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Showing Your Story: The Narrative Essay

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The purpose of this article is to explain how a narrative essay differs from other college essays in both its form and function and to enable you to write a narrative essay with maximum impact.

Everyone Has a Story

While research essays focus on argument and informative essays focus on explanation, the narrative essay is all about *you*. Most often, narrative essays tell stories based on true events in our personal lives. This gives us much more freedom to write creatively, relying mainly on experience instead of hard data and technical research. Clear organization and descriptive language will help you craft a story that will hook your readers and leave them with a powerful impression.

Narrate What You Know

In narrative essays, the main goal is to draw from experience to tell a meaningful and engaging story. Imagine you are taking your reader on a journey. Like the plot of a movie, your story should have a clear and logical progression from start to finish. Usually, you will also include a series of significant events that build to a climax. This is the point of highest emotional intensity that the rest of the narrative leads up to. With clear organization, your reader can easily follow the flow of your narrative, and the impact of your story will be much greater.

The other key element of the narrative essay is descriptive language. Your story will only be compelling and engaging if you use your creativity, drawing detailed and imaginative pictures. A common phrase for creative writers is to “show not tell”; this is also true for writing narrative essays. As you write, remember that you are trying to pull the reader into your story. You want the reader to see, hear, and feel what you felt, exploring your senses to make the narrative come alive. The more vivid, creative, and detailed your descriptions, the more your readers will connect with your story naturally without you telling them to do so.

One final thing to consider when writing narrative essays is purpose. While telling a story can be purely entertaining, in an essay, a writer usually explores a theme, reveals an insight, or teaches a lesson. “The moral of the story” is not required for narrative essays but sometimes is a good finish. As you come to the end of your essay, you may include some takeaways from your experience. Your story has a greater chance to impact your reader if you share how it impacted you.

Example

Imagine you are writing a narrative essay for an ENG113 class. You want to write about your experience of starting college. But why? What is your purpose, and what idea do you want your readers to leave with? Know the main point before you begin. Then, think about structure. Where do you want to start the narrative? Do you want to begin with your first day of classes? In the middle of your first final, with a flashback to when you started college? Whatever you choose, your beginning should be interesting

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enough to hook your reader. Consider the middle and end of your story. How will your story unfold? Where will you choose to end your story? Keep in mind you will not have space to describe your entire first year of college in one essay, but you can describe your first week or your first day. It is better to describe one event or short time than a long period.

Narrate using interesting and descriptive language. Practice *showing* not telling. Imagine you want to share how you felt going to your first college class. Consider the sentences below.

Telling: *I was so scared going into my first class that I just wanted to run away.*

Showing: *When my heart began to pound as everyone's eyes turned toward me. My legs began to shake, and I froze in the doorway. I couldn't make my body move, even though I wanted nothing more than to run away.*

As you come closer to finishing your story, consider the climax and ending. What will be the turning point? Maybe it's passing a test. Maybe a conversation with your professor. And how will you end your story? Maybe you end with the moment you finally unpack the last box in your dorm. Or maybe you end with your last class of the week. Whatever ending you decide on, make sure your descriptions are clear and creative.

Tips

1. When creating the structure of your narrative essay, prewrite an outline with points for the beginning, middle, and end. This will help you visualize your organization and see if your essay flows.
2. If you are struggling to write descriptively, try to list out as many details as you can remember about the thing or event you are trying to describe. Use words that relate to sensory imagery (what you see, hear, feel, smell, and taste).
3. Read other stories, nonfiction or fiction, and pay attention to how the author organizes their stories and the language they use.

Works Consulted

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