

Handouts

Teaching Elements of Personal Narrative Texts

Gateway Resource TPNT0001

Personal Narrative Elements

English Language Arts and Reading Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills Glossary Definition

Personal narrative: an expressive literary piece written in first person that centers on a particular event in the author's life and may contain vivid description as well as personal commentary and observations

Elements

Personal narratives are based on real-life (true) personal experiences that have significant meaning for the writer. The experience may have resulted in the writer gaining insight or learning a lesson. The writer narrates or tells a story to describe the personal experience. Personal narratives are written in the first person ("I") point of view.

1. Narrow, Clearly Defined Focus

Personal narratives have a narrow, clearly defined focus. The writer focuses on a central idea (theme or message) based on a significant event and why it is important or meaningful to the writer. This focus is sustained throughout the essay.

The central idea is the point of a personal essay. It is similar to the thesis or controlling idea in expository or persuasive essays, but the central idea may not always be conveyed in one specific place like a thesis. The author may convey the central idea in several places within the essay.

The central idea communicates to the reader a sense of the experience and its significance (meaning, insight, or lesson learned).

Visualization and scaffolds such as sentence stems can help writers clarify the significance of a particular event or experience to their lives.

For example, writers may do the following:

- Visualize the events or the experience they will write about. Writers imagine themselves once again in that experience and focus on their feelings, thoughts, and impressions.
- Think about why the experience was important to them
 - This is important to me now because it . . .
 - I will always remember this experience because it . . .
 - This experience is worth writing about because it . . .

2. Character Descriptions

Personal narratives describe the characters involved in the writer's personal experience. The characters are developed through interesting details that describe each character's appearance, actions, and words. The writer may visualize each character and then describe how the character looks, acts, and sounds.

3. Dialogue

Incorporating some dialogue in a personal narrative makes the characters and the description of the personal experience come alive for the reader. Dialogue moves the narrative along and often reveals something about the characters. Dialogue should sound natural and not be overused.

When writing dialogue in an essay, the character's words are enclosed inside quotation marks. Quotation marks signal a direct quotation and typically adhere to the following conventions:

- Opening quotation marks are placed before the first word a character speaks. Closing quotation marks are placed after the last word a character speaks (even if several sentences are spoken).
- The writer begins a new paragraph each time the speaker changes or a different character speaks.
- Each sentence of a direct quotation begins with a capital letter.
- A comma is used to separate a direct quotation from a speaker tag such as "he said." The comma is placed inside the closing quotation marks.
- Periods also are placed inside closing quotation marks. All other punctuation (exclamation marks, question marks) are placed outside closing quotation marks. The one exception to this rule is that when a punctuation mark is part of a quote itself, it is placed within the closing quotation marks (e.g., "What is the answer to the first question?" the teacher asked the class.).

4. Setting Description

Personal narratives also describe the setting (where and when the event or experience happened).

The setting can be vividly described by using sensory details to bring the experience to life. The writer determines which details of the setting are most important in conveying the personal experience and its significance or meaning. For example, what does the writer smell, see, hear, taste, or feel?

5. Strong Introduction

Personal narratives include a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning of a narrative includes an introduction. The following parts are typically included in an introduction of a narrative:

- **Theme:** In the introduction, the writer may tell what the essay is about (the central idea, theme, or message). The author also may provide a clue as to how he or she feels about the experience.
- **Hook:** The introduction also includes a hook to get the reader interested and motivated to read more. Writers can use a variety of different ways to introduce their personal narratives and hook their readers, including foreshadowing (a hint of something to come), action, dialogue, character description, or setting description.

The introduction usually sets the tone or reveals the writer's attitude toward the experience described in the essay. To establish the tone of the essay, the writer thinks about the effect he or she wants the essay to have on the audience (e.g., to laugh, cry, or share the pleasure of a special time or place). The introduction also establishes why the essay is worth reading.

6. Interesting Details

Personal narratives include interesting, specific details that add substance and contribute to the writer's portrayal of the experience. Interesting details that appeal to the senses and describe what is happening instead of merely telling the facts or listing the actions draw readers into the story. These details provide the reader with a clear understanding of why an experience is meaningful and help the reader to visualize the experience. Readers may vicariously experience the feelings of the characters (and the narrator) and even feel like they are there. As a result, readers connect with the writer's personal experience and reactions to it.

Writers develop the details or events relating to the personal experience most effectively when they use a "show, don't tell" approach. In other words, writers elaborate and add concrete and specific description, action, and dialogue as they re-create scenes from their experience. This type of writing results in readers clearly picturing what is happening (the scene).

For readers to understand the import of the essay topic, it is imperative that writers reflect on what they thought or felt at the time. Writers should provide plausible motivations for their behavior or actions and reveal any changes or insights that developed as a result of their experience.

7. Logical Sequence

In personal narratives, the writer uses organizational strategies and/or literary devices (story elements) to communicate the importance or meaning of the experience. The organizational structure supports the central idea (message, theme). The writer presents the events in a logical sequence or meaningful order. The most common organization for personal narratives is chronological order.

The organization is often similar to the plot line of a story. Like stories, personal narratives typically include an introduction, a plot, characters, a setting, a climax, and a conclusion. Personal narratives often build to a climax or resolution of a problem (usually resulting in personal growth for the author).

Some authors may organize their personal narrative by developing a sequence of events. However, writers should not just list events and then conclude the essay with a lesson learned or an explanation of how the story related to the author's life. To ensure that readers have a clear understanding of why an experience was and is meaningful, the changes, insights, and/or lessons learned should be evident throughout the essay.

The writer should also use meaningful transitions and strong sentence-to-sentence connections to enhance the logical movement of the narrative and reinforce the link between the experience and its meaning. Transitional words and phrases show the relationship of ideas and events. Transitions connect events and move the reader smoothly through the story.

8. Strong Conclusion

Personal narratives require a strong conclusion. The conclusion should leave readers with a lasting impression of the personal experience and insight (new or deeper understanding of the experience). The conclusion should also give readers a sense of closure and completion.

Conclusions can include a strong action, feeling, or image that shows the author's personal growth and/or emphasizes the importance of the event.

9. Purposeful and Precise Word Choice

The writer's word choice in a personal narrative should be accurate, concise, clear, and concrete. Effective word choice enables the writer to re-create the personal experience in a way that conveys its importance or meaning. Writers often focus on word choice to improve their first drafts.

Examples of how word choice can improve writing include the following:

- Replacing overused words with stronger, more powerful ones
 - Action verbs
 - Adjectives
 - Adverbs
- Inserting phrases and figurative language (e.g., similes, metaphors) that describe, explain, or provide additional detail and connections

10. Varied Sentence Structure

Sentences are the building blocks of writing. The ways sentences are constructed affect the fluency or the flow of the writing. Personal narrative essays are enhanced when the writer uses purposeful sentences that are varied in both length and structure.

Examples of how writers can vary sentences to improve their writing include the following:

- Using a variety of sentence patterns
 - Combining short sentences with prepositional phrases, appositive phrases, or participial phrases
 - Combining short sentences by linking items of equal importance with a coordinating conjunction
 - Combining short sentences that contain ideas of unequal importance with a subordinating conjunction
- Varying sentence beginnings
 - Beginning with an adverb
 - Beginning with a phrase (e.g., prepositional, participial, or infinitive)
 - Beginning with an introductory clause
- Breaking up long, rambling sentences (often run-on sentences) into two or three shorter sentences

Personal Narrative Elements Mini-Chart

1. Narrow, clearly defined focus
2. Character descriptions
3. Dialogue
4. Setting description
5. Strong introduction
6. Interesting details
7. Logical sequence (does not need to be chronological)
8. Strong conclusion
9. Purposeful and precise word choice
10. Varied sentence structure

Using Mentor Texts to Identify Personal Narrative Elements

Personal Narrative Elements

“Tights and Camo” By Brock Clarke

Central idea:
Skiing helps the author maintain peace in his relationship with family member.

I grew up in a small mill town just south of the Adirondack Mountains, and although I live in Maine now, for many years I lived in places where it didn't really snow, and I would look forward to my trip home for the holidays, when I would go cross-country skiing with my dad. “Look forward” is a bit misleading; “pay obsessive attention to the snow report while ignoring everything else” might be more accurate.

The main reason for my snow obsession had something to do with the end of the world; never mind about that. The other reason is that I missed my father, and when you miss your parents, the more you try to express it, the more likely you are to get into an argument with them—but it's nearly impossible to get into an argument with your father while you're both cross-country skiing.

I didn't go skiing with my dad last year—he was sick (he's better now, thank you)—and so my wife agreed to go with me in his place, mostly because I begged her. This was Christmas Eve. We were in the deep woods, in deep snow; it was beautiful, and perfectly quiet and empty—until, that is, we heard the baying of dogs and gunshots. A few seconds later, we saw a guy walking toward us. He was wearing camo and holding a gun.

When I see a guy walking toward me holding a gun, I want to turn and run, or turn and ski. But in this case my masculine pride prevented me from doing so, although my masculine pride had not prevented me from wearing ski tights and a hat with a fuzzy ball on top. Anyway, the guy got to within a few feet of us, and before he or I could say anything, my wife blurted out, “You get any deer?”

My wife grew up in New Jersey and doesn't exactly keep tabs on the length of the deer-hunting season in upstate New York, so she had no idea that she'd inadvertently accused this stranger with a gun of being a poacher, which he might well have been. Which was why I then said, loudly and idiotically, “Ha, ha, of course he's not hunting deer!” And then, rather than ask him what he was hunting (if it wasn't deer, it had to be rabbits, unless it was humans), I said, “Cold, isn't it?”—again, idiotically, because it wasn't all that cold and because his camo pants were certainly insulated and for that matter so were my tights.

“Naw,” the guy said. “It was 10 below in Speculator last week.” Then he eyed me, over his beard (his beard was red and covered every bit of his lower face until just an inch under the eyes), and asked, “You know where Speculator is?”

I did know where Speculator was—an hour north of where we were standing. I’d been there many a time. And so I said, “I know exactly where Speculator is!” This must have sounded as suspect to him as it sounds to me now, because he said, “Well, you ever been to Bungtown?”

I had not been to Bungtown. I had never even heard of a place in upstate New York with that name. But I was too busy establishing that even though he had a gun and I was wearing tights, I had been to just as many really cold places as he had. So I said, “Yeah, yeah, I’ve been to Bungtown.”

“It’s cold there, isn’t it?” the guy said, grinning now.

“Sure is,” I said. “Really cold.”

He and I had a good laugh over how cold it is in Bungtown, and then he said his goodbyes and strode away. I watched him go, feeling pretty good about the whole exchange, watched him until he turned into the woods and disappeared. I imagined him finding his dogs, who had found the animal he shot before running into my wife and me. I imagined him putting his dogs and the dead animal into his truck and then driving home. And then I imagined him telling his family about getting this guy in the woods to say he’d been to a place that doesn’t exist called Bungtown. I imagined my wife telling the same thing to my family when we got home, and all of them having a big laugh at my expense, and me having a good sense of humor about it and then not and getting ticked off and eventually getting into an argument about something else, anything else.

Strong conclusion:
The conclusion leaves readers with a lasting impression of the significance of the experience. Skiing helps the author maintain peace in his relationship with family member.

I turned to face my wife, to begin the inevitable process. But she was already 100 yards away, skis kicking, poles poling. “That’s exactly what my dad would have done, too,” I thought, and then set off after her, putting as much distance as I could between us and whatever we might have argued about had we not been skiing.

Source: Clarke, B. (2011, February 6). Tights and camo. *The New York Times*, p. MM50. Reprinted with permission.

Using Model Sentences to Teach Conventions in Context

Use the mentor text "Tights and Camo" by Brock Clarke to complete the following instructional practices for noticing and imitating model sentences to teach conventions in context.

Teaching Dialogue

Notice

1. Identify a model sentence for dialogue.
2. Jot down what you notice: What works? What is the effect? What does the punctuation do? What changes if it is removed?

Imitate

3. Look closely at the model sentence. Deconstruct the sentence—underline the prominent features, including the dialogue.
4. As a visual scaffold, write a sentence pattern or frame that imitates the model sentence's structure and use of dialogue (especially for English language learners and students with learning disabilities).
5. Write an original sentence that uses the sentence pattern and dialogue to show students how to insert their own ideas and experiences.

Teaching Strong Action Verbs

Notice

1. Identify a model sentence for strong action verbs.
2. Jot down what you notice: What works? What is the effect? What does the punctuation do? What changes if it is removed?

Imitate

3. Look closely at the model sentence. Deconstruct the sentence—underline the prominent features, including the strong action verbs.
4. As a visual scaffold, write a sentence pattern or frame that imitates the model sentence's structure and use of strong action verbs (especially for English language learners and students with learning disabilities).
5. Write an original sentence that uses the sentence pattern and strong action verbs to show students how to insert their own ideas and experiences.

Source: Anderson, J. (2007). *Everyday editing: Inviting students to develop skill and craft in writer's workshop*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.