

What Is a Narrative Essay?

A **narrative** essay tells a story. In fact, *narrative* is another word for *story*. In this unit, you will learn how to organize and write a narrative essay. Even though the narrative essay has the same basic form as most other academic essays, it allows the writer to be a little more creative than academic essays usually do. Narratives can tell long stories or just a few minutes' worth of excitement. While the narrative essay has a particular structure, narrative ideas are often used in different writing tasks, such as argument or compare-contrast.

Structure of a Story

Several important elements make up a good story:

Setting The setting is the location where the action in a story takes place.

Theme The theme is the basic idea of the story. Very often the theme will deal with a topic that is common in life or human nature, such as independence, envy, courage, failure, and success.

Mood The mood is the feeling or atmosphere that the writer creates for the story. It could be happy, hopeful, suspenseful, or scary. Both the setting and descriptive vocabulary create the mood in a narrative.

Characters The characters are the people in the story. They are affected by the mood of the story, and they react to the events in which they are involved.

Plot The plot is what happens in the story, that is, the sequence of events. The plot often includes a climax or turning point at which the characters or events change.

Just like other types of essays, an effective narrative essay also includes these elements:

- a **thesis** that sets up the action in the introduction
- **transition sentences** that connect events and help the reader follow the story
- a **conclusion** that ends the story action and provides a moral, prediction, or revelation



The Introduction

The **introduction** of a narrative essay is the paragraph that begins your story. In the introduction, you describe the setting, introduce the characters, and prepare your audience for the action to come. Of course, the introduction should have a hook and a thesis.

The Narrative Hook

You learned in Unit 1 that the **hook** in an essay is the part of the introduction—usually the first few sentences—that grabs readers’ attention. Hooks are especially important in narrative essays because they help set the stage for the story. The hook makes readers start guessing about what will happen next. Let’s look at the hook from Essay 8 that you will read in Activity 2.

I had never been more anxious in my life. I had just spent the last three endless hours trying to get to the airport so that I could travel home.

Does this hook make you want to know what happened to the narrator? The hook should make the reader ask *wh*- questions about the essay. You may have thought of questions like these when you read the preceding hook:

- Who is the narrator and why is he or she anxious?
- Where is the airport?
- What made the trip to the airport seem endless?
- Why is this person going home?

ACTIVITY 1 Identifying Hooks

Read the sentences below. Which three sentences would not be good hooks for a narrative essay? Put a ✓ next to these sentences. Be ready to explain why you think these sentences do not work well as hooks for narrative essays.

1. _____ The roar of race-car engines ripped through the blazing heat of the day.
2. _____ It was freezing on that sad December day.
3. _____ After my brother’s accident, I sat alone in the hospital waiting room.
4. _____ My friend and I should not have been walking home alone so late on that dark winter night.
5. _____ Whales are by far the largest marine mammals.
6. _____ She gave her friend a birthday gift.
7. _____ The gleaming snow lay over the treacherous mountain like a soft white blanket, making the terrain seem safe instead of deadly.
8. _____ The Russian dictionary that we use in our language class has 500 pages.
9. _____ Amber never expected to hear the deadly sound of a rattlesnake in her kitchen garden.
10. _____ A shot rang out in the silence of the night.

The Thesis

In most types of essays, the **thesis** states the main idea of the essay and tells what the organization of the information will be. However, in a narrative essay, the thesis introduces the action that begins in the first paragraph of the essay. Look at these example thesis statements:

Now, as I watched the bus driver set my luggage on the airport sidewalk, I realized that my frustration had only just begun.

I wanted my mother to watch me race down the steep hill, so I called out her name and then nudged my bike forward.

Because his pride would not allow him to apologize, Ken now had to fight the bully, and he was pretty sure that he would not win.

These thesis statements do not tell the reader what happens. They only introduce the action that will follow. The paragraphs in the body will develop the story.

The Body

The **body** of your narrative essay contains most of the plot—the supporting information. The action in the plot can be organized in many different ways. One way is **chronological** or time order. In this method, each paragraph gives more information about the story as it proceeds in time—the first paragraph usually describes the first event, the second paragraph describes the second event, and so on.

Transitional Sentences

In an essay with chronological organization, each paragraph ends with a **transitional sentence**. Transitional sentences have two purposes: (1) to signal the end of the action in one paragraph, and (2) to provide a link to the action of the next paragraph. These sentences are vital because they give your story unity and allow the reader to follow the action easily. The following example is from Essay 8 on page 43, Paragraphs 2 and 3. Notice how the ideas in the last sentence of Paragraph 2 (the transitional sentence, underlined) and the first sentence of Paragraph 3 (underlined) are connected.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 2 | This was my first visit to the international terminal of the airport, and nothing was familiar. I could not make sense of any of the signs. Where was the check-in counter? Where should I take my luggage? I had no idea where the immigration line was. I began to panic. What time was it? Where was my plane? <u>I had to find help because I could not be late!</u> |
| 3 | <u>I tried to ask a passing businessman for help, but my words all came out wrong.</u> He just scowled and walked away. What had happened? I had been in this country for a whole semester, and I could not even remember how to ask for directions. This was awful! Another bus arrived at the terminal, and the passengers stepped off carrying all sorts of luggage. Here was my chance! I could follow them to the right place, and I would not have to say a word. |

The Conclusion

Like academic essays, narrative essays need to have concluding ideas. In the **conclusion**, you finish describing the action in the essay. The final sentence can have two functions:

1. It can deliver the **moral** of the story by telling the reader what the character(s) learned from the experience.
2. It can make a **prediction** or a **revelation** (disclosure of something that was not known before) about future actions that will happen as a result of the events in the story.

Look at these examples:

Moral The little boy had finally learned that telling the truth was the most important thing to do.

Prediction I can only hope that one day I will be able to do the same for another traveler who is suffering through a terrible journey.

Revelation Every New Year's Eve, my wife and I return to that magical spot and remember the selfless act that saved our lives.

Writer's Note

Storytelling Tip

If you describe the sights, smells, and sounds of the story, you will bring the story alive for the reader. Try to include a few adjectives in your sentences. The more descriptive the information, the more the reader will connect with the story you are telling. Make readers feel that they are there with you as you experience what you are describing.

In the following example, the writer uses adjectives (underlined) to add depth to the story by giving additional information.

I walked into the noisy classroom and looked for a place to sit down. In the back of the well-lit room, I saw an old wooden desk and walked toward it. After a few moments, the anxious students quieted down when they observed the prim English teacher enter the room.

ACTIVITY 2 Studying a Narrative Essay

Discuss the Preview Questions with a classmate. Then read the essay and answer the questions that follow.

Preview Questions

1. Have you ever had trouble getting from one place to another while traveling? Where were you going? What happened that made this travel difficult?
2. Can everyday people be considered heroes? What do you consider to be a heroic act?

Essay 8

Frustration at the Airport

- 1 I had never been more anxious in my life. I had just spent the last three endless hours trying to get to the airport so that I could travel home. Now, as I watched the bus driver set my luggage on the airport sidewalk, I realized that my frustration had only just begun.
- 2 This was my first visit to the international terminal of the airport, and nothing was familiar. I could not make sense of any of the signs. Where was the check-in counter? Where should I take my luggage? I had no idea where the immigration line was. I began to panic. What time was it? Where was my plane? I had to find help because I could not be late!

- 3 I tried to ask a passing businessman for help, but my words all came out wrong. He just **scowled** and walked away. What had happened? I had been in this country for a whole semester, and I could not even remember how to ask for directions. This was awful! Another bus arrived at the **terminal**, and the passengers came out carrying all sorts of luggage. Here was my chance! I could follow them to the right place, and I would not have to say a word.
- 4 I dragged my enormous suitcase behind me and followed the group. We finally reached the elevators. Oh, no! They all fit in it, but there was not enough room for me. I watched in **despair** as the elevator doors closed. I had no idea what to do next. I got on the elevator when it returned and **gazed** at all the buttons. Which one could it be? I pressed button 3. The elevator slowly climbed up to the third floor and **jerked** to a stop. A high, squeaking noise announced the opening of the doors, and I looked around **timidly**.
- 5 Tears formed in my eyes as I saw the **deserted** lobby and realized that I would miss my plane. Just then an **elderly** airport employee **shuffled** around the corner. He saw that I was lost and asked if he could help. He gave me his handkerchief to dry my eyes as I related my **predicament**. He smiled kindly, and led me down a long hallway. We walked up some stairs, turned a corner, and, at last, there was customs! He led me past all the lines of people and pushed my luggage to the inspection counter.
- 6 When I turned to thank him for all his help, he was gone. I will never know that kind man's name, but I will always remember his unexpected **courtesy**. He helped me when I needed it the most. I can only hope that one day I will be able to do the same for another traveler who is suffering through a terrible journey.

to scowl: to frown

a terminal: an arrival and departure point for some forms of mass transportation

to despair: the condition of having no hope

to gaze: to look at slowly and steadily

to jerk: to move with an abrupt motion

timidly: hesitantly, shyly

deserted: empty

elderly: older; mature

to shuffle: to walk by sliding one's feet along the ground

a predicament: a troubling situation

a courtesy: a kind or polite action



Post-Reading

1. What is the narrative hook? _____

2. Do you think the hook is effective? In other words, did it grab your attention? Why, or why not?

3. Where is the setting of this story?

4. What is the theme, or the basic idea, of “Frustration at the Airport”?

5. Read the final sentences in Paragraphs 2, 3, 4, and 5. How does each one prepare the reader for the action to come?

6. What do you think the mood of the story is? What feeling or atmosphere does the writer create?

7. List the characters in this essay.

8. What verb tense is used in “Frustration at the Airport”?_____. Write five verbs that the writer uses._____

9. This essay is arranged in chronological order. In a few words, describe what happens first, second, third, and so on.

10. Underline the transitional sentences.

11. Does the story end with a moral, prediction, or revelation? _____ Write the final sentence here.

Building Better Sentences: For further practice, go to Practice 8 on page 196 in Appendix 1.

ACTIVITY 3 Outlining Practice

Below is an outline for “Frustration at the Airport.” Some of the information is missing. Reread the essay beginning on page 43 and complete the outline.

Title: _____

I. Introduction (Paragraph 1)

A. Hook: I had never been more anxious in my life. I had just spent the last three endless hours trying to get to the airport so that I could travel home.

B. Thesis statement: _____

II. Body

A. Paragraph 2 (Event 1) topic sentence: This was my first visit to the international terminal of the airport, and nothing was familiar.

SUPPORT

1. The signs were confusing.
2. I began to panic.
3. Transition sentence: _____

B. Paragraph 3 (Event 2) topic sentence: _____

SUPPORT

1. He scowled and walked away.
2. I could not remember how to ask for directions.
3. _____
4. Transition sentence: _____

C. Paragraph 4 (Event 3) topic sentence: I dragged my enormous suitcase behind me and followed the group.

- SUPPORT**
1. _____
 2. I got on the elevator and looked at the buttons.
 3. _____
 4. Transition sentence: _____

D. Paragraph 5 (Event 4) topic sentence: Tears formed in my eyes as I saw the deserted lobby and realized that I would miss my airplane.

- SUPPORT**
1. An airport employee offered to help.
 2. _____
 3. _____
 4. Transition sentence: He led me past all the lines of people and pushed my luggage to the inspection counter.

III. Conclusion (Paragraph 6)

- A. Close of the action: _____
- B. I will never know his name, but I will always remember his unexpected courtesy.
- C. _____
- D. Final sentence (moral, prediction, or revelation): _____

ACTIVITY 4 Adding Supporting Information

The following narrative essay is missing large parts of the story (supporting information in the body). As you read, add information that moves the story along. Be sure to write transition sentences at the end of Paragraphs 2, 3, and 4. If you need more space, use a separate piece of paper.

Essay 9

A Bad Day

1 I should never have deleted the chain letter e-mail from my computer. The letter clearly warned me that if I did, I would have one day of bad luck. Unlike my mother, I tend not to believe these types of things bringing bad luck: breaking a mirror, someone giving me the “evil eye,” or even opening an umbrella in the house. As a result, I got rid of this **superstitious** e-mail with one quick click of the mouse. That night, however, as I fell asleep, I had the uncomfortable feeling that something was not quite right.

2 When I woke up the next morning, I was surprised to find that I had overslept and would be late for work. As I rushed down the stairs to eat a quick breakfast, I **tripped** over my bag and _____

3 On my way to work, I decided to take a shortcut through an old part of town.

superstitious:
irrational, believing
in things that are not
based on science

to trip: to stumble or
fall



4 When I arrived at work, I found a note from my boss on my desk. She wanted to see me **right away**. I took a deep breath and walked into her office. As I stepped inside, I noticed a scowl on her face.

5 Finally, after a long and difficult day, I returned home to find that my air conditioner was broken. I could not take it anymore! It had been the worst day ever, and I did not want anything else to happen. I rushed to my computer, opened up my e-mail, and went directly to the deleted e-mail folder. I opened up the letter and reread the words: "Send ten copies of this e-mail to your friends, and you will have good luck for a year." I put on my reading glasses and began scrolling through my list of e-mail contacts. They could take their chances, but I was not going to have any more bad luck!

right away:
immediately

Building Better Sentences: For further practice, go to Practice 9 on page 196 in Appendix 1.