

The Anti-Racist Writing Classroom

Exploring Linguistic Diversity through Literacy Narratives

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What is a Literacy Narrative?

- Literacy narratives are autobiographical writing that focus on how the writer learned to read and write or another critical event that influenced their attitude towards reading and writing.
- Many composition instructors assign a literacy narrative near the beginning of a term in order to learn more about students' relationship with reading and writing. Often, these are low-stakes, in-class assignments, but here we offer some suggestions for making a literacy narrative your course's first major assignment.

Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue" is one famous example of a literacy narrative, and the suggested assignment provided in Part II of our "Teaching Translingual" series provides scaffolding that would give students time to begin drafting ideas that might make their way into a longer paper. Other popular examples of literacy narratives are included in the list below. When discussing these essays in class, be sure to bring students' attention to what you see as effective moves they may emulate in their own narratives.

- "Learning to Read" by Malcolm X (excerpted from his longer autobiography)
- "Two Languages in Mind, but Just One in the Heart" by Louise Erdrich
- "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" by Gloria Anzaldúa
- "One Writer's Beginnings" by Eudora Welty
- "Where I Learned to Read" by Salvatore Scibona
- "Social Variables" by Susan Tamasi and Lamont Antieau (excerpted from *Language and Linguistic Diversity in the US: An Introduction*)

Most of these essays are widely anthologized and easily found online. Many of them are featured in Samantha Looker-Koenigs's *Language Diversity and Academic Writing* (2018)

Why Assign Literacy Narratives?

They Help You Meet Students Where They Are

- Like a pre-course survey, successful literacy narratives help you better understand the individual backgrounds and needs of your students.
- This assignment requires students' reflection on how their literacy practices have shaped their lives. An honest student's essay will allow you a chance to validate a student's feelings about past injustices or successes and respond with encouragement for how the student can intentionally approach writing and reading throughout college...beginning with your course.

They Offer Practice with Transferable Skills

- **Narrative:** The attention to detail and chronology narratives require will be necessary in many academic and professional genres, including lab reports, research proposals, and medical records.
- **Dialogue:** Encourage students to use brief episodes of dialogue when narrating a specific event. More practical lessons such as how to integrate a quotation can work alongside discussions of how to decide what language should be quoted and what would be better summarized--great practice for working with sources later.
- **Theme:** Even though you may not ask students to create an explicit thesis for this assignment, emphasize how their essay should still center around one specific idea with all elements of the essay contributing to that theme.

Suggestions for Assigning Literacy Narratives

Remember It's Personal

- Consider foregoing peer review for this assignment so students can be assured the instructor is their only audience.
- Instead of assigning an essay, some instructors may find asking students to write them a letter about their past experiences with reading and writing makes students less intimidated.

Make it Multimodal: Timelines

One activity that may help students identify ideas for this assignment is creating a timeline of their life as a reader and writer. Several websites offer free tools for creating visually compelling timelines, but pen and paper work, too!

Make it Multimodal: Podcasts

Due to their personal nature, narratives are a particularly fun assignment to make into podcasts. Once students have a final draft, they can use apps on their computer or phone to record themselves reading their work.

Emphasize Narrative+Reflection

- Often, student writers become so focused on vividly sharing their story, they forget to focus on why the story is being shared. In your rubric and in class, make clear that a good story includes a beginning, middle, and end but a good literacy narrative goes further, explaining how that story influences the writer today.