I. What is a Narrative Essay?

To begin, let’s examine the first half of the title: the narrative. This is probably the type of writing with which you are most familiar, both as a reader and a writer. At its core, a narrative is a story, and most of us were raised on stories, from children’s books to the novels and short stories we read today, both for class and for pleasure. Most of us have also been writing or dictating narratives of one form or another since we began to connect words into sentences. Think back to first grade when you drew the pictures on the top half of the page and wrote the accompanying story down below in the large blue lines that helped you keep your letters consistently sized. You were writing narratives.

A narrative has a beginning, middle, and an end. It is governed by plot, it moves through events, usually in a rough chronological order, and one thing seems to follow another in some logical sequence. But what makes the difference between a simple story and a narrative essay? Like all other essays, the narrative essay is composition in which the author is trying to make a point. (That point will become your thesis.) A story isn't really worth writing about unless there is some larger truth the reader can learn from the events themselves. There must be movement or growth from the beginning to the end; things are not the same at the end of the tale as they were at the beginning. It should also be evident that the writer has given thought to the relationship between the events of the narrative. This reflection on and careful reconstruction of events is what makes for a good narrative essay.

II. What Are the Components of a Good Narrative Essay?

**Appropriate Topic Selection:** Pick an event that you can transform into an engaging story. The scope of this event should not be too broad or too narrow. An example of a topic too broad for a 2-3 page essay would be your *entire* experience at summer camp one year, while one too narrow might be a short conversation with another person. Keep the length of your assignment in mind when you select a topic.

In addition to picking a topic of appropriate scope, also be sure that you are writing a narrative essay, not a description. For example, the subject of a descriptive essay could be, “When I was a kid, I always used to ride my bike around the neighborhood….”; a narrative essay topic, in contrast, might be, “Once when I was five, I rode my bike …”) and something significant happened on that one particular bike ride. The topic should be a specific, one-time event with a distinct beginning, middle, and end.

Finally, for the purposes of a narrative essay, you must pick an event in which you were a key player. Do not narrate something that happened in your absence, or in which you were a very minor presence.
Appropriate Point of View: If you are writing fiction, you can choose in whose shoes you will stand to tell the story. With the nonfiction narrative essay, however, you must use the first person, "I," since you are a key player in the action and your viewpoint is the lens through which your reader will see the experience.

Element of Conflict: A good story includes some kind of conflict, some complication that the protagonist (main character) runs up against. This doesn't necessarily have to be an external struggle between two people; it could also be an internal conflict (e.g. the struggle going on inside of the protagonist between what he/she wants as an individual and what he/she knows is best for the larger community). Often in a narrative essay, an external conflict serves to bring a lingering internal conflict to a crisis point.

Climax: The climax of a story is defined as the place at which the conflict comes to a point of crisis, a high point in the tension, an important turning point. After this high point, the narrative has some kind of resolution. However, resolution does not mean everything has to wrap up happily and neatly. Nonetheless, there does need to be a sense of having arrived at a new level of understanding or awareness.

Selection of Significant Details: When you write about your event, you will not include every little thing that happened. A narrative is not an exact transcription. It is up to you to determine which of the many parts of the experience are important. But how do you make that choice? This is where the thesis comes in. What are you trying to illustrate with your story? Which of the details are essential to getting that idea across? Keep those. Which parts are unrelated to, even distracting from the main idea? Omit those.

Pacing: Selecting the significant details is essential, but it is also important to think about how you move through the event in the retelling. You may spend one sentence breezily summarizing a week in which not much happened, and then invest four paragraphs on a five-minute interaction or event, if that is the heart of the experience. It is also important to think about the order in which you present the events, saving the key, climactic episode for last. This is called "climactic sequencing."

Use of Descriptive Writing: While the rhetorical mode here is narrative, a good story also makes use of description. When a character or setting is introduced, by all means, do some of the "show not tell" writing you have learned in previous years. But do so only if the idea about that person or place you are conveying in some way relates to the point of your story. Be careful not to let the descriptive mode take over the narrative.

Use of Appropriate Dialogue: Although not required, most stories include the actual words of people involved in the event--fragments of conversations that actually happened. Dialogue can enhance the reader's sense of "being there" in the moment with the narrator. Be careful, however, not to put in dialogue for the sake of having dialogue. Just as you select significant details, so too should you select only significant verbatim snippets of dialogue. Dull dialogue is an instant turn off. What if you can't remember the
exact words? Don't worry, so long as you are true to the voice of the speaker and content of what was said.

**Clear Narrative Thesis:** Finally, don't forget to include a clear narrative thesis in your essay. Why does a narrative essay need a clear thesis? While in the world of the novel, you will find few authors who actually write out their point, the essayist is more likely to include an explicit thesis. Even the best professional essayists may hint at their point, if not lay it out there directly. As a relative beginner at this form, it is important for you to write out your thesis for several reasons: First, it forces you to actually have a point in mind! Many a young writer will tell the story beautifully, but lack the reflection upon, the analysis of the event that gives the story significance beyond his/her personal experience. Second, it is ensures that your reader will get the point that you have in mind. Third, if there is a big gap between what your peer reader seems to think the story suggests and what your thesis asserts, he/she can give you that feedback and help you to revise the essay to bring the story and thesis into closer alignment.

**What Is a “Generalized Thesis” and Why Do I Want One?**
A generalized thesis is one in which you word your point in terms that apply outside of just your own personal experience. For example, in an essay about your week at summer camp, the point of your story might be, in personal terms: “My week at camp showed me that despite my initial fears, I am now able to get along without my parents.” This is undoubtedly a very important part of your camp experience, but that won’t mean too much for readers who don’t know you, your parents, or camp life very well. Consider broadening it to appeal to a wider audience, outside the immediate context of summer camp. “Children develop independence when they are removed from the protective rules and support structures of their parents.” Now what you are saying applies to other people besides you, and could be true of other situations beyond just summer camp.

Another benefit of writing the thesis in this “generalized” way is that it can help you to get to an even deeper point of understanding and analysis of the events described in the narrative. For example, with the above thesis, one might ask further questions: “Why is it so? What is it about the camp environment that allows for growth and independence while the child is still young and in need of supervision? The writer can then delve back into the experience to try to come up with an even more thoughtful, less self-evident thesis. “Although children aren’t ready to be on their own until late adolescence, earlier experiences that take them out of their well known environments and force them to form new support systems help lay the foundations of future independence.”

This general point will be illustrated by the essay, in which you narrate your specific camp experience. As with most types of essays, the specific example should prove the general point or thesis.

**One Word of Warning:**
A thesis is not the same thing as a moral. Try not to get preachy in your conclusion. “You should always appreciate what you have in life,” “People need to be more accepting of
others.” Not only are these cliché, they probably don’t reflect the story as accurately as a more thoughtfully considered, less absolute thesis would.

**III. How Do I Organize My Narrative?**

There are no hard, fast rules for organizing the narrative essay, no formulaic outline into which you can plug in topic sentences. For many, that is the appeal of this mode; for other, the frustration. What we can offer here are some general guidelines. Each story lends itself to a different order.

**Getting Started...**"It was a dark and stormy night..." Perhaps more so than in other modes of writing, it is essential to draw your reader in with an engaging opening line. When people hear "narrative," they think story; they want to be engaged (not to be confused with humored, though your story may have a humorous tone). The best way to see what works is to open a lot of narratives around your house or library and see what professional authors use to draw in their readers. Jumping right into the action or conversation often works in narrative essays, then stepping back to give more of a context.

**Organization and Chronology:** Think in terms of climactic sequence: What is the most important part of the experience? Put that toward the end, right before the resolution and thesis, and work backward from there. If you want to set the stage with a general summary, background, or descriptive writing, that should go toward the beginning.

**Paragraph Structure/Paragraph Changes:** In general, authors of narratives start new paragraphs when something changes:

- speaker changes
- characters change (especially entrances of new people)
- place of action changes (characters move to a new setting)
- time of action changes; time passes, leaves a gap
- action changes (purpose or focus of action)
- mode changes (from retelling to reflecting on action)

**Wrapping Up:** In the narrative essay, the thesis is generally given at or toward the end of the paper, after the reader has had a chance to experience the event through the lens of the narrator. Summary of the story should be limited to that which is necessary to effectively deliver the thesis. Try to end with a punch, with a sense of finality. This may or may not be your actual thesis statement.