CHAPTER 6
Strategies for Personal Writing: Narration

Clicking off the evening news and padding toward bed, Heloise suddenly glimpsed, out of the corner of her eye, a shadow stretching across the living room floor from under the drawn curtains.

"Wh—who’s there?"
No response.
Edging backwards toward the phone, her eyes riveted on the shadow, she stammered, “I—I don’t have any money.”
Still no answer.
Reaching the phone, she gripped the receiver and started to lift it from its cradle. Just then she heard a noise. . . .

If you want to know what happens next, the above narrative has begun to weave its spell. A narrative relates a series of events that may be real—as in histories, biographies, or news stories—or imaginary, as in short stories and novels. Television sitcoms and mysteries, video games, movies, and even commercials use stories to draw us in, making us want to know what happens next. No doubt, you have responded to stories almost from the time you began to talk. As a child, as soon as you heard the words “Once upon a time,” you probably leaned forward to listen closely, your eyes glowing. As adults, we gossip about people we may or may not know, tell friends about odd or distressing events we have experienced, and report stories we have read about on social media. Good speeches are usually enlivened with relevant stories.
CHAPTER 6
STRATEGIES FOR PERSONAL WRITING: NARRATION

The writing we do for school and work may use short narratives to hook the reader in or illustrate a point we are making. You might also be asked to write essays based on narratives. In an English class, you may be asked to research the story of how a novelist lived and wrote. In a psychology class, you might study or write a case history, or your history instructor might have you recap the events leading to a major war. At work, a police officer may record the events leading to an arrest, a scientist may recount the development of a research project, and a department manager may prepare a brief history of an employee’s work problems.

PURPOSE

Most narratives do not simply tell what happened or recite a series of events, but instead they make a point or have a purpose. The point can be stated or implied, but it always shapes the writing. Narratives of history and biography delve into the motives underlying the events and lives they portray, while narratives of personal experience offer lessons and insights. They often reveal a change, or shift in perspective, from the beginning of the story to the end. In the following conclusion to a narrative about an encounter with a would-be mugger, the writer reveals his understanding of the meaning of self-respect.

I kept my self-respect, even at the cost of dirtying my fists with violence, and I feel that I understand the Irish and the Cypriots, the Israelis and the Palestinians, all those who seem to us to fight senseless wars for senseless reasons, better than before. For what respect does one keep for oneself if one isn’t in the last resort ready to fight and say, “You punk!”?

Harry Fairlie, “A Victim Fights Back”

ACTION

Action plays a central role in any narrative. Some writing tells about action that has happened offstage. Sometimes, gaps remain to stimulate readers’ imaginations:

A hundred thousand people were killed by the atomic bomb, and these six were among the survivors. They still wonder why they lived when so many others died. Each of them counts many small items of chance or volition—a step taken in time, a decision to go indoors, catching one streetcar instead of the next—that spared him. And now each knows that in the act of survival he lived a dozen lives and saw more death than he ever thought he would see. At the time, none of them knew anything.

John Hersey, Hiroshima

This passage suggests a great deal of action—the flash of an exploding bomb, the collapse of buildings, screaming people fleeing. However, because it does not recreate the action moment by moment, it does not pull the reader directly into the scene as the following narration from Charles Dickens’ novel Great Expectations does:

. . . Passing on into the front court-yard, I hesitated whether to call the woman to let me out at the locked gate of which she had the key, or first to go up-stairs and assure myself that Miss Havisham was as safe and well as I had left her. I took the latter course and went up. I looked into the room where I had left her, and I saw her seated in the ragged chair upon the hearth close to the fire, with her back towards me. In the moment when I was
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withdrawing my head to go quietly away, I saw a great flaming light spring up. In the same moment, I saw her running at me, shrieking, with a whirl of fire blazing all about her, and soaring at least as many feet above her head as she was high.

I had a double-caped great-coat on, and over my arm another thick coat. That I got them off, closed with her, threw her down, and got them over her; that I dragged the great cloth from the table for the same purpose, and with it dragged down the heap of rottenness in the midst, and all the ugly things that sheltered there; that we were on the ground struggling like desperate enemies, and that the closer I covered her, the more wildly she shrieked and tried to free herself; that this occurred I knew through the result, but not through anything I felt, or thought, or knew I did. I knew nothing until I knew that we were on the floor by the great table, and that patches of tinder yet alight were floating in the smoky air, which, a moment ago, had been her faded bridal dress.

Then, I looked round and saw the disturbed beetles and spiders running away over the floor, and the servants coming in with breathless cries at the door. I still held her forcibly down with all my strength, like a prisoner who might escape; and I doubt if I even knew who she was, or why we had struggled, or that she had been in flames, or that the flames were out, until I saw the patches of tinder that had been her garments, no longer alight but falling in a black shower around us.

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

Dickens’ description of a struggle between a young man and a very disturbed elderly woman in flames conveys a vivid moment-to-moment replay of action that is so terrifying as to seem unreal. Of course, narrative action is not always this dramatic, and often refers to more ordinary events—such as a long, patient wait that comes to nothing, or an unexpected kiss after some friendly assistance. It may also convey the dramatic tension of an inner struggle. In all cases, the narrative action should contribute to a larger point.

Conflict

In narrative writing, conflict and its resolution, if any, usually motivate and often structure the action. Some conflicts pit one individual against another or against a group, such as a company or institution. In other cases, the conflict may be between a person and the elements of nature. Often, the conflict is an inner one that involves clashing impulses inside one person’s mind.

In the following excerpt from the beginning of an essay, note how the student writer sets out an inner conflict that she has had about accepting and appreciating her name.

While I sit here at my desk, trying to think of something to write about for my English class, I begin by typing my name at the top right hand corner of the page. I frown as I read the words “Gurminder Khun Khun.” All I can think of is past memories of children at school mocking my name as they chanted, “Gur-Hindu, and Gurbinder.” I remember the unbearable feeling as the teacher would read out the list of names from the attendance list. She would call out “Jeremy Jingson, Brandon Klame,” pause for a few seconds and call out “Gurminder Khoon Khoon.” As I stare at the computer screen, I notice that the Microsoft Word program underlines my name in pink, suggesting that my name is a typo. I enjoy being simple, so why on earth did I get such an embarrassing
name? As I sit here pondering several negative thoughts about my given name, a flashback quickly fills my mind.

I am ten years old and sitting at the kitchen table. My mother is filling out passport application forms and our birth certificates are spread out on the wooden table. I pick up my green birth certificate that is in a plastic case. I sigh as I read the words “Gurminder Kaur Khun Khun.”

As I rub my finger over the plastic cover, frowning, I say, “I hate my name. It’s so embarrassing. Why couldn’t I get a prettier name? Like Gurina, Sabrina, or Kelly, just like Mom did.”

My grandmother, who is also sitting at the table, frowns, puts down her tea cup, and says, “You have a beautiful name. There is so much meaning and value attached to your name.”

Gurminder Khun Khun, student, “What’s in a Name?”

For some narrative writing, as in the essay excerpted above, it might be helpful to think of conflict in terms of an unresolved problem with which the narrator struggles. Tension builds until the ending, which may suggest a solution to the problem.

**POINT OF VIEW**

Narrative writers may adopt either a first-person or a third-person point of view. In first-person narratives, one of the participants tells what happened, whereas a third-person narrator tells the story from an outside perspective. Narratives you write about yourself use the first person, as do autobiographies. Biographies and histories use the third person, and fiction may employ either point of view.

In first-person narration, pronouns such as I, me, mine, we, and ours identify the storyteller. Often, the immediacy of first-person narration enhances reader identification. In contrast, the third-person narrator usually stays behind the scenes, quietly shaping events and selecting details. Although the use of third-person narration creates more distance between reader and characters, this narrator can move more freely in time and space.

**First-Person Narration**

It was a lovely and windless evening, and the birds were twittering, and the trees in the orchard near the road were golden in the late sunlight, and the purple milkweed flowers that grew beside the drive smelled very sweetly; and also the last few peonies beside the verandah, and the climbing roses; and the coolness came down out of the air, while Jamie sat and played on his flute. . . . After a while McDermott came skulking around the side of the house like a tamed wolf, and leant against the side of the house, and listened also. And there we were, in a kind of harmony; and the evening was so beautiful, that it made a pain in my heart, as when you cannot tell whether you are happy or sad; and I thought that if I could have a wish, it would be that nothing would ever change. . . .

Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*
Third-Person Narration

People driving by don’t notice Spit Delaney. His old gas station is nearly hidden now behind the firs he’s let grow up along the road, and he doesn’t bother to whitewash the scalloped row of half-tires someone planted once instead of fence. And rushing by on the Island highway today, heading north or south, there’s little chance that anyone will notice Spit Delaney seated on the big rock at the side of his road-end, scratching at his narrow chest, or hear him muttering to the flat grey highway and to the scrubby firs and to the useless old ears of his neighbour’s dog that he’ll be damned if he can figure out what it is that is happening to him.

Jack Hodgins, “Separating”

KEY EVENTS

Any narrative includes many separate events, enough to swamp your narrative boat if you try to pack them all in. Suppose that you wish to write about your recent attack of appendicitis to make a point about heeding early warnings of an oncoming illness. Your list of events might look like this:

- Awakened
- Showered
- Experienced acute but passing pain in abdomen
- Dressed
- Ate breakfast
- Opened garage door
- Started car
- Drove to work
- Parked in employee lot
- Entered building
- Greeted fellow employees
- Began morning’s work
- Felt nauseated
- Met with boss
- Took coffee break
- Visited bathroom
- Experienced more prolonged pain in abdomen
- Ate lunch
- Returned to work
- Began afternoon’s work
- Collapsed at workstation
- Was rushed to hospital
- Underwent diagnostic tests
- Had emergency operation

A narrative that included all, or even most, of these events would be bloated and ineffective. Thus you need to be selective, building your narrative around key events that bear directly on your purpose. Include just enough incidental details or events to keep the narrative flowing smoothly, but sketch them in lightly. Key events, such as the first attack of pain in the example above, will be developed more fully.

My first sign of trouble came shortly after I stepped out of the shower. I had just finished towelling when a sharp pain in my lower right side sent me staggering into the bedroom, where I collapsed onto an easy chair in the corner. Biting my lip to hide my groans, I sat twisting in agony as the pain
gradually ebbed, leaving me grey-faced, sweat-drenched, and shaken. What, I asked myself, had been the trouble? Was it ulcers? Was it a gallbladder attack? Did I have stomach cancer?

The vivid details in this passage help to recreate the experience in the reader’s imagination.

**USE OF TELLING DETAIL**

To establish the setting, create a mood, or advance the storyline, a narrative often blends in specific details that appeal to the reader’s senses. If you are telling a story about a dreamlike, disoriented moment in your life, you may use details that suggest a dreamlike setting—maybe a time when you were driving on a wet, foggy night, peering through the wipers swishing back and forth on your car’s windshield. Rather than simply piling on adjectives and adverbs, search for accurate nouns and verbs. In one of the essays in this chapter, the writer Moses Milstein does not simply tell the reader that he lives with his son in a wealthy part of the city; instead he describes the “quiet punctuated by the thwonk of tennis balls” from nearby tennis courts. In his novel *In the Skin of a Lion*, Michael Ondaatje describes how “a blue moth had pulsed on the screen, bathed briefly in light, and then disappeared into darkness.” The verb “pulsed” indicates the subtle movement of the moth while also evoking the brevity of the moth’s life, and the image of a moth “bathing” in light is a simple but striking way to describe the attraction of the light for the moth. If you are writing a narrative and want to show that someone was angry with you, you might find a verb or a telling detail that implies anger: perhaps the person glared at you, tightened their lips, or stomped out of the room.

To give your narrative a sense of life, you need to pay close attention to details that appeal to all five senses. As you read the next passage, excerpted from a student essay, note which sensory details are most effective in conveying the harshness of a family’s struggle to survive in urban poverty.

“It was about survival,” Ken said, looking down at the table, as if he felt a twinge of guilt about what he was telling me. Saturdays were good for hungry kids looking to make money. They would be taken to the centre of town, near the bars. Rifling through the pockets of drunks sleeping off their Friday night paycheques earned them a few coins, which bought meat pies from the bakery on the corner.

Staring through the bakery window at the huge meat pies, Ken would enjoy the whiff of the aroma of fresh food. As he describes these pies to me, he stretches his hands out wide, like someone in a commercial barely able to hold an enormous burger with two hands.

After spending their hard-earned money in the bakery, the three siblings would take their meat pies behind the dry cleaner next door and hunker down. The warm steam silently drifting down brought shelter from Toronto’s unforgiving cold.
Under the vent, wrapped in a blanket of stream, three children would stay warm eating meat pies. They relished what might be their first real food in days, but no matter how hungry they felt, they always saved one pie to take back to their mother.

Kyle Butt, student

Choose only those details that relate to your overall purpose, or the mood you are trying to create. As you read the following passage from an article about cleaning out an elderly parent’s home, note how the writer has incorporated details that suggest a sense of loss and contribute to a larger point about the ephemeral nature of human life and memory.

On day one of all this, we had ducked into the basement, past wooden shelves of canned preserves that will never be opened, to check out the crawl space. And there we found the steamer trunk. It was a grimy, beaten-up old thing, the kind of container that once carried people’s lives over from Europe. Dragged upstairs, its contents (all unused) started to tell a story: a frying pan with the label still on, a set of pea-green containers, eight tiny wine glasses, three pressed dresses from Woodward’s, two pairs of men’s socks and ten pairs of hose, still in their packaging. Why was it all untouched? Why abandoned there, wrapped in pages of a 1969 copy of the Vancouver Sun?

Michael Harris, “Clearing House”

**EXERCISE** Spend some time in an environment such as a cafeteria or a city intersection. Concentrate on one sense at a time. Begin by observing what you see; then jot down the precise impressions you receive. Now do the same for impressions of touch, taste, smell, and sound.

When you have finished, select four or five of these details that you could use to create a certain kind of mood in a narrative—perhaps anxiety, dread, excitement, boredom, delight, or security.

**DIALOGUE**

Dialogue, or conversation, animates many narratives. Written conversation, however, does not duplicate real talk. When speaking with friends, we repeat ourselves, throw in irrelevant comments, use slang, lose our train of thought, and overuse expressions like you know, uh, and well. Dialogue that reproduced actual conversation word by word would likely bore the reader.

Good dialogue resembles real conversation without copying it. It chooses economical sentences while avoiding excessive repetition of phrases such as she said and he replied. If the conversation unfolds smoothly, the speakers’ identities are clear, as seen in the following excerpt from an essay based on an interview a young Canadian-born woman had with her mother, who was born in Pakistan.

Now I had the choice to continue with clichéd questions or meaningful ones. I chose quality over quantity. “So you had an arranged marriage? Would you want the same for me?” Since she and I frequently bickered about the value of arranged marriage vs. a love marriage, I thought that this was the perfect time for me to listen to her on this sensitive topic.
“It was time. I was twenty two, educated, young, and I could cook. I was ready for marriage, I guess. I didn't have anyone in mind at that time. Time is everything and no man wants an old wife.”

Filza Ahmar, student

Besides making your dialogue sound realistic, make sure that you punctuate it correctly. Here are some key guidelines:

- Each shift from one speaker to another requires a new paragraph.
- When an expression like he said interrupts a single quoted sentence, set it off with commas.
- When such an expression comes between two complete sentences, put a period after the expression and capitalize the first word of the second sentence. “I know it looks bad,” she said. “But I didn’t mean to blow up the lab.”
- Put commas, periods, and other punctuation marks that come at the end of a direct quotation inside the closing quotation mark. “What do you want from me?”

ETHICAL ISSUES

Think what your response might be if you were surfing the Internet and came across a narrative about your first date that used your real name and cast you in an unfavourable light. At the very least, you would find it embarrassing. As you mull over any narrative you write, you’ll want to think about several ethical issues, especially if you’re depicting an actual event.

- Am I providing a truthful account that participants will recognize and accept? Deliberate falsification of someone’s behaviour that tarnishes that person’s reputation is libel and could even result in legal action.
- Would the narrative expose anyone to possible danger if it became public? Do I need to change any names to protect people from potential harm? Suppose that your narrative includes someone who cooperates with authorities behind the scenes to help solve a case. You should probably give that person a fictitious name.
- Does the narrative encourage unethical or illegal behaviour? For example, extolling the delights of smoking marijuana for a teenage audience is clearly unethical.

These guidelines don’t rule out exaggerated, humorous, or painfully truthful narratives. As with any writing, however, narratives can affect people’s lives; ethical writers consider the possible consequences of their work.

WRITING A NARRATIVE

Although you might use the third person if you are writing about something that happened to someone else, most narratives that you write for a composition class will use the first person because they will relate personal experience. In either case, your narrative needs to make a point, or go somewhere. In your first draft, you may start describing how you violated a friend’s confidence, and as you continue writing, a point may emerge—for example, you may uncover an idea about the ethical obligations of friendship. Later, as you revise, you can shape and consciously select parts of the narrative that lead to this point.
Prewriting the Narrative

As you consider what to write about, do some guided brainstorming, asking yourself the questions below. When you have pinpointed a topic, use further brainstorming to generate supporting material.

**Finding Your Topic**

- What experience in my life or that of someone I know interests me?
- Is there an interesting problem—even a small one—that I have struggled with and would like to explore?
- Who was involved and what parts did they play?
- Is there a point to this story that I could state in one or two sentences?

Planning and Drafting the Narrative

Before you start to write, develop a plot outline showing the significant events of your narrative. Begin with the context—the details of where, who and when. Then move on to the first, second, and subsequent events. For each one, jot down what you saw, heard, or did, and what you thought or felt. To create a thesis statement, ask yourself what important insight or discovery you made.

Consider the following tips for drafting and organizing your narrative.

Following are suggestions for organizing your narrative:

**Introduction**

- Sets the stage for what follows.
- Possibly tells when and where the action occurred.
- Provides useful background information.
- Notes the incident that started events.
- States main point here or in the conclusion.

**Body**

- Moves action forward to turning point.
- Establishes conflict.
- Provides sequence of main events.
- Usually resolves conflict.
- Uses time signals such as “now,” “next,” “finally,” “when I returned” to help reader.
- Uses dialogue.

**Conclusion**

- Ties up loose ends.
- Gives a sense of completion.
- May include a reflective summary of events, note your reactions, offer a surprise twist, or discuss aftermath.
ELEMENTS TO KEEP IN MIND FOR A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE NARRATIVE

1. **Larger purpose**—similar to a thesis, it is the larger point, something the reader can ponder. It can be stated or implied.

2. **Action**—shows or recreates action; is not just a summary. Use energetic verbs (for example, instead of saying, “I walked slowly with heavy limbs,” you could use a verb such as “trudged,” “limped,” or “strolled” to do the work).

3. **Conflict or problem**—provides tension and intrigue; may be subtle inner conflict, such as a moment when you were unsure about what to do.

4. **Point of view**—first person (I) or third person (he or she). Check later that you have used consistent pronoun reference; students often unconsciously switch from “I” to “you.”

5. **Key event(s)**—should be selected as they relate to the overall purpose or point. Don’t try to tell everything, but provide only what the reader needs to stay engaged, including any necessary background.

6. **Dialogue**—even if yours is a more reflective piece, such as the essay “Memories of Montreal—and Richness” later in this chapter, even a partial quotation or scrap of dialogue can add life.

   Note that you use a new paragraph each time someone new speaks. Therefore, if your essay has much dialogue, you could have many more paragraphs than are usual in your writing.

   ■ Direct quotations: “I’m coming. Don’t worry. I won’t be late,” I murmured.
   “Well, that would be a first. You’ve been late all year so far,” Mr. Miller snapped.
   ■ Indirect quotation: I promised Mr. Miller that I would not be late. He said that he didn’t believe me.

7. **Paragraphing**—depending on what kind of story you tell, may have more paragraphs and shorter paragraphs than you normally do. Paragraph breaks in narratives can signal a change of scene or mood, and can help control the pace.

8. **Time signals**—use words or phrases that move the action forward: *then, next, immediately afterwards, a few days later, as soon as I, the next morning, when I returned, later that afternoon, before I had time to think,* and so on. Readers and listeners get frustrated if they are not oriented in time as well as space.

Revising the Narrative

As you revise, follow the guidelines in Chapter 4. With narratives, it is especially useful to brainstorm details for the events described in the narrative. You can also jot down additional dialogue. Sometimes, it is useful to freewrite briefly about the narrative from someone else’s point of view. In addition, ask yourself these questions:

■ Have I made the point, stated or unstated, that I intended?
■ Do I need to supply necessary background information or context?
What parts seem bland, vague, or overly obvious, and could be cut or greatly condensed?

■ Have I made the most of key events, developing them with details or relevant dialogue?

■ What about rhythm and pacing? Do I need to use more strategic paragraph breaks and time signals?

■ What could help develop the conflict or build tension more effectively for the reader?

■ What events that are important to the purpose of the narrative have been left out? What details would make the narrative more powerful and interesting?

■ Does the point of view work for the reader? Are there any places where it changes and is confusing?

■ Where is more dialogue necessary, where does it get in the way, and where does it seem artificial or boring?

■ Where could paragraphs be better focused or developed?

■ Is the conclusion satisfying, or does it simply trail off? What could be done to make it more memorable and leave the reader with something to think about? Do I need to cut something so that I do not belabour an obvious point—or do I need to add?

■ Is the narrative ethical or are there sections that cause misgivings?

EXAMPLES OF STUDENT ESSAYS USING NARRATION

The following two student essays are responses to a special kind of narrative assignment called a literacy narrative. Students were asked to narrate a story related to their development of literacy—their process of learning to read and write and/or speak English, either in school or outside school.

I Found My Voice in Room 204

Kiran Heer

1 In elementary school, I was the kid who sat in the back corner of the classroom trying desperately to disappear into the white plastered walls. My fascination with chameleons—the way their bodies could change colour to adapt to changing environments and the way they could pass by unseen—began in kindergarten.

2 That year I had a teacher, Mrs. O’Connell, who liked to call on students to answer questions. She would walk around the classroom with small, measured steps, while her short brown curls bounced with invisible electricity. With her lullaby-soft voice, she would utter bits of wisdom until her sharp gaze settled on one student in particular.
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3

Once during science class, her gaze landed on me. I don’t recall the exact question, but I know it had something to do with butterflies. I know because in class we were raising monarch butterflies. We kept them in little, cylinder-shaped habitats made of net. For weeks after school I watched as they slowly emerged from their cocoons, staggering on the plastic floors of their home, their orange and black wings too wet for them to fly. The time I spent watching the monarchs was the best of my kindergarten experience. The butterflies were content with my silence and didn’t ask me to answer questions I wasn’t sure about.

4

I never did answer the question my teacher asked me that day. I just shook my head sheepishly while staring at the vinyl floor of the classroom, hoping my body would slowly mutate into the scaly form of a chameleon. The seconds dragged by interminably until Mrs. O’Connell walked on. That day after school I was watching the butterflies as usual, when I saw my parents come in. They were talking to my teacher, but I didn’t pay attention until I heard the phrase “Room 204.” For kindergarteners in my school, Room 204 was a death sentence. Kids who didn’t know how to speak English were sent to Room 204. These were the same children who sat separately during lunch, munching away on their strangely foreign foods.

5

“Room 2-0-,” I remember my friend, Melissa whispering, her words stuttering before she actually got to the number four. “My brother told me that his friend Alex was tortured there in kindergarten. He said they tied him to a chair and made him rehearse ‘Peter Piper’ until his tongue was tied.”

6

I tried to imagine what it would feel like to have my tongue tied.

7

“But he said that Alex wouldn’t admit to being tortured,” Melissa continued. “He said that Alex only told him that it was fine and they mostly sat around a table doing show-and-tell.”

8

That night I remember telling my parents that I didn’t want to go to Room 204. They only shook their heads, saying that it was probably for the best. When I tried to tell them about Alex and how he was tortured, my mom said that reciting nursery rhymes was hardly torture.

9

“You’ll like ESL,” she said. “It’ll give you more practice speaking English. We don’t speak it nearly enough at home.”

10

What my mother called ESL, I called a nightmare. I already knew how to speak English and I got all the practice I needed when I watched television.

11

On my first day of ESL it didn’t take me too long to discover what all of us ESL children had in common—dead silence. No one in the ESL class liked to answer questions in class. We were all quiet and all foreign in some way. My friend, Lee, was also in my class. His parents had been called in after I was and though he was one of the smartest kids I knew, Lee was also silent. Lee could
count to twenty, tie his own shoe laces, and write down the entire alphabet from memory. At home, Lee didn’t speak too much English either since he was Chinese. He told me his grandmother didn’t like it when he spoke English at home, because she couldn’t understand what he was saying.

There was also a Portuguese kid named Aldo in my ESL class, who had a pet hamster named Skunk. I didn’t know about his hamster until after our first show-and-tell practice. Aldo had brought Skunk with him to school in a cage, and during show-and-tell we got to feed him sunflower seeds. I quickly befriended Aldo after this because I’d never had a friend with a pet before. There were three more kids in my ESL; two were Chinese like Lee and another was of Indian descent like I was.

The first few weeks of ESL passed in agonizing silence. The ESL teacher, Miss Hadley, would try and encourage conversation, but after a few short replies that conversation would wither and die. It was nearly the third week in before a brave soul ventured to break the silence. It all started when Miss Hadley asked us about our favourite show.

“I like Power Rangers,” said Lee. “The blue one’s my favourite. He’s the smartest.”

I watched Power Rangers as well but I thought the yellow one was the smartest.

“No,” said Aldo. “The red one is the smartest because he’s the leader.”

Then other children jumped into the debate, which soon became a loud symphony of sound.

I saw Miss Hadley glance at me. I knew what was coming—she was going to ask me a question.

“What about you, Kiran? Do you watch Power Rangers?” Her blue eyes looked at me expectantly.

Swallowing, I nodded and quietly said, “I do.”

“Oh, and who’s your favourite?”

“I like the yellow one. I think she’s the smartest.” Then I saw Lee looking at me like I had betrayed him so I added, “But I think the blue one is smart too.”

Miss Hadley nodded her blonde head and smiled at me. I felt myself glow from the inside out and I knew why Mrs. O’Connell had sent me here.

For the rest of our ESL days, the six of us learned to speak out more, and answer more questions. Miss Hadley would paste a smiley-face sticker on our progress charts whenever we raised our hand and answered a question without being asked. I remember that Lee beat me for the grand prize chocolate bar by the sticker he got on our last day of ESL.

Even now, I remember my ESL experience with more clarity than anything else in that year. I remember hating Mrs. O’Connell for a while, thinking that she
must not have liked me very much and that was why she wanted to send me away to Room 204. It was a betrayal I felt keenly because I thought teachers were supposed to like all their students. It wasn’t until much later that I found out that she had nothing against me personally, but it was the silence she couldn’t fight. My not speaking meant she had no way of knowing that I was learning any of the material she was presenting. I know now that from her point of view, she was trying to help me as best she could. Though she wrongly assumed that my foreignness was the reason behind my silence, because I didn’t give her any evidence to the contrary, I do not resent Mrs. O’Connell for what she did. I made more friends in ESL and answered more questions than I ever did in my homeroom. The smaller group of students in ESL made it easier for the painfully shy students like me to open up.

Room 204, with formerly silent students and their supposedly strange foods, taught me the power of speech.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Identify two turning points in this narrative.
2. This narrative spans about one school year. At what points has the writer omitted events? Why?
3. How does the writer help you appreciate that some children of immigrants may feel like outsiders in Canada, even though they were born in this country?
4. What is the larger point of this essay? Is it stated or implied?

TOWARD KEY INSIGHTS

Were you surprised at the revelation that the writer ended up appreciating the dreaded ESL class? Why or why not?

Do you think the elementary school teacher was insensitive in sending a Canadian-born student to the ESL room, or do you think she made an appropriate choice?

What have been your experiences of speaking in class?

Have you ever been in situations where you have felt a shyness or fear similar to the writer’s?

SUGGESTION FOR WRITING

1. After reading this essay and the next one, write your own literacy narrative that explores your identity as a reader, writer, and speaker. What early experiences shaped your identity as a literate person? What people, events, and literature shaped you as a writer, speaker, or student of English?

2. Bring in some dialogue and focus on developing one or two key scenes with telling detail. Include at least one turning point that helps the reader to envision a change of perspective.
English as the Enemy
Kimberly Florendo

“You will have to take English.” I cringed as the university counsellor spoke. The word “English” made my stomach churn.

The counsellor must have seen my expression. “You don’t like English?” she asked kindly.

“Not at all.” I rolled my eyes.

A flashback to high school quickly filled my mind.

I sat at my desk writing a newspaper article for our Grade 10 “New Westminster’s Newsflash” newspaper. Everyone in our English class had to write one article. Our English teacher, Mr. Hodson, would grade our articles out of five and then select a few of the best to publish in our fictional newspaper.

I had no doubts about my writing abilities. Ever since I started receiving letter-graded report cards, I got straight A’s. Not one subject posed a challenge for me, including English, so a prosaic newspaper article seemed like child’s play. I continued scribbling away at my desk, writing about a woman who was robbed at Metrotown station by a man threatening to harm her.

Quite pleased when I finished, I walked up to Mr. Hodson’s desk and proudly handed him my article. I stood for a moment by his desk, anticipating some delicious praise for my writing. I watched him scan the article until he reached the end. He then looked up and I looked away, hoping he did not realize I was staring at him. He grabbed his red pen and scrawled 3/5 in the top margin of the paper.

My heart sank. I stood there looking at the paper in his hands. The red ink seemed like blood. He handed me my article, saying nothing, and returned to his unfinished crossword puzzle. I slowly walked back to my seat, and by then my friends realized that something was wrong.

Concetta, my best friend, saw my stunned look. “What’s wrong?”

“I failed,” I said flatly, not meeting her eyes.

My friends rushed to my desk. They knew that I was a straight A student who scored A’s on all her assignments and tests. They stared at my article in disbelief. The red ink stared back at them.

“Do you want me and Brittany to talk to Mr. Hodson?” Concetta offered. “We’ll tell him to let you hand in another newspaper article so that you can get a higher mark.”

I said nothing. Concetta and Brittany took my silence as a yes and marched themselves up to Mr. Hodson’s desk. I kept my head down and my eyes fixated on the 3/5 veined in red. My vision of the red ink began to blur. “Don’t cry, Kim.
Don’t cry,” I repeated sternly to myself. When I glanced at Mr. Hodson’s desk, I saw Mr. Hodson and my friends looking back at me while they spoke. They were not so far out of earshot that I could make out the words: “Look how sad she is.” I grabbed another sheet of paper and began writing another version of the newspaper article. Concetta and Brittany returned to my desk.

“Mr. Hodson said you can hand in a revision and he’ll average your mark.”

“Thanks Britt,” I murmured, not looking up from my paper. Questions swirled in my mind. Why didn’t I receive an A? What was wrong with my writing?

I half-heartedly wrote another version of the article and dropped in on Mr. Hodson’s desk. As the lunch bell rang and the classroom emptied out, I lingered. When the last person left, I asked what I needed to know. “Mr. Hodson, was my article that bad?”

He looked up from his desk. “No,” he said. “It’s just that your word choices and sentence structure need improvement, but your ideas are good.”

With a quiet inner shudder, I came back to the present moment, looking blankly at the counsellor behind the desk. She smiled politely and we continued our discussion on how I could pursue my goal of becoming a high school teacher.

After our talk, I walked out slowly, contemplating my options. It looked if I wanted to become a high school teacher, my best shot was to graduate with a double minor in math and English. That meant that I would have to take many English courses, courses that would require an abundance of writing. I thought I could completely elude all English courses in university, but that was not the case. I either had to switch career paths in order to avoid taking any English courses, or I had to face English and all its challenges.

Looking at my choices was like staring at my nemesis. I had two options: to fight or to flee.

I chose to fight.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What is the main conflict or tension in this narrative, and how is it brought out?
2. How does the writer use dialogue to further the narrative? How does the writer identify the speakers without using too many tag phrases such as *she said* or *I replied*?
3. How does the writer dramatize key moments in the narrative that are also personal turning points?
4. What details are most effective, in your opinion, for conveying emotions and moods?
TOWARD KEY INSIGHTS

Were you able to empathize with the writer’s intense disappointment about her mark on the high school assignment? Why or why not?

Have you ever experienced a similar deflation of your expectations—in school, sports, or family/social life?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Write a narrative about an encounter or experience in school where the outcome was not what you expected and you learned something new about yourself.

2. Write a narrative that shows how you were able to find resilience or a new perspective after having your expectations disappointed. Keep in mind all of the key narrative elements: purpose, action, conflict, point of view, key events, and dialogue.

THE PERSONAL ESSAY: PROFESSIONAL MODELS

NARRATION READING STRATEGIES

1. Read each essay quickly to get a feel for the story and its main point.
2. Identify the main conflict that moves the story forward. Identify the major characters and what they may represent.
3. Don’t get lost in the details. Note (possibly in the margins) the overall impression or mood the description is evoking.
4. Identify a thesis statement (possibly in the first or last paragraph—but in a narrative, it may be implied) and/or a statement of purpose. Read the essay with an anticipation of what the description is intended to accomplish.
5. Read each narrative again, more slowly, with the main point in mind. Keep an eye on how the narrative supports the main point.

READING CRITICALLY

1. Consider whether the narrative would seem different if told from another person’s point of view. Consider how a scene or event might look very different if described from a different vantage point.
2. Examine what principle seems to have guided the selection of details. Has the writer created a certain mood or dominant impression by selecting certain kinds of details?
3. Ask whether the narrative really supports the author’s main point. Consider what other possible perspectives or narratives could be included but are not. Would these contradict the writer’s claims?
CHAPTER 6  STRATEGIES FOR PERSONAL WRITING: NARRATION  

READING AS A WRITER

1. Identify the organizational pattern and decide whether it is the most effective arrangement for this piece of writing.
2. Determine the setting, conflict, characters, and development of the narrative. Note whether the writer gives enough information, or too much in places.
3. Notice any particularly effective movements in the plot. If you find a useful strategy, jot it down.
4. Observe how the writer uses dialogue. Make a note of any especially effective techniques.
5. Examine the essay for particularly effective examples of word choice.

Dan Greenburg

Sound and Fury

A native of Chicago, Dan Greenburg holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Illinois and a Master of Fine Arts from UCLA. A prolific writer, he has authored 72 books, including such bestsellers as How to Be a Jewish Mother, How to Make Yourself Miserable, and How to Avoid Love and Marriage. Greenburg has also written four different series of children’s books, including The Zack Files, which were inspired by his son Zack. His articles have appeared in a wide and diverse range of popular magazines and been reprinted in many anthologies of humour and satire. He has been a guest on The Today Show, Larry King Live, Late Night with David Letterman, and other major TV talk shows.

1 We carry around a lot of free-floating anger. What we do with it is what fascinates me.
2 My friend Lee Frank is a stand-up comedian who works regularly in New York comedy clubs. Not long ago I accompanied him to one of these places, where he was to be the late-night emcee and where I myself had once done a stand-up act in a gentler era.
3 The crowd that night was a typical weekend bunch—enthusiastic, hostile and drunk. A large contingent of inebriated young men from Long Island had decided that a comedian named Rusty who was currently on stage was the greatest thing since pop-top cans and began chanting his name after almost everything he said: “Rus-TEE! Rus-TEE!”
4 My friend Lee knew he had a tough act to follow.
5 Indeed, the moment Lee walked on stage, the inebriated young men from Long Island began chanting “Rus-TEE! Rus-TEE!” and didn’t give him a chance. Poor Lee, the flop sweat running into his eyes, tried every trick he knew to win them over, and finally gave up.
6 When he left the stage I joined him at the bar in the back of the club to commiserate.
7 “You did the best you could,” I told him.
8 “I don’t know,” he said, “I could have handled it better.”
9 “How?”
10 I don’t know,” he said.
11 As we spoke, the young men who’d given him such a tough time trickled into the bar area. One of them spotted Lee and observed to a companion that Lee might want to do something about their heckling.

This familiar expression comes from the title of a famous novel by William Faulkner and is originally taken from Shakespeare’s Macbeth: “[Life] is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.” The reader may be intrigued: What does the title signify here?

The brief opening paragraph suggests a larger purpose and point for the story that is about to unfold. Paragraph 2 identifies who, when, where, and why. Paragraphs 2 and 3 set up tension, conflict, and even suspense.

Sound impression

Touch impression

Time signal

Dialogue: The off-stage exchange between the writer and his comedian friend helps draw readers into the story.

Conflict arises in key event
Lee thought he heard the companion reply, “I’m down,” a casual acknowledgment that he was willing to have a fistfight. Lee repeated their remarks to me and indicated that he, too, was “down.”

Though slight of frame, Lee is a black belt in Tae Kwon Do, has had skirmishes with three-card monte con men in Times Square, and once even captured a robber-rapist. I am also slight of frame but have had no training in martial arts. I did have one fistfight in my adult life (with a movie producer), but as Lee’s best friend, I assumed that I was “down” as well. Considering that there were more than a dozen of them and only two of us, the period of time that might elapse between our being “down” and our being down seemed exceedingly brief.

The young man who’d made the remark drifted toward Lee. The eyes of everyone in the bar shifted slightly and locked onto the two men like heat-seeking missiles. Fight-or-flight adrenaline and testosterone spurted into dozens of male cardiovascular systems. Safeties snapped off figurative weapons. Red warning lights lit up dozens of DEFCON systems; warheads were armed and aimed. In a moment this bar area might very well resemble a saloon in a B grade western.

“How ya doing?” said Lee, his voice flat as unleavened bread, trying to make up his mind whether to be friendly or hostile.

“Okay,” said the guy, a pleasant-looking, clean-cut kid in his mid-20s.

I was fascinated by what was going on between the two of them, each feeling the other out in a neutral, unemotional, slightly bemused manner. I saw no hostility here, no xenophobic loathing, just two young males jockeying for position, going through the motions, doing the dance, willing to engage at the slightest provocation. I had seen my cat do this many times when a stranger strayed onto his turf.

And then I had a sudden flash of clarity: These guys could either rip each other’s heads off now or they could share a beer, and both options would be equally acceptable to them.

I’d felt close to critical mass on many occasions myself. But here, feeling outside the action, I could see clearly that it had to do with the enormous reservoir of rage that we men carry around with us, rage that seethes just under the surface and is ready to be tapped in an instant, with or without just provocation.

“What’re you in town for?” asked Lee casually.

The guy was watching Lee carefully, making minuscule adjustments on his sensing and triggering equipment.

“It’s my birthday,” said the guy.

Lee mulled over this information for a moment, still considering all his options. Then he made his decision.

“Happy birthday,” said Lee finally, sticking out his hand.

The guy studied Lee’s hand a moment. Then, deciding the gesture was sincere, he took the hand and shook it.

“Thanks,” he said, and walked back to his buddies.

All over the room you could hear safeties snapping on, warheads being unarmed. The incident was over, and in a moment it was as if it had never happened.

I felt I had just witnessed in microcosm the mechanism that triggers most acts of aggression, from gang fights to international conflagrations. It was so simple: a minor act of provocation. A decision on how to interpret it. Whether or not to escalate. And, in this particular case, a peaceful outcome. What struck me was how absolutely arbitrarily it had all been decided.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the appropriateness of Greenburg’s title.
2. Does this essay have a stated or an unstated point? If it is stated, indicate where. If it is unstated, express it in your own words.
3. The expression our being down occurs twice in paragraph 14. Explain what it means in each instance.
4. Discuss the effectiveness of the figurative language in paragraph 16.
5. In paragraph 21, Greenburg credits “feeling outside the action” for helping him understand the rage involved in this situation as well as in others. Explain what he means.
6. How often do you think that the “equally acceptable” options mentioned in paragraph 20 occur in confrontations?

TOWARD KEY INSIGHTS

What reasons can you give for the “free-floating anger” that Greenburg mentions at the outset of the essay? How frequently and in what ways is this anger manifested?

What are some effective strategies for coping with this anger?

SUGGESTION FOR WRITING  Write a narrative about a small incident that turned into a serious confrontation. Possible incidents include an improper or reckless action of another driver, a minor disagreement with a friend or spouse, or retaliation for an action at a sporting event. The outcome can be peaceful or otherwise. Make sure your essay makes a larger point that could be stated or implied throughout the essay.

Moses Milstein
Memories of Montreal—and Richness

Moses Milstein was born in 1947 in Austria and grew up in Montreal. He received degrees from McGill University, Université de Montréal, and Guelph University, and worked in British Columbia as a veterinarian. In this essay, originally published in The Globe and Mail, Milstein recounts memories of growing up in Montreal. He reflects with subtle nostalgia on how his experience of urban, economic, and cultural diversity growing up in Montreal will not be duplicated for his son, who is growing up in a more homogeneous, upper-middle-class area of Vancouver. The essay may prompt discussion of generational, class, or ethnic differences, or of gains that may entail losses.

In the April of his youth, my son walks to school in a gentle shower of cherry blossoms. Down the slopes of West Vancouver’s Hollyburn Mountain he can see the houses nestled among tall cedars. Bursts of rhododendrons guard the yards and over their tops...
he can see the sun glinting on the placid waters of Howe Sound. He walks through this serene neighbourhood unmolested, the quiet punctuated by the thwong of tennis balls coming from cozy courts nearby.

2 And I blame myself.

3 In the April of my childhood in the Montreal of the fifties, the way to school was still studded with chunks of sandy moraine from winter’s retreating ice. With the threat of blizzards gone, I could shed my heavy winter boots, and feel the sidewalk strangely close beneath the thin soles of my shoes.

4 The corners of our street, like every street then, were held by the four corner stores. The one we used, the “Jewish” store, could be counted on for an emergency box of matzohs, or kosher Coca Cola during Passover. Although Mr. Auerbach practically lived in his store, he did, in fact, go home at night. His French competitors across the street, though, lived amidst their crowded displays of potato chips, soft drinks and fly-paper rolls—cooking, sleeping, arguing, watching TV, just behind the curtain in the back of the store.

5 You could buy a tiny bag of potato chips for a penny. My mother insisted that it was filled with sweepings.

6 Around the corner was Wing Ling, the Chinese laundry, like all Chinese laundries painted green on the outside. Within, great vats seethed with steam where Mr. Lee and his family washed and ironed our sheets, which he would then hand to me in a package wrapped in brown paper and string.

7 Next to the laundry, across the alley, which ran like a sparkling river of broken glass and urine produced by the hordes of feral cats, giant rats and stumbling drunks who waded therein, was the Jewish Tailor. His narrow house, barely a door and a window wide, extended backwards from his work room and housed his wife and daughter, a sewing machine and a steam iron. An air of sadness, like the tape measure he wore around his neck, enveloped the place.

8 His old, thick-legged wife shared his melancholic mien. Their daughter was my age and wore braces on her legs. I often wondered whether they were her parents or her grandparents, so great was the difference in their ages. According to rumour, they were, like our family, survivors of the “Krieg,” the Holocaust. The tailor and his wife had each had families of their own, children and spouses. They perished somehow, I don’t remember the details. Every family I knew then had a story of death and they were all mixed up in my mind. In a DP camp after the war, the tailor met and married this woman and she was able to give birth to one more child, with crippled legs, and then no more.

9 I would rush by their sad house, and in one block was on St. Lawrence Street, noisy and bursting with commerce. Two long blocks before I reached my school.

10 My father worked on St. Lawrence Street at the Junior Trend Factory, which he pronounced “Jooniohtren.” One April, when school was closed for Passover, I brought him his lunch. The elevator in his building passed floor after floor of angrily buzzing sewing machines. On some floors anonymous contractors were making clothes under other manufacturer’s labels; on others I could see fancy offices where men with cigars, manicured fingers and pomaded hair struggled for ascendancy in the shmatte business.

11 My father worked among his friends from back home. They would usually greet me with jokes, smiles and much cheek-pinching. But when I saw them at their sewing machines their faces were closed and dark and they worked feverishly at
CHAPTER 6  STRATEGIES FOR PERSONAL WRITING: NARRATION

piecework, sewing linings, sleeves, buttonholes under the critical eyes of the foreman. I left quickly.

12 Between these rows of tall, brown brick buildings, I would pass the restaurants that fed the workers. Delicatessens beckoned, their windows steamed from the smoked meat briskets waiting within, festooned with hanging salamis, rows of jars of pickled tomatoes and long banana peppers, green and red. Inside, the esteemed smoked-meat cutter stood resplendent on his pedestal, dispensing thick, greasy, spicy slices of meat onto golden rounds of rye bread. A good cutter was rumoured to be worth his substantial weight in gold and was held in reverential awe by my friends and me. Unhappily, the price of 25 cents, an hour’s wages for my father, was beyond our reach.

13 The smells of the delicatessen mixed with the forest of urban smells welling out of each block—fruit stores, bakeries, taverns (for men only), poultry and egg stores, fish stores, bagel bakeries, steak houses, all of which would have me slavering until I reached that pinnacle of sensual delights, the Rachel Market. Here, the smells and sights merged as the French farmers, some able to speak Yiddish, backed their trucks up to the wide sidewalks where they set up their tables and displayed their produce. Beneath the market, down a spiral of stone steps slicked with blood, was a subterranean chamber of death. If you stood halfway down the stairs, you could see the hell waiting for the birds below. An open fire to singe their pin feathers burned in an alcove. Hooks covered the walls from which the chickens were suspended by their feet while men in bloodied aprons cut their throats, drained their blood and plucked their feathers which floated in the air until they settled among the clots of gray droppings on the floor and walls.

14 Across the street, the large bakery, Richstones, held a secret known only to the few. On Fridays, if you went to the door at the top of the loading bays, you could ask for the seconds, the crumbled cakes, broken doughnuts, smeary cupcakes. Sometimes they would give you some and sometimes they would chase you away angrily. Another example of the incomprehensible capriciousness of adults.

15 As if to remind me of my destination, I would ultimately come to the offices of Der Kanader Adler, one of three local Yiddish papers. Occasionally, one of my teachers would publish a poem there, truly the last song of the last of the Mohicans. The Jewish Peretz School was just around the corner on Duluth Street. We were educated in Yiddish, spoke to each other in English and lived in a French neighbourhood.

16 I can recall every building and business along the two blocks to school. Many of the proprietors knew me and my family. I felt as safe and happy on the streets as in my own home and would often linger until dusk on the return home.

17 When I grew up I bought a house in the gentle forests of the Pacific and my son walks to school among the cherry blossoms. And sometimes I am sad for him.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What contrast does the writer introduce in the first three paragraphs? What details are especially effective in highlighting the contrast? Why do you suppose that the second paragraph is only one sentence long?

2. Point out sensory details that reflect sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch. Comment on the effect of these sensory impressions.
3. What does the description of the Jewish tailor and his small family (paragraphs 7 to 9) add to the essay?

4. An adult writer who is trying to evoke the reality of childhood experiences in the here and now often blends the child’s perspective with the adult’s. How does Moses Milstein reveal a kind of double perspective, as a child and an adult? Consider the fragment that ends paragraph 14, where the writer clearly uses vocabulary he would not have known as a child: “Another example of the incomprehensible capriciousness of adults.” What does the writer mean here? Can you find other examples where the adult is able to articulate something the child sensed, but probably could not have put into words?

5. In the last paragraph, the father states that he is sad for his son sometimes, even though his son “walks to school among the cherry blossoms.” What is the paradox here? Do you think the boy would understand if his father tried to explain to him that he was missing something?

6. Does this essay have a stated or an unstated point? If it is stated, indicate where. If it is unstated, express it in your own words.

TOWARD KEY INSIGHTS

What are the advantages of living in a place of cultural and economic diversity? Are there any disadvantages?

What are the possible losses and gains associated with moving away from the place where you grew up?

What does Moses Milstein reveal about the nature of parent–child relationships?

Whose childhood would you prefer—the father’s or the son’s? Explain.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Create a sense of paradox by recounting a memory of a time or place that at first glance seemed perfect, until you gradually discovered what was missing. Conversely, you could narrate a memory of a time or place that at first seemed far from perfect, but has given you riches that you have come to appreciate over time.

2. After reading “Memories of Montreal—and Richness” (pages 135–137), read two other essays about place and identity—“No Place like Home” (pages 303–307 in Chapter 13) and “I’m a Banana and Proud of It” (pages 215–217 in Chapter 10)—and then write a narrative that focuses on what has been lost or gained by staying in or moving away from a particular community or ethno-cultural group you know well. If you want to incorporate actual material from any of these essays, be sure that you understand the documentation conventions covered in Chapters 14 to 16.