

Please write a paper introducing yourself and talk about your life, etc. I expect at least four pages, typed, double spaced, with a font no larger than size 12.

Your first essay will be a narrative. Focus on events that elucidates some aspect of your life. This narrative, therefore, should describe events that took place in a matter of minutes, hours, or days.

The subject of the essay can be an event that resulted in personal growth, a change in your character, a shift in your political ideas or moral values, or just a new way of seeing things. It could be an event that caused you to change or question the way you previously saw or understood the world around you. Most often, an engrossing narrative of the sort you will find in your textbook focuses on a defining moment or single incident in a writer's life. These events illustrate, clarify, explain, and/or analyze something about the writer's personality and way of thinking. Normally, this is an event that contributed to formation of character and world view.

Try to "hook" the reader early in the paper, most often in the first paragraph or first sentence. But if you do not come up with the perfect introduction right away, just keep writing. Come back to the beginning of the paper later. Then revise and edit until you are sure you've written an introduction that will keep the reader engaged. An introduction that contains facts—names of people and places, dates, background, all the elements for setting a scene—is much more seductive to the reader than general philosophical musings. Indeed, students who begin a narrative with abstract observations in the first paragraph often lose their way and can't figure out how to continue. A simple tactic is to begin with the words "I remember." Memories conger images of people and places rather than vague ideas. Beginning this way helps to immediately ground your essay in the physical world. A similar tactic is to begin with an actual date. If you begin with a date, avoid the obvious "It was.." or "It happened on a Tuesday." These kinds of openings do not usually generate the drama they are intended to. Instead, just begin with, "On Tuesday of last week, I ran into an old friend..." or a similar statement and continue on. I caution you against relying on simplistic and clichéd introductions like "Since the beginning of time....," or "Webster's defines love as....," or "Man has always...."

Pay attention to how you organize the essay. Will you tell the story in a traditional linear fashion? Will you use flashbacks, or perhaps an allegory to make your point? Will you be the main subject or will you focus on another person? Think also about what style you will use: an informal, conversational style; a formal academic approach; a satirical/humorous approach? All of these decisions should be dictated by your subject and purpose. Often how you present a subject is as important as what you have to say. In fact, form and meaning are often viewed as inseparable.

Finally, as far as possible, focus on facts. Allow the story to convey your feelings about the subject rather than spelling them out. Readers respond to how well you describe an event much more than to a description of your response to the event.

A safe bet is to describe an event that you find yourself thinking about often, even though you may barely be aware of it. For many people, a bus passing in the rain, a person dressed a particular way, a café with a particular style of curtains or tables, a child sailing a boat on a pond, an open window in an apartment building, or even a geranium on a window sill can evoke strong emotions or memories. If so, you might start your paper with a description of the scene that evokes that memory.

You can also write about an event that you were not personally involved in—perhaps something you witnessed from a car or bus, at work, on the street. The event does not have to be dramatic; in fact, seemingly mundane events often turn out to be the most poignant, memorable, and thought-provoking for generations of readers. What you write about is not as important as how you write about it. For instance, carefully recorded observations about an old man walking his dog can be as creative and interesting as more sensational events.

Remember that a major pitfall in narration/description is self indulgence. As stated above, avoid excessive and lengthy discussions of your feelings. You are writing to communicate with a reader which is quite different from recording your thoughts and feelings in a personal journal. For instance, instead of telling the reader how sad the death of a loved one made you feel, focus on that person. Show us the person—give us mainly the facts—and let us know that person and be the judge of him/her and what happened. Likewise, before writing about personal relationships, I suggest that you make sure that you have sufficient distance from the event. Some writers say that it's best to write in the heat of the moment; others believe that it's best to be in a position to reflect on an experience calmly and objectively. The difficulty of writing about relationships with spouses or partners is that such topics tend often to be more interesting to the writer than the reader.