

Writing Workshop

Narrative Essay

Historical Narrative

► Introduction

In a historical narrative, you tell about a historical event, blending facts with imagined characters and situations. When you write a historical narrative, you combine fiction with nonfiction. Like nonfiction, a historical narrative describes people who actually lived and events that actually happened. However, a historical narrative also includes fictional people and details imagined by the writer. A historical narrative should have the following characteristics:

- accurate historic events and details of actual places
- one person’s point of view
- some characters and circumstances invented by the writer
- chronological organization

Assignment On the following pages, you will learn how to write a historical narrative. You will get step-by-step instructions. Each step will include an example from a historical narrative in which a cameraman in the television studio recalls the first Kennedy-Nixon presidential debate in 1960.

Read the instructions and the examples. Then, follow each step to plan and write a 300-to-400-word historical narrative on this topic:

Write a historical narrative about Martin Luther King’s march on Washington in 1963.

For a review of the steps in the writing process, see the **Historian’s Toolkit, *Write Like a Historian***.

► Prewriting

Choose a historical event and a central character. Begin by deciding on the historical event you will narrate. Then, choose a real or fictional person to place at the center of your narrative. Ask the questions in the chart to help you make this decision.

Brainstorm for and research background details about the historical event. In order to write a convincing historical narrative, you need to learn as much as you can about the event you are relating.

Choosing Events and Characters: Guiding Questions	
For real people	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What individuals were actually involved in this historical event?• In what way was each involved?
For fictional characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What other types of people might have participated in or witnessed the event?
For fictional and real	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Of all these people—real and fictional—who would have the most interesting perspective on the story?• Which one would I most enjoy writing about?

Use libraries and the Internet to gather information. Use the points highlighted in the chart to guide your research.

Describe your central character and his or her surroundings.

Write a few sentences in which your central character describes himself or herself in the first person (“I,” “me,” “my,” etc.). Then, have your central character describe the setting of the historical event, the time and place in which he or she lives.

Chart your narrative’s sequence.

Most historical narratives use chronological organization. Decide at what point your narrative will start and when it will end. Then, list the series of events that you want to cover.

► Drafting

Open the narrative. In the first paragraphs of your narrative, introduce your main character and his or her world to your readers. As you write, think about the following questions:

- What details root this person in a particular time and place?
- How does he or she feel about the historical event?
- Why is this story being told? Is your storyteller relating this narrative to a friend? Talking to a group of strangers?

Develop the narrative. After you have introduced your storyteller and setting, relate the series of events that make up the narrative. Keep the narrative in the first person. Use transitions—such as *first, before, later on, after, the next day*, and so on—to help your audience keep track of time.

The narrative should progress until it reaches a high point. As you build up to that point, increase your reader’s interest. Use powerful and vivid language to intensify the storyteller’s emotions and to show his or her reaction to what happens.

Close the narrative. The final paragraphs of your historical narrative should wind down the action.

Researching a Historical Narrative: Guiding Questions	
Historical event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What exactly happened? • Why, when, and where did it happen? • Were the surroundings urban or rural? • What did the scene of the event look like? • What details about the event are known?
Current event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What year is it? • What was happening at home and abroad?
Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did people of that time and culture believe in? • What were they concerned about?
Economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was it like to be a wealthy person? • What was it like to be poor? • What kinds of jobs did people have?
Daily life/Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did people dress? • What did they eat? • How were they entertained? • What did they read?
Imagine yourself living in that time and place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you think you would have fit into that world? Would you have liked living then and there? Why or why not?

Sample description:
 Normally my job is pretty routine, but I think I saw something tonight that I’ll remember for a long time. I’m a cameraman, and tonight I worked at WBBM Studios in Chicago, where the first presidential debate took place.

► Model Narrative

Read the following model of a historical narrative about the presidential debate in 1960, between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. Notice that it includes the characteristics you have learned.

The First Televised Presidential Debate

Normally my job is pretty routine, but I saw something tonight that I'll remember for a long time. I'm a cameraman, and tonight I worked at WBBM Studios in Chicago, where the first presidential debate took place between Vice President Nixon and Senator Kennedy.

This first debate has turned into a big deal. The whole setup for the debate was really brand new, since the television networks all gave an hour of free time—no commercials. President Eisenhower even signed a special law to allow it. So it was definitely a very big deal.

When I got to the station late this afternoon, everyone seemed pretty keyed up. I was too—I was really worried about not making any mistakes. I was really excited when the two candidates arrived. Vice President Nixon got there first, with a Secret Service man. Nixon wore a baggy-looking gray suit that made him blend into the back wall. Not good. His shirt collar looked too big, and I remember that he'd had some kind of bad leg injury a few weeks before, so maybe he lost weight in the hospital. Also not good.

Then Senator Kennedy came. Kennedy seemed younger than Nixon and was definitely healthier looking — all tanned. His suit was dark blue, which contrasted well with the gray wall. Kennedy wore a white shirt, which looked great with his dark suit and tan. But white is terrible on television, since it starts to glow. Someone had to get him a light-blue shirt. The director offered the candidates makeup. The Vice President said "No" (bad idea, since he was pretty pale). But the senator, who was already tanned, thought he wanted some (smart—it keeps your face from showing sweat).

The central character describes his surroundings.

The writer included historical events in the narrative.

The writer blends fiction and nonfiction to create the narrative.

► Revising

After completing your draft, read it again carefully to find ways to make your writing better. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

Revise for clarity.

- Is the event portrayed accurately and clearly, with detail?
- Does the narrative establish a clear impression of the storyteller and his or her world?
- Does the narrative include transitions to help the reader?

Revise for tone and style.

- Does your storyteller's language sound convincing?
- What impression of the storyteller does your writing create?
- Does your narrative convey the emotion you wanted?

Revise to meet written English-language conventions.

- Are all sentences complete, with a subject and a verb?
- Are all the words spelled correctly?
- Are all proper nouns capitalized?
- Are all sentences punctuated correctly?

► Rubric for Self-Assessment

Evaluate your historical narrative using the following rating scale:

	Score 4	Score 3	Score 2	Score 1
Organization	Develops the narrative clearly in chronological order; includes all necessary explanations and interesting details; does not lose track of the main event in the story	Follows chronological order but may be missing some important explanations; could use more interesting details	Roughly follows chronological order but skips around several times; is missing some vital explanations; occasionally loses track of the main event	Shows lack of organizational strategy
Presentation	Includes first-person narration of a historic event by an actual or fictional character; storyteller's role is well developed; smoothly incorporates factual information and maintains reader interest	Is usually first-person narration with a few inconsistencies; storyteller's character seems undeveloped at times; uses good factual information but is sometimes awkward in incorporating it; occasionally loses reader interest	Shifts between first-person and third-person narration; storyteller's character is not developed; includes some factual information but awkwardly incorporated; there are also several inaccuracies; loses reader interest	Does not use first-person narration; there is no sense of a storyteller at all; barely uses any factual information; there are many inaccuracies; confuses reader
Use of Language	Varies sentence structure and vocabulary successfully; includes almost no mechanical errors	Uses some variety in sentence structure and vocabulary; includes several mechanical errors	Uses the same types of sentences without varying them; repeats words; includes many mechanical errors	Writes incomplete sentences; uses language poorly; sounds confused; includes many mechanical errors