Analyzing Writing Strategies: Narration and Action

1. Read the following passage, from Axelrod and Cooper’s *The St. Martin’s Guide to Writing* 6th ed.:

When you write about remembered events in your life, you write autobiography, a popular genre of writing. Autobiography is so popular because reading as well as writing it leads people to reflect deeply on their own lives. When you reflect on the meaning of experience, you examine the forces within yourself and within society that have shaped you into the person you have become.

When you write about a remembered event, your purpose is to present yourself to readers by telling a story that discloses something significant about your life. Autobiographical writers do not just pour out their memories and feelings. Instead they shape those memories into a compelling story that conveys the meaning and importance of an experience—what can be called its autobiographical significance.

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In addition to the autobiographical significance, remembered event essays also contain all of the following:

- An entertaining story
- Vivid details that make events, people, and places memorable
- Self-presentation, but not unwanted self-disclosure

2. Think about situations in other courses, on the job, and in your life when you might have to write such a paper. Write these on a separate sheet of paper.

3. Now is a good time to stop and review your responses with an instructor or tutor. Take this time to ask the instructor or tutor any questions you may have about narratives.

Instructor name

Date
Once you are ready to continue, go on to #4.

4. Now, read “On Being a Real Westerner” by Tobias Wolff attached here. This essay is an example of a narrative.

The following activity also comes from *The St. Martin’s Guide to Writing* 6th edition.

5. Good stories show people in action—what we call specific narrative action—people moving or gesturing. Analyze paragraphs 7 and 9 by underlining the narrative actions and then putting brackets around the verbs that specifically name the action.

6. Now that you have completed this analysis, how do you think specific narrative action contributes to autobiographical stories? Respond to this on a separate sheet.

7. Review your work with an instructor or tutor in the WRC, and ask any additional questions you may have about the use of description and detailing in narratives. Then, have that person sign and date this sheet.

8. Return this completed, signed sheet to your instructor.
Tobias Wolff is probably best known for his short stories and for a novel, The Barracks Thief, for which he won the 1985 PEN/Faulkner Award. Wolff has also written two autobiographical works, In Pharaoh’s Army (1996) and A Boy’s Life (1989), which was made into a movie in 1993 and from which “On Being a Real Westerner” comes. Reflecting on his writing process, Wolff has said that it is “part memory, part invention. I can no longer tell where one ends and the other begins. The very act of writing has transformed the original experience into another experience, more ‘real’ to me than what I started with.”

The story Wolff tells here is based on an actual experience that occurred when he was ten years old. He and his mother had just moved west from Florida to Salt Lake City, followed by Roy, his divorced mother’s boyfriend. “Roy was handsome,” Wolff writes, “in the conventional way that appeals to boys. He had a tattoo. He’d been to war and kept a silence about it that was full of heroic implication.” As you read, notice how Wolff’s storytelling skills help you imagine what happened.

On Being a Real Westerner

Tobias Wolff

Just after Easter Roy gave me the Winchester .22 rifle I’d learned to shoot with. It was a light, pump-action, beautifully balanced piece with a walnut stock black from all its oilings. Roy had carried it when he was a boy and it was still as good as new. Better than new. The action was silky from long use, and the wood of a quality no longer to be found.

The gift did not come as a surprise. Roy was stingy, and slow to take a hint, but I’d put him under siege. I had my heart set on that rifle. A weapon was the first condition of self-sufficiency, and of being a real Westerner, and of all acceptable employment—trapping, riding herd, soldiering, law enforcement, and outlawry. I needed that rifle, for itself and for the way it completed me when I held it.

My mother said I couldn’t have it. Absolutely not. Roy took the rifle back but promised me he’d bring her around. He could not imagine anyone refusing him anything and treated the refusals he did encounter as perverse and insincere. Normally mute, he became at these times a relentless whiner. He would follow my mother from room to room, emitting one ceaseless note of complaint that was pitched perfectly to jelly her nerves and bring her to a state where she would agree to anything to make it stop.

After a few days of this my mother caved in. She said I could have the rifle if, and only if, I promised never to take it out or even touch it except when she and Roy were with me. Okay, I said. Sure. Naturally. But even then she wasn’t satisfied. She plain didn’t like the fact of me owning a rifle. Roy said he had owned several rifles by the time he was my age, but this did not reassure her. She didn’t think I could be trusted with it. Roy said now was the time to find out.
For a week or so I kept my promises. But now that the weather had turned warm, Roy was usually off somewhere and eventually, in the dead hours after school when I found myself alone in the apartment, I decided that there couldn't be any harm in taking the rifle out to clean it. Only to clean it, nothing more. I was sure it would be enough just to break it down, oil it, rub linseed into the stock, polish the octagonal barrel and then hold it up to the light to confirm the perfection of the bore. But it wasn't enough. From cleaning the rifle I went to marching around the apartment with it, and then to striking brave poses in front of the mirror. Roy had saved one of his army uniforms and I sometimes dressed up in this, together with martial-looking articles of hunting gear: fur trooper's hat, camouflage coat, boots that reached nearly to my knees.

The camouflage coat made me feel like a sniper, and before long I began to act like one. I set up a nest on the couch by the front window. I drew the shades to darken the apartment, and took up my position. Nudging the shade aside with the rifle barrel, I followed people in my sights as they walked or drove along the street. At first I made shooting sounds—kyoo! kyoo! Then I started cooing the hammer and letting it snap down.

Roy stored his ammunition in a metal box he kept hidden in the closet. As with everything else hidden in the apartment, I knew exactly where to find it. There was a layer of loose .22 rounds on the bottom of the box under shells of bigger caliber, dropped there by the handful the way men drop pennies on their dressers at night. I took some and put them in a hiding place of my own. With these I started loading up the rifle. Hammer cocked, a round in the chamber, finger resting lightly on the trigger, I drew a bead on whoever walked by—women pushing strollers, children, garbage collectors laughing and calling to each other, anyone—and as they passed under my window I sometimes had to bite my lip to keep from laughing in the ecstasy of my power over them, and at their absurd and innocent belief that they were safe.

But over time the innocence I laughed at began to irritate me. It was a peculiar kind of irritation. I saw it years later in men I served with, and felt it myself, when unarmored Vietnamese civilians talked back to us while we were herding them around. Power can be enjoyed only when it is recognized and feared. Fearlessness in those without power is maddening to those who have it.

One afternoon I pulled the trigger. I had been aiming at two old people, a man and a woman, who walked so slowly that by the time they turned the corner at the bottom of the hill my little store of self-control was exhausted. I had to shoot. I looked up and down the street. It was empty. Nothing moved but a pair of squirrels chasing each other back and forth on the telephone wires. I followed one in my sight. Finally it stopped for a moment and I fired. The squirrel dropped straight into the road. I pulled back into the shadows and waited for something to happen, sure that someone must have heard the shot or seen the squirrel fall. But the sound that was so loud to me probably seemed to our neighbors no more than the bang of a cupboard slammed shut. After a while I sneaked a glance into the street. The squirrel hadn't moved. It looked like a scarf someone had dropped.

When my mother got home from work I told her there was a dead squirrel in the street. Like me, she was an animal lover. She took a cellophane bag off a loaf of bread and we went outside and looked at the squirrel. "Poor little thing," she said. She stuck
her hand in the wrapper and picked up the squirrel, then pulled the bag inside out away from her hand. We buried it behind our building under a cross made of popsicle sticks, and I blubbered the whole time.

I blubbered again in bed that night. At last I got out of bed and knelt down and did an imitation of somebody praying, and then I did an imitation of somebody receiving divine reassurance and inspiration. I stopped crying. I smiled to myself and forced a feeling of warmth into my chest. Then I climbed back in bed and looked up at the ceiling with a blissful expression until I went to sleep.

For several days I stayed away from the apartment at times when I knew I'd be alone there.

Though I avoided the apartment, I could not shake the idea that sooner or later I would get the rifle out again. All my images of myself as I wished to be were images of myself armed. Because I did not know who I was, any image of myself, no matter how grotesque, had power over me. This much I understand now. But the man can give no help to the boy, not in this matter nor in those that follow. The boy moves always out of reach.