Memoir or Personal Narrative: Learning Lessons from the Personal

4



FIGURE 4.1 Personal narratives and memoirs give the narrator's perspective on a life experience. Here, a Florida family is having a makeshift meal together at a shelter set up during Hurricane Charley in 2004 for people who had to evacuate their homes. How do you imagine the parents and children are feeling and getting along during this time? What might the children, now adults, say about their memories of the hurricane? Family relationships and living through natural disasters are frequent subjects of personal writing. (credit: "Photograph by Mark Wolfe" by Mark Wolfe/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

4.1 Exploring the Past to Understand the Present
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4.3 Glance at Genre: Conflict, Detail, and Revelation
4.4 Annotated Sample Reading: from Life on the Mississippi by Mark Twain
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INTRODUCTION Since pen was first put to paper, authors have been recording their personal experiences in order to perpetuate them, share meaningful lessons learned, or simply entertain an audience. Indeed, even as far back as Roman ruler Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE), who wrote accounts of his epic battles, authors have written to preserve history, seek acclaim for accomplishments, and pass down wisdom. Writing about your own life can feel alternately satisfying, terrifying, and exhilarating. It allows you to share meaningful personal experiences, to reflect on them, and to connect on a new level with your audience. Personal writing can reveal

more than just events you've experienced—it tells your audience who you are as you relate personal experiences to convey humor, compassion, fears, and beliefs.

A **personal narrative** is a form of nonfiction writing in which the author recounts an event or incident from their life. A **memoir** is a type of nonfiction writing in which the author tells a first-person version of a time period or an event in their life. Because the two genres, or forms of writing, share more similarities than differences, they are covered here together. Personal writing, whether a narrative or a memoir, is an opportunity to share your lived experiences with readers. A personal narrative tells a story and often includes memories and **anecdotes** (short, amusing, or interesting stories about something that happened in real life) to relate events and ideas. Like all good writing, personal narratives have an overarching **theme** (message you want to impart to your readers) and a purpose beyond the story itself. Although personal narratives usually follow the traditional narrative arc of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution, personal writing has several unique features. Unlike some forms of academic writing, personal writing welcomes the use of **first-person point of view** (narrator participates in events), and narratives and memoirs often have a narrow focus.

The key to effective personal writing is to know your audience and purpose. You may write to relay an event, to teach a lesson, or to explore an idea. You may write to help provide relief from stages of deep emotion (a process called *catharsis*), to evoke an emotional response, or simply to entertain readers. Above all, a personal narrative or memoir tells about an individual's experience or a series of events in a way that emotionally engages readers. The more clearly and vividly you share your experience, the more likely readers will be moved.

This chapter presents an excerpt from American writer Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), a memoir about his years as a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi River. Studying this text and Twain's use of the components of personal narrative will help you understand how authors create meaningful accounts of personal events. Later in the chapter, you too will create a personal narrative about an important event in your life.

4.1 Exploring the Past to Understand the Present

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Read for inquiry, learning, critical thinking, and communicating.
- Read in several genres to understand how genre conventions shape and are shaped by readers' and writers' practices and purposes.

Personal writing is unique in that it tells *your* story. Because it is a form of storytelling, there may be a tendency to discount personal writing as less academic or less valuable a skill than more formal writing. Although it may allow for greater freedom in style and content, personal writing is valuable in its own right because it enables you to make sense of the world as you—not others—experience it.

Two genres of this type of writing are personal narratives and memoirs. A **genre** is a category of writing that features compositions with distinct characteristics, styles, content, and formats. These two genres belong to the larger family of **creative nonfiction**, a term that applies to the kind of nonfiction writing that shares many traits with fiction writing. The main difference is that the plots, settings, and characters come from real life rather than an author's imagination. (For more about the characteristics of literary nonfiction, see Print or Textual Analysis: What You Read.) Works of creative nonfiction include American writers Sebastian Junger's (b. 1962) *The Perfect Storm* (1997), Jon Krakauer's (b. 1954) *Into Thin Air* (1997), and Terry Tempest Williams's (b. 1955) *Refuge* (1991). Shorter pieces appear regularly in popular literary magazines, especially in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *The Atlantic*, as well as in periodicals such as *Sports Illustrated*, *Rolling Stone*, and *The Wall Street Journal.*

Writers of narrative nonfiction commonly borrow stylistic and formal techniques from the fast-paced visual narratives of film and television as well as from the innovative language of poetry, fiction, and drama. These influences encourage a multifaceted, multidimensional prose style to keep pace with the multifaceted and multidimensional real world. In addition to memoirs and personal narratives, biographies, autobiographies, and literary journalism are considered creative nonfiction.

Differences between Memoir and Personal Narrative

Both a memoir and a personal narrative are accounts of personal experiences written in a narrative style, but there are some differences. A memoir is an account of certain incidents in a person's life, often from a specific period of time. The narrator is a character in the story and reflects on past events to draw a conclusion based on those events. Memoirs focus on how the author remembers a part of their own life. On the other hand, personal narratives typically center on one major event through which the narrator reveals thoughts, feelings, and possibly related experiences. Like other works in the narrative genre, personal narratives and memoirs develop setting, plot, characterization, and dialogue.

The word *memoir* comes from the French *mémoire*, meaning "memory." Personal writing relies on memory but is not necessarily an account of every detail of the event the author is writing about. If this were the case, it could make for dry and tedious reading, contrary to what most authors seek—audience engagement. The more important aim is to create a composition that is emotionally authentic and conveys the core sentiment of an event, time period, or lesson and its impact on you, the writer. In the next section, you will meet an author who does just that. He reflects on deeply personal events from his own life as they relate to broader cultural and social issues. The subject of your personal narrative or memoir should not be just *you*, though you will tell a story from your life. The overall message of the story should be about something bigger—a universal understanding, a lesson learned, a common human experience. The more readers can relate to your story through the details you include, the more it will mean to them.

The Cultural Aspect



Personal writing provides a unique opportunity to explore cultural contexts. **Culture**—shared values, customs, arts, and traits of a social group—is at the heart of personal narratives and memoirs and should be part of their central focus. Including historical information, anecdotes, and vivid details in your writing, as well as using a specific and relevant English variety, helps you depict the cultures that are part of your life and enhances readers' understanding. Thus, readers are likely to experience deeper **empathy** and emotional responses in connection to the larger issues presented. You also provide opportunities for culture to be shared as a common human experience.



4.2 Trailblazer

Memoir Trailblazer: Ta-Nehisi Coates

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Read for inquiry, learning, and critical thinking to determine how authors develop personal narratives and memoirs.
- Identify composition techniques for personal writing in various rhetorical and cultural contexts.



FIGURE 4.2 Author Ta-Nehisi Coates often frames current events from the perspective of his own lived experiences. (credit: "Ta Nehisi Coates 2 BBF 2010 Shankbone" by David Shankbone/ Wikicommons, CC BY 3.0)

"I just felt this . . . deep need to express myself. . . . I felt the deep need to understand."

The Storyteller's Tools: Context and Voice

Ta-Nehisi Coates (b. 1975) is a best-selling author, journalist, and educator. His writing explores complex issues such as race relations, urban policing, and racial identity, often focusing on his personal experiences as a person of color. Coates was born in Baltimore, Maryland. His mother was a teacher, his father a librarian and founder of the Black Classic Press, which publishes and republishes significant works by and about lesser-known people of African descent. Reading the works of these authors instilled in Coates a lifelong love of reading and learning and a desire to experience the world outside his neighborhood.

Coates began his writing vocation at age 17, first exploring the genre of poetry. He studied journalism at Howard University for five years but did not graduate. However, he did write and begin earning bylines as a young writer, publishing articles in popular periodicals such as *Washington Monthly*, *Mother Jones*, and *Time.* In 2008, he became a national correspondent for *The Atlantic*, often writing articles and covering stories about national current events. Among other topics, he has written about Barack Obama (b. 1961) as the first Black president and the shooting of Florida teen Trayvon Martin (1995–2012).

True to the genre of personal narrative, Coates focuses his writing not only on his lived experiences but also on their meaning in the context of larger cultural and social issues, specifically examining race relations and racial equity. In 2008, Coates published his first book, the critically acclaimed memoir *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood*. In it, he writes about his childhood, especially his memories of his father. A former member of the Black Panther Party (founded in 1966), Coates's father raised

him and his six siblings as a family unit in West Baltimore. Coates's father and the children's four mothers raised the siblings together. Though they didn't all live together, they were a continuing and active presence in one another's lives.

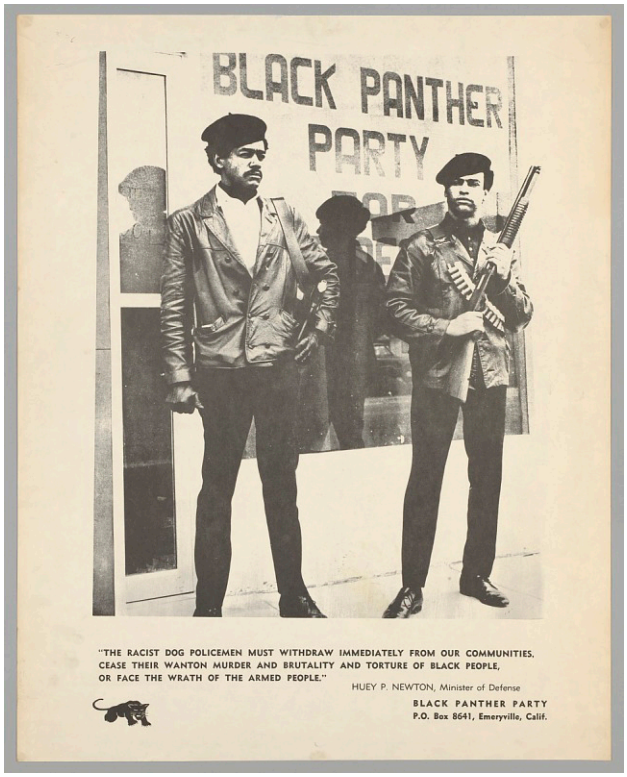


FIGURE 4.3 Bobby Seale (left; b. 1936) and Huey P. Newton (right; 1942–1989) founded the Black Panther Party in 1966 in response to police violence and racism. (credit: "Black and white poster of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale" by Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Public Domain)

Coates credits his unusual upbringing with providing him both stability and early access to influential "Afro-centric" literature, which would influence his life and career. His memoir reflects the steps his father took to encourage his son's development into adulthood, from reading all types of books to exploring the neighborhood to helping him grapple with what it means to be a Black man in America. This lived experience is central to the personal narrative he creates in *The Beautiful Struggle.*

Coates's best-known essay, "The Case for Reparations," which proposes reparations for slavery, was published in *The Atlantic* in June 2014. Framing his argument around the history of slavery, Coates paints a picture detailing the connections among slavery, race, and economics, specifically focusing on the modern Chicago housing crisis and policy. "The essence of American racism is disrespect," he proposes.

The next year, Coates published the best seller *Between the World and Me*, a personal narrative written as a letter to his teenage son. In this book, recounting his own upbringing in Baltimore's violent inner city during the crack cocaine epidemic, Coates explores the idea that the structure of American society fosters white supremacy. He reveals his wish for his son, now "growing into consciousness": "that you feel no need to constrict yourself to make other people comfortable." In 2019, Coates published his first novel, *The Water Dancer*, a work of historical fiction about a slave who helps in the Underground Railroad.

In addition to writing, Coates is an educator. From 2012 to 2014, he was a visiting professor at MIT, and in 2014, he joined the faculty of the City University of New York as a journalist-in-residence. Coates compares writing to a refining process: by applying pressure to yourself, you develop new muscles. He calls writing "an act of physical courage" that relies on the revision process to translate thought to page: "I . . . consider the entire process about failure, and I think that's . . . why more people don't write."

Coates uses **doubling** in his writing. Because he is both protagonist and narrator, he sees himself as both subject and object, both character and storyteller, and at once a participant and an observer in his narration. Such doubling is often symbolic in memoirs, represented by paired events or mirroring.

You can watch Advice on Writing (https://openstax.org/r/adviceonwriting) to learn more of Coates's advice to writers such as yourself. Listen as American correspondent Martha Teichner (b. 1948), interviews Coates on *CBS Sunday Morning (https://openstax.org/r/cbssundaymorning)*, November 5, 2017.

Discussion Questions

1. How might Coates's use of personal stories influence the emotions of his readers?
2. How might Coates use personal anecdotes and current events to create commentary on broad historical ideas? What personal events can you link to more wide-ranging ideas or issues?
3. What is the impact of the cultural and lived experiences that Coates weaves into his personal writing? How would the impact differ if he wrote in a more academic style?
4. Coates says his writing process is about pressure and failure. In what way is failure part of the development of narrative writing?
5. On what turning points or important events might Coates focus in his memoir when discussing his father?

4.3 Glance at Genre: Conflict, Detail, and Revelation

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify common formats and design features used to develop a personal narrative or memoir.
- Show that genre conventions are shaped by purpose, culture, and expectation.

In personal writing genres, you share experiences of your life, centering them on a specific theme or memory. Unlike an autobiography, which typically extends across an entire lifetime or at least a number of years, memoirs and personal narratives are shaped by a narrower focus, with more specific storytelling surrounding a time period or an event. When writing in these personal genres, authors seek to make an emotional connection with their audience to relate an experience, emotion, or lesson learned.

Characteristics of Memoirs and Personal Narratives




One way to approach a memoir or personal narrative is to think of it as a written series of photographs—snapshots of a period of time, moment, or sequence of events connected by a theme. In fact, writing prose snapshots is analogous to constructing and arranging a photo album composed of separate images. Photo albums, when carefully assembled from informational snapshots, tell stories with clear beginnings, middles, and endings. However, they show a lot of white space between one picture and the next, with few transitions explaining how the photographer got from one scene to another. In other words, while photo albums tell stories, they do so piecemeal, requiring viewers to fill in or imagine what happens between shots. You also might think of snapshots as individual slides in a slideshow or pictures in an exhibition—each the work of the same maker, each a different view, all connected by some logic, the whole presenting a story.

Written snapshots function in the same way as visual snapshots, each connected to the next by white space. Sometimes written snapshots can function as a series of complete and independent paragraphs, each an entire thought, without obvious connections or transitions to the preceding or following paragraph. White space between one snapshot and another gives readers breathing space, allowing them time to digest one thought before continuing to the next. It also exercises readers' imaginations; as they participate in constructing logic that offers textual meaning, the readers themselves make connections and construct meaning. At other times, snapshots flow more directly, one after another, through chronological, circular,

parallel, or other structures to move from event to event.

The secret to using snapshots successfully in your writing is to place them carefully in an order that conveys a theme and creates an unbreakable thread. And as with visual snapshots, writers must carefully choose which moments to include—and which to omit. Because they tell stories, memoirs and personal narratives share aspects of the fictional narrative genre. In writing them, you will use crafting tools to tell a vivid and purposeful story that takes into consideration your personal experience and the needs of your reader.

The Storyteller's Dilemma: Clarity of Action

How you construct your story is as important as the story you choose to tell. Deciding on the most effective way the way to tell the story—that is, deciding what framework to use—helps you develop clarity of action to lead readers to the theme or message you seek to develop. Various components work together to bring clarity, but most often in a memoir or personal narrative, clarity comes from plot and character development. Narratives often follow a general structure called an *arc* to develop characters and plot and build the emotional impact of a story. Look at Figure 4.4 for an idea of what a story arc looks like.

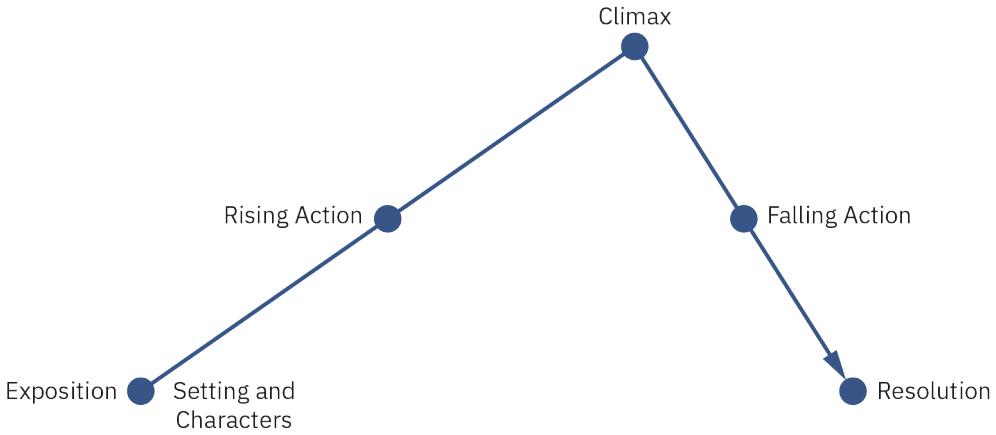


FIGURE 4.4 Narrative arc (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY NC-SA 4.0 license)

This arc, also called a *narrative arc* or a *plot triangle*, is composed of the following elements:

- The **exposition** sets up the narrative. It introduces characters and setting and establishes the primary conflict of the story, allowing readers to learn the who, what, when, where, and why of the events that will unfold.
- Next, the **rising action** fully develops the conflict. This developed series of events, the longest part of the narrative, produces increasing tension that engages readers.
- The **climax** is the turning point of the narrative, in which the story reaches its highest point of tension and conflict. It is the moment when some kind of action must be taken.
- In the **falling action**, the conflict begins to be resolved, and the tension lessens.
- Finally, during the **resolution**, the conflict is resolved, and the narrative ends. In memoirs and personal narratives, the resolution often includes or precedes a reflection that examines the broader implications of the theme or lessons learned. Of course, as in real life, conflicts are not always resolved, but the narrator can still reflect on the outcome of the situation.

Although many narratives and memoirs follow this plot-driven arc, narratives can also focus on character arcs. Character-driven narratives explore an individual, most often the narrator, and their development. The stories focus on creating an emotional connection between the character and the reader. Both plot and character arcs may be, and often are, present in memoirs and personal narratives.

Regardless of whether the focus is on plot or characters, conflict is synonymous with the reason for telling your story—it is the driving force. Conflict is often the main challenge faced by a character, and it urges the story along by engaging readers through tension and encouraging them to keep reading. Without conflict, your

memoir or personal narrative will lack an overall theme. The major conflict is the undercurrent that drives each scene and is often developed by an **inciting incident**. Introduced in the exposition and developed in the rising action, this incident sets the **mood** of the story and engages readers. After the story's climax, where the conflict reaches its peak, the tension gradually resolves during the falling action and moves toward resolution, during which you can explicitly or implicitly explore the theme that ties the story elements together. Sometimes the resolution is accompanied by a **revelation**, in which the narrator or reader understands something about the bigger picture, such as a lesson learned from the events recounted or knowledge about the general human condition. Of course, each scene or section should have its own conflict, connected in some way to the overarching message of your writing. As you write, ask yourself, *What's the conflict?* By identifying the conflict explicitly, you will ensure that it remains central to your narrative.

Two important aspects of plot structure regarding time in a memoir are *chronos* and *kairos*. ***Chronos*** is the sequence of events told according to their order. This order is often chronological and linear, but not always—it can be interrupted, fragmented, circular, or otherwise out of sequence and can sometimes include flashbacks. *Chronos* develops themes by the telling of events. ***Kairos***, on the other hand, is the Greek concept of timeliness. Events told through the lens of *kairos* are often transcendental, an argument that is made at the right time, often rooted in a cultural moment or movement.

Other important aspects of personal writing overlap with the narrative genre. Both reader engagement and plot rely largely on vivid details and sensory descriptions to move readers through the story. For more information on narrative elements that may enhance your personal narrative or memoir, revisit Literacy Narrative: Building Bridges, Bridging Gaps.

Key Terms for Memoir or Personal Narrative Writing

- **anecdotes:** a short, interesting story or event told to demonstrate a point or amuse the audience.
- **Bias:** the inclusion or exclusion of certain events and facts, the decisions about word choice, and the consistency of tone. All work together to convey a particular feeling or attitude. Bias comes from a specific stance or worldview and can limit a text, particularly if that bias is left unexamined.
- **Characters:** fictional people (or other beings) created in a work of literature. The narrator of a memoir or personal narrative is the nonfiction equivalent of the main character.
- **Climax:** the point of highest level of interest and emotional response in a narrative.
- **Conclusion:** in narrative writing, the resolution. It is the point at which the narrator has reached a decision.
- **Conflict:** the major challenge that the main character faces.
- **Doubling:** a mirroring of events, objects, characters, or concepts in a memoir.
- **Exposition:** the beginning section of a narrative that introduces the characters, setting, and plot.
- **Falling action:** the section of the plot after the climax in which tension from the main conflict is decreased and the narrative moves toward the conclusion, or resolution.
- **Flashback:** a scene that interrupts the chronological order of the main narrative to return to a scene from an earlier time.
- **Foreshadowing:** hints of what is to come in the text.
- **Mood:** the atmosphere of the text, often achieved through details, description, and setting.
- **Plot:** the events that make up a narrative or story.
- **Point of view:** the perspective from which a narrative is told. Memoirs and personal narratives usually use the first-person point of view, or tell the story through the eyes of the narrator.
- **Resolution:** the point at which a story's conflict is settled; the conclusion of a narrative.
- **Revelation:** a discovery about a person, event, or idea that shapes the plot.
- **Rising action:** a series of events in the plot in which tension surrounding the major conflict increases and the plot moves toward its climax.
- **Setting:** when and where a narrative occurs. Setting is revealed through narration and details.
- **Theme:** the underlying idea that reveals the author's message about a narrative.

- **Vivid details:** sensory language and detailed descriptions that help readers gain a deeper and fuller understanding of ideas and events in the narrative.
- **Voice:** the combination of vocabulary, tone, sentence structure, dialogue, and other details that make a text authentic and engaging. Voice is the "identity" or "personality" of the writer and includes the specific English variety used by the narrator and characters.

4.4 Annotated Sample Reading: from Life on the Mississippi by Mark Twain

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Read for understanding, showing that genre conventions are shaped by purpose, culture, and expectation.
- Analyze relationships between ideas and patterns of organization in a nonfiction text.

Introduction

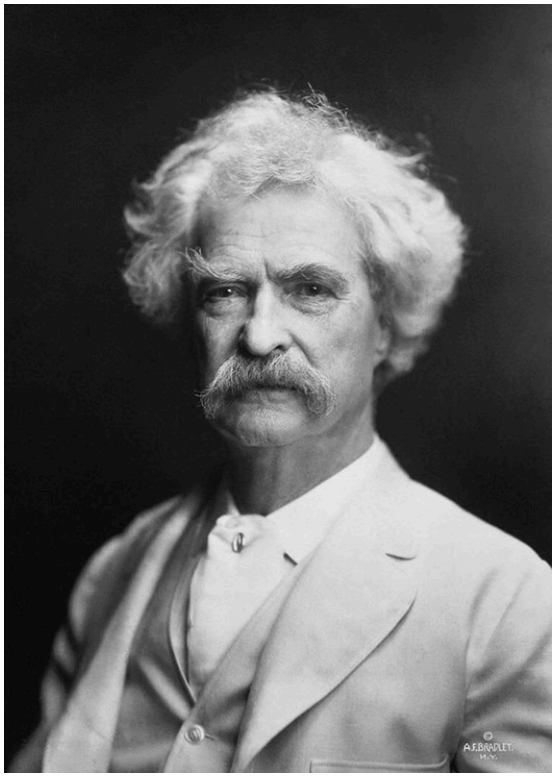


FIGURE 4.5 Mark Twain, 1907 (credit: "Mark Twain" by A.F. Bradley/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

An image in literature is a description that engages one of the five senses. Details rich in **imagery** appeal to readers' emotions, create new meaning, and draw an audience into the story. Sensory images—what the narrator sees, hears, tastes, feels, and smells—should be specific and contain emotional content that enhances your writing. When you write your personal narrative, you will use imagery to engage readers, convey meaning, and bring your story to life.

In the text excerpt you are about to read, Mark Twain (1835–1910) uses imagery to place readers with him aboard a steamboat on the Mississippi River as Mr. Bixby trains him to pilot it. As you read, put yourself in the shoes of the narrator—Mark Twain. Notice how vividly he describes sensory experiences and how they enhance your understanding of his purpose.

Twain lived in a pre–Civil War America in which slavery was accepted and prevalent. He used his literature to criticize slavery and hierarchical social codes of the American South, though he wasn't necessarily an outspoken opponent in his public life. Twain provides an example of the ways in which literature can subtly

influence the beliefs and identities of generations of readers. Visit Project Gutenberg (https://openstax.org/r/projectgutenberg) for the full text of *Life on the Mississippi*.

LIVING BY THEIR OWN WORDS

The Storyteller's World: Entering through Imagery

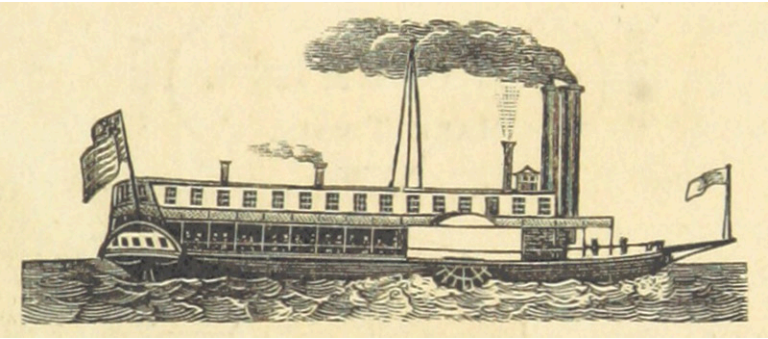


FIGURE 4.6 In this illustration, appearing in Life on the Mississippi, the steamboat is an older vessel but is similar to the one in Twain's memoir. (credit: "MISSISSIPPI STEAMBOAT - FIFTY YEARS AGO" by Samuel Langhorne Clemens/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

> Mr. Bixby served me in this fashion once, and for years afterward I used to blush even in my sleep when I thought of it. I had become a good steersman [a person steering a boat or ship]; so good, indeed, that I had all the work to do on our watch, night and day; Mr. Bixby seldom made a suggestion to me; all he ever did was to take the wheel on particularly bad nights or in particularly bad crossings, land the boat when she needed to be landed, play gentleman of leisure nine-tenths of the watch, and collect the wages. The lower river was about bank-full, and if anybody had questioned my ability to run any crossing between Cairo and New Orleans without help or instruction, I should have felt irreparably hurt. The idea of being afraid of any crossing in the lot, in the *day-time*, was a thing too preposterous for contemplation. Well, one matchless summer's day I was bowling down the bend above island 66, brimful of self-conceit and carrying my nose as high as a giraffe's, when Mr. Bixby said,—

Point of view. *Twain writes in first person, using the pronouns I and me.*

Exposition. *Though the excerpt starts in the middle of a chapter of a larger work, this paragraph begins an anecdote that Twain relates about a specific incident in his time in training. The paragraph acts as the exposition, establishing the setting, characters, and lead-in to the conflict related in the anecdote.*

Reflection. *Twain's reflection of the memory, saying he would "blush even in my sleep," reveals his embarrassment in a way that readers can relate to.*

> "I am going below a while. I suppose you know the next crossing?"

> This was almost an affront. It was about the plainest and simplest crossing in the whole river. One couldn't come to any harm, whether he ran it right or not; and as for depth, there never had been any bottom there. I knew all this, perfectly well.

> "Know how to *run* it? Why, I can run it with my eyes shut."

Tone. *In this dialogue, the narrator takes on a tone of confidence, which helps develop his own voice and character.*

Dialogue. *Twain uses dialogue to recreate the scene and reveal characters.*

> "How much water is there in it?"

> "Well, that is an odd question. I couldn't get bottom there with a church steeple."

> "You think so, do you?"

> The very tone of the question shook my confidence. That was what Mr. Bixby was expecting. He left, without saying anything more. I began to imagine all sorts of things. Mr. Bixby, unknown to me, of course, sent somebody down to the forecastle [forward part of the ship, below the deck] with some mysterious instructions to the leadsmen, another messenger was sent to whisper among the officers, and then Mr. Bixby went into hiding behind a smoke-stack where he could observe results. Presently the captain stepped out on the hurricane deck [an upper deck on a ship]; next the chief mate appeared; then a clerk. Every moment or two a straggler was added to my audience; and before I got to the head of the island I had fifteen or twenty people assembled down there under my nose. I began to wonder what the trouble was. As I started across, the captain glanced aloft at me and said, with a sham uneasiness in his voice,—

Vivid Details and Imagery. *Twain builds tension through vivid detail and imagery that recreates the sounds and paints a picture of his experience. From the whispers of the messengers to the sight of more and more people appearing on the deck to observe the narrator, readers can almost feel the narrator becoming more nervous.*

Rising Action. *The reader begins to understand the conflict through the sequence of events. This rising action builds tension by contrasting Twain's earlier stated confidence with his increasing anxiety.*

> "Where is Mr. Bixby?" | "Gone below, sir."

Dialogue. *Twain employs dialogue to advance the plot and simultaneously increase tension, thus defining the conflict. The dialogue here signals the narrator's move from confidence to anxiety, the next line indicating that the captain's questioning "did the business" for him. Dialogue also helps establish authenticity and recreate "reality" for readers, allowing them an opportunity to "witness" the scene and the characters directly.*

> But that did the business for me. My imagination began to construct dangers out of nothing, and they multiplied faster than I could keep the run of them. All at once I imagined I saw shoal [shallow] water ahead! The wave of coward agony that surged through me then came near dislocating every joint in me. All my confidence in that crossing vanished. I seized the bell-rope; dropped it, ashamed; seized it again; dropped it once more; clutched it tremblingly once again, and pulled it so feebly that I could hardly hear the stroke myself. Captain and mate sang out instantly, and both together,—

Vivid Description. *Twain moves the plot toward the climax in this paragraph, particularly with his description of the dangers multiplying and the peril he imagines.*

Mood. *In this section, Twain creates a frazzled and frantic mood through not only the details and description but also the sentence structure. Particularly in the sentence "I seized the bell-rope; dropped it, ashamed; seized it again; dropped it once more . . . ," the short, connected clauses and phrases and the repetition of the words dropped and seized all add to the sense of panic.*

> "Starboard lead there! and quick about it!"

> This was another shock. I began to climb the wheel like a squirrel; but I would hardly get the boat started to port [the left side of the ship when a person on board is facing forward] before I would see new dangers on that side, and away I would spin to the other; only to find perils accumulating to starboard [the right side of the ship when a person on board is facing forward], and be crazy to get to port again. Then came the leadsman's sepulchral [bleak, morbid] cry:—

Organization. *After the introduction in which Twain writes in the present tense to indicate he will tell an embarrassing story from the past, the rest of the passage follows a chronological organization, recounting the event from beginning to end.*

> "D-e-e-p four!" | Deep four in a bottomless crossing! The terror of it took my breath away.

> "M-a-r-k three! . . . M-a-r-k three . . . Quarter less three! . . . Half twain!"

> This was frightful! I seized the bell-ropes and stopped the engines.

> "Quarter twain! Quarter twain! *Mark* twain!"

Dialogue. *Here, the dialogue emphasizes the narrator's terror and leads to the climax.*

> I was helpless. I did not know what in the world to do. I was quaking from head to foot, and I could have hung my hat on my eyes, they stuck out so far.

Hyperbole. *Twain uses a combination of sensory detail and hyperbole, or exaggeration, to emphasize how panicked he feels in the moment.*

> "Quarter *less* twain! Nine and a *half*!"

> We were *drawing* nine! My hands were in a nerveless flutter. I could not ring a bell intelligibly with them. I flew to the speaking-tube and shouted to the engineer,—

> "Oh, Ben, if you love me, *back* her! Quick, Ben! Oh, back the immortal *soul* out of her!"

Climax. *In this part of the story the narrator calls out for help as the tension reaches its peak.*

> I heard the door close gently. I looked around, and there stood Mr. Bixby, smiling a bland, sweet smile. Then the audience on the hurricane deck sent up a thundergust [roar] of humiliating laughter. I saw it all, now, and I felt meaner than the meanest man in human history. I laid in the lead, set the boat in her marks, came ahead on the engines, and said:—

Vivid Details. *The narrator describes Mr. Bixby's "bland" smile, contrasted with the uproarious laughter of the rest of the group. He also uses vivid details to describe his own reaction: he "felt meaner than the meanest man in human history."*

Falling Action. *After it is revealed that the group was tricking Twain, the tension begins to dissipate.*

> "It was a fine trick to play on an orphan, *wasn't* it? I suppose I'll never hear the last of how I was ass enough to heave the lead at the head of 66."

> "Well, no, you won't, maybe. In fact I hope you won't; for I want you to learn something by that experience. Didn't you *know* there was no bottom in that crossing?"

> "Yes, sir, I did."

> "Very well, then. You shouldn't have allowed me or anybody else to shake your confidence in that knowledge. Try to remember that. And another thing: when you get into a dangerous place, don't turn coward. That isn't going to help matters any."

Theme. *Through this dialogue, Twain introduces the message of the story. More than providing an amusing recollection about a time he was embarrassed, his purpose is to convey the message that it is important to rely on your knowledge and training rather than allow fear to rule.*

> It was a good enough lesson, but pretty hardly learned. Yet about the hardest part of it was that for months I so often had to hear a phrase which I had conceived a particular distaste for. It was, "Oh, Ben, if you love me, back her!"

Resolution. *The narrator explicitly states his lesson learned at the end of the story and adds a detail about his continuing humiliation.*

Discussion Questions

1. For what reason might Twain have chosen to tell this anecdote in his memoir?
2. How does telling this story help Twain reveal his experience of learning to be a riverboat pilot?
3. How does Twain build tension to support the conflict in the anecdote?

4. How does the narrator pull the reader into the action in the paragraph beginning "But that did the business for me"?
5. How do the narrator's word choices in the story shape the tone and mood?
6. How does Twain's use of vivid details and descriptions help the reader connect to the text?

4.5 Writing Process: Making the Personal Public

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Develop a writing project through multiple drafts.
- Apply correct genre conventions for structure, paragraphs, tone, and mechanics.
- Write with purposeful shifts in voice, diction, tone, formality, and structure appropriate to personal narratives.
- Proficiently employ cultural and language variations in composition.
- Experience the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes.
- Give and act on productive feedback to works in progress.

Now it's your turn to put pen to paper and experience the genre through action. Once you choose a moment to write about and begin the narrative process, you may want to rearrange, rewrite, or even omit some parts entirely. The goal is to create a story that not only gets your message across but also creates an emotional connection with your readers.

Summary of Assignment: A Turning Point

Choose an event from your life that has stuck in your memory as a turning point of some sort. Certainly, you can write about major milestones—graduations, achievements, and the like—but consider small moments and events, too: something that someone said to you or that you overheard, a time you got or didn't get what you wanted, a time you were disappointed, or a time you thought you knew better than a more experienced person. To get the most accurate perspective of the event, go back in time as far as you can so that you think about the event as objectively as possible and know it as a real and meaningful turning point. Write a story about the event, and use narrative techniques to show why the event has become meaningful. Here are some other ideas about possible turning points:

- A changed attitude toward a friend, sibling, or other family member
- A change of major, if that change is a big step away from what you planned to do
- Making or not making the cut for a team or some other group
- Your feelings when you learned something about yourself or someone close to you
- A move from another country to the United States or from another U.S. location to where you are now
- Becoming fluent in another language
- Realizing that a certain behavior either gets you what you want or doesn't
- Realizing that someone you admire is not so admirable, or vice versa
- Becoming friends with someone you didn't expect to be friends with
- Facing an illness or crisis and how it changed or didn't change you

Another Lens. An alternative to writing a first-person narrative about a turning point is to consider writing about the event from the perspective of someone—or something—else. If the story involves another person in addition to yourself, consider making that person the narrator and having them tell the story as they might view it. Also consider telling your story from an outside observer's perspective, or even from the perspective of an inanimate object—for example, the pen used to sign a contract. This perspective may be beneficial for exploring your own emotions and may also offer a helpful alternative if including details about your personal life in your story makes you uncomfortable.

Quick Launch: Plot Diagram

Once you have chosen a topic, freewrite for 5 to 10 minutes, considering the following questions:

- Why is this event memorable?
- What conflict did you face?
- What images come to mind when you think of this event?

Then, begin to isolate details to create a plot diagram. Remember, following a plot diagram involves focusing on the building of tension surrounding the conflict in a story and then resolving it in a meaningful way.

Access multimedia content (http://openstax.org/books/writing-guide/pages/4-5-writing-process-making-the-personal-public)

Drafting: Conflict, Point of View, Organization, and Reflection

With the skeleton of a plot diagram in mind, freewrite again for 5 to 10 minutes, considering the following questions:

- Why is this event memorable?
- What conflict did you face?
- What images come to mind when you think of this event?
- What do you want to express to your readers about the event?
- What lessons did you learn from the event?

Purpose

Along with your freewrite, consider what message you want to leave with readers. The reason this moment is important to you should be made clear to readers through the development of the story, most often through the conflict and its resolution. Remember that the conflict is the primary problem or obstacle that the main character—most likely you in this personal narrative—faces and must overcome in order to reach a resolution. Conflict in a personal narrative, as in fiction, usually consists of one or more of five main conflict types:

- Character vs. character
- Character vs. self
- Character vs. environment or nature
- Character vs. society
- Character vs. fate or the supernatural

The **purpose** and theme are shaped by the conflict. Consider the conflict in the Mark Twain excerpt. Twain needs to run a crossing that, at the beginning of the passage, he feels confident to handle. But as the story progresses and Mr. Bixby sends more people to make him nervous, Twain begins to second-guess himself.

> But that did the business for me. My imagination began to construct dangers out of nothing, and they multiplied faster than I could keep the run of them. All at once I imagined I saw shoal water ahead! The wave of coward agony that surged through me then came near dislocating every joint in me. All my confidence in that crossing vanished. I seized the bell-rope; dropped it, ashamed; seized it again; dropped it once more; clutched it tremblingly once again, and pulled it so feebly that I could hardly hear the stroke myself.

This conflict not only builds the reader's interest in the main character's problem but also helps Twain develop the theme, his message to the reader: you must rely on your knowledge and training rather than second-guess yourself. In this anecdote, the theme is explicitly stated, but more often than not, authors are more subtle, requiring readers to infer themes on the basis of details in the text. The ways in which you craft your conflict and theme will affect its significance to your readers.

To help you organize you work, complete a graphic organizer like Table 4.1 as you are able at this point. You may want to revise it later as you write your draft.

Basic Story Elements	
Purpose	
Conflict	
Main Characters	
Theme	

TABLE 4.1 Basic story elements

Plot Elements

Now that you have considered your overall message and have a general idea of what you will write about, think of how you will structure your story. You already have diagrammed some of the Mark Twain excerpt and know how plots move along. One idea for organizing the plot of your narrative is to write down individual moments or events on notecards and physically place them on a table to mimic a hands-on plot diagram. You should have a series of events leading to the climax and fewer events that make up the falling action. This method of plot diagramming also helps you identify where holes may turn up in your plan. For example: *Is your exposition missing key background information that is necessary for readers to understand the story? Have you created sufficient tension in the lead-up to the climax of your story?* Examine your plot diagram to identify where you need more (or perhaps less) detail in your outline. You might notice that the plot diagram is a bit lopsided, skewing left. If it does, then much of your story leads up to the climax, as it should, with fewer words between the climax and resolution.

Most, but not all, personal narratives are written in chronological order; that is, the storyteller follows the sequence of events according to the order in which they occur. However, there are other structures, such as anecdotes told according to theme, through flashbacks, or in reverse chronological order. The order in which you recount events is important in building tension in the story, thus stimulating readers' curiosity. Seriously consider how each choice that you make will create readers' engagement and emotional connection to your story as you plan toward the climax.

Exposition

Next, follow your plot diagram to begin writing your narrative. Start with a strong introduction. Try to think of this introductory section as the "hook," engaging readers so that they want to continue reading. Create the introduction with vivid details or a relatable anecdote. Remember that this section will introduce the main characters, the setting, and the conflict. Here are some suggestions for an opening strategy, all of which should be brief, generally not more than two paragraphs:

- Anecdote related to your story
- Description of one of the characters involved
- Scenario in which you ask readers what they might do in that situation
- Description of a setting in which you found yourself
- Significant dialogue or action that you will explain later
- One or more open-ended questions that relate closely to the theme; avoid yes/no questions

Transitions

As you do in other writing, build your overall structure through **transitions**—words and phrases you use to move readers through events, ideas, and time. Transitions smooth connections between ideas, clarifying them and making reading easier. In narratives, transitions often indicate the passage of time. They may also

introduce new characters or ideas, tie ideas together, or make connections to the larger theme or message.

Transitions may be concrete, as is the one Mark Twain uses: "Well, one matchless summer's day. . ." This statement clearly establishes the passage of time. But transitions can also be abstract or subtle, helping the author organize ideas and information. More subtle transitions include changes in elements such as tone, voice, point of view, or even setting. Use the plot diagram as an outline, and move from event to event as you draft your narrative. You will have freedom with paragraph length and structure because you will use dialogue and description. Also, some events or characters may require more detail than others. As you write your narrative, use transitions to move readers along until you ultimately resolve the central conflict and tie its resolution to the theme.

Point of View

Authors have options for narrating a literary work—that is, they can choose from whose **point of view** they tell the story. In your narrative, you most likely will use the **first-person point of view**. When a story is told from this point of view, the narrator is a character in the story and tells it as it happens—that is, as the narrator experiences the event. Mark Twain tells his story from the first-person point of view in the excerpt from *Life on the Mississippi*. The first sentence of that excerpt reads, "Mr. Bixby served me in this fashion once, and for years afterward I used to blush even in my sleep when I thought of it." Not only do readers understand that the narrator is telling the story, using pronouns such as *me* and *I*, but the narrator also describes his feelings ("blush[ing] even in my sleep") and thoughts. For more information about point of view, see Editing Focus: Characterization and Point of View and Point of View.

Characters

Characters in a personal narrative are generally real people, at least in part. As the author, you can focus on certain character traits and ignore, minimize, or exaggerate others. In making the people in your narrative come to life, you will likely assign them different ways of behaving and speaking. For example, one character may use long words and speak condescendingly to another. Another character may find conversation difficult and say little, relying on gestures more than words. Still another character might be generous, sympathetic, arrogant, or sneaky. When creating characters, make sure the characters' language and behavior reflect their characterizations. For more information about characterization, see Editing Focus: Characterization and Point of View.

You can use a web diagram, similar to the one shown in Figure 4.7, to keep track of characters' traits.

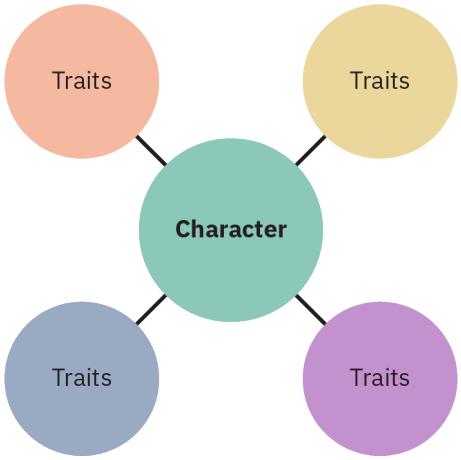


FIGURE 4.7 Character web (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY NC-SA 4.0 license)

Setting

Where and when your narrative takes place is an important part of a narrative, as it is in the excerpt from Twain's story. You may want to describe a setting in detail if it is important in the course of the story, or you

may find it a less essential part of the narrative. In either case, the setting must be described to some extent to give the narrative a sense of time and place.

Verb Tense

Choose the **tense** in which you want to tell your story, and ensure that you stay consistent throughout the narrative. Typically, you will choose between past tense and present tense. **Past tense** provides a familiar sense of storytelling, as Twain develops in his anecdote: "I looked around, and there stood Mr. Bixby, smiling a bland, sweet smile." Another option is to tell your story in the **present tense**, which provides a sense of urgency to the events and allows readers to feel closer to the action. If you are considering using the present tense, try substituting it in the excerpt from *Life on the Mississippi*. Consider how it sounds and the difficulties you might encounter in using it. Whichever tense you choose, however, the most important thing is to stick to it, changing it only to indicate a change in chronology. For example, if you are narrating in the present tense and want to indicate something that happened at a time before the events of your story, you would change tenses for clarity. Read more about verb tense consistency in Editing Focus: Verb Tense Consistency.

Active vs. Passive Voice

Verbs have two voices: active and passive. In an active-voice sentence structure, the subject performs the action of the verb. In a passive-voice sentence structure, the subject receives the action of the verb. Consider the examples in Table 4.2.

Active Voice	Passive Voice
I devoured the silky pudding.	The silky pudding was devoured by me.
The teacher will give you directions.	Directions will be given to you by the teacher.
The barnacles scraped my skin.	My skin was scraped by the barnacles.
The sloth carried her baby on her back.	The baby sloth was carried by its mother on her back.
The two presidents are signing the agreement.	The agreement is being signed by the two presidents.
A tornado destroyed the neighborhood.	The neighborhood was destroyed by a tornado.

TABLE 4.2 Active vs. passive voice

The meanings in both passive and active voice remain the same, yet their effect is different. In active voice, the message will be clearer and often more convincing. While it is not wrong to write in the passive voice on occasion, you will usually strengthen your writing by focusing on how a subject performs an action rather removing it from the direct action. For more information about active and passive voice, see Clear and Effective Sentences.

Imagery



In personal narratives and memoirs, imagery not only brings the experience to life but also engages readers through their senses. For example, Twain appeals to the sense of hearing when he describes "the leadsman's sepulchral cry:—'D-e-e-p four!'" The use of figurative language, such as similes, metaphors, hyperbole, or personification, often enhances these descriptions. Think of images and figurative language as ways of *showing* versus *telling*. Consider Twain's recounting of the moment he loses his nerve: "I began to climb the wheel like a squirrel." Certainly, he could have said instead, "I spun the wheel back and forth." But the use of figurative language, in this case a simile comparing his action to a squirrel's, helps readers imagine and share Twain's terror as if they are experiencing the event in the same way. Within a scene in your story, choose an

event, moment, or place, and practice using imagery to describe it. Then use a graphic organizer like Figure 4.8 to imagine how you might use each sense to describe the same event or another event, moment, or place from your story.

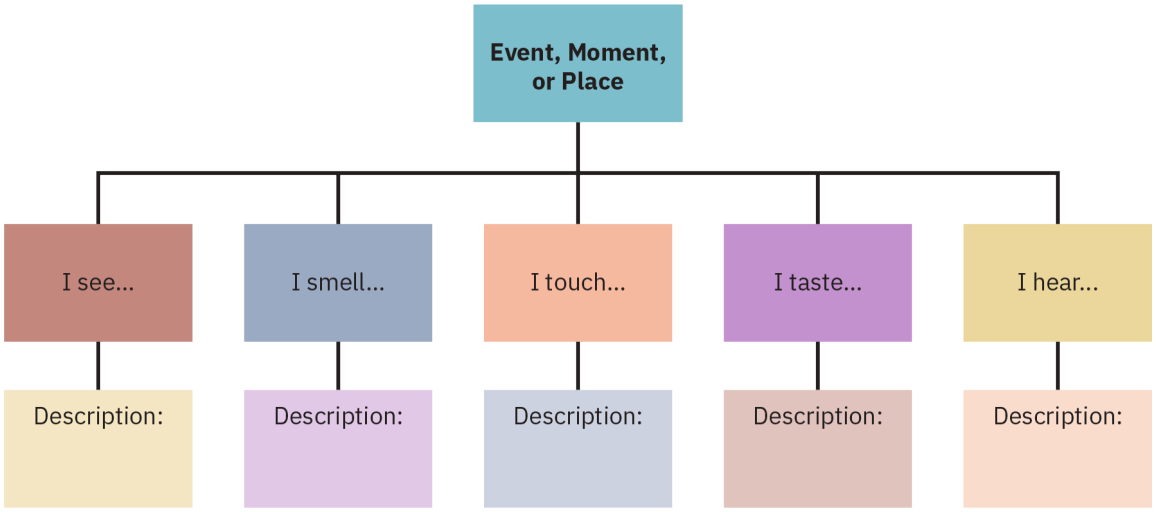


FIGURE 4.8 Senses chart (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY NC-SA 4.0 license)

For your narrative, you do not have to use all the descriptions in the graphic organizer, and doing so would likely clutter your story. Choose the best, most powerful details to enhance your writing and help readers viscerally experience the event, moment, or place.

Sentence Structure

You can structure your text in various ways to achieve your intended mood, tone, and overall message. No matter what your form or style, sentences are your main units of composition, explaining the world in terms of subjects, actions, and objects: some force (a subject) does something (action) that causes something else to happen (an object). Narrative writing, like all prose, is built around complete and predictable sentences.

Sometimes, however, writers use sentences in less predictable and more playful ways. For example, **fragmented sentences** suggest fragmented stories. Fragmented sentences can be used judiciously in conventional writing, even academic writing, as long as their purpose is clear and your fragment is not mistaken for a grammatical error. Writers sometimes use fragments audaciously and sometimes with abandon to create the special effects they want: *A flash of movement. A bit of a story. A frozen scene.*

Fragments force quick reading, ask for impressionistic understanding, and suggest parts rather than wholes. Like snapshots, fragments invite strong reader participation to stitch information together and move toward clear meaning. Fragmented sentences suggest, too, that things are moving fast. Often used in dialogue as well to mimic real speech, purposeful fragments can be powerful: *Deliberate. Intentional. Careful. Functional. Usually brief.*

Consider British novelist Charles Dickens's (1812–1870) use of fragments in this story told in *The Pickwick Papers* (1836). The impact of the sentence fragments here conveys a sensory experience and creates a mood for the reader.

> "Heads, heads—take care of your heads!" cried the loquacious stranger, as they came out under the low archway, which in those days formed the entrance to the coach-yard. "Terrible place—dangerous work—other day—five children—mother—tall lady, eating sandwiches—forgot the arch—crash—knock—children look round—mother's head off—sandwich in her hand—no mouth to put it in—head of a family off—shocking, shocking!"

On the opposite pole of sentence structure are **labyrinthine sentences**. A labyrinthine sentence seems never

to end. Instead, it goes on and on and on, using all sorts of punctuational and grammatical tricks to create a compound sentence (two or more independent clauses joined by a comma and a conjunction such as *and*, *or*, or *but*) or a complex sentence (one independent clause with one or more dependent clauses). Such sentences are often written to suggest that events or time are running together and hard to separate. However, such writing may more often suggest error than experiment, so be careful.

Another type of sentence variation is achieved through repetition of words, phrases, or sentences for emphasis. Repeated words and ideas suggest continuity of idea and theme, help meld ideas and paragraphs, and sometimes create rhythms that are pleasing to the ear. While **refrain** is a term more often associated with music, poetry, and sermons, it is a form of repetition that is quite powerful in prose as well. A refrain is a phrase or group of words repeated throughout a text to remind readers (or listeners) of an important theme. For example, the words "I have a dream" are a refrain from American activist Martin Luther King Jr. 's (1929–1968) speech by the same name. Look at how Mark Twain uses repetition to increase the tension.

> I seized the bell-rope; dropped it, ashamed; seized it again; dropped it once more; clutched it tremblingly once again, and pulled it so feebly that I could hardly hear the stroke myself.

Variation in sentence structure, established through such techniques as fragments, labyrinthine sentences, and repetition, creates certain effects within the text because each technique conveys its information in an unmistakable way. These techniques are stylistic devices that add an emotional dimension to the typically factual material of narrative prose without announcing, labeling, or dictating what those emotions should be. The wordplay of alternate-style composing allows narrative prose to convey themes more often conveyed through more obviously poetic forms. These sentence variations are a large component of what constitutes voice. For more information about sentence structure, see Clear and Effective Sentences.

Voice

As you write, focus on developing your **voice**, which in writing is the identity or personality of the narrator or writer. A writer's voice is sometimes equated with an individual's personal style—the elements that contribute to the way that person looks and acts. *Do you favor certain kinds of clothing? Do you walk in a certain way? Do you have certain characteristic gestures or speech patterns?* In writing, your voice is the sum total of the words you choose, the way you use them, the attitude you project by your word choice, the mood you create, the way your words describe characters, the way characters speak and behave, and the way you relate events. In personal writing, voice comes through via narration, dialogue, and characterization and the way you project your personality through them.

Further, writers often speak with more than one voice, or maybe with a single voice that has a wide range, varied registers, multiple tones, and different pitches. In any given composition, a writer may try to say two things at the same time. Sometimes writers question their own assertions, sometimes they say one thing aloud and think another silently to themselves, sometimes they say one thing that means two things, and sometimes they express contradictions, paradoxes, or conundrums.

Double voices in a text may be indicated by parentheses—the equivalent of an actor speaking an aside on the stage or in a film. In a film, the internal monologue of a character may be revealed as a voice-over or through printed subtitles while another reaction is happening on-screen. With text, you can change the type size or font or switch to *italic*, **boldface**, or CAPITAL LETTERS to signal a switch in your voice as a writer. The double voice can also occur without distinguishing markers at all or with simple paragraph breaks or spaces.

Effective voice can be achieved through sentence structure and word choices. Try to balance **descriptive language** and **dialogue**. You likely have heard the expression "Show, don't tell." Use narration to describe events, actions, and even the narrator's thoughts, but don't fall into the trap of feeling as though you need to describe *everything*. Allow events to flow naturally through the narration, weaving in action and dialogue. Precisely placed dialogue can reinforce the narration.

Because voice infuses personality into the composition, the lack of voice or a weak voice may make your story read like a timeline rather than selected events leading to a meaningful turning point. You want your voice to be consistent, reliable, and relatable to your readers. Often this voice will sound like you, infusing your personality or identity into the text. If you recreate authentic (or a good imitation of authentic) dialogue, narration, and description, your voice will likely be strongest, as it suggests a real connection with you.

Mood

When expressing the narrator's emotions and point of view about the events of the text, voice is a major factor in creating **mood** (atmosphere). For example, a mood may be gloomy, happy, or tense. The same event told by a narrator with a casual, lighthearted voice can be read completely differently if narrated with a formal, argumentative voice. Consider these two sentences and the effect created by the word choice:

- The rain danced on the pavement, sparkling droplets falling from cotton balls above.
- The rain pounded the pavement, pouring buckets from thundering gray clouds above.

The mood in the first sentence reflects a positive disposition toward the rain. The second sentence, though it says nearly the same thing, shows a negative attitude, expressing the violence of the rain. The two distinct moods, developed through imagery, details, and language, influence the reader's perception of the rain.

Conclusion and Reflection

At the end of your story, you will have the opportunity to reflect on the turning-point event, its impact on you, and perhaps its application to a universal theme. In the Twain example, the reflection is relatively straightforward.

> "Very well, then. You shouldn't have allowed me or anybody else to shake your confidence in that knowledge. Try to remember that. And another thing: when you get into a dangerous place, don't turn coward. That isn't going to help matters any."

> It was a good enough lesson, but pretty hardly learned. Yet about the hardest part of it was that for months I so often had to hear a phrase which I had conceived a particular distaste for. It was, "Oh, Ben, if you love me, back her!"

Twain uses Mr. Bixby's words to teach both himself and readers the lesson. Twain's reflection also points to a universal lesson, creating a relatable thread from which readers can learn. As you compose your reflection, ask yourself these questions:

- What have you learned from your turning point?
- What can readers learn from your turning point?
- How will you express this lesson?

You may reflect by using literary elements such as imagery or figurative language that help develop the theme or message. You will want to leave room for your readers' own interpretations so that they can apply the lesson to their own lives, as Twain does. Certainly, most people have doubted their knowledge and abilities at some point, and Mr. Bixby's directive "Don't turn coward" has universal meaning.

Peer Review: Focus on Big-Picture Elements

After your first draft is complete, begin the process of peer review. In this initial review, peer reviewers should focus on big-picture elements, such as plot, point of view, organization, and reflection. Peer reviewers can use the following sentence starters to assess these elements.

- My first impression of the story is _____. From it, I learned _____.
- The story begins with/by _____. It could be made more engaging by _____.
- The author uses dialogue to _____.
- The narrative is organized by _____. Doing _____ could strengthen the organization.

- The author's main point is _____ and is developed by _____.
- The author wants to tell me _____.
- I think these details could be made stronger to better develop the main idea or theme of _____.

In addition, peer reviewers may choose to mark the manuscript in the following ways:

- Circle unnecessary details. Underline places where more vivid details would bring events or ideas to life.
- Mark places where transitions are needed.
- Place quotation marks in the margin to indicate places where dialogue might better develop the story.

Revising: Let the Small Stuff Go for Now

After reading through your peer review, you now have the opportunity to revise your story. When you **revising**, reimagine your manuscript until it reaches your audience in the way you want it to. Begin this process by identifying the physical changes you want to make. These might include moving, adding, or deleting content and rewriting ideas. There are also nonphysical ways to revise. Focus on the big picture; think about whether the way you have told your story has delivered your intended message effectively. Avoid getting caught up in minute details before you have shaped the narrative to relate your intended ideas.

Use the following checklist to work through the revision process.

☐ **Introduction:** Does the introduction hook the reader and establish the background knowledge needed, including plot and setting?
☐ **Sequence of events:** Is the story told in a logical and consistent order?
☐ **Vivid details:** Do you provide vivid details that engage your readers' senses?
☐ **Tone and mood:** Are the tone and mood effective for your purpose?
☐ **Characterization, narration, and voice:** Have you developed consistent and specific characterization through your narration and voice?
☐ **Dialogue:** Does the dialogue help move the plot and reflect the characters?
☐ **Transitions:** Have you used clear transitions and time signals to establish chronology and connect important ideas?
☐ **Structure:** Have you developed a cohesive structure, including varying sentence lengths and structures? Can you improve sentences by restructuring, combining, or separating them?
☐ **Conclusion:** Does your conclusion clearly explain the significance of the turning-point event, including its relationship to the theme you want to develop?

4.6 Editing Focus: More on Characterization and Point of View

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Correctly identify and use conventions of the personal narrative genre, including structure, paragraphing, tone, and mechanics.
- Gain experience negotiating variations in genre conventions.

When you began writing your story, you likely concentrated on developing the plot and placing events and ideas in an order that made sense. Now, as you edit, work toward refining characterization and point of view in your narrative.

The Storyteller's Personas: Characterization

After you have developed your narrative, consider the characterization you used to develop the narrator's voice. Characterization helps create a picture of the narrator as a character, drawing the reader in and giving life and interest to the story. **Persona**, from the Latin word for a type of mask worn by stage actors, develops the impression the narrator leaves on the reader.

A persona is actually a construct. Although the story is about you, the actual character on the page is *not* you.

Like the Latin word, it is a mask, or a stand-in for you. You can carefully choose a persona for your character to communicate more authentically and directly with your audience. In real life, your persona refers to your appearance, mannerisms, voice, and body language. In a personal narrative, it is similar—the voice of the narrator as developed through thoughts, actions, and dialogue. Just as you might have a different persona when interacting with a teacher than you would with a friend, your persona as narrator should be carefully crafted to create the most meaning. Use your inner life to help bring the narrator to life. You can be who you want (or do not want) to be.

Consider how Twain creates a persona at the beginning of the excerpt from *Life on the Mississippi*. The opening of the excerpt provides information about both the narrator and Mr. Bixby, and the characterization of each supports the other. The narrator is portrayed as the junior steersman. He is confident but perhaps slightly cross at doing the majority of the work while the more experienced Mr. Bixby plays "gentleman of leisure."

> I had become a good steersman; so good, indeed, that I had all the work to do on our watch, night and day; Mr. Bixby seldom made a suggestion to me; all he ever did was to take the wheel on particularly bad nights or in particularly bad crossings, land the boat when she needed to be landed, play gentleman of leisure nine-tenths of the watch, and collect the wages.

Like Twain, you can develop persona through characterization in your story. Keep in mind that characters are viewed through your eyes. Other people or characters may view them differently, but in your personal narrative, it is your opinion that counts most. Use the following tips to strengthen characterization:

- Observe and report on a character's surroundings.
- Relay a character's personality through mannerisms, style, physical appearance, and dialogue.
- Build characters on the basis of relationships and roles.
- Report on how characters interact with one another and how they confront events.
- Relate characters to time.
- Express a character's role in plot events.

Choosing the First-Person Point of View

Remember that point of view has to do with the narrator of a story and how that narrator reports and understands events. A narrator may be biased or only have access to certain information and will relate and interpret events accordingly. You most likely have chosen or been assigned to write from the first-person point of view.

First-Person Point of View

A **first-person narrator** is a character in the story, whether fiction or nonfiction. Memoirs and autobiographies, as well as personal narratives and many works of fiction, are narrated from the first-person point of view. In telling their stories, first-person narrators, whether real people or fictional characters, are part of the story. They participate in the action, share opinions, and provide descriptions and interpretations. It is important in writing to remember that these narrators know only what they observe around them—what they learn from dialogue, what they are told, and what actions or events occur. They do not know what other characters are thinking and cannot go beyond what they imagine regarding other characters. For example, as Mark Twain begins to steer the boat, he observes Mr. Bixby leave and the others arrive. He cannot know what they are thinking or what motivates them. First-person narrators use *I* and *me* to indicate that they are the ones speaking and observing.

First-person point of view is the most frequently used in memoirs and personal narratives and serves as an authentic and credible point of view.

Third-Person Point of View

Third-person narration is also used frequently in narrative writing, but usually in fiction and nonpersonal narratives. In this point of view, a narrator who is not a character tells the story. In other words, the narrator is

outside the story and sees it from a broader angle. The narrator's point of view may be **limited point of view**, in which case the narrator aligns with one or several characters and knows only what they know—that is, the narrator reveals only the thoughts of that one or those several characters. Alternatively, the point of view may be **omniscient**, or all-knowing. Omniscient narrators know all characters' thoughts and actions regardless of whether the characters are present. Third-person narrators do not put themselves in the story, and they narrate with third-person pronouns such as *he*, *she*, and *they*. This point of view may provide more reliable and objective narration—but not always.

Second-Person Point of View

A final type of narration is the **second-person point of view**, in which the narrator uses the pronoun *you* to address readers directly. As in first-person narration, the narrator in this case is usually a character in the story; however, **second-person narration** folds the reader into the story as a character, a technique that draws them closer to the plot. Consider how American author Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) draws in the reader in the opening of his short story "The Haunted Mind" (1835).

> What a singular moment is the first one when you have hardly begun to recollect yourself after starting from midnight slumber! By unclosing your eyes so suddenly, you seem to have surprised the personages of your dream in full convocation round your bed, and catch one broad glance at them before they can flit into obscurity.

The second-person point of view is used much less in literary writing than either first or third person. Although it sometimes can be an effective perspective for experienced authors, second person presents problems for both readers and writers. It is difficult to develop successfully, and it's easy to lose track of the narration, thus confusing the reader. You can be sure that if you as the author have difficulty following the narration as you work through the revision process, your readers have little chance. Also, use of the second-person point of view may not be clear to readers who might not notice a difference between addressing readers as *you* simply to provide some information and actually drawing readers into the story as characters. Finally, second person can be difficult for readers to trust, for you are essentially asking them to suspend disbelief and take on all the qualities and experiences that you, as the author, assign them.

You will mostly likely use first-person narration as you retell a turning point in your life, but whichever narration you choose, be consistent.

Practice with Point of View

To become more familiar with first- and third-person points of view, rewrite a paragraph of your personal narrative using both types of third-person point of view, limited and omniscient. For the limited point of view, choose one of the characters for the narrator to focus on. For the omniscient point of view, focus on all of the characters. Then reflect on how the point of view changes the story. *Which point of view do you prefer—first, limited third, or omniscient third? Why?*

4.7 Evaluation: Structure and Organization

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Develop flexible strategies for reviewing and revising.
- Give and act on productive feedback for works in progress.
- Correctly identify and use conventions of the personal narrative genre, including structure, paragraphing, tone, and mechanics.

Ask your peer reviewer to evaluate your second draft by using the rubric in this section. The rubric can help you evaluate your writing regarding the conventions and style of a personal narrative. Though you may make personal writing choices that your peer reviewer doesn't agree with, a peer's perspective offers you a window into a reader's mind and can help you ensure that your story's impact matches your intentions. After

considering your peer reviewer's feedback, revise your paper by incorporating the changes you believe will strengthen it.

Rubric

Score	Critical Language Awareness	Clarity and Coherence	Rhetorical Choices
5 **Skillful**	The text always adheres to the "Editing Focus" of this chapter—characterization and point of view, discussed in Section 4.6—and reflects well-developed, relatable characters and a consistent point of view. The text also shows ample evidence of the writer's intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writer creates a meaningful narrative and provides effective development of characters, vivid details, and reflection through a clear and organized sequence of events. Tenses are always consistent, and events are seamlessly connected with transitions.	The writer consistently demonstrates strong awareness of the rhetorical situation, including narrator, message, audience, purpose, context, and culture. The writer uses dialogue and action to bring readers into the scene. Sentences are varied appropriately.
4 **Accomplished**	The text usually adheres to the "Editing Focus" of this chapter—characterization and point of view, discussed in Section 4.6—and reflects developed, relatable characters and a consistent point of view. The text also shows some evidence of the writer's intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writer creates a consistent narrative and provides effective development of characters, some vivid details, and reflection through a fairly well- organized sequence of events. Tenses are usually consistent, and events are usually connected with transitions.	The writer usually demonstrates strong awareness of the rhetorical situation, including narrator, message, audience, purpose, context, and culture. The writer uses dialogue and action to bring readers into the scene. Some sentences are varied.
3 **Capable**	The text generally adheres to the "Editing Focus" of this chapter—characterization and point of view, discussed in Section 4.6—and reflects fairly developed, relatable characters and a somewhat consistent point of view. The text also shows limited evidence of the writer's intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writer sometimes creates a consistent narrative and provides reasonably effective development of characters, some vivid details, and reflection through a somewhat organized sequence of events. Tenses may be inconsistent at times, and more transitions may be needed for coherence.	The writer sometimes demonstrates awareness of the rhetorical situation, including narrator, message, audience, purpose, context, and culture. The writer uses some dialogue and action to bring readers into the scene, but more of both are needed. Some sentences may be varied.

TABLE 4.3

Score	Critical Language Awareness	Clarity and Coherence	Rhetorical Choices
2 **Developing**	The text occasionally adheres to the "Editing Focus" of this chapter—characterization and point of view, discussed in Section 4.6—and reflects somewhat developed, relatable characters and a somewhat inconsistent point of view. The text also shows emerging evidence of the writer's intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writer rarely creates a consistent narrative and provides little development of characters, few details, and minimal reflection through a mostly disorganized sequence of events. Tenses are inconsistent or ineffective, and transitions are lacking or inappropriate.	The writer may occasionally demonstrate awareness of the rhetorical situation, including narrator, message, audience, purpose, context, and culture. The writer uses little dialogue and action to bring readers into the scene. Sentence structure shows little variation.
1 **Beginning**	The text does not adhere to the "Editing Focus" of this chapter—characterization and point of view, discussed in Section 4.6—and reflects undeveloped, unrelatable characters and an inconsistent point of view. The text also shows little to no evidence of the writer's intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writer creates a disorganized narrative with little or no development of characters, details, and reflection. Tenses are inconsistent or ineffective, and transitions are lacking or inappropriate.	The writer demonstrates little or no awareness of the rhetorical situation, including narrator, message, audience, purpose, context, and culture. The writer uses little or no dialogue and action. Sentence structure is not varied.

TABLE 4.3

4.8 Spotlight on … Multilingual Writers

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Respond to a variety of situations and contexts by recognizing diction, tone, formality, design, medium, or structure to meet the situation.
- Read a diverse range of texts, attending especially to patterns of organization, the interplay between verbal and nonverbal elements, and how these features function for different audiences and situations.

Multilingual writers are those who write in both first and second (or third . . . or more!) languages, as opposed to monolingual writers, who write in a single language. In the United States, it is not uncommon that English is the second language of multilingual authors, many of whom may have extensive familiarity and literacy in both their first and second languages. Colleges and universities, too, in their quest to include a more diverse population within their ranks, have seen an increase in multilingual writers and students.

Addressing the needs of multilingual students and writers deserves special attention, as these writers may experience a variety of differences between writing in their first languages and in English. In fact, the landscape and functions of various parts of writing—linguistics, audience, and rhetorical appeals, to name a few—vary across languages and cultures. While certain expectations exist in the academic sphere—for example, the way rhetorical appeals are incorporated within a position argument—different cultural practices and assumptions may require different processes for those writing from the perspective of multiple languages

or cultures. Understanding academic literacies can be challenging enough for students entrenched in the typical American classroom, and space should be carved out for those coming from different outlooks, particularly multilingual writers.

Multilingual writers have much to offer to classrooms and readers' literary experiences. In the past, languages have been viewed as occupying separate spaces in a multilingual writer's mind. It is commonly accepted that multilingual authors switch between the linguistic and cultural norms of each of their languages. But separate languages are also cohesive, allowing authors to draw on a wide variety of inventory from a different language as they compose, thus enhancing their writing.

The Storyteller's Purpose: The Truth of the Human Experience





Consider adding multilingual elements to your writing if you are a multilingual author. Language can create a mood and atmosphere for your readers, helping communicate cultural and linguistic individualities. You might add narration or dialogue in a language other than English to the story of your personal turning point if it makes sense within the narrative. For example, you might use dialogue to convey a young woman's conversation with her Mexican grandmother:

"Te amo, nieta," she whispered gently.

This can be a more powerful use of language and culture than simply stating that the grandmother spoke in Spanish, allowing the reader to experience the culture through language. Or a character may ask a question or make a statement in another language, allowing the reader to understand through the context of surrounding narration or dialogue:

"Vous avez des livres de Dickens?" the woman inquired. "Yes," I responded, "we have several books by Dickens."

Alternatively, consider sharing your own thoughts in another language, retaining traces of that language's structure and grammar. Reflection Trailblazer: Sandra Cisneros does this in Spanish, and Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi-Adichie (b. 1977) does this in Igbo. Both serve as models of how to incorporate another language into writing. In addition, some professional authors write in the language of the country they live in. For example, Irish playwright, poet, and novelist Samuel Beckett (1906–1989) lived in France and wrote in both French and English. American author Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967), who was born in London to Indian parents, lived for years in Italy and has written in Italian as well as her native English.

Publish Your Work

Publishing your personal writing is the next step you may want to take. In addition to your campus literary magazine, the following journals accept undergraduate creative work and are often looking for submissions.

- *The Allegheny Review (https://openstax.org/r/thealleghneyreview)*
- *Creative Nonfiction (https://openstax.org/r/creativenonfiction)*
- *Inquiries Journal (https://openstax.org/r/inquiriesjournal)*
- *International Journal of Undergraduate Research & Creative Activities (https://openstax.org/r/undergraduateresearch)*

4.9 Portfolio: Filtered Memories

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Reflect on the composition process.
- Reflect on how the composition process affects your writing.
- Use composition for learning, critical thinking, and communicating in various rhetorical contexts.

As part of this course, you are creating a portfolio of your compositions to show your development as a writer.

As you add to this portfolio, you assess your growth as a writer. The portfolio of your work allows you not only to have a record of your compositions but also to reflect on those compositions and the process involved in writing them. In this section, you will write a reflection on the process you followed in writing your turning-point story, including revision and editing. Consider your original intention when creating your essay and how close your final composition comes to fulfilling that intention.

Reflective Task

Answer the following questions before writing several paragraphs reflecting on the personal turning point you wrote about in this chapter. Consider both the process and the outcome of the writing assignment.

- Why did you choose the turning-point moment or event that you did?
- Which part of the writing process came the most naturally? Which was the most difficult?
- Which parts of the composition do you think are the strongest? Why?
- Which parts of the composition would you still like to improve?
- How did you develop your voice as a narrator as you wrote?
- If you were to write another turning-point story, what would you do differently? (Consider topic, organization, structure, point of view, and voice.)
- How did your story change through the revision and peer-editing processes? Name at least two changes you made, and reflect on how they made the piece stronger.
- What did you learn about yourself, both as a writer and as a person, from this exercise?

Further Reading

The following titles are good examples of essays, memoirs, and poems that tell personal stories.

Akbar, Kaveh. "How I Found Poetry in Childhood Prayer: In the Presence of the Long Faultless Tongue of God." *Literary Hub*, 12 Sept. 2017, https://lithub.com/kaveh-akbar-how-i-found-poetry-in-childhood-prayer/.

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Random House, 1969.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 4th ed., Aunt Lute Books, 2012.

Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son*. 1955. Beacon Press, 2012.

Beasley, Sandra. *Don't Kill the Birthday Girl: Tales from an Allergic Life*. Crown, 2011.

Bryson, Bill. *I'm a Stranger Here Myself: Notes on Returning to America after 20 Years Away*. Broadway Books, 1999.

Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. Pantheon Books, 1994.

McCourt, Frank. *Angela's Ashes*. Scribner, 1996.

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Houghton Mifflin, 1990.

Pausch, Randy. *The Last Lecture*. With Jeffrey Zaslow, Hyperion, 2008.

Schutz, Samantha. *I Don't Want to Be Crazy*. Scholastic, 2006.

Walls, Jeanette. *The Glass Castle: A Memoir*. Scribner, 2006.

Woodson, Jacqueline. *Brown Girl Dreaming*. Nancy Paulsen Books, 2014.

Read some of Ta-Nehisi Coates' articles to study his writing style:

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "Ta-Nehisi Coates." *The Atlantic*, https://www.theatlantic.com/author/ta-nehisi-coates/. Accessed 17 Mar. 2022

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Malcolm X. "Literacy behind Bars." *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Ballantine, 1964. *Northern Local School District*, https://www.nlsd.k12.oh.us/userfiles/63/Classes/4521/malcolm%20x%20-%20literacy%20behind%20bars.pdf.

Twain, Mark. *Life on the Mississippi*. James R. Osgood, 1883. *Project Gutenberg*, http://www.gutenberg.org/

files/245/old/orig245-h/245-h.htm.