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WHAT IS a Narrative?

CHAPTER 1

The quick answer to the question of what is a narrative is that it is the kind of talking and writing we do most often.

- When we talk about what happened during the day, we are composing an oral narrative.
- When we write in a diary, we are composing a written personal narrative likely to contain comment. But that's okay because narratives are seldom neutral, unless you're tape-recording an autopsy.

Narratives use factual information about an object, character, or event to convey narrative information. They may reconstruct a past event, whether the event is imaginative or within the author's experience. Narratives are time-sequenced and include personal reflections or comment. Some narratives use a setting, initiating the structure of an event, complication, or resolution; others simply employ a structure consisting of a listing of events.

So, there are different types of narratives, and there are no pure narratives apart from those found in linguists' heads. Narratives are even found inside other types of writing. For example, when someone is arguing a point of view, that individual may tell about an incident that supports his or her position. Sometimes, sports announcers seem to be commenting more than narrating!

Although narratives serve a range of purposes, they are still easy to spot. Here are their characteristics:

- Most often, they are about something that happened in the past.
- Most are written in the third person. However, personal narratives in a diary may use the first person, especially when the writer reflects on events.

The events described in a narrative are usually ordered in a time sequence. This order is explicitly signaled with such words or phrases as

first	before	next	eventually
last	after	then	on the second day
later	during	finally	

Believe it or not, these words are alternatives to the oft-used “And then . . . , and then . . .” that young writers are so fond of using.

Sometimes it is hard to find the border between the narrative continuum and other kinds of factual writing. *Star Trek* is an imaginative science fiction narrative, that is, it is science fiction but episodes include factual information, and it is an event-sequenced form of narrative. But, at the other end of the continuum is the ship’s log or postmortem log. These are, strictly speaking, informational narratives of a factual type.

Why Think and Write Narratives?

Grade 1 teachers know that first writing is often narrative writing—what happened at home or what happened over the weekend. Students of this age like writing about real, recent, and concrete experiences that involved them. They tend to talk and write narratives before other nonfiction texts, such as discussion (see chapter 16), perhaps because narratives lend themselves to telling about concrete events whereas discussions lend themselves to thinking about abstract ideas. Of course, young students do discuss and do argue or persuade—ask any parent or teacher. And they should never be dissuaded from attempting any type of writing.

Links between cognitive development and narrative writing (Vygotsky 1978; Applebee 1978) suggest we might expect different types of thinking represented in different narrative structures. For example, Grade 1 students’ narratives may be random collections of statements or events. Later, these may take on a sense of unity, cohesion, and sequence that enables writers to develop a theme or moral. On another level, the narratives of Grade 1 students tend to be self-centered, whereas older students compose more decentered texts that enable them to argue points of view.

However, teachers need to be critical about accepting a sequence of cognitive development or a sequence in the development of language forms. There is no fixed sequence. Students are capable of composing a range of narratives at any age, just as Grade 1 students are capable of formal operational thinking when narrating about real-world situations (Donaldson 1978). Indeed, even Grade 12 students may benefit from