The Narrative Essay

When you write a narrative essay, you are telling a story with a detailed account of the significant events that make up a particular situation. In his book At A Glance: Essays*, Lee Brandon discusses five elements in a good narrative: Situation/Conflict/Struggle/Outcome/Meaning.

- **Situation** - the information, including the events or history, that will orient your readers to the story you are going to tell.
- **Conflict** – the general circumstances in the story requiring change or growth.
- **Struggle** - the specific obstacles a character or person faces and how he or she tries (successfully or not) to overcome those difficulties. Build up to the most significant struggle so that you create suspense.
- **Outcome** - the resolution of the conflict and struggle, for better or worse. What is the result of the struggle? How does the story end up?
- **Meaning** - the lesson learned from the story, the moral or point. What insights do the characters gain?

Usually, you tell a narrative in chronological (or time) order. Time-transition words such as “first,” “second,” “third,” “next,” “last year,” “two months ago,” “in 1977,” etc., help to keep the reader aware of when the actions take place, what order they come in, and when the story begins and ends. Often narratives are told from beginning to end, but sometimes writers start the essay at the end and work backward, or from the middle to the beginning to the middle again, and then to the end. The important thing is to use time transitions so that the reader does not get confused.

**Sample Outline**

**Situation:** Last Saturday when I was babysitting, the children Kayla and Eric Smith were getting ready for bed when the phone rang at 9 pm. The operator asked me to call 351-2294 because a Mr. Adler was trying to reach his daughter Maria Smith but could not remember her phone number, which is unlisted. “I didn’t know the phone company would call an unlisted number to say someone was trying to reach the unlisted party,” I told the operator.

The operator paused and quietly said, “Uh, yes, we do...in the case of an emergency...”

**Conflict:** As I began dialing the number the operator had given me, that word “emergency” hung heavily in my mind. Emergency? What emergency? I heard the phone ringing...

**Struggle:** After a few seconds, Mrs. Smith’s father came to the phone. “Maria?” he yelled.

“This is Sue, the babysitter,” I answered.

“Maria, come quickly! I’m at the hospital. Mom had a stroke!”

“Sir, I’m sorry, this is Sue, the babysitter. Maria is not here...”

**Outcome:** At 8:30 on Sunday morning, Mr. and Mrs. Smith finally got home from the hospital. Their faces were white, and their eyes were puffy. Kayla and Eric ran down from their bedrooms to find out how their grandma was doing...

**Meaning:** I don’t know if I’ll ever look at babysitting the same way again.

**Summary**

In a narrative, you show the reader how a situation plays out; you recount events that the people in the story have to struggle with in order to come to some sort of resolution (or outcome). Sometimes you will explain the meaning explicitly, and at other times, the meaning will only be implied.