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# A FORMER FIRST-YEAR COMP STUDENT TEACHES NARRATIVE

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16 min read

## What You Will Learn in this Chapter

How is writing narrative more than “just” a story? If it’s a personal narrative, how is it more than being self-absorbed, or how can our own story reach other people? You’ll discover in this chapter ways to give your narrative significance or answer the “so what” question for readers: “why should I care?” You’ll learn about the importance of having a “claim of significance,” and how to come to that by finding what Donald Murray calls a “central tension” in a narrative. You’ll read about the importance of revision to best find and bring out the tension and significance. Finally, you’ll get some ideas for how to get words on the screen by being as particular as you can as well as how your openings and endings can help give your narrative more substance and meaning.

## Key Terms

- Claim of Significance (“So what”)
- Central tension
- Allatonicness
- Openings & Endings

## Why and How to Find the “So What?” in Your Narrative

Sometimes we feel like we have nothing to say, and we might feel that even more when we’re given an assignment. When I took first-year composition my first semester of college, we wrote personal narratives the entire semester. I had lots to say—I was homesick, overwhelmed, but also thrilled about the social happenings coming at me. But I still sat stymied in front of the screen, not sure what would make a good story or what was interesting to readers. Brainstorming helped, but I still had to come up with initial ideas. I decided to write about things familiar to me from home, stories I’d told that had gotten good reactions from friends. I wrote about

my parents' car I borrowed in high school that could no longer go in reverse; I wrote about a terrible movie date where my date disappeared from the movie theater—I thought he'd ditched me—only to find out that when he got up to use the restroom during the movie, his leg had fallen asleep. He had to crawl up the aisle and was too embarrassed to come back in to the theater, dark as it was. I wrote about a bridge where my friends and I used to converge.

These were readable, even engaging, according to my instructor, but she kindly pushed me in her feedback to clarify the point or purpose of my essays. To put it not-as-nicely: *so what?* Coming up with an idea may or may not be the hard part—sometimes it's having an idea that readers can engage with and get into, that has a clear purpose, that's the hardest part. Narrative can be deceptively simple—I'm just writing a story—but it still should have a purpose. Wendy Belcher calls this purpose a **claim of significance**, which is a piece's "worthiness or value, emerging from its object of study, approach, argument, or solution."<sup>1</sup> She's talking here about drafting an academic article that typically has a clearer, more overt argument than narrative, but it applies just as much here: to "answer readers' questions of 'so what?' That is: 'what will reading this [piece] do for me? Why does/should your [piece] matter to readers like me?'"<sup>2</sup>

How can we go from an idea, something that sparks our energy or interest that might be a good story—good meaning engaging to readers—to a successful narrative? Largely the revision process helps us get there. Revision means to "re-see." It doesn't mean to write to an outline and then "perfect" your points. Outlines can be great to have a foothold and guiding focus, but if it is approached as the answer to get to and not a guide to help us develop our writing, narratives can be limited and not have much of a claim of significance. Rather than, or in addition to, creating an outline, try asking yourself some questions about the moment both when you're initially drafting or later, when you're revising.

Donald Murray, a writing teacher and theorist on the writing process, wrote *The Craft of Revision*, and in it he says what I think connects to finding a claim of significance: "Every piece of effective writing will say many different things to individual readers. Good writing has depth and texture, but something should stand out."<sup>3</sup> He calls this a **central tension**, "what makes the focus dynamic, active, something worth writing and reading. There should be forces at work within the focus: a question, a doubt, a conflict, a contradiction."<sup>4</sup> This can happen if the piece is humorous, serious, or both. A central tension is more than an idea or topic and gives you as a writer much more to play with, because an idea or topic don't automatically come with a central tension. Murray shows this well when he describes writing an essay about your mom—that's a topic or idea, but not a central tension. But here's one: *My mom's first love—her third husband*. (My dad introduces my mom—his wife of over 50 years—as his first wife. Embedded in his joke is a central tension meant to be a funny icebreaker when meeting someone new.)

A lack of tension can be why some topics might fall flat: I've worked with students writing an argument essay against drunk driving, for instance, but write themselves into a corner when trying to make their argument, since the vast majority of people agree that driving drunk is a poor choice. But an essay on whether or not the legal limit for drunkenness should be lowered is going to bring about differing opinions and give the author more fodder to draw upon.

So how do you get to the central tension from an idea or topic—how can you have one purposeful idea come across? Questions in the early drafting and revision process can help you get there. Murray offers some great questions to ask of the draft:

- What surprised you?
- What did you expect to read? How was what you read different from your expectations?
- What do you remember most vividly?
- What one thing does a reader need to know?
- What is the single most important detail, quote, fact, idea in the draft?

1. Belcher, Wendy Laura. *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks*. 2nd Ed. U of Chicago P, 2019. p.192

2. Belcher, p. 192

3. Murray, Donald. *The Craft of Revision*. 5th Ed., Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2013. p. 60

4. Murray, p. 60

- What do you itch to explore during revision?
- What single idea may the final draft deliver?<sup>5</sup>

It's through revision—and even if we have a nugget of the “so what” in the initial drafting, it's rare for the claim of significance to be fully discovered, realized, or developed—I came to understand the meaning of the narratives I was writing as a student in my first-year comp class. My funny story about my bad movie date was about the awkwardness and vulnerability of putting myself out there. My essay about this plain, cement bridge was about loving a rural landscape that most people overlook.

Of course, that's not to say the initial drafting doesn't set the stage for unearthing the central tension. It may be more accurate to say the scenes may need to be re-staged through revision. A good way to explain it comes from Bruce Ballenger, a writing theorist and teacher, who draws on Ann Berthoff's idea of “allatonceness” (all-at-once-ness; she was thinking in hashtags before hashtags were a thing). The metaphor she uses is that writing is like learning to ride a bike: you don't separate handlebar skills with pedaling with balancing, but you get on the bike and try to bring these things together.<sup>6</sup> This allatonceness happens because thinking and writing happen simultaneously rather than thinking happening *before* writing.

Let me extend the metaphor a bit. It can be frustrating, falling off and getting back on a bike, and so we might cling to the outline like we do training wheels. And training wheels serve us well up to a point, but we're more limited. Outlines can be a guide, but if we hold too tightly to them, our narrative is constrained and often underdeveloped in its potential complexity. Even more, you as the author may lose interest, and that can make it harder to get and sustain interest from the reader. In short: the outline can be a tool for your writing but can be less helpful as the end goal.

We have an idea, a question, a glimmer toward a possible claim of significance. We know now that writing and thinking together move us forward, but that blank screen might still be intimidating us. How to start?

Try these two things to get moving:

- Start in the middle of a story—meaning a scene or real-time moment—where things are already happening, not so the reader is lost or confused, but where she will want to dive right in to keep up
- Share that story with particulars and specifics to your experience.

Sometimes less-experienced writers think the best way to reach everybody is to be as general as possible so that the broadest possible audience can be reached. Thinking of your audience as everybody is a challenge. You want to have some sense of your audience—a generally educated person that you want to convince of an argument? An empathetic reader you want to connect to or move with your prose? But you'll still want to narrow some. For example, in writing this chapter, I'm making a couple of assumptions: 1) that you're taking a college writing course and 2) that you could have less experience with writing. The first assumption is pretty safe, as I was asked to create a chapter for a book for a writing class. The second assumption could be on the mark but not a sure thing. Maybe you're someone who has come back to college at age 30 and had a full time job that involved writing. Chances are more students are the traditional college-aged demographic. As the author I can't know the exact audience, so I have to make some assumptions but must be quite careful in doing so to not resort to stereotypes.

The second issue with trying to be broad to be universal is ripe for pitfalls. The idea that we are all human and that we all have universal experiences—heartache, grief, joy—makes sense, but it doesn't account for our many different identities, experiences, beliefs, upbringings. So my experience of heartbreak at age 18 in a rural town as a white, young adult is likely different than yours.

And yet: writing and stories do allow us to immerse ourselves in other peoples' experiences and realities, and research has shown that learning about others in this way can improve empathy and understanding.

Here's the paradox of particulars: when sharing our narrative, we want to do the opposite of being broad to cast a wide net for

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5. Murray, p. 62

6. Ballenger, Bruce. *The Curious Writer*. 5th Ed. Pearson, 2016. p. 6

the most readers. It is in the particularities that we can best connect to other readers. That isn't to say that they will have the same experience or that we are all the same, but it is much more likely to invite readers to appreciate, if not feel or connect to, the situation of the writer.

For example, if I share with you the story of my heartbreak and first set the scene about my first love in high school, I might reveal a moment from my prom at a high school so small that we didn't need to have dates because we just needed a critical mass to fill up the dance floor. So the guy I was crushing on was there at the prom, but he wasn't my date. Good news, though: he wasn't anyone else's date, either. I might describe him as I saw him, leaning over in his rented tux at one of the tables on the gym stage, looking out at the dance floor, me shadowed by the stage in the white, fitted dress with more dazzle than I'd normally wear (I'd borrowed the dress), peeking up at him while out of his eyesight. But then my favorite song, "If You Leave" by OMD begins playing over the loudspeakers. I feel a compulsion to ask him to dance; *Pretty in Pink* had just come out a couple months before, after all. I do, and he says yes.

Now: you may not have gone to your prom, or you may not be crushing on anyone, or you maybe couldn't reveal a crush for certain reasons, and my assumption is that your prom was not in the 1980s like mine was. But my hope as a writer is that you could still find a way in to that story in a way that connects to your particulars or experiences in some way even if it was vastly different than mine. In other words: as writers we want to try to connect with our readers through our experiences, but that doesn't mean we should assume they have the same experiences or feelings about their experiences.

Keep in mind, then, what Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd say in their book *Good Prose: the Art of Nonfiction*, "A story lives in its particulars, in the individuality of person, place, and time."<sup>7</sup>

After brainstorming and getting distractions out of the way (close browsers, turn over your phone, or better yet, move it), unpack the story that stems from the idea or tension you are pursuing. While doing so, stay in the particulars that come from sensory details or descriptions that can also reveal tension (notice how I was looking up at my crush on the stage from below. True, but also thematically relevant). Later, when I know more about what I'm trying to say (perhaps my essay will be about the realities—versus the 1980s movie versions—of unrequited love), I'll revise to draw out the tension even more through scenes and moments.

Perhaps in that first draft, but more likely during revision, you'll then want to cue readers to that claim of significance—why they are reading about this tension at all. (Are you seeing how important revision is, the part that's often overlooked as we instead put much pressure on ourselves to come up with the perfect idea than instantly and easily translate it from our brain to the screen?)

I want to wrap this chapter by speaking to two key parts of a narrative that people either overlook or stew so much over that it can stop them cold from producing words: the introduction and conclusion. Only I think it's more accurate to call them "openings" and "endings," because the ways introductions and conclusions are usually defined are formulaic and too narrow for the possibilities that come with personal narratives.

As a reader, getting pulled in to an essay that starts with the broadest, most generic sentence possible is tough: "People in society like to have a place to connect with each other." But starting in the middle of the action by opening rather than introducing the piece can bring readers with you: "I approached the Sarben Bridge, turning off my headlights so I didn't block the view of the fireflies and blind my friends who'd arrived before me." Openings invite the reader into your story, and then you can leave a trail that signals the claim of significance; in a personal narrative you don't need to state your central tension directly in the first paragraph, though you do want to clue your reader in to where things are headed sooner rather than later (the first page or so, give or take).

Endings: those can be daunting, and with good reason. We've usually been taught that they either re-state everything that's been said or end with a dramatic final thought that magically wraps everything together in a tidy bow for the reader. There's not one right way to end a personal narrative, but rather than thinking summarize or conclude, try leaving the reader with what a lot of writers call resonance, an idea or image that has reverberations beyond the essay by leaving readers thinking. Emily W. Blacker explains this well: "An essay ending 'works' when it clarifies and amplifies the dominant theme or emotional exploration of the piece without hitting

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7. Kidder, Tracy and Richard Todd. *Good Prose: the Art of Nonfiction*. Random House, 2013. p. 14

the reader over the head with it.”<sup>8</sup> This isn’t easy to do, but often ending on an image or moment that references or invokes the central tension can do this better than spelling it out. (Listen to the essay “Repeat After Me,” by David Sedaris for an ending that does this beautifully.<sup>9</sup>)

It can feel like a lot, making all of these elements of personal narrative come together seamlessly. Here’s the thing: it doesn’t come together seamlessly—it comes together by batting around ideas, drafting and lots of revision that gets more focused when you are clearer what you are really wanting to get across. Usually when I talk with my students—or myself—about writing a piece, I tell them to learn about the genre but not get so caught up that it trips you up while writing. Sit (and put away distractions!) and get to the #allatonceness. (Let’s just make it a hashtag!)

Happy drafting! You’ve got this.

## Discussion Questions

- What experience do you have with revision? What has worked best for you? Why?
- Try this for starting an essay: put the central tension right there in the first paragraph, like talking about a trip to Disney World at age 10 but saying you hated Disney World. Roxane Gay does this in her *New York Times* essay, “Why the Beach is a Bummer,” where she takes the assumption that everyone loves the beach and turns it on its head.<sup>10</sup>
- What are some examples you have from books or movies or podcasts or games that really pulled you in as the audience? What kind of particulars brought you in to the piece, and why? How could you appreciate or connect to the text whether or not it connected to your own experiences?
- Sometimes cutting can be some of the smartest revision we can do. Take a first draft you have and try cutting the current first and last paragraph. What gets lopped off? Have you already said it better somewhere else? Can you move an idea or two from those paragraphs elsewhere? Try and see what happens.

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