

Personal Narrative Writing Guide

Module 2.4 · Advocacy Academy · Steampunk Farms

The Personal Narrative Formula

Your story answers five questions:

1. **Where was I?** — Scene. Ground the listener in a specific place and time.
2. **What did I believe before?** — Value + the old assumption.
3. **What happened that cracked it open?** — Tension + the turn.
4. **What do I understand now?** — Realization (arrived at, not announced).
5. **What am I asking you to consider?** — Next Step (one doable thing).

Four Common Pitfalls

The Origin Dump: Telling your entire life story instead of one focused moment. Your listener needs one scene, not a biography.

The Convert's Zeal: "I saw the truth and now I know better." This implies the listener is wrong. Reframe: "I learned something that surprised me."

The Missing Listener: Writing for people who already agree. Test: would your target listener still be reading at paragraph three?

The Lecture Ending: "And that's why everyone should..." If the story did its job, the listener draws the conclusion. End with an invitation, not a verdict.

The Dignity Check

Run every paragraph through these questions:

- If my target listener read this, would they feel **invited** or lectured?
- Does my story make the listener feel stupid for not already knowing this?
- Does it offer a path they can walk with **dignity** — or demand identity abandonment?
- If I read this aloud to that person, would they nod — or walk away?

A story that fails the Dignity Check activates resistance instead of reducing it. Every persuasion mechanism depends on the listener staying open.

The Mechanism Check

- **Transportation:** Can a reader close their eyes and be in your scene? Sensory detail?
- **Identification:** Can your target listener see themselves in this situation or these values?
- **Emotional Arousal:** Does the story evoke a specific, identifiable emotion?
- **Reduced Counter-Arguing:** Does the point arrive through experience — or get announced?

Craft Reminders

- **Rhythm:** Vary sentence length. Short at the turn. Longer for reflection. (Module 2.2)

- **Sensory detail:** Rule of Two — two senses per scene, no more. (Module 2.2)
- **The turn:** 2–3 sentences max. An experience, not an argument. Short, specific. (Module 2.3)
- **Values:** Lead with the listener's values, not yours. Same cause, different entry. (Module 2.3)
- **The ask:** One. Doable. Dignified. So small that saying no feels harder than saying yes.