

**Developing Your Personal Narrative**  
Personal Narratives in Theater and Film  
Porter 23B, Summer 2015  
Bob Giges, Instructor

The primary texts of this course are all personal narratives, each an autobiographical self-portrait in words and time. All of the works are told in the first person, merging storyteller, producer/director, with a central “character” (whom we often mistakenly presume to be one and the same). This assignment asks you to develop your own short personal narrative. More specifically, **write the story of one or two life-changing incidents from your own history**. You could be at the center of the story, or the main character might be someone else. Look for “scenes” from your life that were particularly emotionally charged and that helped make you who you are today. The most successful pieces usually relate to a particular event or series of events—*when something very specific and evocative occurs*—rather than to a more generalized era in one's life.

*(Please note:* In starting the class with this assignment, I am hoping that you will develop first-hand insight about the particular challenges personal narrative artists face. I don't expect you to be experts on theater and filmed autobiographical works. You aren't required to use any particular format on the page; the main idea here is that you imagine how you might render an influential episode of your life as a film or theaterwork. My hope is that this will help you in understanding other artists' personal narratives as we study them.)

As you construct this autobiographical work, pay particular attention to your relationship as author to the events under scrutiny. What is your point of view on the subject of your narrative? Make sure this is clear to you as you write and revise. You might look back with nostalgia or with bitterness and anger—imagine how different your piece would be coming out of each stance. (As you're viewing the weekly videos, see if you can specify the filmmaker's or performer's point of view in order to clarify this issue for yourself.) In developing your own distinct point of view, it will be helpful if you have the sufficient distance that the passage of time brings, so I suggest you avoid recent events.

Your relationship as author to the world inside your piece is altogether different from your relationship as a central character. One of my students responded to this assignment by writing about her own birth. As you might imagine, her tongue-in-cheek narration must have been completely different from her experience emerging into the world. She played with the dramatic line by freeing herself from a strict chronology of events, focusing instead on the most interesting and powerful moments. She also gave attention to developing her parents into interesting characters in the story.

In writing the narrative, instead of merely reporting how your central character feels, **invite your readers to feel what s/he feels through imagery and sensate details** that create a mood. As an engaged and inquisitive audience, we prefer to experience the moment ourselves, instead of reading a description of someone else's emotions; study the “Don't Tell, but Show” article (Week 2's readings on eCommons) so that you can put this idea in motion in your piece.

In this assignment, you may wish to write about personal and potentially sensitive information. Please do so with the knowledge that you will eventually present the revised piece to the class as a whole live or on video. Final presentations of your personal narrative might consist of a theatrical monologue, narration over slides, a film version of your story (with multiple locations, scenes, etc), movement theater, singing/rapping your story to music, or most any other time-based work--as long as your written script is used in the piece. Running time of your project should be 4-6 minutes.

While many of you will want to be in your performance or presentation, you need not be. You may serve as director instead, if you like. I will want each of you to create your own separate and original written work, but I encourage you to work together. For example, some of you will probably serve as actors in each other's performances.

Part of this assignment involves participation in a virtual (online) writing group through eCommons. I'll assign you to work with two other students in the class in the second week of the term, and you'll give and get feedback on your personal narrative story. Only the three of you will be able to read your submissions (your story and your feedback to each other) in your particular Discussion Forum.

#### Personal Narrative Assignment 1: A Story

Following the assignment's guidelines above, write your autobiographical story and upload it to your virtual writing group's Discussion Forum by **Friday, July 3rd at 5 PM** (inside your Writing Group, use the New Topic icon, top left and attach your story). Your story should be approximately 800-1000 words total (not per incident). If you elect to write about two incidents, they should be related in some fashion, even if their intersection is at a subliminal or thematic level. In this case, I would suggest you work towards creating a piece that feels whole and unified, even though it consists of two parts.

**PERMITTED FORMATS** for this and all documents in the class: pdf (preferred), doc, docx, txt, rtf. Please make sure the title of your file includes your name and the appropriate extension (e.g. MoralesStory.pdf). We probably won't be able to open documents formatted in other programs. If we can't open it, we can't give you credit for your work

#### Personal Narrative Assignment 2: Writing Group Feedback

Using all of the **four prompts below**, write to each of your writing groupmates in response to their autobiographical stories (use the PostReply button inside their Topics in your eCommons Writing Group and either attach a file or cut and paste using the "paste from Word" icon). Each four-question response should total at least 400 words.

- 1) Who is the central "character" or protagonist? How does this protagonist change in the course of the story?
- 2) What is the climactic moment in the story (assuming there is one)? This could be as subtle as an intensification of the central conflict. If you don't find a climax, comment on this.
- 3) Explore the tone, mood or point of view of the piece. Does it fit the purpose of the piece, as you understand it? Could it be clearer or stronger?
- 4) What other feedback do you have for the author?

Due **Monday, July 6<sup>th</sup> at 5 PM.**

### Personal Narrative Assignment 3: Your Artist's Statement and Revised Personal Narrative

Taking into account the feedback you received from your writing group and from our Reader Rebecca Ora, revise and finalize your personal narrative. Complete the "Revision Cover Sheet" detailing the changes made. Include your answers to the questions in the personal narrative document you upload (in the front.)

Your revised personal narrative should be in one of two forms:

- 1) A film script that combines action rendered in moving images with dialogue. Use your judgment as to form on the page—you are not required to follow any particular standard for formatting.
- 2) A monologue, defined by language and by physical action. Feel free to work with experimental staging, if the piece calls for it.

To help us understand and ultimately evaluate your creative work, you are required to also **submit an Artist's Statement**. This document will discuss some of the strategies you have observed in the course's texts that have informed your final project. Cite specific strategies and theories from class sources (readings *and* films). The Artist's Statement should make clear the thematic intent of your piece, as well as justifying the choice you made in rendering your narrative in the form that you chose. It should be in the range of 400-600 words.

Post a single document that contains the Revision Cover Sheet, the Personal Narrative script, and the Artist's Statement to your writing group's Discussion Forum. Use the PostReply button inside the Topic that you started when you posted your Personal Narrative Assignment 1. Due **Monday, July 13<sup>th</sup> at 5 PM**.

### Personal Narrative Assignment 4: Present Your Personal Narrative

Present your Personal Narrative in our final class (live or video) on Tuesday, July 21st. All videos must be uploaded to youtube.com before class (directions on this will follow). If the size of the class prevents us from viewing your video during our final class, we will post comments to your youtube site following our viewing outside of class.