

Telling Stories: Narrative Elements in Argument Essays



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For many years, I taught argumentative writing by teaching logic, how to have a strong thesis statement, and how to add evidence to prove your point. My students composed well-written essays, but it was only a few students a year whose work would truly stand out. The reason: Those students had included narrative techniques in their writing that made the reader connect with them. After reading Liz Prather's book, "[Story Matters: Teaching Teens to Use the Tools of Narrative to Argue and Inform](#)," I began to see how essential narrative tools are to help convince.

I then looked at all the mentor texts I have used over the years, among them many Times editorials from professional columnists, but also student winners. Sure enough, the majority of them used narrative techniques to strengthen their arguments. I challenge you: Look at argumentative essays that were published by a renowned newspaper or magazine. Look at advertisements. Look at speeches that are recognized as successful and well written. Look at the winners of The New York Times Student Editorial Contest. While you are reading these texts, take note of the frequency of narrative techniques — stories of the author's own personal experience and/or the personal experiences of others, used to make a point. I'm confident you'll find many.

I ask students to choose a narrative structure for their own editorials, telling them that the structure may change during the writing process, and that is fine. I meet with everyone individually to make sure they are on the right track. Many of my students will choose the “circle” structure Ms. Prather identifies in her book. “[Lessons from Failure](#)” by Sophie S. Ding is a great example of that structure. She chooses herself as the protagonist of her editorial who is devastated about getting a 37 out of 100. It isn’t until the end of her editorial that she comes back to her narrative, concluding that the 37 has taught her more than all of the 100s ever did, accepting failure as something good.

A student example: One of the girls in my class wants to write about how social media helps teenagers with depression. She chose one of her friends as the main character. She chose the “circle” structure, starting her editorial by describing her friend’s misery and devastation and ending her editorial by depicting how her friend has changed and feels better due to using and interacting with other people on social media.

Whether you teach Common Core or not, throughout most students’ school careers, they are taught to view informative, argumentative and narrative writing as three separate writing genres. However, that is not the reality of professional writing. I concede that keeping writing genres separate up until sixth grade makes sense; students need a solid foundation in each writing genre. However, it is my hope that starting in sixth grade, students start entering the “grey zone” — what I’d like to rename the “multi-perspective zone” — where they learn to mix writing genres, purposefully using narrative techniques to argue and inform.

— **Lea Maryanow, Teacher, Visalia, Calif.**