

# Personal Narrative Elements

## ELAR TEKS Glossary Definition

Personal narrative: an expressive literary piece written in first person that centers on a particular event in the author's life and may contain vivid description as well as personal commentary and observations

## Elements

Personal narratives are based on real-life (true) personal experiences that have significant meaning for the writer. The experience may have resulted in the writer gaining insight or learning a lesson. The writer narrates or tells a story to describe the personal experience. It is written in the first person ("I") point of view.

### 1. Narrow, clearly defined focus

Personal narratives have a narrow, clearly defined focus. The writer focuses on a central idea (theme or message) based on a singular, significant event and why it's important or meaningful to him or her. This focus is sustained throughout the essay.

The central idea is the point of a personal essay. It is similar to the thesis or controlling idea in expository or persuasive essays, but it may not always be conveyed in one specific place like a thesis. The author may convey the central idea in several places within the essay.

The central idea communicates to the reader a sense of the experience and its significance (meaning, insight, or lesson learned).

Visualization and scaffolds, such as sentence stems, can help writers clarify the significance of a particular event or experience to their lives.

For example, writers may do the following:

- Visualize the events or the experience they will be writing about. They imagine themselves once again in that experience and focus on their feelings, thoughts, and impressions.
- Think about why the experience was important to them
  - This is important to me now because it . . .
  - I will always remember this experience because it . . .
  - This experience is worth writing about because it . . .

### 2. Character descriptions

Personal narratives include character descriptions for the people involved in the writer's personal experience. The characters are developed through interesting details that describe each character's

appearance, actions, and words. The writer may visualize each character or person in the story and then describe how the character looks, acts, and sounds.

### 3. Dialogue

Incorporating some dialogue in a personal narrative makes the characters and the description of the personal experience come alive for the reader. Dialogue moves the narrative along and often reveals something about the characters. Dialogue should sound natural and not be overused.

When writing dialogue within an essay, the character's words are enclosed inside quotation marks. Quotation marks are used to signal a direct quotation and are written using the following conventions:

- Opening quotation marks are placed before the first word a character speaks. Closing quotation marks are placed after the last word that a character speaks (even if there are several sentences spoken).
- The writer begins a new paragraph each time the speaker changes or a different character speaks.
- Each sentence of a direct quotation begins with a capital letter.
- A comma is used to separate a direct quotation from a speaker tag, such as "he said." The comma is placed inside the closing quotation marks.
- In addition to commas, periods are placed inside closing quotation marks. All other punctuation (exclamation marks, question marks) are placed outside closing quotation marks. The one exception to this rule is that when a punctuation mark is part of a quote itself, it is placed within the closing quotation marks (for example, "What is the answer to the first question?" the teacher asked the class.).

### 4. Setting description

Personal narratives also include a description of the setting (where and when the event or experience happened).

The setting needs to be vividly described, using sensory details to bring the experience to life.

The writer visualizes the place/time that is being described. For example, the writer determines which details of the setting are most important in conveying the personal experience and its significance or meaning. What does he/she smell, see, hear, taste, or feel?

### 5. Strong introduction

Personal narratives include a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning of a narrative includes an introduction. The following parts are typically included in an introduction of a narrative:

- **Theme.** In the introduction, the writer may choose to tell what the essay is about (states the central idea, theme, or message). The author also may provide a clue as to how he or

she feels about the experience.

- **Hook.** The introduction also includes a hook to get the reader interested and motivated to read more. Writers can use a variety of different ways to introduce their personal narratives and hook their readers, including foreshadowing (a hint of something to come), action, dialogue, character description, or setting description.

The introduction usually sets the tone or reveals the writer's attitude toward the experience being described in the essay. To establish the tone of the essay, the writer thinks about the effect he or she wants the essay to have on the audience (e.g., to laugh, cry, or share the pleasure of a special time or place). The introduction also establishes why the essay is worth reading.

## 6. Interesting details

Personal narratives include interesting, specific details that add substance and contribute to the writer's portrayal of the experience. Interesting details, which appeal to the senses and specifically describe what is happening instead of merely telling the facts or listing the actions, draw readers into the story. These details provide the reader with a clear understanding of why an experience is meaningful and help the reader to visualize the experience. The readers may vicariously experience the feelings of the characters (and the narrator) and even feel like they are there. As a result, readers are able to connect with the writer's personal experience and reactions to it.

Writers develop the details or events describing the personal experience most effectively when they use a "show, don't tell" approach. How do writers show rather than tell what is happening? They elaborate and add concrete and specific description, action, and dialogue as they re-create scenes from their experience. This type of writing results in readers being able to clearly picture or visualize what is happening (the scene).

For readers to understand the real import of what they're being shown, it's imperative that writers reflect on what they were thinking or feeling at the time. They should provide plausible motivations for their behavior or actions and also reveal any changes or insights that developed as a result of their experience.

## 7. Logical sequence

In personal narratives, the writer uses organizational strategies and/or literary devices (story elements) to communicate the importance or meaning of the personal experience.

The organizational structure supports the focus or central idea (message, theme). The writer presents the events that happened in a logical sequence or meaningful order.

Because personal narratives are written to tell about a singular significant event that occurs within a certain time, the most common organization is chronological order.

The organization is often similar to the plot line of a story. The story/narrative typically includes an introduction, a plot, characters, a setting, a climax, and a conclusion. The narrative builds to a climax or the resolution of a problem (usually resulting in personal growth for the author).

Some authors may organize their personal narrative by developing a sequence of events. However, writers should not just list events and then conclude the essay with a lesson learned or an explanation of how the story related to the author's life. To ensure that readers have a clear understanding of why an experience was and is meaningful, the changes, insights, and/or lessons learned should be evident throughout the essay.

The writer should also use meaningful transitions and strong sentence-to-sentence connections to enhance the logical movement of the narrative and reinforce the link between the experience and its meaning. Transitional words and phrases show the relationship of ideas and events. Transitions help connect events so the writing smoothly moves the reader along through the story.

## **8. Strong conclusion**

Personal narratives require a strong conclusion. The conclusion should leave readers with a lasting impression of the personal experience and insight (new or deeper understanding of the experience) that the author has written about.

The conclusion should also give readers a sense of closure and completion.

Conclusions can include a strong action, feeling, or image that shows the author's personal growth and/or emphasizes the importance of the event.

## **9. Purposeful and precise word choice**

The writer's word choice in a personal narrative should be accurate, concise, clear, and concrete. Effective word choice enables the writer to re-create the personal experience in a way that conveys its importance or meaning. Writers often focus on word choice to improve their first drafts.

Examples of how word choice can improve writing include the following:

- Replacing overused words with stronger, more powerful ones
  - Action verbs
  - Adjectives
  - Adverbs
- Inserting phrases and figurative language (e.g., similes, metaphors) that describe, explain, or provide additional detail and connections

## **10. Varied sentence structure**

Sentences are the building blocks of writing. The ways sentences are constructed affect the fluency or the flow of the writing. Personal narrative essays are enhanced when the writer uses purposeful sentences that are varied in both length and structure.

Examples of how writers can vary sentences to improve their writing include the following:

- Using a variety of sentence patterns: simple, compound, and complex

- Combining short sentences with prepositional phrases, appositive phrases, or participial phrases
- Combining short sentences by linking items of equal importance with a coordinating conjunction
- Combining short sentences containing ideas that are of unequal importance with a subordinating conjunction
- Varying sentence beginnings by starting sentences in different ways
  - With an adverb
  - With a phrase (i.e., prepositional, participial, or infinitive)
  - With an introductory clause
- Breaking up long, rambling sentences (often run-on sentences) into two or three shorter sentences