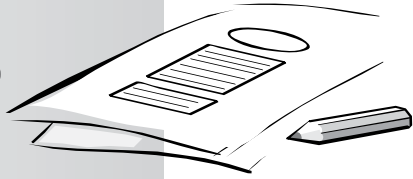


Section 2

Teaching Genres Using BEW



CHAPTER 6

A personal narrative tells the audience my story. This type of story must include a well-planned story line, with details that occur in chronological order, character development using dialogue, a vivid story setting, a plot that informs the audience as to what is happening, and a story conclusion or ending that tells the audience that the author has achieved problem resolution or some new level of enlightenment.

Personal Narrative Writing



What Is a Personal Narrative?

Lights! Camera! Action! It's time for a story! Narrative writing appeals to the audience's emotions. This genre usually entertains and amuses the audience while telling a story of an experience, an event, a list of recurring events, or a firsthand observable account. Elementary and middle school students usually start their writing careers with personal narratives. It's the perfect genre for beginning authors because we all know that everybody, young and old, has a story to tell!

All children have a story to tell! Alayna is no exception as she shares her personal narrative with her class.

A personal narrative may be fiction or nonfiction. It may be written as any one of the following story types: tall tales, folktales, fables, scripts, or personal narratives. It may be written about an event in your life or about being an eyewitness to some type of historical event. In any case, the personal narrative becomes a version of “my story.”



Personal Narrative Building Blocks

If you’ve ever built a house or watched one being built in your neighborhood, you realize that in order for a house to withstand the test of time, it must be built correctly. Building a house requires *specific* building materials, such as wood to build the frame, bricks and mortar to cover the frame, and shingles to cover the roof. Building a house requires a carpenter to follow a blueprint or plan as well as a *sequentially* ordered building process to make sure each step is completed at the appropriate time. Everyone agrees that building a house is a process that should result in a fine product just like the one that you live in; however, it requires quality materials, good workmanship, and paying careful attention to the plan.

Writing a personal narrative can be compared with building a house. To begin, the author needs a blueprint or an organizational plan along with all the necessary *quality* materials—just like building a house. And, yes, writing a personal narrative is a process too—just like building a house; however, wood, brick, mortar, and shingles won’t build you a strong personal narrative. You must still use a blueprint or organizational tool, but you also must use the specific personal narrative building material if you want to build a strong story. First, you need a way to plan or organize your story. We advocate the use of a specific graphic organizer: our Blueprint. Using your notes to complete this Blueprint results in a plan for your story. What next? Writing *my story* requires that all the building blocks of a personal narrative be carefully assembled to produce a quality story. The final product will be a personal narrative that gives authors a unique opportunity to tell an audience about their special life and learning experiences. So, you may be wondering, what exactly are the specific materials needed for building a great personal narrative?

Key: Narrative writing includes tall tales, folktales, fables, and personal narratives—to name only a few. The most commonly taught version of narrative writing in grades K through 8 is personal narrative.

ELL-BEWCONNECTION

Every culture believes in the power of storytelling. It was a primary method of relating information before written language. Allow your ELL students to share their cultural stories with the class.

Building blocks for a personal narrative must include characters, a story line with substantial detail, a vividly described setting, and a plot with a story climax or problem resolution that results in personal growth for the author. Within the story there should be substantial character development and the characters should use dialogue. The story line should have a setting and should take place over time, yet include detailed events. Also, the writer should strive to incorporate voice and interesting vocabulary. In a personal narrative, the writer should draw the reader into the story so that the reader vicariously shares the same feelings experienced by the characters.

For young authors, rather than using a plot, the story may develop a sequence of events, but the author must reach a new level of enlightenment that results in a new learning experience. In either case, whether it's a suspenseful personal narrative with a well-defined plot or a description of a real-life sequence of events leading to a lesson well learned, the author must use the building blocks required for constructing a personal narrative selection.

Following these building blocks may seem like a mighty big order for young as well as older authors. However, when you teach process writing with BEW strategies, the elements of a personal narrative are brought into focus, leading to great student writing selections. (See Table 6.1.)

Common Student Mistakes: What a Personal Narrative Is Not

It is important for you to know the proper building blocks needed to build a good personal narrative. However, it is equally important to know some of the stumbling blocks.

Topic Is Too Large

Not: Don't write a book!

Oh, you mean write on just one topic!

Using traditional teaching methods, students may be off target when attempting to write a personal narrative. Students tend to use stories they know from children's literature as examples. This results in narratives written on topics that are much too broad. Students also tend to include too many details or have complicated character development. In addition, they may try to include convoluted problems with many spin-offs, leading to complex problem resolutions.

While teaching this concept to our class, one of our students came up the acronym *TMI* or *too much information* to describe this problem. When students are not successful in writing personal

Table 6.1 Personal Narrative Building Blocks

Genre Purpose	Appeals to your audience's emotions, usually entertains and amuses
Building Block Features	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Interesting characters 2. A story line with substantial detail 3. A vividly described setting 4. A plot with a story climax or a problem resolution that resulted in personal growth for the author 5. Substantial character development within the story; characters should use dialogue 6. A story line with a setting that takes place over time yet includes detailed events 7. Incorporation of voice and interesting vocabulary 8. Readers drawn into the story so that they vicariously share the same feelings experienced by the characters
Genre Writing Techniques	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Point of View</i>: written in the first person is best; written in the third person is acceptable 2. <i>Audience Appeal</i>: appealing to the senses; puts your audience in the scene with you 3. <i>Show Don't Tell</i>: uses language that describes what is happening instead of merely telling the facts or listing the actions 4. <i>Character Development</i>: makes your characters come alive with dialogue; uses voice 5. <i>Vivid Verbs</i>: uses exciting, powerful verbs to describe action and events 6. <i>Flashbacks</i>: moving backward in time to describe an event that is part of the story line 7. <i>Fast Forward</i>: moving ahead in time to describe the story line
Genre Format and Voice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Story Introduction or Beginning</i>: telling the student topic and providing a <i>hook</i> to get the reader to read on 2. <i>Detail Paragraph(s) with a Plot</i>: a story structured so that it has a problem that leads to a resolution and an ending 3. <i>Summary or Story Ending</i>: shows how the author was enlightened, leading to personal growth 4. <i>Chronological Order</i>: events listed in a logical sequence 5. <i>Setting</i>: well-defined setting relating to the author's senses 6. <i>Voice</i>: uses a lot of your voice and imagery

narrative selections, the primary reason is because the topics selected are too large (see Table 6.2). Remember to help your students narrow their topic focus.

Table 6.2 Comparison of Student Writing Topics

Topics That Are Too Large	Properly Narrow Topic
Our Family Trip to Cedar Point Amusement Park	My Roller-coaster Ride
My New School	First Day at a New School
My Fishing Trip	Catching the Big Fish

Story Line Written as a List of Details

Not: A story isn't a grocery list of ideas.

Oh, you mean I should explain the ideas!

When students' topics are too large, they tend to be constructed in a sequential format listing all the story events in the hope of getting everything down. You can see this problem in the notes they take on their Blueprint. The following table presents two examples of notes our students listed on their Blueprints for a single detail paragraph. The purpose of this paragraph was to create a story setting. The example on the left is for a topic that is too large. The example on the right is for an appropriately focused topic. Look what happens to this third-grade student's notes when the topic is too large (see Table 6.3).

Can you see what happened in this example? The student whose notes are on the left was attempting to get everything about her trip written down. She wanted to tell you how she got to the location, what time of day it was, and the events on the way. Consequently, the story would have become a sequential list of unimportant events. Note that in the second column, when the student topic is narrow, the author's notes become more meaningful and she actually sets the scene. When the topic is too large or, as we say in BEW, "Students are writing on the theme instead of writing on a topic," students tend to lose their voice, shrink their vocabulary, and actually end up changing the genre from a personal narrative to an informational writing selection.

Table 6.3 Keep the Focus Narrow

Detail Paragraph Notes, Topic Too Large	Detail Paragraph Notes, Proper Narrow Focus
<p><i>Our Family Trip to Cedar Point</i> (setting paragraph)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We got up early and got into the car. 2. We were in the car forever. 3. We stopped for lunch. 4. Got to Cedar Point, it was dark. 	<p><i>My Roller-coaster Ride</i> (setting paragraph)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Standing in line with my brother, Jim, he's eight years old. 2. My hands were sweating, felt like I was going to pass out. 3. Watched the roller coaster drop down the hill like a cannon going off. 4. Felt like I was going to pass out cold.

No Ending

Not: You're not still on vacation!

Oh! You mean I have to tell what happened at the end?

After reading thousands of students' personal narratives during the past thirty years, we've found that one of the most common errors students make in this genre is that they don't write an ending. They simply leave you hanging! That's right. There's no ending. There's no lesson that has been learned. Recently, one of our students wrote a personal narrative about her dream vacation. The topic she selected was *Swimming with Dolphins*—an excellent topic for a personal narrative because of its narrow scope. She told us about the great time she had in the water with the dolphins, but abruptly ended her narrative in the middle of the action. As far as the story goes, she's still swimming in the ocean. Many students do not know how to end a story. This problem is more prevalent today than it was when we first began teaching. We believe this is because today's children don't spend as much time reading books as children in former generations. Children in those days knew the structure of a story by the time they reached school. Today, quite a few children are coming to school language-, vocabulary-, and story-deprived. So, learning the building blocks of a story is new to many children. With BEW, we provide a structured format for writing personal narrative stories where all children can be successful.

TIP: The vocabulary items included in this section are the essential building blocks for constructing a personal narrative. Teach these genre-specific vocabulary words (along with reviewing the more general vocabulary associated with the writing process) for successful student writing in this genre.

Teach the Genre Using BEW Phases

We listed the building blocks needed for developing a personal narrative earlier in the table. We also discussed some of the pitfalls to be avoided. You may be wondering how to fit these ideas into the BEW process. To do this, we will now show you how to apply each of the phases of BEW on a step-by-step basis to a personal narrative writing. (Make a new student Rough Draft Writing Folder for each personal narrative writing selection.)

Three Steps in Phase I: Authentic Vocabulary

Step 1: Written Expression Vocabulary

Let's go back to phase I of BEW: teaching authentic vocabulary words. Along with reviewing the Big Ten vocabulary words in the BEW process, we recommend teaching the following genre-specific vocabulary words as they pertain to personal narrative writing.



Professor Write's Interactive Teaching Strategy

Teaching Personal Narrative Vocabulary

1. Genre

Review: Ask, "What is a personal narrative?" Students should respond, "My story," with their hand on their heart.

Say: "Today we will talk about a personal narrative. This is *your story*. You will be given a writing prompt or question as a theme for your writing selection."

2. Audience

Say: "You need to know who you are writing for, your audience. You will be writing this personal narrative for . . . [for example, another student or a younger student in the school, or to put into a classroom book]. Keep in mind how much the particular audience knows about your topic."

3. Characters

Say: "Your personal narrative will need to have interesting people. We call them *characters*."

4. Setting

Say: "You will need to tell the reader where your story takes place. This is called the *setting*."

5. Plot

Say: "The plot is the structure of the story. It is the rising and falling action of the story that leads to a problem resolution."

Step 2: Conventions and Grammar

Every genre has different conventions that are a part of its building blocks. A specific convention needed for the personal narrative genre is the *point of view* in which the selection is written.