

Writing the Narrative Essay

AP English Language and Composition

Material adapted from *Patterns for
College Writing: A Rhetorical Reader
and Guide*

What is narration?

- tells a story by presenting events in an orderly, logical sequence.
- can be the dominant pattern in many kinds of writing and in speech.
- underlies folk and fairy tales and radio and television reports.

Histories, biographies, and autobiographies follow narrative form, as do personal letters, diaries, journals, and bios on personal Web pages or social networking sites.

Anytime you tell what happened, you're narrating.

Planning a Narrative Essay

Thesis:

In college writing, the narrative essay is more likely to present a sequence of events for the purpose of supporting a thesis.

It is usually best to present an explicit thesis statement, but you may also choose to imply your thesis through the selection and arrangement of events.

For example:

In a narrative about your problems with credit card debt, your purpose may be to show readers that a first-year college student should not have easy access to credit cards.

You would not simply tell the story of your unwise spending.

You carefully choose and arrange details to show readers why having a credit card encouraged you to spend money you didn't have.

Explicit Thesis: “My negative experiences with easy credit have convinced me that first-year college students should not have easy access to credit cards.”

Including Enough Detail

Narratives need:

- rich, specific details
- details that help create a picture for the reader
- exact times, dates, and locations when they would be helpful
- authenticity

Including Enough Detail

From “My Mother Never Worked” by Bonnie Smith-Yackel

“In the winter she sewed night after night, endlessly, begging cast-off clothing from relatives, ripping apart coats, dresses, blouses, and trousers to remake them to fit her four daughters and son. Every morning and every evening she milked cows, fed pigs and calves, cared for chickens, picked eggs, cooked meals, washed dishes, scrubbed floors, and tended and loved her children. In the spring she planted a garden once more, dragging pails of water to nourish and sustain the vegetables for the family. In 1936 she lost a baby in her sixth month.”

The details given add interest and authenticity. We know from reading this paragraph that the central figure is a busy, productive woman, and we know this because we have been given a catalog of her activities.

Varying Sentence Structure

When narratives present a long series of events, the sentences can all start to sound alike.

Imagine Smith-Yackel had written:

“She sewed dresses. She milked cows. She fed pigs. She fed calves. She cared for chickens.”

This makes for monotonous reading. Shake it up! Look at the variety of structures in that same paragraph on the next slide.

“In the winter **she sewed night after night, endlessly**, begging cast-off clothing from relatives, ripping apart coats, dresses, blouses, and trousers to remake them to fit her four daughters and son. **Every morning and every evening she milked cows, fed pigs and calves, cared for chickens, picked eggs, cooked meals, washed dishes, scrubbed floors, and tended and loved her children.** In the spring she planted a garden once more, dragging pails of water to nourish and sustain the vegetables for the family. In 1936 she lost a baby in her sixth month.”

Maintaining Clear Narrative Order

Chronological order is a common pattern for narratives, as they tend to describe events in the order in which they occurred. Whether or not you use it depends upon your purpose. Writing a straightforward historical account usually calls for chronological order.

In a personal experience narrative or a fictional narrative, you might engage your readers by beginning with an event that actually happened in the middle or even the end of your story, and then describe the events leading up to it. You might also begin in the present and use one or more flashbacks to tell your story.

The keys to helping readers follow your pattern are **verb tense** and the use of clear transitional words and phrases.

Verb Tense

Tenses indicate temporal (time) relationships.

Verb tense must be consistent and accurate so that readers can follow the sequence of events.

Shift tenses to reflect an actual time shift in the narrative.

Avoid unwarranted shifts in verb tense; they will make your narrative confusing.

Using Transitions

Transitions are **connecting words and phrases** that help link events in time, enabling fluency in your narrative.

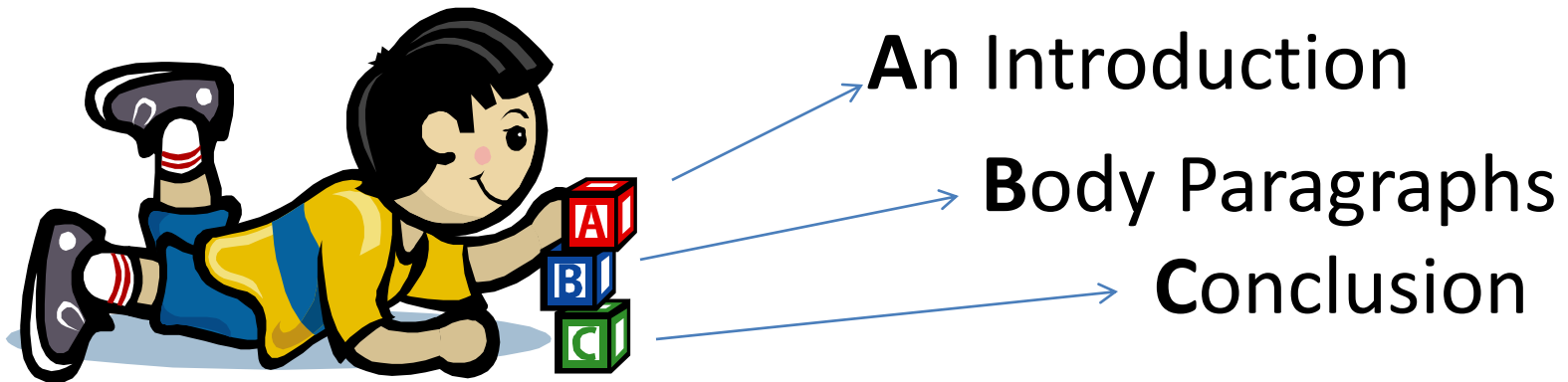
Transitions indicate the order of events, and they also signal shifts in time. In narrative writing, some commonly used transitions are:

first second next then later finally
at the same time soon meanwhile before
earlier immediately after afterward now

You might also need to use specific time markers such as “three years later” or “in 1927.” These indicate how much time passed between events or how much has passed since the events.

Structure of the Narrative Essay

We use the standard building blocks:



The Building Blocks

An Introduction:

usually contains the explicitly stated thesis

Body Paragraphs:

recount the events that make up your narrative in a clear, orderly way

Conclusion:

gives your readers the sense that the narrative is complete, perhaps by restating your thesis or summarizing key points or events

Sample Outline

Introduction: Thesis –“My negative experiences with easy credit have convinced me that first-year college students should not have easy access to credit cards.”

Body Paragraphs:

- Event one – got the first card offer in the mail
- Event two – bought something unnecessary and saw how easy it was to have something without really paying for it
- Event three – started to receive bills I couldn't pay or could only pay the minimum payment while interest added up
- Event four – had my first experience with a collection agency
- Event five – received help from a credit counseling service

Conclusion: Restatement of thesis/review of key points