

3. Why does Ortiz Cofer use “babyseed” (8) instead of “sperm” or some other word to describe her grandmother’s plight?
4. Mamá’s room, says Ortiz Cofer, is the “heart” of the house (3). What are the implications of this metaphor?

FOR WRITING

1. Write a paragraph or two in which you compare the present-day aspects of a house, room, or other place with the aspects of that place as you picture it in memory.
2. Write a detailed description of a place—it can even be of a whole town—that uses the physical features of the place to reveal the character of its inhabitants and the tensions (and harmonies) among them.

6

NARRATIVE

NARRATIVE* writing tells a story; it reports “what happened.” All of the essays in this chapter are narratives, telling about what happened to one young pilot on September 11, 2001, for example, and to one African American man when he refused to give up his seat on a bus in North Carolina in the 1940s. There is a big difference, however, between having something “happen” and writing about it, between an event and telling about an event.

In real life, events often occur randomly or chaotically. But in a narrative, they must be told or shown in some orderly sequence (the **PLOT**), by a particular person (the **NARRATOR**), from a particular perspective (the **POINT OF VIEW**), within a definite time and place (the **SETTING**). Let’s look more closely at each of these elements.

Suppose we wanted to tell a story about a young woman sitting alone eating a snack. Our opening line might go something like this:

Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet, eating her curds and whey.

Here, in the first line of a well-known nursery rhyme, we have someone (Miss Muffet) who is doing something (eating) at a particular time (the past) in a particular place (on a tuffet). The problem with our narrative is that it isn’t very interesting. We have a character and a setting, but we don’t really have a plot.

A good plot requires more than just sitting and eating. Plot can be achieved by introducing a conflict into the action, bringing the tension to a high point (the **CLIMAX**), then releasing the tension—in other words, by giving

*Words printed in **SMALL CAPITALS** are defined in the Glossary/Index.

the action of the story a beginning, middle, and end. In our story about Miss Muffet, we could achieve the necessary conflict by introducing an intruder:

Along came a spider and sat down beside her . . .

You know what's coming next, but you can still feel the tension building up before we resolve the conflict and release the rising tension in the final line of our story:

And frightened Miss Muffet away.

Well, that's better. We have a sequence of events now. Moreover, those events occur in our narrative in some sort of order—chronologically. But the events also have to be linked together in some meaningful way. In this case, the appearance of the intruder actually *causes* the departure of the heroine. There are many ways to connect the events in a narrative, but **CAUSE AND EFFECT** is one good approach (see Chapter 12).

We said earlier that a narrative must have a narrator. That narrator may be directly involved in the action of the narrative or may only report it. Do we have one here? Yes, we do; it is the narrator who refers to Miss Muffet as “her.” But this narrator is never identified, and he or she plays no part in the action. Let's look at a narrator who does—Stephen King, in a passage from a narrative about an accident that almost killed him some years ago:

Most of the sight lines along the mile-long stretch of Route 5 that I walk are good, but there is one place, a short steep hill, where a pedestrian heading north can see very little of what might be coming his way. I was three-quarters of the way up this hill when the van came over the crest. It wasn't on the road; it was on the shoulder. My shoulder. I had perhaps three-quarters of a second to register this.

—STEPHEN KING, “On Impact”

Notice that the “I” in this piece is King himself, and he is very much involved in the action of the story he is telling. In fact, he is about to be hit by the van

coming over the crest of the hill. That would introduce a conflict into his walk along Route 5, wouldn't it?

By narrating this story from a **FIRST-PERSON** point of view, King is putting himself in the center of the action. If he had said instead, “The van was closing in on him fast,” we would have a **THIRD-PERSON** narrative, and the narrator would be reporting the action from the sidelines instead of bearing the brunt of it. What makes a chilling story here is that King is not only showing us what happened to him, he is showing us what he was thinking as he suddenly realized that the van was almost on top of him: “It wasn't on the road; it was on the shoulder. My shoulder.” We look in as the narrator goes, in a few swift phrases, from startled disbelief to horrified certainty.

Another way in which King creates a compelling story is by using direct speech, or **DIALOGUE**. When King tells about his first day back at work, he lets his wife speak to us directly: “I can rig a table for you in the back hall, outside the pantry. There are plenty of outlets—you can have your Mac, the little printer, and a fan.” Quoting direct speech like this helps readers to imagine the characters as real people.

But why does King end his narrative back at the writing desk? Because he knows that stories serve a larger **PURPOSE** than just telling what happened. The larger purpose of King's story is to make a point about writing and the writer's life. The van almost killed him, but writing, King demonstrates, helped him to recover and keeps him going.

Well-told stories are almost always told for some reason. The searing tale you heard earlier about Miss Muffet, for example, was told to make a point about narrative structure. A brief, illustrative story like this is called an **ANEC-DOTE**. All stories should have a point, but anecdotes in particular are used in all kinds of writing to give examples and to illustrate the greater subject at hand—writing, for instance.

When you use a story to make a point, don't forget to remind the reader exactly what that point is. When Junot Díaz tells about thieves breaking into his family's apartment in “The Money,” he is also making a point about how police respond differently to crime depending on where it takes place. Normally, Díaz writes, the police would have been called to investigate such an

Yiyun Li, p. 152, uses dialogue to explain why she changed her ideas about marriage.

Mary Mebane, p. 157, tells how segregation laws caused her to “live with terror.”

incident; in his old neighborhood, however, going to the police “would have been about as useless as crying.” Don’t keep your reader in the dark. When your purpose is to explain something, don’t get so wound up in the web of telling a good story that you forget to say what the moral is.

A BRIEF GUIDE TO WRITING A NARRATIVE

As you write a **NARRATIVE**, you need to say who or what the narrative is about, where it takes place, and what is happening. Mary Mebane makes these basic moves of narration in the following lines from her essay in this chapter:

On this Saturday morning Esther and I set out for town for our music lesson. We were going on our weekly big adventure, all the way across town. . . . We walked the two miles from Wildwood to the bus line.

—MARY MEBANE, “The Back of the Bus”

Mebane says *who* her story is about (“Esther and I”), *where* it takes place (on the bus line), and *what* is happening as the story opens (the two teenagers are heading for a “big adventure”).

The following guidelines will help you to make these basic moves as you draft a narrative—and to come up with a subject for your story, consider your purpose and audience, state your point, and organize the specific details and events of your story into a compelling plot by using chronology, transitions, verb tenses, and dialogue.

Coming Up with a Subject

When you enjoy a well-told story, it is often because the author presents an everyday event in an interesting or even dramatic way. To come up with a subject for a story of your own, think of events, both big and small, that you have experienced. You might write a good story about a perfectly ordinary occurrence, such as buying a car, applying for a job, arguing with a friend—or even just doing your homework.

“No, no, no,” the writer Frank McCourt, author of *Angela’s Ashes*, used to say to his students when they complained that nothing had happened to them when they got home the night before. “What did you do when you walked in?” McCourt would ask. “You went through a door, didn’t you? Did you have anything in your hands? A book bag? You didn’t carry it with you all night, did you? Did you hang it on a hook? Did you throw it across the room and your mom yelled at you for it?” Even mundane details like these can provide the material for a good story if you use them to show what people said and did—and exactly where, why, and how they said and did it.

Lynda Barry builds a narrative around the ordinary events of a school day (p. 166).

Considering Your Purpose and Audience

As you compose a narrative, think hard about the audience you want to reach and the **PURPOSE** your narrative is intended to serve. Suppose you are emailing a friend about a visit to an electronics store in order to convince her to take advantage of the great deals you found there. You might tell your story this way: “When I walked into ComputerDaze, I couldn’t believe my eyes. Tablet computers everywhere! And the cheap prices! I went home with a tablet under each arm.” Or suppose you are writing a column in a computer magazine, and the purpose of your story is to show readers how to shop for a tablet. You might write: “The first hurdle I encountered was the numbing variety of brands and models.”

Whatever your purpose, think about how much your audience is likely to know about your subject so you can judge how much background information you need to give, what terms you need to **DEFINE**, and so on. If you are writing an **ANECDOTE**, make sure it is appropriate for your audience and illustrates your larger point.

Generating Ideas: Asking What Happened—and Who, Where, When, How, and Why

How do you come up with the raw materials for a narrative? To get started, ask yourself the questions that journalists typically ask when developing a story: who, what, where, when, how, and why? Your immediate answers will give

you the beginnings of a narrative, but keep asking the questions over and over again. Try to recall lots of particular details, both visual and auditory. As the writer John Steinbeck once advised, “Try to remember [the situation] so clearly that you can see things: what colors and how warm or cold and how you got there . . . what people looked like, how they walked, what they wore, what they ate.”

You will also want your readers to know *why* you’re telling this particular story, so it’s important to select details that support your point. For example, if you’re trying to show why your sister is the funniest person in your family, your story might include specific, vivid details about the sound of her voice, her amusing facial expressions, and a practical joke she once pulled.

Templates for Narrating

The following templates can help you to generate ideas for a narrative and then to start drafting. Don’t take these as formulas where you just have to fill in the blanks. There are no easy formulas for good writing. But these templates can help you plot out some of the key moves of narration and thus may serve as good starting points:

- ▶ This is a story about _____.
- ▶ My story takes place in _____ when _____.
- ▶ As the narrative opens, X is in the act of _____.
- ▶ What happened next was _____, followed by _____ and _____.
- ▶ At this point, _____ happened.
- ▶ The climax of these events was _____.
- ▶ When X understood what had happened, he/she/they said, “_____.”
- ▶ The last thing that happened to X was _____.
- ▶ My point in telling this story is to show that _____.

For more techniques to help you generate ideas and start writing a narrative essay, see Chapter 3.

Stating Your Point

If you are writing a personal story about your sister, you might reveal your point implicitly through the details of the story. However, in much of the narrative writing you do as a student, you will want to state your point explicitly. If you are writing about information technology for a communications class, for example, you might include the story about going to an electronics store, and you would probably want to explain why in a **THESIS STATEMENT** like this: “Go into any computer store today, and you will discover that information technology is the main product of American business.”

Developing a Plot Chronologically

As a general rule, arrange events in chronological order so your readers don’t have to figure out what happened when. Chronology alone, however, is insufficient for organizing a good narrative. Events need to be related in such a way that one leads directly to, or causes, another. Taken together, the events should have a beginning, middle, and end. Then your narrative will form a complete action: a **PLOT**.

One of the best ways to plot a narrative is to set up a situation; introduce a conflict; build up the dramatic tension until it reaches a high point, or **CLIMAX**; then release the tension and resolve the conflict. Even the little horror story about Miss Muffet is satisfying because it’s tightly plotted with a clear sense of completion at the close.

Using Transitions and Verb Tenses

When you write a narrative, you will often incorporate direct references to time: *first*, *last*, *immediately*, *not long after*, *next*, *while*, *then*, *once upon a time*. References like these can be boring in a narrative if they become too predictable, as in *first*, *second*, *third*.

Steve Hendrix, p. 138, shifts between past and present as he writes about a pilot who flew on September 11.

But used judiciously, such **TRANSITIONS** provide smooth links from one event to another, as do other connecting words and phrases like *thus*, *therefore*, *consequently*, *what happened next*, *before I knew it*, and so on.

In addition to clear transitions, your verb tenses can help you to connect events in time. Remember that all actions that happen more or less at the same time in your narrative should be in the same tense: “I *was* three-quarters of the way up this hill when the van *came* over the crest. It *wasn’t* on the road; it *was* on the shoulder.” Don’t shift tenses needlessly; but when you *do* need to indicate that one action happened before another, be sure to change tenses accordingly and accurately. If you need to shift out of chronological order altogether—you might shift back in time in a **FLASHBACK** or shift forward in time in a **FLASH-FORWARD**—be sure to make the leap clear to your readers.

Maintaining a Consistent Point of View

As you construct a narrative, you need to maintain a logical and consistent **POINT OF VIEW**. In a narrative written in the **FIRST PERSON** (“I” or “we”), like Stephen King’s, the **NARRATOR** can be both an observer of the scene (“Most of the sight lines along the mile-long stretch of Route 5 that I walk are good”) and a participant in the action (“I had perhaps three-quarters of a second to register this”). In a narrative written in the **THIRD PERSON** (“he,” “she,” “it,” or “they”), as is the case in most articles and history books, the narrator is often merely an observer, though sometimes an all-knowing one.

Whether you write in the first or third person, don’t attribute perceptions to yourself or your narrator that are physically impossible. If you are narrating a story from the front seat of your car, don’t pretend to see what is going on three blocks away. If you do claim to see (or know) more than you reasonably can from where you sit, your credibility with the reader will soon be strained.

Adding Dialogue

You can introduce the points of view of other people into a story by using **DIALOGUE**. In a story about her childhood, for example, Annie Dillard lets her mother speak for herself: “Lie on your back,” her mother tells young Dillard. “Look at the clouds and figure out what they look like.”

As a first-person narrator, Dillard might have written, “My mother told me to look at the clouds and figure out what they look like.” But these words would be a step removed from the person who said them and so would lack the immediacy of direct dialogue. If you let people in your narrative speak for themselves, your characters will come to life, and your whole narrative will have a greater dramatic impact.

EDITING FOR COMMON ERRORS IN NARRATIVE WRITING

Like other kinds of writing, narrative uses distinctive patterns of language and punctuation—and thus invites typical kinds of errors. The following tips will help you to check for and correct these errors in your narrative writing.

Check that verb tenses accurately indicate when actions occur

Because narrative writing focuses on actions and events, it relies heavily on verbs. Make sure verb tenses accurately indicate when actions take place. Don’t get confused about when to use the simple past (She *arrived* at school), the present perfect (She *has arrived* at school), and the past perfect (She *had arrived* at school).

Use the simple past to indicate actions that were completed at a specified time in the past.

- ▶ He ~~has~~ completed the assignment this morning.

Use the present perfect to indicate actions begun and completed at some unspecified time in the past, or actions begun in the past and continuing into the present.

- ▶ The recession ~~comes~~ has come to an end.
- ▶ The recession ~~goes~~ has gone on for more than five years now.

Use the past perfect to indicate actions completed by a specific time in the past or before another past action occurred.

- ▶ The alligators arrived next, but by then the palm rats had moved out.

Check dialogue to be sure it's punctuated correctly

Narrative writing often includes the direct quotation of what people say. Punctuating dialogue can be challenging because you have to deal with the punctuation in the dialogue itself and also with any punctuation necessary to integrate the dialogue into the text.

Commas and periods always go inside the quotation marks.

- ▶ "Perspective is hard to define," my art history professor said.
- ▶ She noted that in a painting by Jacob Lawrence "perspective means one thing."

Semicolons and colons always go outside the quotation marks.

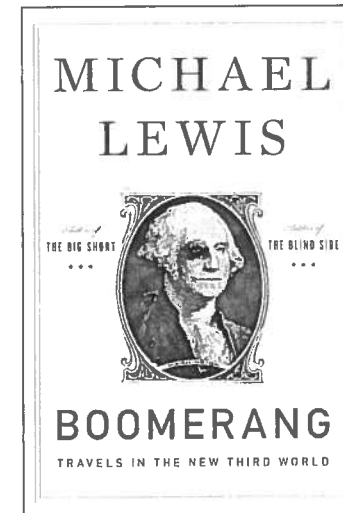
- ▶ But in a Cubist painting by Picasso, she said, "it means quite another"; then she went on to explain the differences.
- ▶ The painting presents the landscape "in layers": from the tops of mountains to the undersides of leaves in the same picture.

Question marks, exclamation points, and dashes go *inside* the quotation marks if they are part of the quoted text but *outside* if they are not part of the quoted text.

- ▶ The teacher asked, "Sam, how would you define perspective in art?"
- ▶ Did you say, "Divine perspective"?

EVERYDAY NARRATIVE

A Book Cover



When you write a narrative, you tell what happened in a particular time and place. In the narrative illustrated on the cover of this book by best-selling author Michael Lewis, somebody has given George Washington a black eye. Lewis's title, *Boomerang*, implies that the wound is self-inflicted. Has George done something that's coming back to hit him in the face? Since the mug shot on this book cover is from a dollar bill, the offense must have been economic. A good narrative does more than simply tell what happened; it gives the story a plot with a beginning, middle, and end. Lewis traces the rise and fall of the global economy before and after 2008. How will the story end? As indicated on this book cover, Lewis concludes that the boomerang effect of excessive borrowing and lending by the United States is harming the economy and may leave the dollar with a semi-permanent black eye. A boom in the economy, on the other hand, would likely keep the dollar strong—and the boomerang from coming back to hit George.