

Assignment 1: Literacy Narrative

Due Dates: Rough Draft Due:
Final Draft Due:

Why Write an Autobiographical Essay about Literacy?

In “The Day Language Came into My Life,” Helen Keller chronicles the amazing transformation that took place when Annie Sullivan, who was her teacher, mentor, and friend, finally penetrated and opened the deaf, dumb, and mute world Helen had always known:

I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of [Annie’s] fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. The living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free . . . I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house, every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me. (Reid 2003: 112-113)

Unlike Keller, most people don’t remember the day, let alone the moment, that language came into their lives because it is, at first glance, transparent. It’s possible to read, write, and think, and not even be cognizant of it as a process or part of a process; and yet language—both language development and language use—is a rich and relatively common topic worthy of serious reflection.

What is Literacy?

According to the Educational Development Center, “It refers to the ability to manipulate any set of codes and conventions—whether it is the words of a language, the symbols in a mathematical system, or images posted to the Internet—to live healthy and productive lives.” What this dense quote means is that literacy is a term used to describe more than reading and writing aptitude. It is a term that refers to the acquisition of any type of communication, expression, or skill. The slang we share with our friends and the stories we repeat in our families are all a part of what sustains our relationships. Playing music, composing a scrapbook page, playing the World of Warcraft, or writing a poem all require a certain type of literacy that we had to acquire in order to do these things well.

How does this topic fit into a narrative?

If we think back on a certain skill, communicative practice, or reading and writing in general, there are a slew of memories to draw from. Consider how you feel about reading or writing. Why do you feel that way? Did you have a wonderful or awful experience in an English class? Is your relationship with books tied to your family? Can you remember the first time you were inspired?

You want to hone in on those key moments, the ones that clearly illustrate a change or influence that set you on a certain path or sparked your enthusiasm. Your chosen moment/memory should be original and specific, and your perspective should be detailed, developed, and analytical. In other words, don’t provide a “museum tour” of a great high school English class or a bird’s-eye view of your elementary schooling just for the sake of narrating it, assignment by assignment or year by year. Instead, investigate something narrow and unique—memorizing prayers in catechism, reading cereal boxes at breakfast, saying a provocative word or slogan among friends—and explain its role in your development as a writer/reader/musician/etc. or its connection to your membership in any group, including a family, an organization, or even a generation, race, or social class.

Useful links:

http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/write/fieldguide/writing_guides.asp#06