

Paragraph Writing for Kids

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UNIT 2: Narrating an Event

Exercise 2A: Choosing the Basic Subject

In this unit, you will write about an experience that happened to you during a family outing, trip, or entertainment. You will retell the incident from your own point of view, in first person (using the pronoun "I"). Your paragraph could be a simple recollection of details, or it could follow a story line, with a problem and a resolution. The following example is a recollection of details, arranged in the order in which they occurred.

The most delightful experience of my life was the time my mother took me to see a ballet. We arrived at the theater in the afternoon, clutching tickets marked with the magical words "Swan Lake." As we made our way to our seats in the balcony, I was enchanted by the red velvet cushions, crystal chandeliers, and golden decorations. Then the lights dimmed. A full orchestra began the familiar, haunting overture. At last, the curtain rose, revealing scenery so lovely I felt transported into another world. The first dancers appeared, dressed in elaborate costumes, and for the next two hours my attention was entirely focused on the graceful movements of the ballet. It was a time of wonder I will never forget.

Here is a paragraph which follows a story line, with a problem and a resolution.

On my tenth birthday, my dad took me to see a baseball game that almost didn't happen. Our local minor league team, the Bayview Buzzards, was scheduled to play their archrivals, the Carville Cougars. But as we climbed to our seats in the stadium, heavy rain clouds closed in. I feared the worst, and sure enough, just as the Buzzards came out to warm up, big, round drops began to fall. The teams retreated to their dugouts. Workers appeared with a

giant tarp to cover the field. The announcer, however, insisted that the storm would blow over in thirty minutes. My dad produced a couple of rain ponchos, and he and I went to the concession stand to buy hot dogs. Thirty minutes later, we were back in our seats, cheering for the Buzzards as they took the field under a sunny sky. Our team won that day, and the victory was all the more special because I had feared there would be no game at all.

Your first task is to choose an experience to write about. Have you and some member(s) of your family recently been to a concert, play, sports event, or other entertainment? Perhaps you were part of a performance that your family attended. Has your family ever visited a theme park? Have you taken a trip to visit relatives, or to see some historical or natural attraction? Maybe you went on an outing close to home—to a park, a museum, or a carnival. Choose an experience that you remember well and can write about in detail. Enter it in the box below. (Examples: "Mom and I Visit the Art Museum," "A Trip to Grandma's House," "A Day at the County Fair," "An Afternoon at the Lake," "Our Trip to the Amusement Park," etc.)

<p>BASIC SUBJECT FOR A NARRATIVE PARAGRAPH:</p> <hr/> <hr/>
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Exercise 2B: Creating a List of Details

In this exercise you will create a list of background details about your basic subject. Below is a list relating to one student's family trip to the mountains. Read it carefully to get a sense of how your own list should look.

too many mosquitoes ice-cold lake water weird cries of loons billions of stars

no wi-fi or cell phone fresh-caught trout for breakfast owls hooting all night

outhouse halfway across campground Dad kept saying it was an adventure

freeze-dried macaroni and cheese my brother complaining big black ants

I caught ten fish bears in campground at night learning how to build a fire

beetles in the firewood Mom stayed home bears knocked over trash cans

snow on peaks across the lake cold at night took forever to set up the tent

hiked all the way around the lake saw an eagle mouse got into our toilet paper

cots inside our tent dogs barked when bears came deer drinking from lake

learned to fish with a fly rod trail around the lake was steep hundreds of bats

brother got into poison ivy on the hike, saw mountain lion tracks granola bars

took plenty of pictures lake stocked with rainbow trout my fish was biggest

campground not very crowded cute chipmunks Dad looks funny in hip waders

trees creaking in the wind my line got caught in a tree climbing on boulders

kept food in the car, safe from bears Dad snores brother fell in the lake

trout tasted great hike took all day sleeping bag too small I never saw a bear

made s'mores over the campfire missed my favorite TV show chased frogs

Exercise 2C: Organizing Your Details into Topics

If you filled both pages in the last exercise, you now have more than enough information for one narrative paragraph. Large collections of ideas can be divided into smaller topics. The following list of details was written by a student who performed in a Three Little Pigs play, together with his brother Bill. Sort the list into separate topics by copying each detail into one of the three boxes on the next page. If a detail pertains to more than one topic, you will need to copy it more than once. If a detail does not belong to any topic, cross it out.

Bill's pig suit was way too small I practiced my wolf lines every day
our little sister Lea never wants to be left out I never had stage fright before
Bill walked funny because his suit was tight the painted scenery looked good
Mom, Dad, and Lea sat in the front row the bricks were made out of cardboard
those pig suits must have been 50 years old Lea thought the bricks were toys
I saw the audience, and my brain froze the stick house went down, and Bill ran
I couldn't think what to say after "Little Pig" Bill's suit ripped down the back
I skipped my lines and just blew on the straw house the theater smelled musty
Straw Pig shouted "Wolf, you skipped my line!" the play was sold out
at the stick house, I remembered my lines when the bricks fell, Lea ran onstage
people laughed when Bill's suit tore Lea grabbed a brick and yelled "BLOCK!"
pigs don't build houses maybe the play was funnier because it wasn't perfect

When you have finished this exercise, review your own list of details on pages 32 and 33. Which seem to belong together? Use different colored highlighter pens to sort your details into topics.

Blank writing area with 10 horizontal lines.

Blank writing area with 10 horizontal lines.

Blank writing area with 10 horizontal lines.

Exercise 2D: Selecting a Topic with Strong Support

In the last exercise, you saw how a list of background details can suggest two or more very different narrative paragraphs. But of course, all topics are not equally suitable for development. A narrative paragraph must include enough interesting details to capture the reader's attention. If the paragraph tells a story, it must have enough content to be engaging. "A boy fell in the mud," is not an interesting story unless you add plenty of details.

In this exercise you will practice identifying topics that can be expanded effectively. In each box, draw an "X" beside the **best** topic, based on the number of ideas you can think of to expand it. Try to write at least four supporting details for the topics you choose.

EXAMPLE:

- a jet plane flew over Grandma's house
- somewhere in the distance, a dog barked
- the garbage truck came and took Grandma's trash
- a snail crawled up the porch

the truck roared in at 6:00 a.m.; orange lights were flashing;
a big man leapt gracefully off the back; he seized the trash
bags, one in each hand; he tossed the bags expertly into the
open back of the truck; he saw Grandma at the window and waved

- we sat on the curb and watched the parade
- Dad checked the weather report
- we slept all the next day
- my sister spent the morning on her cell phone

- ___ I watched TV in the hotel
- ___ I made up words from license plate letters
- ___ a monkey escaped while we were at the zoo
- ___ it rained on the way home

- ___ my sister and I counted pumpkins
- ___ I found the farm's location on the map
- ___ I watched the leaves fall
- ___ my brother and I went through the haunted corn maze

- ___ we waited in line for an hour
- ___ Mom kept track of the receipts from our trip
- ___ I got lost in the natural history museum
- ___ we sang "Hundred Bottles of Beer"

Selecting an appropriate topic is an important skill for good writing. If your topic is too broad, too narrow, or too boring, you will not be able to write an effective paragraph.

Reread the paragraph describing a visit to the ballet, on page 29. That writer's original list of details might have included the names of individual dancers, the seating capacity of the theater, or the price of the tickets. In the end, he or she chose to focus on a handful of details supporting the idea that this event was a "delightful experience."

Now reread the paragraph about the baseball game, starting on page 29. That writer's background material might have included information about a favorite player, facts about the stadium, or recollections about the food. Instead, the writer chose to focus on the drama of how this one particular game came close to being cancelled.

Look at your own list of details on pages 32 and 33. Your narrative paragraph should include four to eight supporting sentences. Which group of details do you think has the most potential for creating an effective paragraph? With a pencil, circle the details that belong to that topic.

Exercise 2E: Starting an Outline

Carefully consider the items you circled in the last exercise.

- Have you circled too much information to cover in a single paragraph? Does your topic need to be narrowed?
- Have you circled enough information to create an effective paragraph? Do you need to add more supporting details?

If you need to make changes to your list, do so now. Write in the margins, erase circles, or add circles as necessary. Don't worry about keeping the list neat. Think of it as a place to work things out.

Now remove one of the outline forms in the Appendix. Using a pencil, copy your basic subject on page 30 into the box at the top of the form. In the bulleted spaces beneath the "Supporting Details" heading, copy your finished set of circled details. For now, they need not be in any order. Leave the short spaces on the left side of the form blank and do not write anything in the "Topic Sentence" or "Concluding Sentence" boxes. You will complete those in later exercises. When you are finished, store your outline in the front pocket of your writing binder.

NOTE: Always use pencil when working on your outline. You may need to make changes later on.