

## What is a Personal Narrative?

The purpose of a personal narrative is to write about one specific event in your life.

- ☆ Personal – about oneself
- ☆ Narrative – tell a story

- ☆ It is told in the first person (use *I, me, my, we*, etc.) So, you are telling what happened from *your* point of view. Using the word *I* invites the reader into the story.

- ☆ Focus on only one, specific event in your life.

*Example:*  
We have a family reunion every year. This is too broad. Make it more specific.

*The following example is from the chapter 'Redneck Reunions' from Under the Influence by Phil Hamman.*

**At one of our family reunions, my cousin Curly got lost in the junkyard when we were playing hide-and-seek. All the kids were playing hide-and-seek, and by the time we went inside for dinner, Curly still hadn't been found.**

Here's another example of a topic that is too broad:

**My friend is really nice.**

Make the following topic more specific by telling a specific story about your friend being nice:

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- ☆ The story is told in chronological order, so use transition words to help the flow of the story. Here's a partial list:

first	next	then	later
one morning	tomorrow	now	the following day
after a while	earlier	eventually	before long
first of all	as soon as	finally	after that

## Choosing a Topic for Your Personal Narrative



Think of an event to tell about and your feelings about what happened.



If an event is interesting to you, it will usually appeal to others. Think of your audience and their interests.

*The following topics are from the chapter 'The Skull and Big Toe Incidents' from the book Under the Influence by Phil Hamman.*

Dysfunctional event – The day my friend's dad got fired for bringing a skull home from work.

Unusual event – The day my friend's brother got his toe cut off.



Brainstorm some stories from your life that could fit into the following categories:

Funny \_\_\_\_\_

Sad \_\_\_\_\_

Exciting \_\_\_\_\_

Unusual \_\_\_\_\_

Scary \_\_\_\_\_

Dysfunctional \_\_\_\_\_

## 'Show Don't Tell' in a Personal Narrative



Avoid telling the reader what he or she is supposed to think or feel. Instead, let the reader experience the event with the sensory words you provide. Let the reader hear, smell, see, taste, and feel what is happening in your story. It's more interesting for your reader to draw conclusions about the story.



One way you can do this is by eliminating the overuse of "to be" verbs, you'll force yourself to pull in sensory words in their place. What is a "to be" verb?

"To be or not to be, that is the question..." Hamlet



The past tense forms of 'to be' are some of the most irregular in the English language. Let's just worry about avoiding the past tense forms of 'to be' when writing a personal narrative since your story will take place in the past. As a reminder, here's a list:

I was                      We were

You were                They were

He/She/It was



Try an example:

**I was walking down the street to my friend's house. I saw a dog and it was trying to get loose.**

What happens if you take out "I was" and 'it was' and replace them?

Read the following example from the chapter 'Firearms and Dogs' from the book Under the Influence by Phil Hamman.

**While walking down the street, I could see Shane staked on a chain. When he saw me he leaped to his feet and strained against his chain, jerking and snarling in an effort to get loose. Suddenly, the stake pulled loose from the ground, and he tore down the street after me.**

Below, rewrite the sentence '*I was walking down the street to my friend's house,*' this time using a *sound* that could be heard on the way:

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## Getting Started With the First Sentence of Your Personal Narrative



Getting started is the hardest part for most people. Here are two simple, proven ways to write that first sentence. Once you have that written, refer to your graphic organizer or time line to keep the flow of words going.



1. Your first sentence can describe the setting using sensory words.

*Example from the chapter 'Mean Streets' from Under the Influence by Phil Hamman.*

**The day was hot and humid, one of those days when you can smell the tar from the road as it bakes in the sun.**

Write an introductory sentence using sensory words to describe your classroom as the setting for a story.

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2. As an alternative, your first sentence can tell about an important character.

*Example from the chapter 'Matthew' in the book Under the Influence.*

**Having been arrested 42 times, charged with multiple felonies, served four different sentences in the state penitentiary, suffered five broken hands from street fights, stabbed, outran the law in high-speed chases numerous times, and a long time friend of mine since we were young, Matt is a unique individual.**

Write an introductory sentence for a story by describing something important about a friend.

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## Using Dialogue in a Personal Narrative



The key to dialogue is to find a happy medium. Don't use too much dialogue or too little. Dialogue helps the reader learn about the personalities of the characters in the story.



How do you know where to add dialogue in the story?

Use dialogue to:

- \* tell someone else in the story what you did.
- \* tell what you said.
- \* tell someone else in the story what another person did.
- \* tell what someone said.

*Example from the chapter 'Trauma' in Under the Influence by Phil Hamman, in which there is a balance of dialogue.*

**"What's going on? Who's bleeding?" I yelled.**

**But my question was lost in the air as they continued yelling at each other. I followed the blood trail which grew in volume as I approached the bathroom.**

This has more impact than writing this:

**I didn't what was going on or who was bleeding. They continued yelling at each other. I followed the blood trail which grew in volume as I approached the bathroom.**



Let your personality come through by what you say and how you say it. Don't worry about saying the 'right' thing or always using correct grammar in your dialogue unless that's the way it was really spoken.

*Example from the chapter 'Bullies and the Bus From Hell':*

**The Maggot had beady eyes that were set too close together, discolored teeth, and an odd body odor. I feared him as much as anyone, but on that day the name just slipped out.**

**"Oh, you think you're tough enough to call me Maggot, huh? I'll tell you what: I'm not getting off at my bus stop. I'm getting off at yours!" was his response.**

The example above is an effective use of dialogue because only the part that was actually spoken is used. It's a better way of showing The Maggot's personality than to write:

**The Maggot had beady eyes that were set too close together, discolored teeth, and an odd body odor. I feared him as much as anyone, but on that day the name just slipped out. The Maggot got mad when I called him this and told me that he was going to wait and get off at my bus instead of getting off at his own bus stop.**

## Personal Narrative Tone



Tone is probably the most overlooked element of writing. Yet tone is what will make your story interesting, believable, and readable. You should sound like you're having a conversation with your audience. This natural tone is what makes your story stand out based on the emotions you want to elicit in the reader. If your story is about something unexpected happening, you want to create a feeling of suspense. If you're writing a scary story, choose words and a tone that creates some fear.



Make sure your tone matches the story. To decide which tone is appropriate, ask yourself why you're writing this story and who your audience will be. Think of tone as the main feeling you want to develop in your audience.



When writing, use your own voice so that you sound like 'somebody'. Don't worry about sounding proper and polite if that isn't how you sound. On the other hand, trying to sound tough, edgy, and angry can just come across as annoying and overdone. Let your writing reflect who you are and how you sound.



Set the tone by describing a character's mood or emotions without stating them outright. Read this example from the chapter 'Becoming Tough' in the book Under the Influence by Phil Hamman.

There, my sisters arranged a fight that was one of those 'my little brother is tougher than your brother' fights. A crowd of kids brought the other young kid and me to a phone booth on the street corner and put us both inside the booth so we couldn't run away. In my mind, I can still see all those faces pressed up against the glass of the phone booth yelling and encouraging us to keep fighting.

The writer puts you inside the phone booth where you are surrounded by a throng of strangers and no way out. You can feel the boy's fear and know that there's no choice but to fight back.

## Writing a Good Ending for a Personal Narrative

A good ending for a personal narrative tells the outcome and is reflective.



Your outcome should indicate why the story was important to you or why it was interesting.

*From the chapter 'Dark Times' in Under the Influence by Phil Hamman.*

**During this dark time, I reached a point where I just didn't care what happened, and when you deal with someone who doesn't care, you're dealing with trouble.**

This leaves the reader thinking about why it's important to know when you're dealing with someone who has reached his or her limit and doesn't care anymore.



Your outcome should also indicate whether you or others learned something from the experience. This doesn't always happen in a personal narrative, but it's very common.

*From the chapter 'Building Bombs and Lessons From Big Jim':*

**But then Easter came and Big Jim told them not to expect any Easter eggs or candy because he had shot and killed the Easter Bunny during hunting season. With the lessons we learned from role models like Big Jim, it's not surprising that we built bombs and got into all kinds of trouble.**

In the example above, the lesson is stated outright.

*From the chapter 'Bloody Halls':*

**If you didn't have a lock they would pee all over your books and your jacket. Junior high was a rough time for me, but as with all things in my life, I learned to deal with it as it was nothing compared to my home life.**

This example is more subtle. The reader can draw the conclusion that the narrator did learn something: how to deal with the things that went on in junior high as well as all other things in life.





Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Personal Narrative Graphic Organizer

Opening

Topic/event:

Time:



Main characters:

Place:



Body - Beginning

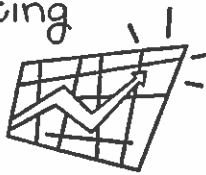
How does the story begin?  
What is the problem?

Sensory details:



Body - Middle

What is the most exciting part?



Sensory details:



Body - Ending

How does the story end?



Sensory details: