

Writing Personal Narratives in a Political World

This unit designed for high school students puts personal narrative and journalistic writing in conversation with one another. It seeks to demonstrate the differences between these two modes of writing, while also uplifting the ways in which they inform each other. Ideal for Social Studies, English, or Journalism courses, in this unit students will first read a recently-published personal narrative of their choice connected to themes of racism, sexism, poverty, and struggles for justice. Next, students will read a related journalistic article published by the Pulitzer Center. Students will then compare and contrast the two forms of writing, considering both their processes and their purposes. This will form the foundation of the unit, which will then shift to students brainstorming the political topics that connect to their lives, which will become the focus of their personal narratives. Students will be given several strategies for choosing their topic, including exploring resources from the Pulitzer Center. The goal of the unit is for students to write personally, focusing on themselves, their families, and their communities, while recognizing that their personal stories are also political. Finally, while the unit outlines 5 lessons, this is the bare minimum, and it's likely students may benefit from additional time to write, revise, and share their personal narratives.

Standards

Common Core English Language Arts Standards for Writing in Grades 11-12

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3](#) - Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.9](#) - Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Essential Questions and Objectives

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How are we as individuals/families/communities impacted by justice issues and struggles that are occurring on a national or international scale?	Read and analyze justice-oriented news stories from around the world, identifying themes and making connections to our personal lives.

<p>What are the important personal stories we have to tell and how do they relate to larger themes of politics and justice? How do we tell our stories in compelling ways that foster connection for readers?</p>	<p>Write a first-person narrative about a meaningful life experience, making connections between the personal and political.</p>
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Unit Outline

DAY 1 - Personal and Political

Personal and Political Student Worksheet
<p>Essential Question: In what ways are our personal lives and stories connected to political history and present day realities?</p>
<p>Opener: Analyze these two quotes. What do they mean? Do you agree or disagree, and why?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "The personal is political." - Feminist slogan of the 1960s/1970s 2. "The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do." - James Baldwin
<p>Activity: Choose a personal narrative to read from the five listed below –</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "Do Not Accept Nan Check," Kiese Laymon 2. "Why I Tried to Save My Father, My Dictator," Karla Cornejo Villavicencio 3. "Racism Is Terrible. Blackness Is Not," Imani Perry 4. "You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body Is a Confederate Monument," Caroline Randall Williams 5. "Why I Speak Up for Black Women," Megan Thee Stallion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● As you read the personal narrative, list the relevant historic/political topics/themes/issues that arise. ● Also highlight your favorite sentence, favorite phrase, and favorite word from the piece.
<p>Closing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● As a whole class, in small groups, or partners, share the sentence, phrase, and word you highlighted. ● Discuss what made these personal narratives powerful/meaningful/creative/deep, and what aspects of the narratives help people connect to them.

DAY 2 - Journalistic vs. Personal Writing

[Journalistic vs. Personal Writing Student Worksheet](#)
[Pulitzer Center Resources Worksheet](#)

Essential Question(s): How does journalist writing/reporting differ from personal narratives? How are the two connected?

Opener: Watch [this video](#) about journalist Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani who writes about discrimination in Nigeria. She wrote both an [essay/memoir](#), as well as a [journalistic piece](#) about this. Listen carefully as she speaks about the differences between the two types of writing. Also, preview the two pieces, and write down the differences you notice.

Activity: Looking at [the resources chart](#), choose a Pulitzer Center article that is related to the personal narrative you read last class.

- As you read the article, keep track of the facts that you learn about this topic/issue.
- Answer this question: how did learning this information help you understand or shed light on the personal narrative you read?

Closing: In pairs or small groups with peers who read the same personal narrative as you, discuss the articles you read and today's essential questions –

- How does journalistic writing/reporting differ from personal narratives? How are the two connected?
- Which did you learn more from? Which did you enjoy reading more?

DAY 3 - Brainstorming Your Personal Narrative Topic

[Brainstorming Your Personal Narrative Topic Student Worksheet](#)

Essential Question: What are the important, meaningful personal stories we have to tell and how do they relate to larger themes of justice/politics?

Opener: Analyze Baldwin's quote. What does it make you think about reading and writing? How does this connect to the personal narratives we read? More importantly, how might it inspire you in the personal narrative you will write and the topic you might choose?

“You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive.”

— James Baldwin

Activity: Today, we are choosing the topic for our personal narrative, something that is both personal and political. It can be something big that happened to you/your family/your community. It can be something seemingly small that had a big impact on you. Use any/all of these strategies to think about what you want to write your personal narrative about!

- Create a VISUAL TIMELINE OF YOUR LIFE, including events (big or small) that have happened in your life (or perhaps even before you were born). Star the ones that have had a big impact on you. Maybe they are things you experienced, maybe they are things you witnessed, maybe they are realizations you had.
- Search the [PULITZER CENTER WEBSITE](#) by using keywords or using the [Issues](#) tab. This can help you brainstorm themes that you could connect to in your own life. You can also review the personal narratives and articles we have discussed over the past two classes. Perhaps there is a theme here that you connect to and might want to write about for your personal narrative. What themes or issues do you connect to?
- Have a one-on-one CONFERENCE WITH YOUR TEACHER to discuss some of your ideas for the personal narrative.

Closing/Homework: Map how you will tell your personal story, by outlining the following –

1. What specific moment/incident is at the core of the story you are trying to tell?
2. How will you begin? How will you hook your reader?
3. What is the central obstacle/tension/problem at the center of your story?
4. What important information/ideas that are historic/political will you include?
5. How will you resolve/close your personal narrative?

DAY 4 - First Half of Your Personal Narrative

[First Half of Your Personal Narrative Student Worksheet](#)

Essential Question: How can we tell our stories in compelling ways that foster connection for readers?

Opener : Look at the [rubric](#) for the [New York Times Personal Narrative Contest](#) and respond to the following questions –

- Which part of this rubric seems easiest for you to do well with?
- Which part seems most important, and why?
- Which part of the rubric seems most challenging?

Activity:

- Analyze the arc of the story, focusing on the exposition, conflict, and rising action.
- Together, read and analyze the opening paragraph of Kiese Laymon’s personal narrative, “[Do Not Accept Nan Check](#),” discussing the following questions: What makes this a strong opening? What does the exposition reveal? What is the conflict?

Independent Work: Plan the first half of your personal narrative –

- A. HOOK - how will you grab the reader's attention right away?
- B. EXPOSITION - what essential information does the reader need to know in the beginning?
- C. CONFLICT - what is the conflict/problem in your piece, and how will you reveal it to the reader?
- D. RISING ACTION - what will happen next in response to the conflict, leading to the climax?

Homework: Use your outline to write the first half of your personal narrative, submit it to your teacher this evening, so you can receive feedback in time for next class.

DAY 5 - Second Half of Your Personal Narrative[Second Half of Your Personal Narrative Student Worksheet](#)

Essential Question - How can we tell our stories in compelling ways that foster connection for readers?

Opener - See feedback from your teacher on the first half of your personal narrative. What changes/additions do you plan to make to the first half of your personal narrative?

Activity:

- Analyze the arc of the story, focusing on the climax, falling action, and resolution.
- Together, read and analyze excerpts from Karla Cornejo Villavicencio’s, “[Why I Tried to Save My Father, My Dictator](#)” discussing what makes the climax, falling action, and resolution strong, and what makes them distinct from one another.

Independent Work: Plan the second half of your personal narrative –

- E. CLIMAX - What will be the big event, the turning point, of your personal narrative? This can be something big that happens externally, or a big internal realization!
- F. FALLING ACTION - What happens in response to the climax/turning point? This should be moving us toward the ending.
- G. RESOLUTION - How do things (begin to) change as a result of what happened? Even though things may not be fully resolved/tied up neatly, how does this narrative come to a close? This does not have to be a “happy ending” - try to avoid cliches here.

Homework: Use your outline to write the second half of your personal narrative. Submit it to your teacher this evening so you can receive feedback in time for next class.

Final Notes

1. Students may need additional time to write their drafts, and it may be necessary to give students class time to write, rather than doing the writing for homework.
2. Giving students the opportunity to share their pieces and read their peers while they are in the midst of the writing process, can be helpful and a powerful way to create a writing community. If possible, give students an additional class period for peer revision.
3. Once students have finished writing, implementing teacher and peer feedback, and revising, create an opportunity for students to share part of all of their personal narratives with partners or in small groups, with the entire class, or more broadly with the larger school community!
4. Students are also encouraged to submit their personal narratives to the annual [New York Times Learning Network Personal Narrative Writing Contest](#). The rubric for the contest is below:

The New York Times Learning Network Student Personal Narrative Contest Rubric

	Excellent (4)	Proficient (3)	Developing (2)	Beginning (1)
Story: Personal narrative tells a short but memorable story about a life experience — and communicates some larger meaning or universal message.				
Language: Personal narrative uses vivid details and images to make the story come alive for the reader. The writing avoids clichés.				
Voice: Personal narrative demonstrates a unique personal voice, style and point of view. The story is fresh and original.				
Narrative Arc: Personal narrative presents a clear conflict — an obstacle, problem or tension — that is resolved in some way.				
Guidelines: Entry follows all contest rules and guidelines.				

The New York Times
Learning Network