

Journal-Writing Ideas

Most of the ideas for your journal writing will come from your personal experiences. However, when nothing personal moves you to write, use the experiences of a friend or a family member, or page through a newspaper or a magazine for ideas. On those occasions when you still draw a blank, consider the following starting points.

Open-Ended Sentences ☺ Complete one of the following open-ended sentences and then continue to write about whatever topic pops up. Write about it from as many angles as possible.

- I wonder . . .
- I question whether . . .
- I hope . . .
- I was surprised to find that . . .
- I wish . . .
- I decided to . . . instead of . . .
- If only . . .
- I need help with . . .
- I have learned that . . .
- I should make a contract with myself to . . .
- They say . . . but my experience tells me . . .
- I never thought I would see the day . . .
- I was once . . . but now I am . . .

Unsent Letters ☺ Write a letter to anyone (a friend, an ancestor, a famous person) to see what develops. Share recent experiences, ask questions, reflect upon a newsworthy event, and so on.

Story Starters ☺ Write a quick rough draft of a story based directly or indirectly on something you see, hear, feel, or happen to be thinking about. Perhaps your growling stomach gets you thinking about lunch, so write a story that starts in a kitchen, a cafeteria, or a fast-food restaurant.

Essentials-of-Life Checklist ☺ Review the “Essentials” checklist in the handbook (see page 44) for possible writing ideas. Consider the first category, *clothing*. It could lead to a journal entry about . . .

- the clothes you are wearing,
- the wardrobe of a friend,
- present fashion trends, or
- what you will be wearing 10 years from now.

WRITING GUIDELINES

Personal Narrative

In a personal narrative, you re-create an incident that happened to you over a short period of time. This incident could be an emotional experience, a silly or serious event, or a frightening encounter. Be sure to include enough specific details to make the incident come alive for your readers. If you can't remember everything, fill in the gaps with details that seem right. (The pros do this all the time.)

■ PREWRITING

1. **Choosing a Subject . . .** Think of a specific incident from your life that you think will appeal to your readers. (See page 135 for ideas.)
2. **Gathering Details . . .** Jot down all of the ideas and details that come to mind when you think of the experience. If necessary, collect more information from other people involved in the event.
3. **Focusing Your Efforts . . .** Decide on a particular feeling or mood that you want to convey in your story. For example, do you want to surprise your readers, make them laugh, have them share in your sorrow or fear?

■ WRITING AND REVISING

4. **Hooking Your Reader . . .** First, try to start right in the middle of the action or introduce the people in your story and get them talking. Build the action by adding specific details, feelings, suspense—whatever it takes to pull in the reader.
5. **Improving Your Writing . . .** Read over your first draft (silently and aloud) for overall effectiveness: *Have you said everything you intended to say? Will your reader be able to follow your story, including any changes in time, place, or speaker? Does your story entertain, surprise, or make a point?* Revise your writing as necessary.

[HOT LINK] See “Assessment Rubric,” page 154, for a helpful revising and editing guide.

■ EDITING AND PROOFREADING

6. **Checking for Style and Accuracy . . .** Review your revised writing for style, making sure that all of your sentences read smoothly and clearly and that you have used the best words to express your ideas. Then check your work for spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors.
7. **Preparing a Final Copy . . .** Write or keyboard a neat final copy of your narrative; proofread your copy before sharing it.

Sample Personal Narrative

In this personal narrative, student writer Matt Vice focuses on a recent event in his life, a memorable football game. The strong sensory details make this event come alive for readers.

The Game

The narrative starts right in the middle of the action.

The rain hit my helmet lightly, like a soft tapping on a door. I pulled my chin strap tightly around my face and snapped it on the other side. Forty-three teammates standing beside me started to jog, workhorses on the move, the clip-clop of our spikes the only sound.

As we approached the field, the rain picked up. I looked at my teammates after hearing the cheers from our fans. I said to myself, "This is why I play football; this is what it's all about." As we burst through the gate, the roar of the crowd engulfed us. Our coach gathered us together on the sidelines and barked the game plan to us. Forty-four sets of eyes locked on him as if we were hypnotized. We broke the huddle, and the receiving team trotted out onto the field.

The ball was kicked. It soared high above our heads as the two teams ran full charge at each other. I found my man and fixed on him like a missile locking on to its target. The return man was hit hard and brought down around the 50-yard line.

The crowd was yelling; the cheerleaders were pumped. I heard the chanting fade into the background as the game progressed. Two quarters passed, then three. Hard-hitting crunches and cracks could be heard play after play. Each team traded scores.

With less than a minute left in the game, we had a 24-to-17 lead. The rain was running down my helmet like an overflowing gutter. With time running out, the opposing quarterback dropped back. The crowd went silent as he passed to an open receiver in the end zone. Everything seemed to go into slow motion as the ball dropped securely into his hands. I stood openmouthed, dumbfounded, and

"I said to myself, 'This is why I play football; this is what it's all about.'"

This paragraph serves as a transition between two parts of the game.

Specific details re-create the final play for readers.

The closing is neatly tied to the opening.

barely breathing. They made the extra point, so the score was tied, which meant overtime.

The opposing team won the coin toss and went first. The official put the ball on the 10-yard line. In three short plays, they scored again, putting them ahead by six. I felt like I was in a bad dream. After the extra point, it was our turn. Our first two plays were stopped cold by their tenacious defense. On third down, our quarterback dropped back and connected with the tailback a yard short of the end zone. I snapped my helmet, anticipating heading out onto the field for the extra point.

"Fourth down in overtime . . . this is the stuff dreams are made of."

Fourth down in overtime . . . this is the stuff dreams are made of. A quarterback sneak was our money play, a play we had executed to perfection at least 30 times throughout the season. How could it go wrong?

Eleven men broke the huddle and slowly walked to the line. The center placed his hands on the ball, keeping the laces up for luck. The quarterback barked his cadence like a general shouting orders. Eyes were locked; the crowd was silent. At the snap of the ball, their linemen charged us, trying to crack the wall. Our quarterback took a hit and fumbled before he could cross the line. The game was over. We lost by inches.

I went still and fell to my knees. Our quarterback sat in the end zone, alone. I could hear sobs from the crowd. Tears ran down my face, or maybe it was just the rain. I couldn't tell. Some teammates were consoled by their families or hugged by their friends. Our last game was not supposed to end in this way.

Heads down, our team walked slowly back to the locker room, the once thunderous footsteps now silent. For the first time that night, I felt the cold. ■

Sample Extended Personal Narrative

An extended narrative, or phase autobiography, covers an important period in your life. In this sample, student writer Natalie Garcia shares the story of her search for her father, a search that spanned a number of years. Note the “I remember” details she includes.

Finding My Family

The opening provides important background information.

— When I was four years old, I saw my dad all of the time. Although my parents were divorced, he used to drive all the way from Michigan just to see me. Sometimes he’d pick me up in his old blue pickup truck, and I’d travel back to his house, bumping along the potholed streets, listening to the radio.

I remember always waking up early in the morning, running into his room, and jumping on his bed to wake him. Soon after, I would smell homemade tortillas and eggs. Sometimes he even made breakfast burritos for a special treat. On other days, I just ate cereal.

I remember the sound of music from the ice-cream truck that would cruise through his neighborhood. We would run out of the house, and my dad would pick me up and hold me while I chose what I wanted. Sometimes I’d choose an orange push-up, but most of the time, I picked the green ice-cream frog on a stick with gum-ball eyes. It was my favorite.

My dad worked as a truck driver, and he’d often bring crates of produce home—bushels of bumpy brown potatoes, bright green peppers, and juicy orange-red tomatoes. I loved to eat the tomatoes whole, sprinkled with salt. I still do that now.

The writer shares deep feelings and concerns.

— All of a sudden, my dad stopped visiting, and I was devastated. I wrote to him as many times as I could, but he never answered my letters. I thought that he didn’t love me anymore. I asked my mom over and over why he didn’t write to me. She said he probably didn’t have the time. But how could someone not have enough time for his own child?

“All of a sudden, my dad stopped visiting, and I was devastated.”

In the final paragraph, the writer shares the resolution to the problem.

About a year ago, I finally received a return letter from my dad. There was a phone number on the letter, so I called. I asked about all of the letters he never answered, and he said, “I never got them.” I didn’t believe that, but I didn’t care. I now had him back in my life, and that’s all I wanted.

Then last year I came home from school and found an unexpected letter. When I read it, I found out that I had an older half-sister, which really shocked me. (My family was suddenly growing.) She told me the real reason that my dad had never answered my letters: His English skills weren’t very good. That, I understood, and I cried with joy after reading the letter.

— I called my dad. During our conversation, for the first time since I was four years old, I heard him say, “I love you.” I now know that I have family—here with Mom, of course, but now there’s also Dad and a half-sister. My family may be scattered over three states, but knowing that everyone is out there is the best feeling in the world. It makes me feel like a hole in my heart has been filled. ■

Narrative-Writing TIPS

The following activities will help you find additional subject ideas for personal narratives:

- **Page through** family photo albums.
- **Talk** to your grandparents.
- **Complete** a series of “I remember . . .” statements.
- **Draw** a winding highway on your paper, representing a map of your life. Note memorable experiences on the map.
- **Collect** possible writing ideas related to different categories: early childhood, elementary school, holidays, and so on.