

Part II: Rhetorical Strategies for Essays

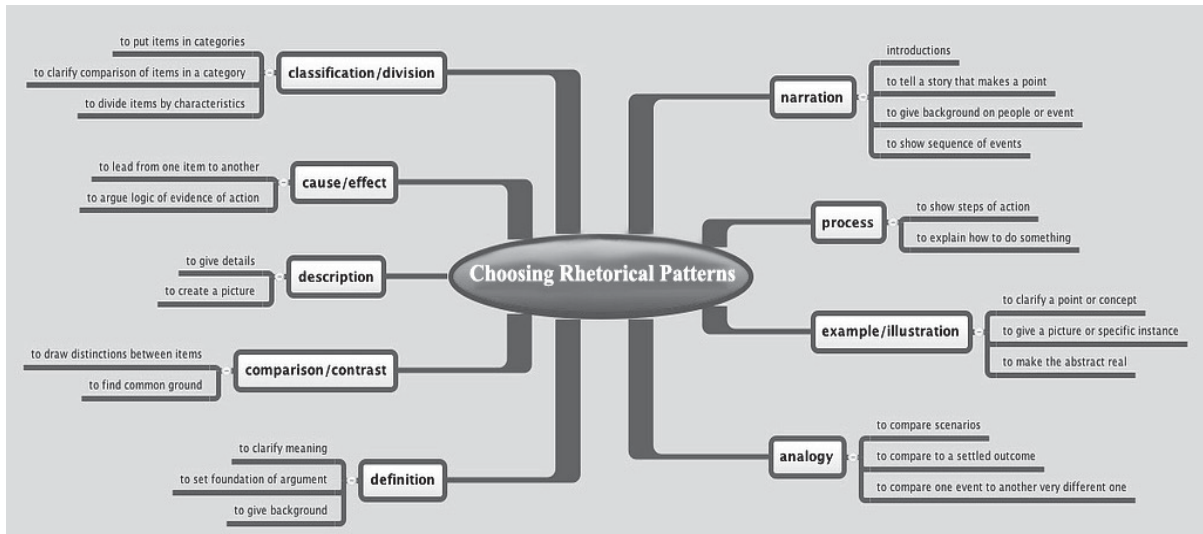


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Introduction

Nine rhetorical strategies are generally recognized: Narration, description, comparison, example, illustration, definition, process, causal analysis and argument. Most writing will use a variety of strategies in a single essay. However, for inexperienced rhetoricians, practicing each separately helps in learning the techniques of organization distinct to the individual strategy. Students then learn to draw from a full palette of techniques to paint their ideas in writing. For example, you can't tell a good story (narration), without description, you might provide examples when comparing items, and you will present causes and effects as part of logical reasoning in argument.

In this section, the chapters included recognize the seven strategies generally taught as single essays. Description is included with Chapter 9: Narration, and example is treated in Chapter 12 as synonymous with illustration.

Chapter 9: The Narrative Essay



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What is Narration?

Narration may serve a variety of purposes in writing. It may serve as the primary mode in a narrative. Narration may also be used just like reasons and examples to support a thesis, based on either fact or invention. Often, it is used to increase reader interest or dramatize a point the writer wants to make. For example, Aesop wrote fables for his clients to use in their legal defense. They were short, easy to remember, and illustrated the client's argument. Traditionally, narration was used to recount the facts of a legal case, in order to put them into context and structure them in the best possible light for the speaker's purpose. Plutarch used narration as the basis for his comparison of Greek and Roman notables. In his 1989 history of the Civil War, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, James MacPherson uses narration to support the theme of the contingency of history. In short, narration has been used as proof for a long time.

What is Narrative?

A narrative is a constructive format (as a work of speech, writing, song, film, television, video games, photography or theatre) that describes a sequence of non-fictional or fictional events. The word derives from the Latin verb *narrare*, "to tell," and is related to the adjective *gnarus*, "knowing" or "skilled."

- First Person Narrative: A mode of narration where a story is told by one character at a time, speaking from their own perspective only, using "I," "My," and other pronouns.
- Second Person Narrative: A mode of narration where a story is told with the use of "You" "Your" EXAMPLE: You went to the store before you bought yourself a flower.

- **Third Person Narrative:** A mode of narration where a story is told with the use of “She” “He” “They” “They’ll”
- **Multiple Narratives:** A mode of narration where a story is told with the use of several narrators which tell the story from different points of view. The task, for readers, is to decide which narrator seems the most reliable for each part of the story.
- **Unreliable Narratives:** An unreliable narrator is a narrator whose credibility is in question or has been compromised. This narrative mode is one which is developed by an author for various reasons, but is usually done so as to deceive the reader or audience. In most circumstances, unreliable narrators are first-person narrators, but third-person narrators can also be unreliable.

Elements

The minimum requirements of narration include:

- A beginning, middle, and end
- A main character, perhaps others as well
- A setting in time and place
- Motivated (or caused) action
- Supports the thesis (“It is best to prepare for the days of necessity.”)

Why Write a Narrative Essay?

Many instructors like to begin ENG 101 classes with the narrative essay. It’s called an essay, but many narrative essays are really short stories. The narrative has a twofold purpose. Because students are writing about an important event in their lives, students find it easy to write helping them get acclimated to college writing and expectations. And, since students are sharing about their own lives, the narrative helps readers get to know them more personally, building community in the class.

How to Write the Narrative Essay

(Narrative essay elements appear in bold in the following list.)

1. Begin by identifying events in your life that taught you important life lessons. These events should have changed you somehow. Be sure to pick a topic that you feel comfortable sharing with other students as well as your instructor. From this choice will emerge **the theme** (the main point) of your story.
2. Once you identify the event, you will write down what happened. Just brainstorm (also called freewriting). Focus on **the actual event**. You do not need to provide a complete build up to it. For example, if I am telling a story about an experience at camp, I do not need to provide readers with a history of my camp experiences, nor do I need to explain how I got there, what we ate each day, how long it lasted, etc. Readers need enough information to understand the event. So, I do not need to provide information about my entire summer if the event only lasts a couple of days.
3. Use **descriptions/vivid details**. As writers, we want our readers to experience this event as we did. We want to bring it to life. Descriptions put the reader in the moment. Make sure they are active descriptions, vivid and clear. Remember that people have five senses. You can appeal to the reader’s sense of smell, taste, sight, sound, feel. Do not simply tell the reader that it was exciting. You need to describe the event in such a way that the readers get excited. Do not simply state that it was hot. Provide a description so that readers think that it is hot. For further explanation and examples, see “Description as a Rhetorical Strategy” following this list.

4. Use **active voice/action**. Active voice puts readers in the moment. They experience events as they happen. Think of a horror story where you experience running from the psychotic murderer right along with the hero. Here is an example of active voice from Tobias Wolff's story "On Being a Real Westerner":
- "Nothing moved but a pair of squirrels chasing each other back and forth on the telephone wires. I followed one in my sight. Finally it stopped for a moment and I fired."
 - The verbs are all in active voice creating a sense of immediacy: *moved, followed, stopped, fired*.
5. Use passive voice sparingly to add variety and slow things down. Here is an example of passive voice:
- "I had been aiming at two old people, a man and a woman, who walked so slowly that by the time they turned the corner at the bottom of the hill my little store of self-control was exhausted" (Wolff).
 - Passive voice uses the verb "to be" along with an action verb: had *been aiming*, was *exhausted*.
6. Develop your **characters**. Even though the "characters" in your story are real people, your readers won't get to know them unless you describe them, present their personalities, and give them physical presence.
7. Use **dialogue**. Dialogue helps readers get to know the characters in your story, infuses the story with life, and offers a variation from description and explanation. When writing dialogue, you may not remember exactly what was said in the past, so be true to the person being represented and come as close to the actual language the person uses as possible.
- "If the story is not about the hearer, he will not listen. And here I make a rule — a great and interesting story is about everyone or it will not last."
(East of Eden)
- Photo credit: Lynn McClelland
- Dialogue is indented with each person speaking as its own paragraph. The paragraph ends when that person is done speaking and any following explanation or continuing action ends.
8. Once you have completed a draft, you will work on **the pace** of your story. You will make sure you include only the **key events** and details that support your story. You will get rid of any description or event that gets in the way of your story's flow. Use active voice as much as possible. Choose the memory that is the most vivid for you.
9. Avoid clichés and idioms: *the passion burns, as red as a rose, as big as a house, etc.*
10. Avoid being overly dramatic in personifying inanimate object: *the evil flames licked the side of the house*. Fire is deadly and can be devastating, but it is not innately evil.
11. Be honest. Tell the story the way you would naturally tell it and not the way you think your teacher might tell it. Avoid what you think might be impressive language. Be exact in your **descriptions**. If you want to describe someone's hair, call it hair. Don't use *tresses* because that word sounds more sophisticated.
12. Be concise: Don't get bogged down in in passive tense or long-winded sentences. Always remember: there is no exact way to write a story. Always think in terms of the point you are making. Does the information help make that point or does it get in the way.

13. Avoid awkward language: *Read your papers out loud.* You can hear a sentence that sounds awkward or bad. You may not catch it reading it quietly.
 - Sample awkward sentence: *There are profound differences between the two types of personalities that scientists are just beginning to find out about.*
 - Cleaner/more concise: *Scientists are just discovering profound differences between the two personality types.*
14. Redundancy: don't be redundant!!! (And avoid exclamation points.) Now is the time to start building your vocabulary. Use a thesaurus and find clearer, more accurate words.
15. Vary sentences: Don't begin your sentences with the same word. Vary sentence beginnings, endings, lengths, and styles.
16. **Point of view:** Be consistent in your point of view. Remember you are telling the story, so it should be in first person. *Do not use second person ("you").*
17. Consistent verb tense: Write the story in past tense. It doesn't work to try to write it in present tense since it already happened. Make sure you stay in past tense.

Description as a Rhetorical Strategy

"Do not simply tell the reader that it was exciting. You need to describe the event in such a way that the readers get excited. Do not simply state that it was hot. Provide a description so that readers think that it is hot." Revision suggestions in margins of student writing often ask writers to "describe." A general comment also is to "show, not tell." What exactly does that mean?

Like many rhetorical strategies for writing essays, such as comparison, causal analysis, and even narration, description rarely stands alone. You can't compare two items unless you describe them. You can't illustrate abstract concepts or make them vivid and detailed without concrete description.

Use Sensory Detail

We have five senses: touch, taste, smell, sight, and sound. So, what does it look like, feel like, smell like, or taste like to be hot? "The sweat mixed with its salt stung my eyes, and it dripped from my forehead and slid down my brow." In concrete "show, not tell" description, leaves are not "soft" but "velvet"; sirens are not "loud" as much as they "start my Labrador to howling and vibrate the glass panes in my front door."

The following examples illustrate a progressive improvement in description:

- My friend is overweight.
- My friend Jamie weighs 260 pounds and is 5'10".
- Since he would never let me risk danger on my own, Jamie scrunched his 5'10" frame and all 260 pounds through the narrow cave entrance and into the black tunnel behind me.

Abstract and Concrete Words

Descriptions when using abstract words or concepts are even more important than when using concrete objects. For example, your instructor crooks her arm and cups her right hand, stating, "Pretend I am holding a grapefruit. Describe it." You and your classmates shout out words: "yellow," "juicy," "softball-sized," "pink and pulpy," and so on. She then cups the left hand and says, "Pretend I am holding love. Describe it." What would you say? And how do you qualify love and make it distinct? Yes, love is "patient" and "kind," "sexy" and "luscious," but these are still abstract words that can have differing meanings to different people. Does love "warm me like a cup of hot chocolate by a fire"? Does it "get up first on a cold morning to make coffee"?

Description is about creating pictures; words are your paint.

Here are some special features of description:

Naming—Exact physical features, behavior, and/or personal traits. For example, Jamie is overweight, has short legs, blue hair and hazel eyes. He is smart, loyal, and an avid gamer.

Dominant impression—Primary unifying picture presented to audience. To create unity, descriptors should not conflict or distract, and all the details should lead up to or support the dominant impression. Jamie cannot be both “like an elephant” and “mousy.” He can be an avid gamer and either an introvert or an extrovert but not both.

Figures of Speech

Simile, metaphor, personification, and hyperbole are common figures of speech employed by skillful writers. A **simile** compares two nouns using *like* or *as*. For example, in virtual reality, Jamie *flies through the air like a jet fighter*. **Metaphor** also compares two nouns or concepts without using *like* or *as*. Jamie *extends his wings and launches into flight*. Often, extended metaphors are used to carry the dominant impression through the piece, which means flight and its various connotations.

Personification attributes human characteristics to inanimate objects. The cave could *whisper greetings* or *grab at our coats*. Hyperbole is an exaggeration for the purpose of effect. **Hyperbole** can be effective when used skillfully: *It was so cold in the cave that I imagined us as polar bears wearing jackets*. However, avoid overused figures of speech and clichés. Don’t describe a cave as *black as night*. Jamie is not as *big as a house*. Nor does he *swim like a fish*.

Be creative and original when using figures of speech.

Organizing the Narrative

The two most common styles of narratives are the “essay” and “short story” forms. The essay form has an introduction and conclusion that frame the key events of the story. Alternatively is **in medias res**, which is Latin for “in the midst of things.” This form works much like a movie or television drama, diving into a critical situation as it is happening in a chain of events. The narrative then continues sequentially, and any back-story is provided as flashback or explanation as the story evolves. Your instructor should identify the preferred style.

In either narrative style, the body of the essay is organized by key event or action. This is where inexperienced writers can get confused and ask when to begin a new paragraph. Paragraphs shift at changes in place or action. Dialogue needs its own paragraph, and each new speaker begins a new paragraph.

Narratives are sequenced in a variety of ways, most commonly chronological order. However, other sequences exist, including final event first, summary opening, and flashback. Place is also important in the narrative. Be sure to ground the event so that readers can picture what happened. If you experience a significant event but only explain “how x made me feel,” you have missed an opportunity to tell the story.

Sample Professional Essays

Coming into Language by Jimmy Santiago Baca

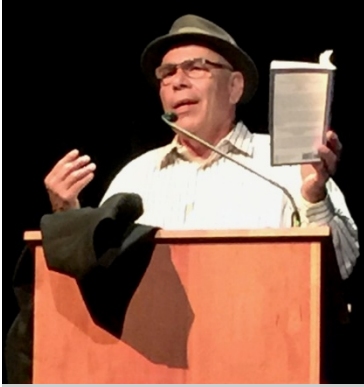


Photo credit: Lynn McClelland

Of Apache and Chicano ancestry, Jimmy Santiago Baca, at the age of twenty-one, was convicted on drug charges and spent six and a half years in prison, where he found his voice as a poet through correspondence with Denise Levertov. Baca wrote about this transformative experience in the essay, “Coming into Language,” which was featured in PEN American Center’s Prize Anthology, Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing. In addition to his many collections of poetry, Baca has written several novels, a memoir, a play, and a screenplay for the film Blood In, Blood Out. Baca also won the 1988 American Book Award for his full-length book of poetry, Martín and Meditations on the South Valley.

On weekend graveyard shifts at St. Joseph’s Hospital I worked the emergency room, mopping up pools of blood and carting plastic bags stuffed with arms, legs and hands to the outdoor incinerator. I enjoyed the quiet, away from the screams of shotgunned, knifed, and mangled kids writhing on gurneys outside the operating rooms. Ambulance sirens shrieked and squad car lights reddened the cool nights, flashing against the hospital walls: gray—red, gray—red. On slow nights I would lock the door of the administration office, search the reference library for a book on female anatomy and, with my feet propped on the desk, leaf through the illustrations, smoking my cigarette. I was seventeen.

One night my eye was caught by a familiar-looking word on the spine of a book. The title was *450 Years of Chicano History in Pictures*. On the cover were black-and-white photos: Padre Hidalgo exhorting Mexican peasants to revolt against the Spanish dictators; Anglo vigilantes hanging two Mexicans from a tree; a young Mexican woman with rifle and ammunition belts crisscrossing her breast; César Chávez and field workers marching for fair wages; Chicano railroad workers laying creosote ties; Chicanas laboring at machines in textile factories; Chicanas picketing and hoisting boycott signs.

From the time I was seven, teachers had been punishing me for not knowing my lessons by making me stick my nose in a circle chalked on the blackboard. Ashamed of not understanding and fearful of asking questions, I dropped out of school in the ninth grade. At seventeen I still didn’t know how to read, but those pictures confirmed my identity. I stole the book that night, stashing it for safety under the slop sink until I got off work. Back at my boardinghouse, I showed the book to friends. All of us were amazed; this book told us we were alive. We, too, had defended ourselves with our fists against hostile Anglos, gasping for breath in fights with the policemen who outnumbered us. The book reflected back to us our struggle in a way that made us proud.

Most of my life I felt like a target in the crosshairs of a hunter’s rifle. When strangers and outsiders questioned me I felt the hang-rope tighten around my neck and the trapdoor creak beneath my feet. There was nothing so humiliating as being unable to express myself, and my inarticulateness increased my sense of jeopardy. Behind a mask of humility, I seethed with mute rebellion.

Before I was eighteen, I was arrested on suspicion of murder after refusing to explain a deep cut on my forearm. With shocking speed I found myself handcuffed to a chain gang of inmates and bused to a holding facility to await trial. There I met men, prisoners, who read aloud to each other the works of Neruda, Paz, Sabines, Nemerov, and Hemingway. Never had I felt such freedom as in that dormitory. Listening to the words of these writers, I felt that invisible threat from without lessen—my

sense of teetering on a rotting plank over swamp water where famished alligators clapped their horny snouts for my blood. While I listened to the words of the poets, the alligators slumbered powerless in their lairs. The language of poetry was the magic that could liberate me from myself, transform me into another person, transport me to places far away.

6 And when they closed the books, these Chicanos, and went into their own Chicano language, they made barrio life come alive for me in the fullness of its vitality. I began to learn my own language, the bilingual words and phrases explaining to me my place in the universe.

7 Months later I was released, as I had suspected I would be. I had been guilty of nothing but shattering the windshield of my girlfriend's car in a fit of rage.

8 Two years passed. I was twenty now, and behind bars again. The federal marshals had failed to provide convincing evidence to extradite me to Arizona on a drug charge, but still I was being held. They had ninety days to prove I was guilty. The only evidence against me was that my girlfriend had been at the scene of the crime with my driver's license in her purse. They had to come up with something else. But there was nothing else. Eventually they negotiated a deal with the actual drug dealer, who took the stand against me. When the judge hit me with a million-dollar bail, I emptied my pockets on his booking desk: twenty-six cents.

9 One night in my third month in the county jail, I was mopping the floor in front of the booking desk. Some detectives had kneed an old drunk and handcuffed him to the booking bars. His shrill screams raked my nerves like a hacksaw on bone, the desperate protest of his dignity against their inhumanity. But the detectives just laughed as he tried to rise and kicked him to his knees. When they went to the bathroom to pee and the desk attendant walked to the file cabinet to pull the arrest record, I shot my arm through the bars, grabbed one of the attendant's university textbooks, and tucked it in my overalls. It was the only way I had of protesting.

10 It was late when I returned to my cell. Under my blanket I switched on a pen flashlight and opened the thick book at random, scanning the pages. I could hear the jailer making his rounds on the other tiers. The jangle of his keys and the sharp click of his boot heels intensified my solitude. Slowly I enunciated the words...p-o-n-d, ri-pple. It scared me that I had been reduced to this to find comfort. I always had thought reading a waste of time, that nothing could be gained by it. Only by action, by moving out into the world and confronting and challenging the obstacles, could one learn anything worth knowing.

11 Even as I tried to convince myself that I was merely curious, I became so absorbed in how the sounds created music in me and happiness, I forgot where I was. Memories began to quiver in me, glowing with a strange but familiar intimacy in which I found refuge. For a while, a deep sadness overcame me, as if I had chanced on a long-lost friend and mourned the years of separation. But soon the heartache of having missed so much of life, that had numbed me since I was a child, gave way, as if a grave illness lifted itself from me and I was cured, innocently believing in the beauty of life again. I stumblingly repeated the author's name as I fell asleep, saying it over and over in the dark: Words-worth, Words-worth.

12 Before long my sister came to visit me, and I joked about taking her to a place called Xanadu and getting her a blind date with this *vato*[i] named Coleridge who lived on the seacoast and was *malias*[ii] on morphine. When I asked her to make a trip into enemy territory to buy me a grammar book, she said she couldn't. Bookstores intimidated her, because she, too, could neither read nor write.

13 Days later, with a stub pencil I whittled sharp with my teeth, I propped a Red Chief notebook on my knees and wrote my first words. From that moment, a hunger for poetry possessed me.

14 Until then, I had felt as if I had been born into a raging ocean where I swam relentlessly, flailing my arms in hope of rescue, of reaching a shoreline I never sighted. Never solid ground beneath me, never a resting place. I had lived with only the desperate hope to stay afloat; that and nothing more.

But when at last I wrote my first words on the page, I felt an island rising beneath my feet like the back of a whale. As more and more words emerged, I could finally rest: I had a place to stand for the first time in my life. The island grew, with each page, into a continent inhabited by people I knew and mapped with the life I lived.

I wrote about it all—about people I had loved or hated, about the brutalities and ecstasies of my life. And, for the first time, the child in me who had witnessed and endured unspeakable terrors cried out not just in impotent despair, but with the power of language. Suddenly, through language, through writing, my grief and my joy could be shared with anyone who would listen. And I could do this all alone; I could do it anywhere. I was no longer a captive of demons eating away at me, no longer a victim of other people’s mockery and loathing, that had made me clench my fist white with rage and grit my teeth to silence. Words now pleaded back with the bleak lucidity of hurt. They were wrong, those others, and now I could say it.

Through language I was free. I could respond, escape, indulge; embrace or reject earth or the cosmos. I was launched on an endless journey without boundaries or rules, in which I could salvage the floating fragments of my past, or be born anew in the spontaneous ignition of understanding some heretofore concealed aspect of myself. Each word steamed with the hot lava juices of my primordial making, and I crawled out of stanzas dripping with birth-blood, reborn and freed from the chaos of my life. The child in the dark room of my heart, who had never been able to find or reach the light switch, flicked it on now; and I found in the room a stranger, myself, who had waited so many years to speak again. My words struck in me lightning crackles of elation and thunderhead storms of grief.

When I had been in the county jail longer than anyone else, I was made a trustee. One morning, after a fistfight, I went to the unlocked and unoccupied office used for lawyer-client meetings, to think. The bare white room with its fluorescent tube lighting seemed to expose and illuminate my dark and worthless life. When I had fought before, I never gave it a thought. Now, for the first time, I had something to lose—my chance to read, to write; a way to live with dignity and meaning, that had opened for me when I stole that scuffed, second-hand book about the Romantic poets. In prison, the abscess had been lanced.

“I will never do any work in this prison system as long as I am not allowed to get my G.E.D.” That’s what I told the reclassification panel. The captain flicked off the tape recorder. He looked at me hard and said, “You’ll never walk outta here alive. Oh, you’ll work, put a copper penny on that, you’ll work.”

After that interview I was confined to deadlock maximum security in a subterranean dungeon, with ground-level chicken-wired windows painted gray. Twenty-three hours a day I was in that cell. Then, just before Christmas, I received a letter from Harry, a charity house Samaritan who doled out hot soup to the homeless in Phoenix. He had picked my name from a list of cons who had no one write to them. I wrote back asking for a grammar book, and a week later received one of Mary Baker Eddy’s treatises on salvation and redemption, with Spanish and English on opposing pages. Pacing my cell all day and most of each night, I grappled with grammar until I was able to write a long true-romance confession for a con to send to his pen pal. He paid me with a pack of smokes. Soon I had a thriving barter business, exchanging my poems and letters for novels, commissary pencils, and writing tablets.

One day I tore two flaps from the cardboard box that held all my belongings and punctured holes along the edge of each flap and along the border of a ream of state-issue paper. After I had aligned them to form a spine, I threaded the holes with a shoestring, and sketched on the cover a hummingbird fluttering above a rose. This was my first journal.

Whole afternoons I wrote, unconscious of passing time or whether it was day or night. Sunbursts exploded from the lead tip of my pencil, words that grafted me into awareness of who I was; peeled back to a burning core of bleak terror, an embryo floating in the image of water, I cracked out of the shell wide-eyed and insane. Trees grew out of the palms of my hands, the threatening otherness of life dissolved, and I became one with the air and sky, the dirt and the iron and concrete.

There was no longer any distinction between the other and I. Language made bridges of fire between me and everything I saw. I entered into the blade of grass, the basketball, the con's eye and child's soul.

23 At night I flew. I conversed with floating heads in my cell, and visited strange houses where lonely women brewed tea and rocked in wicker rocking chairs listening to sad Joni Mitchell songs.

24 Before long I was frayed like rope carrying too much weight, that suddenly snaps. I quit talking. Bars, walls, steel bunk and floor bristled with millions of poem-making sparks. My face was no longer familiar to me. The only reality was the swirling cornucopia of images in my mind, the voices in the air. Midair a cactus blossom would appear, a snake-flame in blinding dance around it, stunning me like a guard's fist striking my neck from behind.

25 The prison administrators tried several tactics to get me to work. For six months, after the next monthly prison board review, they sent cons to my cell to hassle me. When the guard would open my cell door to let one of them in, I'd leap out and fight him—and get sent to thirty-day isolation. I did a lot of isolation time. But I honed my image-making talents in that sensory-deprived solitude. Finally they moved me to death row, and after that to “nut-run,” the tier that housed the mentally disturbed.

26 As the months passed, I became more and more sluggish. My eyelids were heavy, I could no longer write or read. I slept all the time.

27 One day a guard took me out to the exercise field. For the first time in years I felt grass and earth under my feet. It was spring. The sun warmed my face as I sat on the bleachers watching the cons box and run, hit the handball, lift weights. Some of them stopped to ask how I was, but I found it impossible to utter a syllable. My tongue would not move, saliva drooled from the corners of my mouth. I had been so heavily medicated I could not summon the slightest gestures. Yet inside me a small voice cried out, I am fine! I am hurt now but I will come back! I'm fine!

28 Back in my cell, for weeks I refused to eat. Styrofoam cups of urine and hot water were hurled at me. Other things happened. There were beatings, shock therapy, intimidation.

29 Later, I regained some clarity of mind. But there was a place in my heart where I had died. My life had compressed itself into an unbearable dread of being. The strain had been too much. I had stepped over that line where a human being has lost more than he can bear, where the pain is too intense, and he knows he is changed forever. I was now capable of killing, coldly and without feeling. I was empty, as I have never, before or since, known emptiness. I had no connection to this life.

30 But then, the encroaching darkness that began to envelop me forced me to re-form and give birth to myself again in the chaos. I withdrew even deeper into the world of language, cleaving the diamonds of verbs and nouns, plunging into the brilliant light of poetry's regenerative mystery. Words gave off rings of white energy, radar signals from powers beyond me that infused me with truth. I believed what I wrote, because I wrote what was true. My words did not come from books or textual formulas, but from a deep faith in the voice of my heart.

31 I had been steeped in self-loathing and rejected by everyone and everything—society, family, cons, God and demons. But now I had become as the burning ember floating in darkness that descends on a dry leaf and sets flame to forests. The word was the ember and the forest was my life...

32 I was born a poet one noon, gazing at weeds and creosoted grass at the base of a telephone pole outside my grilled cell window. The words I wrote then sailed me out of myself, brown blades of grass came bolts of electrical light that jolted loose my old self; through the top of my head that self was released and reshaped in the clump of scrawny grass. Through language I became the grass, speaking its language and feeling its green feelings and black root sensations. Earth was my mother and I bathed in sunshine. Minuscule speckles of sunlight passed through my green skin and metabolized in my blood.

33 Writing bridged my divided life of prisoner and free man. I wrote of the emotional butchery of prisons, and my acute gratitude for poetry. Where my blind doubt and spontaneous trust in life met, I discovered empathy and compassion. The power to express myself was a welcome storm rasping at

tendrils roots, flooding my soul's cracked dirt. Writing was water that cleansed the wound and fed the parched root of my heart.

I wrote to sublimate my rage, from a place where all hope is gone, from a madness of having been damaged too much, from a silence of killing rage. I wrote to avenge the betrayals of a lifetime, to purge the bitterness of injustice. I wrote with a deep groan of doom in my blood, bewildered and dumbstruck; from an indestructible love of life, to affirm breath and laughter and the abiding innocence of things. I wrote the way I wept, and danced, and made love.

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1991, Reflections on Albuquerque County Jail, New Mexico and Arizona State Prison—Florence, Arizona

[i] In Chicano dialect: dude. (JSB)

[ii] In Chicano dialect: strung out. (JSB)

Questions for Discussion and Analysis

Answer the following questions regarding the essay. Be complete in your explanations and cite examples or quotes in support of your answer. Use complete sentences with proper grammar, spelling and punctuation.

1. In paragraph 18, Baca says, “In prison, the abscess had been lanced.” What is he referring to? (Be sure to understand what “lanced” means in order to answer this question.)
2. How does Baca feel about education at the beginning of the story? Does this change?
3. Would the first paragraph be as effective if Baca had told us his age at the beginning of the paragraph instead of at the end? Why do you think he did that?
4. What one element of narration do you most admire in this essay and why? Choose from key event sequencing, vivid detail, conflict, action, and theme.

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Questions for Discussion and Analysis

Answer the following questions regarding the essay. Be complete in your explanations and cite examples or quotes in support of your answer. Use complete sentences with proper grammar, spelling and punctuation.

1. Why is the scholarship jacket so important to Marta? Cite evidence from the story.
2. Which conversations (dialogue) do you find most effective? Explain why.
3. What does Marta learn from her grandfather through the course of the story?

Additional professional readings are available at the PVCC English Division website/PVCC English Resources: <https://pvccenglish.wordpress.com/>

Sample Student Essay

Student Name

Professor Name

Course Name

Date

Where the Danger Is

1 The weather was cold and gray as usual at this time of year. The trees were all leafless, with fall now just a memory. Christmas was just a few weeks away, and all the kids were looking forward to staying home from school for a few weeks and to the “big payoff” on Christmas morning. Not having to go to school was good, but usually by the time vacation was over, going to school was a big relief. Back to the friends to compare “loot” from Christmas and, to reestablish those fragile ties that hold kids together. At school, students were praised for doing good work, not belittled for each and every mistake. No one there was fighting, and being too loud was against the rules. Right now, the world outside of home was more safe and structured, not chaotic, scary and loud. Even when bad

things did happen, it was always far away and nothing to be too concerned about. With Dad often having too much to drink, and Mom just mad at everyone all the time, being home was not usually a very pleasant experience.

Playing outside in the woods or at a friend's house was the norm for three of us kids. We knew everyone that lived on our road, and except for the cranky old people who lived at the bottom of the hill, everyone was nice to us. In a small rural community, the only thing to be feared at that time of year was crashing on a sled or frost bite from staying out too long. Unless something like that happened, the only rule was to be home before dark.

But that weekend morning was different. We were all home, and the day was starting off rather quietly. None of the kids were arguing, no dogs were barking, and Mom and Dad were actually talking, not shouting or sniping at each other. Dad was sitting at his spot at the dining room table, and Mom was in the kitchen starting breakfast. Usually sitting along the table with Dad at the head was like being at a tennis match, watching the action and listening to the arguments between him at the end and Mom over at the stove.

When the telephone rang, Dad didn't pick it up, even though he was sitting next to it. Mom walked over behind him and answered the call.

"Hello? Hi, Bobbie. What? What are you talking about? How did this happen? Oh, my God, I don't believe it! When did they find her? Oh, poor Connie, how will she handle this?"

Mom's voice kept getting higher and higher in pitch, and the tears were starting to flow. This sort of response was totally out of character for her. We all just sat there trying to figure out what sort of gossip our next-door neighbor would have that would cause such a reaction. Dad didn't say anything, but somehow knew that whatever had happened was completely out of the ordinary. Events occur during each lifetime that forever alter the perception of the world being a safe place to play in. Feeling secure means being at home, no matter the atmosphere, with the door locked up tight.

When Mom finally got herself under control, she said in a low voice, "Margaret was found murdered this morning over on Lauffer Mine Road." Suddenly, our safe little community became a place of uncertainty and confusion where one of the neighbor's children was a victim of a killer. The thought that a murderer might be on the loose in our area was one without precedent. The most serious crimes until this moment had been kids corning and soaping the windows on Halloween night. The idea of something like this happening to one of the neighborhood children was almost unbelievable.

As the day wore on, this tragedy lost some of its shock value and became a part of our reality. Mom was on the phone quite a bit, talking in hushed tones with the neighbors. The gossip mill was in full swing. Who did it? And why? Was it a stranger, or maybe someone we all knew? State police

cars cruised up and down all day, looking everywhere, even around our house. All three of us stayed pretty close to home that day. No one was playing outside or calling us to come down the road to play. Dad was quite glad not to have to get on us too much to leave Mom alone, or stop fighting among ourselves and be quiet. For just a short period of time, we were where we desired to be.

9 Going to bed that night and turning out all the lights was a terribly frightening experience, even for a big fourth-grader. Every noise outside could be the killer walking through our yard. Every time the dogs barked, we looked outside to see if anyone was there. What if the killer was up in the woods behind our house, or hiding in the garage? Being frightened of someone lurking outside was a new experience. Up until then, I never checked to see if the front door was a locked before we went to bed. But the events of that day brought home the reality that my chaotic home was as safe as Dad and Mom could make it. Home really was a haven, and real danger could be as close as the other side of that locked door.

Grader's Comments

- Purposeful
- Excellent focus
- Clear dominant impression
- The narrative's significance is clearly revealed in the opening, middle, and ending
- Excellent use of paragraph structure
- Anecdotes reveal the subjects' character
- Naming of exact physical features could be stronger
- Detailing and imagery could be stronger
- You have a clear focus of events, a strong significance for this narrative, and the work leaves the reader with a dominant impression.

Questions for Discussion and Analysis

Answer the following questions regarding the essay. Be complete in your explanations and cite examples or quotes in support of your answer. Use complete sentences with proper grammar, spelling and punctuation.

1. What is one specific element of the narrative essay that you find exceptional in this essay?
2. What is one area where the story could have used dialogue or description rather than "internalized thinking"?

Tips on Writing the Narrative

- Make sure it is on an important event in your life.
- Make sure you pick an event that caused you to learn an important life lesson.
- You should pick an event that caused you to change and grow in some way.
- Although you certainly do not have to write on something negative, most great steps or leaps in learning have resulted from negative events.
- That is not the only good thing that comes from negative events. Some of your best writing will come from them too.

- Once you have written your rough draft, you will print it out, read it to look for places to enhance, sharpen, and focus the story. Revise.
- Use the feedback from your peers or tutors to revise again. Make sure you are giving your readers the best "telling" of your story.

Topic Ideas

- An emergency that brought out the best or worst in you
- An incident that made you believe in fate
- Your best or worst day at school or work
- A major decision
- An encounter with a machine
- An important learning experience
- A narrow escape
- Your first date, first day on the job, or first anything
- A memorable childhood experience
- An event that precipitated a change in your opinion on a significant issue
- A painful moment
- A significant family event
- An experience in which a certain emotion (pride, anger, regret, or some other) was dominant
- A surprising coincidence
- An act of heroism
- An unpleasant confrontation
- A cherished family story

Chapter Questions for Comprehension

Answer the following questions based on your reading of the chapter. Be sure to use complete sentences.

1. What are four elements (or characteristics) of the narrative essay?
2. Why is it important to use vivid descriptions?
3. How does active voice make stories more engaging?