How to start

- Need a **topic**? See page 24.
- Need to recall the right **details**? See page 25.
- Need to **organize your ideas**? See page 27.

5 Narratives

chronicle events in your life

Narratives might seem like a minor-league genre in college, if you still associate them with the how-I-spent-my-summer-vacation essays you wrote back in grade school. Mere stories, you think, good for a few laughs. However, thanks to social media, personal testimonies have grown ever more important as vehicles for sharing life events and diverse cultural experiences.

Narratives typically assigned today represent opportunities to explain or explore your story with readers interested, in one way or another, in who you are and what you know. Such narratives can have important personal and professional consequences.

LITERACY NARRATIVE

You use a *literacy narrative* to consider how books you read as a child shaped your career decisions.

ARGUMENTATIVE NARRATIVE

Unable to accept a prestigious but unpaid internship, you write an *argumentative narrative* in the form of a feature story for a local paper suggesting that blue-collar workers like you gain more valuable experience from nine-to-five jobs that accomplish something.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Worried that you might seem too old to apply to medical school, you use a *personal statement* explaining how your life experiences have prepared you to treat a wider range of future patients.

Defining the genre

Some narratives begin with an itch to use words to explore some aspect of life as you've come to know it through encounters with people, places, and ideas. Though you could just talk about yourself with friends, sharing ideas on paper (or perhaps on screen) makes words matter more. They have greater weight and consequences.

Make a point—usually. There's typically a reason for writing a narrative, beyond the obvious one of fulfilling a course assignment. Narratives can convey information, explain phenomena, or even make arguments—just as other genres do. But they also invite readers to watch how your mind works, to see how particular experiences lead to specific actions. Writing narratives can be therapeutic, too, helping you confront personal issues or get a load off your chest. And some narratives, such as personal statements, may advance your career, win you an internship, or even get you a job.

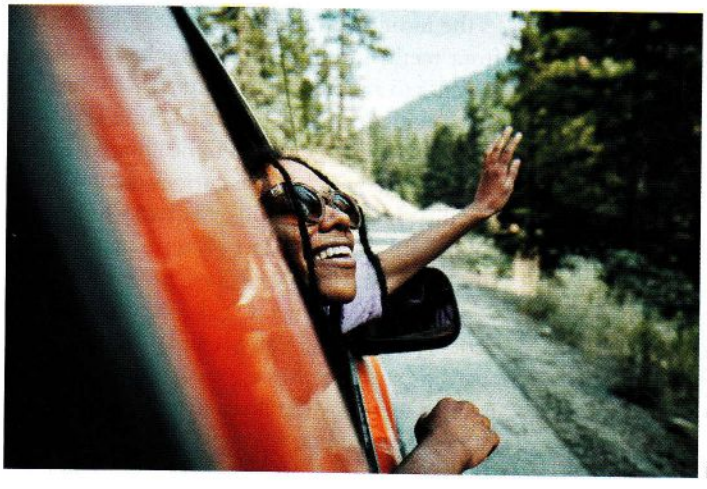
◀ develop a thesis statement, p. 276

Tell a story. In a narrative, something usually happens. For example, in a personal statement, you might recall a moment that altered your point of view or even changed your life. Or in a different type of narrative, you could present a string of events that seem unrelated at first—the classic road-trip script—but that come together in a surprising or illuminating way for you and your readers. Or you might spin a tale as complicated as a mystery and invite readers to draw their own conclusions.

◀ understand genres and purposes, p. 9

Offer details. Details bring narratives to life—the colors, shapes, sounds, textures, and other physical impressions that convince readers that your story is truthful and meaningful. They prove that you were close enough to an experience to gain an insider's perspective. Maybe what you discovered gave you insights or skills you needed for the next step in your life. Don't fall back on clichés in offering details, especially when writing personal statements for readers who don't know you at all. Audiences want authenticity.

Focus on people. Portray the people connected to your story in detail. You might quote individuals you've interviewed, offer anecdotes about people's lives and careers to underscore a point, or even make one individual the focus of an entire piece. And that individual could be *you*. When that's the case, as it might be in composing a personal statement, give the reader reasons to get to know you.



Thomas Barwick/Getty Images

Literacy Narrative

A noteworthy subgenre of narrative explores the process by which people learn to read or write. Not surprisingly, then, in many composition courses, students are asked to write a short initial paper describing their prior experiences with reading, literature, and writing. If you have this opportunity, you'll discover that the assignment can be an icebreaker in a course, a way to introduce yourself to people with whom you'll be sharing ideas, drafts, and editing suggestions for an entire semester. Laura Grisham, a student at the University of Texas at Austin, wrote her literary narrative in response to a prompt that included this advice:

> Tell us about your successes and failures and the teachers who made a difference to you—or those who never appreciated your talent. In the essay, consider sharing the best advice you have ever received about writing—or the worst. Your audience for this item will obviously be your classmates in this class, but imagine a wider readership as well. Your language should be precise, lively, and, of course, mechanically correct. And you may include photos.

Reading the Genre Shaped by the fiction she read as a child, Laura Grisham is someone who expects to write all her life. Your literacy narrative—if you compose one—might talk about other media, everything from video games, graphic novels, and movies to sports columns, blog posts, and even math books. Not everyone in a composition class thinks of writing as a career.

In third grade I dreamed of becoming a professional athlete. Despite mildly severe scoliosis and limited depth perception, my imagined future likely included a Gatorade sponsorship. However, one fateful day in third grade, as the result of an unfortunate face plant in P.E. class that knocked out my front teeth, I humbly opted to change my future area of expertise from athletics to a more academic concentration.

I decided to start taking reading seriously. I memorized the Dewey Decimal System. I convinced the librarian to allow me to check out multiple books at a time. I became curious about the stories on the pages and dove headfirst into their worlds. My curiosity pushed me so far into the literary abyss until suddenly Harry was trying to win over an emotionally unstable Cho Chang in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*.

Not a reader initially, Grisham explains her transition from would-be athlete to Harry Potter fan.

I became a sponge. I soaked up the sharp wit of Lemony Snicket in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and consequently developed a harsh sarcasm that has stuck with me ever since *The Bad Beginning*. Christopher John Frances Boone, with refreshing objectivity, taught me the value in having an earnest desire to do the right thing in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the*

Night-Time. I learned that our actions, despite our intentions, deeply affect those around us in *A Separate Peace*.

Grisham counts on readers recognizing at least some of the books and characters who influenced her.

As I read and absorbed, the stories provoked self-reflective questions: Why can't I drink from the fountain of youth alongside Jesse Tuck? Why can't I love people the way Gatsby loved Daisy? Why do the Pevensie children find adventure through a wardrobe on a rainy day while I am stuck watching raindrops hit the window as my teacher drones on about the difference between sedimentary and igneous rocks?

These thoughts bounced around relentlessly in my head, but I lacked both the confidence and the eloquence to express my musings aloud. Then, in eighth grade my English teacher taught me to put my thoughts in words.

She spent long, painful hours drilling grammar rules into my head, pushing me to hate writing. That is, until she presented the class with a creative writing prompt and I realized that understanding proper grammatical structures enabled me to express my thoughts more clearly and concisely than ever before. Since then, I have rarely been found without a black Pilot G-2 pen clipped to my shirt and a thin notebook of thoughts in my backpack.

Reading and an influential teacher turn Grisham into a writer, represented by the pen and notebook she routinely carries.

I am taking this writing class to revitalize and redefine my love for words. I don't know if I want to write for a living, but I know myself well enough to know that in order to live I have to write. And who knows; maybe, someday, good writers will all be rewarded with Gatorade sponsorships.

Claiming a topic

When writing a narrative on your own, you don't need to search for a topic. You know exactly what aspects of your life to share on Facebook or in a journal. You also understand your audiences well enough to fit your stories to people likely to read them.

But you face tougher choices when asked to compose a narrative for school or a personal statement to accompany a job or scholarship application. Typically, such assignments invite you to describe an event that has shaped or changed you. Or perhaps an instructor or admissions officer wants a story that explores a dimension of your personality and reveals something about the communities to which you belong. When no ideas suggest themselves immediately, consider the following strategies.

▶ find a topic, p. 269

Brainstorm. Freewriting, assembling lists, and using memory prompts are various ways of brainstorming ideas. To find a personal topic worth developing, pick up a yearbook, scroll through photographs, or browse your social media sites. Details you find there may jog your memory or set you to thinking about how your life is evolving or changing. If you already have a résumé, review it to remind yourself what you have already accomplished. Talk with others about their choices of subjects and share ideas on a class website.

Choose a manageable subject. You might be tempted to focus on a life-changing event so dramatic that it can seem clichéd: graduation, a car wreck, your first job, or your first love. For such topics to work, you'll need to make them fresh for readers who've likely had similar experiences—or seen the movie. If you can offer a fresh slant on a clichéd event (it may be a satiric or ironic one), take the risk.

▶ develop an idea, p. 280

Alternatively, try narrating a slice of life rather than the whole side of beef—a single encounter on a road trip rather than the entire cross-country adventure, your toast at a wedding rather than the three-hour reception, or the most frightening moment in your experience with the COVID-19 virus. Most complex events contain within them dozens of smaller, more manageable tales.

Personal statements require a similarly sharp focus because you need to win the attention of readers who know you just through lines in your cover letter or résumé. You need to stand out. So a little blood has to flow through the veins of your statement, but not so much that someone in an office gets nervous.

Choose a consequential subject. Consequential doesn't necessarily mean long, ponderous, and boring. It means a subject that will resonate with readers who might share concerns you have about money, jobs, professions, families, relationships, race, sexuality, education, religion, technology, business, pop culture, or sports. But here's the key—you don't tackle the topic in the abstract. Instead, you come at it from what you know or what you care about or maybe what surprises you. Write about your painful memories of early jobs, or what your grandmother's gift of a dollhouse meant to you, or how makeup makes your life better. Explain to readers why a topic that intrigues you should interest them too.

Choose a risky subject. You don't have to begin a narrative with every point nailed down. Some personal stories may require multiple drafts to work through all their puzzles. Before readers understand what you are trying to do in the piece, you have to figure it out yourself. And that may be the best reason for tackling a dicey subject.

Imagining your audience

Audiences for narratives can be diverse and unusually receptive. In general, people like to read stories that are personal and full of unexpected insights. They hope to be surprised by what they encounter, learn something from it, or perhaps be amused by it. Essays can also be tailored to special audiences, such as enthusiasts and experts who care about, for example, FIFA, video game platforms, or *Stranger Things*.

You can capitalize on such expectations, using stories to introduce ideas that readers might be less eager to entertain if they were presented more formally. As Zadie Smith puts it, "A writer hopes to make connections where the lazy eye sees only a chasm of difference." Women and members of other groups have long used narratives to document the adversities they face and to affirm their solidarity. But good stories also cross boundaries and win readers from well outside the original target audience.

Personal statements represent a special case. They will be read by people you don't know who have something you want—typically a job, position, internship, scholarship, or other appointment. That's scary, but you can usually count on reviewers to be reasonable people willing to give you a fair hearing. And remember that they will measure you against other applicants—not unreachable standards of perfection. How might you overcome audience anxiety in this odd situation? Experienced writing tutor Jacob Pietsch suggests that you address a personal statement to real people in your life who don't know you very well: "Visualize them, and get ready to write them a letter." Not bad advice for other sorts of narratives too.

◀ understand your readers, p. 13

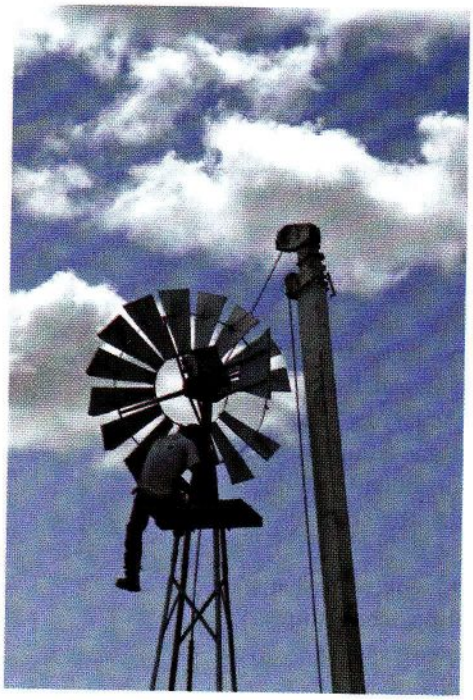
Finally, there are times when the target audience of a story is yourself: you can write about personal experiences to get a handle on them. Even then, be demanding. Think about how your narrative might sound ten or twenty years from now.

Gathering materials

What's different about writing narratives is that you'll likely be dealing with personal information, recollections, and memories rather than formal or academic sources. Of course, when you write about current issues or events—for instance, your reaction to a concert or a political conflict on campus—you'll have facts fresh in your mind. Yet even in such cases, additional evidence, such as news stories, editorials, programs, and published reviews, might rouse your memories and make your narrative more accurate.

▶ do field research, p. 378

Talk to the people involved. A phone call home or a social media post might elicit fresh information about a personal issue or event you intend to treat in an essay or personal statement. Family, friends, classmates, and coworkers might help you recall details of a situation you've forgotten (or suppressed). They might also see events from perspectives you haven't considered. Adding voices other than your own to a narrative may broaden its appeal and, depending on the subject, enhance its credibility.



John J. Ruszkiewicz

If every picture tells a story, what narrative does this image suggest? Consider the missing windmill blade, the worker's posture, the quiet sky, and any other details that seem important.

Consult personal documents. A journal, if you keep one, may be a valuable resource for essays. But even a yearbook, daily planner, or electronic calendar might hold just the facts you need to reconstruct a sequence of events or remind you of people you've dealt with. Social media, especially Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, may similarly contribute material for some types of essays.

Consult images. Not only do photographs and videos document people and places, but they may also generate ideas for personal narratives. Such prompts may revive past events and the feelings they stirred up too. Visual images also remind you of physical details—locales, clothing, hairstyles—that can add authenticity to a narrative.

Trust your experiences. Assigned to write a personal essay or statement, lots of people wonder, "What have I done worth writing about?" They underestimate the quality of their own perceptions. College students, for example, may be incredibly knowledgeable about high school or the local music scene or working minimum-wage jobs or dealing with narrow-minded adults. You don't have to be a salaried professional to observe life or have something to say about it.

Here's humorist David Sedaris—who has made a career of writing essays about his very middle-class life from his unique personal perspective—describing the insecurity of many writers:

> When I was teaching—I taught for a while—my students would write as if they were raised by wolves. Or raised on the streets. They were middle-class kids, and they were ashamed of their background. They felt like unless they grew up in poverty, they had nothing to write about. Which was interesting because I had always thought that poor people were the ones who were ashamed. But it's not. It's middle-class people who are ashamed of their lives. And it doesn't really matter what your life was like, you can write about anything. It's just the writing of it that is the challenge. I felt sorry for these kids, that they thought that their whole past was absolutely worthless because it was less than remarkable.
>
> — David Sedaris, interviewed in *January Magazine*, June 2000

Organizing ideas

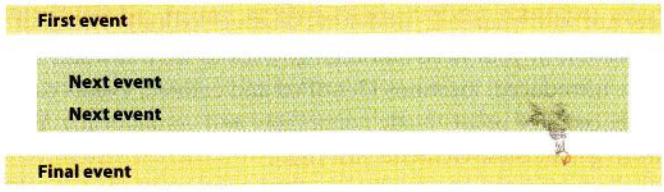
Don't be intimidated by the prospect of organizing a narrative. You have learned a lot about the structure of narratives from reading books, watching films or TV, and navigating online op-eds, magazine pieces, and blog posts. Many conventional story devices—from foreshadowing to flashbacks—can also be adapted to the narratives you compose. Still, you need to be strategic, paying attention, for example, to how much room you have to tell a story.

Yet maybe the bigger challenge for academic writers is that narratives usually don't rely on a formal thesis early on to establish their focus. Of course, some narratives *do* make an important claim up front. It's right in the title of Leah Vann's essay, reprinted later in this chapter: "Bald Is NOT Beautiful" (p. 30). Yet you'll have to read the entire piece to learn exactly why the issue matters so much to the author. In this respect, Vann's paper follows an alternative strategy—building *toward* a point or thesis revealed near the end of the piece.

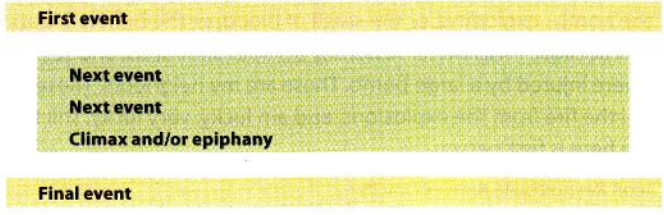
◀ arrange ideas, p. 286

Following are specific structural options to consider when drafting a narrative.

Consider a simple sequence. It's a natural choice when one event follows another chronologically. Journals and diaries may have the most bare-bones sequential structures, with writers connecting one event with another by little more than a date.



Build toward a climax. Narratives become more complicated when you present a series of incidents that lead up to a climax or even an epiphany. Readers usually expect one or the other in a personal narrative. A *climax* is the moment when the narrative strikes home, takes an important turn, or resolves the issue it has raised: Leah Vann explains exactly why bald is not beautiful (p. 30). An *epiphany* is a moment of revelation or insight, when a writer or character suddenly sees things in a new way: The detective realizes that he's not much different from the felon.



Narratives often have both structural features—it's only logical for major events in life to trigger heightened awareness or illumination. To organize a story this way, decide what the pivotal event of the narrative will be and then figure out which elements lead up to or explain it. Delete all actions, characters, descriptions, or passages of dialogue that don't contribute to that point, however much you love them. Or refocus your narrative on a moment that fits with the background elements you love.

Choosing a style and design

Narratives are written in a full range of styles. Many narratives drift toward a middle or a low style because these styles nicely mimic the human voice through devices such as contractions and dialogue. Both styles are also comfortable with *I*, the point of view of many narratives. A middle style may be perfect for reaching your teachers and classmates. But a low style, dipping into slang and casual speech, may sometimes feel more authentic to general readers—fine for some personal or literacy narratives. In a personal statement, however, you don't want to be breezy or casual, but you want to have a human voice. Marrying the conventions and formal vocabulary of high style with the comfortable feel of the middle style might be just right, while the low style would be risky in most personal statements.

▶ define your style, p. 308

Narratives benefit from tight but expressive language—*tight* to keep any tale moving, *expressive* to convey emotions and textures. Here's a suggestion: In the first draft of a narrative, run with your ideas and don't do much editing. Flesh out the piece as you have heard it in your head and then go back to see if it works technically; characters should be introduced, locations identified and colored, events clearly explained and sequenced, key points made memorably and emphatically. You may need several drafts to get all these elements just right.

Then look to your language and allow plenty of time to revise it. You might begin by reviewing Chapter 32, "Clear and Vigorous Writing." Here are some additional recommendations for narratives.

Don't hesitate to use first person—*I*. Most personal narratives are about the writer, so first-person pronouns are used without apology. A narrative often must take readers where the *I* has been, and using the first-person pronoun helps make the writing authentic. Consider online journalist Michael Yon's explanation of why he reported on the Iraq War using *I* rather than a more objective third-person perspective:

> I write in first person because I am actually there at the events I write about. When I write about the bombs exploding, or the smell of blood, or the bullets snapping by, and I say *I*, it's because I was there. Yesterday a sniper shot at us, and seven of my neighbors were injured by a large bomb. These are my neighbors. These are soldiers. . . . I feel the fire from the explosions, and am lucky, very lucky, still to be alive. Everything here is first person.
>
> —Quoted in Glenn Reynolds, *An Army of Davids*

And yet don't count out telling a story from a third-person point of view, even when you are writing about yourself. You may see find it bracing to present yourself as someone else might see you.

The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.
—Mark Twain

Use figures of speech, such as similes, metaphors, and analogies, to make memorable comparisons. *Similes* make comparisons by using *like* or as: *He used his camera like a rifle. Metaphors* drop the *like* or *as* to gain even more power: *His camera was a rifle aimed at enemies.* An *analogy* extends the comparison: *His camera became a rifle aimed at his imaginary enemies, their private lives in his crosshairs.*

People make comparisons habitually. Some are so common they've been reduced to invisible clichés: *hit me like a ton of bricks; dumb as an ox; clear as a bell.* In your own essays, you want similes and metaphors fresher than these and yet not contrived or strained. Here's science writer Michael Chorost effortlessly deploying both a metaphor (*spins up*) and a simile (*like riding a roller coaster*) to describe what he experiences as he awaits surgery.

> I can feel the bustle and clatter around me as the surgical team spins up to take-off speed. It is like riding a roller coaster upward to the first great plunge, strapped in and committed.
>
> — *Rebuilt: How Becoming Part Computer Made Me More Human*

In choosing verbs, favor active rather than passive voice. Active verbs propel the action (*Montaigne invented the personal essay*), while passive verbs slow it down by an unneeded word or two (*The personal essay was invented by Montaigne*).

Since narratives are all about movement of thought, build sentences around strong verbs that do things. Edit until you get to the nub of the action. You will produce sentences as effortless as these from Andrew Cotter, from his 2020 book about his two Labrador retrievers. Verbs are highlighted in this passage.

> . . . dogs rarely sit and contemplate life, and sometimes it might be better for us to function that way. We dwell on the past and fret about the future while they think only of this moment.
>
> — Andrew Cotter, from *Olive, Mabel & Me: Life and Adventures with Two Very Good Dogs*

Keep the language simple. Your language need not be elaborate when it is fresh and authentic. Look for concrete expressions that help readers visualize ideas or concepts. And when it comes to modifiers, one strong word is usually better than several weaker ones (*freezing* rather than *very cold*; *doltish* rather than *not very bright*).

◀ improve your sentences, p. 314

Examining Models

ARGUMENTATIVE NARRATIVE It is easy to imagine Leah Vann writing a purely argumentative version of "Bald Is NOT Beautiful," one that offers a string of good reasons to support the thesis already asserted in the title. Instead, as you will see, she makes her case more memorable by setting the argument within a two-part narrative structure, signaled by dates in headings she provides. The narrative would be compelling on its own, but becomes something more as an essay that makes a powerful point in its very last line.

Reading the Genre An epiphany is a sudden moment of insight that may occur at some moment in a personal narrative, often in the conclusion. Would you describe Vann's final paragraphs as an epiphany? What feelings does the conclusion of the essay generate in you?

Bald Is NOT Beautiful

By Leah Vann

December 8, 2016

April 2014

It was like reliving a nightmare.

I could hear the sound of the razor from one hundred yards away. That familiar, sudden click and buzz. A circle of students stood around her, most with freshly shaved heads.

"Don't do it. Stop it," I thought.

The girl smiled as the razor skimmed the bottom, then sides of her head, letting her hair fall gently on the tarp beneath her. The students clapped and cheered. She still smiled, with tears streaming down her face.

I was frozen. Stone-cold on a sunny day, standing in front of the University of Texas tower, where a sign read "Brave the Shave for St. Baldrick's" in large, green letters.

The "beauty." The "glamour." The "bravery."

How admirable it must be to shave your head when you don't have to. When you have a choice to keep your hair.

"Bald is beautiful," they tell you.

But it's not so beautiful to me.

Vann assumes readers are familiar with "Brave the Shave." You can find out more about the fundraising campaign for child cancer research online.

Readers here will likely want to know why—although they might be able to guess.

November 28th, 2010

"Good morning, Leah. I have your pills," one of my nurses says.

They wake me up at 8:00 every morning to take my cup of twelve pills. It's only been a month and I can already swallow them all at once, including Bactrim, the gigantic horse-pill. I scratch my head and collect a clump of hair to throw in the trash can next to me. My hair started falling out a week ago, but since it's so thick, I still look normal.

The nurse walks in the bathroom to check my toilet.

"Um, I think the last time you peed was around 3:00 am. Let me know if you're having trouble, okay?" she says.

Deliberately graphic details contrast with *beauty, glamour, bravery* noted in the opening section.

Lord, can I wake up first? I'm 15; my ideal wake-up time is noon.

"I'll go soon. It's just really early and I want to sleep," I say. I'm trying to make her go away.

In the hospital, I don't have privacy. Care partners check my blood pressure and temperature every four hours. There are two containers in the toilet that measure my pee and poop for the nurses to collect. Doctors pop in for daily checkups, visitors come to bring food I won't eat, and the nutritionist comes in to scare me into eating.

"Leah, it's really important to eat during chemotherapy because your organs will get damaged. You don't want to have an appendectomy while your platelets are this low. It's dangerous," the nutritionist says.

"I know."

"Now, I have these Carnation instant breakfasts you can drink. They have all kinds of vitamins and protein and you can mix it with milk or water. There's vanilla, chocolate, strawberry . . ."

I cringe. She rolls her eyes.

Mom strides in. There's no way I will sleep now, so I climb out of bed to pee into the measuring bucket.

"Thank you," the nurse says, still typing away on her computer.

Mom gasps.

"Oh my God!" she shouts.

"What?" I ask.

"Can we get some fresh sheets for her?" mom asks the nurse.

Dialogue enhances the reality of the narrative.

"Yes, of course. I'll be right back," she says, taking my bucket of pee.

I look at my bed. It's coated with a blanket of red hair. I carefully scratch my head again, throwing another mass of hair in my trash can. I feel as if thousands of needles are brushing the surface of my head at once.

"Honey, isn't this uncomfortable for you?" mom asks. The nurses come in to change the sheets. I remain standing by the mirror, washing my hands.

"I mean, I'm itchy, but I told you I don't want to shave it until I have my wigs." I've been putting this off for over a week. It keeps me restless. I lie awake at night trying not to scratch hair off my head. I've tried rubbing and applying icepacks to my scalp, but nothing makes it better. Unfortunately, the medicine fighting for my life is what causes it.

"Honey, you could cut your head scratching it. I don't want you to bleed. It's dangerous and it's gross. Look at all this hair."

I stare into the mirror, surveying my head for bald spots. I do this every morning just in case it stops falling out. But in the top right corner, just behind where my hairline begins, is a tiny bald spot on my part. It's the first one. I flip my bangs over the opposite direction and cover it with a clip. The flipping of my bangs sends a tingling burn across my scalp. I wince.

"Um . . . I guess . . . Can we call Cheryl and ask when my wigs will be ready?" I ask, only half-admitting defeat.

"Okay, honey," mom says.

My nurse comes in with visitors. My youth group was coming today to give me a present. Our youth group advisor hands me a University of Michigan football, signed by head coach Rich Rodriguez and athletic director Dave Brandon. She explains that she had a few friends who worked in the athletic department to help make it happen.

The University of Michigan has been a dream of mine since my dad died. He went there and used to sing me the fight song as a lullaby. Brandon wrote a message saying he couldn't wait for me to be a student. I hope that happens . . .

My friends leave and my mom sits on the edge of my bed.

"So, I talked to Cheryl. She has a temporary wig you can wear until the other ones come in. So, what do you want to do? She can come today," Mom says.

I pause. I look behind me, where a freshly woven sweater of hair from the past few hours covers my pillow. I can't put this off any longer. I'm disgusting.

"I think you would feel a lot better," mom says.

"Okay," I say.

Cheryl comes in a few hours later, followed by my stepdad and his hairstylist of twenty years. The hairstylist has a special razor that is gentle enough to prevent open wounds. The last thing I need is to bleed when I don't have the platelets to stop it.

She sits me in front of the mirror.

Visitors here perhaps parallel the students clapping and cheering in the first part.

The medical details here emphasize the seriousness of Vann's condition. She has no choice.

"You're going to feel so much better, honey. It's just itchy and uncomfortable. All my friends I've shaved say they feel better." I'm silent.

Click. Buzz. She starts under my right ear and strokes backwards.

I have a love-hate relationship with my red hair. I hate how curly it is, so I always straighten it. People stop me in grocery stores or shopping malls to tell me how beautiful my hair is. How thick it is. And how do I grow it out so long? To the point it falls almost down to my hips in the back? I'm so damn lucky.

She starts fresh above the first stroke, combing a new bald path down the back of my head. Every stroke is instant relief. But within seconds, she's at the top of my head, near my bald spot. Buzz. Only half of my head of hair remains, and I shut my eyes. I can't watch it anymore. Buzz. Suddenly I love it. I love all of my hair, every inch of it. I promise I won't straighten it. Ever. Buzz. I shiver, it's getting colder. Buzz. It's gone.

"Remember honey, bald is beautiful," the stylist says.

I open my eyes to look in the mirror. The grey lighting illuminates a pale-faced figure staring at me with large, light blue eyes. Clothes hang on the figure like a coat hanger, loose and slightly crinkled.

I don't recognize her.

She looks like a 5' 5" underweight infant, which is ironic, because she's dying, the exact opposite of youth.

She's dying. No, Leah, *you're* dying.

I look around. A long tube attaches the arteries in my heart to a bag of chemotherapy hanging from an IV pole. My wrist is covered in plastic bracelets of different colors that read, "Vann, Leah, Leukemia." The walls are covered with autographed signs telling me to "Beat Cancer" or "Get Well Soon."

I run into the bathroom with my IV pole trailing behind me. I fall to my knees, kneeling before the ledge of the bathtub and I scream.

"I'M SO UGLY!"

This is bald.

Final lines are lean, dramatic, purposeful, repudiating "bald is beautiful."

PERSONAL STATEMENT Preparing personal statements has become almost a ritual among people applying for admission to college, professional school, or graduate school or for jobs, promotions, scholarships, internships, or even elective office. They offer a slice of your life—the verbal equivalent of getting all dressed up for the prom.

Prompts for personal statements are often deliberately open-ended to give you some freedom in pursuing a topic. As you focus on the specific strengths of your work or education, be sure not to repeat what's already in an application letter or résumé. Instead, look for items that bring that résumé to life and find a theme that illustrates your strengths.

Reading the Genre The Academic Service Partnership Foundation (ASPF) asked candidates for an internship to prepare an essay addressing a series of questions. That prompt and Michael Villaverde's response to it follow. Read his personal statement and decide how well he responds to the prompt. Would you do anything differently? Would you take Michael Villaverde seriously as a candidate for the internship? Why or why not?

ASPF NATIONAL INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

Please submit a 250- to 500-word typed essay answering the following three questions:

1. Why do you want an internship with the ASPF?
2. What do you hope to accomplish in your academic and professional career goals?
3. What are your strengths and skills, and how would you use these in your internship?

Specific questions limit reply, but also help organize it.

Villaverde 1

Michael Villaverde

April 14, 20--

The opportunity to work within a health-related government agency alongside top-notch professionals initially attracted

Opening sentence states the writer's thesis or intent; first two paragraphs address the first question.

me to the Academic Service Partnership Foundation (ASPF) National Internship Program. Participating in the ASPF's internship program would enable me to augment the health-services research skills I've gained working at the VERDICT Research Center in San Antonio and the M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. This internship could also help me gain experience in health policy and administration.

Essay uses first person (*I, me*) but is fairly formal in tone and vocabulary, between high and middle style.

I support the ASPF's mission to foster closer relations between formal education and public service and believe that I could contribute to this mission. If selected as an ASPF intern, I will become an active alumnus of the program. I would love to do my part by advising younger students and recruiting future ASPF interns. Most important, I make it a point to improve the operations of programs from which I benefit. Any opportunities provided to me by the ASPF will be repaid in kind.

The author sounds a personal note in expressing enthusiasm for the internship opportunity.

This statement transitions smoothly into the second issue raised in prompt.

Other strengths I bring to the ASPF's National Internship Program are my broad educational background and dedication. My undergraduate studies will culminate in two honors degrees (finance and liberal arts) with additional premed course work. Afterward, I wish to enroll in a combined MD/PhD program in health-services research. Following my formal education, I will devote my career to seeing patients in a primary-care setting, researching health-care issues as a university faculty member, teaching bioethics, and developing public policy at a health-related government agency.

Formidable and specific goals speak for themselves in straightforward language.

The course work at my undergraduate institution has provided me with basic laboratory and computer experience, but my strengths lie in oral and written communication. Comparing digital and film-screen mammography equipment for a project at M. D. Anderson honed my technical-writing skills and

Another transition introduces the third issue raised by the prompt.

comprehension of statistical analysis. The qualitative analysis methods I learned at VERDICT while evaluating strategies used by the Veterans Health Administration in implementing clinical practice guidelines will be a significant resource to any prospective employer. By the end of this semester, I will also possess basic knowledge of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

During my internship I would like to research one of the following topics: health-care finance, health policy, or ethnic disparities in access to high-quality health care. I have read much about the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 and anticipate studying its implications. I would learn a great deal from working with officials responsible for the operation and strategic planning of a program like Medicare (or a nonprofit hospital system). The greater the prospects for multiple responsibilities, the more excited I will be to show up at work each day.

Special interest/ concern is noted and is likely to impress reviewers of statement.

Qualifications listed are numerous and detailed.

Final sentence affirms enthusiasm for technical internship.

Assignments

1. **Literacy Narrative:** After reading Laura Grisham's literacy narrative (p. 22), write one of your own, perhaps recalling how you learned to read or write and teachers who influenced you during the process. Describe books that changed you or any ambitions you might now have to pursue a writing or media career. You don't have to be an aspiring writer to make sense of this assignment. Remember that there are many kinds of literacy. The narrative you compose may be about your encounters with paintings, films, music, fashion, architecture, or maybe even video games. Or it may explore any intellectual passion—from mathematics to foreign policy.

2. **Argumentative Narrative:** Using Leah Vann's "Bald Is NOT Beautiful" (p. 30) as a model, compose an argumentative essay that draws heavily upon your personal experiences. Your piece need not necessarily tell a story (as Vann's does), but it should convince readers that you have the knowledge and experiences to back up your claims. Make this a paper you might want to keep.

3. **Personal Statement:** Think about a job, internship, administrative post, committee role, or scholarship you might apply for now or in the future. It might be a down-to-earth opportunity available right around the corner or a dream position a few years off. Compose a personal statement prompt that you imagine someone offering the post might require. Then, using Michael Villaverde's personal statement (p. 34) as a model, compose a narrative of your own to apply for the opportunity.

4. **Your Choice:** Compose a narrative essay of your own on a subject of your choice *and for a specific audience* who might benefit from what you have to say. Maybe you've discovered that travel on your own is a powerful way to build self-confidence? Maybe your part-time job at a fast-food restaurant has convinced you that more people need comparable work experience? Maybe you wish more teachers could remember what it's like to be a student holding down a full-time job? Write an essay that expresses what you know or what you've been thinking.