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The Personal Narrative

by Kathryn Limerick

When we think about teaching writing, we often think about the writing process or the traits of good writing: Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, and Conventions. And while these are certainly the overarching principles, we need to keep in mind that when teaching writing, we also need to find ways to help students make sense of these principles. That is why teaching the writing traits and the writing principles within a genre study or type of writing, is helpful.

One of the easiest genres of writing to teach is the personal narrative. Students love to orally share what happened the night before, how they did in their game over the weekend, or what happened on the playground that morning. It seems like a perfect place to start when you are trying to get students in the habit of writing daily.

Before we get too far ahead of ourselves, we need to remember that writing looks very different in kindergarten and fifth grade. In kindergarten, we may see a lot of picture drawing with some labeling of the picture, along with a few legible, self-generated words that begin a sentence. However, by fifth grade, we expect the writing to include multiple paragraphs, a logical sequence, dialogue, and figurative details. Regardless of grade, addressing your students as authors will greatly increase their excitement.



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PERSONAL NARRATIVE

To begin writing about “me” or “what happened to me”, you need to generate ideas and focus those ideas into small snippets. I like to look at the latest Dan Brown novel, The Lost Symbol, when I think about being specific. Although it is over 500 pages long, the events in the novel take place over a period of hours. If we want students to write a focused and detailed narrative about an experience, we have to help them see the difference in a “My Dad” topic and a “My Dad took my brother and me to get ice cream last night” topic. Using various Thinking Maps will help your students take a “big” topic and narrow it into a “small” moment in time.



For example, your students can use a Circle Map and put the “Big Topic” in the center of the map and brainstorm “Small Moments” in the outer portion of the circle.



Once students have created their Circle Map, you could help them determine better narrative topics. For instance, a story about their dad taking them for ice cream is a better story than one about their dad’s work location because they actually experienced the trip to the ice cream store. It is a story in which the student is a character (personal narrative).

PERSONAL NARRATIVE



As students are working on **revising** their stories, we need to help them stay focused by helping them add details. Details in a story make all the difference, regardless of the grade level. We also want to make sure that those details are important and on topic. We've all read those stories, "My dad took my brother and me to get ice cream. I got vanilla, my brother got chocolate, and my dad got strawberry. Then we got stuck in the mud." At this point, we could ask questions about the story to help students narrow their focus.

"What size ice cream did you get? Why did you go out to get ice cream? What happened in line? What did you say? What did the server say?" etc. We can model such topics as leads, ellipses, plot, dialogue, character, setting, and sensory details during mini-lessons. We could also suggest that there is an entirely new story about getting stuck in the mud that is just waiting to be written. Students don't have to write only one story at a time. In fact, they may draft a different story every day. Although it may be difficult for us, as teachers, to leave a piece unfinished, it is an authentic and true-to-life way to write. Real authors have huge notebooks of ideas and notes that are jotted down that they use to choose a topic to take to publishing.



As time goes on, you will want to suggest to your students that they choose one story in their file to take through the **publishing process**. Publishing is one of the most exciting times for real authors, and it should be just as exciting for your students. I highly recommend trying to get your students to pick one story they want to publish on a

specific day and giving them one to three days to edit this story. As your students get ready to publish their stories, it is then an appropriate time to help them find spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors. Real authors have Publishing Parties to spread the word about their books. To get the word out, especially to parents and administrators, that your class is publishing, you can plan a party, too. Make it as elaborate or as simple as you would like.



PERSONAL NARRATIVE

You're probably wondering if your students should rewrite their entire story. For kindergarten and first grade students, you could have them rewrite their story or you could type the story for them. Your assistance will give the students an incredible amount of pride. For second through fifth grade, this could be an opportunity to take your students to the computer lab and have them type their story. Then, they can illustrate the story by hand or with the use of computer graphics.



There are so many ways to help students write effective personal narrative stories; these are just a few. Challenge yourself to come up with new ideas. I'm sure your students will thank you for it.

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