

NARRATIVE

A narrative tells a story by presenting a sequence of events. Anytime you "tell what happened," you are using narration.

Although a narrative may be written for its own sake--that is, simply to recount events--sometimes it is used for a purpose, and a sequence of events is presented to prove a point. For instance, in a narrative essay about your first date, your purpose may be to show your readers that dating is a bazaar and often unpleasant ritual. Accordingly, you do not simply "tell the story" of your date. Rather, you select and arrange details of the evening that show your readers why dating is bizarre and unpleasant.

Narratives, like other types of writing, need rich, detail to be convincing. Each detail should help form a picture for the reader; even exact times, dates, and geographical locations can be helpful.

(From: Patterns for College Writing: A Rhetorical Reader and Guide, pp. 33-34)

Here is a narrative paragraph in which George Orwell reports a crucial moment; notice how he mixes external events and snippets of conversation with his inner thoughts, pegging all perfectly with a topic sentence:

But I did not want to shoot the elephant. I watched him beating his bunch of grass against his knees, with that preoccupied grandmotherly air that elephants have. It seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him. At that age I was not squeamish about killing animals, but I had never shot an elephant and never wanted to. (Somehow it always seems worse to kill a large animal.) Besides, there was the beast's owner to be considered. Alive, the elephant was worth at least a hundred pounds; dead, he would only be worth the value of his tusks, five pounds, possibly. But I had to act quickly. I turned to some experienced-looking Burmans who had been there when we arrived, and asked them how the elephant had been behaving. They all said the same thing: he took no notice of you if you left him alone, but he might charge if you went too close to him.

(From: "Shooting an Elephant" by George Orwell)

Here are four of the most common flaws in narrative paragraphs, against which you may check your own drafts:

I. INSUFFICIENT DETAIL.

A few words, of course, can tell what happened: "I saw an accident." But if the reader is to feel the whole sequence of the experience, he needs details, and many of them. He also needs in the first sentence or two some orientation to the general scene--a topic sentence of setting and mood. The following is the opening of a narrative paragraph from an essay that has already logically discussed its thesis that "haste makes waste." It is not a bad beginning, but a few more details, as we shall see in a moment, would help us know where we are, and at what time of day or night:

The sky was very dark. People were walking quickly in all directions...

II. DETAILS OUT OF ORDER.

The writer of the dark-sky paragraph went on in her next sentences with additional detail:

The sky was very dark. People were walking quickly in all directions. The trees were tossing and swaying about. The air felt heavy and lighting flickered here and there behind the gray sky.

But, clearly, the further details are out of order. Although she has said the trees were moving, the air seems to have remained still. She eventually rearranged these details, but not before committing another error.

III. COMMENTS BREAKING INTO NARRATIVE FLOW.

Our dark-sky student went on to intrude an editorializing comment, and a clever one at that. But she would have been better off letting her details imply the moral of the story. Here is her paragraph, revised after conference, with the opening details of setting filled and rearranged, but with the intruding comment, which she actually deleted, left underlined to illustrate the fault:

One day, going home from school, I came to understand for the first time how costly haste can be. The sky was very dark, and people were walking quickly across the streets through the afternoon traffic. The air was heavy, and lightning flickered here and there behind the overcast. Suddenly a soft wind moved through the trees, setting them tossing and swaying; and then came a great gust, sending leaves and papers scurrying, and rattling shop signs. Wet splotches the size of quarters began to dapple the sidewalk; and then it started to pour. Everyone began to run in a frenzied scramble for shelter. People should not lose their heads at the very time they need them most. At the street corner ahead of me, two girls, running from different directions, crashed together. A boy riding a bicycle slammed on his

brakes to avoid them, and he went skidding, out of control, into the middle of the street. A car caught him squarely. Next day, still stunned, I read in the paper that he had died on the way to the hospital.

IV. SHIFTING VIEWPOINT.

The effect of a shift of viewpoint is about the same as that of the intruding comment. The narrative flow is broken. The author seems to have jumped out of his original assumptions, from one location to another, as the underlined sentence show:

My boys of Tent Five were suddenly all piling on top of me on the shaky bunk. I didn't feel much like a counselor, but at least I was keeping them amused. The giggling heap on top of me seemed happy enough. It was organized recreation time, and they seemed pretty well organized. The Chief hurried across the campground, wondering what was going on over there, and issuing a silent death warrant for the counselor of Five. I looked out through a wiggly chink in the heap and saw the Chief in the doorway, with his face growing redder and redder.

The writer of this paragraph has let his imagination shift from his recollected location on the bunk, beneath the heap of boys, to his reconstruction of what must have been going on in the Chief's head out on the campground. Similar unwarranted shifts occur when you have been writing he, and suddenly shift to they, or when you unwittingly shift your tenses from present to past, or past to present.

(From: The Practical Stylist, pp. 30-31.)