

Quite simply, a narrative relates a series of events. Two key words that help define a narrative are "action" and "time." The focus of a narrative is the relating of a series of events (action) over a finite amount of time. The time covered by a narrative could be years, seconds, or anything in between.

Significance in the Workplace

Many people must accurately document action over time. Consider the following:

- A police officer recording the events leading up to an arrest
- A medical professional reporting the changes in a patient
- An employer documenting an employee's performance for a job review
- A person recording the process used in an attempt to fix or create something

Purpose in Writing a Narrative

Your purpose in writing a narrative could be to merely explain what happened in an objective, factual manner. But, usually, the purpose of a narrative is for you to express the insights you gained from the series of events. You can subtly express what you have learned from this experience, how your life has changed as a result of this experience, what insights you have gained about yourself, etc. or you can be much more obvious by stating your purpose in a thesis (See "Introductions and Thesis Statements" on the Online Writing Center Site.) and/or stating or re-stating your purpose or insights in the conclusion.

Point of View

Narratives can be written from the first person (*I, me, my, we, us*) point of view or from the third person (*he, she, they*) point of view. You can decide which point of view is best for your story, but be consistent in your use of that point of view. In addition, do not shift into second person (*you* and *your*) unless you are using those pronouns within dialogue.

Action

Action is central to any narrative. A well-written narrative goes beyond suggesting action; a well-written narrative re-creates action, making the reader feel as though she or he is there.

It's important to understand that action simply refers to something happening; we sometimes have a tendency to associate action only with the really dramatic stuff like sky diving, car chases, and home runs in the bottom of the ninth. Action can be very subtle like taking a deep breath, tying a shoe, or winking. Dramatic or subtle, the action should be the driving force of your narrative.

Key Events

It's rare that you would document every possible action, such as this: *She sat up. She looked to the left. She looked to the right. She blinked. She bent her thumb. She blinked again. She scratched her wrist...*

Instead, you want to focus on key actions or events when writing your narrative. That puts the responsibility on you, the writer, to determine what is and what is not key. The most integral events should be described in detail. Secondary events should be less detailed. And, **those events that don't contribute to your overall purpose – even though they did occur – should be omitted.**

Dialogue

Dialogue (recording people's exact words and/or the narrator's thought patterns) can go a long way toward helping your readers feel like they are there—one of the goals of narrative writing. Well-written dialogue resembles actual conversation, but simplifies it a bit by leaving out the repetition that is a natural part of most of our speaking habits. Whether you incorporate inner dialogue or conversations with others into your narrative, quotation marks should be used around those statements. Each time the conversation shifts from one person to another, indent for a new paragraph.

Description

Besides dialogue, another way to help your readers feel as if they are experiencing what you are writing about is to use description. Vivid and detailed description will allow you to **SHOW** your experience to readers rather than to merely **TELL** your readers about what happened. Here are a few examples of **TELLING** vs. **SHOWING**:

TELLING	SHOWING
I could barely see my way to the cabin since it was dark out.	Fumbling through the darkness, I questioned whether I would find the desolate cabin.
Sarah had never felt so alone.	Overwhelming loneliness stabbed at Sarah's heart for the first time ever.
My heart beat was fast.	My heart was beating uncontrollably – as if it were going to burst from my chest.
My grandma was overweight and unhappy.	Barely able to get out of the rocking chair wither "larger-than-pregnant" belly, my grandma complained about the dirty bowl she spotted in the kitchen sink.

To learn more about description (and **SHOWING**), read about descriptive essays on the Online Writing Center site. You may also want to read about figurative language under "Crafting Your Message" on the Online Writing Center site since it often plays a part in descriptive wording.

Organizational Structure

Most narratives are written in a chronological (i.e. time order) fashion; the events are recorded in the order in which they happened. As you do so, be sure to include time markers, which are transitions like *next*, *ten minutes later*, *the next day*, etc., to help your readers track the passage of time. That is particularly crucial if you choose to start your narrative at a dramatic moment in the story and then flashback to the beginning. From there, the narrative will proceed in a chronological manner.

Examples of Narratives

See the Online Writing Center's "WINK: An Online Journal" to read well-written examples of narrative writing by Western Technical College students.

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Updated: 6-28-17 by Carla Swerman