Norton Field Guide's Writing a Literacy Narrative

Key Features / Literacy Narratives

A well-told story. As with most narratives, those about literacy often set up some sort of situation that needs to be resolved. That need for resolution makes readers want to keep reading. We want to know whether Nichols ultimately will pass the proficiency test. Some literacy narratives simply explore the role that reading or writing played at some time in someone's life—assuming, perhaps, that learning to read or write is a challenge to be met.

Vivid detail. Details can bring a narrative to life for readers by giving them vivid mental images of the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures of the world in which your story takes place. The details you use when describing something can help readers picture places, people, and events; dialogue can help them hear what is being said. We get a picture of Agosín's Chilean childhood when she writes of the "blue electric sky" and her "little blue notebook" in which she described her "house surrounded by cherry trees and gardenias." Similarly, we can picture a little boy standing on a stool planting African violets — and hear a three-year- old's exasperation through his own words: "I'd like to see a menu." Dialogue can help bring a narrative to life.

Some indication of the narrative's significance. By definition, a literacy narrative tells something the writer remembers about learning to read or write. In addition, the writer needs to make clear why the incident matters to him or her. You may reveal its significance in various ways. Nichols does it when she says she no longer loves to read or write. Agosín points out that she writes in Spanish because "nothing else from my childhood world remains . . . To write in Spanish is for me a gesture of survival." The trick is to avoid tacking onto the end a brief statement about your narrative's significance as if it were a kind of moral of the story. My narrative would be less effective if, instead of discussing my grandmother's back- ground and my graduation, I had simply said, "She taught me to be a life- long reader."

A GUIDE TO WRITING LITERACY NARRATIVES

Choosing a Topic

In general, it's a good idea to focus on a single event that took place during a relatively brief period of time. For example:

- any early memory about writing or reading that you recall vividly
- someone who taught you to read or write
- a book or other text that has been significant for you in some way
- an event at school that was interesting, humorous, or embarrassing
- a writing or reading task that you found (or still find) especially difficult or challenging
- a memento that represents an important moment in your literacy development (perhaps the start of a LITERACY PORTFOLIO)
- the origins of your current attitudes about writing or reading
- learning to write instant messages, learning to write email appropriately, learning to construct a website, creating and maintaining a Facebook page

Make a list of possible topics, and then choose one that you think will be interesting to you and to others — and that you're willing to share with others. If several seem promising, try them out on a friend or classmate. Or just choose one and see where it leads; you can switch to another if need be. If you have trouble coming up with a topic, try FREE-WRITING, LISTING, CLUSTERING, or LOOPING.

Considering the Rhetorical Situation

PURPOSE: Why do you want to tell this story? To share a memory with others? To fulfill an assignment? To teach a lesson? To explore your past learning? Think about the reasons for your choice and how they will shape what you write.

AUDIENCE: Are your readers likely to have had similar experiences? Would they tell similar stories? How much explaining will you have to do to help them understand your narrative? Can you assume that they will share your attitudes toward your story, or will you have to work at making them see your perspective? How much about your life are you willing to share with this audience?

STANCE: What attitude do you want to project? Affectionate? Neutral? Critical? Do you wish to be sincere? serious? humorously detached? self-critical? self-effacing? something else? How do you want your readers to see you?

MEDIA / DESIGN: Will your narrative be in print? presented orally? on a web- site? Would photos, charts, or other illustrations help you present your subject? Is there a typeface that conveys the right tone? Do you need headings?

Generating Ideas and Text

Good literacy narratives share certain elements that make them interesting and compelling for readers. Remember that your goals are to tell the story as clearly and vividly as you can and to convey the meaning the incident has for you today. Start by writing out what you remember about the setting and those involved, perhaps trying out some of the methods in the chapter on GENERATING IDEAS AND TEXT. You may also want to INTERVIEW a teacher or parent who figures in your narrative.

Describe the setting. Where does your narrative take place? List the places where your story unfolds. For each place, write informally for a few minutes, DESCRIBING what you remember:

- ***What do you see?*** If you're inside, what color are the walls? What's hanging on them? What can you see out any windows? What else do you see? Books? Lined paper? Red ink? Are there people? Places to sit? A desk or a table?
- ***What do you hear?*** A radiator hissing? Leaves rustling? The wind howl- ing? Rain? Someone reading aloud? Shouts? Cheers? Children play- ing? Music? The zing of an instant message arriving?
- ***What do you smell?*** Sweat? Perfume? Incense? Food cooking?
- ***How and what do you feel?*** Nervous? Happy? Cold? Hot? A scratchy wool sweater? Tight shoes? Rough wood on a bench?
- ***What do you taste?*** Gum? Mints? Graham crackers? Juice? Coffee?

Think about the key people. Narratives include people whose actions play an important role in the story. In your literacy narrative, you are prob- ably one of those people. A good way to develop your understanding of the people in your narrative is to write about them:

• Describe each person in a paragraph or so. What do the people look like? How do they dress? How do they speak? Quickly? Slowly? With an accent? Do they speak clearly, or do they mumble? Do they use any distinctive words or phrases? You might begin by DESCRIBING their movements, their posture, their bearing, their facial expressions. Do they have a distinctive scent?

• Recall (or imagine) some characteristic dialogue. A good way to bring people to life and move a story along is with DIALOGUE, to let readers hear them rather than just hearing about them. Try writing six to ten lines of dialogue between two people in your narrative. If you can't remember an actual conversation, make up one that could have happened. (After all, you are telling the story, and you get to decide how it is to be told.) Try to remember (and write down) some of the characteristic words or phrases that the people in your narrative used.

Write about "what happened." At the heart of every good NARRATIVE is the answer to the question "What happened?" The action in a literacy narrative may be as dramatic as winning a spelling bee or as subtle as a conversation between two friends; both contain action, movement, or change that the narrative tries to capture for

readers. A good story dramatizes the action. Try SUMMARIZING the action in your narrative in a paragraph — try to capture what happened. Use active and specific verbs (pondered, shouted, laughed) to describe the action as vividly as possible.

Consider the significance of the narrative. You need to make clear the ways in which any event you are writing about is significant for you now. Write a page or so about the meaning it has for you. How did it change or otherwise affect you? What aspects of your life now can you trace to that event? How might your life have been different if this event had not hap- pened or had turned out differently? Why does this story matter to you?

Ways of Organizing a Literacy Narrative

Start by OUTLINING the main events in your narrative. Then think about how you want to tell the story. Don't assume that the only way to tell your story is just as it happened. That's one way—starting at the beginning of the action and continuing to the end. But you could also start in the middle—or even at the end. Shannon Nichols, for example, could have begun her narrative by telling how she finally passed the proficiency test and then gone back to tell about the times she tried to pass it, even as she was an A student in an honors English class. Several ways of organizing a narrative follow.

[Chronologically, from beginning to end]

- Introduce the story.
- Describe the setting and people.
- Tell about what happened.
- Say how the story was resolved.
- Say something about the significance.

[Beginning in the middle]

- Start in the middle of the action, giving enough information to let readers know what was happening.
- Fill in details: setting, people, specific actions.
- Make clear how the situation was resolved.
- Say something about the significance.

[Beginning at the end]

- Start at the end of the story: tell how the story ends up, then introduce the subject.
- Go back to the beginning of the story, telling what happens chronologically and describing the setting and people.
- Conclude by saying something about the story's significance.

Writing Out a Draft

Once you have generated ideas and thought about how you want to organ- ize your narrative, it's time to begin DRAFTING. Do this quickly —try to write a complete draft in one sitting, concentrating on getting the story on paper or screen and on putting in as much detail as you can. Some writers find it helpful to work on the beginning or ending first. Others write out the main event first and then draft the beginning and ending.

Draft a beginning. A good narrative grabs readers' attention right from the start. Here are some ways of beginning; you can find more advice in the chapter on BEGINNING AND ENDING.

- Jump right in. Sometimes you may want to get to the main action as quickly as possible. Nichols, for example, begins as she takes the ninth-grade proficiency test for the first time.
- Describe the context. You may want to provide any background information at the start of your narrative, as I decided to do, beginning by explaining how my grandmother taught me to read.
- Describe the setting, especially if it's important to the narrative. Agosín begins by describing the constellations in her native Chile.

Draft an ending. Think about what you want readers to read last. An effective ENDING helps them understand the meaning of your narrative. Here are some possibilities:

- End where your story ends. It's up to you to decide where a narrative ends. Mine ends several years after it begins, with my graduation from college.
- Say something about the significance of your narrative. Nichols observes that she no longer loves to write, for example. The trick is to touch upon the narrative's significance without stating it too directly, like the moral of a fable.
- Refer back to the beginning. My narrative ends with my grandmother watching me graduate from college; Nichols ends by contemplating the negative effects of failing the proficiency test.
- End on a surprising note. Agosín catches our attention when she tells us of the deaths and disappearances of her friends and relatives.

Come up with a title. A good TITLE indicates something about the subject of your narrative — and makes readers want to take a look. Nichols's title states her subject, "Proficiency," but she also puts the word in quotes, calling it into question in a way that might make readers wonder — and read on. I focus on the significance of my narrative: "How I Learned about the Power of Writing." Agosín makes her title an expression of her sense of identity: "Always Living in Spanish."