

05 Assignment 01: The Narrative Essay

Overview

The narrative essay uses a story to illustrate a point or series of points that the writer wants to make. Narrative essays often provide a sense of intimacy that allows the writer to make a closer connection with the reader than he or she might in a more formal, argumentative essay or an essay based on research. Think of the way a preacher or a politician uses little stories and anecdotes to make points rather than just using logic and argument to convey those points. For this reason, narrative essays will often use a structure that is less rigid than that of other academic essay forms.

The structure of the narrative essay, therefore, depends on the story that is being told and is flexible enough to allow the writer to be more creative in his or her organization. Paragraphs might be organized around the chronology of the story—the order in which the events occurred—or the paragraphs might be organized around certain details that will help to demonstrate some aspect of the thesis. Likewise, the often personal and intimate tone of the narrative essay lends itself to a less formal vocabulary.

Though the “I” should generally be avoided in argumentative and research essays, the first-person pronoun will frequently be necessary and valuable in the narrative essay, since it allows the writer to use a comfortable voice in the writing. In fact, the composition courses at Coppin place focus on the narrative in great measure because of this quality; we encourage the development of each writer’s unique and authentic voice before asking these writers to take on the more uniform and standardized voice of the scholar, the academic and the professional writer.

As with any essay, the thesis should help the writer to organize the details of the story. Indeed, the thesis is what distinguishes the narrative essay from a “plain old story.” A “plain old story” may or may not have a main point; it may be told to entertain. But an essay seeks to demonstrate a thesis, and in a narrative essay, the story serves to make the point or series of points that is set out in the thesis. Below, in the section on “Invention and Organization,” we will discuss the subtle ways in which the thesis in the narrative essay might differ from the argumentative thesis, but it is important to go into this kind of assignment knowing that the well-articulated thesis is absolutely essential.

Along with the argumentative essay, the narrative essay is a very common form of expository writing beyond the university setting. It has parallels in the cover letters we write in applications for jobs and in the personal statements we write for admission to graduate or professional school or for grants and scholarships. In these situations, several basic writing prompts can generate good narrative essays. Some of these are listed below.

As with any essay, you must consider the context in which you write. For instance, writing about a very traumatic experience may not be the right choice for a letter applying for a job at the bank, but it may be useful if you are applying to a graduate program in nursing or social work. In the composition classroom, the context of writing is imaginary. In composition, you are learning a skill and an art, and therefore you must imagine that you are writing for a real context. When you write an essay for your history course, the context is that of the history scholar, but in composition, you are writing in order to practice writing. Thus, when you write the narrative essay, do so with a specific real-world context in mind.

Basic Assignment Requirements

The Narrative essay must meet the following **format** guidelines:

- Be in MLA Manuscript Format
 - Have 1 inch top, bottom, right and left margins;
 - Times New Roman 12 font;
 - Running header with last name and page number;
 - MLA compliant title block on first page;
 - All content double spaced.

The Narrative essay must meet the following **content and mechanics** guidelines:

- Must be at least 1,250 words long;
- Must offer a clear and consistent discussion of the topic;
- Must be organized logically with clear topic sentences that clearly delineate the progression of the narrative in time;
- Must provide adequate levels of detail and description to depict the event;
- Must contain a clear thesis, introduction, body, and conclusion that discuss the event and establish its importance to the audience;
- Must contain none of the following major mechanical errors:
 - Run-on sentences
 - Fragments
 - Tense shifts
 - Possession errors
 - Capitalization errors
 - Subject-verb agreement errors
- Must conform to Standard English Grammar requirements for proofreading, usage, and spelling.

Example Assignment Prompts & Variations

Your instructor may choose to assign the same writing prompt to all students, or he or she may allow students to choose from a range of prompts. Please be sure to pay attention to the instructions your instructor gives, as his or her assignment may differ from the prompts in this text.

Again, several basic prompts can generate good narrative essays both for the purposes of your English Composition courses at Coppin and in your professional writing as you move into your careers or as you proceed in your education. The following writing prompts include these basic prompts and variations on their themes. The first few prompts are very broad in scope, while the last few are more specific. The last two prompts are designed to work your writing in the direction of the argumentative essay.

Please note that your instructor may use any of the below prompts, or may provide a different one to you.

Option 1

Write an essay in which you discuss an experience that has helped to shape your personality thus far. Your essay should describe the progress of events and the characters or people involved, and state what effect this experience has had on your life. (First-person narrative)

Option 2

Tell a story about a person who has motivated or inspired you, or from whom you learned an important lesson. This could be a well-known public figure or someone you know personally. The essay must describe the progress of events and characters central to this person's story. (Third-person)

Option 3

Write about a significant meal you ate. Focus your thesis and conclusion on explaining the connections between the food and the circumstances of eating, who you were with, and what brought you together. (First-person)

Option 4

Imagine you could have one “do-over” in life. Write an essay that imagines how you would relive a particular moment and how that moment might change the path of your life. Describe the events as you imagine they would have taken place, the people involved in them, and clearly state how your life would be different today if you had a “do-over.” (First-person)

Option 5

Write an essay in which you tell a story that typifies your educational experiences. Be sure to write about only one experience, a test you worked hard to pass or a problem that your high school faced. Use your conclusion to explain how the specific story you told either demonstrates success or failure in our educational system. (First or Third-person)

Invention and Generating Ideas

In the narrative mode, we frequently write about personal experiences, whether they are our own experiences or those of others. For this purpose, the **freewriting** technique (See Chapter 05, The Writing Process) is often useful in gathering ideas for a first draft. Even if you are not sure what your main point will be, you can begin by taking a few minutes to write down your story in chronological order, choosing details that seem important, and then work backwards, reading over your freewrite with the intent to discover the main point.

Often we will gravitate towards a main point without being completely aware that we are doing so. In these instances, the thesis may quietly emerge in the details that we have chosen to include. Whereas the argumentative essay must begin with the well-articulated thesis, the narrative is flexible enough to find its own thesis through the drafting process.

Writers who produce good narratives experiment. Drafting on the computer enhances a writer’s ability to experiment because multiple copies of drafts can be made and altered quickly. Start with a freewrite of twenty minutes (quickly type what you’ve written if you prefer to begin with handwriting), and then experiment with adjusting the order of events. Or start with a freewrite of thirty minutes, and then read that draft carefully, constantly asking what main point, what primary meaning, the story contains so far. If this main point sounds like something you want to pursue, then articulate a thesis. If not, then you may need to have another go at the story. As with any essay, though, drafting and revision are absolutely the crucial parts of any writing process. They are the keys to invention.

Organizing a Writing Plan

Narrative essays, by their nature, are organized *chronologically*—as in how the events happened over *time*. Chapter 05.2, Organizing a Writing Plan, as well as the following tips, will be extremely helpful as you organize the information that you gather for your narrative essay.

Like any other essay, the narrative needs an introduction and a conclusion. The conclusion should seek to rearticulate the thesis, as it does in most essays, and also attempt to expand and generalize the thesis a bit. For example, if your narrative has told a story that illustrates a lesson that you learned through dealing with the consequences of a decision you once made, then the conclusion should generalize your lesson by commenting broadly on the importance of learning from mistakes or capitalizing on successes. Generalization belongs in the conclusion, but introductions, especially in the narrative essay, can be more effective if they start with the specific.

The Latin term, *in medias res*, refers to stories that start somewhere in the middle. This is often an effective tool for the introduction of a narrative essay, to begin in the midst of the story. The introduction should be as flexible as the body of the narrative essay, but it must lead to the thesis, and that thesis must be taken up again in the conclusion.

There are many famous narrative essays that you can read to get a feel for the form. Excerpts from Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Malcolm X's *Autobiography of Malcolm X* have traditionally been used in Coppin's composition course reader *Dancing with the Tiger*. These of course make useful reading to help you in the invention stages of your prewriting. *The Washington Post Magazine* runs a weekly series called "First Person Singular" that offers a wide variation on narrative essays by skilled amateur writers.