

The Things They Carried

Personal Narrative Assignment

“The literal truth is ultimately, to me, irrelevant. What matters to me is the heart-truth.....what matters is what happens in our hearts. A good lie, if nobly told, for good reason, seems to me preferable to a very boring and pedestrian truth, which can lie, too.”

-Tim O'Brien

Tim O'Brien tells the stories of the things men carried in Vietnam. He tells these stories because “stories can save us” (225). For O'Brien his stories “were exaggerated, or blatant lies, but [they are] a way to bring body and soul back together” (239).

A true war story is not about the “happening truth” but the “emotional truth.” Sometimes fiction can actually feel more true to life than an account of the simple facts. Consider a strong emotion that you have felt about something in your life. Write a fictionalized personal narrative essay using a powerful image or event that possibly never happened, but represents or expresses the emotions you felt in the real moment. In some ways, this is like a tall tale, where you exaggerate or alter the truth to help your reader understand what it really felt like, since they weren't there and can't understand the truth.

For example, Tim O'Brien grappled with feelings of guilt, fear, and indecision when he got his draft notice. He never actually went to the Tip Top Lodge, never met an older man named Elroy, and never actually took a boat to the Canadian border. However, this story expresses the emotions he felt in a more realistic way than just saying he felt guilty, afraid, and couldn't decide what to do. It's no longer a “you had to be there” moment that we'll never understand. By telling this fictional “true war story,” we're able to feel these things like he did.

In this personal narrative essay (~500-650 words), you need to do all of the following:

- Have an epiphany, or revelation, of something personal about yourself
- Show rather than tell or explain
- Use concrete details
- Reflect

Consider one of the following prompts for your personal narrative essay:

- **Choices:** In “Rainy River” O'Brien has difficult choices to make. He does not know whether to follow his moral convictions to go to Canada or whether to go home to avoid embarrassment. Write about a time when you faced a decision. How has this decision affected who you are?
- **Tests:** In various stories characters are tested physically, mentally, and emotionally. For example, O'Brien chooses not to shake a dead man's hand. When have you faced a test of character? How has this test affected who you are?
- **Burdens:** “The Things They Carry” outlines the objects the men carry; some objects are military issued and others are personal. He delineates the weight of all these items in this story and then elaborates on the personal items in later chapters. What objects do you carry physically, mentally, and emotionally? How do these things affect who you are?

Narrative Writing (W 11-12.3)			
Exposition (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.A) Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.			
10	8	6	4 0
Exposition artfully engages and orients the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishes point of view, and introduces characters.	Exposition engages and orients the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishes point of view, and introduces characters.	Exposition sets out a problem, situation, or observation, establishes point of view, and introduces characters.	Exposition does not establish setting or point of view.
Narrative Techniques (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.B) Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.C Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome (e.g., a sense of mystery, suspense, growth, or resolution).			
10	8	6	4 0
Plot/sequencing, pacing, and dialogue, as well as commentary, is fully developed to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome.	Plot/sequencing, as well as commentary, is developed to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome.	Plot/sequencing, as well as commentary, is somewhat developed to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome.	Plot/sequencing is confusing.
Language (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.D) Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.			
10	8	6	4 0
Uses precise words and phrases, telling details, lush description, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.	Uses words, phrases, details, and sensory language to convey a coherent picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.	Words, phrases, and details used sometimes create a coherent picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters	Words, phrases, and details do not create a coherent picture of experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.
Mechanics/Syntax/Grammar (CCSS.ELA-LIT.W.11-12.1.D) Norms and conventions of the discipline: follow the standard rules of punctuation, capitalization, spelling and grammar			
10	8	6	4 0
The writing is error free.	Grammar and punctuation errors are few. The reader is not distracted by the errors.	There are a number of distracting grammar and punctuation errors that confuse the reader.	Frequent errors make it incomprehensible.
Resolution (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.E) Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.			
10	8	6	4 0
Provides a conclusion that artfully follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.	Provides a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.	Conclusion/resolution is present, but does not fully reflect on what is experienced, observed over the course of the narrative.	Conclusion/resolution not present.