

Personal Narrative Essays

This handout will help you begin your personal narrative essay assignment with key points and questions to prompt story development.

What is a personal narrative essay?

A personal narrative essay is a story you choose to share with readers, for it communicates your understanding of yourself, others, and/or society. As people, we remember stories, so your personal narrative essay is a way you can transform an ordinary experience into meaningful commentary that is applicable to a broad audience.

What questions can I consider to help me convey my story effectively?

A personal narrative essay uses the components of a story: introduction, plot, characters, setting, and conflict. It also uses the components of argument, thesis, and conclusion. In a personal narrative essay, we tell our readers a story to make a larger argument. Focusing the readers' attention on significant, detailed scenes, we develop our argument persuasively through effective storytelling.

Conflict and Thesis: Finding the Meaning of Your Story

Because the personal narrative essay is an argument, providing a thesis will help your readers understand the purpose of your story. An effective thesis in a narrative often responds directly to or reflects on a source of conflict, so the first step in developing a personal narrative essay is usually to define the conflict at the heart of your story.

Consider the following questions about conflict as they relate to your personal narrative:

- Is your conflict internal, taking place inside you as you struggle to make sense of competing ideas about yourself, others, social norms, and so on?
- Who or what challenged preconceived notions you have had?
- Is your conflict external, pitting you against circumstances or others involved in an experience with you?
- Is your conflict in response to a stereotype or mentality society holds about some part of your identity?

Your story helps readers reflect on the negotiation of conflict, which generates meaning. Your thesis articulates that meaning succinctly. Sometimes this meaning remains implicit in the narrative—the details themselves powerful enough to evoke understanding among your readers.

With an understanding of your conflict, consider the following questions for your thesis:

- What lesson did you learn from the resolution of your conflict that your readers can identify with?
- How has your perspective changed in a way that relates to your specific audience?

- What did this conflict communicate to you about yourself, family, and/or society; how might you communicate this learning to your audience?

Background and Setting: Developing the Context of Time and Place

Consider the following questions as you develop the setting of your narrative.

- What is the event you want to share?
- Where did this event take place?
- When did this event occur?
- How do the details of time and place develop the context your readers need to understand the meaning of the story?
- What initial expectations or mentality do these details help viewers to establish that will be changed, developed, or affirmed as your story progresses?

Plot: Analyzing Cause and Effect

Consider the following questions as you develop the plot of your narrative.

- What important events led to this event?
- What action happened immediately before the event?
- What action happened after the event?
- What changed as a result of the event?
- How has this event impacted you directly or indirectly?

Characters: Recognizing the Human Dimension of Your Story

Consider the following questions as you develop the characters in your narrative.

- Who was involved in this event?
- What is the relationship between you and these other individuals?
- Why are these individuals significant to your narrative?
- How might their views present a source of conflict in the narrative?
- Who is static in the story, and who is dynamic? That is, who does not change, and who does change?
- Because humans are not one-dimensional, how might you offer multiple perspectives as a basis for why characters chose the action they did?
- Did this story involve a dialogue of points of view among or between characters?

Climax: Isolating the Central Meaning

Consider the following questions as you develop the climax of your narrative.

- At what point in your story did your understanding of your conflict change?
- What meaning is revealed in the moment of truth—or the moment of revelation or recognition?

Conclusion/Resolution: Providing Closure for the Narrative, a Conclusion to the Argument

Consider the following questions as you develop the conclusion to your narrative.

- How was the conflict resolved, or to what extent?
- How can you illustrate relief from or resolution of the tension caused by the conflict?
- Why might the reader believe this conflict will or will not pose a problem in the future?

What story-telling tools will I need to tell my story?

The questions above have helped you to generate the content of your essay and focus its meaning. Now it is time to tell the story. Two important story-telling tools are (1) concrete and figurative word choice and (2) verb tense.

Concrete and Figurative Word Choice

By including sensory details and figurative language, you can help your reader appreciate your experience and understand your thoughts and actions. Sometimes stories are so detailed that readers are carried along to the conclusion without any explicit statement of the main argument: in such cases the details have been powerful enough to imply the main argument. Please refer to our “Concrete Language” Homegrown Handout for more information (available at <http://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter/handouts>).

Verb Tenses in a Narrative Essay

Storytelling engages readers in reading actions as they develop through time. Telling time is critical in reading a story. To discern which verb tense or tenses to use in your narrative, please reference our “Verb Tenses: Telling Time” Homegrown Handout (available at <http://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter/handouts>).

Activity: Analyzing a Personal Narrative Essay

Read the introduction, climax, and conclusion of Langston Hughes’ “Salvation”—a chapter from his autobiography, *The Big Sea*—and answer the questions that correspond to each excerpt.

I was saved from sin when I was going on thirteen. But not really saved. It happened like this. There was a big revival at my Auntie Reed's church. Every night for weeks there had been much preaching, singing, praying, and shouting, and some very hardened sinners had been brought to Christ, and the membership of the church had grown by leaps and bounds. Then just before the revival ended, they held a special meeting for children, "to bring the young lambs to the fold." My aunt spoke of it for days ahead. That night I was escorted to the front row and placed on the mourners' bench with all the other young sinners, who had not yet been brought to Jesus.

1. What is the event Hughes shares?
2. Where did this event take place?
3. When did this event occur?

My aunt told me that when you were saved you saw a light, and something happened to you inside! And Jesus came into your life! And God was with you from then on! She said you could see and hear and feel Jesus in your soul. I believed her. I had heard a great many old people say the same thing and it seemed to me they ought to know. So I sat there calmly in the hot, crowded church, waiting for Jesus to come to me.

4. Why is Hughes' aunt significant to his story?
5. What is Hughes' expectation?

Now it was really getting late. I began to be ashamed of myself, holding everything up so long. I began to wonder what God thought about Westley, who certainly hadn't seen Jesus either, but who was now sitting proudly on the platform, swinging his knickerbockered legs and grinning down at me, surrounded by deacons and old women on their knees praying. God had not struck Westley dead for taking his name in vain or for lying in the temple. So I decided that maybe to save further trouble, I'd better lie, too, and say that Jesus had come, and get up and be saved.

6. What is Hughes' source of conflict?
7. Why is Westley significant to Hughes' narrative?
8. How does Hughes seek to resolve his internal conflict?

That night, for the first time in my life but one for I was a big boy twelve years old—I cried. I cried, in bed alone, and couldn't stop. I buried my head under the quilts, but my aunt heard me. She woke up and told my uncle I was crying because the Holy Ghost had come into my life, and because I had seen Jesus. But I was really crying because I couldn't bear to tell her that I had lied, that I had deceived everybody in the church, that I hadn't seen Jesus, and that now I didn't believe there was a Jesus anymore, since he didn't come to help me.

9. What does Hughes' crying reveal?
10. What is Hughes' conclusion, and how does it relate to his topic?
11. What significance will readers find outlined in Hughes' conclusion? How does this central argument speak to a reality shared with his audience?

Analysis for Activity

1. **What is the event Hughes shares?** Hughes shares his experience attending his aunt's church at a time of great revival.
2. **Where did this event take place?** The revival takes place at Hughes' aunt's church.
3. **When did this event occur?** This event occurs when Hughes is twelve years old.
4. **Why is Hughes' aunt significant to his story?** Hughes' aunt sets up his expectation for what it means to be saved. His aunt's description of salvation is how he determines if he is to come into the Christian faith or not.
5. **What is Hughes' expectation?** Hughes' expectation is that he will see the light and feel something inside just as his aunt described.
6. **What is Hughes' source of conflict?** Hughes does not see a light or feel anything inside, which causes anxiety as he has a church audience expecting him to receive Jesus. People are waiting on him to make an important decision.

7. **Why is Westley significant to Hughes' narrative?** Like Hughes, Westley does not feel compelled to be saved. However, Westley decides to lie about his salvation. Westley's lying gives Hughes his solution. Westley also affirms Hughes' reality: they both have not had an encounter with Jesus.
8. **How does Hughes seek to resolve his internal conflict?** Hughes decides to lie too. Because these two young boys have to lie, readers understand the weight that is placed on this decision. Readers understand the pressure these young boys are under. Even further, readers may begin to question the church's understanding of salvation.
9. **What does Hughes' crying reveal?** Hughes' crying reveals that his internal conflict is not over. He feels guilty for lying, deceiving his church, and ultimately not witnessing Jesus.
10. **What is Hughes' conclusion, and how does it relate to his topic?** Hughes provides his new stance. He does not believe there is a Jesus. Hughes was given an expectation of what it means to be saved, so when he did not experience this, he began to doubt himself and eventually his belief in God. Based on everybody else's description of salvation in his community, Hughes felt Jesus had let him down in his absence.
11. **What is the significance of Hughes' conclusion as it pertains to his audience? How does this central argument speak to a reality shared with his audience?** Hughes was denied the opportunity to experience Jesus for himself because of the preexisting and limited expectation of that experience from his community. Hughes' conflict and ultimate conclusion reveal the inclination most of us have to reject something we cannot conform to.