
Unit 4 – Writing Section #2 – Narrative Writing

This relatively short writing unit concentrates on the easiest type of writing for students to tackle: narrative writing. Narrative writing, or storytelling, requires the lowest level of complex thinking, and it is the easiest to accomplish because, without exception, every human has stories to tell. It allows students to dig inside their experience and tell stories as they have been telling them from their earliest days at nursery school.

The unit begins with day one of writing a short narrative and preparing to complete an activity called a Read-Around. The next day begins with the Read-Around and then begins the process of writing a longer story by helping students remember important incidents from which they have learned “lessons.” This longer story will be developed over three and one-half days from the creation of an idea to the turning in of a final copy with changes made through the drafting process. This second unit of writing done using independent ideas not generated from literature covers another way to help students become more fluent in the area of writing.

As was done in the first unit of writing, student writing will be stored in the student workbook that came with this course. In this way, writing continues to be organized and students can look at their writing and see that it is progressing in a positive way.

CONTENT BACKGROUND

Attempts to classify the functions of narration seem certain to develop difficulties and end in arbitrary and sometimes fuzzy distinctions. These need not distress us, however, if we remember that narration remains narration – a factual or fictional report of a sequence of events – and that our only reason for trying to divide it into categories is to find some means of studying its uses.

Analyzing a process makes one important, if rather narrow, use of narration, since it explains in sequence how specific steps lead to completion of some process. But at the other extreme is narration that has very little to do with exposition; the story itself is the important thing and instead of a series of steps leading obviously to a completed act, events develop out of each other and build suspense, however mild, through some kind of conflict. Here narration assumes important in its own right as one of the four basic forms of prose, and it includes the novel and the short story, as well as some news and sports reporting. Because we want these students to study the four forms of discourse in their basic stages, we do not study the types of narration named above; they require special techniques, the study of which would require a whole course, or in fact, several courses.

Between the extremes of a very usable analysis of process and a very intriguing narration for the story’s sake – and often seeming to blur into the other – is narration for explanation’s sake, to explain a concept that is more than process and that might have been explained by one of the other patterns of exposition. Here only the form is narrative; the function is expository.

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The most common problems in narration can be summarized as follows:

1. Selection of details. The use of narration always has far more details available than he/she can or should use. Good unity demands that the writer select only those details which are relevant for the purpose and the effect the writer wants to create.

2. Time order. The writer can use straight chronology, relating events as they happen (the usual method in much narrative writing especially that done by young or inexperienced writers); the writer can also use the flashback method, leaving the sequence temporarily in order to go back and relate some now-significant happening of a time prior to the main action. If flashback is used, it should be deliberate and for a valid reason – nor merely because the episode was neglected at the beginning.

3. Transitions. The lazy writer of narration is apt to resort to the transitional style of a three-year-old storyteller: “. . .and then we. . .and then she. . .and then we. . .!” Avoiding this style may tax a student’s ingenuity, but invariably the result is worth the extra investment of time and thought. Good transitioning is one skill which is worth working on during the revision process; any improvement from the “and then” writing is worth the effort.

4. Point of view. This is a large and complex subject if dealt with fully. Briefly, however, the writer should decide at the beginning whether the reader is to experience the action through a participant’s eyes (and ears and brain), or from an overall, objective view. This decision makes a difference in how much can be told, whose thoughts or secret actions can be included. The writer must be consistent throughout the narrative and include only information that could logically be known through the adopted point of view. Young writers typically write their own stories from their own points of view. If a writer is a bit more sophisticated, he/she may look through the eyes of someone else in the story.

5. Dialogue. Presumably the writer already knows the mechanics of using quotations. Beyond these mechanics, a young writer tends to have trouble making conversation sound natural and concise so that it does not ramble through meaningless details. Dialogue is a tool to keep a narrative piece moving forward and is very important in good narration. When students use good dialogue in writing their narratives, they have moved up the writing ladder in terms of their skill.

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Lesson 4-1: Day 56 Writing a Narrative

Overview: Today’s lesson covers the concept of what narration is and gets the student to attempt to put a short narrative down on paper. Through the use of guided imagery, students will focus on an early holiday memory and will then write that memory as accurately as possible on paper.

Objectives: Students will learn the meaning of the word narration.
Students will remember an early memory of a holiday.
Students will write down their narration of an early holiday memory.

Topic: Writing a narrative

Procedure:

1. Ask students to define the word “narrative” or “narration.” Write their answers on the board.
2. At some point in their suggested answers, write on the board: **Narration is the telling of a story.**
3. Carry on a class discussion for five to ten minutes about telling stories and elicit from students when they tell stories (**nearly at any time of the day or night**), how long they think they have been telling stories (**even the youngest children tell stories when given the opportunity**), to whom they tell stories (**basically to anyone who will listen**) and why they tell stories (**to teach a lesson, to show a particular part of their own personality, for entertainment**).
4. Ask students to take out a piece of paper, put the last four digits of their Social Security number in the upper right hand corner (**it is very important that this piece of writing be unidentifiable for the next part of the activity**), and to then put down both the paper and the pencil.
5. Tell students, “We will now go through a guided activity routine by which you will be able to remember an event from your past that you might not so easily be able to remember without this activity.”
6. Ask students to relax as they sit in their chairs and to close their eyes. Once everyone is cooperating, ask students to clear their minds of as many thoughts as possible and to try to picture themselves as a young child. When you think they have had sufficient time to do that, ask them to think back as far as possible to a Christmas (holiday) that they remember. Throughout this process, keep asking them questions or making suggestions to get them to think through this holiday. Allow quiet time between each question so that students can be visualizing in their minds. Appropriate questions would be the following: who is at this Christmas celebration? Where is this Christmas celebration taking place? What kind of clothes are all of

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the people in your mental picture wearing? What decorations are around the room? What kinds of presents are underneath the tree? What are you feeling at this moment in your dream?

7. Once you have gone through this imagery and feel that students have a mind full of pictures and images, ask them to write immediately the story of what they have just seen in their minds. Ask them to write quickly with **NO CONCERN** for any type of copy-editing issues. If they do a good job and then go back and do some proofreading, this should complete the class period for the day. When students are finished, they should file their paper in their workbooks.

Homework: There is no homework tonight.

Assessment: There is no assessment of the work done today.

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Lesson 4-2: Day 57 “Read Around”

Overview: Today’s lesson involves an activity called a “Read Around” and the beginning of choosing a topic for a longer narrative paper. Students will be reading each other’s papers and choosing one that they “like” the best. Once that is done and a discussion is held concerning the reasons why they liked a piece of writing, the teacher will help students begin to think of good “stories” that they can tell.

Objectives: Students will read “Christmas” papers written by class members.
Students will choose the “Christmas” paper they liked the most.
Students will list reasons why they chose their favorite paper.
Students will choose a new topic for a narrative paper.

Materials: “Christmas” story written during Day 56.

Procedure:

1. Ask students to take out their “Christmas” papers that they wrote yesterday. Ask them to make sure that their names are nowhere to be found on the papers.
2. Divide your class into groups of four. Place the groups of four around the room in a circular fashion. Give each group a consecutive number (1, 2, 3, etc.)
3. Give the following instructions to each group: “Choose one person to be a recorder in your group. The recorder will need an extra sheet of paper.” At this point make sure that the group recorder has a clean sheet of paper. Say to the recorders: “Please number your paper down the left hand column from 1 to...(however many groups are in your class.”
4. Instruct the groups as follows: “One person in your group will be the passer. The job of the passer is to collect all of the papers in the group and pass them on to the next group. For example, group 1 will pass to group 2 which will pass to group 3, etc. The last group (e.g., 8) will pass to group 1.”
5. Final instructions are these: “When I say begin, the passer in each group will take the papers in the group and pass them on. When they are passed on, they should be distributed to all member of the new group. Every person in every group will read every paper, four papers at a time. As soon as everyone in your group has read all the papers, the group will choose the favorite paper in that foursome. The recorder will write down the number of the favorite paper. When all groups are ready, I will tell you to pass the papers on again. Then we will read and choose. This process of reading, choosing, and passing will continue until your group gets its own papers back and chooses the favorite from within the group.”
6. While you are supervising the passing and reading of these papers, you should place on the board a matrix of numbers using the number of groups that you have across the top and along the side. You will be recording the scores of each group when the passing is done.

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7. When all groups are finished, record their favorite choices. For example, you would ask the recorder of group 1 to tell you his/her group's choices. The lines might look thus:

	1	2	3	4	5	
1	1234	2345	3456	4567	5678	
2	1234	1111	3456	4567	3214	
3	1234	2345	6543	4567	5678	etc.

As you can see from the way the numbers are shaping up, there are some consistent stories that students will like.

8. At this point, ask students to explain to you what specifically they liked about the stories they chose as their favorites. List the specific points on the board. Typically they will say things like, "It was funny," "I liked the descriptions," "It made me think of my own family," etc. From these comments you can explain to them that good narration tells a story which moves quickly, includes interesting facts and information, makes the reader want to read to the end, etc.

9. If you have a way, it is appropriate to take the best papers and feature them for a day or two on a bulletin board. This simple type of "publishing" is one important step of the writing process which the students need to understand.

10. Now is the time to say to students: "Please take out a clean sheet of paper. On this paper, we will do some brainstorming and prewriting. We will not begin to choose a topic for a narrative paper that you will write. One reason that we tell stories is for them to prove something that we believe or to teach us a lesson." At this point, you need to be able to tell them a story of your own to make the point. For example, a lesson that some narrative stories teach is that "Honesty is the best policy." Maybe you have a story in your own life that proved that point: As a child, perhaps you lied about what time a practice was over at school, ended up coming home late, and eventually got found out by a parent who then grounded you and did not trust you for a very long time. Or perhaps you learned to value family members when someone died unexpectedly. At this point, tell your story. When you have finished telling the story, ask students to start thinking about things that have happened in their lives that have taught them important lessons.

Homework: Ask students to come prepared tomorrow with five stories from their lives that have proved some point to them. There is no reason for them to write these episodes down. More will be written tomorrow.