How to Write a Personal Narrative

**by** [Grace Fleming](https://www.thoughtco.com/grace-fleming-1856759)

**Updated March 19, 2018**

The personal narrative essay can be the most enjoyable type of assignment to write because it provides you with an opportunity to share a meaningful event from your life. After all, how often do you get to tell funny stories or brag about a great experience and receive school credit for it?

**Think of a Memorable Event**

A personal narrative can focus on any event, whether it is one that lasted a few seconds or it spanned a few years. Your topic can reflect your personality, or it can reveal an event that shaped your outlooks and opinions. But your story should have a clear *point*.

* you could write about a learning experience that challenged and changed you
* you could describe a new discovery that came about in an interesting way
* you could write about something funny that happened to you or your family
* you could write about a lesson you learned the hard way

**How to Plan Your Narrative**

You can start this process with a [brainstorming session](https://www.thoughtco.com/brainstorming-techniques-1857082), taking a few moments to scribble down several memorable events from your life. Remember, this doesn’t have to be high drama: your event could be anything from blowing your first bubble gum bubble to getting lost in the woods.

If you think your life doesn't have that many interesting events, try to come up with one or more examples for each of the following.

* times you laughed the hardest
* times you felt sorry for your actions
* painful memories
* times you were surprised
* scariest moments

Next, look over your list of events and narrow your choices by selecting those that have a clear [chronological pattern](https://www.thoughtco.com/chronological-order-composition-and-speech-1689751) of events, and those that would enable you to use colorful, entertaining, or interesting details and descriptions.

Finally, decide if your topic has a point. A funny story might represent irony in life or a lesson learned in a comical way; a scary story might demonstrate how you learned from a mistake.

Decide on the point of your final topic and keep it in mind as you write.

**Show Don’t Tell**

Your story should be written in first person point of view. In a narrative, the writer is the storyteller, so you can write this through your own eyes and ears. You want to make the reader *experience* what you experienced - not just *read* what you experienced.

You can go about this by imagining that you are re-living your event. As you think about your story, describe on paper what you see, hear, smell, and feel.

**Describing actions:**

Don't say "My sister ran off."

Instead, say "My sister jumped a foot in the air and disappeared behind the closest tree."

**Describing moods:**

Don't say "Everyone felt on edge."

Instead, say "We were all afraid to breathe. Nobody made a sound."

**Elements to Include**

Your story should be written in chronological order, so you should make a brief outline showing the sequence of events before you begin to write the narrative. This will keep you on track.

Your story should include the following:

**Characters** - Who are the people involved in your story? What are their significant [character traits](https://www.thoughtco.com/character-traits-1856947)?

**Tense** - Your story already happened, so you should probably write in the past tense. Some writers are effective telling stories in the present tense - but that is tricky! And it probably isn't a good idea.

**Voice** - Are you attempting to be funny, somber, or serious? Are you telling the story of your five-year-old self? Keep this in mind at all times.

**Conflict** - Any good story should have a conflict of some kind, but conflict can come in many forms. Conflict can be between you and your neighbor’s dog, or it can be two feelings you are experiencing at one time, like guilt and the need to be popular.

**Descriptive language** - You must make an effort to broaden your vocabulary and use expressions, techniques, and words that you don’t normally use. This will make your paper more entertaining and interesting, and it will make you a better writer.

**Make your point** - The story you write should come to a satisfying or interesting end. You should not attempt to write out an obvious lesson directly - the lesson should come from observations and discoveries. In other words:

Don't say: "I learned not to make judgments about people based on their appearances."

Instead, say "Maybe the next time I bump into an elderly lady with greenish skin and a large, crooked nose, I'll greet her with a smile. Even if she is clutching a warped and twisted broomstick."