

Narrative Writing Sample and Overview

In personal narrative writing you write about an experience or event you lived through. In this writing, you describe the experience using details, description, and dialogue. Good narratives also have a “point” to them, i.e., they relate to the reader a larger life lesson or meaning that is common to many and not just to the writer of the narrative.

Your task is to write about an experience or event you can remember well (and one for which you have photographs). This experience or event can be as common as a family get together, such as a holiday meal; or it can be as uncommon as some unique experience you had on a trip somewhere. Whatever you choose, think about choosing something that meets these criteria: (1) you remember well the whole experience; (2) you have photos from that experience; (3) there is a meaning or “point” to this event that you can relate through your story telling.

We will provide you with more directions as you begin the writing process. For now, read this writing sample to give you an idea of what you will be writing.

I braced myself against the flagpole atop the 9406-foot Mt. Baden Powell near Mt. Baldy. A stiff breeze blew against my face, and I found myself feeling chilled even though this was Labor Day weekend at the end of one of the hottest, most unbearable Southern California summers I could remember. “Okay, I think I got it,” one of the other adults in my Scout troop told me as he snapped a few photos with my phone.

With proof of my ascent accomplished, I headed off to share my lunch with another Scout dad and his son. After a two-minute walk from the summit flag pole, I joined up with this father and son in a windswept area next to an ancient-looking Bristlecone Pine tree. “Join us,” David told me, scooting over on the log next to the pine tree to create sitting space for me.

I unpacked my Zip-Loc bag filled with my high-calorie, convenience foods — a couple of snack packs of Ritz crackers, some fruit gummies, a bag of frosted animal cookies, a pack of Spam, and my favorite — two packs of Star Kist salmon. “Everything tastes better when you’ve been hiking for a while,” said David, the Scout dad I sat with. How true, I thought. The lunch in front of me would have far less appeal 45 miles down the Angeles Crest Highway back in “civilization.” But, here, nearly two miles above sea level, and nearly 10 miles from our cars, this was a most satisfying spread before me. I carefully squeezed out some salmon on a Ritz cracker, took a bite, and looked up at an amazingly sparkling blue sky. A red-tailed hawk soared above us, surveying the small army of Scouts and their parents atop this peak.

“Amazing birds,” I finally said to David and his son, Jonathan. “Indeed,” said David. “Though after our encounter with an owl near our house this past month, I’m not sure how involved I’d want to be with a bird of that size again.” David then proceeded to tell me how a young, grey owl had somehow wedged itself between the posts in their front yard fence. His family rescued the owl, contacted the Glendale Humane Society (to no avail), and then spent the next few days feeding the owl in their home before finally returning it to the wild.

Our hourlong respite at the peak nearly up, I excused myself from the log I shared with David and Jonathan, and I walked along the ridge of Baden Powell. The wind pushed at my back as I wound my way along a narrow path towards the monument at the peak that commemorated Baden Powell’s founding of

Scouting more than 100 years ago. Low lying plants and dried grasses clung to the rocky soil. Their fragility and tenacity impressed me, so I made a special effort to avoid trampling them, even as I knew they wouldn't cry out at me should I falter in my footing and trample them.

Standing at the Baden Powell monument, I was impressed by the very idea that humans would actually construct something of concrete and steel at the top of a mountain. The four-sided obelisk mounted with plaques stands in contrast to the nature that surrounds it. The steel railing around the monument isolates the structure from the surroundings — surroundings which look untouched even with the hundreds of hikers who summit Baden Powell each weekend.

After a group photo at the monument, our group of seventeen Scouts began winding our way back down the Pacific Crest Trail, back to our campsite at Little Jimmy. The trip down the trail was a faster one, of course. No stiff breeze billowing across the saddles atop the San Gabriel Mountain ridge, pushing us back the way we came. No more steep precipices to scamper across. Now we just had to watch our step so that we wouldn't twist an ankle on the decomposing granite path. And watch for the snakes . . . actually two snakes . . . that we had seen on the way up the trail that morning. The first was a five-foot long rattler, probably the biggest any of us had ever seen. We gave it wide berth on the way up the trail. Now, heading down past its earlier locale, we stepped with much trepidation, hoping that we wouldn't see it again. Fortunately, we didn't see him again, nor his smaller cousin who rattled nearby that morning. Still, it was a nervous time for some of us more than others, especially for our former Senior Patrol Leader who said that he might literally need to hold one of our hands as we walked past the snakes' lair.

With the sun nearly setting on the ridge behind the Little Jimmy Camp, our group of seventeen was glad to be back in camp. For some, it was a time to peel off the sweaty socks and soak our feet in some cool, spring water. For others — myself included — it was a time to just lay flat on our sleeping bags and pads, and to rest a bit before dinner.

The next morning, we all gathered around in a circle for our traditional "thorns and roses" routine where each Scout shares something negative and something positive from the experience. As the other Scouts began sharing their experiences, I pondered the arc of my life, standing in this circle 35 years after I had climbed this mountain peak as a Scout not much different from the ones who stood before me.

So much had changed in my life since I was fourteen years old. My father, who was developing Parkinson's Disease at that time, has now been dead for twenty years. Yet, I still felt his presence in that circle — imagining how annoyed I probably was by him when I was a teen just as my own son today, nearly 14 himself, is so often annoyed by me. At fourteen, I hadn't even had a serious girlfriend. Now, thirty-five years later, I stood in the circle, so happily married to my partner in life for the past fifteen years . . . something I wouldn't have imagined for myself having grown up in a household where my own parents didn't get along well.

Yet interestingly, I also thought about how little had changed in me and around me. I was still in Southern California despite my loathing of the congestion, the smog, the heat, the aridity of this area. I still found value in helping others — then as a fourteen year old who'd organize Red Cross fundraising efforts at his Burbank high school and now as a parent who volunteers in his son's Scout troop and coaches at his son's school.

And I still found, somewhat to my surprise, that something in nature still energizes my soul.

Perhaps it was the purity of the wind which crested at the top of each pass on the way up to Mt. Baden Powell. Or perhaps it was the resiliency in nature as shown through the resurgent pine forests which were growing back after a fire more than a decade ago (and despite nearly six years of drought). Or perhaps it was the stillness of the Creation when one stopped to listen and to watch, as that red-tailed hawk reminded me as I sat on the log eating salmon on a Ritz.

The drive back down the Angeles Crest Highway looked different from the one we had taken just 48 hours earlier. The Jeffrey pine trees looked more stately, the granite cliffs more grand, the sky just a bit more blue. I felt a bit more alive. And I knew that Southern California could still be a place I could call home.