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Chapter 7

Narration

Chapter Outline

Narration is the process of recalling events, usually in order of time, or **chronological order**. In other words, it is storytelling. The arrangement of events is called the *plot*. Writers usually begin by relating the first event in a series, which usually sets the plot in motion. They usually end the story with the last event.

However, this is not always the case. Where a writer begins and ends depends upon the kind and purpose of story being told. Some stories begin in the middle or even at the end and then recall what happened earlier. Others are preceded or followed by information that the author thinks important to fully understanding the story. For example, in this chapter, Martin Gansberg prefaces his story of a young woman's vicious murder by commenting upon the lack of responsibility of thirty-seven witnesses who stood by and did nothing. Lois Diaz-Talty introduces her story about an adult lifestyle change by telling us about problems she experienced in childhood and adolescence.

More than 2,300 years ago, the Greek philosopher Aristotle taught that a narrative must have a beginning, middle, and end. In short, a successful story must be complete. It must contain all the information readers will need to understand what happened and to follow along easily. This is the most important idea to remember when writing narratives, but there are others.

7.1 Determining Purpose and Theme

There are two types of narration: nonfiction and fiction. Works of nonfiction record stories of actual events. Fiction, though sometimes based on real life, is born mainly of the author's imagination and does not re-create events as they happened.

Of course, the narrative method is used by both historians and journalists. Indeed, nonfiction can explain complex ideas or make important points about very real situations. Adrienne Schwartz's "The Colossus in the Kitchen," for example, exposes the evil and stupidity of apartheid, a political system once used in South Africa. In fact, many nonfiction narratives are written to explain an important (central) idea, often called a *theme*. They reveal something important about human nature, society, or life itself. At times, the theme is stated as a *moral*, as in Aesop's fables, the ancient Greek tales that teach lessons about living. More often, however, the theme of a narrative remains unstated or implied. It is revealed only as the plot unfolds; in such cases, the story speaks for itself.

Always ask yourself whether the story you have chosen to tell is important to you. This doesn't mean that you should limit yourself to events you have witnessed or experienced, although personal experience can provide information needed to spin a good yarn. It does mean that the more interested you are in the people, places, and events you are writing about, the better able you will be to make your writing meaningful and appealing.

7.2 Finding the Meaning in Your Story

As explained earlier, you don't have to reveal the purpose or theme (central idea) of a narrative. You can allow the events to speak for themselves. At first, you may not clearly understand what the theme of your story is or why it is important. But that's fine. Writing is a voyage of discovery. It teaches you things about your subject (and yourself) that you would not have known had you not started the process in the first place. Just write about something you believe is interesting and important. You can always figure out why your story is important or what theme to demonstrate when you write your second or third draft.

chronological order
The arrangement of material in order of time.

7.3 Deciding What to Include

In most cases, you won't have trouble deciding which details to include, for you will be able to put down events as you remember them. In some cases, however—especially when trying to project a particular theme or idea—you will have to decide which events and people should be discussed in great detail, which should be mentioned only briefly, and which should be excluded from your story.

7.4 Showing the Passage of Time

The most important thing about a story is the plot, a series of events occurring in time. Writers must make sure that their plots make sense, that they are easy to follow, and that each event or incident flows into the next logically.

A good way to indicate the passage of time is to use transitions or connectives, the kind of words and expressions used to create coherence within and between paragraphs. (You can learn more about transitions in chapter 2.) In Martin Ganzberg's "37 Who Saw Murder Didn't Call the Police," the author uses such words and phrases to make logical connections and to indicate the passage of time.

> It was 3:50 by the time the police received their first call, from a man who was a neighbor …. In two minutes they were at the scene. The neighbor, a 70-year-old woman, and another woman were the only persons on the street. Nobody else came forward.

7.5 Describing Setting and Developing Characters

Establishing the setting of your story involves indicating the time and place in which it occurs. Describing characters allows you to make your story more believable and convincing. (You can find more about describing places and people in chapter 6.) Remember that your chief purpose is to tell a story, but the people in that story and the time and place in which it occurs may be as interesting as the events themselves.

An important element in narrative is dialogue, the words a writer allows people in the story to speak. Dialogue can expose important aspects of a character's personality, describe setting, and even reveal events that help move the plot along. Writers often allow their characters to explain what happened or to comment on the action in their own words, complete with grammatical errors and slang expressions.

7.6 Making Your Stories Interesting and Believable

One of the best ways to keep your readers' interest is to use effective verbs. More than any other parts of speech, verbs convey action—they tell what happened. It's important to be accurate when reporting an event. You should recapture it exactly as you remember and without exaggeration. However, good writing can be both accurate and interesting, both believable and colorful. You can achieve this balance by using verbs carefully. In Seamus Heaney's "Mid-Term Break," for example, the speaker reports that his mother "coughed out angry tearless sighs." He could have said that she was so angry she could not cry, but that would not have given us a sense of the emotional torture she suffered.

A good way to make your writing believable is to use proper nouns that create a realistic setting, that name real people, or that reveal other aspects of your story to make it more convincing. In "37 Who Saw Murder Didn't Call the Police," Martin Gansberg mentions easily recognizable places names such as Kennedy International Airport. He includes specific street addresses, as well as the names of neighborhoods, and he identifies both the major and minor characters in this news story.

7.7 Writing About Ourselves and About Others: Point of View

point of view
The perspective from which a narrative is told. Stories that use the first-person point of view are told by a narrator who is involved in the action and who uses words such as *I*, *me*, and *we* to explain what happened. Stories that use the third-person point of view are told by a narrator who may or may not be involved in the action and who uses words such as *he*, *she*, and *they* to explain what happened.

The essays and poems in this chapter may be divided into two categories. The first, including Heaney's "Mid-Term Break" and student Diaz-Talty's "The Day I Was Fat," are autobiographical. They look inward to explain something important about the narrator (storyteller). They are told from the first-person **point of view**, using the pronouns *I* or *we*. In these selections, the narrator is involved in the action. Also included in this group is Schwartz's "The Colossus in the Kitchen," a student essay in which the young narrator is not the major character. Nonetheless, her voice is heard clearly as she comments upon institutional racism and tells us about one of its most innocent victims.

The second category includes Gansberg's "37 Who Saw Murder Didn't Call the Police," which reports on events involving others. Told from the third-person point of view, it uses pronouns such as *he*, *she*, *it*, and *they*.

7.8 Visualizing Narrative Elements

The paragraphs that follow are from "Padre Blaisdell and the Refugee Children," Rene Cutforth's true story of a Catholic priest's efforts to save abandoned children during the Korean War. The place is Seoul; the time, December 1950.

Describes setting and introduces the main character.

At dawn Padre Blaisdell dressed himself in the little icy room at the top of the orphanage at Seoul. He put on his parka and an extra sweater, for the Siberian wind was fluting in the corners of the big grey barrack of the school …. The water in his basin was solid ice ….

His boots clicked along the stone flags in the freezing passages which led to the main door. The truck was waiting on the snow-covered gravel in the yellow-grey light of sunrise. The two Korean nurses stood as usual, ready for duty—pig-tailed adolescents, their moon faces as passive and kindly as cows.

Describes other characters.

Uses a transition to show passage of time.

By the time he reached Riverside Road, the padre had passed through the normal first stage of reaction to the wind …; he was content now in his open vehicle to lie back and admire the effortless skill of the wind's razor as it slashed him to the bone.

Uses a metaphor, action verb.

Uses vivid adjectives and proper nouns to describe setting.

There's a dingy alley off Riverside Street, narrow, and strewn with trodden straw and refuse which would stink if the cold allowed it life enough. This alley leads to the arches of the

railway bridge across the Han River. The truck's wheels crackled over the frozen … alley, passed from it down a sandy track and halted at the second arch of the bridge [in front of which] lay a pile of filthy rice sacks, clotted with dirt and stiff as boards. It was a child, practically naked and covered with filth. It lay in a pile of its own excrement in a sort of nest it had scratched out among the rice sacks. Hardly able to raise itself on an elbow, it still had enough energy to draw back cracked lips from bleeding gums and snarl and spit at the padre like an angry kitten. Its neck was not much thicker than a broom handle and it had the enormous pot-belly of starvation.

Uses vivid verbs and adjectives.

Uses a simile.

At eleven o'clock in the morning, when the padre returned to the orphanage, his truck was full. "They are the real victims of the war," the padre said in his careful … colorless voice. "Nine-tenths of them were lost or abandoned …. No one will take them in unless they are relations, and we have 800 of these children at the orphanage. Usually they recover in quite a short time, but the bad cases tend to become very silent. I have a little boy who has said nothing for three months now but *Yes* and *No*."

Uses transition to show passage of time.

Uses dialogue to provide information and explain story's purpose.

7.8a Tracking the Passage of Time: "Padre Blaisdell and the Refugee Children"

We can divide the story roughly into three major sections, each of which is introduced by transitions that relate to time.

"At dawn ..."
Padre Blaisdell and the nurses leave the orphanage in search of orphans.

↓

"By the time he reached Riverside Road …"
They find the child in the alley.

↓

"At eleven o'clock in the morning …"
They return with a truckload of children.

7.9 Revising Narrative Essays

The first reading selection in this chapter, "The Colossus in the Kitchen," was written by Adrienne Schwartz, a student who recalls the racial prejudice aimed at Tandi, a black woman who worked for the author's family in South Africa. Realizing narrative essays require as much care as any others, Schwartz made important changes to her rough draft and turned an already fine essay into a memorable experience for her readers.

Schwartz—Rough Draft

Our neighbors, in conformity with established thinking, had long called my mother, and therefore all of us, deviants, agitators, and no less than second cousins to Satan himself. The cause of this dishonorable labeling was the fact that we had been taught to believe in the equality and dignity of humankind.

Use a quotation to show this?

That was why I could not understand the apoplectic reaction of the neighbors to my excited news that Tandi was going to have a baby. After all, this was not politics; this was new life. Tandi's common-law husband lived illegally with her in the quarters assigned to them; complying with the law on this and many other petty issues was not considered appropriate in our household. It was the Group Areas Act that had been responsible for the breakup of Tandi's marriage. Her lawful husband, who was not born in the same area as she, had been refused a permit to work in the Transvaal, a province in northeastern South Africa, where we lived. In the way of many others, he had been placed in such a burdensome situation and found the degradation of being taken from his wife's bed in the middle of the night and joblessness more often than he could tolerate. He simply went away, never to be heard from again.

Connect these ideas better?

Make smoother?

Needed?

More vivid?

Clarify?

The paradox of South Africa is complex in the extreme. It is like a rare and precious stone set amid barren wastes, and yet it feeds off its own flesh.

Find a better place for this idea?

The days passed, and Tandi's waist got bigger and pride could be seen in her eyes.

The child died after only one day.

Slow down? Show passage of time?

Schwartz—Final Draft

Our neighbors, in conformity with established thinking, had long called my mother, and therefore all of us, deviants, agitators, and no less than second cousins to Satan himself. The cause of this dishonorable labeling was the fact that we had been taught to believe in the equality and dignity of humankind.

"Never take a person's dignity away from him," my mother had said, "no matter how angry or hurt you might be because in the end you only diminish your own worth."

Uses direct quotation to prove an idea.

That was why I could not understand the apoplectic reaction of the neighbors to my excited news that Tandi was going to have a baby. After all, this was not politics; this was new life. But the paradox of South Africa is complex in the extreme. The country is like a rare and precious stone set amid barren wastes, and yet close up it is a gangrenous growth that feeds off its own flesh.

Moves this information to a more logical place.

Adds vivid details in a metaphor.

Tandi's common-law husband lived illegally with her in the quarters assigned to them; complying with the law on this and many other petty issues was not considered appropriate in our household. It was the Group Areas Act that had been responsible for the breakup of Tandi's marriage in the first place. Her lawful husband, who was not born in the same area as she, had been refused a permit to work in the Transvaal and, like others placed in such a burdensome situation, suffered the continuous degradation of being dragged from his wife's bed in the middle of the night and of being denied work more often

Removes unnecessary information.

Adds transition to connect ideas.

Adds vivid verbs.

than he could tolerate. Eventually he simply melted away, never to be seen or heard from again, making legal divorce impossible.

As the days passed, Tandi's waist swelled, and pride glowed in her dauntless eyes.

Adds three transitions to show time passing.

And then the child was born, and he lived for a day, and then he died.

Expands last sentence for dramatic effect.

7.10 Practicing Narrative Skills

What follows is an eyewitness account of the last moments of the *Titanic*, which sank in 1912 after striking an iceberg. The writer views the scene from a lifeboat after having abandoned ship. Practice your skills by following the instructions for each section of this exercise.

1. Underline words and phrases that make this an effective narrative. Look especially for vivid verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Also underline transitions.

> In a couple of hours … [the ship] began to go down … rapidly. Then the fearful sight began. The people in the ship were just beginning to realize how great their danger was. When the forward part of the ship dropped suddenly at a faster rate … there was a sudden rush of passengers on all the decks towards the stern. It was like a wave. We could see the great black mass of people in the steerage sweeping to the rear part of the boat and breaking through to the upper decks. At a distance of about a mile we could distinguish everything through the night, which was perfectly clear. We could make out the increasing excitement on board the boat as the people, rushing to and fro, caused the deck lights to disappear and reappear as they passed in front of them. [Mrs. D. H. Bishop]

2. Important words have been removed from the following paragraphs. Replace them with words of your own. Use only the kinds of words indicated. Avoid *is, are, was, were, have been, had been,* and other forms of the verb *to be*.

> This panic went on, it seemed, for an hour. _____ (TRANSITION) the ship seemed to _____ (VERB) out of the water and stand there perpendicularly. It seemed to us that it stood _____ (ADVERB) in the water for four full minutes. _____ (TRANSITION) it began to _____ (VERB) gently downwards. Its speed increased as it went down head first, so that the stern _____ (VERB) down with a rush.
>
> The lights continued to burn till it sank. We could see the people _____ (VERB) _____ (ADVERB) in the stern till it was gone … . _____ (ADVERB OF TIME) the ship sank, we _____ (VERB) the screaming a mile away. Gradually, it became fainter and fainter and died away. Some of the lifeboats that had room for more might have _____ (VERB) to their rescue, but it would have meant that those who were in the water would have _____ (VERB) aboard and sunk them.

7.11 Reading Selections

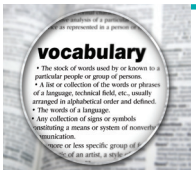
7.11a The Colossus in the Kitchen

Author Biography

Adrienne Schwartz was born in Johannesburg in the Republic of South Africa, where she now lives. "The Colossus in the Kitchen" is about the tragedy of apartheid, a political system that kept power and wealth in the hands of whites by denying civil and economic rights to nonwhites and by enforcing a policy of racial segregation. Tandi, the woman who is at the center of this story, was Schwartz's nursemaid for several years. Schwartz wrote this essay in 1988. Since that time, South Africa has abolished apartheid and extended civil rights to all citizens. Nelson Mandela, a black political leader who had been imprisoned by the white minority government during the apartheid era, became South Africa's first freely elected president.

Preparing to Read

1. The Group Areas Act, which Schwartz refers to in paragraph 6, required blacks to seek work only in those areas of the country for which the government had granted them a permit. Unfortunately, Tandi's legal husband was not allowed to work in the same region as she.
2. The Colossus was the giant bronze statue of a male figure straddling the inlet to the ancient Greek city of Rhodes. It was known as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. More generally, this term refers to anything that is very large, impressive, and powerful. As you read this essay, ask yourself what made Tandi a colossus in the eyes of young Schwartz.



Vocabulary

apoplectic (adjective) Characterized by a sudden loss of muscle control or ability to move.

ashen (adjective) Gray.

bestriding (adjective) Straddling, standing with legs spread widely.

cavernous (adjective) Like a cave or cavern.

confections (noun) Sweets.

cowered (adjective) Cringing.

dauntless (adjective) Fearless.

deviants (noun) Criminals.

disenfranchised (adjective) Without rights or power.

entailed (verb) Involved.

flaying (noun) Whipping.

gangrenous (adjective) Decaying, decomposing.

nebulous (adjective) Without definite shape.

prerogative (noun) Privilege.

sage (adjective) Wise.

The Colossus in the Kitchen

Adrienne Schwartz

I remember when I first discovered the extraordinary harshness of daily life for black South Africans. It was in the carefree, tumbling days of childhood that I first sensed apartheid was not merely the impoverishing of the landless and all that that entailed, but a flaying of the innermost spirit. 1

The house seemed so huge in those days, and the adults were giants bestriding the world with surety and purpose. Tandi, the cook, reigned with the authoritarian discipline of a Caesar. She held audience in the kitchen, an enormous room filled with half-lights and well-scrubbed tiles, cool stone floors and a cavernous black stove. Its ceilings were high, and during the heat of midday I would often drowse in the comer, listening to Tandi sing, in a lilting voice, of the hardships of black women as aliens in their own country. From half-closed eyes I would watch her broad hands coax, from a nebulous lump of dough, a bounty of confections, filled with yellow cream and new-picked apricots. 2

She was a peasant woman and almost illiterate, yet she spoke five languages quite competently; moreover, she was always there, sturdy, domineering and quick to laugh. 3

Our neighbors, in conformity with established thinking, had long called my mother, and therefore all of us, deviants, agitators, and no less than second cousins to Satan himself. The cause of this dishonorable labeling was the fact that we had been taught to believe in the equality and dignity of humankind. 4

"Never take a person's dignity away from him," my mother had said, "no matter how angry or hurt you might be because in the end you only diminish your own worth." 5

That was why I could not understand the apoplectic reaction of the neighbors to my excited news that Tandi was going to have a baby. After all, this was not politics; this was new life. But the paradox of South Africa is complex in the extreme. The country is like a rare and precious stone set amid barren wastes, and yet close up it is a gangrenous growth that feeds off its own flesh. 6

Tandi's common-law husband lived illegally with her in the quarters assigned to them; complying with the law on this and many other petty issues was not considered appropriate in our household. It was the Group Areas Act that had been responsible for the breakup of Tandi's marriage in the first place. Her lawful husband, who was not born in the same area as she, had been refused a permit to work in the Transvaal and, like others placed in such a burdensome situation, suffered the continuous degradation of being dragged from his wife's bed in the middle of the night and of being denied work more often than he could tolerate. Eventually he simply melted away, never to be seen or heard from again, making legal divorce impossible. 7

As the days passed, Tandi's waist swelled, and pride glowed in her dauntless eyes. 8

And then the child was born, and he lived for a day, and then he died. 9

I could not look at Tandi. I did not know that the young could die. I thought death was the prerogative of the elderly. I could not bear to see her cowered shoulders or ashen face. 10

I fled to the farthest corner of the yard. One of the neighbors was out picking off dead buds from the rose bushes. She looked over the hedge in concern. 11

"Why! You look terrible … are you ill, dear?" she said. 12

"It's Tandi, Mrs. Green. She lost her baby last night," I replied. 13

Mrs. Green sighed thoughtfully and pulled off her gardening gloves. "It's really not surprising," she said, not unkindly, but as if she were imparting as sage a piece of advice as she could. "These people (a term reserved for the disenfranchised) have to learn that the punishment always fits the crime." 14

Read More on the Web

For more on apartheid, visit

- "Apartheid," History.com: www.history.com/topics/africa/apartheid
- "The History of Apartheid in South Africa": http://bvtlab.com/7ke8Z

Questions for Discussion

1. Why does Schwartz spend so much time describing the kitchen in paragraph 2?
2. What details do we learn about Tandi, and what do they tell us about her character? Why does the author call her a "colossus"?
3. Why are we told so little about the story's characters other than Tandi?
4. Why does Schwartz recall events from Tandi's past (paragraph 6)?
5. The author makes especially good use of verbs in the last half of this essay. Find some examples.
6. Where does Schwartz use dialogue, and what does it reveal?

Thinking Critically

1. Apartheid was not "merely the impoverishing of the landless" but also "a flaying of the innermost spirit," says Schwartz. What does she mean by this? If necessary, do some research on apartheid on the Internet or in the library.
2. Is Schwartz's message or central idea similar to Leo Romero's in "What the Gossips Saw" (Chapter 4)? Write a paragraph in which you compare (point out similarities between) the central ideas of these selections.

Suggestions for Journal Entries

1. Have you or anyone you know well ever witnessed or been involved in a case of intolerance based on race, color, creed, or sex? List the important events that made up this incident and, if appropriate, use focused freewriting to write short descriptions of the characters involved.
2. Schwartz's essay is a startling account of her learning some new and very painful things about life. Using any of the prewriting methods discussed in Getting Started, make notes about an incident from your childhood that opened your eyes to some new and perhaps unpleasant reality.
3. Were you ever as close to an older person as Schwartz was to Tandi? Examine your relationship with the individual by briefly narrating one or two experiences you shared with him or her.

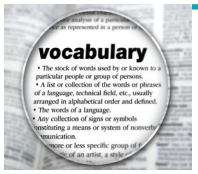
7.11b Mid-Term Break

Author Biography

Seamus Heaney (1939–2013) was born in County Derry in Northern Ireland. The son of a farmer, Heaney took a bachelor of arts at Queen's University in Belfast and then began teaching in secondary school. He was a professor of poetry at Oxford University in England and served as a visiting lecturer at Harvard University and at the University of California. Called the greatest living Irish poet of his time, Heaney won many awards, including the Nobel Prize for Literature (1995), the most prestigious honor a writer can receive. His poems focus on the land, people, and history of Northern Ireland. Some of his works also discuss the political and religious turmoil that have plagued his country. Collections of Heaney's poetry include *Field Work* (1979), *Station Island* (1984), and *The Hero Lantern* (1987).

Preparing to Read

1. What does the title tell us about the speaker of this poem?
2. As you read the first stanza (verse paragraph), ask yourself why the speaker tells us about spending "all morning in the college sick bay [infirmary]."
3. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker mentions bells ringing. For what might this prepare us?



Vocabulary

gaudy (adjective) Conspicuous, ugly, in bad taste.

knelling (adjective) Ringing.

poppy (adjective) Red or deep orange.

pram (noun) Baby carriage.

snowdrops (noun) White flowers that bloom in early spring.

stanched (adjective) Wrapped so as to stop the flow of blood.

Mid-Term Break

Seamus Heaney

I sat all morning in the college sick bay
Counting bells knelling classes to a close.
At two o'clock our neighbours drove me home.

In the porch I met my father crying—
He had always taken funerals in his stride—
And Big Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow.

The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram
When I came in, and I was embarrassed
By old men standing up to shake my hand

And tell me they were "sorry for my trouble."
Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest,
Away at school, as my mother held my hand

In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs.
At ten o'clock the ambulance arrived
With the corpse, stanched and bandaged by the nurses.

Next morning I went up into the room. Snowdrops
And candles soothed the bedside; I saw him
For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
He lay in the four foot box as in his cot.
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

Read More on the Web

For more about Seamus Heaney and his work visit these websites:

- "SeamusHeaney,"Poetryfoundation.org:www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/seamus-heaney
- "About Seamus Heaney," The Poetry Archive: www.poetryarchive.org/poet/seamus-heaney

Questions for Discussion

1. What transitions does Heaney use to move this brief poem along?
2. What function does dialogue play in this poem?
3. What do the reactions of the speaker's mother and father reveal about them?
4. Comment upon the poet's choice of verbs in lines 13 through 21. What use of adjectives (especially participles) does he make?
5. Explain how changes in setting help the speaker convey his reaction to the death of his brother?
6. Find examples of figurative language.

Thinking Critically

1. We are shocked to learn of the death of a child at the end of this poem, but Heaney has prepared us all along. Make notes in the margins where you find clues about the poem's ending.
2. What contrasts does Heaney draw in this poem?
3. Heaney attended St. Columb's College before entering Queens University. What might the word *college* mean as used in "Mid-Term Break"?

Suggestions for Journal Entries

1. In the Questions for Discussion, you were asked to consider the different ways in which Heaney's mother and father reacted to the loss of their child. Some people react differently to death than others. Use freewriting, clustering, or listing to gather details that might help explain how you or someone you know reacted to the death of a loved one. Try to use vivid language and be as detailed as you can as you gather this information.
2. In lines 16 and 17, Heaney writes: "Snowdrops/And candles soothed the bedside." Find out more about "snowdrops" in an unabridged dictionary or online. Then, using freewriting, compose a detailed picture of what you imagine this scene to be. Base your description on Heaney's words, but go beyond them by adding detail from your own imagination.

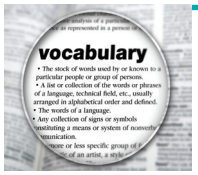
7.11c The Day I Was Fat

Author Biography

When she isn't waitressing part-time or taking care of her family of four, ***Lois Diaz-Talty*** studies nursing and writes interesting essays such as the one that follows. She credits her husband and children for encouraging her academic efforts. Nonetheless, as the essay shows, she is an energetic, determined, and intelligent woman who is sure to succeed. When asked to write about a pivotal event or turning point in her life, Diaz-Talty recalled an incident that is burned into her memory and that has helped shape her life.

Preparing to Read

1. The significance of the event narrated in this essay is explained in its thesis, which appears near the end.
2. Diaz-Talty's style is conversational and often humorous, but her essay is always clear and focused. Pay attention to her use of dialogue, which captures the flavor of the moment.
3. Her title is unusual. What does it signal about what is to come?



Vocabulary

condiments (noun) Seasonings, flavorings.

committed (adjective) Determined.

ironically (adverb) Having an effect opposite the one expected.

limber (adjective) Able to bend easily, flexible.

notorious (adjective) Shameful, bad.

The Day I Was Fat

Lois Diaz-Talty

I was never in great shape. As a child, I was always called "plump," and my friend "Skinny Sherri" was always, well, skinny. I could never sit Indian-style the way other kids did, and when I made the cheerleading squad in eighth grade it was because I had a big mouth and a great smile, not because I could execute limber splits or elegant cartwheels. Although I maintained a respectable weight throughout high school (after all, my "entire life" depended upon my looks and popularity), there was always a fat person inside of me just waiting to burst onto the scene. 1

Adulthood, marriage, and settling down had notorious effects on my weight: I blew up! The fat lady had finally arrived, saw the welcome mat, and moved right in. No one in my family could tell me I was fat. They knew that I had gained weight, I knew that I had gained weight, and I knew that they knew that I had gained weight. But to discuss the topic was out of the question. Once, my mother said, "You're too pretty to be so heavy"; that was the closest anyone had ever come to calling me fat. Later, my husband teased me because we couldn't lie on the couch together anymore, and I just cried and cried. He never dared to mention it again, but I didn't stop eating. 2

I had just given birth to my first child and was at least fifty pounds overweight. Nonetheless, I remember feeling that that was the greatest time in my life. I had a beautiful new baby, new furniture, a great husband, a lovely house. What more could anyone want? Well, I knew what else I wanted: I wanted to be thin and healthy. I just didn't care enough about myself to stop my frequent binging. I tried to lose weight every day, but I couldn't get started. Diets didn't last through lunch, and I got bigger by the day. 3

One summer afternoon in 1988, as I was headed to the pool with my sister-in-law Mary Gene and our children, I got into an argument with a teenager who was driving fast and tail-gating our car. When he nearly ran us off the road, I turned around and glared at him to show my disapproval and my concern for our safety. Suddenly, we began yelling at each other. He was about 18, with an ugly, red, swollen face. The few teeth he had were yellow and rotten. He followed us to the pool and, as he pulled into the parking lot behind us, our argument became heated. 4

"What's your problem, bitch?" he screamed. 5

"You drive like an idiot! That's my problem, okay?" 6

When I got out of the car and walked around to get the baby, he laughed to his friend, "Ah, look at 'er. She's fat! Go to hell, fat bitch." And then they drove away. 7

Once inside the gates to the pool, my sister-in-law advised me to forget the whole incident. 8

"Come on," she said. "Don't worry about that jerk! Did you see his teeth? He was gross." 9

But I couldn't get his words out of my mind. They stung like a whip. "I'm fat," I thought to myself. "I haven't just put on a few pounds. I'm not bloated. I don't have baby weight to lose. I'm just plain fat." Nobody had ever called me fat before, and it hurt terribly. But it was true. 10

On that very day, as I sat at the pool praying that nobody would see me in my bathing suit, I promised myself that no one would ever call me fat again. That hideous, 18-year-old idiot had spoken the words that none of my loved ones had had the heart to say even though they were true. Yes, I was fat. 11

From then on, I was committed to shedding the weight and getting into shape. I started a rigorous program of running and dieting the very next day. Within months, I joined a gym and managed to make some friends who are still my workout buddies. However, in the past seven years, I've done more than lose weight: I've reshaped my attitude, my lifestyle, and my self-image. Now, I read everything I can about nutrition and health. I'm even considering becoming an aerobics instructor. I cook low-fat foods—chicken, fish, lean meats, vegetables—and I serve my family healthy, protein-rich meals prepared with dietetic ingredients. The children and I often walk to school, ride bikes, rollerblade, and run. Health and fitness have become essential to our household and our lives. But what's really wonderful is that, sometime between that pivotal day in 1988 and today, my self-image stopped being about how I look and began being about how I feel. I feel energetic, healthy, confident, strong, and pretty. Ironically, the abuse I endured in the parking lot has helped me regain my self-esteem, not just my figure. My body looks good, but my mind feels great! 12

I hope that the kid from the pool has had his teeth fixed because I'm sure they were one source of his misery. If I ever see him again, I won't tell him that he changed my life in such a special way. I won't let him know that he gave me the greatest gift he could ever give me just by being honest. I won't give him the satisfaction of knowing that the day he called me fat was one of the best days of my life. 13

Read More on the Web

For more on dieting and losing weight see the following:

- The Obesity Society: www.obesity.org
- Nutrition.gov: www.nutrition.gov

Questions for Discussion

1. Where does Diaz-Talty express the essay's central idea? In other words, which sentence is her thesis?
2. What purpose does the author's quoting herself serve in this essay? Why does she quote her mother?
3. Why did the author quote the exact words of the boy who harassed her? Would simply telling us what happened have been enough?
4. Why does Diaz-Talty bother to describe this person? Why does she make sure to reveal her attitude toward him?
5. Reread three or four paragraphs, and circle the transitions used to show the passage of time and to create coherence.
6. Find places in which the author uses particularly good verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.

Thinking Critically

1. Make notes in the margins next to details that reveal important aspects of the author's personality.
2. If you were in the author's place, how would you have reacted to the insult? Write a paragraph that explains an aspect of your personality or lifestyle that needs improvement. Then, write a paragraph that explains how you might improve it.

Suggestions for Journal Entries

1. Recall an event that changed your life for the better. Ask the journalists' questions to collect details about this event and to explain how it helped you. For example, here is the journal entry Diaz-Talty made in preparation for "The Day I Was Fat."

   When? In 1988, shortly after I gave birth to Tommy.
   What? An argument with a teenager who had been driving behind us. He called me fat.
   Who? I and a rude, 18-year-old stranger, who looked gross.
   Where? On the way to the pool.
   Why important? Because I was fat.
   How? His insult shamed me. Made me work harder to lose weight and helped restore self-esteem.

2. Use focused freewriting to gather details about how you reacted to an incident in which someone hurt, insulted, or cheated you or did something else unpleasant to you. In the process, analyze your reaction

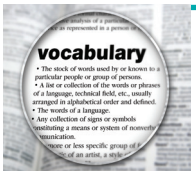
7.11d 37 Who Saw Murder Didn't Call the Police

Author Biography

Martin Gansberg was a reporter and editor at *The New York Times* when he wrote "37 Who Saw Murder Didn't Call the Police" in 1964. This story about the murder of a young woman is doubly terrifying, for the thirty-eight witnesses to the crime might very well have saved her life if only they had had the courage to become involved.

Preparing to Read

1. The setting is Kew Gardens, a well-to-do neighborhood in Queens, New York. One reason Gansberg describes it in great detail is to make his story realistic. Another is to show his readers that the neighbors had a clear view of the crime from their windows. But there are other reasons as well. Pay close attention to the details used to describe the setting.
2. Gansberg begins the story by using dialogue to report an interview he had with the police. He ends it similarly, including dialogue from interviews with several witnesses. Read these two parts of the narrative as carefully as you read the story of the murder itself. They contain important information about Gansberg's reaction to the incident and his purpose in writing this piece.
3. The story of Kitty Genovese is a comment about the fact that people sometimes ignore their responsibilities to neighbors and lose that important sense of community that binds us together. Identify this central idea, or theme, as you read "37 Who Saw Murder Didn't Call the Police."



Vocabulary

deliberation (noun) Thinking.

distraught (adjective) Very upset.

punctuated (verb) Were clearly heard (literally "made a mark in").

recitation (noun) Speech, lecture.

Tudor (adjective) Type of architecture in which the beams are exposed.

37 Who Saw Murder Didn't Call the Police

Martin Gansberg

For more than half an hour 38 respectable, law-abiding citizens in Queens watched a killer stalk and stab a woman in three separate attacks in Kew Gardens. 1

Twice their chatter and the sudden glow of their bedroom lights interrupted him and frightened him off. Each time he returned, sought her out, and stabbed her again. Not one person telephoned the police during the assault; one witness called after the woman was dead. 2

That was two weeks ago today. 3

Still shocked is Assistant Chief Inspector Frederick M. Lussen, in charge of the borough's detectives and a veteran of 25 years of homicide investigations. He can give a matter-of-fact recitation on many murders. But the Kew Gardens slaying baffles him—not because it is a murder, but because the "good people" failed to call the police. 4

"As we have reconstructed the crime," he said, "the assailant had three chances to kill this woman during a 35-minute period. He returned twice to complete the job. If we had been called when he first attacked, the woman might not be dead now." 5

This is what the police say happened beginning at 3:20 a.m. in the staid, middle-class, tree-lined Austin Street area: 6

Twenty-eight-year-old Catherine Genovese, who was called Kitty by almost everyone in the neighborhood, was returning home from her job as manager of a bar in Hollis. She parked her red Fiat in a lot adjacent to the Kew Gardens Long Island Railroad Station, facing Mowbray Place. Like many residents of the neighborhood, she had parked there day after day since her arrival from Connecticut a year ago, although the railroad frowns on the practice. 7

She turned off the lights of her car, locked the door, and started to walk the 100 feet to the entrance of her apartment at 82-70 Austin Street, which is in a Tudor building, with stores in the first floor and apartments on the second. 8

The entrance to the apartment is in the rear of the building because the front is rented to retail stores. At night the quiet neighborhood is shrouded in the slumbering darkness that marks most residential areas. 9

Miss Genovese noticed a man at the far end of the lot, near a seven-story apartment house at 82-40 Austin Street. She halted. Then, nervously, she headed up Austin Street toward Lefferts Boulevard, where there is a call box to the 102nd Police Precinct in nearby Richmond Hill. 10

She got as far as a street light in front of a bookstore before the man grabbed her. She screamed. Lights went on in the 10-story apartment house at 82-67 Austin Street, which faces the bookstore. Windows slid open and voices punctuated the early-morning stillness. 11

Miss Genovese screamed: "Oh, my God, he stabbed me! Please help me! Please help me!" 12

From one of the upper windows in the apartment house, a man called down: "Let that girl alone!" 13

The assailant looked up at him, shrugged and walked down Austin Street toward a white sedan parked a short distance away. Miss Genovese struggled to her feet. 14

Lights went out. The killer returned to Miss Genovese, now trying to make her way around the side of the building by the parking lot to go to her apartment. The assailant stabbed her again. 15

"I'm dying!" She shrieked. "I'm dying!" 16

Windows were opened again, and lights went on in many apartments. The assailant got into his car and drove away. Miss Genovese staggered to her feet. 17

A city bus, Q-10, the Lefferts Boulevard line to Kennedy International Airport, passed. It was 3:35 a.m. 18

The assailant returned. By then, Miss Genovese had crawled to the back of the building, where the freshly painted brown doors to the apartment house held out hope for safety. The killer tried the first door; she wasn't there. At the second door, 82-62 Austin Street, he saw her slumped on the floor at the foot of the stairs. He stabbed her a third time—fatally. 19

It was 3:50 by the time the police received their first call, from a man who was a neighbor of Miss Genovese. In two minutes they were at the scene. The neighbor, a 70-year-old woman, and another woman were the only persons on the street. Nobody else came forward. 20

The man explained that he had called the police after much deliberation. He had phoned a friend in Nassau County for advice and then he had crossed the roof of the building to the apartment of the elderly woman to get her to make the call. 21

"I didn't want to get involved," he sheepishly told the police. 22

Six days later, the police arrested Winston Moseley, a 29-year-old business-machine operator, and charged him with homicide. Moseley had no previous record. He is married, has two children and owns a home at 133-19 Sutter Avenue, South Ozone Park, Queens. On Wednesday, a court committed him to Kings County Hospital for psychiatric observation. 23

When questioned by the police, Moseley also said that he had slain Mrs. Annie May Johnson, 24, of 146-12 133rd Avenue, Jamaica, on Feb. 29 and Barbara Kralik, 15, of 174-17 140th Avenue, Springfield Gardens, last July. In the Kralik case, the police are holding Alvin L. Mitchell, who is said to have confessed to that slaying. 24

The police stressed how simple it would have been to have gotten in touch with them. "A phone call," said one of the detectives, "would have done it." The police may be reached by dialing "O" for operator or Spring 7-3100. 25

Today witnesses from the neighborhood, which is made up of one-family homes in the $35,000 to $60,000 range with the exception of the two apartment houses near the railroad station, find it difficult to explain why they didn't call the police. 26

A housewife, knowingly if quite casually, said, "We thought it was a lover's quarrel." A husband and wife both said, "Frankly, we were afraid." They seemed aware of the fact that events might have been different. A distraught woman, wiping her hands on her apron, said, "I didn't want my husband to get involved." 27

One couple, now willing to talk about that night, said they heard the first screams. The husband looked thoughtfully at the bookstore where the killer first grabbed Miss Genovese. 28

"We went to the window to see what was happening," he said, "but the light from our bedroom made it difficult to see the street." The wife, still apprehensive, added: "I put out the light and we were able to see better." 29

Asked why they hadn't called the police, she shrugged and replied: "I don't know." 30

A man peeked out from the slight opening in the doorway to his apartment and rattled off an account of the killer's second attack. Why hadn't he called the police at the time? "I was tired," he said without emotion. "I went back to bed." 31

It was 4:25 a.m. when the ambulance arrived to take the body of Miss Genovese. It drove off. "Then," a solemn police detective said, "the people came out." 32

Read More on the Web

More about the Genovese case can be found by searching for the following on the Web:

- History.com: www.history.com/topics/crime/kitty-genovese
- "The Truth about Kitty Genovese," *New York Daily News*: http://bvtlab.com/v3t25

Questions for Discussion

1. Catherine Genovese "was called Kitty by almost everyone in the neighborhood" (paragraph 7). What does this fact reveal about her relationship with her neighbors?
2. In Preparing to Read, you learned that there are several reasons for Gansberg's including details to describe the setting of this story. In what kind of neighborhood does the murder take place? What kind of people live in it?
3. In reporting several interviews he had with the police and with witnesses, Gansberg frames the story with dialogue at the beginning and end. What do we learn from this dialogue?
4. The author keeps the story moving by mentioning the times at which various episodes in the attack took place. Where does he mention these times? In addition, what transitional words or expressions does Gansberg use to show the passage of time?
5. The story's verbs demonstrate how brutal and terrifying the murder of Kitty Genovese actually was. Identify a few of these verbs.

Thinking Critically

1. Make a list of things you might have done to help Kitty Genovese had you witnessed the attack.
2. Gansberg quotes several witnesses. If you had had the opportunity to interview these people, what would you have asked or told them? Write your questions and comments in the margins alongside their remarks.
3. The title of this article is "37 Who Saw Murder Didn't Call the Police." Yet the first line mentions 38 witnesses. Explain this apparent discrepancy.

Suggestions for Journal Entries

1. This story illustrates what can happen when people lose their sense of community and refuse to "get involved." Use focused freewriting to make notes about one or two incidents from your own experiences that illustrate this idea too.
2. Recall a time when you thought you were in some danger. Briefly describe what it was like. What did you do to try to avoid or escape physical harm?

7.12 Suggestions for Sustained Writing

1. Have you ever been treated unfairly, belittled, or held back because of your race, religion, nationality, physical handicap, personal belief, or any other reason? Tell your story vividly and completely. In the process, explain what the experience taught you about other people or society in general. Express this idea as your thesis statement somewhere in the essay.

   A good example of an essay that uses narration to develop a strong thesis statement is Adrienne Schwartz's "The Colossus in the Kitchen." In her first paragraph, Schwartz defines apartheid as "a flaying of the innermost spirit"; she then uses the rest of her essay to support that idea.

   Begin working by reviewing journal notes you made after reading this essay Then outline and draft your paper. Like Schwartz, you can focus on one event. Or you might narrate two or three events to support your thesis. Either way, include details about the people in your story as you draft or revise. Describe their personalities by revealing what they said or did. Then, as you edit for grammar, punctuation, and spelling, pay special attention to the vocabulary you have chosen. Include proper nouns as appropriate, and make sure your language is specific and vivid.

2. If you responded to the first Suggestion for Journal Entries after Seamus Heaney's "Mid-Term Break," write an essay in which you explain your reaction or the reaction of someone you know to the death of a loved one. Now, add information to the notes you have already taken on this topic in your journal. If possible, interview or brainstorm with another person who has shared this loss—perhaps another family member or a close friend. Delve into your subject's character by explaining how he or she reacted to the shock, grieved over the loss, and dealt with the grief, if at all. Your narrative might span a few days, a few weeks, or even a few years.

   As you revise your first draft, add concrete details, figures of speech, and vivid verbs and adjectives. When you revise your second draft, try adding dialogue, and make sure you have described the setting and the people in your story well. Finally, check to see if you have included transitional devices and effective verbs to move the story along and to make it easy to follow. Next, edit your work for grammar; sentence structure, length, and variety; word choice; and punctuation and spelling. As always, proofread. This will probably be a powerful story—you don't want to spoil it with silly mistakes in writing or typing.

3. Use narration to explain what someone did to influence you either positively or negatively. Show how this person encouraged or discouraged you to develop a particular interest or talent, explain what he or she taught you about yourself, or discuss ways he or she strengthened or weakened your self-esteem.

You need not express yourself in an essay. Consider writing a letter instead. Address it to the person who influenced you, and explain your appreciation or resentment of that influence. Either way, put your thesis—a statement of just how positively or negatively he or she affected you—in the introduction to your essay or letter.

Before you begin, check the journal entries you made after reading the essay by Lois Diaz-Talty. Then, write one or two stories from personal experience that show how the person in question affected you. After completing your first draft, try adding dialogue to your stories. Reveal your subject's attitude toward you by recalling words he or she used when answering your questions, giving you advice or instructions, or commenting on your efforts.

As you revise your work further, make sure you have explained the results of this person's influence on you thoroughly. Add details as you move from draft to draft. Then, edit for grammar, punctuation, spelling, and other problems that can make your writing less effective.

4. The first of the Suggestions for Journal Entries after Lois Diaz-Talty's "The Day I Was Fat" asks you to gather information about a painful experience that changed your life for the better. Use this information to begin drafting a full-length essay that explains what happened.

   You might begin the first draft by stating in one sentence how this event changed you; this will be your working thesis. You can then tell your story, including only those materials that help explain or prove the thesis. For example, Diaz-Talty says that being called fat helped her regain her self-esteem and her figure; every detail in her story helps prove this statement.

   As you write later drafts, add dialogue and descriptive detail about people in your story, just as Diaz-Talty did. If you are unhappy with your introductory and concluding paragraphs, rewrite them by using techniques explained in chapter 3.

   Before you get to your final draft, make certain your paper contains vivid verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, which will keep readers interested. If it doesn't, add them. Then, edit and proofread your work carefully.

5. Have you ever witnessed or experienced an automobile accident, a robbery, a mugging, a house fire, serious injury, sudden illness, or other violence or misfortune? Tell what happened during this terrible experience and describe the people involved. However, spend most of your time discussing the reactions of people who looked on as the event took place. Were you one of them? What did they do or say? What didn't they do that they should have done?

   You might find inspiration and information for this project in the journal entries you made after reading Adrienne Schwartz and Martin Gansberg. Before you write your first draft, however, think about what the event itself and the onlookers' reactions taught you about human nature. Were you encouraged or disappointed by what you learned? Express your answer in a preliminary thesis statement. Write at least two drafts of your story, and make sure to include details that will support this thesis.

   Then revise at least one more time by turning what you have just written into a letter to the editor of your college or community newspaper. Use your letter to explain your approval or disappointment about the way the onlookers reacted, but don't mention their names. If appropriate, offer suggestions about the way your readers might respond if faced with an experience like the one you have narrated. Whether or not you send your letter to a newspaper, edit it carefully, just as if it were going to be published.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Cutforth, Rene. Excerpt from *Korean Reporter*. London, Allan Wingate, 1964.

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