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NARRATION
Recalling Childhood

You **narrate** every time you tell a story about something that happened. Narration helps us make sense of events and share our experiences with others; consequently, it is one of the longest-standing and most essential methods of communicating. (As the writer Joan Didion famously put it, "We tell stories in order to live.") You can use narration to entertain friends by retelling an amusing or a scary experience, to explain the sequence of events in a chemistry experiment, to summarize a salesclerk's actions in a letter complaining about bad customer service, to explain what went wrong in a ball game, or to persuade skeptics by means of several stories that the forestry industry is sincere about restoring clear-cut forests. Storytelling is instinctive to the ways we think and speak; it's no surprise, then, that narration should figure into so much of what we read and write.

Reading Narration

Narration relates a sequence of events that are linked in time. By arranging events in an orderly progression, a narrative illuminates the stages leading to a result. Sometimes the emphasis is on the story itself, as in fiction, biography, autobiography, some history, and much journalism. But often a narrative serves some larger point, as when a paragraph or a brief story about an innocent person's death helps to strengthen an argument for stricter

handling of drunk drivers. When used as a primary means of developing an essay, such pointed narration usually relates a sequence of events that led to new knowledge or had a notable outcome. The point of the narrative—the idea the reader is to take away—then determines the selection of events, the amount of detail devoted to them, and their arrangement.

Though narration arranges events in time, narrative time is not real time. An important event may fill whole pages, even though it took only minutes to unfold; a less important event may be dispensed with in a sentence, even though it lasted for hours. Suppose, for instance, that a writer wants to narrate the experience of being mugged in order to show how courage came unexpectedly to his aid. He might provide a slow-motion account of the few minutes' encounter with the muggers, including vivid details of the setting and of the attackers' appearance, a moment-by-moment replay of his emotions, and exact dialogue. At the same time, he will compress events that merely fill in background or link main events, such as how he got to the scene of the mugging or the follow-up questioning by a police detective. And he will entirely omit many events, such as a conversation overheard at the police station, that have no significance for his point.

The point of a narrative influences not only which events are covered and how fully but also how the events are arranged. There are several possibilities:

- A straight chronological sequence is most common because it relates events in the order of their actual occurrence. It is particularly useful for short narratives, for those in which the last event is the most dramatic, or for those in which the events preceding and following the climax contribute to the point being made.
- The final event, such as a self-revelation, may come first, followed by an explanation of the events leading up to it.
- The entire story may be summarized first and then examined in detail.
- **Flashbacks**—shifts backward rather than forward in time—may recall events whose significance would not have been apparent earlier. Flashbacks are common in movies and fiction: a character in the midst of one scene mentally replays another.

In addition to providing a clear organization, writers also strive to adopt a consistent **point of view**, a position relative to the events, conveyed in two main ways:

- Pronouns indicate the storyteller's place in the story: the first-person *I* if the narrator is a direct participant; the third-person *he, she, it,* or *they* if the writer is observing or reporting.
- Verb tense indicates the writer's relation in time to the sequence of events: present (*is, run*) or past (*was, ran*).

Combining the first-person pronoun with the present tense can create great immediacy ("I feel the point of the knife in my back"). At the other extreme, combining third-person pronouns with the past tense creates more distance and objectivity ("He felt the point of the knife in his back"). In between these extremes are combinations of first person with past tense ("I felt . . .") or third person with present tense ("He feels . . ."). The choice depends on how involved the writer is in the events and on his or her purpose.

Analyzing Narration in Paragraphs

Michael Ondaatje (born 1943) is a poet, fiction writer, essayist, and filmmaker. The following paragraph is from *Running in the Family* (1982), Ondaatje's memoir of his childhood in Ceylon, now called Sri Lanka, off the southern tip of India.

After my father died, a grey cobra came into the house. My stepmother loaded the gun and fired at point blank range. The gun jammed. She stepped back and reloaded but by then the snake had slid out into the garden. For the next month this snake would often come into the house and each time the gun would misfire or jam, or my stepmother would miss at absurdly short range. The snake attacked no one and had a tendency to follow my younger sister Susan around. Other snakes entering the house were killed by the shotgun, lifted with a long stick and flicked into the bushes, but the old grey cobra led a charmed life. Finally one of the old workers at Rock Hill told my stepmother what had become obvious, that it was my father who had come to protect his family. And in fact, whether it was because the chicken farm closed down or because of my father's presence in the form of a snake, very few other snakes came into the house again.

Chronological order

Past tense

Transitions (underlined)

Point of view: participant

Purpose: to relate a colorful, mysterious story

Donald Hall (born 1928) served as poet laureate of the United States from 2006 to 2007. He is also an award-winning essayist, critic, playwright, and children's author. The following paragraph comes from his memoir *Unpacking the Boxes* (2008).

Memory is stronger when it recalls transgression. I played with a neighbor boy while a repairman worked on the kitchen refrigerator, which had a white coil at its top. The repairman's dented Model T, cut down to a pickup, stood beside the kitchen door on two narrow strips of breaking-apart cement. My playmate and I lifted chunks of concrete onto the pickup's bed. My mother, peeking out the screen door, issued a reprimand, and my friend and I set to undo the crime. I stood in the truck bed lifting chunks down to my accomplice, who wore an Indian headdress. I stood above the boy looking down on his head surrounded by feathers, and carefully dropped a large lump of concrete onto his skull. Oh, the bliss of targeting a head circled by feathers! He howled and ran home; I was sent to my room.

Chronological order

Past tense

Transitions (underlined)

Point of view: direct participant

Purpose: to express the joy of getting into trouble

Developing a Narrative Essay

Getting Started

You'll find narration useful whenever relating a sequence of events can help you make a point, sometimes to support the thesis of a larger paper, sometimes as the thesis of a paper. If you're assigned a narrative essay, probe your own experiences for a situation such as an argument involving strong emotion, a humorous or embarrassing incident, a dramatic scene you witnessed, or a learning experience like a job. If you have the opportunity to do research, you might choose a topic dealing with the natural world (such as the Big Bang scenario for the origin of the universe) or an event in history or politics (such as how a local activist worked to close down an animal-research lab).

Explore your subject by listing all the events in sequence as they happened. At this stage you may find the traditional journalist's questions helpful:

- Who was involved?
- What happened?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?
- Why did it happen?
- How did it happen?

These questions will lead you to examine your subject from all angles. Then you need to decide which events should be developed in great detail because they are central to your story; which merit compression because they merely contribute background or tie the main events together; and which should be omitted altogether because they are irrelevant to the story or might clutter your narrative.

While you are weighing the relative importance of events, consider also what your readers need to know in order to understand and appreciate your narrative.

- What information will help locate readers in the narrative's time and place?
- How will you expand and compress events to keep readers' attention?
- What details about people, places, and feelings will make the events vivid for readers?
- What is your attitude toward the subject—lighthearted, sarcastic, bitter, serious?—and how will you convey it to readers in your choice of events and details?
- What should your point of view be? Do you want to involve readers intimately by using the first person and the present tense? Or does that seem overdramatic, less appropriate than the more detached, objective view that would be conveyed by the past tense or the third person or both?

Forming a Thesis

Whatever your subject, you should have some point to make about it: Why was the incident or experience significant? What does it teach or illustrate? If you can, phrase this point in a sentence before you start to draft. For instance:

> I used to think small-town life was boring, but one taste of the city made me appreciate the leisurely pace of home.

> A recent small earthquake demonstrated the hazards of inadequate civil defense measures.

Sometimes you may need to draft your story before the point of it becomes clear to you, especially if the experience had a personal impact or if the event was so recent that writing a draft will allow you to gain some perspective.

Whether to state your main point outright in your essay, as a thesis sentence, depends on the effect you want to have on readers. You might use your introduction to lead to a statement of your thesis so that readers will know from the start why you are telling them your story. Then again, to intensify the drama of your story, you might decide to withhold your thesis sentence for the conclusion or omit it altogether. Remember, though, that the thesis must be evident to readers even if it isn't stated: the narrative needs a point.

Organizing

Narrative essays often begin without formal introductions, instead drawing the reader in with one of the more dramatic events in the sequence. But you may find an introduction useful to set the scene for your narrative, to summarize the events leading up to it, to establish the context for it, or to lead in to a thesis statement if you want readers to know the point of your story before they start reading it.

The arrangement of events in the body of your essay depends on the actual order in which they occurred and the point you want to make. To narrate a trip during which one thing after another went wrong, you might find a strict chronological order most effective. To narrate an earthquake that began and ended in an instant, you might sort simultaneous events into groups—say, what happened to buildings and what happened to people—or you might arrange a few people's experiences in order of increasing drama. To narrate your experience of city life, you might interweave events in the city with contrasting flashbacks to your life in a small town, or you might start by relating one especially bad experience in the city, drop back to explain how you ended up in that situation, and then go on to tell what happened afterward. Narrative time can be manipulated in any number of ways, but your scheme should have a purpose that your readers can see, and you should stick to it.

Let the ending of your essay be determined by the effect you want to leave with readers. You can end with the last event in your sequence, or the one you have saved for last, if it conveys your point and provides a strong finish. Or you can summarize the aftermath of the story if it contributes to the point. You can also end with a formal conclusion that states your point—your thesis—explicitly. Such a conclusion is especially useful if your point unfolds gradually throughout the narrative and you want to emphasize it at the finish.

Drafting

Drafting a narrative can be less of a struggle than drafting other kinds of papers, especially if you're close to the events and you use a straight chronological order. But the relative ease of storytelling can be misleading if it causes you to describe events too quickly or write without making a point. While drafting, be as specific as possible. Tell what the people in your narrative were wearing, what expressions their faces held, how they gestured, what they said. Specify the time of day, and describe the weather and the surroundings (buildings, vegetation, and the like). All these details may be familiar to you, but they won't be to your readers.

At the same time, try to remain open to what the story means to you, so that you can convey that meaning in your selection and description of events. If you know before you begin what your thesis is, let it guide you. But the first draft may turn out to be a search for your thesis, so that you'll need another draft to make it evident in the way you relate events.

In your draft you may want to experiment with dialogue—quotations of what participants said, in their words. Dialogue can add immediacy and realism as long as it advances the narrative and doesn't ramble beyond its usefulness. In reconstructing dialogue from memory, try to recall not only the actual words but also the sounds of speakers' voices and the expressions on their faces—information that will help you represent each speaker distinctly. And keep the dialogue natural sounding by using constructions typical of speech. For instance, most speakers prefer contractions such as *don't* and *shouldn't* to the longer forms *do not* and *should not;* and few speakers begin sentences with *although*, as in the formal-sounding "Although we could hear our mother's voice, we refused to answer her."

Whether you are relating events in strict chronological order or manipulating them for some effect, try to make their sequence in real time and the distance between them clear to readers. Instead of signaling

sequence with the monotonous *and then . . . and then . . . and then* or *next . . . next . . . next,* use informative transitions that signal the order of events (*afterward, earlier*), the duration of events (*for an hour, in that time*), or the amount of time between events (*the next morning, a week later*). (See the Glossary under *transitions* for a list of such expressions.)

Revising and Editing

When your draft is complete, revise and edit it by answering the following questions and considering the information in the box below.

- *Is the point of your narrative clear, and does every event you relate contribute to it?* Whether or not you state your thesis, it should be obvious to readers. They should be able to see why you have lingered over some events and compressed others, and they should not be distracted by insignificant events and details.
- *Is your organization clear?* Be sure that your readers will understand any shifts backward or forward in time.

FOCUS ON VERBS

Narration depends heavily on verbs to clarify and enliven events. Weak verbs, such as forms of *make* and *be,* can sap the life from a story. Strong verbs sharpen meaning and engage readers:

WEAK The wind made an awful noise.
STRONG The wind roared around the house and rattled the trees.

WEAK The noises were alarming to us.
STRONG The noises alarmed us.

Keep in mind that verbs in the active voice (the subject does the action) usually pack more power than verbs in the passive voice (the subject is acted upon). While strengthening your verbs, also ensure that they're consistent in tense. See page 51 for a discussion of passive versus active voice and page 50 for advice on avoiding shifts in tense.

▶ To practice editing for weak and passive verbs, visit Exercise Central at *bedfordstmartins.com/rewriting*.

- *Have you used transitions to help readers follow the sequence of events?* Transitions such as *meanwhile* or *soon afterward* serve a dual purpose: they keep the reader on track, and they link sentences and paragraphs so that they flow smoothly. (For more information, see pp. 36 and 38 and the Glossary under *transitions.*)
- *If you have used dialogue, is it purposeful and natural?* Be sure all quoted speech moves the action ahead. And read all dialogue aloud to check that it sounds like something someone would actually say.

A Note on Thematic Connections

All the authors in this chapter saw reasons to articulate key events in their childhoods, and for that purpose narration is the obvious choice. Michael Ondaatje, in a paragraph, recalls his stepmother's inability to kill a cobra, perhaps because it embodied his dead father (p. 65). Donald Hall, in another paragraph, remembers hurting a playmate remorselessly (p. 66). Annie Dillard's essay recounts the ecstasy of being chased by an adult for pelting his car with a snowball (next page), while Langston Hughes pinpoints the moment during a church revival when he lost his faith (p. 78). And Kaela Hobby-Reichstein's narrative recalls some disturbing girlhood experiences with racism (p. 83).