

## Personal Narrative

### Exemplar Openings

The beginning paragraphs of these three narratives showcase how fabulously diverse this genre is... no five paragraph essays here! In addition to their particular tone and flavor, what makes these openings so special is how each line builds toward the story to come—each word is doing important work! We've included notes in the margins that comment on the behind-the-scenes decisions that (we imagine) went into the writing process.

#### I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

By Maya Angelou

When I was three and Bailey four, we had arrived in the musty little town, wearing tags on our wrists which instructed—"to Whom It May Concern"—that we were Marguerite and Bailey Johnson Jr., from Long Beach California, en route to Stamps, Arkansas, c/o Mrs. Annie Henderson.

Our Parents had decided to put an end to their calamitous marriage, and Father shipped us home to his mother. A porter had been charged with our welfare—he got off the train the next day in Arizona—and our tickets were pinned to my brother's inside coat pocket.

I don't remember much of the trip, but after we reached the segregated southern part of the journey, things must have looked up. Negro passengers, who always traveled with loaded lunchboxes, felt sorry for "the poor little motherless darlings" and plied us with cold fried chicken and potato salad.

Years later I discovered that the United States had been crossed thousands of times by frightened Black children traveling alone to their newly affluent parents in Northern cities, or back to grandmothers in Southern towns when the urban north reneged on its economic promises.

The town reacted to us as its inhabitants had reacted to all things new before our coming. It regarded us a while without curiosity but with caution, and after we were seen to be harmless (and children) it closed in around us, as a real mother embraces a stranger's child. Warmly, but not too familiarly.

Two young children traveling across the country ALONE. What a way to pull the reader into the story!

This line turns the reader's expectation on its head, piquing curiosity: "segregation" is a word loaded with dark suggestion, and yet here it brings about something positive.

Specific details allow the reader to experience this, too.

Jumping forward in time for this short paragraph sets her experience in a broader, more universal, context.

The suggestion embedded in here: How will the narrator find her sense of belonging here in this unfamiliar land?

## A Long Way Gone

Ishamel Beah

There were all kinds of stories told about the war that made it sound as if it was happening in a faraway and different land. It wasn't until refugees started passing through our town that we began to see that it was actually taking place in our country. Families who had walked hundreds of miles told how relatives had been killed and their houses burned. Some people felt sorry for them and offered them places to stay, but most of the refugees refused, because they said the war would eventually reach our town. The children of these families wouldn't look at us, and they jumped at the sound of chopping wood or as stones landed on the tin roofs flung by children hunting birds with slingshots. The adults among these children from the war zones would be lost in their thoughts during conversations with the elders of my town. Apart from their fatigue and malnourishment, it was evident they had seen something that plagued their minds, something that we would refuse to accept if they told us all of it. At times I thought that some of the stories the passersby told were exaggerated. The only wars I knew of were those that I had read about in books or seen in movies such as Rambo: First Blood, and the one in neighboring Liberia that I had heard about on the BBC news. My imagination at ten years old didn't have the capacity to grasp what had taken away the happiness of the refugees.

The first time that I was touched by war I was twelve. It was in January of 1993. I left home with Junior, my older brother, and our friend Talloi, both a year older than I, to go to the town of Mattru Jong, to participate in our friends' talent show.

This one line accomplishes two things.

- 1) Establishes connection: Most readers would feel the same way—"How could war come here to my home?"
- 2) Instills a sense of dread: Uh oh, this can't be good; war is on its way.

Concrete details that portray both the vibrant life of the village AND the trauma inside the children.

As readers, we share this feeling: there is much more beneath the surface of this paragraph.

Comment: Again, this line establishes a universality: Most readers can relate to the familiar occurrence of a talent show, which places the dark onset of war in stark relief for all.

## Tracks

By Robyn Davidson

I arrive in the Alice at five a.m. with a dog, six dollars, and a small suitcase full of inappropriate clothes. 'Bring a cardigan for the evenings,' the brochure said. A freezing wind whipped grit down the platform as I stood shivering, holding warm dog flesh, and wondering what foolishness had brought me to this eerie, empty train station in the centre of nowhere. I turned against the wind, and saw the line of mountains at the edge of town.

There are some moments in life that are like pivots around which your existence turns—small intuitive flashes, when you know you have done something correct for a change, when you think you are on the right track. I watched a pale dawn streak the cliffs with Day-glo and realized this was one of them. It was a moment of pure, uncomplicated confidence—and lasted about ten seconds.

These opening details reel the reader right into the scene, implanting the question: "How did she get there?!"

And this invites the reader in further, offering sensory details that plant you on the train platform beside Davidson, on the brink of adventure.

Perhaps this is the CENTRAL question—the one which will drive the narrative. What was she searching for and why?

Stepping back with this reflection sets up what's to come, compelling the reader to pay attention, and building their investment in the narrative.