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That's Another Story

Academic writing can loosely be defined as any writing completed in an academic environment—for high school, college, and university. It spans from research papers to journal articles; academic writing can encompass any genre. However, narratives have been nudged aside in this realm of academia. Often times—specifically at the high school level—personal experiences have been deemed unprofessional or disreputable, but this is not necessarily a truth of all stories. Narratives have the foundation to provide considerable insight and highly-developed ideas by utilizing an intimate point of view.

However, this anti-narrative stance is not rampant throughout academia. Many scholars and professional writers alike find the narrative process refreshing. In “Making sense of life stories: The role of narrative perspective in perceiving hidden information about social identity” Tibor Polya, Janos Laszlo, and Joseph P. Forgas—all psychologists—suggest that the telling of personal narratives are prime exhibitions of our own character. They propose, “There are reasonable grounds to assume that the way a narrator recounts a life story may indeed convey hidden information about their identity states. There are a number of research traditions in psychology that suggest that the way something is communicated is often more informative than is the content of the message itself.” Therefore, narratives can provide endless interpretations. Also, Julie Beck further explains the importance of personal narratives:

Though perhaps the facts of someone's life, presented end to end, wouldn't much resemble a narrative to the outside observer, the way people choose to tell the stories of their lives, to others and—crucially—to themselves, almost always does have a narrative arc. In telling the story of how you became who you are, and of who you're on your way to becoming, the story itself becomes a part of who you are. (Beck)

As previously mentioned, narratives are stories, so how does one go about constructing one? Of course, this depends on each individual's writing process. Many authors choose to plan out their writing with outlines, story "rules," or general plot points. Others prefer to simply begin writing and allow their words to lead and define the narrative. Whichever style that is most comfortable or inciteful for the author is acceptable. However, there are other factors to keep in mind when writing narratives. Above all, the academic narrative shall have be coherent. To assure this, the writing should be organized in a manner which is easily followed. This would explain the prominence of chronologically ordered events in narratives. In addition, the story should have a purpose or purposes also known which can be translated into motifs and/or themes. Narratives are exceedingly flexible; so long as the author is concise, the writing should be adequate.

For centuries, storytelling has been the traditional method of transferring information and life lessons. As children, we delve into these stories, embracing every sentence with our hungry minds. I distinctly remember listening to the tale of the Tortoise and the Hare for the first time in first grade. After finishing the story, my teacher went on to explain its meaning, which the entire class seemed to miss. Due to laziness, the Hare lost the race to the Tortoise who persevered and kept a slow, but steady, pace. However, this lesson proved void when I read *The 7 Habits of*

Highly Effective Teens for a class assignment in eighth grade. According to the self-help book, young people should take time to “sharpen their saw.” In other words, they must take time to relax if they wish to be “highly effective.” Without rest, performance becomes subpar. Further, most athletes swear by the “interval training system” in which the individual alternates between intense and moderate exercise. This would suggest a different conclusion. Yes, the Tortoise may have won the race, but the Hare probably experienced a better cardiovascular workout. Therefore, narratives are more open to interpretation as well. Here, I grasped the gem that is an ages-old fable and discovered a new facet on its surface. Narratives can form seemingly definite shapes on an ink blot test, but each viewer perceives it differently.

Indeed, narratives allow for incredible honesty, so beliefs can be expressed freely. Depending on the assignment, a professor may be the only soul to peruse an essay. Consequently, students are more likely to remove barriers from their writing. They can exclaim their opinion, share childhood memories, or let unfiltered thoughts stream the page. College application essays, for example, are read by only an admissions counselor (with the possibility of a proof reader of your choice), so a student may be inclined to show more of their personality when compared to an essay written for a speech class. Personally, I took a liberty this year by writing about a particularly unpleasant experience. Initially, I thought my topic of choice was a wretched mistake—that is until I received remarkable feedback from my high school English teacher who reviewed it.

With narratives, the author is given absolute control which increases chance of “discovery” during the writer’s process. While research essays mostly adhere to already existent ideas or practices, narratives can build with each action. Further, narratives are perfectly crafted vessels for creativity. When someone ponders the word “story,” princesses, talking animals, and

fantastical events come to mind, but these do not comprise the entire scope of narratives. To an extent, even fibs could be honorary narratives. If it contains plot points, or resembles a story in the least, I would be willing to deem a false statement a narrative. My case in point: the story of Santa Claus—a fabricated tale of a hulking, obese man who defies the laws of physics by delivering gifts to every child on Earth—is repeated year after year during the holiday season.

Additionally, narratives can introduce individuals, who might not be initially interested in certain matters, to important issues by disguising them as entertainment. For example, *The Help*'s main purpose may seem to be entertain, but it truly informs the reader of the conditions and landscape of the South during the Civil Rights era as well.

In its essence, a narrative is a story, a story that can be entirely fictional or a precise memoir of the author's own experiences, an account that fills a singular page or spans seven, thickly bound books. And truly, we have been constructing narratives all our lives. As babbling toddlers, we provide relatives with narratives of journeys to the park or the incoherent plot points of a cartoon. At this point, the organization is jumbled, but worry not, practice will aid this storytelling process. In elementary school—usually around 4th grade—we explore the world of compositions. Oh, the dreaded one-page assignments in which we must write about a family member. How were we to fill up that entire wide-ruled page with words? Later, middle school journal warm-ups made an appearance which largely consisted of prompts such as “Write a mysterious short story that ends with a cliffhanger” or the simpler “What did you do over Thanksgiving break?” However, high school was another animal in the domain of narratives. Suddenly, they were deemed unprofessional, and why was the use of first person pronouns prohibited? At any rate, people have created narratives throughout their life—whether they were aware or not.

Works Cited

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