

# Writing Effective Narrative and Descriptive Paragraphs

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover how to write both narratives that are true and narratives that are fiction, as well as how to write vivid details in the descriptive mode. The specific areas of focus include:

## 1. Narrative Mode

When you call a piece of writing a narrative, you're really talking about any writing that is done in the **narrative mode**. The narrative mode is writing that is driven by a story. Thus, narrative writing is storytelling.

There are so many kinds of narrative writing that you may have seen or even written yourself; fictional narrative, of course, but then there's also personal narrative, where authors write about themselves.

Some kinds of personal narrative include:

- Autobiography
- Memoir
- Life writing
- Creative nonfiction

Because these narratives are about the author, it's totally appropriate for the author to write from their perspective and use words such as "I" or "we."

There are many reasons why authors may choose to write in the narrative mode. These narratives may be designed to entertain or to educate, to reflect on an experience, or to record that experience for posterity.

No matter what, a personal narrative will share the author's sense of meaning or particular insight into a situation. This is powerful writing.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### **Narrative Mode**

Writing that is driven by a story.

## 2. Types of Narrative

As you know, narratives can be stories that are either fictional or nonfictional. If a story is fictional, it will likely follow a structure that is prescribed by the kind of story it is, such as a fairy tale that begins with the line “once upon a time” and ends with “happily ever after.”

In contrast, a personal narrative may have a looser structure. Regardless, both kinds of narratives need to contain a logical internal structure, meaning a logical sequence of events depicted to tell a story that makes sense.

### 2a. Fictional

In a fictional narrative, you start by setting the stage. You introduce your readers to the characters, where the story is taking place, what the plot might be, what time period you’re in, and any other piece of context or important background that the readers will need to follow the story.

Then the story will move towards the rising action when events begin to unfold. There will be the climax where everything comes together and the action reaches a breaking point. This will be followed by the falling action when the story moves towards resolution.

Everything will end with a conclusion, where all the threads of the plot are untangled, and all the questions your readers might have had about the plot are resolved.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Think of the story of the three bears. You begin by learning where they live. Then you see conflict arise when Goldilocks arrives and eats their porridge. Then there is the climax when the bears return home to find Goldilocks sleeping in the baby bear's bed. Finally, there is resolution, as Goldilocks runs away from the house and escapes becoming a bowl of porridge herself.

### 2b. Nonfictional

In nonfiction, similar structures are often deployed. You might see a story begin with a problem that the author describes having to solve, followed by an explanation of why this is significant.

Then there might be a movement towards solving this problem and finally a conclusion that resolves the issue and discusses the overall significance.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Think about the purportedly true story of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree. The story has a beginning when young George chops down his family’s cherry tree to prove how good he is with an ax. Then there is the conflict when his parents confront him about the tree. Finally, you see the conclusion and moral of the story, which tells you why this is significant. George admits the truth and accepts punishment because he refuses to tell a lie. This is meant to demonstrate the trustworthiness of America’s first president.

### 2c. Rules for Both Types

Although fiction and nonfiction have their differences, there are some good rules to follow for writing both kinds of narrative:

- Avoid adding too many details if they don’t help drive the plot forward. Do you need to know the color of the walls in the bears’ house? No. Do you need to know that George Washington’s tree was a special tree that someone might miss? Yes. Skip the former, but include the latter.

- Know before you start what the focus and purpose of the story are. Does anyone need to know about the time you tied your shoes wrong? No. Instead, only choose stories that have some significance, and then stay focused on what that significance is.
- If you use dialogue, balance it with written explanations. A narrative story has more to it than just the recording of a conversation or what two characters said to one another. Include dialogue to add richness and detail to your story, but balance it with context and explanation.

Here's an example of a short narrative that follows these rules.

*When the Bears came home, they noticed that their porridge was missing. "I'm hungry! Where's my food!" bellowed the Papa Bear. Upstairs, Goldilocks awoke, startled by the loud roars she heard from down below.*

The dialogue "I'm hungry, where's my food" moves the plot forward but also adds in a more vivid description of the events. That dialogue helps explain why Goldilocks wakes up startled.

Here's a nonfictional example.

*When I woke up, I didn't know that the day would be memorable, but by the time I was done drinking my coffee, the phone had rung to deliver the news. "Mom!" I shouted, "I'm moving to Hawaii! I got in!" My mother rushed into the room. "Congratulations," she said softly, and although I knew she was glad for me, the tone of her voice revealed how much she would miss me while I was gone. I was happy, but knew that things were going to change.*

The details at the beginning set the stage for something momentous to happen to this author, in addition to showing the speed with which this event moved.

Note as well that the dialogue here not only explains more of the plot, but also indicates the emotional significance of the story for these two characters. You might even assume that the purpose of this story is to explain that transformative moments can be bittersweet.

Finally, note that you probably want to read more to see what happens next between the speaker and the mother, which means that this is a good narrative.

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### 3. Descriptive Mode

In addition to thinking about narrative mode writing, you also want to think about the **descriptive mode**. Descriptive mode paragraphs provide details about specific persons, places, and things. This mode can be used in any type of writing.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You could use the descriptive mode to tell about a vacation you had. You could also use this mode in a piece of professional writing when describing the way a product works and who it might be marketed towards.

Like the narrative mode, the descriptive mode has some rules that you should follow to ensure it is successful:

- Avoid being vague. A descriptive paragraph should have a good amount of detail.

- Use all of the senses (sight, smell, sound, taste, touch).
- Choose your words wisely to create vivid descriptions and rich details.

One way to explain this is the maxim “Show, don’t tell.” That means that instead of telling your readers that the dog was happy, show them by describing how the dog is wagging its tail, jumping up and down, and panting enthusiastically.

Here’s an example of a descriptive paragraph that isn’t really working yet.

*I came home from work tired, but my dog was happy to see me. After I said hello to her, we went for a walk. It was cold and snowing, but we didn’t mind. I enjoyed watching her play, and that made me feel more energetic.*

That’s pretty dull and lifeless as it stands, but consider the revision below. This version is much more interesting, as there are many descriptive words and sensory details used. There is even dialogue. All of that makes this a much more enjoyable story in the descriptive mode.

*I trudged home from work, my eyes gluey with exhaustion, but was immediately met by the wiggling tail and sloppy kisses of my hound dog. "Hello, silly beast!" I exclaimed while clicking on her leash. Outside, the snow was beginning to pile up around us, turning the whole world shiny and white. Bundled up in her fur coat, my dog didn’t mind. And watching her bounce through the snow drifts, I felt a warm glow of joy in my chest. Before I knew it, I was wide awake.*



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Descriptive Mode**

Writing that provides details concerning a specific person, place, or thing.



#### SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned that the **narrative mode** is used to tell a story. There are two **types of narrative: fictional** and **nonfictional**. While these two types have their differences, there are some important **rules for both**, such as avoiding unnecessary details, knowing your focus before you start, and balancing dialogue with explanations.

You also learned about the **descriptive mode** of writing, which involves embedding vivid details into your paragraphs to make them more enjoyable and engaging for your readers.

Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Martina Shabram.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

**Descriptive Mode**

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**Narrative Mode**

Writing that is driven by a story.