

## *Writing a Personal Narrative*

A **personal narrative** is a story of a life experience that taught you something about yourself. is your memory of an important experience. Tap into your personal store of memories

- by looking through old photographs, journals, diaries, or letters
- asking family members or friends for stories about you
- looking at mementos, such as souvenir buttons or play programs

As you review your experiences, be aware of your thoughts and feelings. A strong reaction means that the experience was important to you.

### **Evaluating an Experience**

**Step 1: Summarize what happened.** If you have a hard time restating the experience in a sentence or two, then it is probably too complicated for this paper.

**Step 2: Map out what happened.** Make sure you can recall the events clearly and in order. If there are big gaps in your narrative, your readers will have trouble following you.

**Step 3: Tell what you learned from your experience.** If you have no clear answer, the experience may not be important enough to choose as a topic.

**Step 4: Quiz yourself.** Will you be comfortable sharing your experience with others? What might they learn from you?

### **Think About Purpose and Audience**

**What's It All About?** In a personal narrative, your main purpose is to express yourself. Keep these *characteristics of expressive writing* in mind as you plan your narrative.

- is written in the first person ("I")
- includes vivid details of people, places, events, and things
- tells the events of an experience in the order in which they happened (first, second, third, and so on)
- includes the writer's thoughts and feelings during the experience

You may discover a secondary purpose as you write your paper. In addition to expressing yourself, you may find yourself also trying to entertain, to inform, or even to influence your readers.

**Who Wants to Know?** Now that you have identified an experience to share, consider with whom you are comfortable sharing it. If you write about your first crush, will you share that experience in the school newspaper, or would you rather share it with only a close friend? Choose the most appropriate **audience** for your narrative. Keep in mind your audience could be someone close to you, or it could be readers you have never met. (Remember that your teacher is automatically part of your audience, so be sure are comfortable sharing this experience with him or her.)

### Thinking About Purpose and Audience

Your purpose for writing a personal narrative is to express yourself to others. Use the following steps to identify an appropriate audience.

- First, list several different audiences.
- Then, choose one audience with whom you are comfortable sharing this experience.

### Recall and Arrange Details

**Make It Real** To get your readers involved in your narrative, you need to show them events as you experienced them. **Details are the heart of an interesting story.** Details can include the kinds of information listed on the next page.

- smaller events that were part of the experience you are retelling
- what you observed by using your senses (hearing, touch, smell, taste, and sight)—in other words, sensory details
- specific information about other people involved in the experience, including dialogue, or what people said
- the time and place the experience happened
- your thoughts and feelings during the experience

**Walk This Way** As you consider details, you should think about how you will arrange them. **Most narratives are written in chronological order. That is, events are told in the order in which they happened.** To make sure you retell your experience in chronological order, you can simply number the events and details in a chart, or you can make a time line like the one below. A **time line** may help you recall in more detail the events that made up your experience.

### Recalling and Arranging Details

In chronological order, list as many details as you can recall about your experience. You can make a time

line or create a chart. Remember to include smaller events, your thoughts and feelings, and sensory details.

### Choosing Relevant Details

On my first day at my new school, I was nervous. The school was at the end of a narrow, winding street. I went to the main office to sign up. It was crazy, with kids running everywhere holding pink permission slips. In comparison, I felt like I was moving in slow motion.

Are all the details in this passage relevant? In other words, do they make the experience clear, or do they just clutter up the narrative?

**Relevant details** help readers focus on the main idea: the writer is nervous. The details about the main office show how busy and confusing the school is.

**Irrelevant details** take readers away from the main idea. The narrow, winding street may add to the picture in your mind, but it does not relate to the writer's main idea.

### Testing Details for Relevance

Here is how a writer determined that the details about the school office were relevant to his story.

**STEP 1** Identify the main idea of the narrative.

The main idea is how awkward and nerve racking the first day of school was.

**STEP 2** Make sure the details relate to the main idea.

The scene in the office was the first sign that I would be out of step with everybody the whole day.

**STEP 3** Make sure that the details will help the reader create a mental picture.

The kids running around made me feel like I was in a circus. I want readers to see that.

## Writing

### Personal Narrative

#### Framework

#### Introduction

- Attention-grabbing opening
- Details that set the scene

#### Directions and Explanations

- Grab your reader's attention right away with an interesting beginning. Look at professional authors' opening lines for ideas. Also, include enough **details to set the scene** for your readers

## Body

- Event 1 (details)
- Event 2 (details)
- Event 3 (details) and so on

- Arrange the events of your narrative and their details in the order in which they occurred. Start at the beginning and work your way to the end. Connect the events using transitional words such as first, next, then, and finally.
- Use **details** to **elaborate** on each event in the narrative. Include sensory details, details about people who were involved, and **dialogue**. Most important, include just enough details about your feelings at the time to keep your audience in **suspense**. Save your explanation of the meaning of the experience until the very end.

## Conclusion

- Meaning of the experience for the narrator

- Let your readers know the **meaning of the experience**