Personal Narrative Writing Assignment

A step-by-step guide to writing an entertaining story about your life.

Name: ____________________________

Class: ___________
Personal Narrative Assignment

TASK

In a personal narrative, you re-create an incident that happened to you over a short period of time. This incident could be an emotional experience, a silly or serious event, or a frightening encounter. Be sure to include enough specific details to make the incident come alive for your readers. If you can’t remember everything, fill in the gaps with details that seem right.

WRITING GUIDELINES

Prewriting

1. Characteristics of an Effective Personal Narrative... Read three personal narratives from the collection provided and list each example’s effective traits. Complete Qualities of Effective Personal Narratives worksheet and share ideas with classmates.

2. Choose a Subject... Think of a specific incident from your life that you think will appeal to readers. Complete My Personal Writing Territories worksheet.

3. Gathering Details... Jot down all of the ideas and details that come to mind when you think of the experience. Use a storyboard to help organize your ideas.

4. Show, Don’t Tell... Practice turning making your writing more interesting. Complete Show-Me Sentences worksheet.

5. Focusing Your Efforts... Decide on a particular feeling or mood that you want to convey in your story. For example, do you want to surprise your readers, make them laugh, or have them share in your sorrow or fear?

6. Dialogue... Review how to use the proper format for writing dialogue. Complete Punctuating Dialogue worksheet.

Writing and Revising

1. Hooking Your Reader... First, try to start right in the middle of the action or introduce the people in your story and get them talking. Build the action by adding specific details, feelings, suspense – whatever it takes to pull the reader in. Experiment with different
styles of lead paragraphs using **Narrative Leads** handout as a guide. Write two leads on looseleaf and then choose the one that best fits.

2. *Improving Your Writing...* Read over the first draft for overall effectiveness. Have you said everything you intended to say? Will your reader be able to follow your story, including any changes in time, place, or speaker? Does the story entertain, surprise, or make a point?

3. *Peer Response:* Have a peer read and respond to your story using the rubric provided.

4. *Revisions:* Revise your narrative using your peer's and teacher's suggestions as well as your own ideas for improving your story. All revisions need to be written on the revision sheet provided.

**Editing and Proofreading**

1. *Checking for Style and Accuracy...* Make sure all your sentences read smoothly and clearly and that you have used the best words to express your ideas. Then check for spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors. Have a peer help you with this process if you like.

2. *Preparing Final Copy...* Type a neat final copy of your narrative; proofread before sharing.

**DUE DATE:**
Sample **Personal Narrative**

In this personal narrative, student writer Matt Vice focuses on a recent event in his life, a memorable football game. The strong sensory details make this event come alive for readers.

The Game

The rain hit my helmet lightly, like a soft tapping on a door. I pulled my chin strap tightly around my face and snapped it on the other side. Forty-three teammates standing beside me started to jog, workhorses on the move, the clip-clop of our spikes the only sound.

As we approached the field, the rain picked up. I looked at my teammates after hearing the cheers from our fans. I said to myself, "This is why I play football; this is what it’s all about." As we burst through the gate, the roar of the crowd engulfed us. Our coach gathered us together on the sidelines and barked the game plan to us. Forty-four sets of eyes locked on him as if we were hypnotized. We broke the huddle, and the receiving team trotted out onto the field.

"I said to myself, ‘This is why I play football; this is what it’s all about.’"

The crowd was yelling; the cheerleaders were pumped. I heard the chanting fade into the background as the game progressed. Two quarters passed, then three. Hard-hitting crunches and cracks could be heard play after play. Each team traded scores.

With less than a minute left in the game, we had a 24-to-17 lead. The rain was running down my helmet like an overflowing gutter. With time running out, the opposing quarterback dropped back. The crowd went silent as he passed to an open receiver in the end zone. Everything seemed to go into slow motion as the ball dropped securely into his hands. I stood openmouthed, dumbfounded, and
barely breathing. They made the extra point, so the score was tied, which meant overtime.

The opposing team won the coin toss and went first. The official put the ball on the 10-yard line. In three short plays, they scored again, putting them ahead by six. I felt like I was in a bad dream. After the extra point, it was our turn. Our first two plays were stopped cold by their tenacious defense. On third down, our quarterback dropped back and connected with the tailback a yard short of the end zone. I snapped my helmet, anticipating heading out onto the field for the extra point.

"Fourth down in overtime... this is the stuff dreams are made of."

Eleven men broke the huddle and slowly walked to the line. The center placed his hands on the ball, keeping the laces up for luck. The quarterback barked his cadence like a general shouting orders. Eyes were locked; the crowd was silent. At the snap of the ball, their linemen charged us, trying to crack the wall. Our quarterback took a hit and fumbled before he could cross the line. The game was over. We lost by inches.

I went still and fell to my knees. Our quarterback sat in the end zone, alone. I could hear sobs from the crowd. Tears ran down my face, or maybe it was just the rain. I couldn't tell. Some teammates were consoled by their families or hugged by their friends. Our last game was not supposed to end in this way.

Heads down, our team walked slowly back to the locker room, the once thunderous footsteps now silent. For the first time that night, I felt the cold.
Qualities of Effective Personal Narratives

Read three examples of a personal narrative and list the qualities of each one in the space below.

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Title of the 3 personal narratives read:
QUESTIONS FOR MEMOIRISTS

- What are my earliest memories? How far back can I remember?
- What are the most important things that have happened to me in my life so far?
- What have I seen that I can't forget?
- What's an incident that shows what my family and I are like?
- What's an incident that shows what my friends and I are like?
- What's an incident that shows what my pet(s) and I are like?
- What's something that happened to me at school that I'll always remember?
- What's something that happened to me at home that I'll always remember?
- What's an incident that changed how I think or feel about something?
- What's an incident that changed my life?
- What's a time or place that I was perfectly happy?
- What's a time or place that I laughed a lot?
- What's a time or place when it felt as if my heart were breaking?
- What's a time with a parent that I'll never forget?
- What's a time with a grandparent that I'll never forget?
- What's a time with a brother or sister that I'll never forget?
- What's a time with a cousin or another relative that I'll never forget?
- Can I remember a time I learned to do something, or did something for the first time?
- What memories emerge when I make a time line of my life so far and note the most important things that happened to me each year?
My Personal Writing Territories

Use the space below to record ideas for your original personal narrative.

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Show-Me Sentences

When writing a personal narrative, don’t tell the reader what he or she is supposed to think or feel. Instead, let the reader see, hear, smell, feel, and taste the experience directly, and let the sensory experiences lead him or her to your intended thought or feeling.

This is an example of a telling sentence.
My baby sister was the picture of health. (cliché)

Sample: This is an example of a showing paragraph.
Instead of: My baby sister was the picture of health.

Josie flitted from one thing to another, as if everything in the kitchen were there for her amusement. She had already left a trail of pots, pans, bananas, and crackers behind her. Flashing Mom a bright-eyed smile, she reached her dimpled hands toward her juice cup. The juice dribbled down her chin as she drank. A swipe across her plump cheeks with her hand took care of that. She plunked the half-empty cup on the counter and started to sing to herself as she marched around the kitchen table. A sound from the yard suddenly caught her attention, and she ran toward to back door on eager little legs.

Activity
Take one of these telling sentences and rewrite it as a show-me paragraph.

- I’ve never been so cold.
- I wouldn’t want to be in his/her shoes.
- It was an incredible sight to see!
- The crowd went crazy!
- It was the best book I’ve ever read.
Tips for Writing a Personal Narrative

Before you begin drafting your own original personal narrative, read over the following tips to give yourself a clear idea of what to do.

Purpose and Audience

Personal narratives allow you to share your life with others and vicariously experience the things that happen around you. Your job as a writer is to put the reader in the midst of the action letting him or her live through an experience. A good story creates a dramatic effect, makes us laugh, gives us pleasurable fright, and/or gets us on the edge of our seats. A story has done its job if we can say, "Yes, that captures what living with my father feels like," or "Yes, that’s what being cut from the football team felt like."

Structure

There are a variety of ways to structure your narrative story. The three most common structures are: chronological approach, flashback sequence, and reflective mode. Select one that best fits the story you are telling.

Methods

Show, Don’t Tell
Don’t tell the reader what he or she is supposed to think or feel. Let the reader see, hear, smell, feel, and taste the experience directly, and let the sensory experiences lead him or her to your intended thought or feeling. Showing is harder than telling. It’s easier to say, "It was incredibly funny," than to write something that is incredibly funny.

Let People Talk
It’s amazing how much we learn about people from what they say. One way to achieve this is through carefully constructed dialogue. Work to create dialogue that allows the characters’ personalities and voices to emerge through unique word selection and the use of active rather than passive voice.

Choose a Point of View
Point of view is the perspective from which your story is told. It encompasses where you are in time, how much you view the experience emotionally (your tone), and how much you allow yourself into the minds of the characters. Most personal narratives are told from the first-person limited point of view.
Punctuating Dialogue

Talking is so easy that you don't have to think about it. You just . . . talk. But recording “talk” on paper is another matter entirely—one that can be a lot of work. There are definite rules to follow regarding the use of quotation marks, commas, end marks, and capital letters. (Turn to 390.1, 399.1-399.3, and 400.1 in Write Source 2000 for more information.)

**EXAMPLE**

“When will we leave for camp?” asked Todd.
(The question mark is placed inside the quotation marks because the quotation is a question.)

**Directions:** Punctuate the following dialogue with quotation marks, commas, and end marks. The first sentence has been done for you.

1. All aboard, Scouts, said Counselor Dave as he climbed into the
2. bus.
3. Are you men prepared to camp in the Sonora Desert tonight?
4. Not yet Dave shouted Andy We still need to buy some sandpaper.
5. Why do you need sandpaper asked the puzzled counselor.
6. Andy grinned We’re going to need a map when we drive through
7. the desert
8. As the bus pulled up to the campground, Counselor Dave shouted
9. The last man off this bus is a rotten egg
10. Excuse me Counselor said Andy I can’t get down off the bus.
11. Why not asked the counselor What is the problem.
12. Everyone knows you can only get down from a goose Andy
13. laughed

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NARRATIVE LEADS

Typical

It was a day at the end of June. My mom, dad, brother, and I were at our camp on Rangeley Lake. We arrived the night before at 10:00, so it was dark when we got there and unpacked. We went straight to bed. The next morning, when I was eating breakfast, my dad started yelling for me from down at the dock at the top of his lungs. He said there was a car in the lake.

- Action: A Main Character Doing Something

I gulped my milk, pushed away from the table, and bolted out of the kitchen, slamming the broken screen door behind me. I ran down to our dock as fast as my legs could carry me. My feet pounded on the old wood, hurrying me toward my dad’s voice. “Scott!” he bellowed again.

“Coming, Dad!” I gasped. I couldn’t see him yet—just the sails of the boats that had already put out into the lake for the day.

- Dialogue: A Character or Characters Speaking

“Scott! Get down here on the double!” Dad bellowed. His voice sounded far away.

“Dad?” I hollered. “Where are you?” I squinted through the screen door but couldn’t see him.

“I’m down on the dock. MOVE IT. You’re not going to believe this,” he replied.

- Reaction: A Character Thinking

I couldn’t imagine why my father was hollering for me at 7:00 in the morning. I thought fast about what I might have done to get him so riled. Had he found out about the way I talked to my mother the night before, when we got to camp and she asked me to help unpack the car? Did he discover the fishing reel I broke last week? Before I could consider a third possibility, Dad’s voice shattered my thoughts.

“Scott! Move it! You’re not going to believe this!”

When beginning a story, craft several leads. Experiment. A lead you love will fuel you as a writer. Choose the way in that makes you happiest; it will make your readers happy, too.
# Personal Narrative Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus</strong></td>
<td>Does not focus on one incident or event</td>
<td>Focuses on a specific event</td>
<td>Presents an entertaining view of a specific event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Characters</strong></td>
<td>Reader cannot relate to characters</td>
<td>More information about the people involved needed to better understand story</td>
<td>Presents an engaging picture of the person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supporting Details</strong></td>
<td>Does not contain specific details</td>
<td>Contains some supporting details about people, events, and setting</td>
<td>Contains specific details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Logical Organization</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level 3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>Does not include a clear beginning that pulls the reader into the story</td>
<td>Attempt made to pull the reader into the story</td>
<td>Includes a clear and interesting beginning that pulls readers into the story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organisation</strong></td>
<td>Story is difficult to follow</td>
<td>Generally well organized</td>
<td>Presents ideas in an organized manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transitions</strong></td>
<td>Does not attempt to use transitions between sentences and paragraphs</td>
<td>Attempts to use transitions between sentences and paragraphs</td>
<td>Uses transitions to link sentences and paragraphs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Word Choice and Style</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level 3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Word Choice</strong></td>
<td>Does choice the best words possible</td>
<td>Attempts to use specific nouns, vivid verbs, and colourful adjectives</td>
<td>Contains specific nouns, vivid verbs, and colourful adjectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fluency</strong></td>
<td>Story does not flow smoothly from one idea to the next</td>
<td>Generally flows smoothly from one idea to the next</td>
<td>Flows smoothly from one idea to the next</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sentence Style</strong></td>
<td>Does not include a variation of sentence structure and length</td>
<td>Attempts to use a variation in sentence structure and length</td>
<td>Shows a variation in sentence structure and length</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Correct, Accurate Copy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level 3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing Mechanics</strong></td>
<td>Constant errors make comprehension difficult</td>
<td>Contains some spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar errors</td>
<td>Follows the rules of writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dialogue</strong></td>
<td>Does not include dialogue between characters</td>
<td>Attempts to use proper format for writing dialogue</td>
<td>Uses proper dialogue format and dialogue moves the events of the along</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Comments:**

________________________________________________________________________
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Revisions

Use the following space to record your revisions you have made to your personal. Write the symbol \textbf{R__} and then the number of the revision, on your first draft and then record to the revision below.

Ex. \textit{R1 – My mission was to reach the bunker alive with the enemy plans. It was the most dangerous mission ever and nobody else was capable of doing it.}