

Key Features / Literacy Narratives

A well-told story. As with most narratives, those about literacy often set up some sort of situation that needs to be resolved. That need for resolution makes readers want to keep on reading. We want to know how Kassfy will deal with an irate customer. Some literacy narratives simply explore the role that developing literacy of some kind played at some time in someone's life, as when Karim discovered the school library and American Girl novels. And some, like Gutierrez's, explore the writer's literacy development in a larger context.

Vivid detail. Details can bring a narrative to life for readers by giving them vivid mental sensations of the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures of the world in which your story takes place. The details you use when describing something can help readers picture places, people, and events; dialogue can help them hear what is being said. We grasp the importance of books for Karim as she "touched the pictures on the front and back cover." Similarly, we can picture and hear Gutierrez as a little girl who speaks only Spanish in an English-language kindergarten, "sobbing and crying for my mother."

Some indication of the narrative's significance. By definition, a literacy narrative tells something the writer remembers about learning to read, write, or gain competence in a specific area. In addition, the writer needs to make clear why the incident matters to them. You may reveal its significance in various ways. Kassfy comes to understand that to work in an auto repair shop, she needs to understand automotive repair terms. Gutierrez places her literacy in a tradition going back generations—and continuing with her sister's relationship with her. Karim's narrative shows that her literacy was a key to understanding her place in society.

A GUIDE TO WRITING LITERACY NARRATIVES

Choosing a Topic

In general, it's a good idea to focus on a single event that took place during a relatively brief period of time—though sometimes learning to do or understand something may take place over an extended period. In that case, several snapshots or important moments may be needed. Here are some suggestions for topics:

- any early memory about writing, reading, speaking, or another form of literacy that you recall vividly
 - someone who taught you to read or write
 - someone who helped you understand how to do something
 - a book, video game, recording, or other text that has been significant for you in some way
 - an event at school that was related to your literacy and that you found interesting, humorous, or embarrassing
 - a literacy task that you found (or still find) especially difficult or challenging
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❖ 385–90

- a memento that represents an important moment in your literacy development (perhaps the start of a **LITERACY PORTFOLIO**)
 - the origins of your current attitudes about writing, reading, speaking, or doing something
 - learning to text, learning to write an email appropriately, creating and maintaining a *Facebook* page or blog
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Make a list of possible topics, and then choose one that you think will be interesting to you and to others—and that you're willing to share with others. If several seem promising, try them out on a friend or classmate. Or just choose one and see where it leads; you can switch to another if need be. If you have trouble coming up with a topic, try **FREEWITING**, **LISTING**, **CLUSTERING**, or **LOOPING**.

Considering the Rhetorical Situation

■ [59–60](#)

PURPOSE

Why do you want to tell this story? To share a memory with others? To fulfill an assignment? To teach a lesson? To explore your past learning? Think about the reasons for your choice and how they will shape what you write.

■ [61–64](#)

AUDIENCE

Are your readers likely to have had similar experiences? Would they tell similar stories? How much explaining will you have to do to help them understand your narrative? Can you assume that they will share your attitudes toward your story, or will you have to work at making them see your perspective? How much about your life are you willing to share with this audience?

■ [72–74](#)

STANCE

What attitude do you want to project? Affectionate? Neutral? Critical? Do you wish to be sincere? serious? humorously detached? self-critical? self-effacing? something else? How do you want your readers to see you?

■ [75–77](#)

MEDIA / DESIGN

Will your narrative be in print? presented orally? online? Should you use photos, tables, graphs, or video or audio clips? Is there a font that conveys the right tone? Do you need headings?

Generating Ideas and Text

333–44

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Good literacy narratives share certain elements that make them interesting and compelling for readers. Remember that your goals are to tell the story as clearly and vividly as you can and to convey the meaning the incident has for you today. Start by thinking about what you already know about writing a literacy narrative. Then write out what you remember about the setting of your narrative and those involved, perhaps trying out some of the methods in the chapter on **GENERATING IDEAS AND TEXT**. You may also want to **INTERVIEW** a teacher or parent or other person who figures in your narrative.

Explore what you already know about writing a literacy

narrative. Think about recent occasions when you've had to narrate a story, either orally or in writing, in school or out. Take a few moments to think about a couple of those occasions, especially ones involving your reading, writing, speaking, or learning to do something. Why and to whom were you telling these stories? How successful do you think your narratives were? What aspects of telling the story did you feel most confident about or do especially well? What could you have done better? What do you still need to learn about writing a literacy narrative?

456–63

Describe the setting. Where does your narrative take place? List the places where your story unfolds. For each place, write informally for a few minutes, **DESCRIBING** what you remember:

- **What do you see?** If you're inside, what color are the walls? What's hanging on them? What can you see out any windows? What else do you see? Books? Lined paper? Red ink? Are there people? places to sit? a desk or a table?
- **What do you hear?** A radiator hissing? Leaves rustling? The wind howling? Rain? Someone reading aloud? Shouts? Cheers? Children playing? Music? The chime of a text arriving on your phone?
- **What do you smell?** Sweat? Perfume? Incense? Food cooking?
- **How and what do you feel?** Nervous? Happy? Cold? Hot? A scratchy wool sweater? Tight shoes? Rough wood on a bench?
- **What do you taste?** Gum? Mints? Graham crackers? Juice? Coffee?

Think about the key people. Narratives include people whose actions play an important role in the story. In your literacy narrative, you are probably one of those people. A good way to develop your understanding of the people in your narrative is to write about them:

- **Describe each person in a paragraph or so.** What do the people look like? How do they dress? How do they speak? Quickly? Slowly? With an accent? Do they speak clearly, or do they mumble? Do they use any distinctive words or phrases? You might begin by describing their movements, their posture, their bearing, their facial expressions. Do they have a distinctive scent?
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- **Recall (or imagine) some characteristic dialogue.** A good way to bring people to life and move a story along is with **DIALOGUE**, to let readers hear them rather than just hearing about them. Try writing six to ten lines of dialogue between two people in your narrative. If you can't remember an actual conversation, make up one that could have happened. (After all, you are telling the story, and you get to decide how it is to be told.) Try to remember (and write down) some of the characteristic words or phrases that the people in your narrative used.
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● [550–51](#)

Write about “what happened.” At the heart of every good **NARRATIVE** is the answer to the question “What happened?” The action in a literacy narrative may be as dramatic as winning a spelling bee or as subtle as a conversation between two friends; both contain action, movement, or change that the narrative tries to capture for readers. A good story dramatizes the action. Try **SUMMARIZING** the action in your narrative in a paragraph—try to capture what happened. Use active and specific verbs (“pondered,” “shouted,” “laughed”) to describe the action as vividly as possible.

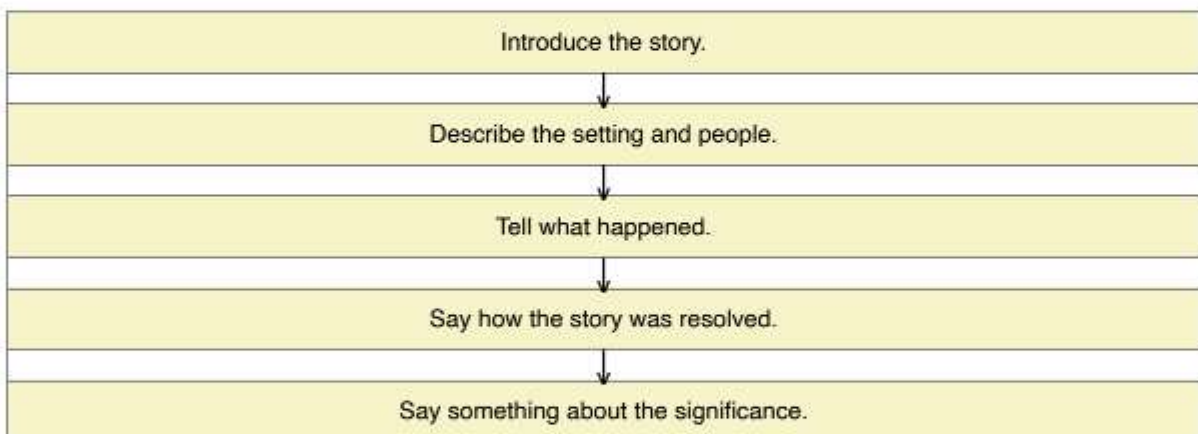
Consider the significance of the narrative. You need to make clear the ways in which any event you are writing about is significant for you now. Write a page or so about the meaning it has for you. How did it change or otherwise affect you? What aspects of your life now can you trace to that event? How might your life have been different if this event had not happened or had turned out differently? Why does this story matter to you?

Ways of Organizing a Literacy Narrative

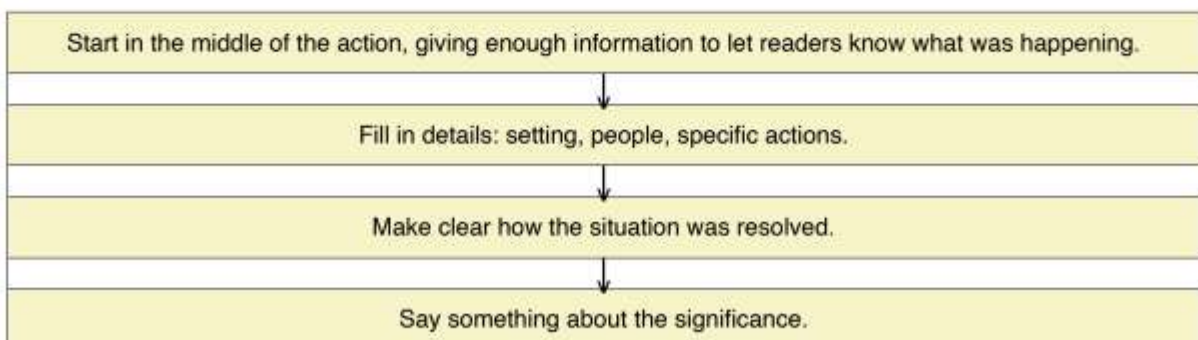
340–42

Start by **OUTLINING** the main events in your narrative. Then think about how you want to tell the story. Don't assume that the only way to tell your story is just as it happened. That's one way—starting at the beginning of the action and continuing to the end. But you could also start in the middle—or even at the end. Karla Gutierrez, for example, could have begun her narrative by discussing her current literacy and then gone back to trace the influences of her family. Several ways of organizing a narrative follow.

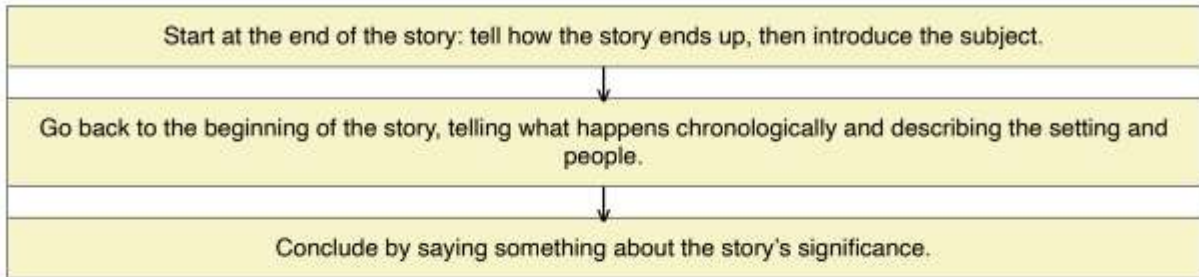
[Chronologically, from beginning to end]



[Beginning in the middle]



[Beginning at the end]



Writing Out a Draft

[364–66](#)

Once you have generated ideas and thought about how you want to organize your narrative, it's time to begin **DRAFTING**. Do this quickly—try to write a complete draft in one sitting, concentrating on getting the story on paper or screen and on putting in as much detail as you can. Some writers find it helpful to work on the beginning or ending first. Others write out the main event first and then draft the beginning and ending.

[346–54](#)

Draft a BEGINNING. A good narrative grabs readers' attention right from the start. Here are some ways of beginning:

- **Create a question to be answered.** Karim begins her narrative at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., leading readers to wonder how this scene connects to her literacy.
 - **Describe the context.** You may want to provide background information at the start of your narrative, as Gutierrez does with an anecdote about her illiterate grandmother's struggle to collect a pension.
 - **Describe the setting, especially if it's important to the narrative.** Kassfy begins by describing her family's roles working in her father's auto shop.
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[354–58](#)

Draft an ENDING. Think about what you want readers to read last. An effective ending helps them understand the meaning of your narrative. Here are some possibilities:

- **End where your story ends.** It's up to you to decide where a narrative ends. Karim ends on a field trip in high school.
 - **Say something about the significance of your narrative.** Gutierrez explores the meaning of her experience over several paragraphs, and Kassfy discusses her ignorance and resulting embarrassment. The trick is to touch on the narrative's significance without stating it too directly.
 - **Refer back to the beginning.** Karim refers back to her trip to Washington, D.C., and Gutierrez to her grandmother and the "piling up" of literacies over several generations.
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Consider REWRITING. If you have time and want to explore alternatives, you might try rewriting your draft to see if a different plan or approach might work better.

Come up with a title. A good TITLE indicates something about the subject of your narrative—and makes readers want to take a look. Kassfy’s title joins two terms —“automotive” and “literacy”—that aren’t usually seen together. Gutierrez uses wordplay —“Reading, Writing, and Riding,” to suggest the multiple roles literacy plays in our lives.

Considering Matters of Design

You'll probably write your narrative in paragraph form, but think about the information you're presenting and how you can design it to enhance your story and appeal to your audience.

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- What would be an appropriate **FONT**? Something serious, like Times Roman? Something whimsical, like *Comic Sans*? Something else?

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- Would it help your readers if you added **HEADINGS** in order to divide your narrative into shorter sections?

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- Would photographs or other **VISUALS** show details better than you can describe them with words alone? If you're writing about learning to read, for example, you might scan in an image of one of the first books you read. Or if your topic is learning to write, you could include something you wrote. You could even include a video or audio recording. Would your narrative best be conveyed as a multimedia composition that combines written text, images, and video or audio?

Getting Response and Revising

[372-74](#)

The following questions can help you study your draft with a critical eye. **GETTING RESPONSE** from others is always good, and these questions can guide their reading, too. Make sure they know your purpose and audience.

- Do the title and first few sentences make readers want to read on? If not, how else might you begin?
 - Is the sequence of events in the narrative clear? Does it flow, and are there effective transitions? Does the narrative get sidetracked at any point?
 - Is anything confusing?
 - Is there enough detail, and is it interesting? Will readers be able to imagine the setting? Can they picture the characters and sense what they're like? Would it help to add some dialogue so that readers can "hear" them?
 - Are visuals used effectively and integrated smoothly with the written text? If there are no visuals, would using some strengthen the narrative?
 - Have you made the narrative meaningful enough for readers so that they wonder and care about what will happen?
 - Do you narrate any actions clearly? vividly? Does the action keep readers engaged?
 - Is the significance of the narrative clear?
 - Is the ending satisfying? What are readers left thinking?
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[375-77](#)

The preceding questions should identify aspects of your narrative you need to work on. When it's time to **REVISE**, make sure your text appeals to your audience and achieves your purpose as successfully as possible.

Editing and Proofreading

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Once you've revised your draft, follow these guidelines for **EDITING** a narrative:

◆ [474–82](#)

• [361–62](#)

- Make sure events are **NARRATED** in a clear order and include appropriate time markers, **TRANSITIONS**, and summary phrases to link the parts and show the passing of time.
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- Be careful that **VERB TENSES ARE CONSISTENT** throughout. If you start your narrative in the past tense (“he *taught* me how to use a computer”), be careful not to switch to the present (“So I *look* at him and *say* . . .”) along the way.
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★ [HB-11–13](#)

- Check to see that **VERB TENSES** correctly indicate when an action took place. If one action took place before another action in the past, for example, you should use the past perfect tense: “I forgot to dot my *i*'s, a mistake I *had made* many times before.”
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- Punctuate **DIALOGUE** correctly. Whenever someone speaks, surround the speech with quotation marks (“No way,” I said). Periods and commas go inside quotation marks; exclamation points and question marks go inside if they're part of the quotation, outside if they're part of the whole sentence:

INSIDE Opening the door, Ms. Cordell announced, “Pop quiz!”

OUTSIDE It wasn't my intention to announce “I hate to read”!

- **PROOFREAD** your finished narrative carefully before turning it in.

Taking Stock of Your Work

Take stock of what you've written by considering to these questions:

- How did you go about coming up with ideas and generating text? Did you try freewriting, looping, mapping, something else? Which activities were most productive for you?
 - How effectively did you use dialogue, description, or other narrative strategies in your writing?
 - Did you use photographs or other visual or audio elements? If so, what did they add? If not, why not?
 - Did you take any risks with your writing, or did you experiment in some way? Was the experiment a success? A failure? What can you learn from it?
 - How did others' responses influence your writing?
 - What did you learn about reading, writing, or other literacies as you worked on your piece? How might you use this learning in the future?
 - Overall, what did you do well in this piece? What could still be improved? What would you do differently next time?
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