Part One: Description, Narrative, and Reflection

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Part One
Description,
Narration,
and Reflection
Section Introduction: Description, Narration, and Reflection

**Chapter Vocabulary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>description</td>
<td>a rhetorical mode that emphasizes eye-catching, specific, and vivid portrayal of a subject. Often integrates imagery and thick description to this end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>narration</td>
<td>a rhetorical mode involving the construction and relation of stories. Typically integrates description as a technique.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reflection</td>
<td>a rhetorical gesture by which an author looks back, through the diegetic gap, to demonstrate knowledge or understanding gained from the subject on which they are reflecting. May also include consideration of the impact of that past subject on the author’s future—“Looking back in order to look forward.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rhetorical situation</td>
<td>the circumstances in which rhetoric is produced, understood using the constituent elements of subject, occasion, audience, and purpose. Each element of the rhetorical situation carries assumptions and imperatives about the kind of rhetoric that will be well received. Rhetorical situation will also influence mode and medium.</td>
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Storytelling is one of few rituals that permeates all cultures. Indeed, there’s nothing quite as satisfying as a well-told story. But what exactly makes for a well-told story?

Of course, the answer to that question depends on your rhetorical situation: your audience, your sociohistorical position, and your purpose will determine how you tell your story. Perhaps your story is best told in traditional writing; maybe it is a story best told orally, among friends or family; it could
Section 1: Description, Narration, and Reflection

even be a story that uses images or technology. By creating your own story in this unit, you will be negotiating a distinct rhetorical situation. As you learn techniques and concepts for effective storytelling, so too will you practice asking the critical questions of any rhetorical situation.

The following section explores three useful rhetorical tools—description, narration, and reflection—that often contribute to effective storytelling. Each chapter will provide techniques and activities to help you decide which stories you can tell and the ways in which you can tell them. The assignment at the end of this section, a descriptive personal narrative essay, encourages you to synthesize all three rhetorical tools to share one of your stories in writing.
Chapter One
Describing a Scene or Experience

This morning, as I was brewing my coffee before rushing to work, I found myself hurrying up the stairs back to the bedroom, a sense of urgency in my step. I opened the door and froze—what was I doing? Did I need something from up here? I stood in confusion, trying to retrace the mental processes that had led me here, but it was all muddy.

It’s quite likely that you’ve experienced a similarly befuddling situation. This phenomenon can loosely be referred to as automatization: because we are so constantly surrounded by stimuli, our brains often go on autopilot. (We often miss even the most explicit stimuli if we are distracted, as demonstrated by the Invisible Gorilla study.)

Automatization is an incredibly useful skill—we don’t have the time or capacity to take in everything at once, let alone think our own thoughts simultaneously—but it’s also troublesome. In the same way that we might run through a morning ritual absent-mindedly, like I did above, we have also been programmed to overlook tiny but striking details: the slight gradation in color of cement on the bus stop curb; the hum of the air conditioner or fluorescent lights; the weight and texture of a pen in the crook of the hand. These details, though, make experiences, people, and places unique. By focusing on the particular, we can interrupt automatization. We can become radical noticers by practicing good description.

In a great variety of rhetorical situations, description is an essential rhetorical mode. Our minds latch onto detail and specificity, so effective description can help us experience a story, understand an analysis, and nuance a critical argument. Each of these situations requires a different kind of description; this chapter focuses on the vivid, image-driven descriptive language that you would use for storytelling.
### Chapter Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>constraint-based writing</strong></td>
<td>a writing technique by which an author tries to follow a rule or set of rules in order to create more experimental or surprising content, popularized by the Oulipo school of writers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>description</strong></td>
<td>a rhetorical mode that emphasizes eye-catching, specific, and vivid portrayal of a subject. Often integrates imagery and thick description to this end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>defamiliarization</strong></td>
<td>a method of reading, writing, and thinking that emphasizes the interruption of automatization. Established as “остранение” (&quot;estrangement&quot;) by Viktor Shklovsky, defamiliarization attempts to turn the everyday into the strange, eye-catching, or dramatic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ethnography</strong></td>
<td>a study of a particular culture, subculture, or group of people. Uses thick description to explore a place and its associated culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>figurative language</strong></td>
<td>language which implies a meaning that is not to be taken literally. Common examples include metaphor, simile, personification, onomatopoeia, and hyperbole.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>imagery</strong></td>
<td>sensory language; literal or figurative language that appeals to an audience’s imagined sense of sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>thick description</strong></td>
<td>economical and deliberate language which attempts to capture complex subjects (like cultures, people, or environments) in written or spoken language. Coined by anthropologists Clifford Geertz and Gilbert Ryle.</td>
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Techniques

*Imagery and Experiential Language*

Strong description helps a reader experience what you’ve experienced, whether it was an event, an interaction, or simply a place. Even though you could never capture it perfectly, you should try to approximate sensations, feelings, and details as closely as you can. Your most vivid description will be that which gives your reader a way to imagine being themselves as of your story.

*Imagery* is a device that you have likely encountered in your studies before: it refers to language used to ‘paint a scene’ for the reader, directing their attention to striking details. Here are a few examples:

Bamboo walls, dwarf banana trees, silk lanterns, and a hand-size jade Buddha on a wooden table decorate the restaurant. For a moment, I imagined I was on vacation. The bright orange lantern over my table was the blazing hot sun and the cool air currents coming from the ceiling fan caused the leaves of the banana trees to brush against one another in soothing crackling sounds.

The sunny midday sky calls to us all like a guilty pleasure while the warning winds of winter tug our scarves warmer around our necks; the City of Roses is painted the color of red dusk, and the setting sun casts her longing rays over the Eastern shoulders of Mt. Hood, drawing the curtains on another crimson-grey day.

Flipping the switch, the lights flicker—not menacingly, but rather in a homey, imperfect manner. Hundreds of seats are sprawled out in front of a black, worn down stage. Each seat has its own unique creak, creating a symphony of groans whenever an audience takes their seats. The walls are adorned with a brown mustard yellow, and the black paint on the stage is fading and chipped.

You might notice, too, that the above examples appeal to many different senses. Beyond just *visual* detail, good imagery can be considered sensory language: words that help me see, but also words that help me taste, touch, smell, and hear the story. Go back and identify a word, phrase, or sentence that suggests one of these non-visual sensations; what about this line is so striking?
Imagery might also apply **figurative language** to describe more creatively. Devices like metaphor, simile, and personification, or hyperbole can enhance description by pushing beyond literal meanings.

Using imagery, you can better communicate specific sensations to put the reader in your shoes. To the best of your ability, avoid clichés (stock phrases that are easy to ignore) and focus on the particular (what makes a place, person, event, or object unique). To practice creating imagery, try the Imagery Inventory exercise and the Image Builder graphic organizer in the Activities section of this chapter.

**Thick Description**

If you’re focusing on specific, detailed imagery and experiential language, you might begin to feel wordy: simply piling up descriptive phrases and sentences isn’t always the best option. Instead, your goal as a descriptive writer is to make the language that every word is **on purpose**, and this credo is exemplified by thick description. Thick description as a concept finds its roots in anthropology, where ethnographers seek to portray deeper context of a studied culture than simply surface appearance. In the world of writing, thick description means careful and detailed portrayal of context, emotions, and actions. It relies on specificity to engage the reader. Consider the difference between these two descriptions:

- The market is busy.
- There is a lot of different produce. It is colorful.
- Customers blur between stalls of bright green bok choy, gnarled carrots, and fiery Thai peppers. Stopping only to inspect the occasional citrus, everyone is busy, focused, industrious.

Notice that, even though the description on the right is longer, its major difference is the specificity of its word choice. The author names particular produce, which brings to mind a sharper image of the selection, and uses specific adjectives. Further, though, the words themselves do heavy lifting—the nouns and verbs are descriptive.
too! “Customers blur” both implies a market (where we would expect to find “customers”) and also illustrates how busy the market is (“blur” implies speed), rather than just naming it as such.

Consider the following examples of thick description:

I had some strength left to wrench my shoulders and neck upward but the rest of my body would not follow. My back was twisted like a contortionist’s.\textsuperscript{6}

Shaking off the idiotic urge to knock, I turned the brass knob in my trembling hands and heaved open the thick door. The hallway was so dark that I had to squint while clumsily reaching out to feel my surroundings so I wouldn’t crash into anything.\textsuperscript{7}

Snow-covered mountains, enormous glaciers, frozen caves and massive caps of ice clash with heat, smoke, lava and ash. Fields dense with lush greenery and vibrant purple lupine plants butt up against black, barren lands scorched by eruptions. The spectacular drama of cascading waterfalls, rolling hills, deep canyons and towering jagged peaks competes with open expanses of flat, desert-like terrain.\textsuperscript{8}

Where do you see the student authors using deliberate, specific, and imagistic words and phrases? Where do you see the language working hard?

**Unanticipated and Eye-catching Language**

In addition to our language being deliberate, we should also strive for language that is unanticipated. You should control your language, but also allow for surprises—for you and your reader! Doing so will help you maintain attention and interest from your reader because your writing will be unique and eye-catching, but it also has benefits for you: it will also make your writing experience more enjoyable and educational.
How can you be surprised by your own writing, though? If you’re the author, how could you not know what you’re about to say? To that very valid question, I have two responses:

1) **On a conceptual level:** Depending on your background, you may currently consider drafting to be thinking-then-writing. Instead, you should try thinking-through-writing: rather than two separate and sequential acts, embrace the possibility that the act of writing can be a new way to process through ideas. You must give yourself license to write before an idea is fully formed—but remember, you will revise, so it’s okay to not be perfect. (I highly recommend Anne Lamott’s “Shitty First Drafts.”)

2) **On a technical level:** Try out different activities—or even invent your own—that challenge your instincts. Rules and games can help you push beyond your auto-pilot descriptions to much more eye-catching language!

**Constraint-based writing** is one technique like this. It refers to a process which requires you to deliberately work within a specific set of writing rules, and it can often spark unexpected combinations of words and ideas. The most valuable benefit to constraint-based writing, though, is that it gives you many options for your descriptions: because first idea ≠ best idea, constraint-based writing can help you push beyond instinctive descriptors.

When you spend more time thinking creatively, the ordinary can become extraordinary. The act of writing invites discovery! When you challenge yourself to see something in new ways, you actually see more of it. Try the Dwayne Johnson activity to think more about surprising language.
Activities

Specificity Taxonomy

Good description lives and dies in particularities. It takes deliberate effort to refine our general ideas and memories into more focused, specific language that the reader can identify with.

A taxonomy is a system of classification that arranges a variety of items into an order that makes sense to someone. You might remember from your biology class the ranking taxonomy based on Carl Linnaeus’ classifications, pictured here.

To practice shifting from general to specific, fill in the blanks in the taxonomy below. After you have filled in the blanks, use the bottom three rows to make your own. As you work, notice how attention to detail, even on the scale of an individual word, builds a more tangible image.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More General</th>
<th>General</th>
<th>Specific</th>
<th>More Specific</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(example):</td>
<td>animal</td>
<td>mammal</td>
<td>dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Great Dane</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>organism</td>
<td>conifer</td>
<td>Douglas fir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>airplane</td>
<td></td>
<td>Boeing 757</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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### Section 1: Description, Narration, and Reflection

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<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>novel</td>
<td>Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>clothing</td>
<td>blue jeans</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>medical condition</td>
<td>respiratory infection</td>
<td>the common cold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>school</td>
<td>college</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>artist</td>
<td>pop singer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>structure</td>
<td>building</td>
<td>The White House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>coffee</td>
<td>Starbucks coffee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>scientist</td>
<td>Sir Isaac Newton</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Compare your answers with a classmate. What similarities do you share with other students? What differences? Why do you think this is the case? How can you apply this thinking to your own writing?

**Micro-Ethnography**

An *ethnography* is a form of writing that uses thick description to explore a place and its associated culture. By attempting this method on a small scale, you can practice specific, focused description.

Find a place in which you can observe the people and setting without actively involving yourself. (Interesting spaces and cultures students have used before include a poetry slam, a local bar, a dog park, and a nursing home.) You can choose a place you’ve been before or a place you’ve never been: the point here is to look at a space
and a group of people more critically for the sake of detail, whether or not you already know that context.

As an ethnographer, your goal is to take in details without influencing those details. In order to stay focused, go to this place alone and refrain from using your phone or doing anything besides note-taking. Keep your attention on the people and the place.

• Spend a few minutes taking notes on your general impressions of the place at this time.
  Use imagery and thick description to describe the place itself.
  What sorts of interactions do you observe? What sort of tone, affect, and language is used?
  How would you describe the overall atmosphere?
• Spend a few minutes “zooming in” to identify artifacts—specific physical objects being used by the people you see.
  Use imagery and thick description to describe the specific artifacts.
  How do these parts contribute to/differentiate from/relate to the whole of the scene?

After observing, write one to two paragraphs synthesizing your observations to describe the space and culture. What do the details represent or reveal about the place and people?

**Imagery Inventory**

Visit a location you visit often—your classroom, your favorite café, the commuter train, etc. Isolate each of your senses and describe the sensations as thoroughly as possible. Take detailed notes in the organizer below, or use a voice-recording app on your phone to talk through each of your sensations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense</th>
<th>Sensation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sight</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Now, write a paragraph that synthesizes three or more of your sensory details. Which details were easiest to identify? Which make for the most striking descriptive language? Which will bring the most vivid sensations to your reader’s mind?

**The Dwayne Johnson Activity**

This exercise will encourage you to flex your creative descriptor muscles by generating unanticipated language.

Begin by finding a mundane object. (A plain, unspectacular rock is my go-to choice.) Divide a blank piece of paper into four quadrants. Set a timer for two minutes; in this time, write as many describing words as possible in the first quadrant. You may use a bulleted list. Full sentences are not required.

Now, cross out your first quadrant. In the second quadrant, take five minutes to write as many new describing words as possible without repeating anything from your first quadrant. If you’re struggling, try to use imagery and/or figurative language.

For the third quadrant, set the timer for two minutes. Write as many uses as possible for your object.
Before starting the fourth quadrant, cross out the uses you came up with for the previous step. Over the next five minutes, come up with as many new uses as you can.

After this generative process, identify your three favorite items from the sections you didn’t cross out. Spend ten minutes writing in any genre or form you like—a story, a poem, a song, a letter, anything—on any topic you like. Your writing doesn’t have to be about the object you chose, but try to incorporate your chosen descriptors or uses in some way.

Share your writing with a friend or peer, and debrief about the exercise. What surprises did this process yield? What does it teach us about innovative language use?

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1) Writing invites discovery: the more you look, the more you see.
2) Suspend judgment: first idea ≠ best idea.
3) Objects are not inherently boring: the ordinary can be dramatic if described creatively.

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**Surprising Yourself: Constraint-Based Scene Description**

This exercise asks you to write a scene, following specific instructions, about a place of your choice. There is no such thing as a step-by-step guide to descriptive writing; instead, the detailed instructions that follow are challenges that will force you to think differently while you’re writing. The constraints of the directions may help you to discover new aspects of this topic since you are following the sentence-level prompts even as you develop your content.

1) Bring your place to mind. Focus on “seeing” or “feeling” your place.
2) For a title, choose an emotion or a color that represents this place to you.
3) For a first line starter, choose one of the following and complete the sentence:
   - You stand there…
   - Every time…
   - We had been…
   - When I’m here, I know that…
   - I [see/smell/hear/feel/taste]…
   - I think sometimes…
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4) After your first sentence, create your scene, writing the sentences according to the following directions:
   Sentence 2: Write a sentence with a color in it.
   Sentence 3: Write a sentence with a part of the body in it.
   Sentence 4: Write a sentence with a simile (a comparison using like or as)
   Sentence 5: Write a sentence of over twenty-five words.
   Sentence 6: Write a sentence of under eight words.
   Sentence 7: Write a sentence with a piece of clothing in it.
   Sentence 8: Write a sentence with a wish in it.
   Sentence 9: Write a sentence with an animal in it.
   Sentence 10: Write a sentence in which three or more words alliterate; that is, they begin with the same initial consonant: “She has been left, lately, with less and less time to think….”
   Sentence 11: Write a sentence with two commas.
   Sentence 12: Write a sentence with a smell and a color in it.
   Sentence 13: Write a sentence without using the letter “e.”
   Sentence 14: Write a sentence with a simile.
   Sentence 15: Write a sentence that could carry an exclamation point (but don’t use the exclamation point).
   Sentence 16: Write a sentence to end this portrait that uses the word or words you chose for a title.

5) Read over your scene and mark words/phrases that surprised you, especially those rich with possibilities (themes, ironies, etc.) that you could develop.

6) On the right side of the page, for each word/passage you marked, interpret the symbols, name the themes that your description and detail suggest, note any significant meaning you see in your description.

7) On a separate sheet of paper, rewrite the scene you have created as a more thorough and cohesive piece in whatever genre you desire. You may add sentences and transitional words/phrases to help the piece flow.

Image Builder

This exercise encourages you to experiment with thick description by focusing on one element of your writing in expansive detail. Read the directions below, then use the graphic organizer on the following two pages or write your responses as an outline on a separate piece of paper.
1) Identify one image, object, action, or scene that you want to expand in your story. Name this element in the big, yellow bubble.

2) Develop at least three describing words for your element, considering each sense independently, as well as emotional associations. Focus on particularities. (Adjectives will come most easily, but remember that you can use any part of speech.)

3) Then, on the next page, create at least two descriptions using figurative language (metaphor, simile, personification, onomatopoeia, hyperbole, etc.) for your element, considering each sense independently, as well as emotional associations. Focus on particularities.

4) Finally, reflect on the different ideas you came up with.
   a. Which descriptions surprised you? Which descriptions are accurate but unanticipated?
   b. Where might you weave these descriptions in to your current project?
   c. How will you balance description with other rhetorical modes, like narration, argumentation, or analysis?

5) Repeat this exercise as desired or as instructed, choosing a different focus element to begin with.

6) Choose your favorite descriptors and incorporate them into your writing.

If you’re struggling to get started, check out the example on the pages following the blank organizer.
Section 1: Description, Narration, and Reflection

Image, Object, Action, or Scene

- Sight
  - Descriptors:

- Smell
  - Descriptors:

- Touch
  - Descriptors:

- Taste
  - Descriptors:

- Sound
  - Descriptors:

- Emotions
  - Descriptors:

(continue on the next page)
Model:

Image, Object, Action, or Scene:
The pond at my grandparents' house in Vermont

Sight:
Descriptors:
- Reflective
- Shimmering
- Partially covered in algae

Smell:
Descriptors:
- Mucky
- Earthy
- Fishy

Touch:
Descriptors:
- Just-above-frozen cold
- Squishy mud at the bottom
- Warm sunshine on the dock

Taste:
Descriptors:
- Accidental gulps of water taste like algae
- Oversweet CountryTime lemonade on the dock
- Traces of bug spray on my lips

Sound:
Descriptors:
- "Peeper" frogs chirping
- Tractor in the distance rumbling
- Splashes and laughter from my cousins

Emotions:
Descriptors:
- Relaxation
- Warmth
- Independence
Image, Object, Action, or Scene:
The pond at my grandparents' house in Vermont

Model:

**Sight**
- Figurative Language:
  - The surface shimmers in the wind like a curtain.
  - The algae meanders across the pond.

**Smell**
- Figurative Language:
  - The odor of fish and mud crawls up my nostrils.
  - The layer of muck left between my toes smells like autumn's decaying leaves.

**Touch**
- Figurative Language:
  - Nearly-frozen jets of cold water are a wake-up call.
  - Sunlight tickles my skin as I lay on the dock.

**Taste**
- Figurative Language:
  - My tongue tingles from the cheap mix lemonade my grandma brought.
  - Chemicals linger on my lips from religious bug spray application.

**Sound**
- Figurative Language:
  - Frogs chirp and splunk as they travel around the pond.
  - Squealing with joy, my teenage cousins are children again.

**Emotions**
- Figurative Language:
  - The weight of the world vanishes from my shoulders.
  - I am self-reliant here, like solemn, giant oak tree.
Imagine the sensation of the one split second that you are floating through the air as you were thrown up in the air as a child, that feeling of freedom and carefree spirit as happiness abounds. Looking at the world through innocent eyes, all thoughts and feelings of amazement. Being free, happy, innocent, amazed, wowed. Imagine the first time seeing the colors when your eyes and brain start to recognize them but never being able to name the shade or hue. Looking at the sky as it changes from the blackness with twinkling stars to the lightest shade of blue that is almost white, then the deep red of the sunset and bright orange of the sun. All shades of the spectrum of the rainbow, colors as beautiful as the mind can see or imagine.

I have always loved the sea since I was young; the smell of saltiness in the air invigorates me and reminds me of the times spent with my family enjoying Sundays at the beach. In Singapore, the sea was always murky and green but I continued to enjoy all activities in it. When I went to Malaysia to work, I discovered that the sea was clear and blue and without hesitation, I signed up for a basic diving course and I was hooked. In my first year of diving, I explored all the dive destinations along the east coast of Malaysia and also took an advanced diving course which allowed me to dive up to a depth of thirty meters. Traveling to a dive site took no more than four hours by car and weekends were spent just enjoying the sea again.

Gearing up is no fun. Depending on the temperature of the water, I might put on a shortie, wetsuit or drysuit. Then on come the booties, fins and mask which can be considered the easiest part unless the suit is tight—then it is a hop and pull struggle, which reminds me of how life can be at times. Carrying the steel tank, regulator, buoyancy control device (BCD) and weights is a torture. The heaviest weights that I ever had to use were 110 pounds, equivalent to my body weight; but as I jump in and start sinking into the sea, the contrast to weightlessness hits me. The
moment that I start floating in the water, a sense of immense freedom and joy overtakes me.

Growing up, we have to learn the basics: time spent in classes to learn, constantly practicing to improve our skills while safety is ingrained by our parents. In dive classes, I was taught to never panic or do stupid stuff: the same with the lessons that I have learned in life. Panic and over-inflated egos can lead to death, and I have heard it happens all the time. I had the opportunity to go to Antarctica for a diving expedition, but what led to me getting that slot was the death of a very experienced diver who used a drysuit in a tropic climate against all advice. He just overheated and died. Lessons learned in the sea can be very profound, but they contrast the life I live: risk-taker versus risk-avoider. However, when I have perfected it and it is time to be unleashed, it is time to enjoy. I jump in as I would jump into any opportunity, but this time it is into the deep blue sea of wonders.

A sea of wonders waits to be explored. Every journey is different: it can be fast or slow, like how life takes me. The sea decides how it wants to carry me; drifting fast with the currents so that at times, I hang on to the reef and corals like my life depends on it, even though I am taught never to touch anything underwater. The fear I feel when I am speeding along with the current is that I will be swept away into the big ocean, never to be found. Sometimes, I feel like I am not moving at all, kicking away madly until I hyperventilate because the sea is against me with its strong current holding me against my will.

The sea decides what it wants me to see: turtles popping out of the seabed, manta rays gracefully floating alongside, being in the middle of the eye of a barracuda hurricane, a coral shelf as big as a car, a desert of bleached corals, the emptiness of the seabed with not a fish in sight, the memorials of death caused by the December 26 tsunami—a barren sea floor with not a soul or life in sight.
The sea decides what treasures I can discover: a black-tipped shark sleeping in an underwater cavern, a pike hiding from predators in the reef, an octopus under a dead tree trunk that escapes into my buddy’s BCD, colorful mandarin fish mating at sunset, a deadly box jellyfish held in my gloved hands, pygmy seahorses in a fern—so tiny that to discover them is a journey itself.

Looking back, diving has taught me more about life, the ups and downs, the good and bad, and to accept and deal with life’s challenges. Everything I learn and discover underwater applies to the many different aspects of my life. It has also taught me that life is very short: I have to live in the moment or I will miss the opportunities that come my way. I allow myself to forget all my sorrow, despair and disappointments when I dive into the deep blue sea and savor the feelings of peacefulness and calmness. There is nothing around me but fish and corals, big and small. Floating along in silence with only the sound of my breath—inhale and exhale. An array of colors explodes in front of my eyes, colors that I never imagine I will discover again, an underwater rainbow as beautiful as the rainbow in the sky after a storm. As far as my eyes can see, I look into the depth of the ocean with nothing to anchor me. The deeper I get, the darker it turns. From the light blue sky to the deep navy blue, even blackness into the void. As the horizon darkens, the feeding frenzy of the underwater world starts and the watery landscape comes alive. Total darkness surrounds me but the sounds that I can hear are the little clicks in addition to my breathing. My senses overload as I cannot see what is around me, but the sea tells me it is alive and it anchors me to the depth of my soul.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said: “The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of
infancy even into the era of manhood... In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man in spite of real sorrows....”

The sea and diving have given me a new outlook on life, a different planet where I can float into and enjoy as an adult, a new, different perspective on how it is to be that child again. Time and time again as I enter into the sea, I feel innocent all over again.

**Teacher Takeaways**

“One of the more difficult aspects of writing a good descriptive essay is to use the description to move beyond itself – to ‘think through writing.’ This author does it well. Interspersed between the details of diving are deliberate metaphors and analogies that enable the reader to gain access and derive deeper meanings. While the essay could benefit from a more structured system of organization and clearer unifying points, and while the language is at times a bit sentimental, this piece is also a treasure trove of sensory imagery (notably colors) and descriptive devices such as personification and recursion.”

– Professor Fiscaletti

**Comatose Dreams**

Her vision was tunneled in on his face. His eyes were wet and his mouth was open as if he was trying to catch his breath. He leaned in closer and wrapped his arms around her face and spoke to her in reassuring whispers that reminded her of a time long ago when he taught her to pray. As her vision widened the confusion increased. She could not move. She opened her mouth to speak, but could not. She wanted to sit up, but was restrained to the bed. She did not have the energy to sob, but she could feel tears roll down her cheek and didn’t try to wipe them away. The anxiety overtook her and she fell back into a deep sleep.

She opened her eyes and tried to find reality. She was being tortured. Her feet were the size of pumpkins and her stomach was gutted all the way up her abdomen, her insides exposed for all to see. She was on display like an animal at the zoo. Tubes were coming out of her in multiple directions and her throat felt as if it were coated in chalk. She was conscious, but still a prisoner. Then a nurse walked in, pulled on one of her tubes, and sent her back into the abyss.
Eventually someone heard her speak, and with that she learned that if she complained enough she would get an injection. It gave her a beautiful head rush that temporarily dulled the pain. She adored it. She was no longer restrained to the bed, but still unable to move or eat. She was fed like baby. Each time she woke she was able to gather bits of information: she would not be going back to work, or school.

She began to heal. They removed a tube or two and she became more mobile. She was always tethered to a machine, like a dog on a leash. The pain from the surgeries still lingered and the giant opening in her stomach began to slowly close. The couch was her safe haven.

She came closer to dying during recovery than she had in the coma. The doctors made a mistake. She began to sweat profusely and shiver all at the same time. She vomited every twenty minutes like clockwork. It went on like that for days and she was ready to go. She wanted to slip back into her sleep. It was time to wake up from this nightmare. She pulled her hair and scratched her wrists trying to draw blood, anything to shake herself awake.

She sat on a beach remembering that nightmare. The sun beat down recharging a battery within her that had been running on empty for far too long. The waves washed up the length of her body and she sank deeper into the warm sand. She lay on her back taking it all in. Then laid her hand on top of her stomach, unconsciously she ran her fingers along a deep scar.

Teacher Takeaways

“This imagery is body-centered and predominantly tactile – though strange sights and sounds are also present. The narrow focus of the description symbolically mirrors the limitation of the comatose subject, which enhances the reader’s experience. Simile abounds, and in its oddities (feet like pumpkins, something like chalk in the throat), adds to the eerie newness of each scene. While the paragraphs are a bit underdeveloped, and one or two clichés in need of removal, this little episode does an excellent job of conveying the visceral strangeness one might imagine to be associated with a comatose state. It’s full of surprise.”

- Professor Fiscaletti
The Devil in Green Canyon

The sky was painted blue, with soft wisps of white clouds that decorated the edges of the horizon like a wedding cake. To the West, a bright orb filled the world with warm golden light which gives life to the gnarled mountain landscape. The light casted contrasting shadows against the rolling foot hills of the Cascade Mountain Range. A lone hawk circled above the narrow white water river that lay beneath the steep mountain side. Through the hawk’s eyes the mountains look like small green waves that flow down from a massive snow white point. Mt. Hood sits high above its surrounding foot hills, like that special jewel that sits on a pedestal, above all the others in a fancy jewelry store. The hawk soars into the Salmon River Valley, with hope of capturing a tasty meal, an area also known as the Green Canyon.

For hundreds of years, the Salmon River has carved its home into the bedrock. Filled from bank to bank with tumbled boulders, all strewn across the river bed, some as big as a car. Crystal clear water cascades over and around the rocky course nature has made with its unique rapids and eddies for the native salmon and trout to navigate, flanked by thick old growth forest and the steep tree studded walls of the canyon. Along the river lies a narrow two-lane road, where people are able to access tall wonders of this wilderness. The road was paved for eight miles and the condition was rough, with large potholes and sunken grades.

In my beat up old Corolla, I drove down windy roads of the Salmon River. With the windows down and the stereo turned up, I watched trees that towered above me pass behind my view. A thin ribbon of blue sky peeked through the towering Douglas Fir and Sequoia trees. At a particular bend in the road, I drove past an opening in the trees. Here the river and the road came around a sharp turn in the canyon. A natural rock face, with a patch of gravel at its base, offered a place to park and enjoy the river. The water was calm and shallow, like a sheet of glass. I could see the rocky bottom all the way across the river, the rocks were round and smoothed by
the continuous flow of water. It was peaceful as gentle flow of water created this tranquil symphony of rippling sounds.

As the road continued up the gentle slope guarded on the right by a thicket of bushes and tall colorful wild flowers giving red, purple, and white accents against lush green that dominated the landscape, followed by tall trees that quickly give way to a rocky precipice to the left. A yellow diamond shaped sign, complete with rusty edges and a few bullet holes indicated a one-lane bridge ahead. This was it! The beginning of the real journey. I parked my dusty Corolla as the gravel crunched under the balding tires, they skidded to a stop. As I turned the engine off, its irregular hum sputtered into silence. I could smell that hot oil that leaked from somewhere underneath the motor. I hopped out of the car and grabbed my large-framed backpack which was filled with enough food and gear for a few nights, I locked the car and took a short walk down the road. I arrived at the trail head, I was here to find peace, inspiration and discover a new place to feel freedom.

Devil’s Peak. 16 miles. As the trail skirted its way along the cascading Salmon River. The well-traveled dirt path was packed hard by constant foot traffic with roots from the massive old fir trees, rocks and mud that frequently created tripping hazards along the trail. Sword Fern, Salmon Berry and Oregon Grape are among the various small plant growth that lined the trail. Under the shade of the thick canopy, the large patches of shamrocks created an even covering over the rolling forest floor like the icing on a cake. The small shamrock forests are broken by mountainous nursery logs of old decaying trees. New life sprouts as these logs nature and host their kin. Varieties of maple fight for space among the ever-growing conifers that dominate the forest. Vine maple arches over the trail, bearded with hanging moss that forms natural pergolas.

It is easy to see why it is named Green Canyon, as the color touches everything. From the moss covering the floor, to the tops of the trees, many hues of green continue to paint the forest. These many greens are broken by the brown pillar like
trunks of massive trees. Their rough bark provides a textural contrast to the soft leaves and pine needles. Wild flowers grow between the sun breaks in the trees and provide a rainbow of color. Near the few streams that form from artesian springs higher up, vicious patches of devil’s glove, create a thorny wall that can tower above the trail. Their green stalk bristling with inch long barbs and the large leaves some over a foot long are covered with smaller needles.

I can hear the hum of bees in the distance collecting pollen from the assorted wild flowers. Their buzz mixes in with the occasional horse fly that lumbers past. For miles the trail, follows the river before it quickly ascends above the canyon. Winding steeply away from the river, the sound of rushing water began to fade, giving way to the serene and eerie quiet of the high mountains. Leaves and trees make a gentle sound as the wind brushes past them, but are overpowered by the sound of my dusty hiking boots slowly dragging me up this seemingly never-ending hill. I feel tired and sweat is beading up on my brow, exhausted as I am, I feel happy and relieved. Its moments like this that recharge the soul. I continue to climb, sweat and smile.

Undergrowth gives way to the harsh steep rock spires that crown the mountain top like ancient vertebra. The forest opens up to a steep cliff with a clearing offering a grand view. The spine of the mountain is visible, it hovers at 5000 feet above sea level and climbs to a point close to 5200 feet. Trees fight for position on the steep hillside as they flow down to the edge of the Salmon River. This a popular turn around point for day hikes. Not for me; I am going for the top. The peak is my destination where I will call home tonight. Devil’s Peak is a destination. Not just a great view point but it is also home to a historic fire watchtower. Here visitors can explore the tower and even stay the night.

From the gorge viewpoint the trail switchbacks up several miles through dense high-altitude forests. Passing rocky ramparts and a few sheer cliff faces the path ends at an old dirt road with mis from bygone trucks that leave faint traces of life. A hand carved wooden sign, nailed to a tree at the continuation of the trail indicates another
2.6 miles to Devil’s Peak. The trail is narrow as it traces the spine of the mountain before steeply carving around the peak. There are instances where the mountain narrows to a few feet, with sheer drops on both sides, like traversing a catwalk. The trees at this altitude are stunted compared to the giants that live below. Most trees here are only a foot or two thick and a mere 50 feet in height. The thick under growth has dwindled to small rhododendron bushes and clumps of bear grass. The frequently gusting wind has caused the trunks of the trees to grow into twisted gnarled forms. It is almost like some demon walked through the trail distorting everything as it passed. Foxglove and other wild flowers find root holds in warm sunny spots along the trail. Breaks in the thick forest provide snapshots of distant mountains: Mt. Hood is among the snowcapped peaks that pepper the distant mountains.

With sweat on my brow, forming beads that drip down my face, I reached the top. The trail came to a fork where another small sign indicates to go left. After a few feet the forest shrinks away and opens to a rocky field with expansive views that stretched for miles. There, standing its eternal watch, is the Devil’s Peak watch tower. Its sun-bleached planks are a white contrast to the evergreen wall behind it. It was built by hand decades ago before portable power tools by hardened forest rangers. It has stood so long that the peak which once offered a 360-degree view now only has a few openings left between the mature trees that surround the grove in which the old devil stands, watching high above the green canyon. The lookout stands 30 feet in height. Its old weathered moss-covered wood shingled roof is topped with a weathered copper lightning rod. A staircase climbs steeply to the balcony that wraps around the tower. Only two feet wide, the deck still offers an amazing view where the forest allows. Mt. Hood stands proud to the North and the green mountains stretch South to the edge of the horizon.
The builders made window covers to protect the glass during storms. Once lined and supported with boards that have been notched to fit the railing, the tower is open filling the interior with daylight. In all the cabin is only twelve feet by twelve feet. The door has a tall window and three of the four walls have windows most of the way to the ceiling. The furnishing is modest, with a bed that has several pieces of foam and some sleeping bags to make mattress, it was complete with a pillow with no case. A table covered with carvings and some useful information and rules for the tower were taped to the surface. An old diary for the tower and a cup full of writing instruments next to it for visitors to share their experience lay closed in the middle of the table. In the South East corner, on a hearth made of old brick sat an old iron wood stove. The door had an image of a mountain and trees molded into it. The top was flat and had room to use for a cook top. Someone left a small pile of wood next the stove. The paint on the inside was weathered and stripping. The floor boards creaked with each step. Whenever the wind gusted the windows rattled. The air inside the cabin was musty and dry. It smelled old. But the windows all pivot and open to make the inside feel like its outside and as soon as the windows were opened the old smell is replaced with the scent of fresh pine.

Surrounded by small patches of wild flowers and rocks, all ringed by a maturing forest Devil’s Peak watchtower sits high above the Green Canyon. On a high point near the tower where solid rock pierces the ground there is a small round plaque cemented to the ancient basalt. It is a U.S. geological marker with the name of the peak and its elevation stamped into the metal. Standing on the marker I can see south through a large opening in the trees. Mountains like giant green walls fill the view. For miles, rock and earth rise up forming mountains, supporting the exquisite
green forest.

The hawk circles, soaring high above the enchanting mountains. On a peak below, it sees prey skitter across a rock into a clump of juniper and swoops down for the hunt. There I stand on the tower’s wooden balcony, watching the sunset. The blue horizon slowly turned pale before glowing orange. Mt. Hood reflected the changing colors, from orange to a light purple. Soon stars twinkled above and the mountain faded to dark. The day is done. Here in this moment, I am.

Teacher Takeaways

“This author’s description is frequent and rich with detail; I especially like the thorough inventory of wildlife throughout the essay, although it does get a feel a bit burdensome at times. I can clearly envision the setting, at times even hearing the sounds and feeling the textures the author describes. Depending on their goals in revision, this author might make some global adjustments to pacing (so the reader can move through a bit more quickly and fluidly). At the very least, this student should spend some time polishing up mechanical errors. I noticed two recurring issues: (1) shifting verb tense [the author writes in both present and past tense, where it would be more appropriate to stick with one or the other]; and (2) sentence fragments, run-ons, and comma splices [all errors that occur because a sentence combines clauses ungrammatically].”

– Professor Wilhjelm
Chapter Two
Telling a Story

“We’re all stories, in the end.” – Steven Moffat, *Doctor Who*¹⁵

Whether or not you’ve seen a single episode of *Doctor Who*, you can appreciate this quote. I love it for its ambiguities.¹⁶ As I can tell, we can interpret it in at least four ways:

- **All we are is stories, in the end.**
  Our identities, our ambitions, our histories are all a composite of the many stories we tell about ourselves.

- **All of us are stories, in the end.**
  Our stories are never just our own: you share common stories with your parents, your friends, your teachers and bosses, strangers on the street.

- **Each of us is a story, in the end.**
  Your entire life, while composed of many interlocking stories, is one story among many.

- **We are stories (in all of the above ways), but only at the end.**
  Our individual stories have no definite conclusion until we can no longer tell them ourselves. What legacy will you leave? How can you tell a piece of your story while it’s still up to you?
But perhaps that’s enough abstraction: narration is a rhetorical mode that you likely engage on a daily basis, and one that has held significance in every culture in human history. Even when we’re not deliberately telling stories, storytelling often underlies our writing and thinking:

- Historians synthesize and interpret events of the past; a history book is one of many narratives of our cultures and civilizations.
- Chemists analyze observable data to determine cause-and-effect behaviors of natural and synthetic materials; a lab report is a sort of narrative about elements (characters) and reactions (plot).
- Musical composers evoke the emotional experience of story through instrumentation, motion, motifs, resolutions, and so on; a song is a narrative that may not even need words.

What makes for an interesting, well-told story in writing? In addition to description, your deliberate choices in narration can create impactful, beautiful, and entertaining stories.

### Chapter Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>characterization</strong></th>
<th>the process by which an author builds characters; can be accomplished directly or indirectly.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>dialogue</strong></td>
<td>a communication between two or more people. Can include any mode of communication, including speech, texting, e-mail, Facebook post, body language, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>dynamic character</strong></td>
<td>a character who noticeably changes within the scope of a narrative, typically as a result of the plot events and/or other characters. Contrast with static character.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>epiphany</strong></td>
<td>a character’s sudden realization of a personal or universal truth. See dynamic character.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>flat character</strong></td>
<td>a character who is minimally detailed, only briefly sketched or named. Generally less central to the events and relationships portrayed in a narrative. Contrast with round character.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>mood</strong></td>
<td>the emotional dimension which a reader experiences while encountering a text. Compare with tone.</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>multimedia / multigenre</strong></td>
<td>a term describing a text that combines more than one media and/or more than one genre (e.g., an essay with embedded images; a portfolio with essays, poetry, and comic strips; a mixtape with song reviews).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>narration</strong></td>
<td>a rhetorical mode involving the construction and relation of stories. Typically integrates description as a technique.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>narrative pacing</strong></td>
<td>the speed with which a story progresses through plot events. Can be influenced by reflective and descriptive writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>narrative scope</strong></td>
<td>the boundaries of a narrative in time, space, perspective, and focus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>narrative sequence</strong></td>
<td>the order of events included in a narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>plot</strong></td>
<td>the events included within the scope of a narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>point-of-view</strong></td>
<td>the perspective from which a story is told, determining both grammar (pronouns) and perspective (speaker’s awareness of events, thoughts, and circumstances).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>round character</strong></td>
<td>a character who is thoroughly characterized and dimensional, detailed with attentive description of their traits and behaviors. Contrast with flat character.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>static character</strong></td>
<td>a character who remains the same throughout the narrative. Contrast with dynamic character.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>tone</strong></td>
<td>the emotional register of the text. Compare with mood.</td>
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Techniques

Plot Shapes and Form

Plot is one of the basic elements of every story: put simply, plot refers to the actual events that take place within the bounds of your narrative. Using our rhetorical situation vocabulary, we can identify “plot” as the primary subject of a descriptive personal narrative. Three related elements to consider are scope, sequence, and pacing.

Scope

The term scope refers to the boundaries of your plot. Where and when does it begin and end? What is its focus? What background information and details does your story require? I often think about narrative scope as the edges of a photograph: a photo, whether of a vast landscape or a microscopic organism, has boundaries. Those boundaries inform the viewer’s perception. In this example, the scope of the left photo allows for a story about a neighborhood in San Francisco. In the middle, it is a story about the fire escape, the clouds. On the right, the scope of the story directs our attention to the birds. In this way, narrative scope impacts the content you include and your reader’s perception of that content in context.

The way we determine scope varies based on rhetorical situation, but I can say generally that many developing writers struggle with a scope that is too broad: writers often find it challenging to zero in on the events that drive a story and prune out extraneous information.
Consider, as an example, how you might respond if your friend asked what you did last weekend. If you began with, “I woke up on Saturday morning, rolled over, checked my phone, fell back asleep, woke up, pulled my feet out from under the covers, put my feet on the floor, stood up, stretched…” then your friend might have stopped listening by the time you get to the really good stuff. Your scope is too broad, so you’re including details that distract or bore your reader. Instead of listing every detail in order like this:

... you should consider narrowing your scope, focusing instead on the important, interesting, and unique plot points (events) like this:

You might think of this as the difference between a series of snapshots and a roll of film: instead of twenty-four frames per second video, your entire story might only be a few photographs aligned together.

It may seem counterintuitive, but we can often say more by digging deep into a few ideas or events, instead of trying to relate every idea or event.

The most impactful stories are often those that represent something, so your scope should focus on the details that fit into the bigger picture. To return to the previous example, you could tell me more about your weekend by sharing a specific detail than every detail. “Brushing my teeth Saturday morning, I didn’t realize that I would probably have a scar from wrestling that bear on Sunday” reveals more than “I woke up on Saturday morning, rolled over, checked my phone, fell back asleep, woke up, pulled my feet out from under the covers, put my feet on the floor, stood up,
stretched…. Not only have you foregrounded the more interesting event, but you have also foreshadowed that you had a harrowing, adventurous, and unexpected weekend.

**Sequence and Pacing**

The *sequence* and *pacing* of your plot—the order of the events and the amount of time you give to each event, respectively—will determine your reader’s experience. There are an infinite number of ways you might structure your story, and the shape of your story is worth deep consideration. Although the traditional forms for narrative sequence are not your only options, let’s take a look at a few tried-and-true shapes your plot might take.

You might recognize Freytag’s Pyramid from other classes you’ve taken:

A. **Exposition**: Here, you’re setting the scene, introducing characters, and preparing the reader for the journey.
B. **Rising action**: In this part, things start to happen. You (or your characters) encounter conflict, set out on a journey, meet people, etc.
C. **Climax**: This is the peak of the action, the main showdown, the central event toward which your story has been building.
D. **Falling action**: Now things start to wind down. You (or your characters) come away from the climactic experience changed—at the very least, you are wiser for having had that experience.
E. **Resolution**: Also known as dénouement, this is where all the loose ends get tied up. The central conflict has been resolved, and everything is back to normal, but perhaps a bit different.
This narrative shape is certainly a familiar one. Many films, TV shows, plays, novels, and short stories follow this track. But it’s not without its flaws. You should discuss with your classmates and instructors what shortcomings you see in this classic plot shape. What assumptions does it rely on? How might it limit a storyteller? Sometimes, I tell my students to “Start the story where the story starts”—often, steps A and B in the diagram above just delay the most descriptive, active, or meaningful parts of the story. If nothing else, we should note that it is not necessarily the best way to tell your story, and definitely not the only way.

Another classic technique for narrative sequence is known as in medias res—literally, “in the middle of things.” As you map out your plot in pre-writing or experiment with during the drafting and revision process, you might find this technique a more active and exciting way to begin a story.

In the earlier example, the plot is chronological, linear, and continuous: the story would move smoothly from beginning to end with no interruptions. In medias res instead suggests that you start your story with action rather than exposition, focusing on an exciting, imagistic, or important scene. Then, you can circle back to an earlier part of the story to fill in the blanks for your reader. Using the previously discussed plot shape, you might visualize it like this:
You can experiment with your sequence in a variety of other ways, which might include also making changes to your scope: instead of a continuous story, you might have a series of fragments with specific scope (like photographs instead of video), as is exemplified by “The Pot Calling the Kettle Black....” Instead of chronological order, you might bounce around in time or space, like in “Parental Guidance,” or in reverse, like “21.” Some of my favorite narratives reject traditional narrative sequence.

I include *pacing* with *sequence* because a change to one often influences the other. Put simply, pacing refers to the speed and fluidity with which a reader moves through your story. You can play with pacing by moving more quickly through events, or even by experimenting with sentence and paragraph length. Consider how the “flow” of the following examples differs:

*The train screeched to a halt. A flock of pigeons took flight as the conductor announced, “We’ll be stuck here for a few minutes.”*

*Lost in my thoughts, I shuddered as the train ground to a full stop in the middle of an intersection. I was surprised, jarred by the unannounced and abrupt jerking of the car. I sought clues for our stop outside the window. All I saw were pigeons as startled and clueless as I.*

I recommend the student essay “Under the Knife,” which does excellent work with pacing, in addition to making a strong creative choice with narrative scope.

**Point-of-View**

The position from which your story is told will help shape your reader’s experience, the language your narrator and characters use, and even the plot itself. You might recognize this from *Dear White People Volume 1* or *Arrested Development Season 4*, both Netflix TV series. Typically, each episode in these seasons explores similar plot events, but from...
a different character’s perspective. Because of their unique vantage points, characters can tell different stories about the same realities.

This is, of course, true for our lives more generally. In addition to our differences in knowledge and experiences, we also interpret and understand events differently. In our writing, narrative position is informed by point-of-view and the emotional valences I refer to here as tone and mood.

**point-of-view (POV):** the perspective from which a story is told.
- This is a grammatical phenomenon—i.e., it decides pronoun use—but, more importantly, it impacts tone, mood, scope, voice, and plot.\(^{18}\)

Although point-of-view will influence tone and mood, we can also consider what feelings we want to convey and inspire independently as part of our narrative position.

**tone:** the emotional register of the story’s language.
- What emotional state does the narrator of the story (not the author, but the speaker) seem to be in? What emotions are you trying to imbue in your writing?

**mood:** the emotional register a reader experiences.\(^{19}\)
- What emotions do you want your reader to experience? Are they the same feelings you experienced at the time?

### A Non-Comprehensive Breakdown of POV

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1(^{st}) person</th>
<th>Narrator uses 1(^{st}) person pronouns (I/me/mine or us/we/ours)</th>
<th>Can include internal monologue (motives, thoughts, feelings) of the narrator. Limited certainty of motives, thoughts, or feelings of other characters.</th>
<th>I tripped on the last stair, preoccupied by what my sister had said, and felt my stomach drop.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2(^{nd}) person</td>
<td>Narrator uses 2(^{nd}) person pronouns (you/you/your)</td>
<td>Speaks to the reader, as if the reader is the protagonist OR uses apostrophe to speak to an absent or unidentified person</td>
<td>Your breath catches as you feel the phantom step. O, staircase, how you keep me awake at night.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Typically, you will tell your story from the first-person point-of-view, but personal narratives can also be told from a different perspective; I recommend “Comatose Dreams” to illustrate this at work. As you’re developing and revising your writing, try to inhabit different authorial positions: What would change if you used the third person POV instead of first person? What different meanings would your reader find if you told this story with a different tone—bitter instead of nostalgic, proud rather than embarrassed, sarcastic rather than genuine?

Furthermore, there are many rhetorical situations that call for different POVs. (For instance, you may have noticed that this book uses the second-person very frequently.) So, as you evaluate which POV will be most effective for your current rhetorical situation, bear in mind that the same choice might inform your future writing.

**Building Characters**

Whether your story is fiction or nonfiction, you should spend some time thinking about **characterization**: the development of characters through actions, descriptions, and dialogue. Your audience will be more engaged with and sympathetic toward your narrative if they can vividly imagine the characters as real people.
Like description, characterization relies on specificity. Consider the following contrast in character descriptions:

My mom is great. She is an average-sized brunette with brown eyes. She is very loving and supportive, and I know I can rely on her. She taught me everything I know.

In addition to some of my father’s idiosyncrasies, however, he is also one of the most kind-hearted and loving people in my life. One of his signature actions is the ‘cry-smile,’ in which he simultaneously cries and smiles any time he experiences a strong positive emotion (which is almost daily).

How does the “cry-smile” detail enhance the characterization of the speaker’s parent?

To break it down to process, characterization can be accomplished in two ways:

a) **Directly**, through specific description of the character—What kind of clothes do they wear? What do they look, smell, sound like?—or,

b) **Indirectly**, through the behaviors, speech, and thoughts of the character—What kind of language, dialect, or register do they use? What is the tone, inflection, and timbre of their voice? How does their manner of speaking reflect their attitude toward the listener? How do their actions reflect their traits? What’s on their mind that they won’t share with the world?

Thinking through these questions will help you get a better understanding of each character (often including yourself). You do not need to include all the details, but they should inform your description, dialogue, and narration.
**Round characters**...
- are very detailed, requiring attentive description of their traits and behaviors.
- Your most important characters should be round: the added detail will help your reader better visualize, understand, and care about them.

**Flat characters**...
- are minimally detailed, only briefly sketched or named.
- Less important characters should take up less space and will therefore have less detailed characterization.

**Static characters**...
- remain the same throughout the narrative.
- Even though all of us are always changing, some people will behave and appear the same throughout the course of your story. Static characters can serve as a reference point for dynamic characters to show the latter’s growth.

**Dynamic characters**...
- noticeably change within the narrative, typically as a result of the events.
- Most likely, you will be a dynamic character in your personal narrative because such stories are centered around an impactful experience, relationship, or place. Dynamic characters learn and grow over time, either gradually or with an epiphany.

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**Dialogue**

**dialogue**: communication between two or more characters.

Think of the different conversations you’ve had today, with family, friends, or even classmates. Within each of those conversations, there were likely preestablished relationships that determined how you talked to each other: each is its own rhetorical situation. A dialogue with your friends, for example, may be far different from one with your family. These relationships can influence tone of voice, word choice (such as using slang, jargon, or lingo), what details we share, and even what language we speak.
As we’ve seen above, good dialogue often demonstrates the traits of a character or the relationship of characters. From reading or listening to how people talk to one another, we often infer the relationships they have. We can tell if they’re having an argument or conflict, if one is experiencing some internal conflict or trauma, if they’re friendly acquaintances or cold strangers, even how their emotional or professional attributes align or create opposition.

Often, dialogue does more than just one thing, which makes it a challenging tool to master. When dialogue isn’t doing more than one thing, it can feel flat or expositional, like a bad movie or TV show where everyone is saying their feelings or explaining what just happened. For example, there is a difference between “No thanks, I’m not hungry” and “I’ve told you, I’m not hungry.” The latter shows frustration, and hints at a previous conversation. Exposition can have a place in dialogue, but we should use it deliberately, with an awareness of how natural or unnatural it may sound. We should be aware how dialogue impacts the pacing of the narrative. Dialogue can be musical and create tempo, with either quick back and forth, or long drawn out pauses between two characters. Rhythm of a dialogue can also tell us about the characters’ relationship and emotions.

We can put some of these thoughts to the test using the exercises in the Activities section of this chapter to practice writing dialogue.

Choosing a Medium

Narration, as you already know, can occur in a variety of media: TV shows, music, drama, and even Snapchat Stories practice narration in different ways. Your instructor may ask you to write a traditional personal narrative (using only prose), but if you are given the opportunity, you might also consider what other media or genres might inform your narration. Some awesome narratives use a multimedia or multigenre approach, synthesizing multiple different forms, like audio and video, or nonfiction, poetry, and photography.

In addition to the limitations and opportunities presented by your rhetorical situation, choosing a medium also depends on the opportunities and limitations of different forms. To determine which tool or tools you want to use for your story, you should consider which medium (or combination of media) will help you best accomplish your purpose. Here’s a non-comprehensive list of storytelling tools you might incorporate in place of or in addition to traditional prose:
Section 1: Description, Narration, and Reflection

- Images
- Poetry
- Video
- Audio recording
- “Found” texts (fragments of other authors’ works reframed to tell a different story)
- Illustrations
- Comics, manga, or other graphic storytelling
- Journal entries or series of letters
- Plays, screenplays, or other works of drama
- Blogs and social media postings

Although each of these media is a vehicle for delivering information, it is important to acknowledge that each different medium will have a different impact on the audience; in other words, the medium can change the message itself.

There are a number of digital tools available that you might consider for your storytelling medium, as well.²²

*Video: Storytelling with Robyn Vazquez*²³
Activities

_Idea Generation: What Stories Can I Tell?_

You may already have an idea of an important experience in your life about which you could tell a story. Although this might be a significant experience, it is most definitely not the only one worth telling. (Remember: first idea ≠ best idea.)

Just as with description, good narration isn’t about shocking content but rather about effective and innovative writing. In order to broaden your options before you begin developing your story, complete the organizer on the following pages.

Then, choose three of the list items from this page that you think are especially unique or have had a serious impact on your life experience. On a separate sheet of paper, free-write about each of your three list items for no less than five minutes per item.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List five places that are significant to you (real, fictional, or imaginary)</th>
<th>List ten people who have influenced your life in some way (positive or negative, acquainted or not, real or fictional)</th>
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### List ten ways that you identify yourself (roles, adjectives, or names)

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### List three obstacles you’ve overcome to be where you are today

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### List three difficult moments – tough decisions, traumatic or challenging experiences, or troubling circumstances

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**Idea Generation: Mapping an Autobiography**

This exercise will help you develop a variety of options for your story, considered especially in the context of your entire life trajectory.

First, brainstorm at least ten moments or experiences that you consider influential—moments that in some way impacted your identity, your friendships, your worldview—for the better or for the worse. Record them in the table below.

Then, rate those experiences on a degree of “awesomeness,” “pleasurability,” or something else along those lines, on a scale of 0 – 10, with 10 being the hands down best moment of your life and 0 being the worst.
Next, plot those events on the graph paper on the back of this page. Each point is an event; the x-axis is your age, and the y-axis is the factor of positivity. Connect the points with a line.

Finally, circle three of the events/experiences on your graph. On a clean sheet of paper, free-write about each of those three for at least four minutes.²⁴

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your age</th>
<th>Event, moment, or experience</th>
<th>Awesomeness Factor (0-10)</th>
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Experimenting with Voice and Dialogue

Complete the following three exercises to think through the language your characters use and the relationships they demonstrate through dialogue. If you’ve started your assignment, you can use these exercises to generate content.

The Secret
1) Choose any two professions for two imaginary characters.
2) Give the two characters a secret that they share with one another. As you might imagine, neither of them would reveal that secret aloud, but they might discuss it. (To really challenge yourself, you might also come up with a reason that their secret must be a secret: Is it socially unacceptable to talk about? Are they liable to get in trouble if people find out? Will they ruin a surprise?)
3) Write an exchange between those characters about the secret using only their words (i.e., no “he said” or “she said,” but rather only the language they use). Allow the secret to be revealed to the reader in how the characters speak, what they say, and how they say it. Pay attention to the subtext of what’s being said and how it’s being said. How would these characters discuss their secret without revealing it to eavesdroppers? (Consider Ernest Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” as a model.)
4) Draw a line beneath your dialogue. Now, imagine that only one of the characters has a secret. Write a new dialogue in which one character is trying to keep that secret from the other. Again, consider how the speakers are communicating: what language do they use? What sort of tone? What does that reveal about their relationship?

The Overheard
1) Go to a public space and eavesdrop on a conversation. (Try not to be too creepy—be considerate and respectful of the people.) You don’t need to take avid notes, but observe natural inflections, pauses, and gestures. What do these characteristics imply about the relationship between the speakers?
2) Jot down a fragment of striking, interesting, or weird dialogue.
3) Now, use that fragment of dialogue to imagine a digital exchange: consider that fragment as a Facebook status, a text message, or a tweet. Then, write at least ten comments or replies to that fragment.
4) Reflect on the imaginary digital conversation you just created. What led you to make the choices you made? How does digital dialogue differ from real-life dialogue?
Beyond Words
As you may have noticed in the previous exercises, dialogue is about more than just what the words say: our verbal communication is supplemented by inflection, tone, body language, and pace, among other things. With a partner, exchange the following lines. Without changing the words, try to change the meaning using your tone, inflection, body language, etc.

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<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I don’t want to talk about it.”</td>
<td>“Leave me alone.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Can we talk about it?”</td>
<td>“What do you want from me?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I want it.”</td>
<td>“You can’t have it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Have you seen her today?”</td>
<td>“Why?”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

After each round, debrief with your partner; jot down a few notes together to describe how your variations changed the meaning of each word. Then, consider how you might capture and relay these different deliveries using written language—what some writers call “dialogue tags.” Dialogue tags try to reproduce the nuance of our spoken and unspoken languages (e.g., “he muttered,” “she shouted in frustration,” “they insinuated, crossing their arms”).

Using Images to Tell a Story
Even though this textbook focuses on writing as a means to tell stories, you can also construct thoughtful and unique narratives using solely images, or using images to
supplement your writing. A single photograph can tell a story, but a series will create a more cohesive narrative. To experiment with this medium, try the following activity.

1) Using your cell phone or a digital camera, take at least one photograph (of yourself, events, and/or your surroundings) each hour for one day.
2) Compile the photos and arrange them in chronological order. Choose any five photos that tell a story about part or all of your day.
   - How did you determine which photos to remove? What does this suggest about your narrative scope?
   - Where might you want to add photos or text? Why?

To consider models of this kind of narrative, check out Al Jazeera’s “In Pictures” series. In 2014, a friend of mine recorded a one-second video every day for a year, creating a similar kind of narrative— you can check it out here.
Model Texts by Student Authors

Under the Knife

The white fluorescent lights mirrored off the waxed and buffed vinyl flooring. Doctors and nurses beelined through small congregations of others conversing. Clocks were posted at every corner of every wall and the sum of the quiet ticking grew to an audible drone. From the vinyl floors to the desks where decade old Dell computers sat, a sickly gray sucked all the life from the room. The only source of color was the rainbow circle crocheted blanket that came customary for minors about to undergo surgery. It was supposed to be a token of warmth and happiness, a blanket you could find life in; however, all I found in the blanket was an unwanted pity.

Three months ago doctors diagnosed me with severe scoliosis. They told me I would need to pursue orthopedic surgery to realign my spine. For years I endured through back pain and discomfort, never attributing it to the disease. In part, I felt as if it was my fault, that me letting the symptoms go unattended for so long led it to become so extreme. Those months between the diagnosis and the surgery felt like mere seconds. Every day I would recite to myself that everything would be okay and that I had nothing to worry about. However, then minutes away from sedation, I felt like this bed I was in—only three feet off the ground—would put me six feet under.

The doctors informed me beforehand of the potential complications that could arise from surgery. Partial paralysis, infection, death, these words echoed throughout the chasms of my mind. Anxiety overwhelmed me; I was a dying animal surrounded by ravenous vultures, drool dripping awaiting their next meal. My palms were a disgusting swamp of sweat that gripped hard onto the white sheets that covered me. A feeling of numbness lurked into my extremities and slowly infected its way throughout my body.

The vinyl mattress cover I was on felt like a porcelain toilet seat during a cold winter morning. It did not help my discomfort that I had nothing on but a sea blue
gown that covered only the front and ankle high socks that seemed like bathroom scrubbers. A heart rate monitor clamp was tightly affixed onto my index finger that had already lost circulation minutes ago. The monitor was the snitch giving away my growing anxiety; my heart rate began to increase as I awaited surgery. Attached to the bed frame was a remote that could adjust almost every aspect of the bed. I kept the bed at an almost right angle: I wanted to be aware of my surroundings.

My orthopediatrician and surgeon, Dr. Halsey, paced in from the hallway and gave away a forced smile to ease me into comfort. The doctor shot out his hand and I hesitantly stuck out mine for the handshake. I’ve always hated handshakes; my hands are incredibly sweaty and I did not want to disgust him with my soggy tofu hands. He asked me how my day was so far, and I responded with a concise “Alright.” Truth was, my day so far was pretty lackluster and tiring. I had woken up before the birds had even begun to chirp, I ate nothing for breakfast, and I was terrified out of my mind. This Orthopedic Surgeon, this man, this human, was fully in charge of the surgery. Dr. Halsey and other surgeons deal with one of the most delicate and fragile things in the world—people’s lives. The amount of pressure and nerves he must face on an everyday basis is incredible. His calm and reserved nature made me believe that he was confident in himself, and that put me more at ease.

An overweight nurse wheeled in an IV with a bag of solution hooked to the side. “Which arm do you prefer for your IV?” she inquired.

Needles used to terrify me. They were tiny bullets that pierced through your skin like mosquitos looking for dinner, but by now I had grown accustomed to them. Like getting stung by a bee for the first time, my first time getting blood taken was a grueling adventure. “Left, I guess,” I let out with a long anxiety-filled sigh.

The rubber band was thick and dark blue, the same color as the latex gloves she wore. I could feel my arm pulse in excitement as they tightly wrapped the rubber band right above my elbow.
“Oh, wow! Look at that vein pop right out!” The nurse exclaimed as she inspected the bulging vein.

I tried to distract myself from the nurse so I wouldn’t hesitate as the IV was going in. I stared intently at the speckled ceiling tiles. They were the same ones used in schools. As my eyes began to relax, the dots on the ceiling started to transform into different shapes and animals. There was a squirrel, a seal, and a do—I felt pain shock through my body as the IV needle had infiltrated into my arm.

Dr. Halsey had one arm planted to the bottom end of the bed frame and the other holding the clipboard that was attached to the frame. “We’re going to pump two solutions through you. The first will be the saline, and the second will be the sedation and anesthesia.” The nurse leaned over and punched in buttons connected to the IV. After a loud beep, I felt a cooling sensation run down my arm. I felt like a criminal, prosecuted for murder, and now was one chemical away from finishing the cocktail execution. My eyes darted across the room; I was searching for hope I could cling to.

My mother was sitting on a chair on the other side of the room, eyes slowly and silently sweating. She clutched my father’s giant calloused hands as he browsed the internet on his phone. While I would say that I am more similar to my mother than my father, I think we both dealt with our anxiety in similar ways. Just like my father, I too needed a visual distraction to avoid my anxiety. “I love you,” my mother called out.

All I did was a slight nod in affirmation. I was too fully engulfed by my own thoughts to even try and let out a single syllable. What is my purpose in life? Have I been successful in making others proud? Questions like these crept up in my mind like an unwanted visitor.

“Here comes the next solution,” Dr. Halsey announced while pointing his pen at the IV bags. “10...,” he began his countdown.
I needed answers to the questions that had invaded my mind. So far in life, I haven’t done anything praiseworthy or even noteworthy. I am the bottom of the barrel, a dime a dozen, someone who will probably never influence the future to come. However, in those final seconds, I realized that I did not really care.

“7….” Dr. Halsey continued the countdown.

I’ve enjoyed my life. I’ve had my fun and shared many experiences with my closest friends. If I’m not remembered in a few years after I die, then so be it. I’m proud of my small accomplishments so far.

“4…”

Although I am not the most decorated of students, I can say that at least I tried my hardest. All that really mattered was that I was happy. I had hit tranquility; my mind had halted. I was out even before Dr. Halsey finished the countdown. I was at ease.

Breathing Easy

Most people’s midlife crises happen when they’re well into adulthood; mine happened when I was twelve. For most of my childhood and into my early teen years, I was actively involved in community theater. In the fall of 2010, I was in the throes of puberty as well as in the middle of rehearsals for a production of Pinocchio, in which I played the glamorous and highly coveted role of an unnamed puppet. On this particular day, however, I was not onstage rehearsing with all the other unnamed
puppets as I should’ve been; instead, I was locked backstage in a single-stall bathroom, dressed in my harlequin costume and crying my eyes out on the freezing tile floor, the gaudy red and black makeup dripping down my face until I looked like the villain from a low-budget horror movie.

The timing of this breakdown was not ideal. I don’t remember exactly what happened in the middle of rehearsal that triggered this moment of hysteria, but I know it had been building for a long time, and for whatever reason, that was the day the dam finally broke. At the time, I had pinpointed the start of my crisis to a moment several months earlier when I started questioning my sexuality. Looking back now, though, I can see that this aspect of my identity had been there since childhood, when as a seven-year-old I couldn’t decide if I would rather marry Aladdin or Princess Jasmine.

Up until the age of 16, I lived in Amarillo, Texas, a flat, brown city in the middle of a huge red state. Even though my parents had never been blatantly homophobic in front of me, I grew up in a conservative religious community that was fiercely cisheteronormative. My eighth-grade health teacher kicked off our unit on sex education with a contemptuous, “We aren’t going to bother learning about safe sex for homosexuals. We’re only going to talk about normal relationships.” Another time, when I told a friend about a secret I had (unrelated to my sexuality), she responded with, “That’s not too bad. At least you’re not gay,” her lips curling in disdain as if simply saying the sinful word aloud left a bad taste in her mouth.

I laid in a crumpled mess on that bathroom floor, crying until my head throbbed and the linoleum beneath me became slick with tears and dollar-store face paint. By the time my crying slowed and I finally pulled myself up off the floor, my entire body felt weighed down by the secret I now knew I had to keep, and despite being a perfectionist at heart, I couldn’t find it within myself to care that I’d missed almost all of rehearsal. I looked at my tear-streaked face in the mirror, makeup smeared all over my burning cheeks, and silently admitted to myself what I had
subconsciously known for a long time: that I wasn’t straight, even though I didn’t know exactly what I was yet. At the time, even thinking the words “I might be gay” to myself felt like a death sentence. I promised myself then and there that I would never tell anyone; that seemed to be the only option.

For several years, I managed to keep my promise to myself. Whereas before I had spent almost all of my free time with my friends, after my episode in the bathroom, I became isolated, making up excuses anytime a friend invited me out for fear of accidentally getting too comfortable and letting my secret slip. I spent most of middle school and the beginning of high school so far back in the closet I could barely breathe or see any light. I felt like the puppet I’d played in that production of Pinocchio—tied down by fear and shame, controlled by other people and their expectations of me rather than having the ability to be honest about who I was.

Just as I ended up breaking down in that theater bathroom stall when I was twelve, though, I eventually broke down again. My freshman year of high school was one of the worst years of my life. Struggling with mental illness and missing large portions of school as I went in and out of psychiatric hospitals was hard enough, but on top of all of that, I was also lying about a core part of my identity to everyone I knew. After a particularly rough night, I sat down and wrote a letter to my parents explaining that I was pansexual (or attracted to all genders and gender identities). “I’ve tried to stop being this way, but I can’t.” I wrote, my normally-neat handwriting reduced to a shaky chicken scratch as I struggled to control the trembling of my hands. “I hope you still love me.” With my heart pounding violently in my chest, I signed the letter and left it in the kitchen for them to find before locking myself in my room and pretending to go to sleep so I wouldn’t have to deal with their initial response.

By some amazing twist of fate, my parents did not have the horrible reaction I’d been dreading for the past two years. They knocked on my door a few minutes after I’d left the letter for them, and when I nervously let them in, they hugged me and told
me that they loved me no matter what; my dad even said, “Kid, you couldn’t have picked a better family to be gay in.” For the first time in years, I felt like I could breathe again. My fear of rejection was still there—after all, I still had to come out to most of my friends and extended family—but it seemed so much more manageable knowing I had my parents on my side.

It took me several years to fully come out and get to a point where I felt comfortable in my own identity. A lot of people, even those who had known and loved me since I was a baby, told me that they couldn’t be friends with me or my family anymore because of my “sinful lifestyle.” As painful as it was each time I was shunned by someone I thought was my friend, I eventually gained enough confidence in myself and my identity to stop caring as much when people tried to tear me down for something I know is outside of my control.

Now, as a fully out-of-the-closet queer person, I still face discrimination from certain people in my life and from society as a whole. However, I’ve learned that it’s a lot easier to deal with judgement from external forces when you surround yourself with people who love and support you, and most importantly, when you have love for yourself, which I’m glad to say I now do. Even though it was terrifying at first, I’m glad I broke the promise I made to myself in that backstage bathroom, because no matter what struggles I might face, at least I know I’m able to be open about who I am.

**Teacher Takeaways**

“This essay begins in compelling fashion, in a dramatic, vividly descriptive scene that proves central to the narrative. The use of dialogue is also strong here, especially in the letter the narrator writes to their parents and the father’s response to that letter. The author also experiments with narrative sequence. It’s a good move, but it does introduce some chronological confusion, making it difficult to place events on a timeline in relation to one another. This is a challenge with non-traditional narrative sequencing, but it can be resolved with strategic editing.”

- Professor Dunham
Before I got sober I never paid attention to my dreams. I don’t even remember if I had dreams. In the end I was spiritually broken, hopeless, scared and desperate. My life was dedicated to blotting out my miserable existence using copious amounts of booze and drugs. The substances stopped working. Every night was intoxicated tear soaked erratic fits of despair until I passed out. Only to wake up the next morning and begin the vicious cycle all over. Bending and writhing my way out of a five year heroin and alcohol addiction was just as scary. I was in jail. I had no idea how to live. I had no purpose in life. Then the dreams came back. Some of them were terrifying. Some dreams had inspiration. There is one dream I will never forget.

I am standing in a room full of people. They are all sitting looking up at me. I am holding a hand drum. My hands are shaking and I am extremely nervous. An old woman enters the room and walks up to me. The old woman is about half my height. She is barefoot and wearing a long green wool dress. She is holding a walking stick and is draped in animal furs. She has long flowing hair that falls over the animal furs. The old woman looks at all the people in the room. Then she looks at me and says, “It’s okay, they are waiting, sing.” My heart is racing. I strike the hand drum with all my courage. I feel the heartbeat of the drum. It’s my heartbeat. I begin to sing, honoring the four directions. After each verse I pause and the old woman pushes me forward “It’s okay,” she says, “Sing.” I am singing louder now. The third verse is powerful. I am striking the drum with all my strength. Many people singing with me. My spirit is strong. During the fourth verse sparks are flying from the contact between the beater stick and my drum. I am striking the drum with all our strength. We are all singing together. The room is shaking with spirit. The old woman looks over at me and smiles.

I woke up. My heart was racing. I took a deep breath of recirculated air. I could taste the institution. I looked over and saw my cellmate sleeping. I remembered where I was. I knew what I had to do. I had to get sober and stay sober. I had to find my spirit. I had to sing.
At six months of sobriety I was out in the real world. I was living on the Oregon Coast and I was attending local AA meetings. I was still lost but had the dream about singing with the drum in the back of my mind. One day an oldtimer walked into the meeting and sat down. He introduced himself, “My name is Gary, and I am an alcoholic from Colorado.” We all respond, “Welcome Gary.” Gary intrigued me. He was wearing old jeans, a sweatshirt and a faded old native pride hat with an eagle feather embroider on the front. Beneath the hat he wore round eyeglasses which sat on top of his large nose, below his nose was a bushy mustache. He resembled an Indian version of Groucho Marx. Something felt familiar about his spirit. After the meeting Gary walked up and introduced himself to me. I invited him to our native recovery circle we have on Wednesday nights.

Gary came to our circle that Wednesday. We made plans to hang out after the meeting. Gary is Oglala Lakota. He is a pipe carrier for the people. We decide to hold a pipe ceremony in order to establish connectedness and unite with one heart and mind. To pray and get to know each other. We went down to the beach and lit a fire. It was a clear, warm night. The stars were bright. The fire was crackling and the shadows of the flames were bouncing of the clear night sky. I took my shoes off and felt the cool soft sand beneath my feet and between my toes. The ocean was rumbling in the distance. Gary started digging around in his bag. The firelight bounced off his glasses giving a twinkle in his eye as he gave me a little smile. He pulled out a hand drum. My heart stopped. He began to sing a song. I knew that song. He was honoring the four directions. My eyes began to water and a wave of emotion flooded over me. I looked up to the stars with gratitude. I asked Gary if he would teach me and he shrugged.

I began to hang around Gary a lot. I would just listen. He let me practice with his drum. He would talk and I would listen. Sometimes he would sing and I would sing along. We continued to go to our native recovery circle. It was growing in
attendance. Gary would open the meeting by honoring the four directions with the song and we would smudge down. I would listen and sometimes sing along.

I had a year of sobriety when I got my first drum making supplies. I called Gary and he came over to help me make it. Gary showed me how to prep the hide. How to stretch the hide over the wooden hoop and how to lace it up in the back. I began to find purpose in the simple act of learning how to create stuff. I brought my drum to our native recovery circle. Around forty people attend our circle now. Many of them young and new still struggling with addiction. We lit the sage to open the meeting. The smoke began to rise into the sky. I inhaled the smoky scent deep and could feel the serenity and cleansing property of the sage medicine. I looked around at all the people. They were all looking at me and waiting. Then I looked at Gary. Gary smiled and said, “It’s okay, they are all waiting, sing.”

We now have another recovery circle here in Portland on Friday nights. Gary is gone. He had to move to Nashville, Tennessee. Many people come to our circle to find healing from drug and alcohol abuse. We light the sage and smudge down while I honor the four directions with the same song. I carry many of the traditional prayer songs today. Most of them given to me by Gary.

At one meeting a young man struggling with alcoholism approaches me and tells me he needs to sing and wants to learn the songs. The next week we open the meeting and light the sage. The young man is standing next to me holding his own drum. His own heartbeat. He looks at all the people. They are all looking at him. He looks at me. I smile and say, “It’s okay; they are waiting, sing.”

**Teacher Takeaways**

“I love this essay. It’s clear that the student is personally invested in the subject matter—that they’ve chosen something that is important to their identity and worldview—and they use repetition to highlight the experience of learning and growing. If this author planned to revise further, I would encourage them to experiment with sentence structure: the author uses what we call ‘simple sentences’ predominantly, which leads to a rhythmic but sometimes monotonous cadence. For instance, instead of ‘Gary is gone. He had to move to Nashville, Tennessee,’ the student could try ‘Because he had to move to Nashville, Tennessee, Gary is gone now.’ (Neither sentence is inherently better, but variety in sentence structure keeps the reader more engaged.)”

- Professor Dawson
Chapter Three
Reflecting on an Experience

One of my greatest pleasures as a writing instructor is learning about my students’ life journeys through their storytelling. Because it is impossible for us to truly know anything beyond our own lived experience, sharing our stories is the most powerful form of teaching. It allows us a chance to learn about others’ lives and worldviews.

Often, our rhetorical purpose in storytelling is to entertain. Storytelling is a way to pass time, to make connections, and to share experiences. Just as often, though, stories are didactic: one of the rhetorical purposes (either overtly or covertly) is to teach. Since human learning often relies on experience, and relating an experience constitutes storytelling, narrative can be an indirect teaching opportunity. Articulating lessons drawn from an experience, though, requires reflection.

Reflection is a rhetorical gesture that helps you and your audience construct meaning from the story you’ve told. It demonstrates why your story matters, to you and to the audience more generally: how did the experience change you? What did it teach you? What relevance does it hold for your audience? Writers often consider reflection as a means of “looking back in order to look forward.” This means that storytelling is not just a mode of preservation, nostalgia, or regret, but instead a mechanism for learning about ourselves and the world.
**Chapter Vocabulary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>reflection</td>
<td>a rhetorical gesture by which an author looks back, through the diegetic gap, to demonstrate knowledge or understanding gained from the subject on which they are reflecting. May also include consideration of the impact of that past subject on the author’s future—“Looking back in order to look forward.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diegetic gap</td>
<td>from “diegesis,” the temporal distance between a first-person narrator narrating and the same person acting in the plot events. I.e., the space between author-as-author and author-as-character.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Techniques

“Looking back in order to look forward,” or
“I wish that I knew what I know now when I was younger”

As you draft your narrative, keep in mind that your story or stories should allow you to draw some insight that has helped you or may help your reader in some way: reflection can help you relate a lesson, explore an important part of your identity, or process through a complicated set of memories. Your writing should equip both you and your audience with a perspective or knowledge that challenges, nuances, or shapes the way you and they interact with the world. This reflection need not be momentous or dramatic, but will deepen the impression of your narrative.

Reflection relies on what I call the diegetic gap. Diegesis is a term from the field of narratology referring to narration—the story as it is portrayed. In turn, this gap identifies that time has passed between the plot events and your act of writing. Simply put, the diegetic gap is the distance between you-the-author and you-the-character:

Because we are constantly becoming ourselves, shaped by our relationships and experiences, “you” are a different person at all three points. By looking back at your story, you can cultivate meaning in ways you could not during the events or immediately following them. Distance from an event changes the way we see previous events: time to process, combined with new experiences and knowledge, encourages us to interpret the past differently.

As you’ll see in the upcoming activities, looking back through this gap is a gesture akin to the phrase “When I look back now, I realize that…”
Wrap-up vs. Weave

Students often have a hard time integrating reflective writing throughout their narratives. In some cases, it is effective to use reflection to “wrap up” the story; it might not make sense to talk about a lesson learned before the story has played out. However, you should try to avoid the “tacked on” paragraph at the end of your story: if your reflective writing takes over at the end of the story, it should still feel like a part of the narrative rather than an afterthought. In other words, you should only reserve your reflective writing for the last paragraph or two if the story has naturally and fluidly brought us across the diegetic gap to present day.

Instead of a wrap-up, though, I often challenge my students to weave their reflection in with the story itself. You can see this at work in “Slowing Down” and “Parental Guidance” in some places. However, to see woven reflection applied even more deliberately, take a look at the model text “Blood & Chocolate Milk.” This author explicitly weaves narration and reflection; while your weave doesn’t need to be this obvious, consider how the author’s choices in this essay enhance both the narrative and your understanding of their family dynamic.

Spelling it Out vs. Implying Meaning

Finally, you should be deliberate about how overt you should make your reflection. If you are trying to connect with your reader, sharing your story so they might better know you, the world you live in, or even themselves, you need to walk the fine line between subtlety and over-explanation. You need to be clear enough that your reader can generalize and relate. Consider the essay “Comatose Dreams” in the previous section: it does exceptional work with implication, but some readers have trouble knowing what they should take away from the story to apply to their own lives.

It is also possible, though, to be too explicit. Take, for example, Charles Perrault’s 1697 publication of a classic folk story, “Little Red Riding Hood.” As with many fairy tales, this story is overtly didactic, stating the following moral after Little Red Riding Hood’s demise:

Moral: Children, especially attractive, well bred young ladies, should never talk to strangers, for if they should do so, they may well provide dinner for a wolf. I
say “wolf,” but there are various kinds of wolves. There are also those who are charming, quiet, polite, unassuming, complacent, and sweet, who pursue young women at home and in the streets. And unfortunately, it is these gentle wolves who are the most dangerous ones of all.34

I encourage you to discuss the misogynist leanings of this moral with your class. For our purposes here, though, let’s consider what Perrault’s “wrap-up” does, rhetorically. With a target audience of, presumably, children, Perrault assumes that the moral needs to be spelled out. This paragraph does the “heavy lifting” of interpreting the story as an allegory; it explains what the reader is supposed to take away from the fairy tale so they don’t have to figure it out on their own. On the other side of that coin, though, it limits interpretive possibilities. Perrault makes the intent of the story unambiguous, making it less likely that readers can synthesize their own meaning.
Activities

What My Childhood Tastes Like

To practice reflection, try this activity writing about something very important—food.

First, spend five minutes making a list of every food or drink you remember from childhood. Mine looks like this:

- Plain cheese quesadillas, made by my mom in the miniscule kitchenette of our one-bedroom apartment
- “Chicken”-flavored ramen noodles, at home alone after school
- Cayenne pepper cherry Jell-O at my grandparents’ house
- Wheat toast slathered in peanut butter before school
- Lime and orange freezy-pops
- My stepdad’s meatloaf—ironically, the only meatloaf I’ve ever liked
- Cookie Crisp cereal (“It’s cookies—for breakfast!”)
- Macintosh apples and creamy Skippy peanut butter
- Tostitos Hint of Lime chips and salsa
- Love Apple Stew that only my grandma can make right
- Caramel brownies, by my grandma who can’t bake anymore

Then, identify one of those foods that holds a special place in your memory. Spend another five minutes free-writing about the memories you have surrounding that food. What makes it so special? What relationships are represented by that food? What life circumstances? What does it represent about you? Here’s my model; I started out with my first list item, but then digressed—you too should feel free to let your reflective writing guide you.

My mom became a gourmet with only the most basic ingredients. We lived bare bones in a one-bedroom apartment in the outskirts of Denver; for whatever selfless reason, she gave four-year-old the bedroom and she took a futon in the living room. She would cook for me after caring for other mothers’ four-year-olds all day long; usually plain cheese quesadillas (never any sort of add-ons, meats, or veggies—besides my abundant use of store-brand ketchup) or scrambled eggs (again, with puddles of ketchup).

When I was 6, my dad eventually used ketchup as a rationale for my second stepmom: “Shane, look! Judy likes ketchup on her eggs too!” But it was my mom I remembered cooking for me every night—not Judy, and certainly not my father.

“I don’t like that anymore. I like barbecue sauce on my eggs.”
Reflection as a Rhetorical Gesture

Although reflection isn’t necessarily its own rhetorical mode, it certainly is a posture that you can apply to any mode of writing. I picture it as a pivot, perhaps off to the left somewhere, that opens up the diegetic gap and allows me to think through the impact of an experience. As mentioned earlier, this gesture can be represented by the phrase “When I look back now, I realize that…” To practice this pivot, try this exercise.

1) Over five minutes, write a description of the person who taught you to tie your shoes, ride a bike, or some other life skill. You may tell the story of learning this skill if you want, but it is not necessary. (See characterization for more on describing people.)
2) Write the phrase “When I look back now, I realize that.”
3) Complete the sentence and proceed with reflective writing for another five minutes. What does your reflection reveal about that person that the narrative doesn’t showcase? Why? How might you integrate this “wrap-up” into a “weave”? 
End-of-Episode Voice-Overs: Reflection in Television Shows

In addition to written rhetoric, reflection is also a tool used to provide closure in many television shows: writers use voiceovers in these shows in an attempt to neatly tie up separate narrative threads for the audience, or to provide reflective insight on what the audience just watched for added gravity or relevance for their lives. Often a show will use a voiceover toward the end of the episode to provide (or try to provide) a satisfying dénouement.

To unpack this trope, watch an episode of one of the following TV shows (available on Netflix or Hulu at the time of this writing) and write a paragraph in response to the questions below:

- Scrubs
- Grey’s Anatomy
- The Wonder Years
- How I Met Your Mother
- Ally McBeal
- Jane the Virgin
- Sex and the City

- What individual stories were told in the episode? How was each story related to the others?
- Is there a common lesson at all the characters learned?
- At what point(s) does the voiceover use the gesture of reflection? Does it seem genuine? Forced? Satisfying? Frustrating?

**Dr. Cox:** “Grey’s Anatomy always wraps up every episode with some cheesy voice-over that ties together all of the storylines, which, incidentally, is my least favorite device on television.” …

**Elliot:** “I happen to like the voice-overs on Grey’s Anatomy, except for when they’re really vague and generic.”

**Voice-over (J.D.):** And so, in the end, I knew what Elliot said about the way things were has forever changed the way we all thought about them. - Scrubs
I remember a time when I was still oblivious to it. My brother, sister, and I would pile out of the car and race through the parking lot to the store, or up the driveway to the house, never so much as a glance backward. I’m not sure exactly when it happened, but at some point I started to take notice, fall back, slow my pace, wait for him.

My dad wasn’t always that slow. He didn’t always have to concentrate so hard to just put one foot in front of the other. Memory has a way of playing tricks on you, but I swear that I can remember him being tall, capable, and strong once. When I was real little he could put me on his shoulders and march me around: I have pictures to prove it. I also have fuzzy memories of family camping trips—him taking us to places like Yosemite, Death Valley, and the California coast. What I remember clearly, though, was him driving to and from work every day in that old flatbed truck with the arc welder strapped to the back, going to fix boilers, whatever those were.

My dad owned his own business; I was always proud of that. I’d tell my friends that he was the boss. Of course, he was the sole employee, aside from my mom who did the books. I didn’t tell them that part. But he did eventually hire a guy named David. My mom said it was to “be his hands.” At the time I wasn’t sure what that meant but I knew that his hands certainly looked different than other people’s, all knotty. And he’d started to use that foam thing that he’d slip over his fork or toothbrush so he could grip it better. I supposed that maybe a new set of hands wasn’t a bad idea.

When I was about 8, he and my mom made a couple of trips to San Francisco to see a special doctor. They said that he’d need several surgeries before they were through, but that they’d start on his knees. I pictured my dad as a robot, all of his joints fused together with nuts and bolts. I wondered if I’d have to oil him, like the tin
man. It made me laugh to think about it: bionic dad. That wouldn’t be so bad; maybe I
could take him to show and tell. To be honest, I was sometimes a little embarrassed by
the way he looked when he came to pick me up at school or my friend’s house. He
wore braces in his boots to help him walk, he always moved so slow, and his hands
had all those knots that made them curl up like old grapevines. And then there was
that dirty old fanny pack he always carried with him because he couldn’t reach his
wallet if it was in his pocket. Yeah, bionic dad would be an improvement.

It was around this time that my parents decided to give up the business. That
was fine with me; it meant he’d be home all day. Also, his flatbed work truck quickly
became our new jungle gym and the stage for many new imaginary games. Maybe it
was him not being able to work anymore that finally made it click for me, but I think it
was around this time that I started to slow down a bit, wait for him.

He could still drive—he just needed help starting the ignition. But now, once
we’d get to where we were going, I’d try not to walk too fast. It had begun to occur to
me that maybe walking ahead of him was kind of disrespectful or insensitive. In a way,
I think that I just didn’t want him to know that my legs worked better than his. So, I’d
help him out of the car, offer to carry his fanny pack, and try to walk casually next to
him, as if I’d always kept that pace.

I got pretty good at doing other stuff for him, too; we all did. He couldn’t really
reach above shoulder height anymore, so aside from just procuring cereal boxes from
high shelves we’d take turns combing his hair, helping him shave, or changing his
shirt. I never minded helping out. I had spent so many years being my dad’s shadow
and copying him in every aspect that I possibly could; helping him out like this just
made me feel useful, like I was finally a worthy sidekick. I pictured Robin combing
Batman’s hair. That probably happened from time to time, right?

Once I got to high school, our relationship began to change a bit. I still helped
him out, but we had started to grow apart. I now held my own opinions about things,
and like most kids in the throes of rebellion, I felt the need to make this known at
I rejected his music, politics, TV shows, sports, you name it. Instead of being his shadow we became more like reflections in a mirror; we looked the same, but everything was opposite, and I wasted no opportunity to demonstrate this.

We argued constantly. Once in particular, while fighting about something to do with me not respecting his authority, he came at me with his arms crossed in front of him and shoved me. I was taller than him by this point, and his push felt akin to someone not paying attention and accidentally bumping into me while wandering the aisles at the supermarket. It was nothing. But it was also the first time he’d ever done anything like that, and I was incredulous—eager, even—at the invitation to assert myself physically. I shoved him back. He lost his footing and flailed backwards. If the refrigerator hadn’t been there to catch him he would have fallen. I still remember the wild look in his eyes as he stared at me in disbelief. I felt ashamed of myself, truly ashamed, maybe for the first time ever. I offered no apology, though, just retreated to my room.

In those years, with all the arguing, I just thought of my dad as having an angry heart. It seemed that he wasn’t just mad at me: he was mad at the world. But to his credit, as he continued to shrink, as his joints became more fused and his extremities more gnarled, he never complained, and never stopped trying to contribute. And no matter how much of an entitled teenaged brat I was, he never stopped being there when I needed him, so I tried my best to return the favor.

It wasn’t until I moved out of my parents’ house that I was able to really reflect on my dad’s lot in life. His body had started to betray him in his mid-20s and continued to work against him for the rest of his life. He was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, the worst case that his specialists had seen, and eventually had surgery on both knees, ankles, wrists, elbows, and shoulders. Not that they helped
much. He had an Easter-sized basket full of pills he had to take every day. When I was younger I had naively thought that those pills were supposed to help him get better. But now that I was older I finally realized that their only purpose was to mitigate pain. I decided that if I were him, I’d be pretty pissed off too.

I was 24 and living in Portland the morning that I got the call. I was wrong about his heart being angry. Turned out it was just weak. With all of those pills he took, I should have known that it was only a matter of time before it would give out; I’m pretty sure he did.

When I think back on it, my dad had a lot of reasons to be angry. Aside from himself being shortchanged, he had us to consider. I know it weighed on him that he couldn’t do normal “dad” stuff with us. And then there was my mom. Their story had started out so wild and perfect, a couple of beautiful longhaired kids that met and fell in love while hitchhiking in Canada. She had moved across the country to marry him. The unfairness that life didn’t go as they’d planned, that she’d be a young widow—these are things I know he thought about. But he never mentioned them. He never complained. He never talked about the pain he was in, even though I know now it was constant. I guess at some point he became like the fish that doesn’t know it’s in water. That, or he just made his peace with it somehow.

It took me a long time to find my own peace in his situation. Our situation. I was angry for myself and my family, but mostly I was angry for him. I was pissed that he had to spend the last twenty something years of his life in that prison he called a body. Eventually though, that anger gave way to other feelings. Gratitude, mostly. I don’t think that my dad could have lived a hundred healthy years and taught me the same lessons that I learned from watching him suffer. He taught me about personal sacrifice, the brevity of life, how it can be both a blessing and a curse. All kids are egocentric (I know I definitely was), but he was the first one to make me think outside
of myself, without having to ask me to do it. He taught me what compassion and patience looked like. He taught me to slow down.

**Teacher Takeaways**

“This essay is commendable for its deft narration – replete with a balanced use of specific descriptions and general exposition. However, the mixture of simple past tense with simple future tense (used here to indicate the future in the past) situates both the reader and the narrator primarily in the past. This means that we really don’t get to the simple present tense (i.e. across the diegetic gap) until the final two paragraphs of the essay. That said, the narrator’s past reflections are integrated often throughout the essay, making it more an example of ‘weaving’ than of ‘wrap-up.’”

– Professor Fiscaletti

**Untitled**

The sky was white, a blank canvas, when I became the middle school’s biggest and most feared bully. The sky was white and my hands were stained red with blood—specifically a boy named Garrett’s blood. I was 12 years old, smaller than average with clothes-hanger collar bones but on that day I was the heavyweight champion. It wasn’t as if I’d just snapped out of the blue; it wasn’t as if he were innocent. He had just been the only one within arms-length at the time when my heart beat so loudly in my ears, a rhythm I matched with my fists. I was dragged off of him minutes later by stunned teachers (who had never seen me out of line before) and escorted to the Principal’s Office. They murmured over my head as if I couldn’t hear them. “What do you think that was about?” “Who started it?” I was tightlipped and frightened, shaking and wringing my hands, rusting with someone else’s blood on them. Who started it? That particular brawl could have arguably been started by me: I jumped at him, I threw the only punches. But words are what started the fight. Words were at the root of my anger.

I was the kid who was considered stupid: math, a foreign language my tongue refused to speak. I was pulled up to the front of the classroom by my teachers who thought struggling my way through word problems on the whiteboard would help me
grasp the concepts, but all I could ever do was stand there humiliated, red-faced with clenched fists until I was walked through the equation, step by step. I was the one who tripped over my words when I had to read aloud in English, the sentences rearranging themselves on the page until tears blurred my vision. I never spoke in class because I was nervous—“socially anxious” is what the doctors called it. Severe social anxiety with panic disorder. I sat in the back and read. I sat at lunch and read because books were easier to talk to than people my own age. Kids tease; it’s a fact of life. But sometimes kids are downright cruel. They are relentless. When they find an insecurity, they will poke and prod it, an emotional bruise. A scar on my heart. Names like “idiot” and “loser” and “moron” are phrases chanted like a prayer at me in the halls, on the field, in the lunchroom. They are casual bombs tossed at me on the bus and they detonate around my feet, kicking up gravel and stinging my eyes. What is the saying? Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me? Whoever came up with that has quite obviously never been a 12-year-old girl.

The principal stared at me as I walked in, his eyes as still as water. He told me my parents had to be called, I had to be suspended the rest of the week, this is a no-tolerance school. Many facts were rattled off. I began to do what I do best—tune him out—when he said something that glowed. It caught my attention, held my focus. “Would you like to tell me your side of the story?” I must have looked shocked because he half-smiled when he said, “I know there are always two sides. I know you wouldn’t just start a fist fight out of nowhere. Did he do something to you?” An avalanche in my throat, the words came crashing out. I explained the bullying, how torturous it was for me to wake up every morning and know I would have to face the jeers and mean comments all day. I told him about how when I put on my uniform every morning, it felt like I was gearing up for a battle I didn’t sign up for and knew I
wouldn’t win. The shame and embarrassment I wore around me like a shawl slipped off. He listened thoughtfully, occasionally pressing his fingers together and bringing them to his pursed lips, his still eyes beginning to ripple, a silent storm. When I was done he apologized. How strange and satisfying to be apologized to by a grown-up. I was validated with that simple “I’m sorry.” I almost collapsed on the floor in gratitude. My parents entered the room, worry and anger etched on their faces, folded up in the wrinkles that were just then starting to line their skin. My parents listened as I retold my story, admitted what I had been bottling up for months. I was relieved, I felt the cliché weight lifted off of my too-narrow shoulders. My principal assured my parents that this was also a no-tolerance stance on bullying and he was gravely sorry the staff hadn’t known about the abuse earlier. I was still suspended for three days, but he said to make sure I didn’t miss Monday’s assembly. He thought it would be important for me.

The Monday I returned, there was an assembly all day. I didn’t know what it was for, but I knew everyone had to be there on time so I hurried to find a seat. People avoided eye-contact with me. As I pushed past them, I could feel the whispers like taps on my shoulder. I sat down and the assembly began. It was a teenage girl and she was talking about differences, about how bullying can affect people more than you could ever know. I was leaning forward in my seat trying to hang onto every word because she was describing how I had felt every day for months. She spoke about how her own anxiety and learning disability isolated her. She was made fun of and bullied and she became depressed. It was important to her for us to hear her story because she wanted people like her, like me, to know they weren’t alone and that words can do the most damage of all. R.A.D. Respect all differences, a movement that was being implemented in the school to accept and celebrate everybody. At the end of her
speech, she asked everyone who had ever felt bullied or mistreated by their peers to stand up. Almost half of the school stood, and I felt like a part of my school for the first time. She then invited anyone who wanted to speak to come up and take the mic. To my surprise, there were multiple volunteers. A line formed and I found myself in it.

I heard kids I’d never talked to before speak about their ADHD, their dyslexia, how racist comments can hurt. I had no idea so many of my classmates had been verbal punching bags; I had felt utterly alone. When it was my turn I explained what it means to be socially anxious. How in classrooms and crowds in general I felt like I was being suffocated: it was hard to focus because I often forgot to breathe. How every sentence I ever spoke was rehearsed at least 15 times before I said it aloud: it was exhausting. I was physically and emotionally drained after interactions, like I had run a marathon. I didn’t like people to stare at me because I assumed everyone disliked me, and the bullying just solidified that feeling of worthlessness. It was exhilarating and terrifying to have everyone’s eyes on me, everyone listening to what it was like to be inside my head. I stepped back from the microphone and expected boos, or maybe silence. But instead everyone clapped, a couple teachers even stood up. I was shocked but elated. Finally I was able to express what I went through on a day-to-day basis.

The girl who spoke came up to me after and thanked me for being brave. I had never felt brave in my life until that moment. And yes, there was the honeymoon period. Everyone in the school was nice to each other for about two weeks before everything returned to normal. But for me it was a new normal: no one threw things at me in the halls, no one called me names, my teachers were respectful of my anxiety by not singling me out in class. School should be a sanctuary, a safe space where students feel free to be exactly who they are, free of ridicule or judgment. School had
never been that for me, school had been a warzone littered with minefields. I dreaded facing my school days, but then I began to look forward to them. I didn’t have to worry about being made fun of anymore. From that moment on, it was just school. Not a place to be feared, but a place to learn.

Teacher Takeaways

“This author obviously has a knack for descriptive metaphor and simile, and for the sonic drive of repetition, all of which contribute to the emotional appeal of the narrative. The more vivid the imagery, the more accessible the event. However, the detailed narrative is only briefly interrupted by the author’s current ideas or interpretations; she might consider changing the structure of the essay from linear recollection to a mix of narrative and commentary from herself, in the present. Still, the essay does serve as an example of implicit reflection; the author doesn’t do much of the ‘heavy lifting’ for us.”

– Professor Fiscaletti

Parental Guidance

“Derek, it’s Dad!” I already knew who it was because the call was made collect from the county jail. His voice sounded clean: he didn’t sound like he was fucked up. I heard from his ex-girlfriend about a year earlier that he was going to jail for breaking into her apartment and hiding under her bed with a knife then popping out and threatening her life; probably other stuff too. I wasn’t all that surprised to hear from him. I was expecting a call eventually. I was happy to hear from him. I missed him. He needed a place to stay for a couple weeks. I wanted to be a good son. I wanted him to be proud of me. My room-mates said it was alright. I gave him the address to our apartment and told him to come over. I was 19.

I am told when I was a toddler I wouldn’t let my dad take the garbage outside without me hitching a ride on his boot. I would straddle his foot like a horse and hang onto his leg; even in the pouring rain. He was strong, funny and a good surfer. One time at the skatepark when I was 6 or 7 he made these guys leave for smoking pot in front of me and my little sister. He told them to get that shit out of here and they listened. He was protecting us. I wanted to be just like him.
When my dad got to the apartment he was still wearing his yellow jail slippers. They were rubber with a single strap. No socks, a t-shirt and jeans was all he had on. It was January: cold and rainy. He was clean and sober from what I could tell by his voice and eyes. He was there. I hugged him. I was hopeful that maybe he was back for good. I found my dad a pair of warm socks and a hoodie. We were drinking beer and one of my friends offered him one. He must have wanted one but he knows where that leads and he said no thanks. We all got stoned instead.

One time when I was in 7th grade my dad was driving me and my siblings home from school. He saw someone walking down the street wearing a nice snowboarding jacket. It looked just like my dad’s snowboarding jacket which he claimed was stolen from the van while he was at work. He pulled the van over next to this guy and got out. He began threatening him. He was cursing and yelling and throwing his hands up and around. I was scared.

He said he only needed a couple weeks to get back on his feet. I was happy to have him there. As long as he wasn’t drinking or using drugs he had a chance. He said he was done with all that other shit. He just needs to smoke some pot to relax at night and he will be fine. Sounded reasonable to me. It had been about a year since I dropped out of high school and moved out of my mom’s. I worked full time making pizza and smoked pot and drank beer with my friends and roommates. Occasionally there was some coke or ecstasy around but mostly just beer, pot and video games.

One day in 4th grade when we were living in Coos Bay the whole family went to the beach to surf and hang out. My mom and dad were together and it seemed like they loved each other. My littlest sister was a toddler and ran around on the beach in the sun with my mom and our Rottweiler Lani. My older brother and other sister were in the ocean with me and my dad. We all took turns being pushed into waves on our surfboards by dad. We all caught waves and had a great day. My mom cheered us on from the shore. He was a good dad.
Two weeks passed quickly and my dad was still staying at our apartment. One day while I was at work my dad blew some coke with my roommate. I could tell something was off when I got home. I was worried. He said he was leaving for a couple days to go stay with his friend who is a pastor. He needed some spiritual guidance or something like that. He sounded fucked up.

Growing up we did a lot of board sports. My dad owned a surf shop in Lincoln City for a while and worked as a sales representative for various gear companies. We had surfboards, snowboards, windsurfers, sails, wakeboards, wetsuits: several thousand dollars’ worth of gear. One day my dad told us someone broke into our garage and stole all the gear. The window in the garage was broken except it appeared to be broken from the inside. He didn’t file a police report. My middle school surf club coach tried to get my surfboard from the pawnshop but it was too expensive and the pawn shop owner wouldn’t give it back. I felt betrayed.

I came home from work and found my dad in my room passed out. I stumbled over an empty beer can on the way in and there were cheap whiskey bottles scattered about. It smelled horrible. He woke up and was ashamed. He looked up at me from my bed with a thousand pounds pulling down on his puffy eyelids and asked me for a cigarette. He was strung out. Half of our spoons went missing. It smelled like booze, heroin and filth. I was ashamed.

One day in 9th grade I came home from school to find my brother lifting blood stains out of the carpet with hydrogen peroxide. He said some guys came over and beat dad up. He owed them money or stole from them or something. I wanted to call my mom. I was scared.

I told my dad he had to leave. He pleaded to stay for another thirty minutes. I would be at work by then. While I was at work my friends escorted him out. He said he was going to his friend the pastor’s house. I didn’t hear from him for a couple years after that.
We learn a lot from our parents. Sometimes the best lessons are those on what not to do.

My two-year-old daughter calls me Papa, Daddy, Dad or Derek. Whatever she calls me it has a positive meaning. When we are driving she says from her car-seat, “Daddy’s hand”, “I want daddy’s hand please” and I reach back and put it on her lap.

One day my daughter woke me up and said, “Oh hi Daddy! I wanna go forest. I wanna go hike!” She was smiling. We practiced the alphabet before breakfast then went for a walk in the woods: mama, papa and baby. I’m a good dad.

**Teacher Takeaways**

“One of the most notable features of this essay is the timeline: by jumping back and forth in chronology between parallel but distinct experiences, the author opens up the diegetic gap and demonstrates a profound impact through simple narration. I also like this author’s use of repetition and parallel structure. However, the author’s description could take a cue from ‘Comatose Dreams’ to develop more complex, surprising descriptors. While the essay makes use of sensory language, I want more dramatic or unanticipated imagery.”

- Professor Dawson
Assignment: Descriptive Personal Narrative

To synthesize what you’ve learned about description, narration, and reflection, you will write a personal narrative. This is generally a nonfiction, prose essay (similar to a memoir), but your instructor might provide additional guidelines in regard to genre, media, approach, or assessment standards.

Assignment

Your task is to identify an influential place, event, or person from your life experience about which you can tell a story. Then, you will write a narrative essay that relates that story and considers the impact it had on you, your worldview, and/or your life path. Using model texts in this book as exemplars, you will tell a story (narrate) using vivid description and draw out meaning and insight using reflection.

As you’ll evaluate below, descriptive personal narratives have a variety of purposes. One important one is to share a story that stands in for a bigger idea. Do not be worried if you don’t know the “bigger idea” yet, but be advised that your final draft will narrate a focused, specific moment that represents something about who you are, how you got here, what you believe, or what you strive to be.

Be sure to apply the concepts you learn in class to your writing.
Before you begin, consider your rhetorical situation:

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Assignment: Descriptive Personal Narrative

Each student will write an essay which narrates an event or series of events influential to their life path. The essay will incorporate ideas and techniques explored in Section 1, including the use of description and the rhetorical gesture of reflection. The essay will demonstrate thoughtful pre-writing, drafting, and revision based on feedback from the instructor, classmates, and/or the Writing Center.

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Guidelines for Peer Workshop

Before beginning the Peer Workshop and revision process, I recommend consulting the Revision Concepts and Strategies Appendix. In your Peer Workshop group (or based on your teacher’s directions), establish a process for workshopping that will work for you. You may find the flowchart titled “Establishing Your Peer Workshop” useful.

One Example of a Peer Workshop Process

Before the workshop, each author should spend several minutes generating requests for support (#1 below). Identify specific elements you need help on. Here are a few examples:

- I need suggestions for new imagery.
- Do you think my reflective writing seems too “tacked on.”
- Do you have any ideas for a title?
- I need help proofreading and polishing.
**During** the workshop, follow this sequence:

1) Student A introduces their draft, distributes copies, and makes requests for feedback.
   
   *What do you want help with, specifically?*

2) Student A reads their draft aloud while students B and C annotate/take notes.
   
   *What do you notice as the draft is read aloud?*

3) Whole group discusses the draft; student A takes notes. Use these prompts as a reference to generate and frame your feedback. Try to identify specific places in your classmates’ essays where the writer is successful and where the writer needs support. Consider **constructive, specific, and actionable** feedback.
   
   *What is the author doing well? What could they do better?*
   
   - What requests does the author have for support? What feedback do you have on this issue, specifically?
   
   - Identify one “golden line” from the essay under consideration—a phrase, sentence, or paragraph that resonates with you. What about this line is so striking?
   
   - Consult either the rubric included above or an alternate rubric, if your instructor has provided one. Is the author on track to meet the expectations of the assignment? What does the author do well in each of the categories? What could they do better?
     
     - Ideas, Content, and Focus
     - Structure
     - Style and Language
     - Depth, Support, and Reflection
     - Mechanics
   
   - What resonances do you see between this draft and others from your group? Between this draft and the exemplars you’ve read?

4) Repeat with students B and C.

**After** the workshop, try implementing some of the feedback your group provided while they’re still nearby! For example, if Student B said your introduction needed more imagery, draft some new language and see if Student B likes the direction you’re moving in. As you are comfortable, exchange contact information with your group so you can to continue the discussion outside of class.
Model Texts by Student Authors

The Pot Calling the Kettle Black...

“You aren’t acting normal,” my dad said with a dopy, concerned look on his face. He was a hard-working, soft and loving man. He was smaller than my mother, physically and figuratively. She sat beside him. She had a towering stature, with strong, swimmers’ shoulders, but she was hunched often. She didn’t really have eyebrows, but she didn’t need them. She had no problem conveying emotion on her face, especially negative ones.

“What’s wrong?” my mother asked. She took my hand frantically. Not the way one might take someone’s hand to connect with or comfort them. She needed reassurance more than I did.

My parents were sitting across from me on cushioned, bland-colored chairs in my dad’s office, while I sat on a rickety, torturous wooden chair. My dad’s office generally utilized natural light due to the expansive glass windows that allowed the light to drown the room, enclosing us in the chamber. I felt like an inmate being prepped for lethal injection. The weather was particularly gray and dismal. Perhaps it was the ambiguous, gray, confusing feelings I was breathing through. My parents had somewhat regular “interventions” to address my somewhat regular (sometimes public) emotional breakdowns, my self-medicating habits, and my general shitty attitude.

This week in particular, I had purposely destroyed two of my mother’s collectible horses. She had a maniacal obsession for them. She also maniacally collected sunflower artwork, which was the one obsession, of many, I found endearing. My old babysitter noted at one point there were 74 collectible horses in the house. After my outburst, there were 72.

I could see behind my parents, through the glass-paned door, my two younger sisters were secretly observing the altercation from the dining room, hiding under the
table. They were illuminated by the ominous weather, which was also watching in on the dismal conversation through the windows. I was envious, jealous even, of my spectating sisters. My sisters didn’t have overflowing, excessive emotions. They didn’t have emotions that were considered “excessive.” I felt like an offender being put at the stocks: my parents were the executioners, and my sisters were the jesters.

“I’m angry.”

“What about?” my dad asked, puzzled. “Did someone do something to you?”

“Honey, were you—” my mother looked to my dad, then concealed her mouth slightly with the other hand, “raped?”

I couldn’t help but raise my voice. “No, Mom, I wasn’t raped, Jesus.” I took a moment to grind on my teeth and imagine the bit I was chomping at. Calm, careful, composed, I responded. “I’m just angry. I don’t feel—”

“What don’t you feel?” She practically jumped on me, while yanking my imprisoned hand toward her. She yanked at my reins.

“I don’t feel understood!” My mind was bucking. I didn’t know why I needed to react by raising my voice. It felt instinctive, defensive. Shouting forcefully, I jerked my hand away from her, but it remained in her clutches. I didn’t feel satisfied saying it, though what I said was the truth.

“What are you talking about?” my dad asked mournfully. I knew he felt betrayed. But he didn’t understand. He didn’t know what it’s like for things to be too much. Or to be too much. My dad looked at me longingly, hoping I would correct what I had said. He looked lost, incapable of understanding why I was doing what I was doing. My mother interjected, cutting off my dad’s hypnotic, silent cry for connection.

“You’re crazy!” she said, maintaining eye contact. My mother then let go of my
hand, flipped it back to me. She reclined in her chair, retracting from me and the discussion entirely. She crossed her legs, then her arms. She turned her head away, toward the glass windows, and (mentally) left.

***

I was and am not “too much.”

I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at 18 years old.

***

I had just stepped off a squealing MAX line onto a broken sidewalk slab, gnarled from tree roots, when I felt my phone buzz rhythmically.

“I need you to come to the hospital. Mom had a little accident.” My dad’s voice was distant and cracking, like a wavering radio signal, calling for help.

“What’s going on? Is she okay?” I asked while making my way to campus.

“Where are you?” He wasn’t going to tell me anything over the phone.

Adrenaline set in. I let him know I was downtown and headed to campus, but that I would catch a Lyft to wherever they were. “We’re at Milwaukie Providence. How soon can you get here?”

“I’ll let you know soon.” My assumption was that my parents had been in an argument, my mother left the house in a rage, and crashed her car. She’d been an erratic driver for as long as I could remember, and my parents had been arguing more than usual recently, as many new “empty-nesters” do. The lack of information provided by my dad, however, was unsettling. I don’t really recall the ride to the hospital. I do remember looking over the river while riding from the west to east side of town. I remember the menacing, dark clouds rolling in faster than the driver could transport me. I remember it was quick, but it was too much time spent without
When I arrived at Providence, I jumped out of the sedan and galloped into the lobby of the emergency room like a race horse on its final lap. My younger sister and Dad were seated on cushioned, bland-colored chairs in the waiting room. There were expansive glass windows that allowed the light to drown the room. The weather was particularly gray and dismal. Perhaps it was the ambiguous, gray, confusing feelings I was breathing through. I sat down beside my dad, in a firmer-than-anticipated waiting room chair beside him. He took my hand frantically. He took it in the way one might take someone’s hand to connect with or comfort them. He needed reassurance more than I did.

“Where did she get in the accident?” I asked.

My sister, sitting across from me with her head in her knees, looked up at me with aquamarine, tear-filled eyes. She was staring through me, an unclouded window. “Mom tried to kill herself.”

“What?” My voice crescendoed from a normal volume to a shriek in the span of a single word. My mind felt like it was bucking. I grabbed at my hair, pulling it back tight with my spare hand. The tears and cries reared, no matter how hard I yanked my mane.

“We got in another argument this morning, and she sent me a message saying she didn’t want to be in pain anymore. She told me to tell you girls she’s sorry. I’m so sorry.” I’d never seen my dad cry before; I didn’t know he could. I didn’t know his tears would stream like gushing water from a broken dam. He looked lost, incapable of understanding why she was doing what she was doing. I looked from my dad to my sister to my hands. One hand remained enveloped by my dad’s gentle palm. At this point in life, I had not yet learned to be gentle with myself, or others. I cut off my
dad’s hypnotic, silent cry for connection.

“She’s crazy!” I let go of my dad’s hand, flipped it back to him. I reclined in the chair, retracting from the situation entirely. I crossed my legs, then my arms. I turned my head away, toward the glass windows, and (mentally) left.

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“Crazy” is a term devised to dismiss people.
My mother was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at 50 years old.

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**Teacher Takeaways**

“This essay makes excellent use of repetition as a narrative strategy. Throughout the essay, terms and phrases are repeated, generally with slight alterations, drawing the reader’s attention to the moment in question and recontextualizing the information being conveyed. This strategy is especially powerful when used to disclose the separate diagnoses of bipolar disorder, which is central to the narrative. I also appreciate the use of dialogue, though it mostly serves an expository function here. In itself that’s effective, but this narrative would be strengthened if that dialogue could serve to make some of the characters, especially the mother, more rounded.”

- Professor Dunham

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All Quiet

“We can have you kicked out, you know.” Miss Nick (as everyone addressed her) began digging her fists into her hips. She towered over me at six-foot-something, gravity pulling her wire-framed glasses to the end of her nose.

I recounted the empty threats my mom would make.

“Ay nako nanlan! Putang ina! I’ll pull you out of that school! You want to go to Taft? Reseda?” Local public schools.

“Do it, you’ll save a ton of money,” I’d say.

“The only thing Catholic school is good for is producing my favorite unstable artists and writers,” I’d joke with my friends. They had been in the Catholic school system far longer than I had – fourteen years. I was jaded, though it was only my fourth year.
All-girls’ school was supposed to turn me around. But did my mother really expect the Northeastern elitism she hammered into me to fare well in Los Angeles? Especially surrounded by the daughters of television, radio and film legacies who lived in their hilly pseudo-ranches populated with their troupes of horses dancing around in golden Agouran fields? *Homogenized whole milk.*

Lodged right against the Santa Monica mountains was Louisville High School. The school was founded by the French sisters of Saint Louis, a French order founded by Abbé Louis Eugene Marie Bautain—whoever the hell that was. At the top of the rolling hills that were about as blonde as those who lived in them, was a small room that erupted with incense and the chatter of young women. These quarters belonged to this supposed gentle giant who chanted Mary Oliver poems *ad nauseam.* By her side was a new hire: an aspiring Christian songstress, also the daughter of an actor who had been typecast as a hundred high school bullies in the eighties. They, collectively, made up the “campus ministry.”

“Why didn’t you come to us first?” Miss Nick continued. “Why did you have to go straight online?” She had me there. I suppose it just ate at me. Maybe some sense of urgency. Maybe I was just playing their own game.

“Are you gonna cry?” The songstress almost demanded it. Her piercing blue gaze could only be summed up with lunacy. This was the first time I’d actually had any conversation with the religion department outside of class.

“No.”

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles demands Catholic schools regularly hold these retreats in some picturesque Californian mountain range or seaside. A select number of student lectors were elected to tell their stories drawn from their own struggles. It was supposed to be a time of reflection about your faith or something, but it never felt wholly about that. It was a period where you got to know your teachers and your
peers, and empathize with each other. For a lot of the closeted non-religious and agnostics, this was the only time they could identify with their school and community.

Once, during lunch at a retreat, I hailed down one of the most respected instructors of our school. As a seven-foot bleeding wood crucifix looked on, we sipped the punch prepared by the sisters.

“Hey Mr. Clark, what was the name of that cult leader in sixties?” I asked. Amber punched me. We all giggled.

“You mean Jonestown?” He paused. His voice grew stern. “Now ladies—behave.”

Mr. Clark taught history and social sciences. He was the oldest member of the faculty and the most outspoken atheist of all. I’d spend hours in his room for detention, and we would have elusive conversations about Freud, Hunter S. Thompson, and his time in Boulder. The only way to enter campus ministry was through Mr. Clark’s room.

A week prior Olivia had applied to be a student leader for a retreat. Olivia kept to herself for the most part, and though we differed a lot, I always found something to discuss with her. Her last name came right before mine, so we often worked together on a number of assignments and projects. Mostly, we’d just critique our religion classes which emphasized chastity and accused select girls of being hussies. Olivia was a model student with perfect attendance. She was an artist, a writer, and more importantly, my friend.

Olivia’s application was readily denied in favor for the wealthy Catholic sweethearts and a select few who never disclosed certain information.

“I’d put on there that I was an atheist,” she shrugged. I knew for a fact the retreat leadership was ridden with heathens. There, on the sunny knoll, I flipped through the handbook and showed her a clause that prohibited the act of denying anyone for their race, religion or creed. And I knew save for everything, Olivia was overwhelmingly more qualified than anyone to lead a retreat. She was articulate, an
active contributor to all things art and writing, and had come from years of struggle. She’d been living with Type I Diabetes her entire life, and her parents had just divorced. Her brother frequently got in trouble with the law, and she had managed to maintain perfect grades and demeanor for the past year. She actively contributed her art and writing in various forms, and was loved and championed by many teachers. If there’s anyone who deserves this position, it’s her, I thought.

I went home late after serving another detention. I opened my computer, lazed around, wondered for a moment. It’s our last year of high school. Fuck it.

I typed in the search bar, “Petitions.”

I spent a couple hours, which could have easily been spent completing all my assignments, formatting and outlining my 95 theses. I typed and typed with the fury and angst that coincided with the suffix of my age. I clicked submit and shared the URL for my peers to see—namely, my closest friend at the school, Amber, another artist who had recently painted a depiction of a dark-skinned Jesus. Amber naturally became fired up.

The next day, parades of teachers, parents, and students voiced their opinion to me.

“What you’re doing is wonderful,” uttered my art teacher. “I hope she gets the position.” So far, the whole idea was met with so much positivity. Olivia would get her voice.

“Can I speak to you for a moment?” The math and earth science teacher stopped me in my tracks between classes. She, an advocate for the environment and reason, would surely shower the petition with nothing but affirmations.

“I’d put an end to this before it escalates. This is a Catholic school. This is a private school.” I was blindsided. It was not until then I realized what I was doing could be considered wrong.

Endlessly, I cited the handbook. It was their constitution—their code of conduct. Often, I just nodded in confusion. I did not know what to reply. More and
more teachers looked at me with disdain and discouraged me from continuing forth. No one would listen to the citation. Why couldn’t anyone just admit that this clause was being broken? Opponents would only say that the campus ministry could conduct business as they wanted. It was their school.

Amber, vehement and by my side, became my spokesperson. She was the recipient of the arts scholarship. That, coupled with the death of her father years ago, granted her the honor of being selected as a senior lector. Students could not apply for this position—rather, they had to be nominated by a member of faculty. The thing was, Amber was a fervent atheist—more so than Olivia.

“She’s a cunt,” Amber protested, “she’s a fucking cunt.” I envied her absoluteness. It came so naturally to her. But I couldn’t say the same.

From across the knolly pasture I saw my religion teacher, someone I found solace in. He had gone through seminary. He lapsed, and married a former student of our school. He found himself in some sweat lodge deep in New Mexico, where his Catholic faith had been lingering all along. Here, an adult teacher, admitted his agnosticism and his doubt. I admired it so. He had a liberal nature similar to my own: he talked of rogue Catholic sisters who were pro-choice and advocated for birth control.

“I understand your intention,” he told me, “but I don’t think you’re seeing it in the right light. It’s a perceived injustice. I’m not sure it really is one.” My heart dropped.

I finally piped up after an hour-and-a-half into the harangue.

“So, you would have let her speak if she lied about her beliefs? That’s all she had to do?” I could feel my voice rupturing.

“Yes.” Miss Nick replied. I silently stood up.

“Thank you.” I left.

I took down the petition at the instruction of the principal.
“It was very brave what you did,” she smirked, “but we can’t have that on our record, you know how it is.” She gave me a wink. I did not know what to make of that.

Amber was also subject to their lectures. She was told she had to forfeit her position as a student leader for being a “convicted atheist”—more specifically, that she had no business leading because of her system of beliefs. She argued that she was nominated by faculty, and that Mr. Clark was also an atheist embraced by the staff. To no avail.

Olivia thanked me. She said it was the best thing anyone had ever done for her. As an act of compromise, the campus ministry let her say a prayer over the intercom system. People were moved. Silence reigned. Our art teacher, Mrs. Dupuy, cried.

In a city of millions and a country of hundreds of millions, one girl in a small Catholic high school was viewed as threatening to the point of disrupting the entire framework. How could something so miniscule pose such a threat to our adult overseers? I never attacked their religion, but they were so adamant in attacking anyone’s lack thereof. They preach “universality,” but where? They lost all credibility with me.

After that, I became passive, stopped participating, and kept to myself. I often found myself cheek first against my desk in religion classes while Miss Nick ignited a pro-life/pro-choice debate that swept across the room. The songstress rallied for nigh fundamentalist practices that I’d never seen within a Catholic church. In the yearbook’s senior superlatives, there’s a picture of me under “Class Rebel,” but it didn’t mean anything. An embarrassment. No one seemed sincere after that. Self-interest ruled everyone around me: the lenses I had on determined that everyone was doing and saying anything to further their personal convictions, regardless of how uninformed they were, or anyone who defied them.
Including myself. Especially myself.

So, I shut up. *Everyone is self-serving,* I’d remind myself. I became cynical of everyone’s intentions. I longed for authentic empathy. *No,* *unachievable.* I muted myself behind layers upon layers of verbal irony. No one could attack me if I followed my lines with nervous laugh, and *I don’t know! Just kidding!* I prescribed myself large doses of Charlie Kaufman films, acid, and absurdist texts. At least Beckett and Camus see the gray.

“Now ladies,” Mr. Clark said. “I know you don’t agree with her, but she’s had a rough life. Please try to understand where she came from.”

I don’t think anyone there would have done the same.

**Blood & Chocolate Milk**

The stick of gauze, the tinny primal taste of blood and the sweet creaminess of chocolate milk is what I remember. It was a spring day of my junior year in high school. It was the day I lost my wisdom teeth.

The night before my surgery Dad showed up and cooked us dinner. He made spaghetti, those meatballs he makes with the drop of plum sauce on the top, and a salad of spring greens topped with bright balsamic dressing and twirls of carrot. Then

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**Teacher Takeaways**

“This author’s use of dialogue is especially striking to me. Because the individual characters (and the way they speak) are each so vivid, I am more invested in the way the narrative plays out. I also appreciate this author’s reflection; it’s a good reminder that reflective writing doesn’t have to sound like a self-help book or motivational speaker. On a global level, I would love to see this author apply their skill with dialogue to tell this story from multiple perspectives. What if Olivia was a first-person narrator in one section? What if we saw Miss Nick in her office alone after the confrontation?”

— Professor Dawson
Mom, Dad and I watched a movie and Dad tucked me in for the first time in a long time. He slept on the couch.

***

It was strange that we were all together. My parents divorced before I could talk. I don’t think about them as a pair. Other than birthdays and drop-offs they were never in the same place. They were always separate entities that I saw half a week at a time.

***

The next morning we woke bright and early. The dental assistant had told me to wear something comfortable but my cashmere cardigan and slippers did little to calm my nerves.

In the car on the way to the dental surgeon’s office we made groggy early-morning small talk. Mom was at the helm of our beat-up, dark blue minivan, La Fiesta. Dad sat in the passenger seat and I was behind them on the first bench seat wringing my hands.

The waiting room was sterile and white, it smelled of disinfectant and mint. Copies of various parenting magazines, Life and People scattered the low generic coffee table. More catching up. We asked dad how things were going with his new girlfriend, he was happy and we were happy for him. I fidgeted in the uncomfortable pastel green chair.

In the surgical consult they had said that the roots of my wisdom teeth were too close to the nerves in my lower jaw, it was possible that I could lose feeling in my lower lip. I was terrified of that possibility. I watched the hands on the clock tick away. I wanted to get it over with already.

A serious woman in scrubs finally appeared to lead me to the surgical room. I hugged dad and he stayed behind in the waiting room, Mom came with me. There were machines beeping and blinking. I handed Mom my sweater and shoes and she
gave me a tight squeeze.

***

Mom and I are a good team. It’s always been us against the world. Dad has moved away twice but Mom has always been right here.

My parents were young hippies when I was born. They didn’t have life figured out yet and their relationship disintegrated but their love for me never faded. Mom always says “You were a surprise but never a mistake. If I could go back in time I wouldn’t change a thing because I got you and you just kind of came along for the ride. Whatever I did, you did too.”

***

As I laid down on the grey vinyl chair, the stale frigid air and my racing heart prompted tiny goose bumps to appear on my arms. Everything in that room was a dull pastel color or unnatural white. The pastels were unsettling — not the kind that reminded you of a sweet Easter morning but the kind that brought to mind dreary hospitals and desolate nursing homes. Mom held my hand, the tiny IV needle pricked into my vein and I was gone.

Hours later I was semiconscious with a mouth full of cotton and four less teeth. My parents got me to the car and dad sat in the back with me, letting my limp medicated body lean on his. Blood and drool seeped out of my numb lips and onto his ratty Patagonia jacket. He held me the whole way home.

***

Mom is my rock but I know she was glad to have a partner that day. She couldn’t have carried me the way Dad did and she couldn’t have seen me so broken without someone to assure her that I was going to be fine. Dad isn’t always around but
when he is, he gives all he can.

***

Mom and dad helped me wobble into bed and I floated away, my body heavy with anesthesia and Vicodin. I drifted in and out. The light came in my window, soft and pink like the creamy walls of my room.

My eyes opened slightly as I sensed movement in the room. “Hey Mai, how are you feeling?” Mom said, concern and sweetness heavy in her high voice. “It’s time for some more medicine, does your mouth hurt?”

“A little bit,” I said as best as I could with numb lips. The words came out muffled and strange. Gauze thick with blood and saliva was tucked over the wounds from the excavation. My mouth had become a foreign landscape with mountains of gauze and slippery rivers of blood. My tongue tried to ignore the upset. The blood was unnerving.

Dad reached into my mouth to deftly extract the blood soaked wads of gauze. Mom handed me the pills and dad held the bottle of chocolate milk, letting me sip it bit by bit to get the pills down. The milk was cool. Thick. Chalky. Chocolaty. A lazy breeze drifted in and Dad tucked fresh gauze over the wounds at the back of my mouth. They let me succumb to sleep again.

Hours or minutes later, Dad came into my room holding the *Seattle Times*. “Hey Sweetie, how are you feeling? I have some good articles to read to you,” Dad said softly. He was wearing his jeans that didn’t fit quite right and a ratty flannel. He sat down on the edge of my full-sized cloud, his back against the window sill, his legs outstretched horizontally and crossed at the ankle. His tall lanky body looked so out of place in my room but I was grateful to have him there.

***

He didn’t have to come. Maybe it was the medical nature of the event that made that more important in his mind than the school events or performances he’d missed.
He could justify the trip and missing a night of work—to himself and his boss—because it was my body that needed hire, not my heart.

***

I sat up a little bit. I was still groggy but aware. He read me an article about an ignorant hick couple that had gotten lost in the woods but survived to hilariously tell their lucky story. His performance was complete with different voices for each person. The ridiculous accents made me laugh. He read me a few more articles. I savored his performance. He was going back to his city the next day and I was going to miss him.

Mom came in to check on me. She sat down next to dad on the edge of my bed. She touched my forehead, her hand was cool and steady. They looked at me with so much love, the pain was there but they lessened it. We were all under the same roof and on the same page, they were a team taking care of me, Mom handled the important things and dad handled the laughs.

Our journey has been hard but I know that they were always doing their best. They are both here for me in their own way. I grinned as much as I could; my puffy cheeks aching and straining against the gauze. My mouth felt broken but I felt whole. All I need is them, soft light, a warm breeze and chocolate milk.

**Teacher Takeaways**

“This essay caught my attention for a number of reasons. Primarily, I appreciate the content—this essay is about wisdom tooth surgery, but not really. The surgery is a way for the author to explore their family dynamic. Next, the imagery in this essay is vivid and appeals to a variety of senses. Finally, I really enjoy the structural choice this author has made: in order to weave reflection in with narration, they alternate each mode, indicating the shift with asterisks (***). This choice, I feel, is very effective. However, it also runs the risk of choppiness, as the abrupt changes might interrupt the ‘flow’ for some readers.”

- Professor Dawson
Section 1: Description, Narration, and Reflection

Section One Endnotes
Attributions for images used in this section are located in the Alt Text for each image. Complete citations are included at the end of the book.

1 There is a school of writing based on this practice, termed остраение by Viktor Shklovsky, commonly translated into English as defamiliarization.


2 Excerpt by an anonymous student author, 2017. Reproduced with permission from the student author.

3 Excerpt by an anonymous student author, 2017. Reproduced with permission from the student author.

4 Excerpt by Ross Reaume, Portland State University, 2014. Reproduced with permission from the student author.

5 The term “thick description” was coined by Gilbert Ryle and adopted into the field of anthropology by Clifford Geertz.


6 Excerpt by an anonymous student author, 2017. Reproduced with permission from the student author.

7 Excerpt by Noel Taylor, Portland State University, 2014. Reproduced with permission from the student author.

8 Excerpt by Chris Gaylord, Portland State University, 2017. Reproduced with permission from the student author.

9 This activity is courtesy of Mackenzie Myers.

10 This activity was inspired by Susan Kirtley, William Thomas Van Camp, and Bruce Ballenger.

11 This activity is a modified version of one by Daniel Hershel.

12 Essay by Chris Chan, Portland State University, 2014. Reproduced with permission from the student author.


14 Essay by Franklin, who has requested his last name not be included. Portland Community College, 2017. Reproduced with permission from the student author.


16 Of interest on this topic is the word sonder, defined at The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows:

(n.) the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own—populated with their own ambitions, friends,
routines, worries and inherited craziness—an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you’ll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, as a blur of traffic passing on the highway, as a lighted window at dusk.


17 Gustav Freytag is credited with this particular model, often referred to as “Freytag’s pyramid.” Freytag studied the works of Shakespeare and a collection of Greek tragic plays to develop this model in Die Technik des Dramas (1863).

18 For the sake of brevity, I have not included here a discussion of focalization, an important phenomenon to consider when studying point-of-view more in-depth.

19 Sometimes tone and mood align, and you might describe them using similar adjectives—a joyous tone might create joy for the reader. However, they sometimes don’t align, depending largely on the rhetorical situation and the author’s approach to that situation. For instance, a story’s tone might be bitter, but the reader might find the narrator’s bitterness funny, off-putting, or irritating. Often, tone and mood are in opposition to create irony: Jonathan Swift’s matter-of-fact tone in “A Modest Proposal” is satirical, producing a range of emotions for the audience, from revulsion to hilarity.

20 Excerpt by an anonymous student author, 2016. Reproduced with permission from the student author.

21 Thanks to Alex Dannemiller for his contributions to this subsection.

22 Tips on podcasting and audio engineering: http://transom.org/
Interactive web platform hosting: https://h5p.org/
Whiteboard video creation (paid, free trial): http://www.videoscribe.co/
Infographic maker: https://piktochart.com/
Comic and graphic narrative software (free, paid upgrades): https://www.pixton.com/

23 Vazquez, Robyn. Interview with Shane Abrams. 2 July 2017, Deep End Theater, Portland, OR.

24 This activity is a modified version of one by Lily Harris.

25 Thanks to Alex Dannemiller for his contributions to this subsection.


27 Essay by an anonymous student author, 2016. Reproduced with permission from the student author.
To consider this phenomenon further, check out this video – “The Importance of Empathy.”

This is a phrase I picked up from Kelly Gallagher. Gallagher, Kelly. *Write Like This*, Stenhouse, 2011.


This activity is a modified version of one by Susan Kirtley.

Admittedly, this story is not the kind of narrative you will write if your teacher has assigned a descriptive personal narrative: it is fictional and in third person. For the purposes of studying reflection as a rhetorical gesture, though, “Little Red Riding Hood” does some of the same things that a personal narrative would: it uses a story to deliver a didactic message based on learning from experience.


This exercise is loosely based on Gallagher, pp. 44-45.

The quote reproduced below is from “My Scrubs.” *Scrubs*, NBC Universal, 2007.

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