

NARRATIVE WRITING

Narrative writing is storytelling. In University Studies classes, students write short narrative essays (or personal essays) to describe life experiences and identify how experiences shape their goals and ambitions.

A personal essay is used to persuade the reader of the importance of an event or experience (or a set of events/experiences). A personal essay should catch the reader's attention with interesting statements or descriptions of events. When something interesting is at the beginning of an essay, it is called a "hook." A hook might be a surprising statement, a fact or statistic, a quotation, a joke, or a vivid (colorful) description.

As an example of a hook, you might remember the joke at the beginning of David Foster Wallace's comment speech, "This Is Water":

There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys, how's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"

Another narrative technique that a personal essay might use is dialogue. In storytelling, there are often multiple people (or "characters") involved in an event or experience. Dialogue occurs when these characters are shown having a conversation in their own voices. In David Foster Wallace's speech, there's only one example of dialogue:

Anyway, you finally get to the checkout line's front, and pay for your food, and wait to get your check or card authenticated by a machine, and then get told to "Have a nice day" in a voice that is the absolute voice of death...

The checkout clerk saying "Have a nice day" is an example of dialogue, and it is written inside quotation marks.

Since the personal essay IS personal, it should also contain your opinion or feelings about events and experiences in your life. In the above example, "in a voice that is the absolute voice of death" is an opinion. It is David Foster Wallace's interpretation of how a grocery store worker's voice sounds. Discuss: what feelings is he trying to describe in his story about the grocery store checkout line?

David Foster Wallace's speech is full of opinions. Here is another example.

The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day.

A personal essay is written using the "first person" point of view (I or we). Most personal essays are written in the past tense (to explain events that have already happened). In this class, you will often write about the past to explain how you made choices, such as the choice to come to college. You will also write in the future tense to explain what you plan to do at college and how you plan to achieve your goals.