

# Narrative Paragraphs

GOAL: To learn how to write a narrative paragraph

LANGUAGE FOCUS: Consistency in verb tense

Have you read a good story lately? What did you like about it? Readers enjoy a good story when it is told well. When you write a narrative paragraph, you tell a story. The information in this unit will help you write a good narrative paragraph.

## WHAT IS A NARRATIVE PARAGRAPH?

The narrative paragraph can be fun to write because you tell a story or relate an event. Narratives have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Any time you go to a movie or read a fiction book, you are looking at a narrative. Narrative paragraphs often describe events from the writer's life.

A narrative paragraph

- tells a story
- gives background information in the opening sentence(s)
- has a beginning, a middle, and an end
- entertains and informs



## WRITER'S NOTE: Including Background Information

The topic sentence of a narrative paragraph—usually the first sentence—gives background information about the action that is going to happen in the story. The background sentence is not usually the beginning of the story—it sets up the story.

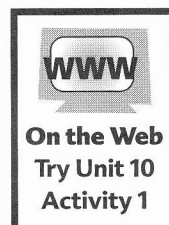
### Beginning, Middle, and End

Every narrative paragraph has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Read this example and study the questions and answers.

#### Paragraph 68

<b>EXAMPLE PARAGRAPH</b>	<i>Background of story (topic sentence)</i>	I never thought I could do it, but I finally conquered my fear of public speaking.
	<i>Beginning of story</i>	My English teacher gave the assignment (to speak for three minutes in front of my class) at the beginning of the semester, and I worried about it for two months. I have always been afraid of making a speech in public. I wrote all of my ideas on note cards. I practiced my speech with my notes in front of a mirror, in front of my dog, and in front of my husband. Would I be able to make my speech in front of my class?
	<i>Middle of story</i>	When the day of my speech came, I was ready. As I reached the podium, I looked at my audience and smiled. Then I looked down at my note cards. At that moment, I realized that I had the wrong information. These were the notes for my biology test, not the information about my speech! I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Suddenly, I began the speech. To my surprise, the words flowed from my mouth.
	<i>End of story</i>	Three minutes later, it was over. Everyone applauded my speech that day, and I left the podium feeling like a winner.

The first sentence in the paragraph—the topic sentence—gives background information about the story. The writer introduces the characters and prepares readers for the action that will come. This sentence is the beginning of the paragraph, but it is not usually the beginning of the story.



1. The main character in this paragraph is I. What will the story be about?

*The story will probably be about what the writer did or what happened that made her no longer afraid of public speaking.*

The main action begins after the topic sentence. Not all narratives contain action. They may be about a problem or a conflict.

2. What is the beginning of the main action or problem in this narrative paragraph?

*The writer has to make a speech in front of the class, and she is afraid of public speaking. To help overcome her fear, the writer practiced her speech with notes in three different situations.*

After the beginning part, you will find the middle part of the story. This is where the main action or problem occurs.

3. What was the main action or problem? What happened?

*The main action is the speech. When the writer stood in front of the class, she discovered that she had biology notes instead of speech notes.*

The end of the story gives the final action or result. If there is a problem or conflict in the story, the solution is presented here.

4. Does the story have a happy or a sad ending? Does the author learn anything from this experience?

*The story has a happy ending. Because the writer practiced the speech so many times, she remembered it without her notes. The writer learned that she has the ability to make a speech in front of a group.*

### Activity 1

### Analyzing Example Narrative Paragraphs

Read and study these example paragraphs. Answer the questions.

#### Paragraph 69

This paragraph is a personal story about a time when the writer was scared.

Before you read the paragraph, discuss these questions with your classmates.

1. Have you ever felt really scared? Describe the situation.

2. What was going on around you during the scary event? Give some sensory adjectives that describe the surroundings.
3. How did the situation end?

Now read the paragraph.



### My Macy's Nightmare

EXAMPLE PARAGRAPH

I will never forget the first time I got lost in New York City. I was traveling with my parents during summer vacation. We were in Macy's department store, and I was so excited to see such a huge place. Suddenly, I turned around to ask my mom something, but she was gone! I began crying and screaming at the top of my lungs. A salesclerk came up to me and asked if I was okay. She got on the public address (P.A.) system and notified the customers that a little boy with blue jeans and a red cap was lost. Two minutes later my mom and dad came running toward me. We all cried and hugged each other. Every time that I see a Macy's, I am reminded of that terrified boy.

at the top of my lungs: very loud

notified: gave information

1. What is the topic sentence of this paragraph? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Where does the story happen? \_\_\_\_\_
3. How old do you think the boy was? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is the beginning of the story? (Circle one.)
  - a. He was in a large New York department store.
  - b. He got separated from his parents.

5. What is the middle of the story? (Circle one.)

a. He screamed and cried.

b. He got separated from his parents.

6. What is the end of the story? (Circle one.)

a. His parents found him.

b. The size of the store excited him.

7. What is the writer's purpose for writing this paragraph? \_\_\_\_\_

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### Paragraph 70

This paragraph deals with an embarrassing moment in the writer's life.

*Before you read the paragraph, discuss these questions with your classmates.*

1. What was the most embarrassing moment in your life? What happened? What was the result?
2. Imagine that you are a waiter or waitress in a restaurant. What is the most embarrassing thing that could happen to you in this job?

*Now read the paragraph.*



## EXAMPLE PARAGRAPH

Friday Night Disaster

My most embarrassing moment happened when I was working in a Mexican restaurant. I was a hostess working on a busy Friday night. As usual, I was wearing a blouse and a long Mexican skirt. While I was taking some menus to a table, one of the waiters accidentally stepped on the hem of my skirt. This made my skirt come off. However, I did not feel it fall off, and I walked through the whole dining room in my slip. Almost every customer in the restaurant saw me without my skirt on! I was so embarrassed by the event that I had a hard time showing my face there the next day.

**disaster:** complete failure

**hem:** the sewn edge of clothing

**hostess:** the person who takes you to your table in a restaurant

**slip:** a loose undergarment that works as a lining for a skirt or dress

**accidentally:** not intentionally or on purpose

1. What is the topic sentence? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Why was the writer embarrassed? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What is the beginning of the story? (Circle one.)
  - a. She was embarrassed.
  - b. She was working in a restaurant.
4. What is the middle of the story? (Circle one.)
  - a. Her skirt fell off.
  - b. She was working in a restaurant.
5. What is the end of the story? (Circle one choice.)
  - a. She was embarrassed because the customers saw her without a skirt.
  - b. She quit her job.
6. What's the writer's purpose for writing this story? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

casually: informally

relationships: friendships

funny: strange

valuable: important

swallowed my pride: put self-respect  
aside and accepted the situation

1. What is the general topic of this paragraph? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. What is the topic sentence? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. In your own words, what is the beginning of the story?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. In your own words, what is the middle of the story?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. In your own words, what is the end of the story?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

6. What lesson did the writer learn from this experience?

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### WORKING WITH IDEAS FOR NARRATIVE PARAGRAPHS

You can find stories in many places, especially your experiences.

#### Activity 2

#### Recognizing Topics for Narrative Paragraphs

Read the following paragraph titles. Put a check (✓) next to the titles that you think would make good narrative paragraphs. Be prepared to explain your choices.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> My Best Friend Luke    | <input type="checkbox"/> Natural Disasters                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> How to Become a Doctor | <input type="checkbox"/> Dalmatians                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The Day I Almost Died  | <input type="checkbox"/> A Wonderful Day in the Mountains |

Compare your choices to a classmate's. Are they the same or different? Explain.

#### Activity 3

#### Sequencing Sentences in a Paragraph

These sentences form a narrative of a personal experience with death. Read the sentences and number them from 1 to 7 to indicate the best order.



WWW

On the Web  
Try Unit 10  
Activity 2

WWW

On the Web  
Try Unit 10  
Activity 3



- a. \_\_\_\_ At 7:18 the next morning, a severe earthquake measuring 8.1 on the Richter scale hit Mexico City. I was asleep, but the violent side-to-side movement of my bed from side to side woke me up. Then I could hear the rumble of the building as it was shaking.
- b. \_\_\_\_ As I was trying to stand up, I could hear the stucco walls of the building cracking. I was on the third floor of a six-story building, and I thought the building was going to collapse. I really believed that I was going to die.
- c. \_\_\_\_ I flew to Mexico City on September 17. The first two days were uneventful.
- d. \_\_\_\_ My trip to Mexico City in September 1985 was not my first visit there, but this unforgettable trip helped me realize something about life.
- e. \_\_\_\_ I visited a few friends and did a little sightseeing. On the evening of the eighteenth, I had a late dinner with some friends that I had not seen in several years. After a very peaceful evening, I returned to my hotel and quickly fell asleep.
- f. \_\_\_\_ In the end, approximately 5,000 people died in this terrible tragedy, but I was lucky enough not to be among them. This unexpected disaster taught me that life can be over at any minute, so it is important for us to live every day as if it is our last.
- g. \_\_\_\_ When I looked at my room, I could see that the floor was moving up and down like water in the ocean. Because the doorway is often the strongest part of a building, I tried to stand up in the doorway of the bedroom.

**Activity 4****Copying a Paragraph**

Now copy the sentences from Activity 3 in the best order for a narrative paragraph. Add a title of your choice.





## LANGUAGE FOCUS: Verb Tense Consistency

When writers tell a story, they usually use the past tense. Consistency in verb tense means that all the verbs are in the same tense. Be careful not to switch tenses when you write a narrative paragraph.

### Example

Read this narrative paragraph.

### Paragraph 73

#### Mihai's Surprise

Mihai knew how difficult it was to get a student visa for the United States. However, he gathered all the important paperwork, including his I-20 document, passport, bank statements, and even a letter from his doctor. On the morning of his interview, he jumped on a bus to the capital. For five long hours he rode in silence, looked out the window at the gray landscape, and wondered about the interview. When he arrived at the embassy, he saw a line of more than one hundred people. He patiently waited until a guard gave him a number to enter the warm building. The faces of the embassy personnel frightened him, except for an older woman who reminded him of his grandmother. She was working at window number 4. He hoped that she would be the one to look at his paperwork. When it was his turn, he looked up quickly. The baby-faced worker at window number 3 was calling him to come up. Mihai stepped up to the window and gave all his documents to the young embassy employee. He glanced at "grandma" and thought his chance was gone. Then he heard her say to another man, "You will not get a visa in a thousand years! Next in line, please." He was shocked. He turned to the embassy worker in front of him and heard him say, "Here you are, sir. Your student visa is valid for one year." Mihai could not believe it. The impossible had happened. Happily, he took his passport and left the building. One day soon he would write about this experience in English in the United States.

EXAMPLE PARAGRAPH

*Did you notice that all the verbs are in the past tense? Go back and underline the verbs. The verbs in the first two sentences have been done for you.*

**Activity 5****Correcting Verb Tenses**

Read the following narrative paragraph. Underline all the verbs. Then make corrections so that all the verbs are in the past tense.

**Paragraph 74**


**On the Web**  
Try Unit 10  
Activity 5

**My First Job**

The happiest day of my life is when I get my first job last year. After college, I try and try for six months to get work with an advertising firm, but my luck is bad. Finally, one day while I was eating a sandwich in a downtown coffee shop, my luck will begin to change. A young woman who was sitting next to me asks if she could read my newspaper. I say okay, and we start talking. She begins to tell me that she is an executive in a huge advertising company and is looking for an assistant. I will tell her that I am very interested in mass communications and study it for four years at the university. She gives me her business card, and within one week, I am her administrative assistant. It is the best lunch of my life!

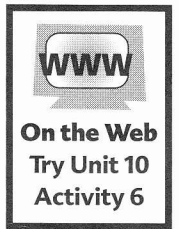
**EXAMPLE PARAGRAPH**

**Activity 6****Editing Narrative Paragraphs**

Read the teacher's comments and the narrative paragraphs. Match the teacher comments to the corrections needed in the paragraphs. Write the number on the line at the end of the paragraph.

**Teacher comments**

1. Your first sentence is too specific to be a topic sentence. Who is "her"? Your topic sentence should tell the reader what the paragraph is going to be about.
2. Be careful of the verbs. They jump from the present to the past tense.
3. Your paragraph is excellent! The topic sentence sets up the rest of the paragraph very nicely. You also use good supporting sentences and correct verbs.
4. Your paragraph is good. However, you did not indent the first line of your paragraph. Be careful with correct paragraph form.
5. This is not a narrative paragraph—it is a descriptive one. Follow directions more carefully.

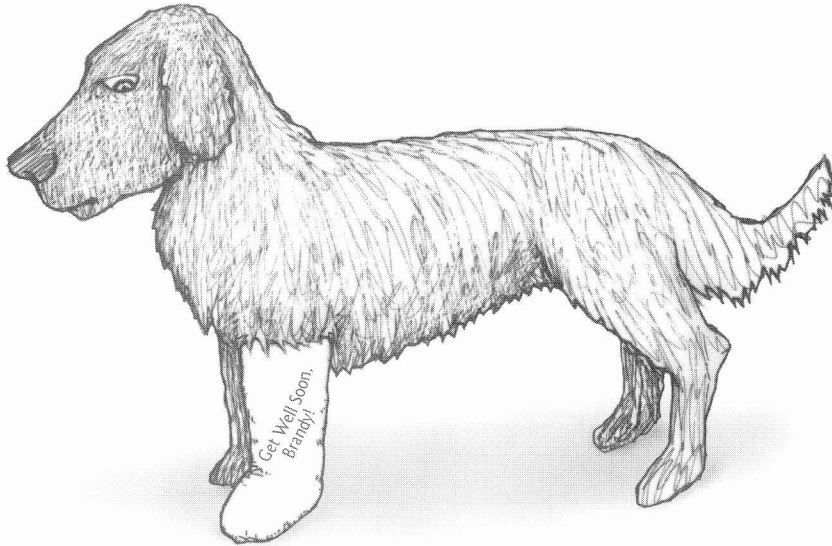
**Paragraph 75****An Unfortunate Family Dinner****EXAMPLE PARAGRAPH**

My family and I went to her house almost every Sunday, but this one time her food almost made me sick. When I sat down at the table, she put some food on my plate. It looked like an old fishing net. I asked her what kind of food it was, but she just said that it was healthy and tasty. I looked around the table and saw that everyone else was eating, even my little brother. Without thinking about it, I put some of the reddish brown food in my mouth. Two seconds later I ran into the bathroom and spit everything out. It was the most terrible stuff I had ever eaten! Later that night my grandmother told me what the food was: fried tripe and cow tongue.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Teacher comment**

**Paragraph 76****Brandy's Luck****EXAMPLE PARAGRAPH**

I will never forget an awful experience that almost took my favorite dog Brandy's life. I always played with Brandy in our front yard every day after school. One day while we were playing, Brandy saw a cat on the other side of the street. She did what any

**EXAMPLE  
PARAGRAPH**

normal dog would do; she started to run across the street to get the cat. I screamed for her to come back, but she did not listen. Suddenly, a car appeared and hit her. The driver of the car was very nice and immediately took Brandy to the neighborhood veterinarian. The vet had to operate on Brandy's leg and put her leg in a cast. When my dog finally returned home, she was almost as good as new. From that day, she never left our front yard again.

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**Teacher comment****Paragraph 77****My Favorite Place****EXAMPLE  
PARAGRAPH**

My bedroom is small but comfortable. The walls are covered with posters and banners of my favorite sports teams. On the left side, there is a twin bed that I have had since I was ten years old. Next to the bed is my dresser. It is blue and white with gold knobs. Beside the dresser is my bookshelf, which holds most of my schoolbooks, dictionaries, and Kurt Vonnegut novels. Across from the bookshelf, you can see my closet. It is too small to hold all my clothes, so some of my stuff has permanent residence on my chair. The clothes get wrinkled there, but I do not mind. My mom does not like it that my room is so messy, so one of these days I am going to clean it up and make her happy.

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**Teacher comment**

**Paragraph 78****A Travel Nightmare****EXAMPLE PARAGRAPH**

When I decided to travel across Europe with a backpack, I did not think I would meet the local police. My best friend and I were sitting in Frankfurt on a train bound for Paris when the nightmare began. A young man comes to the window of the train and asks me what time the train leaves. It took us only ten seconds to open the window and answer him. When we turned away from the window and sat down in our seats, we noticed that our backpacks were missing. Quickly, we got off the train and went to the police headquarters inside the station. We explained what happened. The police officers did not look surprised. They say it is a common way of stealing bags. One person stays outside the train and asks a passenger for help or information. While the passenger is talking to this person, someone else comes quietly into the train car and steals bags, purses, or other valuables. The “team players” are so good at it that they can steal what they want in less than three seconds. The police officers tell us that there is really nothing we can do, but they suggest that we look through the garbage cans and hope that the robbers took only our money and threw our passports and bags away. We looked and looked, but we never found our bags. The next morning we were not in Paris; we were at our embassy in Frankfurt, waiting for duplicate passports.

**Teacher comment**

**Paragraph 79****The Trick That Failed****EXAMPLE PARAGRAPH**

Twin brothers Freddie and Felix often played tricks at school, but one day they went too far. On that day, they decided to try to cheat on a French exam. Freddie was very good at learning languages and was always the best student in both Spanish and French. Felix, however, excelled in mathematics. He was not interested in languages at all. When Felix discovered that he had to take a standardized exam in French, he asked his brother for help. The day of Felix's test, they met in the boys' restroom during lunch and switched clothes. Freddie went to his brother's French class and took the test for him. Meanwhile, Felix followed Freddie's schedule. After school, the twins laughed about their trick and headed home. As they entered the house, their mother called them into the kitchen. She was furious! She had received a phone call from the school principal. The French teacher had found out about the trick! "How did he know?" cried Felix. "Easily," replied his mother. "Everyone at the school knows that one obvious difference between you and your brother is that you are right-handed and Freddie is left-handed. While the French teacher was grading the tests, he noticed that the check marks on the test were made by a left-handed person." Felix and Freddie got into a lot of trouble that day, but they learned a valuable lesson—and they never cheated again.

**Teacher comment****Building Better Sentences****Practice 20**

Correct and varied sentence structure is essential to the quality of your sentences and paragraphs. For further practice with the sentences and paragraphs in this part of the unit, go to Practice 20 on page 246 in Appendix 5.

**Activity 7****Original Writing Practice**

Write a narrative paragraph about an experience that you have had. Follow these guidelines:

- Choose a topic.
- Brainstorm the events in your story.
- Write a topic sentence with controlling ideas.
- Write supporting sentences for the middle of your narrative.
- Check for consistency in past tense verbs.
- Write the end of the story.

If you need help, study the example narrative paragraphs in this unit. Be sure to refer to the seven steps in the writing process in Appendix 1 on pages 198–206.



**Activity 8****Peer Editing**

Work with a partner and exchange paragraphs from Activity 7. Then use Peer Editing Sheet 10 on page 267 to help you comment on your partner's paper. Remember to offer positive comments that will help the writer.

**Activity 9****Additional Writing Assignments**

Here are some ideas for narrative paragraphs. When you write your paragraph, follow the guidelines in Activity 7.

1. Write about the most memorable movie you have seen. Briefly explain the plot (story) of the film.
2. Create a short fable using an animal as the main character. What happens to this animal?
3. Write about how someone you know got out of trouble.
4. Write about an important lesson that you learned.
5. Write about the most frightening (or happy or difficult) experience you have ever had.