Narrative Writing Class
Lesson 3

Here is what you will learn in this lesson:
I. Writing about Other People: Biographical narrative.
II. Requesting an Interview.
III. Writing Interview Questions.
IV. Conducting the Interview.

Writing about Other People: Biographical Narrative

A biographical narrative tells the story of a person other than the author. The story can come from personal observation or from history. Just as an autobiographical narrative grants other people insights into our lives, a biographical narrative gives us insight into someone else’s life, often someone we care about deeply.

Writing a Biographical Narrative: Before the Writing Begins—Choosing a Subject and Topic

In order to get started on writing your biographical narrative, you will need to decide on the person you will write about, called the subject. You will then decide on a topic, and then you will request an interview with your chosen person.

Subject: The subject of your biographical narrative will be a person close to you, such as your mom, dad, grandparent, another family member, or even a neighbor.

Topic: The topic of your biographical narrative will be a specific aspect or moment in the history of your subject’s life, which he or she will share with you through a personal interview. You can ask the person for ideas on what they would like to share with you, or you can think about what you would like to know more about them. Here are just a few ideas for your interview topic:

- What was the world like when you were 10?
- Tell me about the most important event in your life.
- Tell me about your first best friend.
**Requesting an Interview**

Once you have chosen the person to write about and the topic, you will need to contact that person and request an interview. You may call the person, visit him or her in person, or e-mail to request your interview. Explain that you are very interested in his or her life and would like to conduct an interview to learn more about it. If you have decided on a specific topic, let your subject know what the topic is. If not, ask him or her if there is a particular part of his or her life that would be ideal to share. Ask the person what day and time would work best. Make sure it works with your schedule, and then write the appointment on the calendar.

**Writing Interview Questions**

Now that you have your interview set, you will need to prepare for the interview by writing down your interview questions. Writers are unprepared for interviews if they do not write down their interview questions first. Unfortunately, this leaves writers with too many unanswered questions and a great deal of gaps in the narrative. Don’t make this mistake! Before conducting your interview, sit down and brainstorm all the possible questions you may have for your interviewee. This not only will help you stay focused on your topic but also will give you a chance to think of all the information you might want to know about the person you are interviewing. Try to avoid asking yes or no questions; instead, ask questions that allow the person you’re interviewing to give you plenty of details on the setting, his or her feelings and thoughts at the time, and other vivid details about the story.

Here is a list of possible questions. Choose questions that fit with the topic of your biographical narrative, and add your own.

- When were you born?
- Where were you born?
- Were you born in a hospital or somewhere else?
- Was there anything unusual about your birth?
- How many brothers and sisters did you have? When were they born?
• Where were your mother and father born?
• If they were not born in the U.S., when did they come here and why?
• Where did your parents work when you were young?
• What was going on in the world when you were born?
• What are some of your earliest memories?
• Did you have any pets as you were growing up? When? What were they?
• Where did you go to school?
• How many children were in your elementary school classes?
• Do you remember any of your teachers’ names and why they were special?
• Who were some of your best friends? What did you do with them?
• Where did you go to high school?
• What are some things you did in high school?
• Did you do things in high school such as pranks?
• What are some of your memories of high school?
• When did you graduate?
• What was going on in the world at that time?
• How did what was going on in the world affect your or your family’s life? (For instance, if there was a war during this time, did any family members or friends serve in the military? If so, what branch and where?)
• Did you work while you were in high school? What were some of your jobs? Do you remember how much you made per hour?
• What did you do when you graduated from high school?
• If you served in the military, where and in which branch of service? For how long? What are some of your memories and feelings of this time?
• Did you attend college? Where? What did you study? When did you graduate?
• When did you get married? Where? How did you meet your spouse?
• Where did you live when you first married?
• Where did you work when you first married?
• What was your financial situation when you first married?
• What kind of car did you drive?
• What kind of music did you listen to?
• What was going on in the world at that time?
• What are some of the most important things you feel you did in your life?
• What are the things of which you are most proud?
• What are things you wish could have been different?
• Would you share some stories of things that happened as you got older?
• Who do you think influenced you the most when you were growing up? Did you have a hero or mentor?
• What aspect of your personality do you think helps you the most in life?
• What aspect of your personality hinders you in life?
• What is the most exciting thing you can remember?
• What kind of effect have you had on the world? On other people?
• What modern inventions do you feel have increased the quality of life from when you were younger?
• What modern inventions do you feel have decreased the quality of life from when you were younger?
• What advice can you give to young people today?
• What personal values have carried you throughout your life?

You could go on and on with questions, but the important thing to remember is that it is always better to ask too many questions than too few. After you have written down all of your questions, try to put them in a logical order. This will keep you organized during your interview. Once the interview is complete, you can always choose what information to share in your biographical narrative.

Conducting the Interview

Now that you have written your interview questions, you are ready to conduct the interview.

**Just a note:** Quite often people feel nervous about conducting an interview. If you are one of these people, just remember that people love to tell a story, and so will the person you are interviewing.

Here are a few guidelines to follow when conducting your interview:

- Always be on time and be prepared. Read over your interview questions before the interview and have them ready.

- Bring a notebook and pencil for jotting down notes. Also, if you have a tape recorder, you may want to use this (but get the interviewee’s permission to do so). Referring to it later is helpful. Even if you use a tape recorder, you still need to take written notes.
Perhaps one of your parents can attend the interview with you and sit in the background.

Start your interview by saying, “Thank you.” Let your interviewee know that you appreciate his or her time and the information being shared with you.

Make sure that you don’t limit your questions to the ones on your list. If the person you are interviewing talks about something interesting that is not on your list, follow that thought and ask further questions.

As you ask your questions, make sure to write down the information and details in your notebook. You will also want to write down any other information and details the interviewee has shared that you didn’t have on your questions list.

Make sure your notes are legible. This means that you have written them neatly so that you can read them later. Take general notes, but also make sure to write down a few important things word for word. Place quotation marks around the exact words so that you know it is a direct quotation. If you need to ask the person to pause while you write and then verify that what you have written is correct, that is perfectly fine.

After you have finished your interview, make sure to say, “Thank you.” In addition, you will want to ask if it is okay for you to call if you have any further questions. This will be important in case something comes up when writing your biographical narrative.

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**Narrative Writing—Lesson 3 Assignments**

When typing your assignments in Word, please make sure to use MLA format. Also, when you e-mail me your assignments, please make sure that the subject line on your e-mail includes your name, the class name (NW), and the assignment number or numbers.

Example: Subject: BrianS NW-3A
Or (if sending more than one)
Subject: BrianS NW-3B and 3C (and so on)

When you are sending in your revisions, make sure to include that in the subject as well (rev1 or rev2 or whichever revision number it is).

Example: Subject: BrianS NW-3D rev2
NW3A: Vocabulary For this week’s vocabulary assignment, I would like you to choose two new vocabulary words from a book you are reading. Make sure to choose words that you don’t know the meaning of yet. You will need to look up the definition, synonyms, and part of speech for each of your words. Your assignment is to type the following information into a Word document:

- Word 1 (spelled correctly)
- Definition (in your own words)
- Synonyms
- Part of speech
- Sentence using the word correctly

Word 2 [Include all the same information for your second vocabulary word.]

Please name your assignment with your name and NW3A (make sure to save it as a .doc or .docx). Remember to use MLA format. E-mail this assignment to me as an attachment. Example: Brian_NW3A.doc

NW3B: Book Journal Continue making entries in your book journal. Reminder: Journal entries need to be made at least two (2) times a week using one of the techniques described in Lesson 1 (double-entry or problem-solution). Your assignment is to type one of your book journal entries into a Word document. Please make sure to tell me what book you are reading by using it as the title for your assignment. Please name your assignment with your name and NW3B (and make sure to save it as a .doc or .docx). Remember MLA format. E-mail this assignment to me as an attachment.

NW3C: Personal Event Journal Continue to make entries in your personal event journal. Review the entries you have made so far, as you might choose one of your entries as an idea for your autobiographical narrative (Assignment 2D). Reminder: Journal entries need to be made at least two (2) times a week using one of the techniques described in Lesson 1 (double-entry or problem-solution). Your assignment is to have one of your parents e-mail me to let me know that you wrote in your personal events journal twice this week.

NW3D: Biographical Narrative For this lesson, you will be working on the interviewing part of your biographical narrative. Your assignment is to send me the name of the person you will be interviewing, the date you will be interviewing, and the list of interview questions you plan to use at your interview. Type your assignment in a Word document. Name it with your name and NW3D (and make sure to save it as a .doc or .docx). Remember MLA format. E-mail this assignment to me as an attachment.