
UNIT 14 NARRATIVE COMPOSITION-1

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14.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is to help you write narrative compositions. After completing the unit you will know where to look for ideas and how to

- select your topic,
- treat it properly, and
- find the material for it.

14.1 INTRODUCTION

When you listen to a great artist singing, or when you watch a game of tennis or cricket, you sometimes wish that you could also sing or play. But as you know, the singer and the dancer practise their skills day after day, and so do the players. It is only through practice that any skill is acquired. Writing is no exception. If you want to write well, you need practice. To be able to write well is essential for every educated person. The primary aim of these units on narrative composition is to give you practice in expressing your own ideas, emotions and reactions clearly and effectively.

You may have had little experience in formal writing, although you have been speaking since the age of two years and writing from the age of six years. Few students taking up undergraduate studies have in the past made any serious effort to write, even if they have started to compose in their minds. An occasional composition or letter does not really give much practice, especially as it is often done without a clear idea of how to write clearly or effectively. In this unit you will learn how to write a good narrative composition.

At this stage you may feel unprepared to write narratives and a little worried because you have to remember many facts about vocabulary, spelling, and grammar, but the only way to learn writing is by writing, as the only way to swim is by getting into water and swimming. Writing requires two types of skills : literacy skills and expressive skills. You need the basic ability to use words and structures in an acceptable fashion, and also the ability to narrate, to arrange events in the right order, and to use the language as a means of expressing thought and feeling.

Writing is difficult for everyone regardless of his education and experience. Look upon writing as a worthwhile skill which you can master with practice.

14.2 WRITING A NARRATIVE COMPOSITION

All writing is discovering and saying what we think about people, places and events. Events are happening all around us and people participate in these events, but why we choose to write about some of them is because of what we think about them. Before we put our pen to paper to communicate our thoughts to our readers we must think clearly. The first step in becoming a writer is to speak for yourself.

14.2.1 Where to Look for Ideas

You can only write about what you have experienced, observed, imagined, and thought about. Although we discuss the experiences and thoughts of others, they do not become our own. Borrowed ideas like borrowed clothes do not fit, and writing is not so much a matter of ideas or phrases as of how we present them. The most interesting story or narration is the one you have experienced and thought about in your own individual fashion. A narrative in order to be interesting must be original. The sources for your narratives are :

Your memories : What places or persons do you recall clearly? What days do you remember vividly? What was the happiest day you recall? What was the most painful time you remember? Do you remember any day when your family, your neighbourhood, or your town was disturbed?

Your friends and favourite places : Who is the most peaceful person you know? Who is the most amusing person you know? Which is the place you would like to go back to?

Events and participants : What events in your life did you find most moving? What was the greatest satisfaction or disappointment that you experienced? What people in your life did you consider powerful, good, or beautiful? Do you still admire them? What events would you like to wipe out from your memory? What events would you like to remember and relive?

Imagination and wishes : If you had your choice, which country would you like to live in? What persons would you like to meet? What country would you choose as your own?

14.2.2 How to Select Your Topic

You can narrate only what has been part of your personal experience, observation and thought. If your narration is about something you actually know, something you have given thought to, or seen or heard, you have more chances of making your narration effective and interesting. Think of the story-tellers you like to read, and note how each of them writes about the region, the people, and the activities he knows well.

Select the events or persons you can treat adequately in the narrative. If you choose an idea for an epic, or a trilogy of novels, you cannot write a short story about it. The narrative must have a single theme and the limits should be carefully set, so that it can be developed within the scope laid down for it.

14.2.3 Treatment of the Topic

When you have selected a theme, or a theme has been assigned to you, the next step is to plan **how to treat it**. Once you have decided about the treatment, you can collect material to support it.

No writing can be done without a plan of development. This plan will help you to select materials and control your writing. Each narration is a communication aimed at a group of readers and the communication must be based on ideas, facts, and emotions. The writing must be developed with a central aim in mind; it is not just setting down a required number of words in sentences. If the writing has no central plan, you will not enjoy such purposeless activity, nor will your readers get any pleasure from reading it. You can devise your plan by asking the following four basic questions :

- i) What is special or typical about my narrative?
- ii) Why am I telling the story?
- iii) What kind of readers am I writing for?
- iv) How will my reader best understand my plan and purpose?

You may find you have three more questions.

- v) How long does my narrative have to be?
- vi) Do I know enough about what I am narrating?
- vii) Where can I get more information about it?

It is important to do your planning before sitting down to write rather than write a couple of sentences in the first enthusiasm and then get stuck for ideas. Try to follow the five steps suggested below :

1 Determine the main purpose of your narration.

What is the central theme which underlies your narration and controls it? Try and formulate your theme sentence. Your theme sentence will control what material you will choose to support it and the effect it will have on your readers.

2 List the details which will develop the main theme.

e.g., How I found a part-time job

- i) Qualifications
- ii) Search for job opportunity
- iii) Writing applications
- iv) Getting ready for an interview
- v) Taking the tests
- vi) Getting testimonials
- vii) The appointment letter

When you have made such a list, you may decide that you will concentrate on your experience of being interviewed and write about how worried and nervous you were and keep the theme to manageable proportions. Also, this may interest your readers much more.

3 Select an appropriate method of development.

For the theme suggested above an informal and personal narrative is probably the best. But this method will not always be right. Some subjects like this can be treated humorously. What a tough interview I had! What a fool I made of myself! The method you select will be determined by the topic and the readers. A great deal will depend on your purpose. Are you interested in giving information, in telling an amusing anecdote, in persuading people that to learn and earn is both feasible and exciting, in making fun of people who ask questions at interviews which they themselves cannot answer? But whichever purpose you select, you must see that the treatment is appropriate and consistent. In a narrative there is usually very little argument. The emphasis is on the events and the thesis, or what the writer has in mind. By choosing one kind of treatment you will ensure that your narrative has a single tone or mood. You will have to decide which mood or tone suits you and the topic best, so that if you are uncomfortable with humour there is no point in choosing to treat the topic humorously even if this is possible.

4 In choosing supporting material keep the reader in mind. Is the reader well-read on the general area of your topic? Is your narration likely to give the reader fresh information? What and how much background information will you have to include in your narration? What terms used by you may need defining? How much of the technical information is relevant and how much can be safely left out? Too much would probably make your narrative heavy and dull. How will the theme become clearer to your readers? What illustrations and examples need to be used?

5 Students spend long hours in the library collecting facts and supportive materials to develop their themes. Quite often they are tempted not to acknowledge the sources of their materials and try to pass off what they have borrowed from other sources as their own. This can be very unacademic. It is best to acknowledge the sources of your information in footnotes or in brackets, but also to rely on your own experience and learn to narrate the events in factual terms.

14.2.4 Finding the Material

You have now selected a topic and limited the size of the narrative. You have also decided on what you will do with the topic, that is, how you will develop it. These are the planning steps you take before starting to write. Most often students worry about

whether they have enough ideas to develop the topic into a full length narrative.

It is not yet time to put your pen to paper but you are clear on

- i) what you are writing about,
- ii) why you are writing — your purpose, and
- iii) how you are going to get to the goal.

You have also taken out ideas which will not be to the point.

Now where will you find the material that you need? You will find two major sources of information depending on whether the narrative will emphasize the personal and subjective angle or the impersonal and objective one. This is part of how you plan to achieve your purpose. Most students feel too modest and reject the subjective treatment. This is not wise, since the personal touch gives the human touch. It gives even the often repeated topic a fresh and human interest which draws the reader's attention. A large number of facts can never equal the individual observations, thoughts, and imagination which captivate the reader's attention. Such writing usually has a wealth of concrete details and observations. If you have read *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling, you will remember that he uses his memories of India, and that, young as he was, he observed a great deal. Observation means looking at things attentively, and with this attention we can discover what makes things and persons different from others, their characteristic identity. The postman who comes to your door is an individual although he wears the same uniform as other postman, but because he wears a uniform we forget that he is an individual.

Good observation is necessary for writing good narratives. There is a story by G.K. Chesterton about the postman who is 'invisible', that is, unnoticed, because he wears a uniform and almost gets away with a crime. So remember that good detectives, i.e. those who observe well, also tell an interesting story and readers are spellbound.

A Sample Passage

Here is an attempt by a student to describe her aunt, which shows how interesting you can be when you use your observation.

My aunt is fat, short and dark, almost ugly, but has large eyes and lovely teeth, so that you do not always think her that ugly. She is aware, so that she laughs a lot and talks vivaciously, but actually she looks very appealing when she is quiet with that queer lonely look on her face. What goes on inside her then? Is a person such as her ever happy? Does someone ever sit beside her looking into her eyes that she outlines with a dark pencil and hold her hand? She writes poetry in Hindi and reads it to us and anyone who would listen. Then her sharp eyes do not dart about so much and her voice is not quite so anxious.

We nieces often wonder why she talks so much about women's rights. Was it because she found herself too clever? She is very intelligent. She is familiar with every new movement in literature, theatre and films, and she reads all the new books before anyone else does. She talks about these to all the people who come to see her, and we watch them listen to her with that strained polite look in their eyes. Sometimes she finds she has not been able to amuse her listeners and then the glow on her face dies as she realises they are not worthy of her.

She is a fine cook and will call her friends to lunches followed by movies or the theatre. Her old friends admire her for all that she does so well. She is so charming with them. Her face lights up when they praise her; her conversation is pert and clever. She swings her hair that she dyes an unnaturally black colour in a flirtatious way. But somehow I get the feeling that behind all this facade of the gay person there is a sad lovely person watching from behind those large black eyes hooded now with age.

She is successful in her writing and is often on the radio, and she never forgets to tell you to listen to her. She is a popular writer if not a great one. This prosperity has gone to her middle, she has grown plump. It may be the sweets that the doctors have forbidden her to eat and she can always be persuaded to eat. It could be the happiness of being successful has made her relax. She is happy perhaps, though one often gets the feeling that she has missed something in her youth which nothing can replace. The bitterness that she has hidden

under layers of sweets and fat sometimes shows in a sudden burst of temper always against other women. I think, though, it is the men she is angry with, the men who ignored her in her college days. Is that why she never married?

You can see that this has two basic qualities — a lot of patient observation and a touch of imagination. Imagination is a faculty all of us have; it is the ability to form mental pictures. All good writers show that they have exercised this faculty of forming clear pictures of people, of situations, and their surroundings. You can see that our student probably started out by wondering “What is my aunt really like?” “I wonder why she looks so sad.....” “Was she like me when she was a young girl.....” “When you are day-dreaming, you are exercising this faculty too. Now instead of just forming pictures in your head, try and write down about them. Here are some first sentences which you can develop into short paragraphs, using your imagination.

- a) Every day I pass the man making ‘jalebis’ standing behind a big iron frying pan
- b) Our hostel warden looks so stern that new students do not dare speak to him
- c) I looked at the rickshaw-driver only when I paid him, and I noticed he did not look like a rickshaw-driver

So far you have been combining observation and imagination to make up descriptions and narratives where the stress is on the subjective treatment. This kind of narrative writing is both fact and fiction, i.e., it is found in biographical writing as well as in fiction. However, there is more to narrative writing than biographical sketches. You may be reporting an event that has taken place. This is what we read every morning in the newspaper.

14.3 A FACTUAL REPORT

In narratives that deal with factual accounts you will still use your power of observation but the stress now will be on the events and less on the participants, and therefore you will try to be a little more objective. However, it is very difficult not to see any event from one’s own point of view and to eliminate your personality altogether. In fact, newspapers, you may have noticed, always report events with their own slant. If you compare the same news story in two newspapers, you will see the difference. However, this gives your observation full scope while restraining your imagination. This also means being on the spot where the event occurred, finding out for yourself and talking to the people involved. The technique of the interview is often used to find facts.

Example 1

Let us examine a narrative which reports an event. *The Times of India* cricket correspondent writes from Lahore on November 3, 1987.

Imran for probe into assault on liaison official

By Our Cricket Correspondent

LAHORE November 3.

IMHRAN KHAN has demanded an inquiry into an incident involving a coast guard colonel in the alleged beating up of a liaison official attached to the Pakistan team.

Even as the Pakistan skipper was busy with the strenuous practice session he took time off to tell the media men of the incident and dashed off a written statement condemning the behaviour of coast guard Colonel Sadat who instructed one of his guards to beat up the liaison man, Mr. Ghulam Mohammad.

According to Imran, he had instructed Mr. Ghulam Mohammad not to allow anyone into the dressing room during the match against the West Indies at Karachi last Friday. Accordingly, Mr. Mohammad told the Colonel that the Pakistani skipper did not want any visitor in the dressing room and so he should leave.

The Colonel threw a tantrum and said he had the permission of the president of the Board of Control for Pakistan to go wherever he liked. On checking with the BCCP president it was found no such permission was granted. “Such permission could be got only from the manager of the team or the captain,” Imran said.

The Colonel, according to Imran, threatened the liaison officer that he would be dealt with after the match. Soon after the team left, our Ghulam Mohammad got busy packing the player’s equipment when guards pulled him out and assaulted him.

Imran said he would take it up with President Zia-ul-Haq when he comes to the Gaddafi Stadium to witness the semi-final match tomorrow. He said the entire Pakistan team was upset over the incident and condemned the behaviour of the Colonel.

It is clear that the writer was not an eyewitness in this case. The beginning of the second paragraph tells you that he conducted an interview. He interviewed the captain of the cricket team. The beginning of the third paragraph, the end of the fourth paragraph, and the beginning of the fifth and the sixth paragraphs all make it clear that this narrative depends for its facts on what the captain of the cricket team said. The critical statement at the end of the narrative is quoted from the interview. At no point does the reporter make his own comment.

Exercise 1

You could write a similar objective report of facts about any one of the following events :

- i) A theft in your neighbourhood.
- ii) An argument between a bus conductor and a passenger.
- iii) A special exhibition.

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You will have presented a single point of view but suppose the correspondent of the news service had interviewed both the captain of the cricket team and the Colonel. He could have presented two opposing points of view. It is possible in the context of recent events and media-reporting to do some fact-finding. However as events recede in time this exercise becomes more difficult. This brings us to historical narratives. This kind of narrative needs some reference work. We need to read up old reports in media, in biographical writings, and in books. We may then report our findings which will naturally contain our interpretation. Look at the following passage from an article on the recent election in South Korea titled 'Democratic Hurdles in South Korea'

Example 2

In this passage, which spans the time from 1960 to 27 October 1987, a great deal of preparatory reading is involved.

Democratic Hurdles In South Korea

By **HARVEY STOCKWIN**

HONG KONG : As South Korea's voters overwhelmingly endorsed the constitutional change to a more democratic set-up on October 27, they once again set the political stage for a more open and liberal policy. Twice before, in 1960-61, and in 1979-80, South Korea has been on the brink of achieving the goal, only to relapse back into authoritarian rule, amidst weak government, divisive factionalism, and general unrest. Amidst clear signs that history may repeat itself, as would-be "democratic" politicians show that they have learnt little from past failures, it is far too soon to assert that, this time around, it is going to be a case of third time lucky.

Some could argue that South Korea has been lucky to get this far. By the end of June protracted and widening demonstrations, essentially against the perpetuation of President Chun Doo Hwan's authoritarian rule, had created a situation in which there were only two choices: the reimposition of martial law, or sweeping concessions to the demonstrator's demands. Luckily the man Chun had chosen to succeed him, Mr. Roh Tae Woo, clearly perceived that the former option would be far more hazardous than the latter. Mr. Roh accepted the opposition's insistence upon a directly elected executive presidency. He also accepted the need for more freedom and openness. A few days later Mr. Chun, in turn, accepted the concessions Mr. Roh had advocated.

Economic Freedom

With this hurdle surmounted, it was quickly discovered that the desire for greater economic freedom

was as pent-up as the desire for political freedom. Late July and early August a massive wave of strikes threatened to destabilise things before democracy was properly instituted. Again, Mr. Roh rose to the occasion, as he urged that the workers' demands be heard and met. By and large they were. Businessmen found that they could hike wages without destroying profits. The wave subsided, leaving behind a clear warning that economic reform would have to accompany political change.

Meanwhile a third hurdle was somewhat belatedly surmounted. It took them longer than expected, but finally both the government and the opposition, in a display of give-and-take that has been all too rare in South Korea's turbulent political history, reached a parliamentary consensus on the constitutional changes which were approved by the referendum in late October. It was the first time that any Korean could remember a constitution being agreed, rather than imposed by one party or another. But no provision was made for the institution of a vice-presidency, nor for a run-off election, in the French style, so as to ensure that whoever became president did receive a majority of votes cast.

Democratic prospects would look much stronger right now, if a single opposition candidate was contesting the presidency against Mr. Roh Tae Woo. That was what moderate democratic opinion expected. It was promised by the politicians. But it has not come about. Personal ambition has taken precedence over prudent calculation. More political hurdles loom as a consequence.

(From *The Times of India*, 3 November, 1987)

Exercise 2

Write a short plan for a narrative composition on any one of the following :

- i) The history of an educational institution, giving its ups and downs e.g., your school or college.
- ii) The Reliance Cup Series — how it started.
- iii) The rights of divorced women — a recent case.

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14.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have discussed the various steps in the writing of a narrative composition — looking for ideas, selection of the topic, treatment of the topic, and finding the material.

14.5 KEY WORDS

ˌcompo'sition : a piece of writing

ˌcorre'spondent : one who contributes matter for publication in a newspaper

e'vent : a thing that happens

ex'perience : actual observation of facts or events

i'dea : a thing conceived by the mind

i,magi'nation : the power of the mind to form images of external objects not present to the senses

'interview : a meeting of persons face to face

'narrative (adjective) : in the form of a story

ˌobser'vation : watching and noting facts

'plan : an organized method of doing something

thought : an idea produced by thinking

'topic : a theme for discussion

14.6 SUGGESTED READING

1 Reports published in newspapers.

2 Short stories published in magazines.