

ENGL-2000-XXX:

The Literacy Narrative

Genres	Narrative, Memoir, Self-Analysis
Length	At least 1000 words
Deadline	TBD

1. What is a literacy narrative?

“A **literacy narrative** is simply a collection of items that describe how you learned to read, write, and compose. This collection might include a story about learning to read cereal boxes and a story about learning to write plays. Some people will want to record their memories about the bedtime stories their parents read to them, the comics they looked at in the newspaper, or their first library card. Others will want to tell a story about writing a memorable letter, leaning how to write on a computer or taking a photograph; reading the Bible, publishing a 'zine', or sending an e-mail message.”

—*Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives*

No one learns how to speak, read, or write in isolation. The simple act of reading this assignment requires vast experience with language. Furthermore, stories (or “narratives”) are not just the property of English departments and bookstores. Plaintiffs and defendants tell stories in court all the time, and juries are made responsible for interpreting those narratives. Patients describe their pains and symptoms as a kind of narrative (from health to illness), and doctors interpret those stories to find “resolution.” Even the way you act tells a story about who you are, where you come from, and what you value. In other words, language and storytelling are a part of our everyday lives. Your history as a language-user is bound to be long and complex. For this assignment, I want you to tell me one of these stories: what is your experience as a reader and writer.

2. What can I write about?

Here are some **guiding questions** to help you get started. These questions primarily focus on reading and writing, but language and literacy are very complex topics, so you might ask these same questions about learning to use language in a number of ways. While answering these questions, use “thick description” to create vivid detail, and don’t be afraid to ask family and friends for help recollecting memories.

1. Who read to you when you were very young? Where did they read to you? What did they read to you? How did you feel while being read to?
2. What books were in your home? Where were they—in your room, in a play room, in the living room, all over the place? What magazines or newspapers were in your home? Who read them?
3. What texts did people in your home talk about (newspapers, school registration forms, novels, song lyrics, etc)?
4. Why did you read? For pleasure, out of boredom, because you were forced to, all of the above?

5. What did you write, if anything, for pleasure (i.e. not for school assignments)? Stories? Poems? Comic strips? A journal? Songs? Letters? Newsletters? 'zines? Blogs? MySpace or Bebo pages? What motivated you to write these things?
6. How did you "publish" your writing? (Did you show it to a family member or friend, mail it to someone, post it on the internet, perform it, enter it in contests, tuck it into a drawer and read it again later, etc)
7. Who did you see reading when you were a child, at home and at school? What adults or other kids did you think of as "good readers" and what made you think that about them?
8. What did you read? What was your first favorite book? How old were you? Who did you talk about it with? What else did you read? Letters, emails, song lyrics, magazines?
9. Where did you do your independent reading? Under the bedcovers with a flashlight? At the kitchen table? In a beanbag chair at the library? At a coffee shop? Only at your desk at school?
10. What negative experiences did you have with reading or writing? Being forced to read something you hated, getting negative feedback on a piece of writing, getting fussed at or made fun of for reading the wrong thing, or at the wrong time, etc.

3. Does the story have to be true?

Your topic for the narrative must be your own experience. This essay requires one type of research: **memory work**. You must learn how to relate your experience to others in a way that keeps your readers engaged until the end.

However, anytime you write something down, you are **dramatizing** it. When you quote someone as saying "I remember when..." you're putting words into someone else's mouth. When you write in the first-person, you're dramatizing yourself so that readers can follow along with the story. Hollywood does it all the time. So many movies are "based upon true events," but the actors dramatize them so that they become more interesting. It's a typical ploy for getting audiences into theaters.

Since you're dramatizing something from memory, you're bound to forget some details. If you can't remember something exactly, try to get it as close as possible. If need be, you can also change things, but only if the overall story remains faithful to your experience. This is where writing becomes a craft: playing with the words so that they present an issue in an interesting way.

4. Can I use "I"?

Yes. In fact, you would be hard pressed to complete an autobiographical narrative without using the first-person point of view. However, keep in mind that narratives require more than just "I-talk." In other words, your purpose is to tell a story from your experience, not to simply talk about yourself for 1000 words.

5. How will my narrative be evaluated?

I will use the following criteria to evaluate your narratives: (1) **content** (2) **detail**, (3) **significance**, (4) **coherence**, and (5) **conventions**.

6. What is “content”?

“Narratives are stories, and we read and tell them for many different purposes. Parents read their children bedtime stories as an evening ritual. Preachers base their Sunday sermons on Bible stories to teach lessons about moral behavior. Grandparents tell how things used to be (sometimes the same stories year after year). Schoolchildren tell teachers that their dog ate their homework. College applicants write about significant moments in their lives. Writing students are often called upon to compose literacy narratives to explore their experiences with reading and writing.”

—Richard Bullock, *The Norton Field Guide to Writing* (21)

Your literacy narrative must be both reflective *and* analytical. As a narrative, your essay must map out your experiences with reading and writing through specific events, individuals, and details. Simply making a bunch of general statements about loving/hating reading/writing will not be sufficient. You do not have to cover your *entire* history with reading and writing; choose a select number of events, individuals, or texts that have influenced your perspective on literacy (be it positive or negative).

7. What is “detail”?

In part, being “analytical” means being attentive to important details; after all, if you want a comprehensive understanding of a story or issue, you need to have detailed knowledge of it. Your story does not have to be a literary masterpiece by any stretch; however, if you want to engage your audience, you should focus on specifics, then use those specifics to explore more general issues—in this case, literacy.

8. What is “significance”?

Strong narratives do more than simply entertain (though entertainment is an important and essential feature of storytelling). Since this assignment is a literacy narrative, your story should say something about your experience with language, reading, or writing. In other words, your story should answer the all important question: “So what?”

You can think of significance in two ways: inductively and deductively. **Inductive** means moving from a specific incident to a generalization. **Deductive** means moving from a generalization to a specific incident. The **specific incident** is the story that engages your reader; the **generalization** is the topic that your readers can relate to.

If you’re still confused, consider this scenario: When you enter a conversation, your interlocutors are already discussing numerous topics that may or may not concern you. Eventually, you catch on to a conversation that interests you because you’ve lived through something relevant to that topic.

“Actually, I’ve been there/done that,” you say to the others, and they pause just long enough to let you tell your story.

However, after sharing your experience, you get a mixed reaction. Some of them are impressed by your experience, but others look confused.

“Well, that’s a great story,” someone says to you, rubbing his chin, “but how does that relate to our conversation, exactly?”

You’re taken aback for a moment, wondering how to respond. But then someone else speaks on your behalf.

“Weren’t you listening? It matters because...”

This type of exchange happens frequently in conversations. Different interlocutors are bound to have different backgrounds, and that affects how each person will receive your story. Most often, some will understand; others won’t. If everyone understands the relevance of what you’ve said, you’ve surpassed expectations. If no one understands, then you either need more content, or your story really isn’t relevant.

9. What is “coherence”?

Your narrative should be clearly written, logically organized, and easily understandable. Your language should be suitable for an academic audience. Awkward and/or offensive language is unacceptable in a university-level assignment.

Your narrative should flow as a story, with each event or experience clearly related to the last one. (This is what we mean by “coherence” and “relevance.”) You should also demonstrate an ability to write simple, compound, and complex sentences without losing your reader in a jumble of words. Also, make sure that you balance out any “generalizations” with “specific incidents or examples” (see above).

10. What are “conventions”?

Remember Gee’s discussion of “Discourse”? Conventions are the rules that determine “competence” and “membership” within that Discourse. In this case, you are writing to an academic audience, so your style must be appropriate.

Also, make sure that your narratives are grammatically correct and formatted in **MLA style**. Be sure to post your narrative *before the deadline* to the appropriate forum on Moodle, and save it as a .rtf, .doc, or .docx file.