Writing a Personal Narrative

A narrative is a story. In writing a narrative essay, you share with the reader some personal experience of your own in order to make a point or convey a message. Whatever story you tell, your purpose is to share with others some experience that has taught you something or changed you somehow. Remember that narration is more than just description. Your essay should be descriptive, but it should also emphasize the significance of the specific prompt.

Reflection: How is a personal narrative different from the narrative story that you were asked to write in a previous packet?

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Task 1: You will now read a sample personal narrative.

Shame by Dick Gregory

I never learned hate at home, or shame. I had to go to school for that. I was about seven years old when I got my first big lesson. (Think about how the narrator has established both who he is and when in his life this occurred -- occasion) I was in love with a little girl named Helene Tucker, a light-complexioned little girl with pigtails and nice manners. She was always clean and she was smart in school. I think I went to school then mostly to look at her. I brushed my hair and even got me a little old handkerchief. It was a lady's handkerchief, but I didn't want Helene to see me wipe my nose on my hand.

The pipes were frozen again, there was no water in the house, but I washed my socks and shirt every night. I'd get a pot, and go over to Mister Ben's grocery store, and stick my pot down into his soda machine and scoop out some chopped ice. By evening the ice melted to water for washing. I got sick a lot that winter because the fire would go out at night before the clothes were dry. In the morning I'd put them on, wet or dry, because they were the only clothes I had.
Everybody's got a Helene Tucker, a symbol of everything you want. I loved her for her goodness, her cleanness, her popularity. She'd walk down my street and my brothers and sisters would yell, "Here comes Helene," and I'd rub my tennis sneakers on the back of my pants and wish my hair wasn't so nappy and the white folks' shirt fit me better. I'd run out on the street. If I knew my place and didn't come too close, she'd wink at me and say hello. That was a good feeling. Sometimes I'd follow her all the way home, and shovel the snow off her walk and try to make friends with her momma and her aunts. I'd drop money on her stoop late at night on my way back from shining shoes in the taverns. And she had a daddy, and he had a good job. He was a paperhanger.

I guess I would have gotten over Helene by summertime, but something happened in that classroom that made her face hang in front of me for the next twenty-two years. When I played the drums in high school, it was for Helene, and when I broke track records in college, it was for Helene, and when I started standing behind microphones and heard applause, I wished Helene could hear it too. It wasn't until I was twenty-nine years old and married and making money that I finally got her out of my system. Helene was sitting in that classroom when I learned to be ashamed of myself.

It was on a Thursday. I was sitting in the back of the room, in a seat with a chalk circle drawn around it. The idiot's seat, the troublemaker's seat. (Think about the TONE that is established here)

The teacher thought I was stupid. Couldn't spell, couldn't read, couldn't do arithmetic. Just stupid. Teachers were never interested in finding out that you couldn't concentrate because you were so hungry, because you hadn't had any breakfast. All you could think about was noontime; would it ever come? Maybe you could sneak into the cloakroom and steal a bite of some kid's lunch out of a coat pocket. A bite of something. Paste. You can't really make a meal of paste, or put it on bread for a sandwich, but sometimes I'd scoop a few spoonfuls out of the big paste jar in the back of the room. Pregnant people get strange tastes. I was pregnant with poverty. Pregnant with dirt and pregnant with smells that made people turn away. Pregnant with cold and pregnant with shoes that were never bought for me. Pregnant with five other people in my bed and no daddy in the next room, and pregnant with hunger. Paste doesn't taste too bad when you're hungry. (Think about what this paragraph reveals about the speaker)

The teacher thought I was a troublemaker. All she saw from the front of the room was a little black boy who squirmed in his idiot's seat and made noises and poked the kids around him. I guess she couldn't see a kid who made noises because he wanted someone to know he was there. (Think about how the narrator begins to reveal his purpose here)

It was on a Thursday, the day before the Negro payday. The eagle always flew on Friday. The teacher was asking each student how much his father would give to the Community Chest. On Friday night, each kid would get the money from his father, and on Monday he would bring it to the school. I decided I was going to buy a daddy right then. I had money in my pocket from shining shoes and selling papers, and whatever
Helene Tucker pledged for her daddy I was going to top it. And I'd hand the money right in. I wasn't going to wait until Monday to buy me a daddy. (*Think about what this paragraph reveals about the speaker*)

I was shaking, scared to death. The teacher opened her book and started calling out names alphabetically: "Helene Tucker?" "My Daddy said he'd give two dollars and fifty cents." "That's very nice, Helene. Very, very nice indeed."

That made me feel pretty good. It wouldn't take too much to top that. I had almost three dollars in dimes and quarters in my pocket. I stuck my hand in my pocket and held on to the money, waiting for her to call my name. But the teacher closed her book after she called everybody else in the class.

I stood up and raised my hand. "What is it now?" "You forgot me?" She turned toward the blackboard. "I don't have time to be playing with you, Richard."

"My daddy said he'd..." "Sit down, Richard, you're disturbing the class." "My daddy said he'd give...fifteen dollars."

She turned around and looked mad. "We are collecting this money for you and your kind, Richard Gregory. If your daddy can give fifteen dollars you have no business being on relief."

"I got it right now, I got it right now, my Daddy gave it to me to turn in today, my daddy said ..."

"And furthermore," she said, looking right at me, her nostrils getting big and her lips getting thin and her eyes opening wide, "We know you don't have a daddy."

Helene Tucker turned around, her eyes full of tears. She felt sorry for me. Then I couldn't see her too well because I was crying, too.

"Sit down, Richard." And I always thought the teacher kind of liked me. She always picked me to wash the blackboard on Friday, after school. That was a big thrill; it made me feel important. If I didn't wash it, come Monday the school might not function right. (*Think about how the narrator begins to reveal his purpose here*)

"Where are you going, Richard!" I walked out of school that day, and for a long time I didn't go back very often.
Task 2: Your task is to view the videos linked below, if you are able, and/or read the transcript of the video. Choose ONE of the three writing prompts to develop into a personal narrative.

Create an Award for Yourself

https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-9127/
2 Create a Fictional Tattoo

[https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-9133/](https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-9133/)

Here. Here. Here. Welcome. Welcome. Welcome. How are you? How are you? How are you? This is another edition of the Write. Right. Rite and your man Jason Reynolds. Now as some of you know and some of you may not know, I'm covered in tattoos. You can see some of them up here. I've got them all over the place. And you can see I've got some right there on my fingers. They're everywhere. What I want you all to do today is think about a special tattoo. If you -- now I know some of you are already -- your parents are probably like oh, no, Jason but this is good. If you could make up your own tattoo and you could put it anywhere on your body, what would it be? Where would it go? But the most important part is what's the story behind it? You know, all the tattoos that I have on me, they all have different stories attached to them. You know, look at that. They all have different stories and different meanings and they come from different places and different inspirations and are really just tracking different moments in my life. And so what I really want you to think about is if you could come up with a tattoo, where you would put it, what it would look like, what are the colors in it, but most importantly what's the backstory that led you to getting that particular tattoo? Why does that tattoo matter to you, matter enough for you to put it on your body for the rest of your life? What do you want to live with you and on you forever and ever and ever? What is that special and that important that you could see yourself making that kind of commitment? Think about it. Parents don't be mad. Teachers don't be mad but it'd be cool. Right. Think it over. Let me know how it goes, and I'll see you all in the next one. All right. Oh, and by the way, tell your uncle that joke he played on me last week, not funny. Peace.

3 Your Hero Writes You a Response Letter

[https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-9143/](https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-9143/)

Ah! Yo, yo, yo, hey, hey, hey, what's happening? What's happening? What's happening? Jason Reynolds, and here we are again back for another edition of the Write. Right. All right, today, I want to show you all something. This is a very special thing to me. This is a letter from Langston Hughes. Now he did not write it to me, that this is an actual letter he wrote to a fan who had actually reached out to him to ask him questions about his work. Can you imagine what it must be like to receive a letter from Langston Hughes? I mean for me, as somebody who loves Langston Hughes, I would just be crazy. Right? For me to receive a letter from Langston Hughes. And so, what I want us to do today is imagine your hero, whoever that is, Lebron James or your teacher or Beyonce or whoever it is that you idolize, or that you feel like you really admire, imagine that the letter you would like to them, but the letter they would write you back. What would they say to you when they responded to your letter? When they responded to you saying I really admire you. Can you give me some advice? Can you help me understand this? Or thank you for saving my life. Or you go me through a hard time, what do you think their response back would be? For me, if Langston Hughes wrote to me he'd say, "Dear Jason, thank you for reaching out. I think you're the best writer to ever walk the earth. I'm so proud of your brilliant -- " No, I'm just kidding. I'm just kidding, but you know, he wouldn't say that. He'd be like, Jason, get it together. Who do you think you are? Tighten up. Do better, right? But whatever it would be, imagine what your hero would respond to you in letter, and you write that letter down. Write the letter to yourself from the person you idolize the most. It would be a fascinating experience and I'll catch y'all on the next one. By the way, tell your cousin Tito, like honestly, he ruined the greens last time, and next, time I'm not going to be so nice about it. Peace.
**Task 3:** Now look at the SOAPStone organizer below. It has been revised for you to use a planning tool for the narrative essay that you plan to write. You will need to go back to the narrative example to fill out the first column. The second column is for your own planning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Occasion</th>
<th>Audience</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>STEP 1:</strong> DETERMINE THE SPEAKER. A Personal Narrative will be written in 1st person. What details about yourself are important to know?</td>
<td><strong>STEP 2:</strong> RECOGNIZE THE OCCASION. The occasion refers to the time and place of the narrative. When and where do the events take place? How does the time and place affect and develop the narrative? What details are given about the occasion in the narrative itself?</td>
<td><strong>STEP 3:</strong> DESCRIBE THE AUDIENCE. Who was the text written for? Why was it written for them? What details tell you that it was written for them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete / Review the SOAPSTone Analysis for “Shame” (pgs. 1-3)</td>
<td>Use this space as pre-writing for your own narrative essay.</td>
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**Complete** / **Review the SOAPSTone Analysis for “Shame” (pgs. 1-3) Use this space as pre-writing for your own narrative essay.**

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**Speaker**

**STEP 1:** DETERMINE THE SPEAKER. A Personal Narrative will be written in 1st person. What details about yourself are important to know?

- "I was shaking, scared to death."

The usage of "I" is an example of 1st person. By this we understand the author is referring to his own personal story.

**Occasion**

**STEP 2:** RECOGNIZE THE OCCASION. The occasion refers to the time and place of the narrative. When and where do the events take place? How does the time and place affect and develop the narrative? What details are given about the occasion in the narrative itself?

- "I never learned hate at home, or shame. I had to go to school for that."

The narrator establishes the occasion in his first sentence. This tells us the setting and what the narrative is about.

**Audience**

**STEP 3:** DESCRIBE THE AUDIENCE. Who was the text written for? Why was it written for them? What details tell you that it was written for them?

- "We are collecting this money for you and your kind..." “We know you don’t have a daddy”

This narrative talks about not having a father. The author wrote this narrative to help others who might struggle with not having a father.
### Purpose

#### STEP 4: ESTABLISH THE PURPOSE.
Why are you writing this particular narrative for the audience you noted above? Determine the meaning and message underlying the prose and ask yourself: what do you think or hope the audience will think about the narrative or do as a result of it?

“I decided I was going to buy a daddy right then. I had money in my pocket from shining shoes and selling papers, and whatever Helene Tucker pledged for her daddy I was going to top it.”

The speaker wants his audience to understand that no one should be embarrassed about their situation and they can triumph over personnel problems.

### Subject

#### STEP 5: INVESTIGATE THE SUBJECT.
What are you really getting at? Is there a deeper meaning? What do you choose to reveal (or not reveal) when addressing the subject?

“I was pregnant with poverty.” “Helene was sitting in that classroom when I learned to be ashamed of myself.”

The speaker uses these examples to help the reader gain a deeper understanding of how it is to be in his situation.

### Tone

#### STEP 6: DISSECT THE TONE.
How do the words you write reveal how you feel about the subject? Is the message heavy-handed, or is it subtle?

“I was sitting in the back of the room, in a seat with a chalk circle drawn around it. The idiot's seat, the troublemaker's seat.”

The word choice in the quote above helps us to understand how the author is made to feel.

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**Task 4:** Use the far right column of the SOAPSTone planner to complete your narrative essay based on either Prompt Choice 1, 2, or 3.