

The Narrative/Descriptive Essay

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“What happened? When did it happen? Where did it happen? Who did it? What does it look like? What are the characteristics? What impression does it make?”

Purpose of Narrative/Descriptive Essay

“The Significance of the Story”

The purpose of an *academic* narrative/descriptive essay should not be confused with the purpose of a narrative essay. Often termed *creative non-fiction*, a narrative essay is considered to be a work of literature the purpose of which is often to enlighten or entertain the reader.

The purpose of an academic narrative/descriptive essay is much more straightforward than creative non-fiction. Creative non-fiction is, at heart, a “good story.” Although an academic narrative essay may use some of the literary elements of creative non-fiction, such as pacing, dialogue, conflict, suspense and tension, its *intention* is different. The academic narrative/descriptive essay’s purpose or goal is not so much to *entertain* as it is to convey, in a clear, purposeful way, the *significance* of the story being told.

An academic narrative/descriptive essay has a thesis in the first paragraph which communicates a dominant impression. In other words, it answers the unspoken question in the reader’s mind: What is the *point* of the story being told? What is the *dominant* impression the writer is trying to illustrate to her or his reader?

This is not the case with most pieces of literary writing where the purpose is often unstated and therefore the reader often “guesses” at the theme or thesis.

Academic narrative/descriptive writing should convey a dominant impression, but the real key to successfully writing in this mode is to convey the reason or significance of the story being told or described.

The thesis and introductory paragraph should communicate this dominant impression and/or the main purpose for this particular narrative/descriptive story being told in essay form.

However, an academic narrative/descriptive essay will often employ literary techniques and/or devices to enhance the essay but also to demonstrate clear, supporting examples which help to highlight the significance of the thesis. These literary techniques include conflict, suspense and tension (or “plot”) which help to give the reader a frame of reference such as time passing.

Further, anecdotes help to dramatize the writer’s relationship with the subject. They also help to clarify the “the significance of the story” to the reader. In short, in the academic narrative/descriptive essay mode, these techniques are the “support material” of the essay which help to give depth and texture to the thesis and conclusion.

In addition, anecdotes are events about significant incidents—the essay must have at least **two comparable anecdotes**. The purpose of having two comparable anecdotes is to demonstrate a clear relationship to the thesis which points to a significance. Moreover, an academic essay using this mode must have a **focus**—it should not be one long story that tells the reader everything. It’s a significant “center” and focuses only on significant events of the narrative

An anecdote is defined by the Literary Terms and Definitions web site in the following ways:

ANECDOTE: A short narrative account of an amusing, unusual, revealing, or interesting event. A good anecdote has a single, definite point, and the setting, dialogue, and characters are usually subordinate to the point of the story. Usually, the anecdote does not exist alone, but it is combined with other material such as expository essays or arguments. Writers may use anecdotes to clarify abstract points, to humanize individuals, or to create a memorable image in the reader's mind. Anecdotes are similar to exempla.

See exemplum

http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_A.html

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“There’s power in the details.”

As with creative writing, in academic narrative/descriptive writing it is often stronger to “show and not tell” the reader the majority of the story. The academic writer needs to be specific and use all of her or his senses in fully developing a “vivid portrait” of the anecdotes used in the essay.

In addition, literary devices such as adding dialogue to the essay and using similes or metaphors helps to evoke strong mental images in the mind of the reader.

Details are the specific answers to the *who, what, where, when, what and how* questions raised in the reader’s mind as she or he engages with the essay. (For example, a student writing about moving to Arizona might attempt, in the rough draft, to answer the following questions: Who, specifically, traveled across the country? How old was that person?

What kind of car were they driving? When did it break down? Arrive in Phoenix? What did the first impression of an August in Phoenix feel like? Smell like? Sound like? Taste like? Look like?)

Further, strong writers of the narrative/descriptive mode avoid “adjective stacking.” To say that *the gooey, drippy, moldy summer of last year was one to remember* is to stack so many descriptors one on top of the other that it will weaken the dominant impression the essay is trying to create.

Narrative/Descriptive Guideline Checklist

Create a Vivid Portrait- (Skills & Criteria)

- 🍏 Naming—exact physical features, behavior, and/or personality traits
- 🍏 Detailing—name, features are fully described, sensory descriptions
- 🍏 Dominant impressions—primary unifying picture from description and anecdotes
- 🍏 Comparing—similes and metaphors
- 🍏 Dialogue—quoted or summarized. Readers gain insight into personality & motives of the subject
- 🍏 Vantage Point—logically developed frame of reference

Revealing Anecdotes and Recurring Scenes (Skills & Criteria)

- 🍏 Anecdotes are events about significant incidents—must have at least **TWO comparable anecdotes** that demonstrate a clear relationship which points to a significance. Several (no specific required number) one-time incidents
- 🍏 Anecdotes and events reveal the subjects' character
- 🍏 Anecdotes and events dramatize the writer's relationship with the subject
- 🍏 Anecdotes have elements of a well-told story
 - Conflict
 - Suspense
 - Tension—Narrative action; narrative pace; sentence rhythm dialogue
- 🍏 Anecdotes create the dynamic quality of time passing

Indication of the Person's or Event's Significance (Skills & Criteria)

- 🍏 Subject's (or event's) importance to the writer is valid and clearly conveyed either by direct statement and/or created by “showing” the reader through anecdotes, recurring events, dialogue, descriptive details, and narrative action
- 🍏 One exact significance of the story is revealed—it is personal, yet displays an emotional distance from the subject
- 🍏 Complexity of the relationship of the person or event in the story is acknowledged
 - There are feelings of ambivalence toward the subject
 - Feelings are genuine
 - Avoids sentimentalizing the relationship—neither damning or idealizing