Focus:
A personal narrative is a type of reflective text in which writers share insights and observations about life. This type of writing draws upon personal experiences and/or imaginative thinking. It provides rich opportunities for recollection of past, present, or imagined experiences and thoughtful reflection on these experiences.

Goal:
To write personal narratives that:
- Include a clearly defined focus.
- Communicate the importance of or reasons for actions and/or consequences.

To achieve this goal, you will engage in a series of activities in which you work with your teacher and with your classmates to construct two model personal narratives. You will then use these models to construct your own personal narrative.

Activity 1: Reading and Analyzing a Personal Narrative

1. Think about a great story that you’ve heard several times. It might be a family story that gets repeated at get-togethers, or it might be the story of something that happened that you and your friends will never forget. Who tells this story the best? What makes his or her version of the story better than anyone else’s?
2. What elements are common to good stories?

3. As you read the sample narrative that starts on the next page, look for elements of a good narrative. Mark the text by putting a checkmark in the margin when you find the element, and write the name of the element beside the checkmark.
In January of 1980 I was running a seventy-five-mile line, trapping beaver. I had previously trapped with a friend, but this year I was trapping alone, not the wisest thing to do, since there is some risk from bad ice or injuries and it’s better to have a companion. I was alone when I made a mistake that nearly killed me.

The ice around beaver lodges is very dangerous. Beavers live in their lodges and come out of underwater tunnels to get food they have stored at the bottom of the river or pond through the summer, in the form of branches stuck down in the mud. Each time they come out they let air out of their noses and it goes up to make bubbles under the surface of the ice, and this, along with the beavers’ rubbing their backs on the underside of the ice, keeps the ice very thin near a beaver lodge. It can be fifty below with two-foot-thick ice around the whole lake and the ice near the lodge might be less than a quarter inch thick.

I had parked the sled near a lodge and unpacked the gear needed to set a group of snares. Cookie was leading the work team of five dogs and they knew the procedure completely by this time. As soon as I stopped the sled and began to unpack they all lay down, curled their tails over their noses and went to sleep. The process could take two or three hours and they used the time to get rest.

A rope tied the cargo to the sled. I threw the rope across the ice to get it out of the way. One end was still tied to the sled. I took a step on the ice near the rope and went through and down like a stone.

You think there is time to react, that the ice will give way slowly and you’ll be able to hang on to the edge, somehow able to struggle to safety. It’s not that way at all. It’s as if you were suddenly standing on air. The bottom drops out and you go down.

I was wearing heavy clothing and a parka. It gathered water like a sponge and took me down faster.

Two things saved me. One, as I went down my hand fell across the rope I had thrown across the ice, which was still tied to the sled.

Two, as I dropped I had time to yell—scream—and the last thing I saw as I went under was Cookie’s head swinging up from sleeping and her eyes locking on mine as I went beneath the surface.

The truth is I shouldn’t have lived. I have had several friends killed in just this manner—dropping through the ice while running dogs—and there wasn’t much of a chance for me. The water was ten or twelve feet deep. I saw all the bubbles from my clothing going up to the surface and I tried to pull myself up on the rope. My hands slipped and I thought in a wild, mental scream of panic that this was how it would end.

Then the rope tightened. There was a large noose-knot on the end and it tightened and started pulling up and when the knot hit I grabbed and held and the dogs pulled me
out of the hole and back up onto the ice. There was still very little time. I had a quart of white-gas stove fuel on the sled for emergencies and I threw it on a pine tree nearby and lit a match and set the whole tree on fire and, in the heat, got my clothes off and crawled into a sleeping bag. I stood inside it and held my clothes near the flame to dry them.

I would have died if not for Cookie.

She saw me drop, instantly analyzed the situation, got the team up—she must have jerked them to their feet—got them pulling, and they pulled me out.

That was January 1980. It is now 1997 as I write this, and everything that has happened in the last seventeen years—everything: Iditarods, published books, love, living, life—all of it, including this book, I owe to Cookie.

4. What is the main focus of this narrative?

**Activity 2: Writing a Class-Constructed Narrative**

**Prompt:** Write a personal narrative that meets the requirements listed in the goal statement.

1. Use a graphic organizer to help you brainstorm other ideas for topics that are inspired by this narrative.

2. With your class, you will now create notes for the following elements that will help you to write a personal narrative:
   - Brainstorm a list of questions based on your teacher’s brief telling of a story. Use the reporter’s questions (who, what, when, where, why, and how) to fill in details.
   - Brainstorm sensory details you might use to describe the setting of the teacher’s narrative. Be sure to use all the senses, if possible (sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell).
• With your partner, review the ways readers find out information about characters. Skim Paulsen’s piece again to determine which methods he uses.

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• With your class, you will now use your notes and your reading of the sample text to begin writing a narrative with an effective beginning, middle, and ending.

Activity 3: Writing a Narrative with a Partner’s Input

Prompt: Write a personal narrative that meets the requirements listed in the goal statement.

Generating Content

1. Revisit your brainstorming about topics you might write about and add any new ideas for topics. Briefly, tell your partner the story; work together to choose a story for each of you to write. Use the reporter’s questions to ask your partner about the story to help you remember the important details.

2. On separate paper, jot down a brief description of the characters involved. Brainstorm sensory images to make the setting seem vivid to your reader.
3. Plan the structure of your narrative, identifying the beginning, middle, and end of the sequence of events. You should try to remember the incident as clearly as you can, but you might find that there are gaps in your memory. List others who were there and might be able to fill in gaps, and make a plan to ask them for information.

Drafting and Refining an Opening

4. Use Paulsen’s sample and your class-constructed model to help you draft an opening that tells when and where the incident takes place. Remember to use sensory details to describe the setting.

5. Participate in sharing and responding to refine your opening.

Drafting and Refining the Sequence of Events

6. Use your prewriting to help you draft the narrative, telling the events in chronological order, from the beginning, to the middle, to the end. Remember to describe how you felt at key moments.

7. Participate in sharing and responding to refine your telling of the incident.

Revising by Adding Characterization

8. Determine what additional methods of characterization would be useful to help your reader get to know the characters in your narrative. Consider using direct and/or indirect quotations. Use the characterization graphic organizer to think about what you have used and what more you might include.

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Drafting and Refining a Conclusion

9. Reread your narrative and consider how you can express:
   • The reasons for actions.
   • The importance or consequence of actions.

10. Draft a conclusion that comes to a satisfying closing. Note that a satisfying closing does not necessarily mean a happy ending.

11. Participate in sharing and responding to refine your conclusion.

Reflecting and Publishing

12. Use the writer’s checklist and feedback from your partner to make sure that you have included the essential elements of a narrative, and revise as needed.

13. Use available resources as you edit your narrative and prepare it for publication.

Activity 4: Independent Writing

Prompt: Write a personal narrative on an incident of your choice that has a clear focus and that communicates the reasons for actions and the importance of consequences.
**Writing Workshop 4  •  Personal Narrative**

**SCORING GUIDE**

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<th>Exemplary</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
<th>Emerging</th>
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| Development of Ideas   | The composition • tells a focused story about a meaningful personal experience  
|                        | • uses narrative techniques such as dialogue, pacing, and description to effectively tell the story  
|                        | • provides thoughtful reflection on the importance of the experience.       | The composition • tells a generally focused story about a personal experience  
|                        |                                                                          | • uses narrative techniques to tell the story  
|                        |                                                                          | • reflects on the importance of the experience.                           | The composition • tells an unfocused story about an experience  
|                        |                                                                          | • contains little or no use of narrative techniques                      | • contains limited or no reflection.                                     |
| Organizational       | The composition • provides a creative introduction to the characters  
| Structure             |                                                                          | • uses a variety of transitions to connect events and signal shifts in setting or time  
|                        |                                                                          | • provides an ending that naturally follows from the experience.          | The composition • contains a beginning that is unclear and/or does not directly relate to the story  
|                        |                                                                          | • presents disconnected ideas and limited use of transitions               | • provides a minimal conclusion.                                        |
| Use of Language       | The composition • uses sensory language to make the story vivid  
|                      |                                                                          | • uses a variety of sentence structures to enhance the story               | The composition • uses sensory language ineffectively or not at all  
|                      |                                                                          | • uses precise words and phrases to enhance the story                      | • shows little or no variety in sentence structure  
|                      |                                                                          | • shows control of punctuation, grammar, capitalization, and spelling.    | • contains words and phrases that are repetitive and/or unclear  
| Writing Process       | The composition reflects evidence of thoughtful planning, significant revision, and technical command in editing to produce a draft ready for publication. | The composition reflects evidence of planning, revision, and editing to produce a draft ready for publication. | The composition reflects minimal evidence of planning, revision, and editing; the essay is not ready for publication because it lacks clarity and coherence. |