write about something that matters to you—and try to make sure that it will matter to your audience as well.

If you are writing a personal narrative, choosing a topic can be difficult because you are deciding to share something personal about yourself or someone you know. You will need to choose an experience or event that you feel comfortable sharing, in some detail, with an audience. Be sure that the experience is not only important to you but is also of enough general interest to engage your audience.

If your narrative is not a personal one, you still want it to be compelling. Narratives that aren’t personal are often part of a larger conversation about an event, or some topic that the event represents, which gives the story significance. For example, if you are writing a narrative about how specific students’ academic performances changed when they enrolled in a charter school, you need to recognize that such stories are part of an ongoing educational and political debate about the effectiveness of charter schools as an alternative to traditional public schools. You may need to do some research to understand this debate and how your narrative fits into it.

Consider your rhetorical situation

Whenever you write a narrative (or anything, for that matter) you need to consider the following elements of your rhetorical situation:

Think about your audience. Who will be reading what you write, and what's your relationship with them?

• Will your audience have any knowledge about your topic? Will you need to explain anything or provide any background information?
• How are they like or unlike you? Consider age, gender, income, cultural heritage, political beliefs, and so on. How will such factors affect how you tell the story?
• Can you assume they’ll be interested in what you write? How can you get them interested?
• How are they likely to react to your narrative? What do you want them to think or do as a result of reading what you say?

Think about your **purpose**. Why are you writing this narrative? What is the significance of this story, and what do you hope it will demonstrate to your readers? Remember that your narrative needs to do more than just tell an engaging story; it needs to make a point of some kind.

Think about your **stance**. Are you telling a story that is very personal to you, or is it one you have some distance from? How do you want to present yourself as the narrator? Do you want to come across as witty and amusing, if you’re telling a humorous family story? As knowledgeable but impersonal, if you’re recounting historical events for a political science essay? Whatever your stance, how can you make your writing reflect that stance?

**Consider the larger context**. What broader issues are involved in your narrative? What else has been said and written about this topic? Even if your narrative is personal, how might it speak to some larger topic—perhaps a social or political one? Considering the larger context for your narrative can help you see it from perspectives different from your own, and present it in a way that will interest others.

**Consider your medium**. Often you won’t have a choice—but if you do, think about which medium best suits your goals and audience. The kinds of details you include, the language you use, the way you present materials from sources, and many other things depend on the medium. The conventions of a print essay, for instance, in which you can use written words and images, differ markedly from those of an audio essay (in which you can use sounds but no written words or images).

**Consider matters of design**. Does your narrative need headings? Is there anything in the story that could be conveyed better with a photograph than with words alone? Will embedded audio or video clips help you engage your audience? Often in academic writing, you may be expected to use a font and type size or to structure headings a certain way. If you can determine the look of your text, though, remember that design has a powerful impact on the impression your narrative makes.
Explore your topic and do any necessary research

If you are writing a personal narrative, write down all that you remember about your topic. Using freewriting or other activities for generating ideas, write down as many specific details as you can: sounds, smells, textures, colors, and so on. What details will engage your audience? Not all the details that you jot down in this exploratory stage will make it into your essay. You’ll need to choose the ones that will engage your audience and support your main point. In addition to sensory details, try to write down direct quotations or dialogue you can remember that will help bring your story to life.

If your narrative is not a personal one, you’ll likely need to conduct research so that you can provide accurate and sufficient details about the topic. Whether your research takes you to sources in the library or online, or into the community to conduct interviews, it’s important to get the what, when, and where of the narrative right, and consulting sources will help you do that. The point is that when you write a narrative that is not personal, you’ll need to rely on more than your memory for the content.

Decide on a point of view

The subject that you choose to write about will usually determine the point of view from which you write. If you’re telling a story in which you are a central participant, you will usually use the first person (I, we). In some academic disciplines, however, or if you’re narrating a story that is not personal, the third person (he, she, they) may be more appropriate.

Also think about what verb tense would be most effective for establishing the point of view in your narrative. Most personal narratives that are arranged in chronological order are written in the past tense (“When I was twelve, I discovered what I wanted to do for the rest of my life”). However, if you want readers to feel like they are actually experiencing an event, you may choose to use the present tense, as Georgina Kleege and Wright Thompson do in examples earlier in this chapter.

Organize and start writing

Once you’ve chosen a subject and identified your main point, considered your rhetorical situation, come up with enough details, and decided on a
point of view (not necessarily in this order), it's time to think about how to organize your narrative.

**Keep your main point in mind.** As you begin to draft, type out that point as a tentative **thesis** and keep your eye on it as you write; you can decide later whether you want to include it in your text.

**Organize your information.** What happened? Where? When? Who was there? What details can you describe to make the story come alive? Decide whether to present the narrative in **chronological order**, in reverse chronological order, or in some other order.

**Draft an opening.** A good introduction draws your audience into the story and makes them want to know more. Sometimes you'll need to provide a context for your narrative—to describe the setting and introduce some of the people before getting on with what happened. Other times you might start in the middle of your story, or at the end—and then circle back to tell what happened.

**Draft a conclusion.** If you organize your narrative chronologically, you'll likely conclude by telling how the story ends. But make sure your readers see the point of your story; if you haven't made that clear, you might end by saying something about the story's significance. Why does it matter to you? What do you want readers to take away—and remember?

**Look critically at your draft, get response—and revise.**

Read your draft slowly and carefully. Try to see it as if for the first time: Does the story grab your attention, and can you follow it? Can you tell what the point is, and will your audience care? If at all possible, get feedback from others. Following are some questions that can help you or others examine a narrative with a critical eye:

- **How does the opening capture the audience's interest?** Is it clear why you're telling the story, and have you given readers reason to want to find out what happened? How else might the narrative begin?