UWF WRITING SKILLS LAB

NARRATION: STANDARD FORM

Whereas exposition presents facts and explains meaning, and description evokes the sense impression of things, narration is concerned with a series of particular action, presented with a central problem or purpose in mind: to chronicle a life or an era, to relate an event or an episode, or to illustrate with a story a point made in exposition or argumentation or description.  Although usually associated with a novel or short story, narration is the basic purpose of nonfiction writing such as bibliography, history, reporting or illustration.  Narration differs at least in purpose from exposition and argument: its primary and basic appeal is to the emotions of the reader or hearer rather than to the mind or the intellect.  Narrative which does not move the reader, appeal to his emotions, and make him eager to know “What happened next?” is poor narrative indeed. Because it does appeal to the emotions, narrative is the easiest and most pleasant form of discourse to read and listen to.

Narration, which usually assumes a more or less definite locality and period of time in which ensues a continuous and relevant action, is often combined  with descriptive writing, since it is commonly desirable to enable the reader to imagine the setting and actors before he can imagine the action.  And it is often combined with expository writing since explanations may sometimes be made clearer when couched in terms of specific action, and actions may sometimes be made clearer when explained.

The writer of factual narrative treats his story from a particular point of view that is appropriate to convey the underlying idea of the narrative.  He must maintain his point of view consistently--that is, keep clear who is speaking and what the speaker’s relation is to the point and purpose of the narrative.  The first person narrator (the I) may be present as an observer, present as a participant in the action, or not present but fully informed as to all that took place.  The narrator who writes in the third person may be a disinterested observer, or he may have a bias.  Either kind  of narrator may pretend to have learned what he tells from some other person.

Both as a purveyor of pleasure and as a valuable aid in expository and descriptive writing, narration is worth studying.

For this assignment, you will be asked to write an incident, not a fully-fledged short story.  An incident is a short narrative told for its own sake.  It deals with a single, simple situation, an episode.  Its primary emphasis is upon the character of the narrator, of some person involved in the action, or upon the action itself.  The incident involves characters, action, and dialogue, but it is simple in structure, brief, and without necessary emphasis upon dramatic conflict.

In writing a sequence of events, you must be careful to keep your verb tenses logical and consistent.  Do not lapse into excessive description of characters or setting.

SUGGESTED TOPICS

1. Tell and episode from your own early experience that has come back to you recently. (e.g., Buried in my memory . . .)
2. Write a narrative of some event or series of events of apparently “ordinary” or everyday character into which you infuse more than ordinary interest by depicting a subdued clash of personalities or other kind of conflict.
3. From your own experience, narrate an incident that involved one or more of the following: mistaken identity, eavesdropping, sudden change of mood, or a strange meeting.  Keep the story in the third person.
4. Write a narrative account of an incident or experience that revealed to you the character or personality of someone you know or have met.
5. Write a narrative account of some exciting event.  Prepare for the climax by introducing suspense and setting the stage.  Use some dialogue, imaginary or real, quoting witnesses.
6. A childhood memory that is especially vivid to you: your first day of school or first time at camp, the worst punishment your parents ever gave you, or an encounter that helped you to mature.
7. An experience that you had with one of your own children, for example, how you taught your child to swim, or how he or she learned that he or she should always obey you.
8. An incident or experience that revealed to you the true character or personality of someone you know.
9. An incident that revealed to you how you feel about your mother and father.
10. An experience you had in the military that taught you something about the military or about yourself.
11. An incident in which you felt jealousy or some other strong emotion.
12. Your first encounter with racial prejudice.
13. Your first encounter with romantic love.
14. An experience that taught you a lesson about how you always want to live your life or how you do not want to live your life.
15. An incident that illustrates your favorite quotation, for example, “A stitch in time saves nine,” or “Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.” (SEE Bartlett’s Book of Quotations for more examples).

HOW TO WRITE NARRATION

1. Keep the events in chronological order, that is, in the order in which they occurred.
2. Maintain a consistent point of view.  You must decide who you are in the story, take on the voice of your assumed character, and remain faithful to him or her for the duration of the story.  You may be present as a participant in the action or as an observer.  If, for instance, you decide to relate an incident from the point of view of yourself as a young boy, the language you use during the body of the narration should reflect your youthfulness.  Any comments that you wish to make from a mature point of view should be saved for the conclusion, in which you may look back upon the time of immaturity and comment upon it.
3. Pace your narration to focus on dominant scenes.  Pacing is an important and common sense principle of narrative writing; it means that unimportant times, events, and scenes are dismissed as the narrative focuses on and develops in details only what is important to its theme.  A narrative about a favorite hiding place, for example, should develop the hiding place itself in detail, but skim over secondary material such as the places from which you escaped to hide there.  Common sense must guide you in selecting the scenes and events to be developed, but the ultimate rule of thumb is the relevance of the material to your theme, the point you are trying to make.
4. Use details to make vivid the people and places in your narrative.  People and places are the lifeblood of your narrative.  Make them real and imaginable through the use of specific and concrete details, as you did in writing a descriptive theme.
5. Use more dialogue to make your narrative effective.  Your characters will seem much more vivid if you record some of the things they actually said.  When you use dialogue, make sure that you punctuate it correctly (refer to pages 324-326 in Guth handbook).  Start a new paragraph every time you change speakers.
6. Develop a theme in your narrative.  We have already pointed out that good writing must have unity; it must be centered on a thesis idea that controls the whole essay.  Narrative is no exception.  In narrative writing, however, the thesis idea is called the “theme” and is supported by an incident rather than by facts or examples.

Narration establishes its theme by first raising, then resolving conflict.  The conflict gives rise to events that will determine resolution from which the theme can be stated.  Your theme will actually be stated twice in your narrative.  You will mention it first in the introductory paragraph so that the reader will know as he reads what point you will be making.  Then after drawing your narrative to a definite conclusion that shows how the events ended, you will use the final paragraph to make your theme clear.  The reader must be left with the impression that some problem or difficulty has been resolved or an idea established from your experience.

PLANNING A NARRATIVE

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| INTRODUCTIONTime, place, name of incident or kind of conflict, what you gained or learned from incident. | 10 years ago on visit to Canada. Fell out of canoe. Learned for myself how people who do know how to swim can drown. |
| BEGINNINGGive relevant details of place where incident took place, give relevant information about people involved, give any information necessary to make conflict understandable, tell in detail how conflict started. | Beautiful mountainous area with deep lakes. Early September afternoon with cool air and cold water in lake. Husband and I dressed in regular street clothes with shoes and jackets. Decided to go for canoe ride in spite of no experience with canoes. Husband rowed at first until I decided to help. |
| MIDDLEContinue describing place and people as necessary to make action clear. Show how conflict builds to a climax. | Trouble started when I took oar. On first stroke, canoe capsized. We hit water, burdened by clothing, camera, and cooler. Shocked by unexpected capsize and by cold water, I panicked. Began to swallow water and to sob. Husband had to slap me to calm me down. |
| ENDINGContinue description as necessary. Show how conflict is resolved. | Gained enough control to cling to canoe. Girl from shore who had watched whole incident came in motorboat to pick us up. |
| CONCLUSIONComment on what knowledge was gained or idea established by experience. | Arrived back at cottage sopping wet and very chagrined at my behavior. After telling my story numerous times and reflecting on it, I realized how I, a decent swimmer, could easily have drowned. Realized the significance of all the stories I’d heard about people who knew how to swim but drowned after panicking. Leaned a new respect for boats. |