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Narrative Essay Writing

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What is a narrative essay?

When writing a narrative essay, one might think of it as telling a story. These essays are often anecdotal, experiential, and personal—allowing students to express themselves in a creative and, quite often, moving ways. A narrative essay is a prose-written story that's focused on the commentary of a central theme. Narrative essays are generally written in the first-person POV, and are usually about a topic that's personal to the writer. Similarly to a descriptive essay or a reflective essay, a narrative essay asks you to tell a story, rather than make an argument and present evidence. Most narrative essays describe a real, personal experience from your own life (for example, the story of your first big success).

Alternately, your narrative essay might focus on an imagined experience (for example, how your life would be if you had been born into different circumstances). While you don't need to present a thesis statement or scholarly evidence, a narrative essay still needs to be well-structured and clearly organized so that the reader can follow your story.

When you might be asked to write a narrative essay

Although less popular than argumentative essays or expository essays, narrative essays are relatively common in high school and college writing classes.

The same techniques that you would use to write a college essay as part of a college or scholarship application are applicable to narrative essays, as well. In fact, the Common App that many students use to apply to multiple colleges asks you to submit a narrative essay.

How to choose a topic for a narrative essay

When you are asked to write a narrative essay, a topic may be assigned to you or you may be able to choose your own. With an assigned topic, the prompt will likely fall into one of two categories: specific or open-ended.

Examples of specific prompts:

- Write about the last vacation you took.
- Write about your final year of middle school.

Examples of open-ended prompts:

- Write about a time when you felt all hope was lost.
- Write about a brief, seemingly insignificant event that ended up having a big impact on your life.

A narrative essay tells a story and all good stories are centered on a conflict of some sort. Experiences with unexpected obstacles, twists, or turns make for much more compelling essays and reveal more about your character and views on life.

If you're writing a narrative essay as part of an admissions application, remember that the people reviewing your essay will be looking at it to gain a sense of not just your writing ability, but who you are as a person.

In these cases, it's wise to choose a topic and experience from your life that demonstrates the qualities that the prompt is looking for, such as resilience, perseverance, the ability to stay calm under pressure, etc.

It's also important to remember that your choice of topic is just a starting point. Many students find that they arrive at new ideas and insights as they write their first draft, so the final form of your essay may have a different focus than the one you started with.

How to outline and format a narrative essay

Even though you're not advancing an argument or proving a point of view, a narrative essay still needs to have a coherent structure. Your reader has to be able to follow you as you tell the story and to figure out the larger point that you're making.

You'll be evaluated on is your handling of the topic and how you structure your essay. Even though a narrative essay doesn't use the same structure as other essay types, you should still sketch out a loose outline so you can tell your story in a clear and compelling way.

To outline a narrative essay, you'll want to determine:

- how your story will start
- what points or specifics that you want to cover
- how your story will end
- what pace and tone you will use

In the vast majority of cases, a narrative essay should be written in the first-person, using "I." Also, most narrative essays will follow typical formatting guidelines, so you should choose a readable font like Times New Roman in size 11 or 12. Double-space your paragraphs and use 1" margins.

To get your creative wheels turning, consider how your story compares to archetypes and famous historical and literary figures both past and present. Weave these comparisons into your essay to improve the quality of your writing and connect your personal experience to a larger context.

How to write a narrative essay

Writing a narrative essay can sometimes be a challenge for students who typically write argumentative essays or research papers in a formal, objective style. To give you a better sense of how you can write a narrative essay, here is a short example of

an essay in response to the prompt, “Write about an experience that challenged your view of yourself.”

Narrative essay example

Example

Even as a child, I always had what people might call a reserved personality. It was sometimes framed as a positive (“Sarah is a good listener”) and at other times it was put in less-than-admiring terms (“Sarah is withdrawn and not very talkative”). It was the latter kind of comments that caused me to see my introverted nature as a drawback and as something I should work to eliminate. That is, until I joined my high school’s student council.

The first paragraph, or introduction, sets up the context, establishing the situation and introducing the meaningful event upon which the essay will focus.

Example

The other four students making up the council were very outspoken and enthusiastic. I enjoyed being around them, and I often agreed with their ideas. However, when it came to overhauling our school’s recycling plan, we butted heads. When I spoke up and offered a different point of view, one of my fellow student council members launched into a speech, advocating for her point of view. As her voice filled the room, I couldn’t get a word in edgewise. I wondered if I should try to match her tone, volume, and assertiveness as a way to be heard. But I just couldn’t do it—it’s not my way, and it never has been. For a fleeting moment, I felt defeated. But then, something in me shifted.

In this paragraph, the writer goes into greater depth about how her existing thinking brought her to this point.

Example

I reminded myself that my view was valid and deserved to be heard. So I waited. I let my fellow council member speak her piece and when she was finished, I deliberately waited a few moments before calmly stating my case. I chose my words well, and I spoke them succinctly. Just because I'm not a big talker doesn't mean I'm not a big thinker. I thought of the quotation "still waters run deep" and I tried to embody that. The effect on the room was palpable. People listened. And I hadn't had to shout my point to be heard.

This paragraph demonstrates the turn in the story, the moment when everything changed. The use of the quotation "still waters run deep" imbues the story with a dash of poetry and emotion.

Example

We eventually reached a compromise on the matter and concluded the student council meeting. Our council supervisor came to me afterward and said: "You handled that so well, with such grace and poise. I was very impressed." Her words in that moment changed me. I realized that a bombastic nature isn't necessarily a powerful one. There is power in quiet, too. This experience taught me to view my reserved personality not as a character flaw, but as a strength.

The final paragraph, or conclusion, closes with a statement about the significance of this event and how it ended up changing the writer in a meaningful way.

Narrative essay writing tips

1. Pick a meaningful story that has a conflict and a clear “moral.”

If you're able to choose your own topic, pick a story that has meaning and that reveals how you became the person you are today. In other words, write a narrative with a clear “moral” that you can connect with your main points.

2. Use an outline to arrange the structure of your story and organize your main points.

Although a narrative essay is different from argumentative essays, it's still beneficial to construct an outline so that your story is well-structured and organized. Note how you want to start and end your story, and what points you want to make to tie everything together.

3. Be clear, concise, concrete, and correct in your writing.

You should use descriptive writing in your narrative essay, but don't overdo it. Use clear, concise, and correct language and grammar throughout. Additionally, make concrete points that reinforce the main idea of your narrative.

4. Ask a friend or family member to proofread your essay.

No matter what kind of writing you're doing, you should always plan to proofread and revise. To ensure that your narrative essay is coherent and interesting, ask a friend or family member to read over your paper. This is especially important if your essay is responding to a prompt. It helps to have another person check to make sure that you've fully responded to the prompt or question.

Here are some guidelines for writing a narrative essay.

- **If written as a story, the essay should include all the parts of a story.**

This means that you must include an introduction, plot, characters, setting, climax, and conclusion.

- **When would a narrative essay not be written as a story?**

A good example of this is when an instructor asks a student to write a book report. Obviously, this would not necessarily follow the pattern of a story and would focus on providing an informative narrative for the reader.

- **The essay should have a purpose.**

Make a point! Think of this as the thesis of your story. If there is no point to what you are narrating, why narrate it at all?

- **The essay should be written from a clear point of view.**

It is quite common for narrative essays to be written from the standpoint of the author; however, this is not the sole perspective to be considered. Creativity in narrative essays oftentimes manifests itself in the form of authorial perspective.

- **Use clear and concise language throughout the essay.**

Much like the descriptive essay, narrative essays are effective when the language is carefully, particularly, and artfully chosen. Use specific language to evoke specific emotions and senses in the reader.

- **The use of the first person pronoun ‘I’ is welcomed.**

Do not abuse this guideline! Though it is welcomed it is not necessary—nor should it be overused for lack of clearer diction.

- **As always, be organized!**

Have a clear introduction that sets the tone for the remainder of the essay. Do not leave the reader guessing about the purpose of your narrative. Remember, you are in control of the essay, so guide it where you desire (just make sure your audience can follow your lead).