

04 Short Writing Assignments

Short Narrative

Narratives are essays that tell the story of a person, place, thing, or idea; these can be **personal** or **detached** narratives, written from the first person (“I”) or third person perspectives (“he did . . . she then . . . they would . . .”). Narratives are in general organized **chronologically**, but may include **digressions**—relevant tangents that help explain the story’s action—or **flashbacks**, which are sub-stories taking place earlier in time than the main story.

Your essay should have a **thesis statement** that states the main idea or purpose of the narrative, explaining why the narrative you are telling is important or relevant to the audience’s life. Similarly, each paragraph in your essay should begin with a strong and direct **topic sentence** that locates the scene or episode you are talking about *in time* and *in relation to the other scenes or episodes in your narrative*. You should also try to use vivid and descriptive language to relay the events in your narrative to the reader (see the “Description” assignment below for more tips on vivid language).

Assignment Prompt:

Compose a short narrative essay (300-400 words) on one of the following:

- The time in your life that you felt most afraid—and why you felt that way. Include in your essay a clear statement of the situation you were in and how you got to that situation, as well as how you dealt with your fear as it was happening and shortly thereafter;
- A concise biography of one of your classmates. What have been the major milestones in this person’s life? Conduct a short interview with your classmate to gather information. Your essay might consider things like where the person was born, what the person’s upbringing was like, where he or she was educated, how he or she came to Coppin, and your classmate’s plans for the future;
- A fictional obituary, dated the year 2070, for yourself, outlining the major accomplishments and challenges of your life;
- The story of your acquiring or losing an object of special value or importance;
- A short story of the life of a piece of technology that you no longer have any use for (i.e., an outdated cell phone, a CD player, a VHS tape, or an old car). Your narrative should

cover how the thing came into your possession, what you used it for during its life, and how it came to its present state of disuse.

Description

Descriptive writing is writing that is meant to convey impressions or details of a particular scene, place, thing, or event. Paragraphs that are descriptive usually begin with a **topic sentence** that introduces a **controlling idea** or **overall impression** of the thing being described.

Descriptive writing also appeals to the **senses** of its readers—hearing, vision, touch, taste, smell—by using relevant **sensory details**. These details offer specific points of reference to the reader regarding the subject, connecting it to experiences and past impressions that the reader may have had. A key to effective description is the use of **vivid language**: finding appropriate and sensory-oriented adjectives, using comparisons and analogies, and replacing common or vague nouns and verbs with more specific ones will improve the vividness in your writing.

Assignment Prompt

Choose one of the three pictures below, and write a short (300-400 word) essay describing in detail what is happening in the picture. Remember to start your essay with a strong topic sentence that introduces the overall idea or impression that the image creates, and to use sensory details and vivid language to make your description stand out.

You must limit your description to information available in the picture—don't imagine or make up information, but rather focus on conveying accurately the impression of what the picture is describing and the associated emotions. You can use the note space alongside and below each picture to help generate your ideas.

See the next three pages for the pictures.

Picture 1:



Notes and Impressions

What is being depicted here?

What kind of life might these people lead? What in the picture suggests this?

What emotions is the woman feeling? How can you tell, specifically?

What emotions are the children feeling? What details in the picture make you think that this is the case?

Examine the clothing these people are wearing—what impression does this give to you?

Picture 2:



Notes and Impressions

What is being depicted here?

What kind of life might these people lead? What in the picture suggests this?

What emotions or feelings does the landscape around the figures convey?

What is happening in the foreground of the picture? How does it contrast with the top of the picture and the far background?

Picture 3:



Notes and Impressions

What is being depicted here? What is the situation?

What inferences can you draw from the picture regarding the relationships among the actors in the picture?

What emotions are being conveyed through the people's faces here? How, specifically, can you tell?

What does the people's clothing indicate? What impression does it convey to you?

Process Analysis

Process writing is writing designed to describe the operation or function of a particular thing or activity. Whether you know it or not, you encounter process analyses every day. Whenever you read instructions on how to do something, get help from a teacher or friend, write a lab report for science class, or read a textbook, you are learning about how things in the world work—and more importantly, how to do them. You are learning about a *process*.

Understanding process applies not only to the physical operation of something—like an iPod or microwave oven—but also to ideas and more abstract things, like learning how to communicate with your significant other more effectively or how to select the best possible roommate.

Process writing involves **first identifying the process to be examined** (e.g., how an iPod works, how to succeed in first-year composition, how to conduct a Myers-Briggs personality test, or how to collect evidence from a crime scene without contaminating it) and then identifying the **primary steps that make up that process**.

The topic sentence (of a Process paragraph) or the thesis statement (of a Process essay) should clearly identify the process being examined and indicate that there are a number of steps or actions that make up that process. Each paragraph in a Process essay should cover one of the steps involved in the process, describing it in detail using precise and direct language.

Assignment Prompt:

Choose one of the following ideas and write a well-developed paragraph (200-300 words) explaining the process involved.

- Explain the process of selecting and registering for classes at Coppin State University.
- Imagine that you own a small business of your choice (perhaps related to the field you are currently studying—healthcare, criminal justice, English, education). Explain to a prospective investor the process you would use to select employees for your business.
- Write an essay that shows the basics of how to use **one** of the following software applications:
 - a. Facebook
 - b. Twitter
 - c. Microsoft Word

Exemplification

Exemplification, when applied to writing, means “using examples.” The examples explain or support one’s point. An “example” is an *instance* of something, a specific part of a phenomenon that can be used to explain or characterize the whole. Consider the following:

My little brother is a wonderful student: he takes copious notes, does all his course reading, and almost never misses a class.

Middle school-aged children are especially vulnerable to peer pressure. Twelve and thirteen year-olds are often coerced by their friends into drinking, experimenting with illegal drugs, and participating in petty crimes.

In the above passages, the first part gave a general point: “My little brother is a wonderful student . . .” and “Middle school-aged children are especially vulnerable to peer pressure.”

The second part gave **examples** of why the general point was valid. When using exemplification, we should also consider how to **order** our examples: least important to most important? Most common to least common? Most similar to most different? In any case, examples need to be explained through good **descriptive** writing that clearly communicates our ideas.

Examples should be direct and vivid, and should connect directly with the topic sentence (of a paragraph) or thesis statement (of an essay).

Assignment Prompt:

In a paragraph of 200 or so words, use examples to support one of the following topic sentences:

1. Hip-Hop music addresses the everyday concerns that young African-American students face.
2. Current Hollywood movies rely more on special effects than good stories to draw audiences in.
3. There are many different kinds of cheating on college campuses.
4. Having a pet is a wonderful experience for a young child, and there are many kinds of pets that are suitable for a young child to have.
5. Urban crime of all types is rampant in some neighborhoods in Baltimore.