

The Personal Narrative

Definition of a Narrative: A form of discourse the purpose of which is to tell a story. Narrative essays are almost always autobiographical; they form a part of the writer's experience. But even in cases where the story is fictional rather than factual, it is used to make a point, advance an idea or argument, or appeal to human understanding.

Objectives: (1) Since most colleges and universities request a personal essay to be submitted with a student's application, students will benefit from exposure to published narratives and will gain valuable insight into the story of their own lives. (2) Students will apply their knowledge of narrative structure to literary analysis of works presented in the AP course or on the AP Literature and Composition exam.

Skill Focus for the Personal Narrative:

- ▶ Does it make a **point**- stated or unstated?
- ▶ Does it tell a **story** or establish an interesting fact?
- ▶ Does it offer a **lesson or insight**?
- ▶ Does it re-create the **action** related to the main point?
- ▶ Does it clearly present **conflict** and **resolution**?
- ▶ Does it include only **key events** that develop the purpose?
- ▶ Does it contain **external or internal dialogue**?
- ▶ Is it written in **first-person narration**?
- ▶ Does it employ the writer's own **voice**?
- ▶ Does the writer's use of **diction, syntax, tone, imagery** and **figurative language** convey the personal experience effectively?

Model Personal Narratives (some prompts included):

- ▶ *The Next Level: What Colleges Expect from Your Writing*, Teacher's Guide pp. 3-4 (includes a sample lesson plan outline) and Student's Guide pp. 2-22 (includes, lesson commentary, student drafts/revisions and comments/grades from college instructors)

- ✦ ***Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, 4th ed. Robert DiYanni (Chapters 29-35, pp. 1711-1882, include reading and writing guidelines for all essay types, commentary/analysis of sample essays, prompts for writing about essays, and sample student papers for essay analysis.)**
 - ✦ Henry David Thoreau, *The Battle of the Ants*, pp. 1746-1748
 - ✦ Virginia Woolf, *The Death of the Moth*, pp. 1749-1751
 - ✦ Annie Dillard, *Living Like Weasels* (and commentary), pp. 1756-1761
 - ✦ Zora Neale Hurston, *How It Feels to Be Colored Me*, pp. 1766-1772
 - ✦ E.B. White, *Once More to the Lake*, pp. 1791-1800
 - ✦ Maxine Hong Kingston, *No Name Woman* and *Silence*, pp. 1805-1815
 - ✦ Mark Twain, "Cub" *Wants to Be a Pilot*, pp. 1827-1832
 - ✦ George Orwell, *Shooting an Elephant*, pp. 1835-1839
 - ✦ Loren Eiseley, *The Judgment of Birds*, pp. 1840-1845
 - ✦ James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, pp. 1846-1859
 - ✦ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, pp. 1869-1876
 - ✦ Bernard Cooper, *Burl's*, pp. 1876-1882

- ✦ ***The Language of Literature*, Purple Edition**
 (see Writing Workshop - Application Essay, pp. 260-265)
 - ✦ Elizabeth Vigée LeBrun, *Memoirs of Madame Vigée LeBrun*, pp. 681-687
 - ✦ Vera Brittain, *from Testament of Youth*, pp. 1114-1118
 - ✦ Elie Wiesel, *from Night*, pp. 1135-1142 - **(Relate an incident in your life that you now regret, but at the time thought nothing of it.)**
 - ✦ George Orwell, *A Hanging*, pp. 1167-1175 - **(Relate a tragic experience in your life. Focus on your diction, syntax, tone, and details to convey the horror of your experience.)**

- ✦ ***The World of Ideas*, (editions are indicated)**
 - ✦ Frederick Douglas, *from The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, an American Slave*, (4th ed. pp. 75-89, 5th ed. pp. 107-121, 6th ed. pp. 125-139) - **(Tell a story in the first person of your relationship with people who hold power over you legally. Tell your story in such a way as to reveal the political realities that affect both you and those with power.)**
 - ✦ Simone Weil, *Spiritual Autobiography*, (6th ed. pp. 751-771) - **(Writing Prompt #1 pp. 770 - Write a letter in response to Weil's. Simply respond to Weil in your own voice and rely on your own**

attitudes toward religious experience. In the course of the letter, offer her your own "spiritual autobiography.")

- ▶ Harriet Jacobs, *Free at Last*, (6th ed. pp. 585-597) - (Writing Prompt #4 pp. 596- How has her narrative affected you on an emotional level? Has she made you feel emotions that are appropriate to her subject matter and appropriate to the magnitude of her experience? What techniques does she use to evoke the response? Write about an incident in your life using Jacob's techniques to evoke such a response in your readers.)

College Application/Scholarship Personal/Narrative Essay Prompts:

Carleton University

- ▶ What do you see as the turning point(s) or important events in your life and why do you view them as such?
- ▶ Ask and answer the one important question which you wish we had asked.
- ▶ Discuss a social issue that has caused you to rethink a portion of your own life.

Stanford University

- ▶ Select a quote or saying that is particularly meaningful to you, and comment on its significance.
- ▶ Tell us about one of the best conversations you have ever heard.

Harvard (Common Application)

- ▶ Write about something of direct personal importance to you, such as your family, friends, unusual circumstances in your life, or the best or worst features of your school or community.
- ▶ Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.
- ▶ Describe a character in fiction, an historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.
- ▶ A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.

Washington University

- ▶ Name one book that you read during the past year that you recommend. Why?

✦ If you had the opportunity to have a conversation with an important figure, either contemporary or historical, whom would you choose? Why?
Johns-Hopkins University

✦ Using a piece of wire, a Hopkins bumper sticker, and egg carton, and inexpensive hardware-store item, create something that would solve a problem. Tell us about your creation, but don't worry - we won't require proof that it works!

Resources for Writing the Personal Narrative:

Fox, Steve. "Memories of Play, Dreams of Success: Literacy Autobiographies for First Year College Students," *The Educator's Reference Desk* 29 June 2004. <<http://www.eduref.org/Eric/>>

(When you reach the webpage, type in "Memories of Play" for the search. This essay is available for purchase through the ERIC site.)

"Narrative Writing," *Web English Teacher* 24 April 2004. 28 June 2004.
<<http://www.webenglishteacher.com/narrative.html>>

Reinking, James A., et all. *Strategies for Successful Writing*, Sixth Edition. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003.

The Next Level: What Colleges Expect from Your Writing. Lisa Smith Nielson, ed. Austin, TX: Association of Texas Colleges and Universities, 2002.

TEKS: 1B-F; 2A-F; 3A-E; 6A-C; 7A-G; 8A-C, E-H; 9A-C; 10-A-C; 11A-B; 12A-G; 13A, C, E-F; 15A, C, E; 16A-H