Narrative Basics
Scenes Building Tools
When thinking about narrative one of the most important building blocks is a scene. A scene can consist of several elements, such as:

- Description or showing
- Dialogue
- Action
- Narrator and characters
- Setting
- Style

Here is a brief description of each of these elements as well as some questions to help you brainstorm some of these aspects in your own writing:

**Description or showing:** This aspect of a scene often involves the use of rich, vivid detail. These details should rely on the use of the five senses: see, smell, touch, taste, and hear. Using details to place the reader into the situation is a large aspect of narrative storytelling techniques. Rich, vivid detail should naturally lead to the creation of scenes because as a writer you are placing the reader into a very specific situation.

- **Questions for brainstorming:** What objects, characters, places, events need to be described?

**Dialogue:** Here the narrator and characters are offered an opportunity to interact verbally. Dialogue and specific manners of speaking can also reveal a great deal about a character’s personality.

- **Questions for brainstorming:** Who is speaking and to whom? What is the purpose of this interaction? What can dialogue reveal about a character’s personality?

**Narrator and characters:** Both narrators and characters are important choices in a narrative. The narrator most often is you, but you can change how you are seen based on whether you are speaking in past or present tense and also if you are using singular (“I”) or plural (“we,” “us,” “our”) first person pronouns.

Characters are those that surround the narrator and are developed so the reader can understand their motivation. Direct characterization will mean that you’re telling the reader the personality of the character, perhaps using rich, vivid description of appearances and mannerisms. Indirect characterization shows the reader various things that reveal the personality of the character, such as allowing the reader to hear how a character speaks through dialogue. You’ll most likely use a mix of both techniques. Using both techniques the character is offered multiple dimensions for the reader.

- **Questions for brainstorming:** Whose point of view do you want to write from? Who is critical and needs to be included? What makes the person unique? How can you describe interesting aspects of their character? Does the individual have a specific way of speaking that encapsulates their character?

**Setting:** Setting is a physical or, in some cases, metaphorical location that houses the action of the scene.

- **Questions for brainstorming:** Where and when does this scene take place? What is the significance of the setting? What makes the setting important when mixed with other aspects of the scene?
**Action:** Action describes an event(s) that is taking place in the scene. This is the reason why characters are interacting in a specific setting. A description of the inciting event is often what ties all the other elements together and makes it clear to the reader why you are writing about this experience.

- **Questions for brainstorming:** What is happening in the scene? What other scene elements are needed to convey the action? How do the characters change over the course of the scene because of the action? Why is the action significant?

**Style:** Style should be considered in scene work, but will probably be the last piece considered. Style allows you to think about the effect certain writing techniques may have on the scene in question. There are various techniques that you might consider, such as metaphors, similes, hyperbole, onomatopoeia, punctuation, sentence construction/clauses, paragraph construction, word choice (such as active verbs), and repetition. This is certainly not an exhaustive list, but you might consider how some of these techniques might build suspense or offer a change in pacing.

- **Questions for brainstorming:** How should this narrative be told? How might comparisons assist you in character development? How might various writing techniques impact the scene?

**Considering Narrative Form**

Narrative writing often has a form that differs from other academic essays in the sense that it doesn’t have an introduction, thesis, various points with evidence, and conclusion. Instead, your narrative will often have a beginning, middle, and end that are serving the purposes of the story that you are telling and/or analyzing. (An autoethnography functions a bit differently. See the second half of this handout for more information.)

While there is no strict structure, there are some important points that you will want to convey in each section of your essay. Below are some general thoughts on what will make each section successful for a reader as well as some methods to help you consider your own work:

**Beginnings**

Remember, summary doesn’t convince your reader to continue. You’ll need to make sure that you are using methods, such as scene construction, to assist your essay. Red flag openings include the narrator or main character stuck in their own mind contemplating life, opening with a dream, opening with an alarm clock buzzing, or being unintentionally funny. Instead you’ll want to:

- Grab the reader’s attention and don’t let go.
- Reveal the tone and style of the essay.
- Hint at the subject and setting.
  - **Methods to accomplish these goals:** Determine if there is a center of gravity to your story and start with this event or scene. Start in the middle of scene. Start at the end of the event and loop back to this moment. Start with a snippet of dialogue that is intriguing or will get the reader’s attention. Start with a unique detail that will engage the reader.

**Middles**

Control is what you’re looking for the in middle of your essay. Events cannot be controlled in nonfiction, but the timing and telling of the events can and should be controlled by the writer. Here you’ll want to think about the following:

- Consider whether you want to have multiple narratives running.
- Determine whether flashbacks are appropriate tools to use.
Methods to accomplish these goals: Consider what scenes are most important. Consider pacing of events and how you might use style to assist you in your construction of these pieces. When using flashbacks, are they chronological? If you have multiple narratives, how do they tie together? Do they conclude at the same point or have different endings?

ends
When concluding your essay, you’ll want to provide a satisfying close to the story; however, a satisfying close does not necessarily mean a resolution. If all threads are wrapped up too neatly, the ending may seem false to a reader. Since life events rarely have definite end points, conclusions may show that the event is still occurring. As a writer, you do want to leave the main characters in a place that is satisfying to the reader, even if it’s not necessarily positive for the characters. You’ll want to avoid moralizing or considering humanity in general. Consider the following suggestions about endings:

- Arise organically and at the proper moment.
- Consider how to end with a strong statement or mood.
- Remember, because these are stories of life there may not be a clear “conclusion.”
- Trust the reader. Not everything needs to be explained and some pieces can be open to interpretation.
- Also, remember that trying to tie things up in a bow can be problematic and come off as constructed and false.
  - Methods to accomplish these goals: Consider where to bow out. Chop off the last sentence/paragraph and see if this provides you with a stronger ending. Ask yourself if you are still showing at the end or if you have moved into reflection and moralizing (telling) that are less effective for a reader.

Considering Structure Activity
Take the last line of your draft or a line from the middle of your essay and use it as the first line. Does it connect to the central question or idea you are circling in the essay? Does it offer a revised version of that question? Or, does it pose a new question entirely? Regardless, write for at least one page with this line as your opening.

We too often rely on the clichéd idea that we have to “surprise” our readers with a twist ending or an ending that wraps everything up. Doing so can often put forth a false or empty sense of drama that covers up the bigger ideas that are hiding behind what you think is the “main event” in your story. What happens when you get rid of this “surprise” and come right out with it at the beginning? How does the essay change in purpose, structure, or voice?

Reflect for a paragraph on this process. What did you find? Were there any aspects of the story that you discovered you had ignored by trying to tell a dramatic or surprising story? Identify the weak spots that emerged when you removed the big ending or the reveal in the middle of your essay. Those weaknesses are often underdeveloped strengths.

Pacing
When writing a narrative you’ll want to consider how you’re controlling the timing and telling of events. Pacing is a concern throughout your essay, but you’ll probably find yourself determining how to pace the middle portion of your essay as you’re unveiling various details.
Think of pace like a long road trip. There are times where you might be going 70 mph on a highway, but you also may be driving down scenic backroads that require you to pause at stop signs or pull over and take pictures of the breathtaking views. You want to make sure that your essay offers enough pace so that your readers don’t feel like their wheels are stuck in the mud, but you also don’t want your narrative to constantly feel like you’re going 70 mph.

- **When should you worry about pacing?** It’s hard to consider pacing until you know what your full essay will look like. Therefore, typically you’ll consider pace when revising. At this point, you’ll want to consider what techniques you have that can help you control pace.
- **What tools do you have at your disposal?** Check out the scene building tools mentioned earlier.

- **How can I write about a long period of time?** You are going to want to consider what events and details are important. Creating a narrative that is essentially a chronological list of all the events that occurred over, say, a ten year period, will not be effective. Part of writing a good personal narrative is being selective about what you include.

- **How can I cut out sections of time that don’t add to the narrative?** Montage writing is where you actually decide to end part of your narrative at one point and pick it up at another. In published writing, you might see a barrier (a line, three asterisks, a unique design) or physical space indicating that the writer is ending one section or thought and moving on to another. This is a technique that you might consider adopting. Another effective method may be to condense the time in between these events to one or two sentences that contain details that are absolutely necessary and summarize what happened in between one significant moment and the next.

**Cautions**

- **Telling:** You may hear the phrase *show, don’t tell*. Narrative requires rich, vivid detail, a technique that is often missing when telling the reader information rather than showing them ideas. Telling creates vague details and may sound false to your reader. However, telling can be used right and may be necessary when interspersed throughout your narrative, such as in the case of smaller reflections during flashbacks.

- **Boring dialogue:** Get down to the meat of the dialogue. Leave out the pleasantries (unless this is important to character development). Spending too much time saying hello, asking how someone is, or offering other monosyllabic questions or answers will not intrigue an audience.

- **Not developing characters:** These are real people that you’re writing about. You’ll want to make sure your reader can see why they are important and what makes them tick.

- **Crafting an ending that’s too neat:** Life doesn’t have endings. It has moments of transition and change. Consider how this might be reflected in your writing in ways that show life continuing on after the end of your essay.

- **Not considering pace or style:** Pace and style are connected. You’ll want to make sure that your descriptions, setting, and action offer the reader moments to see the characters and understand the way you are reflecting on events. However, you don’t want to bore your reader, so you’ll want to think about moments where the action might need to speed up and how style can help you accomplish this goal.

- **Trying to cover too much time:** One of the biggest challenges with narratives is trying to cover just the right amount of time in the space provided. If you are assigned a 6-8 page personal narrative, trying to cover all the important moments in 10 years’ worth of time would be impossible. You would want to select a few events linked to a specific theme that show the reader why those moments are important.
Autoethnography

The Basics
Like narrative styles of writing, autoethnography asks you to explore your own experience (auto); however, this experience is connected to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings (ethnography). This is a self-reflective form of writing that is used in a wide range of disciplines. Autoethnography is also both a research method and genre since it is conducted by the writer/researcher and written by the writer/researcher.

In order to understand autoethnographies, it’s important to know how ethnographies work.
1. Used most often in anthropology
2. Conducted research often includes fieldwork, such as observing members of a specific community to gain a better understanding of how they function culturally and socially
3. Developed projects often include observations and interviews as key techniques during the research process
4. Written product combines a story woven together for the reader using descriptive, narrative techniques that allow outsiders to view a specific group and see into their daily lives.

When conducting an autoethnography, the lens shifts from a purely outsider stance to conducting self-research as you examine a particular group. By doing this work, researchers are able to consider their own journeys as a starting point for exploration, examination and representation and offer their own stories about being a member of a particular group. Researchers are able to craft narratives that take many cultural and societal factors into account by using their own lived experience.

Topic Selection
Struggling to figure out what groups you belong to that might be good for analysis? Here are a few places you might look:
- Photos
- Junk drawers
- Backpack
- Objects lying around your room
- Calendar
- Computer files

Most likely one or more of these locations has some hints as to groups that you belong to and interact with regularly. Below are some broad examples that might help you hone in on a particular group:
- Your major
- Activities you’ve participated in
- A specific culture (e.g., geek culture, video game culture, scientific culture, and more)
- Student athlete or team affiliations
- Clubs you’re involved with on campus
- Family (e.g., structure, dynamics, core/extended family, beliefs, and more)

You might also ask yourself a few questions.
- Where are you from?
- What do you enjoy?
- How do you define your identity?
- What sets you apart from others?

Brainstorming
After you have a rough topic idea, you’ll want to ask yourself some questions. This might mean using several prewriting techniques. For more on various prewriting techniques see our handout Brainstorming, Outlining, and Organizing.
- How do roles coincide or clash with each other? Is there tension?
- What made you realize you belong to the group you have chosen?
- What made you want to become a part of the group?
• What stories can you tell about your participation in the group?
• In what ways can you step back and observe the group objectively?
• What biases do you hold? How will you overcome these biases?
• What do you already know about the group/community? How can you find out more information?

**Using Sources**
Finding and using sources is an invaluable part of the autoethnography process, for they can:
• Provide additional insight and information to your topic
• Lend a more balanced experience to your information for the reader
• Allow you to situate yourself within a community while also extending the conversation
• Come in a variety of forms, such as scholarly research, popular articles, and interviews

Knowing how to navigate the sources of your community and your campus library are crucial. While you will most likely know about direct sources connected to your community, you can find more information about conducting library research in our handout NC State Library Resources.

**Conducting Your Own Research**
Since autoethnography involves observing a specific group, you’ll want to think about doing your own research. This can involve:

• Interviewing other members of the group
• Administering surveys
• Conducting observations
• Looking at the history of the group (archives)

While conducting your own research, you’ll want to consider ethical practices as a researcher. Make sure that when you use these techniques others are aware that you are conducting research that may be used later. You don’t want friends or family to be surprised when you quote them or discuss your observations of their behaviors. Your instructor will most likely have more information about these various research avenues and other ways you can ensure your research subjects are protected and informed.

**Writing A Draft**
While writing your draft, you will want to include a thesis that identifies how you are positioned within the community; however, unlike other research papers, your thesis can appear anywhere in the essay, but the focus should be evident to the reader early on.

You may opt to write your essay in IMRAD format, but most often the autoethnography uses subheadings to differentiate sections. Using narrative techniques (like those mentioned in the first half of this handout) allow you use include dialogue, song lyrics, epigraphs, or other literary techniques within the essay and set the stage for each section.

Remember, the autoethnography is written in first person and blends several styles of writing together, such as narrative, exposition, and analysis.

**Cautions**
• **Not enough analysis:** This is the largest caution connected to the autoethnography. Remember, you’ll need to include personal experience, BUT you need to make sure that you are moving beyond your experience and analyzing it in significant ways that show the reader how the group functions. This means striking a balance between narrative and analysis. You will also have to adopt an objective stance as you analyze.

Works Consulted:
Creating Nonfiction: A Guide and Anthology (Bradway and Hesse); Hooked: Write Fiction that Grabs Readers at Page One and Never Lets Them Go (Edgerton); The Irving System of Writing: A New Easy Method of Story and Photoplay Writing (Irving); The 3 A.M. Epiphany: Uncommon Writing Exercises that Transform Your Fiction (Kiteley); How to Write a Narrative with Pace (https://www.novel-writing-help.com/how-to-write-a-narrative.html); interTEXTS: A Collection of Student Writing, 3rd ed. (eds. Gierdowski et al.)