Narrators may use telling to articulate remembered feelings and thoughts from the time the event occurred and to convey the writer's present perspective on the event—what the writer feels and thinks now, looking back on it after time has passed.

To alert readers that they are telling, writers sometimes announce their reflections with words like *felt* and *thought*. But they may also choose words that name or imply a particular emotion or thought as in the previous example when Washuta describes how she "cried" and "wept."

RESPOND

Consider possible topics: Exploring how your identity affects your relationships.

Like Montgomery, you could write about how one aspect of your identity affects relationships with those around you. Perhaps, like Montgomery, your family members speak a language that you never learned. Maybe you practice a different religion than your family, or you don't believe in organized religion and your family does. Consider any aspect of your identity and the ways that it affects your relationships with family, friends, coworkers, or members of your community.

ANALYZE & WRITE 2.1

1. Skim paragraphs 1–6, and notice that Montgomery writes in the present tense. Now realize, however, that what she is describing happened in the past. How do you know this is the case? Is her cue sufficient to prevent you from getting lost or confused about the timing of what Montgomery describes?
2. The majority of Montgomery's story includes experiences from the past, although from different periods in her life. List moments in which Montgomery is speaking from her present perspective. How does she cue you that she has shifted to the present?

ANALYZE & WRITE 2.2

1. Reread paragraphs 16–17. List three phrases or sentences in which Montgomery is showing and three in which she is telling.
2. Reread paragraphs 43–48. What cues indicate that Montgomery is speaking from her present perspective? Is Montgomery telling or showing more in these final paragraphs, and how effective is this approach?

Ta-Nehisi Coates | *Losing My Innocence*

Tasos Katopodis/Getty Images

TA-NEHISI COATES is a national correspondent for *The Atlantic*, writes articles for publications such as the *New York Times Magazine* and the *Village Voice*, and is the author of a Black Panther graphic novel series.

Content Warning: This piece describes a moment in which Coates witnessed an older boy pull a gun on a boy his age. It may be difficult or triggering for students to read and discuss, especially if they have experienced or witnessed gun violence. Our goal is to provide

intellectually challenging material that encourages students to consider complex issues. While the potential violence presented in this reading selection may incite emotional discomfort, gun violence is, unfortunately, a subject we must contend with in American culture.

As you read, consider how the experience Coates writes about relates to your own experience when you were around eleven years old and reflect on the fact that Coates frames this story as a letter to his fifteen-year-old son and how this affects the ways you understand the story's significance.

1 I was eleven years old, standing out in the parking lot in front of the 7-Eleven, watching a crew of older boys standing near the street. They yelled and gestured at . . . who? . . . another boy, young, like me, who stood there, almost smiling, gamely throwing up his hands. He had already learned the lesson he would teach me that day: that his body was in constant jeopardy. Who knows what brought him to that knowledge? The projects, a drunken stepfather, an older brother concussed by police, a cousin pinned in the city jail. That he was outnumbered did not matter because the whole world had outnumbered him long ago, and what do numbers matter? This was a war for the possession of his body and that would be the war of his whole life.

2 I stood there for some seconds, marveling at the older boys' beautiful sense of fashion. They all wore ski jackets, the kind which, in my day, mothers put on layaway in September, then piled up overtime hours so as to have the thing wrapped and ready for Christmas. I focused in on a light-skinned boy with a long head and small eyes. He was scowling at another boy, who was standing close to me. It was just before three in the afternoon. I was in sixth grade. School had just let out, and it was not yet the fighting weather of early spring. What was the exact problem here? Who could know?

3 The boy with the small eyes reached into his ski jacket and pulled out a gun. I recall it in the slowest motion, as though in a dream. There the boy stood, with the gun brandished, which he slowly untucked, tucked, then untucked once more, and in his eyes I saw a surging rage that could, in an instant, erase my body. That was 1986. That year I felt myself to be drowning in the news reports of murder. I was aware that these murders very often did not land upon the intended targets but fell upon great-aunts, PTA mothers, overtime uncles, and joyful children—fell upon them random and relentless, like great sheets of rain. I knew this in theory but could not understand it as fact until the boy with the small eyes stood across from me holding my entire body in his small hands. The boy did not shoot. His friends pulled him back. He did not need to shoot. He had affirmed my place in the order of things. He had let it be known how easily I could be selected. I took the subway home that day, processing the episode all alone. I did not tell my parents. I did not tell my teachers, and if I told my friends I would have done so with all the excitement needed to obscure the fear that came over me in that moment.

4 I remember being amazed that death could so easily rise up from the nothing of a boyish afternoon, billow up like fog. I knew that West Baltimore, where I lived; that the north side of Philadelphia, where my cousins lived; that the South Side of Chicago, where friends of my father lived, comprised a world apart. Somewhere out there beyond the firmament past the asteroid belt, there were other worlds where children did not regularly fear for their bodies. I knew this because there was a large television resting in my living room. In the evenings I would sit before this television bearing witness to the dispatches from this other world. There were little white boys with complete collections of football cards, and their only want was a popular girlfriend and their only worry was poison oak. That other world was suburban and endless, organized around pot roasts, blueberry pies, fireworks, ice cream sundaes, immaculate bathrooms, and small toy trucks that were loosed in wooded backyards with streams and glens. Comparing these dispatches with the facts of my native world, I came to understand that my country was a galaxy, and this galaxy stretched from the pandemonium of West Baltimore to the happy hunting grounds of *Mr. Belvedere*. I obsessed over the distance between that other sector of space and my own. I knew that my portion of the American galaxy, where bodies were enslaved by a tenacious gravity, was black and that the other, liberated portion was not. I knew that some inscrutable energy preserved the breach. I felt, but did not yet understand, the relation between that other world and me. And I felt in this a cosmic injustice, a profound cruelty, which infused an abiding, irrepressible desire to unshackle my body and achieve the velocity of escape.

III. **Climax:** End the suspense by dramatizing the most critical moment or turning point.

IV. **Falling action:** Show how the tension diminished as the conflict moved toward resolution.

V. **Conclusion/reflection:** Bring closure to the story, and reflect on the event's overall significance.

Then you can use the following Ways In activities to anticipate your readers' likely questions and flesh out your chronology.

WAYS IN

HOW DO I DEVELOP A DRAMATIC ARC?

Ask yourself the following questions:

What is the underlying conflict, the dilemma facing my narrator?
To answer, provide some EXPOSITION, *the background information that will help your readers understand the situation:*

► I wanted _____ but didn't want to _____. So I _____.

EXAMPLE I had told her and the rest of the class on our first day that I wanted to be a journalist. I guess I wasn't there yet. . . . Some students would have given up at that moment. . . . But I didn't. In fact, Mrs. Maxon's criticism made me want to become a better writer. (Jameson, pars. 3, 7)

What started it?
To answer, dramatize the INCITING INCIDENT, *the crisis that sets off the conflict or triggered the event.*
Use an action sequence:

► I did _____. But then _____.

EXAMPLE As I moved through high school and then through most of college . . . I struggled. (Jameson, par. 10)

Use dialogue:

► "_____," _____ announced excitedly.

EXAMPLE All I could manage to say in response was, "I dunno." (Jameson, par. 4)

What will happen?
To answer, intensify the story's RISING ACTION *to arouse curiosity and build suspense and excitement:*

► He _____ us. We _____.

EXAMPLE At the time, I didn't know how I would be affected by Mrs. Maxon's approach to teaching writing. (Jameson, par. 9)

(continued)

What did it lead to?
To answer, dramatize the CLIMAX by reflecting on what you were feeling at the time:

- He did ....., and I remember [the event] as if ..... .

EXAMPLE The boy with the small eyes reached into his ski jacket and pulled out a gun. I recall it in the slowest motion, as though in a dream. There the boy stood, with the gun brandished, which he slowly untucked, tucked, then untucked once more. (Coates, par. 3)

How did it turn out?
To answer, summarize the FALLING ACTION, *showing how the conflict subsides and complications unravel:*

- Finally, he ....., and I ..... .

EXAMPLE It took some time, but in my junior year of college I took a course called Introduction to Writing Studies, and I began to understand that there is no single correct way to write. (Jameson, par. 12)

Why does my story matter?
To answer, conclude with REFLECTIONS *on the event's significance:*

- I realized then that ..... .

EXAMPLE I don't know why I care so much about a dead poet who lived two hundred years ago. Maybe it's because I've trod the same paths as him, traveling through Europe. Or maybe it's because I can step where Keats stepped. . . . (Montgomery, par. 20)

TEST YOUR CHOICE **Facing an Audience**

With two or three other students, try out your story. Their reactions will help you determine whether you are telling it in an interesting or exciting way.

Storytellers: Take turns telling your stories briefly. Try to pique your listeners' curiosity and build suspense, and watch your audience to see if your story is having the desired reaction.

Listeners: Briefly tell each storyteller what you found most intriguing about the story.

- Were you eager to know how the story would turn out?
- What was the inciting incident? Did it seem sufficient to motivate the climax?
- Was there a clear conflict that seemed important enough to write about?

Use tenses to clarify the sequence of actions.

Excerpts from the reading selections in this chapter demonstrate how writers clarify when different actions occur in relation to each other. Try using some of these strategies to help your readers keep track of what happened when.

Manage **tenses** *to show the sequence of actions occurring over time.* You can use the simple past tense (*yelled*) to depict an action that occurred at one point in the past and the past perfect tense (*had already learned*) to indicate something that happened