

Narration



WHAT IS NARRATION?

Human beings are instinctively storytellers. In prehistoric times, our ancestors huddled around campfires to hear tales of hunting and magic. In ancient times, warriors gathered in halls to listen to bards praise in song the exploits of epic heroes. Things are no different today. Boisterous children invariably settle down to listen when their parents read to them; millions of people tune in day after day to the ongoing drama of their favorite soap operas; vacationers sit motionless on the beach, caught up in the latest best-sellers; and all of us enjoy saying, “Just listen to what happened to me today.” Our hunger for storytelling is basic.

Narration means telling a single story or several related stories. The story can be a means to an end, a way to support a main idea or thesis. To demonstrate that television has become the constant companion of many children, you might narrate a typical child’s day in front of the television—starting with cartoons in the morning and ending with situation comedies at night. Or to support the point that the college registration process should be reformed, you could tell the tale of a chaotic morning spent trying to enroll in classes.

Narration is powerful. Every public speaker, from politician to classroom teacher, knows that stories capture the attention of listeners as nothing else can. We want to know what happened to others, not simply because we’re curious, but also because their experiences shed light on our



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own lives. Narration lends force to opinion, triggers the flow of memory, and evokes places, times, and people in ways that are compelling and affecting.

HOW NARRATION FITS YOUR PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

Since narratives tell a story, you may think they're found only in novels or short stories. But narration can also appear in essays, sometimes as a supplemental pattern of development. For example, if your purpose in a paper is to *persuade* apathetic readers that airport security regulations must be followed strictly, you might lead off with a brief account of armed terrorists who easily boarded planes on September 11. In a paper *defining* good teaching, you might keep readers engaged by including satirical anecdotes about one hapless instructor, the antithesis of an effective teacher. An essay on the *effects* of an overburdened judicial system might provide—in an attempt to involve readers—a dramatic account of the way one clearly guilty murderer plea-bargained his way to freedom.

In addition to providing effective support in one section of your paper, narration can also serve as an essay's dominant pattern of development. In fact, most of this chapter shows you how to use a single narrative to convey a central point and share with readers your view of what happened. You might choose to narrate the events of an afternoon spent with your three-year-old nephew as a way of revealing how you rediscovered the importance of family life. Or you might relate the story of your roommate's mugging, evoking the powerlessness and terror of being a victim.

Although some narratives relate unusual experiences, most tread familiar ground, telling tales of joy, love, loss, frustration, fear—all common emotions experienced during life. Narratives can take the ordinary and transmute it into something significant, even extraordinary. As Willa Cather, the American novelist, wrote: "There are only two or three human stories and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before." The challenge lies in applying your own vision to a tale, thereby making it unique.

At this point, you have a good sense of the way writers use narration to achieve their purpose and to connect with their readers. Now take a moment to look closely at the photograph at the beginning of this chapter. Imagine you're writing a "Recent Events" update, accompanied by the photo, for the website of an organization that supports (or opposes) the war in Iraq. Your purpose is to recount what happened at the protest in such a way that your account supports the website's position on the conflict. Jot down some phrases you might use when *narrating* the events of the day.



PREWRITING STRATEGIES

The following checklist shows how you can apply to narration some of the prewriting strategies discussed in Chapter 2.



NARRATION: A PREWRITING CHECKLIST

Select Your Narrative Event(s)

- What event evokes strong emotion in you and is likely to have a powerful effect on your readers?
- Does your journal suggest any promising subjects—for example, an entry about a bully’s surprisingly respectful behavior toward a disabled student or a painful encounter with racial prejudice?
- Does a scrapbook souvenir, snapshot, old letter, or prized object (an athletic trophy, a political button) point to an event worth writing about?
- Will you focus on a personal experience (your high school graduation ceremony), an incident in someone else’s life (a friend’s battle with chronic illness), or a public event (a community effort to save a beached whale)?
- Can you recount your story effectively, given the length of a typical college essay? If not, will relating one key incident from the fuller, more complete event enable you to convey the point and feeling of the entire experience?
- If you write about an event in someone else’s life, will you have time to interview the person? (“Why did you cross the picket line?” “What did you do when your boss told you to lie?”)

Focus on the Conflict in the Event

- What is the source of tension in the event: one person’s internal dilemma, a conflict between characters, or a struggle between a character and a social institution or natural phenomenon?
- Will the conflict create enough tension to “hook” readers and keep them interested?
- What point does the conflict and its resolution convey to readers?
- What tone is appropriate for recounting the conflict?

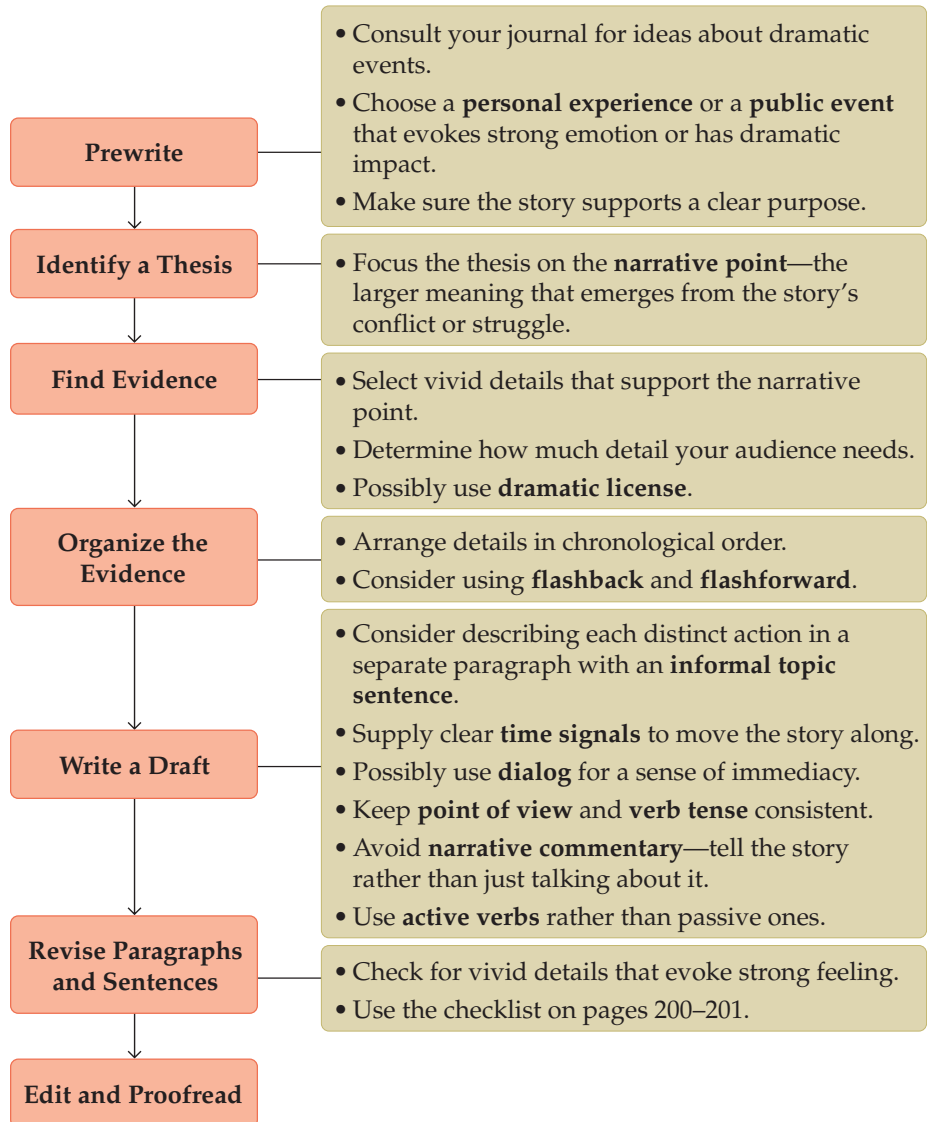
Use Prewriting to Generate Specifics About the Conflict

- Would the questioning technique (“Why did the argument occur?”), brainstorming, freewriting, mapping, or interviewing help you generate details about the conflict? Does your journal suggest ways to explore aspects of the conflict? (“When my friends participated in the violence at the rock concert, why didn’t I try to stop them?”)

STRATEGIES FOR USING NARRATION IN AN ESSAY

After prewriting, you're ready to draft your essay. Figure 11.1 and the suggestions that follow will be helpful whether you use narration as a dominant or supportive pattern of development.

FIGURE 11.1
Development Diagram: Writing a Narration Essay



1. Identify the point of the narrative conflict. As you know, most narratives center around a conflict (see the checklist on page 193). When you relate a story, it's up to you to convey the *significance* or *meaning* of the event's conflict. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain warned: "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished. . . ." Twain was, of course, being ironic; his novel's richness lies in its "motives" and "morals." Similarly, when recounting your narrative, be sure to begin with a clear sense of your *narrative point*, or *thesis*. Then either state that point directly or select details and a tone that imply the point you want readers to take away from your story.

For example, suppose you decide to write about the time you got locked in a mall late at night. Your narrative might focus on the way the mall looked after hours and the way you struggled with mounting terror. But you would also use the narrative to make a point. Perhaps you want to emphasize that fear can be instructive. Or your point might be that malls have a disturbing, surreal underside. You could state this thesis explicitly. ("After hours, the mall shed its cheerful daytime demeanor and took on a more sinister quality.") Or you could refrain from stating the thesis directly, relying on your details and language to convey the point of the narrative: "The mannequins stared at me with glazed eyes and frozen smiles," and "The steel grates pulled over each store entrance glinted in the cold light, making each shop look like a prison cell."

2. Develop only those details that advance the narrative point. Nothing is more boring than a storyteller who gets sidetracked and drags out a story with nonessential details. When telling a story, you maintain an effective narrative pace by focusing on your point and eliminating any details that don't support it. A good narrative depends not only on what is included, but also on what has been left out.

How do you determine which specifics to omit, which to treat briefly, and which to emphasize? Having a clear sense of your narrative point and knowing your audience are crucial. Assume you're writing a narrative about a disastrous get-acquainted dance sponsored by your college the first week of the academic year. In addition to telling what happened, you also want to make a point; perhaps you want to emphasize that, despite the college's good intentions, such "official" events actually make it difficult to meet people. With this purpose in mind, you might write about how stiff and unnatural students seemed, all dressed up in their best clothes; you might narrate portions of strained conversation you overheard; you might describe the way males gathered on one side of the room, females on the other—reverting to behaviors supposedly abandoned in fifth grade. All these details would support your narrative point.

Because you don't want to lead away from that point, you would leave out details about the top-notch band and the appetizing refreshments at the dance. The music and food may have been surprisingly good, but since these details don't advance the point you want to make, they should not be included in your narrative.

You also need to keep your audience in mind when selecting narrative details. If the audience consists of your instructor and other students—all of

them familiar with the new student center where the dance was held—specific details about the center probably wouldn't have to be provided. But imagine that the essay is going to appear in the quarterly magazine published by the college's community relations office. Many of the magazine's readers are former graduates who haven't been on campus for several years. They may need additional specifics about the student center: its location, how many people it holds, how it is furnished.

As you write, keep asking yourself, "Is this detail or character or snippet of conversation essential? Does my audience need this detail to understand the conflict in the situation? Does this detail advance or intensify the narrative action?" Summarize details that have some importance but do not deserve lengthy treatment ("Two hours went by . . ."). And try to limit *narrative commentary*—statements that tell rather than show what happened—since such remarks interrupt the narrative flow. Focus instead on the specifics that propel action forward in a vigorous way.



Sometimes, especially if the narrative re-creates an event from the past, you won't be able to remember what happened detail for detail. In such a case, you should take advantage of what is called **dramatic license**. Using your current perspective as a guide, feel free to add or reshape details to suit your narrative point.

3. **Organize the narrative sequence.** All of us know the traditional beginning of fairy tales: "Once upon a time . . ." Every narrative begins somewhere, presents a span of time, and ends at a certain point. Frequently, you will want to use a straightforward time order, following the event *chronologically* from beginning to end: first this happened, next this happened, finally this happened.

But sometimes a strict chronological recounting may not be effective—especially if the high point of the narrative gets lost somewhere in the middle of the time sequence. To avoid that possibility, you may want to disrupt chronology, plunge the reader into the middle of the story, and then return in a **flashback** to the tale's beginning. You are probably familiar with the way flashback is used on television and in film. You see someone appealing to the main characters for financial help, then return in a flashback to an earlier time when both were students in the same class. Narratives can also use **flashforward**—you give readers a glimpse of the future (the main character being jailed) before the story continues in the present (the events leading to the arrest). These techniques shift the story onto several planes and keep it from becoming a step-by-step, predictable account. Reserve flashforwards and flashbacks, however, for crucial incidents only, since breaking out of chronological order acts as emphasis. Here are examples of how flashback and flashforward can be used in narrative writing:

Flashback

Standing behind the wooden counter, Greg wielded his knife expertly as he shucked clams—one every ten seconds—with

practiced ease. The scene contrasted sharply with his first day on the job, when his hands broke out in blisters and when splitting each shell was like prying open a safe.

Flashforward

Rushing to move my car from the no-parking zone, I waved a quick good-bye to Karen as she climbed the steps to the bus. I didn't know then that by the time I picked her up at the bus station later that day, she had made a decision that would affect both our lives.

Whether or not you choose to include flashbacks or flashforwards in an essay, remember to limit the time span covered by the narrative. Otherwise, you'll have trouble generating the details needed to give the story depth and meaning. Also, regardless of the time sequence you select, organize the tale so it drives toward a strong finish. Be careful that your story doesn't trail off into minor, anticlimactic details.

- 4. Make the narrative easy to follow.** Describing each distinct action in a separate paragraph helps readers grasp the flow of events. Although narrative essays don't always have conventional topic sentences, each narrative paragraph should have a clear focus. Often this focus is indicated by a sentence early in the paragraph that directs attention to the action taking place. Such a sentence functions as a kind of *informal topic sentence*; the rest of the paragraph then develops that topic sentence. You should also be sure to use time signals when narrating a story. Words like *now*, *then*, *next*, *after*, and *later* ensure that your reader won't get lost as the story progresses.
- 5. Make the narrative vigorous and immediate.** A compelling narrative provides an abundance of specific details, making readers feel as if they're experiencing the story being told. Readers must be able to see, hear, touch, smell, and taste the event you're narrating. *Vivid sensory description* is, therefore, an essential part of an effective narrative. (See pages 72–73 in Chapter 6 and pages 127–128 in Chapter 8 for more on concrete, sensory language.) Not only do specific sensory details make writing a pleasure to read—we all enjoy learning the particulars about people, places, and things—but they also give the narrative the stamp of reality. The specifics convince the reader that the event being described actually did, or could, occur.

Compare the following excerpts from a narrative essay. The first version is lifeless and dull; the revised version, packed with sensory images, grabs readers with its sense of foreboding:

Original Version

That eventful day started out like every other summer day. My sister Tricia and I made several elaborate mud pies

that we decorated with care. A little later on, as we were spraying each other with the garden hose, we heard my father walk up the path.

Revised

That sad summer day started out uneventfully enough. My sister Tricia and I spent a few hours mixing and decorating mud pies. Our hands caked with dry mud, we sprinkled each lopsided pie with alternating rows of dandelion and clover petals. Later, when the sun got hotter, we tossed our white T-shirts over the red picket fence—forgetting my grandmother’s frequent warnings to be more ladylike. Our sweaty backs bared to the sun, we doused each other with icy sprays from the garden hose. Caught up in the primitive pleasure of it all, we barely heard my father as he walked up the garden path, the gravel crunching under his heavy work boots.

A caution: Sensory language enlivens narration, but it also slows the pace. Be sure that the slower pace suits your purpose. For example, a lengthy description fits an account of a leisurely summer vacation but is inappropriate in a tale about a frantic search for a misplaced wallet.

Another way to create an aura of narrative immediacy is to use **dialog** while telling a story. Our sense of other people comes, in part, from what they say and the way they sound. Conversational exchanges allow the reader to experience characters directly. Compare the following fragments of a narrative, one with dialog and one without, noting how much more energetic the second version is.

Original

As soon as I found my way back to the campsite, the trail guide commented on my disheveled appearance. I explained that I had heard some gunshots and had run back to camp as soon as I could.

Revised

As soon as I found my way back to the campsite, the trail guide took one look at me and drawled, “What on earth happened to you, Daniel Boone? You look as though you’ve been dragged through a haystack backwards.”

“I’d look a lot worse if I hadn’t run back here. When a bullet whizzes by me, I don’t stick around to see who’s doing the shooting.”

Note that, when using dialog, you generally begin a new paragraph to indicate a shift from one person's speech to another's (as in the second example). Dialog can also be used to convey a person's inner thoughts. Like conversation between people, such interior dialog is enclosed in quotation marks.

The challenge in writing dialog, both exterior and interior, is to make each character's speech distinctive and convincing. Reading the dialog aloud—even asking friends or family members to speak the lines—will help you develop an ear for authentic speech. What sounds most natural is often a compressed and reshaped version of what was actually said. As with other narrative details, include only those portions of dialog that serve your purpose, fit the mood you want to create, and reveal character.

Another way to enliven narratives is to use *varied sentence structure*. Sentences that plod along with the same predictable pattern put readers to sleep. Experiment with your sentences by varying their length and type; mix long and short sentences, simple and complex. (For more on sentence structure, see pages 115–120 in Chapter 8.) Compare the following original and revised versions to get an idea of how effective varied sentence structure can be in narrative writing:

Original

The store manager went to the walk-in refrigerator every day. The heavy metal door clanged shut behind her. I had visions of her freezing to death among the hanging carcasses. The shiny door finally swung open. She waddled out.

Revised

Each time the store manager went to the walk-in refrigerator, the heavy metal door clanged shut behind her. Visions of her freezing to death among the hanging carcasses crept into my mind until, finally, the shiny door swung open and out she waddled.

Original

The yellow-and-blue striped fish struggled on the line. Its scales shimmered in the sunlight. Its tail waved frantically. I saw its desire to live. I decided to let it go.

Revised

Scales shimmering in the sunlight, tail waving frantically, the yellow-and-blue striped fish struggled on the line. Seeing its desire to live, I let it go.

Finally, *vigorous verbs* lend energy to narratives. Use active verb forms (“The boss *yelled* at him”) rather than passive ones (“He *was yelled at* by the boss”), and try to replace anemic *to be* verbs (“She *was* a good basketball player”) with more dynamic constructions (“She *played* basketball well”). (For more on strong verbs, see pages 128–130 in Chapter 8.)

- 6. Keep your point of view and verb tense consistent.** All stories have a *narrator*, the person who tells the story. If you, as narrator, tell a story as you experienced it, the story is written in the *first-person point of view* (“I saw the dog pull loose”). But if you observed the event (or heard about it from others) and want to tell how someone else experienced the incident, you would use the *third-person point of view* (“Anne saw the dog pull loose”). Each point of view has advantages and limitations. First person allows you to express ordinarily private thoughts and to re-create an event as you actually experienced it. This point of view is limited, though, in its ability to depict the inner thoughts of other people involved in the event. By way of contrast, third person makes it easier to provide insight into the thoughts of all the participants. However, its objective, broad perspective may undercut some of the subjective immediacy typical of the “I was there” point of view. No matter which point of view you select, stay with that vantage point throughout the entire narrative. (For more on point of view, see pages 22–23 in Chapter 2.)

Knowing whether to use the *past* or *present tense* (“I *strolled* into the room” as opposed to “I *stroll* into the room”) is important. In most narrations, the past tense predominates, enabling the writer to span a considerable period of time. Although more rarely used, the present tense can be powerful for events of short durations—a wrestling match or a medical emergency, for instance. A narrative in the present tense prolongs each moment, intensifying the reader’s sense of participation. Be careful, though; unless the event is intense and fast-paced, the present tense can seem contrived. Whichever tense you choose, avoid shifting midstream—starting, let’s say, in the past tense (“she *skated*”) and switching to the present tense (“she *runs*”).

REVISION STRATEGIES

Once you have a draft of the essay, you’re ready to revise. The following checklist will help you and those giving you feedback apply to narration some of the revision techniques discussed in Chapters 7 and 8.



NARRATION: A REVISION/PEER REVIEW CHECKLIST

Revise Overall Meaning and Structure

- What is the essay’s main point? Is it stated explicitly or is it implied? Could the point be conveyed more clearly? How?
- What is the narrative’s conflict? Is it stated explicitly or is it implied? Could the conflict be made more dramatic? How?

- From which point of view is the narrative told? Is it the most effective point of view for this essay? Why or why not?

Revise Paragraph Development

- Which paragraphs (or passages) fail to advance the action, reveal character, or contribute to the story's mood? Should these sections be condensed or eliminated?
- Where should the narrative pace be slowed down or quickened?
- Where is it difficult to follow the chronology of events? Should the order of paragraphs be changed? How? Where would additional time signals help?
- How could flashback or flashforward paragraphs be used to highlight key events?
- What can be done to make the essay's opening paragraph more compelling? Would dramatic dialog or mood-setting description help?
- What could be done to make the essay's closing paragraph more effective? Should the essay end earlier? Should it close by echoing an idea or image from the opening?

Revise Sentences and Words

- Where is sentence structure monotonous? Where would combining sentences, mixing sentence type, and alternating sentence length help?
- Where could dialog replace commentary to convey character and propel the story forward?
- Which sentences and words are inconsistent with the essay's tone?
- Which sentences would benefit from sensory details that heighten the narrative mood?
- Where do vigorous verbs convey action? Where could active verbs ("Many of us made the same error") replace passive ones ("The same error was made by many of us")? Where could dull *to be* verbs ("The room was dark") be converted to more dynamic forms ("The room darkened")?
- Where are there inappropriate shifts in point of view or verb tense?

STUDENT ESSAY: FROM PREWRITING THROUGH REVISION

The student essay that follows was written by Paul Monahan in response to this assignment:

In "Shooting an Elephant," George Orwell tells about an incident that forced him to act in a manner contrary to his better instincts. Write a narrative about a time you faced a disturbing conflict and ended up doing something you later regretted.

After deciding to write about an encounter he had with an elderly woman in the store where he worked, Paul did some *freewriting* on his computer to gather material on his subject. When he later reviewed this freewriting, he crossed out unnecessary commentary, wrote notes signaling where dialog and descriptive details were needed, and indicated where paragraph breaks might occur. After annotating his freewriting in this manner, Paul felt comfortable launching into his first draft, without further shaping his freewriting or preparing an outline. As he wrote, though, he frequently referred to his warm-up material to organize his narrative and retrieve details. Paul's original freewriting is shown here; the handwritten marks indicate Paul's later efforts to shape and develop this material:

Freewriting

Set up contrast
Give details about her appearance

An old woman entered the store. She pushed the door, hobbled in, coughed, and seemed to be in pain. She wore a faded dress and a sweater that was much too small for her. The night was cold, but she didn't wear any stockings. You could see her veins. She strolled around the store, sneezing and hacking. She picked up a can of corn and stared at it. ~~She made me nervous.~~ I walked over to see what was going on. Asked if she needed help.

Add dialog

Background information—move to first paragraph

I was the one to do this because I was on duty. Had worked at 7-11 for two years. Felt confident. Always tried to be friendly and polite. Hadn't had any trouble. ~~But the old woman worried me.~~

Add dialog

"I need food," she said. I told her how much the corn cost and also that the bologna was on sale (what a stupid, insensitive thing to do!). She said she couldn't pay. I almost told her to take the can of corn, but all the rules stopped me. Be polite, stay in control. I told her I couldn't give anything away. Her face looked even more saggy. She kind of shook and put the can back. She left, I rushed out after her. Too late. Felt ashamed about acting like a robot. Mad at myself. If only I'd acted differently.

More specifics

Good title?

Now read Paul's paper, "If Only," noting the similarities and differences between his prewriting and final essay. You'll notice, for example, that Paul decided to move background information to the essay's opening, and that he ended up using as his title a shortened version of the final sentence in his prewriting. Finally, consider how well the essay applies the principles of narration discussed in this chapter. (The commentary that follows the paper will help you look at Paul's essay more closely and will give you some sense of how he went about revising his first draft.)

If Only

by Paul Monahan

- 1 Having worked at a 7-Eleven store for two years, I thought I had become successful at what our manager calls "customer relations." I firmly believed that a friendly smile and an automatic "sir," "ma'am," and "thank you" would see me through any situation that might arise, from soothing impatient or unpleasant people to apologizing for giving out the wrong change. But the other night an old woman shattered my belief that a glib response could smooth over the rough spots of dealing with other human beings. Introduction
- 2 The moment she entered, the woman presented a sharp contrast to our shiny store with its bright lighting and neatly arranged shelves. Walking as if each step were painful, she slowly pushed open the glass door and hobbled down the nearest aisle. She coughed dryly, wheezing with each breath. On a forty-degree night, she was wearing only a faded print dress, a thin, light-beige sweater too small to button, and black vinyl slippers with the backs cut out to expose calloused heels. There were no stockings or socks on her splotchy, blue-veined legs. Narrative point (thesis)
- 3 After strolling around the store for several minutes, the old woman stopped in front of the rows of canned vegetables. She picked up some corn niblets and stared with a strange intensity at the label. At that point, I decided to be a good, courteous employee and asked her if she needed help. As I stood close to her, my smile became harder to maintain; her red-rimmed eyes were partially closed by yellowish crusts; her hands were covered with layer upon layer of grime, and the stale smell of sweat rose in a thick vaporous cloud from her clothes. Informal topic sentence
- 4 "I need some food," she muttered in reply to my bright "Can I help you?" Start of dialog
- 5 "Are you looking for corn, ma'am?"
- 6 "I need some food," she repeated. "Any kind."
- 7 "Well, the corn is ninety-five cents," I said in my most helpful voice. "Or, if you like, we have a special on bologna today."
- 8 "I can't pay," she said.
- 9 For a second, I was tempted to say, "Take the corn." But the employee rules flooded into my mind: Remain polite, but do not Conflict established

let customers get the best of you. Let them know that you are in control. For a moment, I even entertained the idea that this was some sort of test, and that this woman was someone from the head office, testing my loyalty. I responded dutifully, “I’m sorry, ma’am, but I can’t give away anything for free.”

Informal topic sentence —▶ The old woman’s face collapsed a bit more, if that were possible, and her hands trembled as she put the can back on the shelf. She shuffled past me toward the door, her torn and dirty clothing barely covering her bent back. 10

Conclusion Moments after she left, I rushed out the door with the can of corn, but she was nowhere in sight. For the rest of my shift, the image of the woman haunted me. I had been young, healthy, and smug. She had been old, sick, and desperate. Wishing with all my 11

Echoing of narrative point in the introduction heart that I had acted like a human being rather than a robot, I was saddened to realize how fragile a hold we have on our better instincts.

Commentary

Point of View, Tense, and Conflict

Paul chose to write “If Only” from the *first-person point of view*, a logical choice because he appears as a main character in his own story. Using the *past tense*, Paul recounts an incident filled with *conflict*—between him and the woman and between his fear of breaking the rules and his human instinct to help someone in need.

Narrative Point

It isn’t always necessary to state the *narrative point* of an essay; it can be implied. But Paul decided to express the controlling idea of his narrative in two places—in the introduction (“But the other night an old woman shattered my belief that a glib response could smooth over the rough spots of dealing with other human beings”) and again in the conclusion, where he expands his idea about rote responses overriding impulses of independent judgment and compassion. All of the essay’s *narrative details* contribute to the point of the piece; Paul does not include any extraneous information that would detract from the central idea he wants to convey.

Organization

The narrative is *organized chronologically*, from the moment the woman enters the store to Paul’s reaction after she leaves. Paul limits the narrative’s time span. The entire incident probably occurs in under ten minutes, yet the introduction serves as a kind of *flashback* by providing some necessary background about Paul’s past experiences. To help the reader follow the course of the narrative, Paul uses *time signals*: “The moment she entered, the woman presented a sharp contrast”

(paragraph 2); “*At that point*, I decided to be a good, courteous employee” (3); “*For the rest of my shift*, the image of the woman haunted me” (11).

The paragraphs (except for those consisting solely of dialog) also contain *informal topic sentences* that direct attention to the specific stage of action being narrated. Indeed, each paragraph focuses on a distinct event: the elderly woman’s actions when she first enters the store, the encounter between Paul and the woman, Paul’s resulting inner conflict, the woman’s subsequent response, and Paul’s delayed reaction.

Combining Patterns of Development

This chronological chain of events, with one action leading to another, illustrates that the *cause-effect* pattern underlies the basic structure of Paul’s essay. And by means of another pattern—*description*—Paul gives dramatic immediacy to the events being recounted. Throughout, he provides rich sensory details to engage the reader’s interest. For instance, the sentence “her red-rimmed eyes were partially closed by yellowish crusts” (3) vividly re-creates the woman’s appearance while also suggesting Paul’s inner reaction to the woman.



Dialog and Sentence Structure

Paul uses other techniques to add energy and interest to his narrative. For one thing, he dramatizes his conflict with the woman through *dialog* that crackles with tension. And he achieves a vigorous narrative pace by *varying the length and structure of his sentences*. In the second paragraph, a short sentence (“There were no stockings or socks on her splotchy, blue-veined legs”) alternates with a longer one (“On a forty-degree night, she was wearing only a faded print dress, a thin, light-beige sweater too small to button, and black vinyl slippers with the backs cut out to expose calloused heels”). Some sentences in the essay open with a subject and verb (“She coughed dryly”), while others start with dependent clauses or participial phrases (“As I stood close to her, my smile became harder to maintain”; “Walking as if each step were painful, she slowly pushed open the glass door”) or with a prepositional phrase (“For a second, I was tempted”).

Revising the First Draft

To get a sense of how Paul went about revising his essay, take a moment to look at the original version of his third paragraph shown here. The handwritten annotations, numbered in order of importance, represent Paul’s ideas for revision. Compare this preliminary version with the final version in the full essay:

Original Version of Third Paragraph

After sneezing and hacking her way around the store, the old woman stopped in front of the vegetable shelves. She picked up a can of corn and stared at the label. She stayed like this for several minutes. Then I walked over to her and asked if I could be of help.

- ③ Inappropriate words—sound humorous
- ① Boring—not enough details
- ② Choppy sentences

As you can see, Paul realized the paragraph lacked power, so he decided to add compelling descriptive details about the woman (“the stale smell of sweat,” for example). When revising, he also worked to reduce the paragraph’s choppiness. By expanding and combining sentences, he gave the paragraph an easier, more graceful rhythm. Much of the time, revision involves paring down excess material. In this case, though, Paul made the right decision to elaborate his sentences. Furthermore, he added the following comment to the third paragraph: “I decided to be a good, courteous employee.” These few words introduce an appropriate note of irony and serve to echo the essay’s controlling idea.

Finally, Paul decided to omit the words “sneezing and hacking” because he realized they were too comic or light for his subject. Still, the first sentence in the revised paragraph is somewhat jarring. The word *strolling* isn’t quite appropriate since it implies a leisurely grace inconsistent with the impression he wants to convey. Replacing *strolling* with, say, *shuffling* would bring the image more into line with the essay’s overall mood.

Despite this slight problem, Paul’s revisions are right on the mark. The changes he made strengthened his essay, turning it into a more evocative, more polished piece of narrative writing.



ACTIVITIES: NARRATION

Prewriting Activities

1. Imagine you’re writing two essays: One analyzes the effect of insensitive teachers on young children; the other argues the importance of family traditions. With the help of your journal or freewriting, identify different narratives you could use to open each essay.
2. Use brainstorming or any other prewriting technique to generate narrative details about *one* of the following events. After examining your raw material, identify two or three narrative points (thesis statements) that might focus an essay. Then edit the prewriting material for each narrative point, noting which items would be appropriate, which would be inappropriate, and which would have to be developed more fully.
 - a. An injury you received
 - b. The loss of an important object
 - c. An event that made you wish you had a certain skill
3. For each of the following situations, identify two different conflicts that would make a story worth relating:
 - a. Going to the supermarket with a friend
 - b. Telling your parents which college you’ve decided to attend

- c. Participating in a demonstration
 - d. Preparing for an exam in a difficult course
4. Prepare six to ten lines of vivid and natural-sounding dialog to convey the conflict in *two* of the following situations:
- a. One member of a couple trying to break up with the other
 - b. A ten-year-old brother and a teenage sister shopping for a parent's birthday present
 - c. A teacher talking to a student who plagiarized a paper
 - d. A young person talking to his or her parents about dropping out of college for a semester

Revising Activities

5. Revise each of the following narrative sentence groups twice: once with words that carry negative connotations, and again with words that carry positive connotations. Use varied sentence structure, sensory details, and vigorous verbs to convey mood.
- a. The bell rang. It rang loudly. Students knew the last day of class was over.
 - b. Last weekend, our neighbors burned leaves in their yard. We went over to speak with them.
 - c. The sun shone in through my bedroom window. It made me sit up in bed. Daylight was finally here, I told myself.
6. The following paragraph is the introduction from the first draft of an essay proposing harsher penalties for drunk drivers. Revise this narrative paragraph to make it more effective. How can you make sentence structure less predictable? Which details should you delete? As you revise, provide language that conveys the event's sights, smells, and sounds. Also, clarify the chronological sequence.

As I drove down the street in my bright blue sports car, I saw a car coming rapidly around the curve. The car didn't slow down as it headed toward the traffic light. The light turned yellow and then red. A young couple, dressed like models, started crossing the street. When the woman saw the car, she called out to her husband. He jumped onto the shoulder. The man wasn't hurt but, seconds later, it was clear the woman was. I ran to a nearby emergency phone and called the police. The ambulance arrived, but the woman was already dead. The driver, who looked terrible, failed the sobriety test, and the police found out that he had two previous offenses. It's apparent that better ways have to be found for getting drunk drivers off the road.



PROFESSIONAL SELECTIONS: NARRATION

AUDRE LORDE

Named poet laureate of the state of New York in 1991, Audre Lorde (1934–92) was a New Yorker born of African-Caribbean parents. Lorde taught at Hunter College for many years and published numerous poems and nonfiction pieces in a variety of magazines and literary journals. Her books include *A Burst of Light* (1988), *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984), and *The Black Unicorn: Poems* (1978). “The Fourth of July” is an excerpt from her autobiography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982).

Please note the essay structure diagram that appears following this selection (Figure 11.2 on page 211).

Pre-Reading Journal Entry

When you were a child, what beliefs about the United States did you have? List these beliefs. For each, indicate whether subsequent experience maintained or shattered your childhood understanding of these beliefs. Take a little time to explore these issues in your journal.

THE FOURTH OF JULY

The first time I went to Washington, D.C., was on the edge of the summer when I was supposed to stop being a child. At least that’s what they said to us all at graduation from the eighth grade. My sister Phyllis graduated at the same time from high school. I don’t know what she was supposed to stop being. But as graduation presents for us both, the whole family took a Fourth of July trip to Washington, D.C., the fabled and famous capital of our country. 1

It was the first time I’d ever been on a railroad train during the day. When I was little, and we used to go to the Connecticut shore, we always went at night on the milk train, because it was cheaper. 2

Preparations were in the air around our house before school was even over. We packed for a week. There were two very large suitcases that my father carried, and a box filled with food. In fact, my first trip to Washington was a mobile feast; I started eating as soon as we were comfortably ensconced in our seats, and did not stop until somewhere after Philadelphia. I remember it was Philadelphia because I was disappointed not to have passed by the Liberty Bell. 3

My mother had roasted two chickens and cut them up into dainty bite-size pieces. She packed slices of brown bread and butter and green pepper and carrot sticks. There were little violently yellow iced cakes with scalloped edges called “marigolds,” that came from Cushman’s Bakery. There was a spice bun and rock-cakes from Newton’s, the West Indian bakery across Lenox Avenue from St. Mark’s School, and iced tea in a wrapped mayonnaise jar. There were sweet pickles for us and dill pickles for my father, and peaches with the 4

fuzz still on them, individually wrapped to keep them from bruising. And, for neatness, there were piles of napkins and a little tin box with a washcloth dampened with rosewater and glycerine for wiping sticky mouths.

5 I wanted to eat in the dining car because I had read all about them, but my mother reminded me for the umpteenth time that dining car food always cost too much money and besides, you never could tell whose hands had been playing all over that food, nor where those same hands had been just before. My mother never mentioned that Black people were not allowed into railroad dining cars headed south in 1947. As usual, whatever my mother did not like and could not change, she ignored. Perhaps it would go away, deprived of her attention.

6 I learned later that Phyllis's high school senior class trip had been to Washington, but the nuns had given her back her deposit in private, explaining to her that the class, all of whom were white, except Phyllis, would be staying in a hotel where Phyllis "would not be happy," meaning, Daddy explained to her, also in private, that they did not rent rooms to Negroes. "We will take you to Washington, ourselves," my father had avowed, "and not just for an overnight in some measly fleabag hotel."

7 American racism was a new and crushing reality that my parents had to deal with every day of their lives once they came to this country. They handled it as a private woe. My mother and father believed that they could best protect their children from the realities of race in America and the fact of American racism by never giving them name, much less discussing their nature. We were told we must never trust white people, but *why* was never explained, nor the nature of their ill will. Like so many other vital pieces of information in my childhood, I was supposed to know without being told. It always seemed like a very strange injunction coming from my mother, who looked so much like one of those people we were never supposed to trust. But something always warned me not to ask my mother why she wasn't white, and why Auntie Lillah and Auntie Etta weren't, even though they were all that same problematic color so different from my father and me, even from my sisters, who were somewhere in-between.

8 In Washington, D.C., we had one large room with two double beds and an extra cot for me. It was a back-street hotel that belonged to a friend of my father's who was in real estate, and I spent the whole next day after Mass squinting up at the Lincoln Memorial where Marian Anderson¹ had sung after the D.A.R.² refused to allow her to sing in their auditorium because she was Black. Or because she was "Colored," my father said as he told us the story. Except that what he probably said was "Negro," because for his time, my father was quite progressive.

9 I was squinting because I was in that silent agony that characterized all of my childhood summers, from the time school let out in June to the end of July, brought about by my dilated and vulnerable eyes exposed to the summer brightness.

10 I viewed July through an agonizing corolla of dazzling whiteness and I always hated the Fourth of July, even before I came to realize the travesty such a celebration was for Black people in this country.

¹An acclaimed African-American opera singer (1902–93), famed for her renderings of Black spirituals.

²Daughters of the American Revolution. A society, founded in 1890, for women who can prove direct lineage to soldiers or others who aided in winning American independence from Great Britain during the Revolutionary War (1775–83).

My parents did not approve of sunglasses, nor of their expense. 11

I spent the afternoon squinting up at monuments to freedom and past presidencies 12
and democracy, and wondering why the light and heat were both so much stronger in
Washington, D.C., than back home in New York City. Even the pavement on the
streets was a shade lighter in color than back home.

Late that Washington afternoon my family and I walked back down Pennsylvania 13
Avenue. We were a proper caravan, mother bright and father brown, the three of
us girls step-standards in-between. Moved by our historical surroundings and the
heat of the early evening, my father decreed yet another treat. He had a great sense
of history, a flair for the quietly dramatic and the sense of specialness of an occasion
and a trip.

“Shall we stop and have a little something to cool off, Lin?” 14

Two blocks away from our hotel, the family stopped for a dish of vanilla ice cream 15
at a Breyer’s ice cream and soda fountain. Indoors, the soda fountain was dim and fan-
cooled, deliciously relieving to my scorched eyes.

Corded and crisp and pinafores, the five of us seated ourselves one by one at the 16
counter. There was I between my mother and father, and my two sisters on the other
side of my mother. We settled ourselves along the white mottled marble counter, and
when the waitress spoke at first no one understood what she was saying, and so the
five of us just sat there.

The waitress moved along the line of us closer to my father and spoke again. “I said 17
I kin give you to take out, but you can’t eat here. Sorry.” Then she dropped her eyes
looking very embarrassed, and suddenly we heard what it was she was saying all at the
same time, loud and clear.

Straight-backed and indignant, one by one, my family and I got down from the counter 18
stools and turned around and marched out of the store, quiet and outraged, as if we had
never been Black before. No one would answer my emphatic questions with anything other
than a guilty silence. “But we hadn’t done anything!” This wasn’t right or fair! Hadn’t I writ-
ten poems about Bataan and freedom and democracy for all?

My parents wouldn’t speak of this injustice, not because they had contributed to it, 19
but because they felt they should have anticipated it and avoided it. This made me
even angrier. My fury was not going to be acknowledged by a like fury. Even my two
sisters copied my parents’ pretense that nothing unusual and anti-american had
occurred. I was left to write my angry letter to the president of the united states all by
myself, although my father did promise I could type it out on the office typewriter next
week, after I showed it to him in my copybook diary.

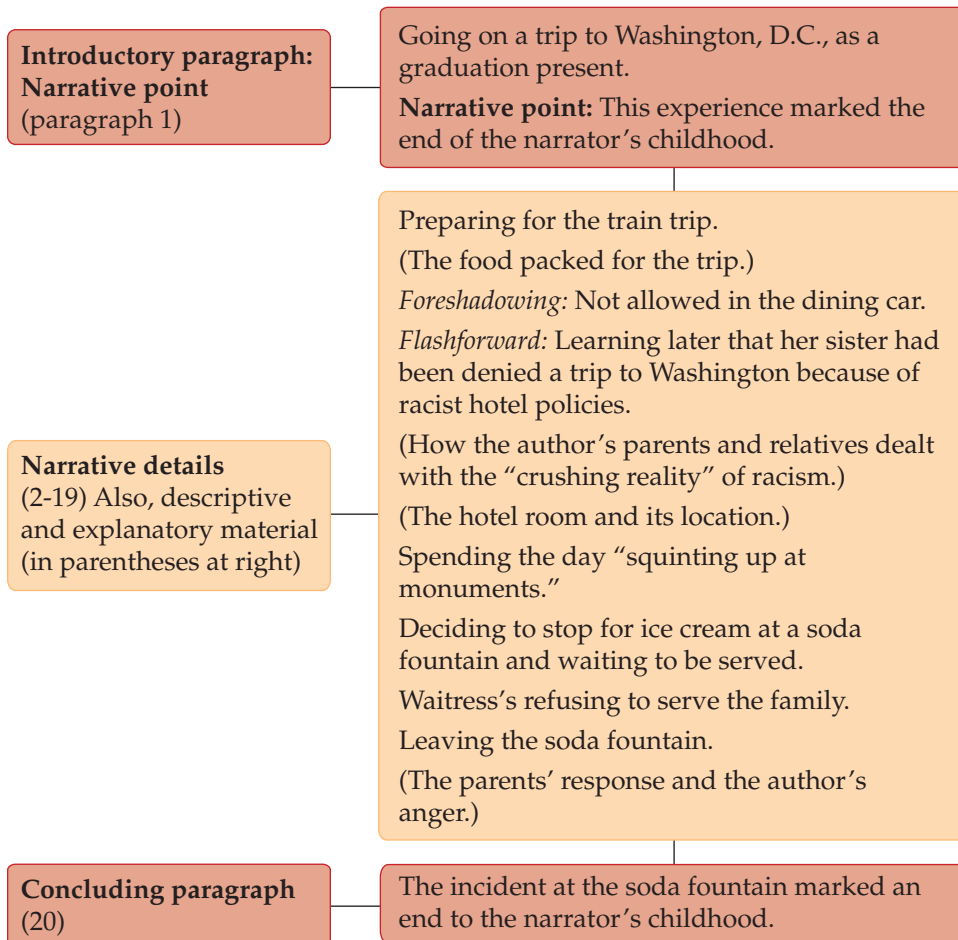
The waitress was white, and the counter was white, and the ice cream I never ate 20
in Washington, D.C., that summer I left childhood was white, and the white heat and
the white pavement and the white stone monuments of my first Washington summer
made me sick to my stomach for the whole rest of that trip and it wasn’t much of a
graduation present after all.

Questions for Close Reading

1. What is the selection’s thesis (or narrative point)? Locate the sentence(s) in which Lorde states her main idea. If she doesn’t state the thesis explicitly, express it in your own words.

FIGURE 11.2

Essay Structure Diagram: “The Fourth of July” by Audre Lorde



- In paragraph 4, Lorde describes the elaborate picnic her mother prepared for the trip to Washington, D.C. Why did Lorde’s mother make such elaborate preparations? What do these preparations tell us about Lorde’s mother?
- Why does Lorde have trouble understanding her parents’ dictate that she “never trust white people” (paragraph 7)?
- In general, how do Lorde’s parents handle racism? How does the family as a whole deal with the racism they encounter in the ice cream parlor? How does the family’s reaction to the ice cream parlor incident make Lorde feel?
- Refer to your dictionary as needed to define the following words used in the selection: *fabled* (paragraph 1), *injunction* (7), *progressive* (8), *dilated* (9), *vulnerable* (9), *travesty* (10), *decreed* (13), *pretense* (19).

Questions About the Writer's Craft

1. **The pattern.** What techniques does Lorde use to help readers follow the unfolding of the story as it occurs in both time and space?
2. When telling a story, skilled writers limit narrative commentary—statements that tell rather than show what happened—because such commentary tends to interrupt the narrative flow. Lorde, however, provides narrative commentary in several spots. Find these instances. How is the information she provides in these places essential to her narrative?
3. In paragraphs 7 and 19, Lorde uses all lowercase letters when referring to America/American and to the President of the United States. Why do you suppose she doesn't follow the rules of capitalization? In what ways does her rejection of these rules reinforce what she is trying to convey through the essay's title?
4. What key word does Lorde repeat in paragraph 20? What effect do you think she hopes the repetition will have on readers?

Writing Assignments Using Narration as a Pattern of Development



1. Lorde recounts an incident during which she was treated unfairly. Write a narrative about a time when either you were treated unjustly or you treated someone else in an unfair manner. Like Lorde, use vivid details to make the incident come alive and to convey how it affected you. Essays including George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" (page 214), Charmie Gholson's "Charity Display?" (page 220), Brent Staples's "Black Men and Public Space" (page 412), and Roberto Rodriguez's "The Border on Our Backs" (page 517) will prompt some ideas worth exploring.



2. Write a narrative about an experience that dramatically changed your view of the world. The experience might have been jarring and painful, or it may have been positive and uplifting. In either case, recount the incident with compelling narrative details. To illustrate the shift in your perspective, begin with a brief statement of the way you viewed the world before the experience. The following essays provide insight into the way a single experience can alter one's understanding of the world: Maya Angelou's "Sister Flowers" (page 167), David Helvarg's "The Storm This Time" (page 175), Charmie Gholson's "Charity Display?" (page 220), and Diane Cole's "Don't Just Stand There" (page 333).

Writing Assignments Combining Patterns of Development



3. Lorde suggests that her parents use the coping mechanism of denial to deal with life's harsh realities. For example, she writes that whatever her mother

“did not like and could not change, she ignored.” Refer to a psychology textbook to learn more about denial as a coping mechanism. When is it productive? When is it counterproductive? Drawing upon your own experiences as well as those of friends, family, and classmates, write an essay *contrasting* effective and ineffective uses of denial. Near the end of the paper, present brief *guidelines* that will help readers identify when denial may be detrimental.



- In her essay, Lorde decries and by implication takes a strong stance against racial discrimination. Brainstorm with friends, family members, and classmates to identify other injustices in American society. To prompt discussion, you might begin by considering attitudes toward the elderly, the overweight, the physically disabled; the funding of schools in poor and affluent neighborhoods; the portrayal of a specific ethnic group on television; and so on. Focusing on *one* such injustice, write an essay *arguing* that such an injustice indeed exists. To document the nature and extent of the injustice, use library and/or Internet research. You should also consider *recounting* your own and other people’s experiences. Acknowledge and, when you can, dismantle the views of those who think there isn’t a problem.



Writing Assignment Using a Journal Entry as a Starting Point



- Write an essay comparing and/or contrasting the beliefs you had about the United States as a child with those you have as an adult. Review your pre-reading journal entry, and select *one* American belief to focus on. Provide strong, dramatic examples that show why your childhood belief in this concept has been strengthened or weakened. Before writing, you should consider reading one or more of the following powerful accounts of personal confrontation with American ideals: Stanley Fish’s “Free Speech Follies” (page 495), Robert Rodriguez’s “The Border on Our Backs” (page 517) and Star Parker’s “*Se Habla Entitlement*” (page 333).

GEORGE ORWELL

Born Eric Blair in the British colony of India, George Orwell (1903–50) is best known for his two novels *Animal Farm* (1946) and *1984* (1949)—both searing depictions of totalitarian societies. A fierce critic of political and economic injustice, Orwell also wrote a number of essays about the desperate lives of English factory workers and miners. Orwell’s position with the Indian Imperial Police provided the basis for the following essay, which is taken from the collection “*Shooting an Elephant*” and *Other Essays* (1950).

Pre-Reading Journal Entry

Think of times when you were keenly aware of institutional injustice—an action, law, or regulation that is legally in the right but that you felt was wrong.

In your journal, record several such examples. Why do you consider them wrong? Have you always felt that way? If not, what changed your opinion?

SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT

In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people—the only 1
time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me. I was
subdivisional police officer of the town, and in an aimless, petty kind of way anti-
European feeling was very bitter. No one had the guts to raise a riot, but if a
European woman went through the bazaars alone somebody would probably spit
betel juice over her dress. As a police officer I was an obvious target and was baited
whenever it seemed safe to do so. When a nimble Burman tripped me up on the
football field and the referee (another Burman) looked the other way, the crowd
yelled with hideous laughter. This happened more than once. In the end the sneer-
ing yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere, the insults hooted after me
when I was at a safe distance, got badly on my nerves. The young Buddhist priests
were the worst of all. There were several thousand of them in the town and none
of them seemed to have anything to do except stand on street corners and jeer at
Europeans.

All this was perplexing and upsetting. For at that time I had already made up my 2
mind that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I chucked up my job and got
out of it the better. Theoretically—and secretly, of course—I was all for the Burmese
and all against their oppressors, the British. As for the job I was doing, I hated it
more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear. In a job like that you see the dirty
work of Empire at close quarters. The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking
cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred
buttocks of the men who had been flogged with bamboos—all these oppressed me
with an intolerable sense of guilt. But I could get nothing into perspective. I was
young and ill-educated and I had to think out my problems in the utter silence that
is imposed on every Englishman in the East. I did not even know that the British
Empire is dying, still less did I know that it is a great deal better than the younger
empires that are going to supplant it. All I knew was that I was stuck between my
hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who
tried to make my job impossible. With one part of my mind I thought of the British
Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, *in saecula saeculorum*,¹
upon the will of prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy
in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts. Feelings like
these are the normal by-products of imperialism; ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you
can catch him off duty.

One day something happened which in a roundabout way was enlightening. It was 3
a tiny incident in itself, but it gave me a better glimpse than I had had before of the
real nature of imperialism—the real motives for which despotic governments act.
Early one morning the sub-inspector at a police station the other end of the town rang
me up on the 'phone and said that an elephant was ravaging the bazaar. Would I
please come and do something about it? I did not know what I could do, but I wanted
to see what was happening and I got onto a pony and started out. I took my rifle, an

¹Latin phrase meaning “for ever and ever” (editors’ note).

old .44 Winchester and much too small to kill an elephant, but I thought the noise might be useful *in terrorem*.² Various Burmans stopped me on the way and told me about the elephant's doings. It was not, of course, a wild elephant, but a tame one which had gone "must." It had been chained up, as tame elephants always are when their attack of "must" is due, but on the previous night it had broken its chain and escaped. Its mahout, the only person who could manage it when it was in that state, had set out in pursuit, but had taken the wrong direction and was now twelve hours' journey away, and in the morning the elephant had suddenly reappeared in the town. The Burmese population had no weapons and were quite helpless against it. It had already destroyed somebody's bamboo hut, killed a cow and raided some fruit-stalls and devoured the stock; also it had met the municipal rubbish van and, when the driver jumped out and took to his heels, had turned the van over and inflicted violences upon it.

4 The Burmese sub-inspector and some Indian constables were waiting for me in the quarter where the elephant had been seen. It was a very poor quarter, a labyrinth of squalid bamboo huts, thatched with palm-leaf, winding all over a steep hillside. I remember that it was a cloudy, stuffy morning at the beginning of the rains. We began questioning the people as to where the elephant had gone and, as usual, failed to get any definite information. That is invariably the case in the East; a story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the scene of events the vaguer it becomes. Some of the people said that the elephant had gone in one direction, some said that he had gone in another, some professed not even to have heard of any elephant. I had almost made up my mind that the whole story was a pack of lies, when we heard yells a little distance away. There was a loud, scandalized cry of 'Go away, child! Go away this instant!' and an old woman with a switch in her hand came round the corner of a hut, violently shooing away a crowd of naked children. Some more women followed, clicking their tongues and exclaiming; evidently there was something that the children ought not to have seen. I rounded the hut and saw a man's dead body sprawling in the mud. He was an Indian, a black Dravidian coolie, almost naked, and he could not have been dead many minutes. The people said that the elephant had come suddenly upon him round the corner of the hut, caught him with its trunk, put its foot on his back and ground him into the earth. This was the rainy season and the ground was soft, and his face had scored a trench a foot deep and a couple of yards long. He was lying on his belly with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to one side. His face was coated with mud, the eyes wide open, the teeth bared and grinning with an expression of unendurable agony. (Never tell me, by the way, that the dead look peaceful. Most of the corpses I have seen looked devilish.) The friction of the great beast's foot had stripped the skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit. As soon as I saw the dead man I sent an orderly to a friend's house nearby to borrow an elephant rifle. I had already sent back the pony, not wanting it to go mad with fright and throw me if it smelt the elephant.

5 The orderly came back in a few minutes with a rifle and five cartridges, and meanwhile some Burmans had arrived and told us that the elephant was in the paddy fields below, only a few hundred yards away. As I started forward practically the whole population of the quarter flocked out of the houses and followed me. They had seen the rifle and were all shouting excitedly that I was going to shoot the elephant. They had not

²Latin phrase meaning "as a warning" (editors' note).

shown much interest in the elephant when he was merely ravaging their homes, but it was different now that he was going to be shot. It was a bit of fun to them, as it would be to an English crowd; besides they wanted the meat. It made me vaguely uneasy. I had no intention of shooting the elephant—I had merely sent for the rifle to defend myself if necessary—and it is always unnerving to have a crowd following you. I marched down the hill looking and feeling a fool, with the rifle over my shoulder and an ever-growing army of people jostling at my heels. At the bottom, when you got away from the huts, there was a metalled road and beyond that a miry waste of paddy fields a thousand yards across, not yet ploughed but soggy from the first rains and dotted with coarse grass. The elephant was standing eight yards from the road, his left side towards us. He took not the slightest notice of the crowd's approach. He was tearing up bunches of grass, beating them against his knees to clean them and stuffing them into his mouth.

I had halted on the road. As soon as I saw the elephant I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him. It is a serious matter to shoot a working elephant—it is comparable to destroying a huge and costly piece of machinery—and obviously one ought not to do it if it can possibly be avoided. And at that distance, peacefully eating, the elephant looked no more dangerous than a cow. I thought then and I think now that his attack of “must” was already passing off; in which case he would merely wander harmlessly about until the mahout came back and caught him. Moreover, I did not in the least want to shoot him. I decided that I would watch him for a little while to make sure that he did not turn savage again, and then go home. 6

But at that moment I glanced round at the crowd that had followed me. It was an immense crowd, two thousand at the least and growing every minute. It blocked the road for a long distance on either side. I looked at the sea of yellow faces above the garish clothes—faces all happy and excited over this bit of fun, all certain that the elephant was going to be shot. They were watching me as they would watch a conjurer about to perform a trick. They did not like me, but with the magical rifle in my hands I was momentarily worth watching. And suddenly I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly. And it was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East. Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd—seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib. For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the “natives,” and so in every crisis he has got to do what the “natives” expect of him. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it. I had got to shoot the elephant. I had committed myself to doing it when I sent for the rifle. A sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things. To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing—no, that was impossible. The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at. 7

But I did not want to shoot the elephant. I watched him beating his bunch of grass against his knees, with that preoccupied grandmotherly air that elephants have. It 8

seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him. At that age I was not squeamish about killing animals, but I had never shot an elephant and never wanted to. (Somehow it always seems worse to kill a *large* animal.) Besides, there was the beast's owner to be considered. Alive, the elephant was worth at least a hundred pounds; dead, he would only be worth the value of his tusks, five pounds, possibly. But I had got to act quickly. I turned to some experienced-looking Burmans who had been there when we arrived, and asked them how the elephant had been behaving. They all said the same thing: he took no notice of you if you left him alone, but he might charge if you went too close to him.

9 It was perfectly clear to me what I ought to do. I ought to walk up to within, say, twenty-five yards of the elephant and test his behavior. If he charged, I could shoot; if he took no notice of me, it would be safe to leave him until the mahout came back. But also I knew that I was going to do no such thing. I was a poor shot with a rifle and the ground was soft mud into which one would sink at every step. If the elephant charged and I missed him, I should have about as much chance as a toad under a steam-roller. But even then I was not thinking particularly of my own skin, only of the watchful yellow faces behind. For at that moment, with the crowd watching me, I was not afraid in the ordinary sense, as I would have been if I had been alone. A white man mustn't be frightened in front of "natives"; and so, in general he isn't frightened. The sole thought in my mind was that if anything went wrong those two thousand Burmans would see me pursued, caught, trampled on and reduced to a grinning corpse like that Indian up the hill. And if that happened it was quite probable that some of them would laugh. That would never do. There was only one alternative. I shoved the cartridges into the magazine and lay down on the road to get a better aim.

10 The crowd grew very still, and a deep, low, happy sigh, as of people who see the theatre curtain go up at last, breathed from innumerable throats. They were going to have their bit of fun after all. The rifle was a beautiful German thing with cross-hair sights. I did not then know that in shooting an elephant one would shoot to cut an imaginary bar running from ear-hole to ear-hole. I ought, therefore, as the elephant was sideway on, to have aimed straight at his ear-hole; actually I aimed several inches in front of this, thinking the brain would be further forward.

11 When I pulled the trigger I did not hear the bang or feel the kick—one never does when a shot goes home—but I heard the devilish roar of glee that went up from the crowd. In that instant, in too short a time, one would have thought, even for the bullet to get there, a mysterious, terrible change had come over the elephant. He neither stirred nor fell, but every line of his body had altered. He looked suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old, as though the frightful impact of the bullet had paralyzed him without knocking him down. At last, after what seemed a long time—it might have been five seconds, I dare say—he sagged flabbily to his knees. His mouth slobbered. An enormous senility seemed to have settled upon him. One could have imagined him thousands of years old. I fired again into the same spot. At the second shot he did not collapse but climbed with desperate slowness to his feet and stood weakly upright, with legs sagging and head drooping. I fired a third time. That was the shot that did for him. You could see the agony of it jolt his whole body and knock the last remnant of strength from his legs. But in falling he seemed for a moment to rise, for as his hind legs collapsed beneath him he seemed to tower upward like a huge rock toppling, his trunk reaching skywards like a tree. He

trumpeted, for the first and only time. And then down he came, his belly towards me, with a crash that seemed to shake the ground even where I lay.

I got up. The Burmans were already racing past me across the mud. It was obvious that the elephant would never rise again, but he was not dead. He was breathing very rhythmically with long rattling gasps, his great mound of a side painfully rising and falling. His mouth was wide open—I could see far down into caverns of pale pink throat. I waited a long time for him to die, but his breathing did not weaken. Finally I fired my two remaining shots into the spot where I thought his heart must be. The thick blood welled out of him like red velvet, but still he did not die. His body did not even jerk when the shots hit him, the tortured breathing continued without a pause. He was dying, very slowly and in great agony, but in some world remote from me where not even a bullet could damage him further. I felt that I had got to put an end to that dreadful noise. It seemed dreadful to see the great beast lying there, powerless to move and yet powerless to die, and not even to be able to finish him. I sent back for my small rifle and poured shot after shot into his heart and down his throat. They seemed to make no impression. The tortured gasps continued as steadily as the ticking of a clock.

In the end I could not stand it any longer and went away. I heard later that it took him half an hour to die. Burmans were bringing dahs and baskets even before I left, and I was told they had stripped the body almost to the bones by the afternoon.

Afterwards, of course, there were endless discussions about the shooting of the elephant. The owner was furious, but he was only an Indian and could do nothing. Besides, legally I had done the right thing, for a mad elephant has to be killed, like a mad dog, if its owner fails to control it. Among the Europeans opinion was divided. The older men said I was right, the younger men said it was a damn shame to shoot an elephant for killing a coolie, because an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie. And afterwards I was very glad that the coolie had been killed; it put me legally in the right and it gave me a sufficient pretext for shooting the elephant. I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.

Questions for Close Reading

1. What is the selection's thesis (or narrative point)? Locate the sentence(s) in which Orwell states his main idea. If he doesn't state the thesis explicitly, express it in your own words.
2. How does Orwell feel about the Burmans? What words does he use to describe them?
3. What reasons does Orwell give for shooting the elephant?
4. In paragraph 3, Orwell says that the elephant incident gave him a better understanding of "the real motives for which despotic governments act." What do you think he means? Before you answer, reread paragraph 7 carefully.
5. Refer to your dictionary as needed to define the following words used in the selection: *imperialism* (paragraph 2), *prostrate* (2), *despotic* (3), *mahout* (3), *miry* (5), *conjurer* (7), *futility* (7), and *sahib* (7).

Questions About the Writer's Craft

- 1. The pattern.** Most effective narratives encompass a restricted time span. How much time elapses from the moment Orwell gets his gun to the death of the elephant? What time signals does Orwell provide to help the reader follow the sequence of events in this limited time span?
- 2.** Orwell doesn't actually begin his narrative until the third paragraph. What purposes do the first two paragraphs serve?
- 3.** In paragraph 6, Orwell says that shooting a working elephant "is comparable to destroying a huge and costly piece of machinery." This kind of comparison is called an *analogy*—describing something unfamiliar, often abstract, in terms of something more familiar and concrete. Find at least three additional analogies in Orwell's essay. What effect do they have?
- 4. Other patterns.** Much of the power of Orwell's narrative comes from his ability to convey sensory impressions—what he saw, heard, smelled. Orwell's *description* becomes most vivid when he writes about the elephant's death in paragraphs 11 and 12. Find some evocative words and phrases that give the description its power.

Writing Assignments Using Narration as a Pattern of Development



- 1.** Orwell recounts a time he acted under great pressure. Write a narrative about an action you once took simply because you felt pressured. Perhaps you were attempting to avoid ridicule or to fulfill someone else's expectations. Like Orwell, use vivid details to bring the incident to life and to convey its effect on you. Reading Kay S. Hymowitz's "Twens: Ten Going on Sixteen" (page 245) will help you see the sometimes disastrous consequence of the pressure to conform.



- 2.** Write a narrative essay about an experience that gave you, like Orwell, a deeper insight into your own nature. You may have discovered, for instance, that you can be surprisingly naive, compassionate, petty, brave, rebellious, or good at something. Your essay may be serious or light in tone. Consider first reading Diane Cole's "Don't Just Stand There" (page 333), an essay showing how the author's response to a challenge revealed much about her character.

Writing Assignments Combining Patterns of Development



- 3.** Was Orwell justified in shooting the elephant? Write an essay *arguing* either that Orwell was justified *or* that he was not. To develop your thesis, cite several specific reasons, each supported by *examples* drawn from the essay. Here are some points you might consider: the legality of Orwell's act, the elephant's temperament, the crowd's presence, the aftermath of the elephant's death, the death itself.



4. Orwell's essay concerns, in part, the tendency to conceal indecision and confusion behind a facade of authority. Focusing on one or two groups of people (parents, teachers, doctors, politicians, and so on), write an essay *arguing* that people in authority sometimes *pretend* to know what they are doing so that subordinates won't suspect their insecurity or incompetence. Part of your essay should focus on the *consequences* of such behaviors.

Writing Assignment Using a Journal Entry as a Starting Point



5. Review your pre-reading journal entry, and select *one* action, law, or regulation that you consider indefensible. Interview friends, family, and classmates in an effort to gather views on all sides of the issue. Also consider supplementing this informal research with information gathered in the library and/or on the Internet. After weighing all your material, formulate a thesis; then write an essay convincing readers of the validity of your position.

CHARMIE GHOLSON

Born in 1962, Charmie Gholson has had a varied career. She has been a waitress, a birthing coach, a radio producer, and a nutrition counselor. Today she writes features and reviews for the *Ann Arbor Observer* and a cooking column for *Current Magazine*. She also hosts a local public affairs radio show called *Renegade Solutions*. The mother of three sons, Gholson lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan. This article was published in *The New York Times Magazine* on January 2, 2005.

Pre-Reading Journal Entry

Americans usually respond generously to others in times of need, either by volunteering their time and labor in community service or by donating money. Reflect on an occasion in which you made a donation to a charitable cause. What caused you to give? Did you give time, money, or both? What effect, if any, did your actions have? How did volunteering or donating make you feel? Use your journal to respond to these questions.

CHARITY DISPLAY?

I didn't recognize the cellphone on caller ID but answered anyway. A man started 1
talking about a local charity. "Look," I interrupted, "I don't have any money to give
you. My husband left me. I've got two little kids, and I'm behind on the rent."

He quickly clarified that he wasn't calling for a donation but to help. He said he was 2
a doctor and a volunteer for an organization called Warm the Children, and I had signed

up for help at my son's school. He offered to give me \$80 for each of my children to buy clothes. All I had to do was meet him at Meijer—a local, family-owned superstore—to do the shopping. I was shoving pants onto my son Gabriel, who never wants to get dressed, so it took a minute to comprehend: Could it be true?

3 The doctor mentioned filling out forms. While I imagined letting a stranger pay for our clothes, Gabriel took off his pants and ran away. Did I really want a handout? Should I endure a bit of humiliation to provide some essentials for my kids? I felt as if I had no choice. Sammy, my 7-year-old, had outgrown his shoes.

4 The night before we were to meet, the kids were with their dad, so I went to the store to shop, making sure to stay within the allotted amount. Then, I found a manager. We put a note on the clothes and left it behind the customer-service counter. I was hoping this would expedite the process and minimize my contact with the doctor: here we go, hey, thanks, goodbye.

5 In the morning I dressed the kids in clean clothes. (There, I thought, we don't look poor.) On the way to Meijer, the boys jumped in puddles, soaking themselves to the waist. With mud.

6 The lady behind the service counter couldn't find my basket but had a good idea where it went. "There's an Asian woman who doesn't speak English," she said. "I bet she put it all back." I ran around the store grabbing snow boots, dress shirts and socks I chose the night before.

7 While we waited by the entrance, my littlest guy climbed out of the cart and started hopping up and down while watching himself on a security monitor. I knew this dance; it meant I had about 10 minutes before he had a meltdown. I thought about leaving; maybe my father would give me more money. But then I saw Sammy, who never complains, just sitting bleary-eyed in the cart, tolerating his boredom.

8 When the doctor arrived, he looked as kind and reassuring as he sounded on the phone. He greeted me and introduced a lanky teenager: "This is my son, Jack." He didn't tell Jack my name or introduce my kids. I shook Jack's hand before he retreated a safe distance behind his father, eyeballing my kids and me. I could not imagine why the doctor brought him along.

9 Once we were in line, I tried to keep the kids quiet; the doctor smiled and blinked at me. I talked nonstop, peppering Jack with polite questions: "What school do you go to? Do you play sports?" He gazed at the ground in my general direction. Occasionally he spat out a one-word answer. This stage of growing up is so awkward. I wondered who had it worse that morning, Jack or I.

10 The doctor showed me the forms we had to fill out. By mistake, he also handed me a set of instructions for how to facilitate this "encounter." At the top, it said: "DO NOT OFFER TRANSPORTATION TO THE CLIENTS." I looked at him in disbelief and repeated it aloud. *Do not offer transportation to the clients?* The doctor just shrugged. I couldn't tell if he was as embarrassed as I was, or if he had any idea how hard it was to accept charity.

11 Our cashier didn't know how to process my forms. After the manager showed her how, I realized I'd overshot my limit, so the cashier called the manager back for an override. The line behind us had grown long with frustrated shoppers, all of whom I assumed intended to pay for their purchases. Everyone stood in an uncomfortable silence—except my boys, who pestered me for some water and got way too close to the doctor. I fantasized about adopting a hillbilly accent and shouting, "Now you kids shut

up er Santa ain't coming!" Finally we were done. Gabriel was clinging to me and chanting, "I want a drink." The doctor and his son said goodbye and hightailed it out of there.

Back at home, a friend called. I couldn't shake the feeling that the doctor used me as an example. "For what?" she asked when I told her. "I'm not even sure," I said. To make his son grateful? To put a face on poverty? Realistically, the doctor could have just been on his way to drop his son somewhere, but now I was angry. At my soon-to-be ex-husband. At the polarized society we live in where the working poor voted themselves into deeper poverty while the rich still coast. Despite the doctor's best intentions, I felt scrutinized—especially with his son there to witness my inability to buy my own kids their damn socks. 12

"You are under an incredible amount of stress," my friend insisted. "I hardly remember most of my divorce." 13

With luck, niether will I. 14

Questions for Close Reading

1. What is the selection's thesis? Locate the sentence(s) in which Gholson states her main idea. If she doesn't state her thesis explicitly, express it in your own words.
2. What is the internal conflict that Gholson experiences in her encounters with the doctor?
3. In paragraph 10, the author sees one of the instructions the doctor has been given: "Do not offer transportation to the clients." Why does she react to this warning "in disbelief"?
4. What does the title of the essay mean? Why does Gholson use a question mark?
5. Refer to your dictionary as needed to define the following words used in the selection: *humiliation* (paragraph 3), *expedite* (4), *lanky* (8), *facilitate* (10), *polarized* (12), and *scrutinized* (12).

Questions About the Writer's Craft

1. **The pattern.** How does Gholson organize the events in this essay? What transitional words and phrases does she use to keep the reader oriented as her story progresses?
2. **Other patterns.** In some passages, Gholson *describes* the behavior of her sons. What do these descriptions contribute to the narrative?
3. In paragraphs 3, 4, 5, and elsewhere, Gholson tells us her thoughts. What effect do these sections have on the pace of the narrative? How do they affect our understanding of what is happening?
4. There are several places in this essay in which Gholson uses dialogue. Find one of these places, and explain why the use of dialogue is (or is not) effective. What function does the dialogue have?

Writing Assignments Using Narration as a Pattern of Development



1. All of us have experienced humiliation at some point, and for Gholson, being the object of charity was such an experience. Think of an experience from your own life that made you feel humiliated. It might have been an important experience, like completely flubbing a performance in front of a hundred people, or a minor experience, like having an assignment criticized by an instructor. Write a narrative of this experience. Be sure to discuss your thoughts and feelings as well as the actions involved in the story. Before writing, consider reading Audre Lorde's "The Fourth of July" (page 208), another account of a painful realization.
2. Write a narrative about a time in your life in which you needed help from others, and explain how this made you feel. The experience might have been painful, like Gholson's, or empowering, or somewhere in between. Use either flashback or flashforward to emphasize an event in your narrative.

Writing Assignments Combining Patterns of Development



3. In paragraph 9, Gholson describes how she tried to keep up a conversation with Jack as they waited in line to pay for her purchases. The conversation lacked any real content or exchange of information, but for Gholson it had other functions. Write an essay in which you describe the *causes* and *effects* of Gholson's effort to carry on a polite conversation. Why did Gholson try to engage Jack even though he was uncommunicative? What were the *results* of her attempts at conversation? *Compare* and *contrast* Gholson's approach to this interaction with Jack's. Are the differences between them related to gender? To age? To the social situation? To gain another perspective on obstacles to communication, read "Euromail and Amerimail" by Eric Weiner (page 375).



4. Warm the Children, the charitable group helping Gholson's sons, is an organization dedicated to providing clothes to needy children. Research this organization or another charitable organization on the Internet, and write an essay analyzing the *process* involved in participating in it and *persuading* others to join it.



Writing Assignment Using a Journal Entry as a Starting Point

5. Review your pre-reading journal entry, in which you *recounted* a time that you either volunteered your time or donated money to a cause. *Compare* your story

to that of the doctor in Gholson's essay. How did your experience differ from his? How was it similar? If you were to give time or money again, would you do so the same way, or would you do it differently? Why?



ADDITIONAL WRITING TOPICS: NARRATION

General Assignments

Write an essay on any of the following topics, using narration as the paper's dominant method of development. Be sure to select details that advance the essay's narrative purpose; you may even want to experiment with flashback or flashforward. In any case, keep the sequence of events clear by using transitional cues. Within the limited time span covered, use vigorous details and varied sentence structure to enliven the narrative. Tell the story from a consistent point of view.

1. An emergency that brought out the best or worst in you
2. The hazards of taking children out to eat
3. An incident that made you believe in fate
4. Your best or worst day at school or work
5. A major decision
6. An encounter with a machine
7. An important learning experience
8. A narrow escape
9. Your first date, first day on the job, or first anything
10. A memorable childhood experience
11. A fairy tale the way you would like to hear it told
12. A painful moment
13. An incredible but true story
14. A significant family event
15. An experience in which a certain emotion (pride, anger, regret, or some other) was dominant
16. A surprising coincidence
17. An act of heroism
18. An unpleasant confrontation
19. A cherished family story
20. An imagined meeting with an admired celebrity or historical figure

Assignments with a Specific Purpose, Audience, and Point of View

On Campus

1. Write an article for your old high school newspaper. The article will be read primarily by seniors who are planning to go away to college next year. In the article, narrate a story that points to some truth about the “breaking away” stage of life.
2. A friend of yours has seen someone cheat on a test, plagiarize an entire paper, or seriously violate some other academic policy. In a letter, convince this friend to inform the instructor or a campus administrator by narrating an incident in which a witness did (or did not) speak up in such a situation. Tell what happened as a result.

At Home or in the Community

3. You have had a disturbing encounter with one of the people who seems to have “fallen through the cracks” of society—a street person, an unwanted child, or anyone else who is alone and abandoned. Write a letter to the local newspaper describing this encounter. Your purpose is to arouse people’s indignation and compassion and to get help for such unfortunates.
4. Your younger brother, sister, relative, or neighborhood friend can’t wait to be your age. Write a letter in which you narrate a dramatic story that shows the young person that your age isn’t as wonderful as he or she thinks. Be sure to select a story that the person can understand and appreciate.

On the Job

5. As fund-raiser for a particular organization (for example, Red Cross, SPCA, Big Brothers/Big Sisters), you’re sending a newsletter to contributors. Support your cause by telling the story of a time when your organization made all the difference—the blood donation that saved a life, the animal that was rescued from abuse, and so on.
6. A customer has written a letter to you (or your boss) telling about a bad experience that he or she had with someone in your workplace. On the basis of that single experience, the customer now regards your company and its employees with great suspicion. It’s your responsibility to respond to this complaint. Write a letter to the customer balancing his or her negative picture by narrating a story that shows the “flip side” of your company and its employees.