Writing the Narrative Essay

Overview: This lesson focuses on the technique of narrative essay writing by exposing students to good narrative essays written by professional and student authors and providing opportunities to practice these techniques by responding to a set of narrative prompts.

Standards:

W.11-12. 3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.
   a. Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experience or events.
   b. Use narrative techniques such as dialogue, pacing description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
   c. Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome (e.g., a sense of mystery, suspense, growth, or resolution).
   d. Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.
   e. Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.

Objectives:
   • Students will learn to brainstorm, plan, and develop a narrative essay which uses the techniques of fiction in order to communicate a message or point.

Materials:
   • An anthology of essays such as the Bedford Reader would be very helpful.

Procedure:

Before the Lesson
Students should be familiar with terms such as dialogue, plot, tension, symbolism, detail, figurative language, and theme.

Students should have had the opportunity to read at least three or four excellent examples of personal narrative writing. Some possible suggestions are included below. Some selections are from larger works; please excerpt as needed. As always, please pre-screen unfamiliar works to ensure their appropriateness for your class and situation.
Common Core State Standards

ELA 11-12: Writing Strand

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- Annie Dillard, “Death of a Moth”
- Ralph Ellison, Living with Music
- Nancy Mairs, “On Being Crippled”
- George Orwell, “Shooting an Elephant”
- Richard Rodriguez, introduction to Days of Obligation
- Virginia Woolf, “The Death of a Moth”

Student Essays
- Christine Moore, “The Wilder Side”
- Emily Garban, “My New Pair of Pants”
- Emilya Terry, “Die, Miss Daae!”

Activity 1: Learning the Tools

Lecture
- Discuss the concept of the “narrative essay,” that odd hybrid of the academic and personal.
  - Narrative = Writing which tells a story
  - Essay = Writing which discusses or analyzes a topic or problem
- The narrative essay does both. Using the techniques of fiction such as dialogue, characterization, plotlines, detail, figurative language, and theme, narrative essays convey a point or message relevant not only to the author’s personal life, but to the reader and the world at large.

Focus: The Tools of the Trade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Tools of the Trade</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Dialogue</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Characterization</td>
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<td>• Description</td>
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<td>• Symbolism</td>
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<td>• Reflection</td>
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<td>• Plot</td>
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<td>• Theme</td>
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Dialogue is one of the hardest elements to teach because it’s difficult to know when to use it. It’s important to remember that dialogue is never just decoration – it needs to advance the plot, provide insight into a character, suggest an evaluation of an event or person, or indicate
setting or mood. Some students may need a bit of a refresher on the proper punctuation of dialogue or may need alternative words to use instead of “said.”

**Ways to Use Dialogue**

- To introduce the central conflict of the essay, e.g., “I never knew inviting a manatee to dinner would prove to be my ultimate ticket to happiness,” my father remarked...
- To provide insight into a character, e.g., “What the heck do YOU want?” Bill sneered, pushing past the chubby sixth-grader...
- To provide reflection about or reaction to an event, e.g., “Wow, that was amazing!” José exulted as he slowed down from his mad dash down the rock-strewn mountain path.
- To suggest local color or setting, e.g., “Y’all wanna git yer stuff off there,” the man drawled...
- To indicate mood, e.g., “No! I don’t know what’s there! Leave me alone,” I babbled, frantically scrabbling for an exit...

**Characterization** is also a tough skill, but students can be helped by reminding how they themselves evaluate the character or personalities of people they have not met – they judge by appearance, by mannerisms, clothing, bearing, statements, attitudes, gestures, accessories or possessions – in short, by a host of telltale details that reveal character.

The biggest rule? Generally speaking, encourage students to SHOW, not TELL. Here’s the difference:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Telling</th>
<th>Showing</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Billy was shy.</td>
<td>Billy ducked his head, not wanting to meet the gaze of anyone else. He drew his shoulders into his chest abruptly, trying to fold himself as</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Practice
Take the following statements that “tell” and, using gestures, actions, behavior, appearance, dialogue, or other tools of the writer’s craft, make them “show” the same idea without ever using that word or its close synonyms. (That is, if the statement says, “Billy was shy,” you may NOT use any words or phrases like “shy” such as “reticent,” “embarrassed around people,” or other ideas. SHOW his shyness instead.)

| 1. Billy was depressed. |
| 2. Billy was mildly content. |
| 3. Billy was exultant. |
| 4. Billy was skeptical. |
| 5. Billy was bored. |

Description
Remind students of what they know about detail (literal language that appeals to the senses) and figurative language, especially those good old workhorses, simile and metaphor. In the following exercise, have students describe a common object BUT observe some artificial limitations that should expand their abilities to use detail and figurative language as part of their descriptions:

Description Exercise
Choose any THREE of the objects below to describe in three to four sentences. If you have examples of the object you have chosen (e.g., a key), put it on the desk in front of you and describe that specific object, not a generalized recollection of one. The catch? In describing your object, you must observe the following rules:

- NO words for color – use comparisons to other well-known objects, e.g., “His shirt was the exact shade of a banana.”
- NO words for size or shape – again, use comparisons to other well-known objects, e.g., “The rocks along the path were like limestone golf balls.”
- NO words for texture – use comparisons to well-known objects. “The steering wheel felt as smooth as a raven’s beak.”
Symbolism
Symbols are basically just *things that convey an abstract idea*. We like tangibles; we are less comfortable with abstractions. Symbols allow us to give tangible form and substance to more abstract notions like love, patriotism, the divine, death, eternity, or many others. Students should be encouraged to focus on significant objects or moments in their stories and give extra “weight” to describing them in order to communicate the message of the story.

Urge students to take symbolism seriously – and individually. One hint for better writing: **Don’t make symbolism obvious or typical.** Don’t have a rose symbolize love, a baby symbolize new life, or a gold ring symbolize marriage. Remember what symbolized the marriage between the troubled couple of Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome*? A pickle dish. That’s *not* obvious…and that’s one reason the novel is good. Think of the first five ideas most people would use to symbolize ideas like life, love, marriage, et cetera...**then cross them all out.** Choose something we WON’T expect.

Reflection
Reflection consists of those moments when you, the writer, “look back” on what occurred and summarize for the reader what the moment meant to you. This can occur at several points during the essay and may be useful “touchstone moments” in establishing the way in which this event changed you as a person. A reflective moment at the beginning can play off a reflective moment at the essay’s end, showing character change over time.

Plot
In a narrative essay, students are, above all, telling a story – which of necessity means that the story they’re telling should have a beginning, a middle, a climactic moment, and an end. In discussing narrative essays, encourage students to use the techniques of fiction they’ve encountered in the past. What follows are some relatively classic structuring techniques one can use in designing an essay’s plot.
The Classic Chronological Order Method

- Tell the story in the order in which the events occurred
- Begin just before the “inciting incident,” the incident or moment that began the sequence of events your essay will detail
- Include an “inciting incident,” a moment that introduces change or tension and causes a problem or issue your essay will discuss
- Detail the way in which you resolved the problem – for better or worse
- Briefly describe the resolution or outcome of the problem and give a sense of how the event affected your outlook or your understanding of the world.

The “Tie the Bow” Method

- Introduce an idea or a moment
- Using flashback, go back in time to a point prior to the idea or moment you introduced already
- Show the development of events up to that moment
- At the end of the essay, return to that moment, “tying the bow” and concluding.

The Cause and Effect Method

- Introduce an event that caused another event – that is, one that acted as the “first domino in the chain”
- Spell out the events caused by this first “prime mover” event. What happened?
- What happened as a result of these other events?
- What was the final, climactic effect?
- At the end of the essay, reflect on the sequence of events and the ultimate insight these events allowed you to understand.

These are obviously not the only structures available, but they are some of the classics. Quite obviously, they can be combined – it’s easy to incorporate a “tie-the-bow” approach with cause/effect or classic chronology, for example. Encourage experimentation – what happens when students are freed up to write an “effect and cause” essay instead of the standard “cause and effect,” for example?
Theme is probably the least understood of the elements of a good essay. It’s not the same as motif, which is a repeated idea or concern (e.g., youth vs. age, idealism, the journey), but rather a commentary or argument or point often made about the motif(s). It’s the equivalent to the thesis in a standard essay, in short.

In a standard expository, argumentative, persuasive, or analytic essay, teachers are all about the explicit thesis. In a good narrative essay, though, the thesis can be either explicitly stated (e.g., “…and that’s why you never bring a ferret to school”) or left for the reader to infer through the sequence of events and the resolution of the story. The inferred thesis is usually far better.

Either way, what is crucial is that the narrative essay – even if it is telling a story – needs to have a point, an argument about the writer’s experience that demonstrated an insight to her or him, one that s/he now feels important to communicate to others.

One important note: Don’t oversimplify your life. Too often when writing, we have a tendency to “wrap up” the events of our life too neatly, so they sound like statements on bumper stickers. Avoid all of the following cliché “life lessons” in your essay! Your life is probably much more “crunchy,” more complicated, and infinitely richer than these oversimplifications would suggest.

Avoid These Cliché Themes or Messages!!

- I learned to be the best that I can be.
- I learned what was really important to me in life.
- I learned that you can be anything you want if you just try hard enough.
- I learned it’s important to take risks in life.
- I learned that family is the most important thing in life.

Activity 2: Reading an Effective Student Model

It can sometimes be enormously helpful to have a teacher guide students through an effective essay – ideally, one written by a “real person” (e.g., an actual student) whose writing is not necessarily professional, but which bears the hallmarks of effective, engaging narrative prose. Having commentary or analysis to indicate what really works about an essay – and why – can also be enormously helpful as well. The following may be reprinted for student use. As always, please pre-screen the essay to ensure that it is appropriate for your class.
**My New Pair of Pants**

_I can do this. I can do this._ My palms, wet with nervous sweat, clenched onto a copy of The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants as I drew closer to the front of the checkout line at Borders. All right, I just need to calm down. All I have to do is walk up to the cashier and hand them the book and my twenty. That’s it; I don’t even have to speak a word. With one more shift I was at the front of the line. I waited anxiously to hear the dreadful word I knew would come. “Next.” My heart began to jump wildly in my chest and, closing my eyes, I took one last deep breath to muster all of my courage. But as I took my first brave step forward I realized that the cashier standing at the now-vacant counter was a boy around my age with the face of a Tommy Hilfiger model. Oh no. I can’t do this. I made a U-turn back around the checkout line, discarded my book on the nearest display table, and ran out the door to meet my mom in the getaway car.

The next day, after, with a roll of her eyes, my mom went back into Borders to purchase my book, I sat on my bed with The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants once again clenched between my hands. Only this time, it was not because of my heightened anxiety but rather because of my deep interest in the drastically contrasting personalities of the four best friend characters, specifically one named Bridget. I do not know why I was so drawn to her. After all, I was certainly more like any of the other three girls; Bridget was very tall and thin; I was short and curvy; she preferred to spend her Saturday nights partying; I preferred to spend them in my room getting a head start on my weekend homework; she worked to be ranked number one in skill among her soccer teammates; I worked to be ranked number one in GPA among my school peers. Needless to say, we were quite opposite, but I think that’s what made me so fascinated with her. She

**COMMENTARY**

Prompt: What childhood book had an important influence on you?

The author begins with (internal) dialogue whose repetition immediately establishes a sense of tension and engages the reader.

Notice how the author works in details of the immediate setting (Border’s) and her conflict (shyness at dealing with the cashier).

The self-deprecating humor – the author turns and runs when faced with “a boy around [her] age with the face of a Tommy Hilfiger model” – is engaging and human. The use of the allusion to Tommy Hilfiger quickly sketches a mental picture of the cashier with a skillful economy of language.
would do what I would never imagine doing and never once questioned herself; I was shocked and thrilled by the idea of Bridget sneaking out of soccer camp to party with her friends at the Cantina. I was awed and anxious as she crept to the soccer coach’s cabin in the middle of the night to flirt with her crush. How could she just break all the rules? How could she risk getting caught? What if her father found out? What defiance! What deception! …What bravery! What independence! Bridget had a certain drive and determination that I longed for. She pursued the affection of a certain soccer coach with the highest resolve, not letting camp rules, self-doubt, or even his shockingly handsome face stand in the way. I read for hours straight awaiting the results of her mischievous plans. Would Eric, the handsome soccer coach, give into her seduction? What would happen if he did? Would they get into trouble? Each of her actions left me with my own desires to be spontaneous and rebellious; my own desires to pursue what I wanted without letting anything stand in my way. Certainly all of her plans didn’t end up successful; after finally achieving Eric’s affection; she was left feeling guilty and empty. But the fact that she was willing to risk it all, the fact that she had no doubt in herself and her abilities was something I admired and yearned to obtain.

All right. This time, I can do it. Just think I am Bridget, I am Bridget. It’s one minute at the counter and I’m free…Ok. I reached the counter at the checkout line at Target, placed the separating bar down, and dropped my items on the belt. I walked right up to the somewhat attractive guy working the cashier. “Hi” he said with a grin. I was shocked by his friendliness, but quickly replied with my own “hi.” Wow. This was easy. I even got a normal dialogue started with the guy. Hey, I could really do this. It all seems ridiculously simple now. I leaned on the counter strutting my newly-found confidence as I watched him scan and bag my items. I pulled out my twenty and handed it to him with a smile as he finished. “$15.42” he said after tapping out the amount on the register and waiting for the receipt to print out. As I reached for the bag I heard him say “Oh wait, is this yours?” and turned to see him holding up a polka dot bra that seemed straight from the girls’ section.
Oh no. I grabbed my bag, and quickly jogged toward the door pretending not to hear. As I dug in my purse for the keys to my own getaway car, I grinned as I thought; *Well at least I got to the counter this time.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>consequences of Bridget’s actions, but ultimately admires “the fact that she was willing to risk it all [and] had no doubt in herself.” This is a pivotal moment in the essay and sets the reader up for the conclusion.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The author “ties the bow” here by returning to a conflict similar to the one present at the beginning of the essay: as before, she is standing in front of a cashier, and as before, she introduces the conflict with internal dialogue. This move allows us to see the distance she has been “traveling” throughout the essay. Telling herself, “I am Bridget” ties in very effectively to the prompt and answers the question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author ends on a humorous note, confronted with a “polka dot bra that seemed straight from the girls’ section,” and although she has managed the courage to start a “normal dialogue” with the cashier, this moment proves too much. Still, the author ends on a note of triumph, consoling herself with the idea that she “got to the counter this time.” We are left with the</td>
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Activity 3: Playing With Prompts
What follows is a series of prompts you can use to develop a narrative essay. Some of them – particularly the prompt about an influential book – often yield delightful results. Students can brainstorm about these prompts and discuss them with others in class before proceeding to the outline stage below.

Sample Narrative Essay Prompts

- Some of the most meaningful literature of our lives is read while we are still very young. Certain characters we encounter in the children’s section of the library affect us deeply and continue to do so throughout our lives. What character from a children’s book particularly affected you as a child or young adult? What influence did that character exert on your personality growing up? How did that character help – or hurt – the person you were then (and are now)?
- We often learn from our successes – but sometimes even more from our failures. Tell about a time you failed in an endeavor. Why did you fail? Did you learn anything from that moment? Did you accept your failure or did you “go back and try again”? What happened?
- Choose a family portrait or a portrait of yourself as a child. What is the story behind that photograph? Who are the people pictured there? Where are they? What occurred immediately before – and what happened after? How does this photograph capture an essential part of the person you were then and became later?
- Describe one item you will leave behind you when you leave home. Why will you leave it? What did it represent for you? Why are you leaving it behind instead of throwing it out?

NOTE: Please make sure that all essays are classroom-appropriate in language and content and contain only the personal information you feel comfortable about sharing with other people.
Activity 4: Outlining the Essay

Feel free to copy and print out for students to use. This outline form is more useful with students still developing their essential skills in outlining and planning an essay, but may also be useful to act as a “checklist” of sorts for more practiced writers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outlining Your Narrative Essay</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin your paper with an interesting “<strong>hook</strong>”:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- a crucial piece of dialogue</td>
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<tr>
<td>- a pivotal moment to which your essay will return</td>
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<tr>
<td>- a moment of conflict</td>
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<tr>
<td>- a moment that foreshadows the conflict</td>
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<tr>
<td>Set the <strong>scene</strong>:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where and when is your story set?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How old were you?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>State or imply your thesis</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What is the lesson you learned from this event?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- What is the message you wish to convey?</td>
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<tr>
<td>In what way did this event affect your character?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hook:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Setting:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Thesis:</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Body Paragraphs

#### Paragraph 1: The Beginning

Your event should generally be told in chronological order.

Select three details – remember to SHOW, not TELL.

- Use comparisons
- Use verbs and nouns
- Use figures of speech
- List smells, sights, textures, temperatures, tastes.

#### Topic sentence:

*The topic sentence must build on or elaborate on the message (thesis) of your paper.*

*Your details will build on your topic sentence and be evidence for your thesis.*

**Detail 1:**

*This moment is included in order to prove or to show:*

**Detail 2:**

*This moment is included in order to prove or to show:*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Body Paragraphs</th>
<th>Topic sentence:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paragraph 2: The Middle</td>
<td>The topic sentence must build on or elaborate on the message (thesis) of your paper.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your event should generally be told in chronological order.

Select three details—remember to SHOW, not TELL.

- Use comparisons
- Use verbs and nouns
- Use figures of speech
- List smells,

This moment is included in order to prove or to show:

Detail 1:
sights, textures, temperatures, tastes.

Detail 2:

This moment is included in order to prove or to show:

Detail 3:

This moment is included in order to prove or to show:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Body Paragraphs</th>
<th>Topic sentence:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paragraph 3: The End</td>
<td>The topic sentence must build on or elaborate on the message (thesis) of your paper.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your event should generally be told in
chronological order.

Select three details – remember to SHOW, not TELL.

- Use comparisons
- Use verbs and nouns
- Use figures of speech
- List smells, sights, textures, temperatures, tastes.

Your details will build on your topic sentence and be evidence for your thesis.

Detail 1:

This moment is included in order to prove or to show:

Detail 2:

This moment is included in order to prove or to show:

Detail 3:
This moment is included in order to prove or to show:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conclusion</th>
<th>Reflection:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>End your paper with ...</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• a crucial piece of dialogue</td>
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<tr>
<td>• A “tying of the bow” – that is, a strategic revisiting of a distinctive idea present in the introduction.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• a reflection on that pivotal moment detailed in your essay</td>
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<tr>
<td>• a reflection on that moment of conflict</td>
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<tr>
<td>• An explicit or implicit statement of the essay’s theme or message.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Theme or Message**

**Closure**
Following the initial writing and development of the rough draft, students can proceed to editing the narrative essay for organization, coherence, adherence to language conventions, and style.
Teachers may wish to make use of the Internet as a tool for editing. Sites such as Dropbox.com allow students to access papers submitted by peers, and Turnitin.com provides specific guidance and support for online peer editing. Peers can be encouraged to provide feedback on each other’s papers and to revise in accordance with the information given to them by others.

As a further development of this lesson, students may be encouraged to publish their works on a secure site (e.g., the school’s website or a password-protected classroom blog), illustrating or formatting their works in such a way as to increase readers’ understanding and appreciation of events.