

## Unit 5: Personal Narrative (1)

### **The Personal Narrative**

During the last three units, we honed our skills in thinking and seeing rhetorically. We also practiced using our descriptive powers, striving to show the reader our place in both the positive and negative paragraphs. In this unit, we will apply some of those same skills. However, rather than simply showing the reader a place, we will be telling them **a true story about one significant event in our own lives**. We will be showing characters, events, and the significance of those events. For the next three units, then, we will be practicing our skills as storytellers, learning the basic elements of story and applying those to our own experiences.

## Unit 5: Personal Narrative (1) - Objectives

### **Objectives:**

- \*Students will examine their own lives, brainstorming for moments of significance.
- \*Students will learn the basic elements of story.
- \*Students will choose one significant event to focus on for their Personal Narrative essays.

## Unit 5: Personal Narrative (1) - Reading

Though the content is very similar, the specific page numbers of your reading assignment may vary depending on your edition of the textbook.

### **9th Edition Reading Assignment:**

*The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*, Chapter 2, pages 14 - bottom of page 47, stopping just before the Planning & Drafting section

## Unit 5: Personal Narrative (1) - Assignment

### **Major Paper #2--The Personal Narrative Essay**

*We will be working on the Personal Narrative essay for the next three units. The Personal Narrative will be due at the end of Unit #7.*

A narrative is simply a story. A personal narrative is a true story, focusing largely on the writer's own life.

For Essay #2, the Personal Narrative, you will be writing a short essay (at least 3-4 pages in length) about a significant event in your own life. This event need not --and probably should not--be inherently, overly dramatic. Sometimes the most influential moments in our lives are smaller moments, events that we may not recognize as influential until years after the experience. In the personal narrative essay, you will want to tell the story as accurately as you can—search your deep memory—and tell the story from your own perspective. You will also want to exercise your selectivity as a writer, choosing to summarize background information/exposition, and really dramatize important scenes for the reader.

During the course of this unit, you will want to read the examples of the Personal Narrative in Chapter 2. You will want to start brainstorming ideas for your own personal narrative, and--by the end of Unit 5--you will want to have selected a significant event that you wish to focus on in this essay.

### **Here is one sample personal narrative:**

Kyle Terry

#### "Cops"

Even as a law breaking mischievous youth I had always looked up to Police Officers in my neighborhood. I even looked up to them when they would chase my friends and I when we snuck out at night and kicked sprinkler heads off, or got caught drinking underage. I loved to watch the show "Cops" and always pictured myself in the situations being portrayed on television. In my youth I did a lot of things that most people would look down on and police departments may shun you for, but that didn't stop me from aspiring to join their ranks.

After serving in the military for over five years and attaining the rank of SGT (P), I was sent orders for recruiting. This was not the path I wanted my career to go down, so I opted to decline the orders. Once I had done this I was faced with a decision, what should I do now? I decided I would try to get hired at a local police department. At the time I was stationed in Manhattan, KS and had to choose between Manhattan, Salina, and Topeka. Topeka and Manhattan were testing on the same days and as fate would have it I decided to give Manhattan a try.

Having no navigational skills in the city I was first challenged in finding the testing site for the physical agility test. The site was located at the RCPD range, which was off of Pillsbury Drive, near Pillsbury Crossing. When I arrived I was shocked to see that I would be up against forty some odd people fighting for five or six slots. Once I got out of my truck and started talking to other hopeful applicants I became worried. What was I going to do if I didn't get hired I asked myself. I felt as though I was under qualified after finding out that 60%- 70% of the applicants had degrees in Criminal Justice. I thought for sure that college would be a major hiring point. I had come this far though and had no reason to doubt my ability to prove myself on an obstacle course.

The air was thin and cold on this particular day, making just breathing a chore. Gazing out at the course the towers were tall and a long climb, the walls were high with steep drops to the other side. Tires lined the courses isles to test your agility running through them, and at the end of the obstacle course there was a 170 pound dummy that you had to drag to a safe zone. I felt confident since I was still in the Army and was in the best cardiovascular condition in my life. The lieutenant introduced himself to the crowd and began explaining the course, at the end of his explanation and demonstration he asked for volunteers to go first. In my mind I thought it would be good to volunteer, but I had learned early on in the Army not to volunteer for anything. I held my ground and stayed back to gauge the motivated people stepping to the front. I felt as if watching them would give me an edge. I watched several individuals run through the course until it was finally my turn.

Once I stepped up to the starting line my adrenaline was pumping full blast, I felt unstoppable at that point. I had heard the fastest time was 2:09 through the course on this day and I was determined to beat it. I took off up the steep flight of stairs and down the other side simulating a chase. I felt like a wild animal closing on my prey as I hopped the fence and dropped to the other side. Next I ran through a make shift neighborhood setting and to a high wall I had to climb. Once at the top I ran down the steps and around the turnaround point. It was then that I realized how fast I was moving, I was flying through the course and hurting badly inside. I told myself that it was mind over matter and to suck it up for another 30 seconds. I ran to the shooting simulation and picked the bad guy out of the stand up targets, ran to the dummy drag and drug the 170 pounds 20 yards like a dog carries a flea on a daily basis.

Once I was at the end of the line I heard the scorer yell "2:03." I had done it. At that point I felt as if the job were in the bag. My score got beat by a fraction of a second later in the day, but I was still proud that I was able to overcome the pain to get to the finish line. After several vocabulary tests, spelling tests, writing tests, and a few oral review boards I was hired. I lived my childhood dream of becoming a Police Officer for three years. It was a thankless job in many ways, but it was also gratifying at times. I have since moved to San Antonio and changed professions, but often reflect on some of the experiences I had. I know I wouldn't have changed it for the world.

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## **Here is another sample personal narrative:**

Spc Shannon Thomas

Randy Johnson, Arizona

### "My Dancing Roots"

Like rain showers breaking the silence of midnight, the thunderous applause poured over that final sustained-for-emphasis A-flat and me. My friends were whistling and hooting like they

just heard their favorite song by their idolized music artist at a sold-out concert. I was all smiles. Although it was only my first vocal music recital at my new high school, my new friends truly made me feel celebrated. We were all artists, born and made from the same peculiar passion that drives us to dedicate ourselves daily to the perfecting of whatever it is we do. Family oriented by choice, there was a nurturing and supportiveness that was contagious among the students and faculty. This school required a rigorous two auditions and an interview with the principal and a senior faculty member from the students intended major. The end result, I shared the hallway with only 200+ students from grades eight through twelve. I have experience singing in Italian, Latin, French, German, Hebrew, and Spanish. Being a vocal music major with a minor in performance piano is what I have always done and was always perfectly content doing. Imagine the awkwardness when I found out that this small performing arts high-school was so exclusively “artsy” that for Physical Education credits, students are required to take Ballet Technique Level I to fulfill the requirement! I distinctly remember thinking, “This is going to be the biggest, longest, stupidest waste of time.”

Most non-dancers shared this depressing requiem. Over lunch the 16-year-old prodigy trumpet player laments how a dance teacher tried to make him stretch his legs open, “This wide!” with his arms outstretched like the crucified Man Of Sorrows. The Sophomore painter shows a doodle of the dizzying stars she saw when they tried to teach her to just spin and spin from one end of the dance studio to the other. A Communications student described his tragedy at Ballet I, as an event so calamitous it “should have been televised.” Clumsily dodging the other beginners as he fumbled through each combination looked less like dancing and more like these beginners had synchronized the ants in there pants. “Anti-graceful” was the agreed upon description for all non-dancers. I was definitely not looking forward to my “first class” experience.

The dressing room was a mixed territory of veteran ballerinas and the tenderfoot wannabe’s that would dare hold a class within a mile of their talent. The distinctions in dress between the two groups were strikingly obvious to me. We all hold to the same basic standard of

black tights, leotard, and hair in a neat bun or chignon out of the face and off the neck. Still, there were details in the clothing itself that separated the novice from the seasoned. The experts wore hundred-times-washed, simple leotards, tights that used to be footed but now had lost fights with a scissor along the way up their bulging calf muscles, some had leg-warmers borrowed from the 1980's, with functional-looking shoes that looked danced to death. They were quite unashamed of their neat-pauper kind of look. The aspirants were like seventh-graders on the first day of school, all fixated on making a good first impression with every shred of dance apparel brand new. I noted that the vets looked prepared to break a sweat and the wannabe's were, of course, clueless.

We filed in slowly like wallflowers, utterly afraid of the open space with a tell-all-your-secrets mirror that spanned one entire wall. The instructor pranced in motivated to embarrass a fresh group of victims assembled for his viewing entertainment. He instead graciously encouraged this group of painters, musicians, and playwrights, with words of affirmation and empathy. He began as a graphic artist himself and got wooed into the dance world. A community of racing pulses instantly slowed to a shared sigh of relief as his speech ended with his humble admission of familiarity to our scary and new world. "Now class, approach the barres." It was time to begin.

Though he moved like molasses through the first combinations it was surprisingly tough to mimic. Contorting into strange twists and bends was taking a toll on my body after the first week. I finally decided to try to embrace and maybe even think about enjoying being a dance student though I truly would have been happy to simply learn the classical piano music we were wasting on the Dance Department. Over the passing weeks the class, as a whole, improved steadily and we began to respect and admire the craft as well as take on new challenges. One morning my teacher required of us an impossible task. In our first lessons we would do each combo with our beloved instructor in front of us as we all faced the mirror for reinforcement. Now we are being required to dance with him out of our sight for cues. Without him front and center to guide our intended outcome, it was much harder to remember what to

make your leg and arm do simultaneously, plus when to do it! Not only did my muscles ache, my brain was now a cardholding member of the, “Organs and Muscle Groups Who Hate Shannon Association”. After painful attempts with some few victories, we eventually got used to not being bottle-fed our choreography. A few of us even acquired a hole here and there in our tights and shoes. Yes!!

When women cry, I have heard it said from men that they can never really tell which emotion has surfaced, so either way a well-meaning hug is usually appropriate. The following year and several thousand dance steps later, I signed up for the next level in dance instruction. My request was denied. A knot got stuck in my throat then found it’s way all the way down to my heart and I said to my self, maybe next semester. I cried. Disappointed, I began wrapping my mind around the fact that I was probably destined to just be a singer who played piano. I showed the transcript to a good friend who pointed out that a certain code did not denote a denial, but a skip to the next level higher than I originally requested. My dance teachers had decided I was progressing rapidly enough to skip all intermediate dance courses and proceed to Advanced level 1. I cried, again. Then somewhere in between, this happiness made me jump up and down in the hallway clapping.

I remember the day I entered that same locker room with a new attitude. The newbie’s were still dressed as newbies, and the experts were still identifiable as experts. Where do I fit in? I looked in a small mirror to see that I resembled an expert on the outside, but felt like a newbie that secretly acquired a backstage pass to an expert class. The weeks went by and there were a lot of times I felt like I was a kitten breathlessly struggling to run among cheetahs. The combinations were more precise, and the transitions from one combo to the next were quicker, almost seamless. I was beginning to accept my place in the rankings as the least experienced expert. You know the one who, as a peer, you never really go to with a question, but usually approach with your own good advice and tips. Whenever a new dance move is taught, we all attempt the choreography one by one in a sort of conga line across the floor. The student who performs it the most accurate is called out to express it alone so the rest of the class can learn a

bit more about how to correctly execute. One day, we were all taught a brand new type of leap and after demonstrating our attempts one by one, I was called out! I thought I had done something so wrong, I would be told that I represent what NOT to do. Turns out I was the only dancer who demonstrated an understanding of what the leap should look like. I did the combination solo and received smiles, pats on the back, and a reassurance that I was in the right place. I leaped the highest I had ever leaped, right into the stride of a cheetah.

My report back at the lunch table that first day of a new school year was one animated with surprise and excitement as I learned that I was maybe multi-talented! My story began like theirs once did, but I discovered the lesson in my experience was in blooming where I was planted. When I perceived I was plopped into a rocky place unfit for the kind of growth I was interested in, I had to uncomfortably tunnel deeper to find that there was good soil beneath. My dancing roots can now be traced to that famous school of the arts where I had begun dancing and have yet to stop to this day.

## Unit 5: Personal Narrative (1) - Lecture Notes

### **Deciding What's Significant**

Again, a personal narrative is simply a story from someone's own life. But how does one decide what to write about?

In general, what you need to do is to figure out which events in your life have been "significant" in some way. What events have impacted how you see yourself and how you see others? What events have shaped your worldview, values, and beliefs?

Next, you'll want to choose which event in particular you would like to write about (and are ready to write about). I usually prefer for students to stay away from subject matter and events that are inherently dramatic (ie car crashes, deaths, break-ups, etc.) Instead, I recommend you think about events that did not seem significant at the time, but later--after reflection--you found very important and/or revealing. In other words, "significant" does not mean there has to be coffins or tears, screaming matches or fiery blazes.

Use the "consider possible topics" suggestions in Chapter 2 of your textbook for brainstorming. In addition to the ideas listed in the book, you might examine your own childhood memories. Most of the memories we retain from our deep past stick with us for a reason, so this can provide insight into some significant events that you may have never recognized as "significant" before.

After listing remembered events, and working on recalling key places, people, and conversation, decide which story about your own life you'd like to pursue for this essay.

Unit 5: Personal Narrative (1) – Discussion

## **Topics**

### **Choosing An Event**

Which essay in Chapter 2 was most compelling, interesting, or enjoyable for you as a reader? Why? Did any of the essays give you ideas for your own personal narrative? What event do you think you'll want to focus on?

## Unit 6: Personal Narrative (2)

Now that you have a topic, you'll want to work on shaping this significant event into a story. You'll want to dramatize this event for the reader, really "putting us there" and allowing us to see the significance ourselves.

In this unit, you will be introduced to several key concepts of story, all of which you'll want to incorporate into your Personal Narrative essay.

## Unit 6: Personal Narrative (2) - Objectives

### **Objectives:**

\*Students will become familiar with basic literary terms, such as plot, character, setting and dialogue.

\*Students will apply these concepts in shaping their own personal narratives.

\*Students will begin drafting the personal narrative.

## Unit 6: Personal Narrative (2) - Reading

Though the content is very similar, the specific page numbers of your reading assignment may vary depending on your edition of the textbook.

### **9th Edition Reading Assignment:**

*The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*, Chapter 2, bottom of 47 - middle of 52 (the entire Planning & Drafting section, all the way up to the Critical Reading Guide). Also, consider re-reading the sample essays in the chapter to reinforce your understanding of the personal narrative essay.

## Unit 6: Personal Narrative (2) - Assignment

By the end of this unit, you will want to have a complete, rough draft of your personal narrative essay. (Remember the this essay should be at least 3-4 pages in length or at least 750-1000 words.) I recommend that you re-read the examples in Chapter 2, and read the lecture notes on this website, before you begin drafting.

## **Here is one sample personal narrative:**

Kyle Terry

### "Cops"

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**Unit 6: Personal Narrative (2) - Lecture Notes**

## Elements of Story: Plot, Character, Setting, Dialogue

The following four terms (plot, character, setting, and dialogue) are the four major elements of story. In other words, these are all essentials for your personal narrative.

**1.) PLOT:** A *plot* is a pattern of events or actions that lead to a change in a character or situation. In the case of this assignment, the plot of your essay should be limited to a key event or series of events that actually occurred in your real life, and resulted in some sort of change in your character, your relationships with others, your worldview, or your situation.

Plot also always includes some kind of tension or conflict. This conflict may be external, between two people (for instance, a fist-fight with your brother, or a disagreement with your mother). In contrast, the conflict may be purely internal (for instance, a conflict between what you desire and your sense of morality). By the end of your essay, we should have some sense that the conflict has been dealt with somehow, if not entirely resolved.

**2.) CHARACTER:** A *character* is any person depicted on the page. We often think of characters in terms of fiction, characters “made-up” or “invented” by the author to further the story or illustrate a point. Even in fiction, however, characters are often based on real-life people. In your narrative essay, you yourself will become a character—even though you must remain true to the facts of your life, personality, etc.—just because you will be reproducing yourself on the page. As a readers, we’ll want to get a sense of who you are as a character on the page in the course of your essay. By the end of the essay, we will also want to know why/how your experience was significant. How did it change you?

To take it even further, beyond the scope of your own life, how was this experience and/or the change it produced significant?

You may also decide to have other characters in your essay, but these must also be real life people who were actually a part of the events you describe. If many people were present during the events you describe, you will need to decide which of those real-life people need to be represented on the page. You will want to limit yourself to including only the characters who played some sort of significant role in the experience. In addition, you will need to decide how much or how little we really need to know about all the characters you include in your personal narrative.

**3.) SETTING:** The *setting* includes time and place. When did all of this happen? How old were you? Where exactly did it happen? As a writer, you must decide how much the reader needs to know about what’s happening when and where. However, you should keep in mind that setting is important, setting the stage for the action of your narrative. You should also note that setting can help set the tone of your piece, establishing the “feeling” of the experience and your attitudes about it.

**4.) DIALOGUE:** *Dialogue* reports conversation between characters directly, and is usually represented in quotes. Especially if you choose to write about something in your deep past, you may not remember everything that was said verbatim. What you will need to do—if you choose to use dialogue—is to plausibly re-create the conversation, based on what you *do* remember.

Unit 6: Personal Narrative (2) - Discussion

## Topics

### **"Showing" vs. "Telling"**

How is your personal narrative coming along? Since "showing" is so important in narratives such as this, what scenes or moments are you going to really dramatize for the reader? What role will summarizing (or telling) play in your essay?

## Unit 7: Personal Narrative (3)

By now, you should have at least a rough draft of paper #2. Your only real task for this unit is to revise your work, making it the best possible essay you can before it's due.

## Unit 7: Personal Narrative (3) - Objectives

### **Objectives:**

\*Students will review their own writing.

\*Students will revise their essays, before turning them in for a grade.

\*Students may exercise the Peer Review Option.

## Unit 7: Personal Narrative (3) - Reading

Though the content is very similar, the specific page numbers of your reading assignment may vary depending on your edition of the textbook.

### **9th Edition Reading Assignment:**

*The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*, Chapter 2, from the middle of page 53 through page 63

## Unit 7: Personal Narrative (3) - Assignment

In this unit, you will want to revise your own work to the best possible quality. I strongly recommend that in addition to reviewing your work yourself, you find yourself an outside reader—someone who will read your work and offer you suggestions for revisions.

You have two options in choosing an outside reader:

- 1.) You can find someone on your own to read your work (ie. your spouse, one of your kids, a friend, a neighbor).
- 2.) You can sign up for the Peer Review Option by emailing me. (I'll set up an email list, so that you and 2-3 of your classmates can email each other your drafts and get feedback.)

## Unit 7: Personal Narrative (3) - Lecture Notes

The tips and questions in your reading for this unit are very important, and should help you improve your Personal Narrative. In addition to the reviewing/revising suggestions in the book, please keep in mind that I'll still be looking for these basics as well: *purpose, focus, organization, tone, and editing.*

(Please review the materials from Unit 1 if you are unfamiliar with these concepts.)

Other than that, I simply want to use your time this unit for revising.

## Unit 7: Personal Narrative (3) - Discussion

### Topics

#### **Reflecting on the Personal Narrative**

Many students find the personal narrative assignment fun and freeing, as they enjoy reflecting on their own lives and telling stories. Others find it excruciating, as they prefer more structured and research-driven assignments with an external (rather than internal) focus. How about you? Did you enjoy this assignment or not? Why? Either way, what skills have you learned that you might be able to apply in other contexts?