

Unit 4

Personal Narrative

What is a personal narrative?

A personal narrative is an account of an event or series of events that the writer has experienced. Using the first-person point of view, the writer conveys to the reader not only the substance of the occurrence, but also its emotional impact. In the personal narrative that follows, author Margaret Atwood shares, with characteristic humour, the circumstances that led her to write poetry.

Learning Goals



- write a personal narrative
- use language and syntax appropriate to your purpose and audience
- use participles, gerunds, and infinitives correctly
- analyze and use the techniques of presenting personal narratives in a variety of media
- identify areas of strength and weakness in your writing

Why I Write Poetry

by Margaret Atwood

I recently read an account of a study which intends to show how writers of a certain age—my age, roughly—attempt to “seize control” of the stories of their own lives by deviously concocting their own biographies. However, it’s a feature of our times that if you write a work of fiction, everyone assumes that the people and events in it are disguised biography—but if you write your biography, it’s assumed you’re lying your head off.

The latter may be true, at any rate of poets: Plato said that poets should be excluded from the ideal republic because they are such liars. I am a poet, and I affirm that this is true. About no subject are poets tempted to lie so much as about their own lives; I know one of them who has floated at least five versions of his autobiography, none of them real. I, of course, am a much more truthful person than that. But since poets lie, how can you believe me?

Here, then, is the official version:

I was once a snub-nosed blonde. My name was Betty. I had a perky personality and was a cheerleader for the college football team. My favourite colour was pink. Then I became a poet. My hair darkened overnight, my nose lengthened, I gave up football for the cello, my real name disappeared and was replaced by one that had a chance of being taken seriously, and my clothes changed colour in the closet, all by themselves, from pink to black. I stopped humming the songs from *Oklahoma!* and began quoting Kierkegaard. And not only that—all of my high-heeled shoes lost their heels, and were magically transformed into sandals. Needless to say, my many boyfriends took one look at this and ran screaming from the scene as if their toenails were on fire. New ones replaced them; they all had beards.



“Still writing poetry.” Margaret Atwood, shown here in November 2000 at the Calgary Arts Centre, is one of Canada’s most recognized and well-known writers. By looking at this photo and the title, what do you expect this essay to be about?

Believe it or not, there is an element of truth in this story. It's the bit about the name, which was not Betty but something equally non-poetic, and with the same number of letters. It's also the bit about the boyfriends. But meanwhile, here is the real truth: I became a poet at the age of 16. I did not intend to do it. It was not my fault.

Allow me to set the scene for you. The year was 1956. Elvis Presley had just appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, from the waist up. At school dances, which were held in the gymnasium and smelled like armpits, the dance with the most charisma was rock'n'roll. The approved shoes were saddle shoes and white bucks, and the evening gowns were strapless, if you could manage it; they had crinolined skirts that made you look like half a cabbage with a little radish head. Girls were forbidden to wear jeans to school, except on football days, when they sat on the hill to watch and it was feared that the boys would be able to see up their dresses unless they wore pants. TV dinners had just been invented.

None of this—you might think, and rightly so—was conducive to the production of poetry. If someone had told me a year previously that I would suddenly turn into a poet, I would have giggled. (I had a passable giggle, then.) Yet this is what did happen.

I was in my fourth year of high school. The high school was in Toronto, which in the year 1956 was still known as Toronto the Good because of its puritanical liquor laws. It had a population of 650,509 people at the time, and was a synonym for bland propriety. The high school I attended was also a synonym for bland propriety, and although it has produced a steady stream of chartered accountants and one cabinet minister, no other poets have ever emerged from it before or since—or not that I know of.

The day I became a poet was a sunny day of no particular ominousness. I was walking across the football field, not because I was sports-minded or had plans to smoke a cigarette behind the field house—the only other reason for going there—but because this was my normal way home from school. I was scuttling along in my usual furtive way, suspecting no ill, when a large invisible thumb descended from the sky and pressed down on the top of my head. A poem formed. It was quite a gloomy poem: the poems of the young usually are. It was a gift, this poem—a gift from an anonymous donor, and, as such, both exciting and sinister at the same time.

I suspect this is why all poets begin writing poetry, only they don't want to admit it, so they make up explanations that are either more rational or more romantic. But this is the true explanation, and I defy anyone to disprove it.

The poem that I composed on that eventful day, although entirely without merit or even promise, did have some features. It rhymed and scanned, because we had been taught rhyming and scansion at school. It resembled the poetry of Lord Byron and Edgar Allan Poe, with a little Shelley and Keats thrown in. The fact is that at the time I became a poet, I had read very few poems written after the year 1900. I knew nothing of modernism or free verse. These were not the only things I knew nothing of. I had no idea, for instance, that I was about to step into a whole set of preconceptions and social roles that had to do with what poets were like, how they should behave, and what they ought to wear; moreover, I did not know that the rules about these things were different if you were female. I did not know that "poetess" was an insult, and that I myself would some day be called one. I did not know that to be told I had transcended my gender would be considered a compliment. I didn't know yet that black was compulsory. All of that was in the future. When I was 16, it was simple. Poetry existed; therefore it could be written; and nobody had told me—yet—the many, many reasons why it could not be written by me.

At first glance, there was little in my background to account for the descent of the large thumb of poetry onto the top of my head. But let me try to account for my own poetic genesis.

I was born on November 18, 1939, in the Ottawa General Hospital, two and a half months after the beginning of the Second World War. Being born at the beginning of the war gave me a substratum of anxiety and dread to draw on, which is very useful to a poet. It also meant that I was malnourished. This is why I am short. If it hadn't been for food rationing, I would have been six feet tall.

I saw my first balloon in 1946, one that had been saved from before the war. It was inflated for me as a treat when I had the mumps on my seventh birthday, and it broke immediately. This was a major influence on my later work.

As for my birth month, a detail of much interest to poets, obsessed as they are with symbolic systems of all kinds: I was not pleased, during my

childhood, to have been born in November, as there wasn't much inspiration for birthday-party motifs. February children got hearts, May ones flowers, but what was there for me? A cake surrounded by withered leaves? November was a drab, dark and wet month, lacking even snow; its only noteworthy festival was Remembrance Day. But in adult life I discovered that November was, astrologically speaking, the month of sex, death and regeneration, and that November first was the Day of the Dead. It still wouldn't have been much good for birthday parties, but it was just fine for poetry, which tends to revolve a good deal around sex and death, with regeneration optional.

Six months after I was born, I was taken in a wooden box to a remote cabin in northwestern Quebec, where my father was doing research as a forest entomologist. I should add here that my parents were unusual for their time. Both of them liked being as far away from civilization as possible, my mother because she hated housework and tea parties, my father because he liked chopping wood. They also weren't much interested in what the sociologists would call rigid sex-role stereotyping. This was beneficial to me in later life, as it helped me to get a job at summer camp teaching small boys to start fires.

My childhood was divided between the forest, in the warmer parts of the year, and various cities, in the colder parts. I was thus able to develop the rudiments of the double personality so necessary for a poet. I also had lots of time for meditation. In the bush, there were no theatres, movies, parades, or very functional radios; there were also not many other people. The result was that I learned to read early—I was lucky enough to have a mother who read out loud, but she couldn't be doing it all the time, and you had to amuse yourself with something or other when it rained. I became a reading addict, and have remained so ever since. "You'll ruin your eyes," I was told when caught at my secret vice under the covers with a flashlight. I did so, and would do it again. Like cigarette addicts who will smoke mattress stuffing if all else fails, I will read anything. As a child I read a good many things I shouldn't have, but this also is useful for poetry.

As the critic Northrop Frye has said, we learn poetry through the seat of our pants, by being bounced up and down to nursery rhymes as children. Poetry is essentially oral, and is close to song; rhythm precedes meaning. My first experiences with poetry were Mother Goose, which contains some of the



“I designed the cover myself, using stick-on dots.” Compare the above two covers for *The Circle Game*: the one that Atwood designed (on the left) and the more recently designed cover. Which one do you prefer? Which one would attract you to buy the book? Why?

most surrealistic poems in the English language; and whatever singing commercials could be picked up on the radio, such as: You’ll wonder where the yellow went/When you brush your teeth with Pepsodent!

Also surreal. What yellow? I wondered. Thus began my tooth fetish.

I created my first book of poetry at the age of five. To begin with, I made the book itself, cutting the pages out of scribbler paper and sewing them together in what I did not know was the traditional signature fashion. Then I copied into the book all the poems I could remember, and when there were some blank pages left at the end, I added a few of my own to complete it. This book was an entirely satisfying art object for me; so satisfying that I felt I had nothing more to say in that direction, and gave up writing poetry altogether for another 11 years.

My English teacher from 1955, run to ground by some documentary crew trying to explain my life, said that in her class I had showed no particular promise. This was true. Until the descent of the giant thumb, I showed no particular promise. I also showed no particular promise for some time afterwards, but I did not know this. A lot of being a poet consists of willed ignorance. If you woke up from your trance and realized the nature of the life-threatening and dignity-destroying precipice you were walking along, you would switch into actuarial sciences immediately.

If I had not been ignorant in this particular way, I would not have announced to an assortment of my high-school female friends, in the cafeteria one brown-bag lunchtime, that I was going to be a writer. I said “writer,” not “poet”; I did have some common sense. But my announcement was certainly a conversation-stopper. Sticks of celery were suspended in mid-crunch, peanut-butter sandwiches paused halfway between table and mouth; nobody said a word. One of those present reminded me of this incident recently—I had repressed it—and said she had been simply astounded. “Why?” I said. “Because I wanted to be a writer?”

“No,” she said. “Because you had the guts to say it out loud.”

But I was not conscious of having guts, or even of needing them. We obsessed folks, in our youth, are oblivious to the effects of our obsessions; only later do we develop enough cunning to conceal them, or at least to avoid mentioning them at parties. The one good thing to be said about announcing yourself as a writer in the colonial Canadian fifties is that nobody told me I couldn’t do it because I was a girl. They simply found the entire proposition ridiculous. Writers were dead and English, or else extremely elderly and American; they were not 16 years old and Canadian. It would have been worse if I’d been a boy, though. Never mind the fact that all the really stirring poems I’d read at that time had been about slaughter, battles, mayhem, sex and death—poetry was thought of as existing in the pastel, female realm, along with embroidery and flower arranging. If I’d been male I would probably have had to roll around in the mud, in some boring skirmish over whether or not I was a sissy.

I’ll skip over the embarrassingly bad poems I published in the high school year book (had I no shame? Well, actually, no) mentioning only briefly the word of encouragement I received from my wonderful Grade 12 English teacher, Miss Bessie Billings: “I can’t understand a word of this, dear, so it

must be good.” I will not go into the dismay of my parents, who worried—with good reason—over how I would support myself. I will pass over my flirtation with journalism as a way of making a living, an idea I dropped when I discovered that in the fifties, unlike now, female journalists always ended up writing the obituaries and the ladies’ page, and nothing but.

But how was I to make a living? There was not then a roaring market in poetry. I thought of running away and being a waitress, which I later tried but got very tired and thin; there’s nothing like clearing away other people’s mushed-up dinners to make you lose your appetite. Finally, I went into English literature at university, having decided in a cynical manner that I could always teach to support my writing habit. Once I got past the Anglo-Saxon it was fun, although I did suffer a simulated cardiac arrest the first time I encountered T. S. Eliot and realized that not all poems rhymed any more. “I don’t understand a word of this,” I thought, “so it must be good.”

After a year or two of keeping my head down and trying to pass myself off as a normal person, I made contact with the five other people at my university who were interested in writing; and through them, and some of my teachers, I discovered that there was a whole subterranean wonderland of Canadian writing that was going on just out of general earshot and sight. It was not large—in 1960, you were doing well to sell 200 copies of a book of poems by a Canadian, and a thousand novels was a bestseller; there were only five literary magazines, which ran on the lifeblood of their editors. But while the literary scene wasn’t big, it was very integrated. Once in—that is, once published in a magazine—it was as if you’d been given a Masonic handshake or a key to the Underground Railroad. All of a sudden you were part of a conspiracy.

People sometimes ask me about my influences. These were, by and large, the Canadian poets of my own generation and the one just before mine. P. K. Page, Margaret Avison, Jay Macpherson, James Reaney, Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen, Al Purdy, D. G. Jones, Eli Mandel, John Newlove, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Michael Ondaatje, Pat Lane, George Bowering, Milton Acorn, A. M. Klein, Alden Nowlan, Elizabeth Brewster, Anne Wilkinson—these are some of the poets who were writing and publishing then, whom I encountered, and/or whose poetry I read. People writing about Canadian poetry at that time spoke a lot about the necessity of creating a

Canadian literature. There was a good deal of excitement, and the feeling that you were in on the ground floor, so to speak.

So poetry was a vital form, and it quickly acquired a public dimension. Above ground, the bourgeoisie reigned supreme, in their two-piece suits and ties and camel-hair coats and pearl earrings (not all of this worn by the same sex). But at night, the Bohemian world came alive, in various nooks and crannies of Toronto, sporting black turtlenecks, drinking coffee at little tables with red-checked tablecloths and candles stuck in chianti bottles, in coffee houses—well, in the one coffee house in town—listening to jazz and folk singing, reading their poems out loud as if they'd never heard it was stupid, and putting swear words into them. For a twenty-year-old, this was intoxicating stuff.

By this time, I had my black wardrobe more or less together, and had learned not to say, “Well, hi there!” in sprightly tones. I was publishing in little magazines, and shortly thereafter I started to write reviews for them too. I didn't know what I was talking about, but I soon began to find out. Every year for four years, I put together a collection of my poems and submitted it to a publishing house; every year it was—to my dismay then, to my relief now—rejected. Why was I so eager to be published right away? Like all 21-year-old poets, I thought I would be dead by 30, and Sylvia Plath had not set a helpful example. For a while there, you were made to feel that, if a poet and female, you could not really be serious about it unless you'd made at least one suicide attempt. So I felt I was running out of time.

My poems were still not very good, but by now they showed—how shall I put it?—a sort of twisted and febrile glimmer. In my graduating year, a group of them won the main poetry prize at the university. Madness took hold of me, and with the aid of a friend, and another friend's flatbed press, we printed them. A lot of poets published their own work then; unlike novels, poetry was short, and therefore cheap to do. We had to print each poem separately, and then disassemble the type, as there were not enough a's for the whole book; the cover was done with a lino-block. We printed 250 copies, and sold them through bookstores for 50 cents each. They now go in the rare-book trade for \$1,800 a pop. Wish I'd kept some.

Three years or so later—after two years at graduate school at the dreaded Harvard University, a year of living in a tiny rooming-house room and working at a market-research company, and the massive rejection of my first

novel, as well as several other poetry collections—I ended up in British Columbia, teaching grammar to Engineering students at eight-thirty in the morning in a Quonset hut. It was all right, as none of us were awake. I made them write imitations of Kafka, which I thought might help them in their chosen profession.

In comparison with the few years I had just gone through, this was sort of like going to heaven. I lived in an apartment built on top of somebody's house, and had scant furniture; but not only did I have a 180-degree view of Vancouver harbour, I also had all night to write. I taught in the daytime, ate canned food, did not wash my dishes until all of them were dirty—the biologist in me became very interested in the different varieties of moulds that could be grown on leftover Kraft dinner—and stayed up until four in the morning. I completed, in that one year, my first officially published book of poems and my first published novel, which I wrote on blank exam-booklets, as well as a number of short stories and the beginnings of two other novels, later completed. It was an astonishingly productive year for me. I looked like *The Night of the Living Dead*. Art has its price.

This first book of poems was called *The Circle Game*. I designed the cover myself, using stick-on dots—we were very cost-effective in those days—and to everyone's surprise, especially mine, it won The Governor General's Award, which in Canada then was the big one to win. Literary prizes are a crapshoot, and I was lucky that year. I was back at Harvard by then, mopping up the uncompleted work for my doctorate—I never did finish it—and living with three roommates named Judy, Sue and Karen. To collect the prize, I had to attend a ceremony at Government House in Ottawa, which meant dress-ups—and it was obvious to all of us, as we went through the two items in my wardrobe, that I had nothing to wear. Sue lent me her dress and earrings, Judy her shoes, and while I was away they all incinerated my clunky, rubber-soled Hush Puppy shoes, having decided that these did not go with my new, poetic image.

This was an act of treachery, but they were right. I was now a recognized poet, and had a thing or two to live up to. It took me a while to get the hair right, but I have finally settled down with a sort of modified Celtic look, which is about the only thing available to me short of baldness. I no longer feel I'll be dead by 30; now it's 60. I suppose these deadlines we set for ourselves are really a way of saying we appreciate time, and want to use all of

it. I'm still writing, I'm still writing poetry, I still can't explain why, and I'm still running out of time.

Wordsworth was partly right when he said, "Poets in their youth begin in gladness/But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness." Except that sometimes poets skip the gladness and go straight to the despondency. Why is that? Part of it is the conditions under which poets work—giving all, receiving little in return from an age that by and large ignores them. Part of it is cultural expectation: "The lunatic, the lover and the poet," says Shakespeare, and notice which comes first. My own theory is that poetry is composed with the melancholy side of the brain, and that if you do nothing but, you may find yourself going slowly down a long dark tunnel with no exit. I have avoided this by being ambidextrous: I write novels too.

I go for long periods of time without writing any poems. I don't know why this is; as Margaret Laurence indicates in *The Diviners*, you don't know why you start, and you also don't know why you stop. But when I do find myself writing poetry again, it always has the surprise of that first unexpected and anonymous gift.

ANALYZING THE MODEL

1. Consider Atwood's purpose and audience. For whom, and for what reason, has Atwood written this account? Do you think her intended audience would enjoy her narrative? Why or why not?
2. In addition to indicating the content or purpose of the piece, the title of a work should appeal to the reader's interest. At first glance, the title of Atwood's personal narrative seems almost juvenile and cliché, much like the titles "How I Spent My Summer Vacation" and "Why I Don't Eat Parsnips." Suggest a reason why Atwood chose such a title.
3. A personal narrative usually begins by quickly establishing the writer as a credible narrator, and arousing interest by identifying the nature of the event he or she will recount. Does Atwood's lead (opening section) succeed in doing both? Explain.

4. Does the lead establish the author's tone (attitude toward her subject)? Give examples to illustrate your comments, and then suggest a reason for Atwood's choice of tone.
5. What advantages does the first-person point of view offer Atwood?
6. Many personal narratives focus on a single event and convey to the reader the event's short- and long-term impact on the writer's life. Atwood, however, writes about a series of events. Does this weaken the focus of her narrative? Why or why not?
7. The details of a personal narrative are often arranged in chronological order. Variations of this organizational pattern may include the use of flashback, a technique that allows the writer to include past events as a means of providing background information. Describe the organizational pattern Atwood has followed in her narrative. Do you think the pattern of organization she chose is appropriate given her purpose? Explain.
8. One technique authors of narratives use to *show* rather than *tell* is to include the actual words spoken by the people involved in the experience. Atwood has used dialogue sparingly in "Why I Write Poetry." Identify places in her narrative where she might have included more dialogue, and suggest reasons why she chose not to.
9. Identify other kinds of techniques or devices that Atwood has used to show, rather than tell about, the various experiences in her narrative.
10. The ending of any narrative should flow naturally from the events it describes. Comment on the effectiveness of Atwood's ending. Does it leave the reader with a sense of completion? Why or why not?

Checkpoint: Personal Narrative

- ✓ As a class, create a checklist of common features of personal narratives, based on the model and your own experience. You can use the checklist to help you write your own personal narrative.