



Level 5

See *Writing Aids* section on Story Writing before teaching about personal narratives.

Personal Narrative

Introduction

Personal narratives are a type of storytelling. They add variety and fun to the student's writing program, since most students enjoy writing stories. In this assignment, the plot is ready-made. To write a personal narrative, the student chooses a recent event in his life and tells the story in a crafted and interesting piece. Moms who attended public schools will well remember the quintessential grammar-level paper we all wrote at the start of every fall: "What I Did on My Summer Vacation." This one-to-three page paper is of that genre.

If the student prefers, you can offer him the opportunity to choose an exciting historical situation to write about in the first person, as if he had been there when it happened. Whatever the story content, the assignment requires the student to understand the basics of story writing: showing, not telling, some characterization, and good narration. You can choose whether or not your student should include practice with writing dialogue as part of the assignment.

Prewriting

Help the student to choose a topic that is worthy of the assignment. Ideally, it should have these elements:

- * An exciting, momentous, or significant event in the student's recent past.
- * A limited topic: we don't want him to relate all of his summer vacation or an entire field trip. Rather, the student should focus on a "moment in time," on the scope of an exciting roller coaster ride or the day he was chosen for the lead in a church play.
- * The student will usually be the central character, but a story with one or more other interesting characters is better than one in which the student is the sole subject.

As always with narratives, the student will want to block out his plot. He can use our graphic organizers—Characterization Grid and Story Map—to plan out his story.

- * If he's writing about things he knows well—a personal story—using the characterization grid is even more useful than with fiction, because the tendency is for students to be less concrete and specific about things they know. Because of familiarity, they tend not to notice details about people in personal narratives, and thus struggle to paint their characters very vividly for the reader.
- * The story map is helpful, too, in recalling details that might have been forgotten. For instance, say a student is writing about a white-water rafting trip. The thrill of running the rapids is probably uppermost in his mind; the details of starting off and finishing up may not be so clear.
- * Also important in this phase is choosing when to start and end the episode. Beware of allowing your student to choose for this assignment a story that needs lots of background information. Help him keep it simple and recognizable so he can concentrate on writing the actual narrative well.

Drafting and Editing

Once the prewriting is done thoroughly and well, the drafting process is straightforward. The student needs to get his story down on paper. Don't allow him to be discouraged if it is either too long or too short at first. Longer papers can be edited; shorter papers probably need more detail and more concrete words added, but all of this belongs to the editing stage. Encourage him to get the story down first, then return to it when he's fresh to edit.



As always, have him self proof for those mechanics for which you typically hold him responsible. Then sharpen your red pencil and help him with the following aspects:

- * Does the story flow well? Did you, the reader, get lost at all, or did you follow easily the sequence of events?
- * How are the student's word choices? Has he chosen good, strong verbs that show you a picture of the action, rather than a lot of generalities that describe the action to death?¹
- * Where description of scenery, clothing, or gestures is really needed, are the words clear, crisp, precise, concrete, and helpful?
- * Does the piece include interesting information about the characters? Do you feel you "know them"? If not, perhaps another little scene, a few adverbs, or a few details about their appearance, tones of voice, gestures with hands, etc., might be in order.
- * Are there any spelling or usage errors?
- * Is the story correctly punctuated, especially if the student is using dialogue? Consult your grammar text or handbook if you don't know enough to instruct your student in this genre.

Polishing and Presenting

The student will, as usual, take your penciled copy back to his computer and enter the changes. After he prints a new copy, it's your job to find a way to present his work to a larger audience. If the student's experience is very exciting, out of the ordinary, or educational, try submitting it to your local newspaper or a children's magazine that accepts such stories. Remember, if all else fails, to have your student read it aloud at dinner for his dad. (Also look at having him post it on one of our Gallery web pages.)

¹ Many parent-teachers don't quite understand the "show, don't tell" writing maxim of the narrative genre. The idea is this. Let us say that a boy was a habitual liar. The author could write, "Joey was a habitual liar, and his family knew it." Or, he could write a section that begins like this: "Joey!" "Yes?" "Did you just tell me a fib?" Joey looked at his sneakers as his face turned red. He hated that feeling that his mother could read his mind. See? Instead of allowing your child to tell the audience what is going on, encourage him to dramatize it as much as possible in his storytelling. (Of course, in all stories, some narration is always needed.)