

# 1 REFLECTING ON LITERACY IDENTITIES THROUGH WRITING PERSONAL NARRATIVES

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## OVERVIEW

In this chapter, I offer an approach to teaching literacy narratives, which encourage students to reflect critically on their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> I interweave examples from literacy narratives written by three of my first-year writing students in Saudi Arabia. By examining the ways students' stories reverberate across multicultural dimensions, I recontextualize Stewart's essay "Weaving Personal Experience into Academic Writings" and Chaudhuri and Bhowmik's "Literacy Autobiography" assignment for a global, multilingual context. I conclude by sharing guidance for writing a literacy narrative that examines the complex ways literacy becomes interwoven with identity.

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## INTRODUCTION: REFLECTING ON YOUR STORY

**W**hat stories have shaped you into who you are today? Why are these moments significant to you, and what lessons or insights have you learned from your experiences? One way to explore your own stories is to write a literacy narrative, a reflection on the ways literacy — including reading, writing, speaking, listening, and other forms

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of communication — has influenced your development as a reader, writer, or communicator. You can think of *reflection* as a looking within — a peering deeply into yourself, your pasts, presents, and futures. In writing a literacy narrative, you might reflect on your experiences with language and literacy within the context of your identity and community. You might consider how you express yourself differently across various languages and cultures. As Chaudhuri and Bhowmik suggest in their “Literacy Autobiography” assignment published in the *Writing Spaces Assignment and Activity Archive*, you could consider questions such as “...how do [you] communicate as part of specific groups, what identities do [you] associate with, what language(s)/dialects do [you] use and how do [you] move between linguistic or cultural differences?” In your narrative, you could draw from your experiences “as part of diverse social, cultural and or linguistic communities” (Chaudhuri and Bhowmik).

In this chapter, I share excerpts from literacy narratives written by three of my first-year writing students in Saudi Arabia. In the narratives, the students reflect critically on their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, illustrating the complex ways literacy becomes interwoven with identity. By re-examining their encounters with new languages and cultures, the students come to deeper understandings of their literacy and cultural heritages and identities.

As you reflect on your literacy journey, you could write about an experience that:

- relates how particular words, phrases, or languages have affected your life.
- explores your connection with your cultural heritage.
- reveals insights into the connections between literacy and identity.

## EXAMPLES OF STUDENT-WRITTEN LITERACY NARRATIVES

### *Relate How Particular Words, Phrases, or Languages Have Affected Your Life*

In reflecting on your experiences with language and literacy, you might consider: Are there particular words or phrases that are meaningful to you or that have taught you valuable lessons? In her narrative “Lost in Translation: The Tale of Mispronounced Water at Starbucks,” Jlenar relates a memory of ordering water with her mother at a Starbucks in upstate New York, where she was living in third grade. As Jlenar recalls, her mother pronounced the word *water* “with a complex *t* sound rather than the softer

*d* sound often in the U.S.” While her mother’s pronunciation did not stand out to Jlenar, the barista couldn’t understand her mother’s request. As Jlenar explains, this seemingly small moment exposed misconceptions about Arabic speakers in the post-9/11 U.S. As Jlenar writes,

One little letter could make such a big difference... I would appreciate it if there were some way to express the same understanding and grace to people who are different from ourselves just as those who are more similar. Looking back now, I have had a bigger and deeper understanding that small interactions like these are often overlooked and I have since attempted to understand those who are different from myself as best as I can. I try to show compassion, empathy, and patience to others instead of frowning upon them or simply giving up on them and truly understand what message they are trying to say.

Jlenar sheds light on the way a single moment, a single letter, a single sound carries broader significance in illustrating linguistic and cultural differences. As Jlenar describes, this moment of misunderstanding reveals a need for greater understanding across cultures and languages. Jlenar’s ideas resonate with Amy Tan’s essay “Mother Tongue,” an essay I read with my first-year writing students. In the essay, Tan, an American writer of Chinese descent, explores her linguistic and cultural heritage through her relationship with her mother. Tan describes the ways others mistakenly perceived her mother’s English as “broken” or “limited,” yet Tan comes to appreciate her mother’s rich linguistic expression. As Tan relates, her mother’s speech is “perfectly clear, perfectly natural”: “It’s my mother tongue. Her language, as I hear it, is vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery. That was the language that helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world.”

As Tan writes, language, with its “observation and imagery,” can shape our experience, altering the ways we perceive the world. Like Tan, Jlenar gives voice to the sounds of her mother tongue, Arabic, while imbuing her experience with a new resonance: Jlenar expresses the way a moment of misunderstanding inspired a shift in her perspective, expanding her sense of empathy across differences. Jlenar’s story of a word “lost in translation,” like Hala’s narrative below, highlights the importance of representation, of opening spaces for the rich languages and literatures that comprise the Arabic-speaking world.

*Explore Your Connection with Your Cultural Heritage*

In considering your literacy journey, you could explore the ways your culture has influenced your identity. In her narrative “Retrieving Literature,” Hala relates how she grew up speaking her mother tongue, Arabic, and reading Arabic books. Then, she transferred to an international school in seventh grade, when she began reading more books written in English. As Hala writes, “I had this stance that Arab writers did not have the creativity to write captivating topics in a compelling style.” However, while studying abroad in Turkey, a place with an unfamiliar language and culture, Hala “longed for something that reminded [her] of home” and returned to Arabic books. In particular, Hala reflects on reading a book called *To Stay* by Khawla Hamdi, a Tunisian-born Arabic-language author. *To Stay* explores the challenges Muslim immigrants face while living in Europe and navigating dual identities. Hala describes the way she resonated with the Tunisian main character’s experiences searching for opportunities in France — with “the inability to use my mother tongue in daily life, the vast difference in culture, with the sense of never belonging.” Hala’s experience reflects “the idea that a sense of belonging is challenged by the straddling of cultures” (Noor Brara); that is, while living in an unfamiliar environment away from our own customs and cultures, we may struggle to find a sense of belonging. Yet while reading *To Stay*, Hala could see herself and her experiences reflected in the story of a character navigating a new culture and language.

Hala describes how reading *To Stay* inspired a shift in her perception of literature: as Hala expresses, differences between Arabic and English literature transcend language to encompass a “difference in cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, and contrasting traditions.” Rediscovering Arabic literature inspired Hala to realize the extent to which our cultures shape our unique perspectives, beliefs, and identities. As Hala writes,

It is origins, traditions, and culture that makes every individual vastly different from the other. It is the reason opposite opinions exist, contrasting beliefs form and distinctive personalities are observed. While exploring other forms of literature gives an amazing insight into different perspectives, one should appreciate their origin’s literature alongside their journey of exploration.

In reflecting on her experiences navigating diverse languages and cultures, Hala articulates the ways she came to recognize the richness and uniqueness of her own literary and cultural heritage. Hala’s narrative conveys in-

sights into the ways our cultures shape how we perceive the world and express ourselves through literature and language.

*Reveal Insights into the Connections between Literacy and Identity*

Like Hala and Jlenar, HFB expresses the ways our linguistic and cultural identities are intertwined. HFB's narrative, "Life's Game of Tug of War," opens by describing a moment of transition – her migration from Saudi Arabia to Canada. HFB recounts the way she gradually lost touch with her culture and community as she adapted to new cultures and customs. Sensing that the threads of her identity were "slipping away," HFB relates how she sought to "reconnect the ties I held so close to my heart and identity," navigating between her home environment and an unfamiliar one. In stitching together the threads of her heritage, HFB recounts how she made efforts to reconnect with Arabic by taking Arabic classes and reading stories in Arabic. In returning to her language, she could return to herself, to her stories. At the same time, she adapted to Canadian culture by learning French and developing a knowledge of francophone culture. HFB writes,

My life came full circle when our time in Canada was over. I thought I would reunite with my old life in the Middle East. But... "We're moving to the United States," my parents announced. I was 16 this time around, but time was repeating itself. Will I lose myself along the way again? At this point in my life I was acquainted with change, but it wasn't easy getting there. I did, however, know that I wasn't afraid anymore. I wouldn't let change steal precious moments of my life, not like last time. It is vital to adapt to new environments by integrating the new aspects of life into your identity, allowing it to be a means of growth instead of transformation. Through my experiences, I was able to learn the importance of maintaining literacy in my mother tongue, while also branching out and learning about new cultures and languages.

In her reflection, HFB articulates the way she came to a new understanding of her literacy identity: by integrating new facets into her identity while preserving literacy in her mother tongue, she could remain true to herself while opening spaces for new knowledge and experiences. As this reflection illustrates, a conclusion can not only bring a story to close but can invite new questions. Even as we come full circle, our circle expands, opening outward into new possibilities for growth as expand our sense of ourselves in relation to our communities and cultures.

## REFLECTIONS ON REFLECTIONS: ILLUMINATING THE INTERTWINING OF LITERACY AND IDENTITY

Reverberating across multicultural dimensions, the students' narratives illustrate the ways literacy and identity are intricately interwoven, intertwining with cultural heritage. Traversing the boundaries of cultures, the students come to new understandings of their linguistic and cultural heritages and identities. Jlenar encourages empathy across cultural differences, inspiring others to "express the same understanding and grace to people who are different from ourselves just as those who are more similar." Hala realizes the importance of representing and appreciating one's "origin's literature alongside their journey of exploration." HFB shares insights into the ways she strives to preserve her own cultural identity while "branching out and learning about new cultures and languages." The students each express the ways they reconnected with their unique cultural and linguistic heritage while opening new avenues for growth and understanding. Reflecting on one's literacy identities thus involves a process of negotiation between the self and the surroundings. To encounter a new book, language, place, or culture is to weave a distinct thread of fabric into an intricate tapestry of languages and literacies. In a layered unraveling of oneself and one's stories, the students come to deeper realizations through reflection, fusing past and present, memory and imagination. To *reflect* is thus to unravel deeper layers of meaning and revelation.

### CONCLUSION: CRAFTING YOUR LITERACY NARRATIVE

Now that you have seen a few examples of student-written literacy narratives, you can begin reflecting on your own story. As you begin to craft your story, you could consider questions such as: What languages or cultures have you encountered? How do you express yourself differently in different languages or cultures? Which books or stories have been particularly meaningful for you, and why? Which moments or memories have shaped your own story? In reflecting more broadly on the lessons you have learned from your experiences, you could contemplate questions such as: What new insights or understandings have you gained about literacy, language, or culture? In what ways have your experiences shaped your perspective of literacy?

As you tease apart one thread in the fabric of your story, you can offer readers a glimpse into the experiences that have shaped you into who you are. By reflecting on your journey, you can explore more deeply the in-

tertwinning of your linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In writing your narrative, you might come to new insights into the ways your languages and cultures have shaped your literacy identity. In the process, you might discover something new or surprising about yourself and the stories that have shaped you into who you are today. In creating spaces for our stories, we create spaces for ourselves.

## STEPS TOWARD WRITING A LITERACY NARRATIVE

1. To help you start thinking of ideas for a literacy narrative, you could write about a memory related to literacy. For example, you could describe your first memory of reading. What was the first book you read? What details about this memory do you remember? Why is this memory important to you?
2. Brainstorm an idea for your literacy narrative. Remember that the memory should relate with literacy (such as reading, writing, speaking, or learning a language, etc.). Explain why you chose to write about this experience. Reflect upon the larger meaning, lesson, or insight you gained from this experience. Remember to choose one experience or a series of experiences to focus on rather than retelling your life story.
3. Outline the structure of your narrative, including the *exposition* (introduction, background, and setting), *rising action* (details that build toward the central conflict), *conflict* or *climax* (the main external event or internal conflict/idea/issue), *falling action* (details that build toward the resolution), and *resolution* (insight and lesson gained from the experience). The elements of a narrative arc are described in more detail in the following section.
4. Write a draft of your literacy narrative. As you draft your narrative, consider how you would like to open your narrative and set the scene, immersing the reader in a particular memory. Think about how you would like to weave in specific moments or scenes that illustrate your experiences. You could think of these scenes as “showing”: using vivid description or action to enhance the narrative. In taking a step back from these moments, you can reflect on the lessons you learned from your experiences. You could think of these broader reflections as “telling.” In writing your narrative, inter-

weave “showing” (specific scenes that unfold in the moment) and “telling” (reflections on the broader insights and lessons learned).

5. After you write a draft, you could share your narrative with a peer or instructor and ask for their feedback. Based on the feedback you receive, revise and edit your narrative.
6. Once you have a polished draft, you might consider sharing your work with others or even publishing your narrative in a collection such as the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (daln.org).

### **CHARTING YOUR STORY: INCORPORATING THE ELEMENTS OF A NARRATIVE ARC**

As with many stories, a literacy narrative follows a narrative arc, including a beginning, middle, and end. More specifically, a literacy narrative typically includes an exposition, rising action, central conflict/climax, falling action, and resolution.

In the opening (or exposition), set the scene for your narrative, including a time and place. To immerse the reader in your story, you could incorporate figurative language such as imagery (vivid and descriptive language) and sensory details (language that appeals to the senses, including sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, e.g., “The plucking strings of the wooden oud and the omnipotent scent of Arabian incense flooded my grandma’s house”).

For the rising action, include details that build toward the central conflict or idea of your narrative. Include one or two events that put your narrative in motion and lead up to the main conflict or climax.

In the climax, describe the main external event or internal conflict or idea of your narrative. For example, you could detail a significant experience you have had with language or literacy, or you could recount an important choice, decision, or challenge you have had to face related with language or literacy.

For the falling action, include details that build toward the resolution. In this section, you could tie up loose ends and lead into a closing.

In the conclusion (and resolution), reflect on your experience and connect your experience to a larger theme or meaning. You could consider questions such as: In what ways has this experience with literacy (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, listening, or other forms of communication) shaped or influenced your life? What insights or lessons about language or literacy have you gained from this experience?



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## TEACHER RESOURCES FOR REFLECTING ON LITERACY IDENTITIES THROUGH WRITING PERSONAL NARRATIVES

### OVERVIEW AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

In this chapter, I offer an approach to writing literacy narratives, which encourage students to reflect critically on their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This assignment can be taught as part of a literacy narrative unit in a first-year writing class. To scaffold literacy narrative writing, teachers could engage students in writing journal entries that reflect on their language and literacy experiences, reviewing the elements of a narrative arc, brainstorming and outlining ideas for a literacy narrative, and discussing sample student-written literacy narratives.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does the word “literacy” mean to you? How do our experiences with literacy shape who we are?
2. In what ways might cultural heritage connect with language and literacy? In what ways do our languages and cultures enrich, deepen, or complicate our identities?
3. What themes emerge from the sample student-written literacy narratives? In what ways do the students reflect on the connections between their linguistic and cultural identities?
4. Are there any examples or moments from the narratives that resonate with you or inspire your thinking about literacy, language, or culture?
5. What books or stories have inspired your development as a reader, writer, or individual? Why do these stories resonate with you?
6. Which language(s) can you speak or write? How can language shape or alter the ways we express ourselves?

### PREWRITING ACTIVITY

1. Brainstorm an experience you would like to write about for your literacy narrative. Remember that the memory should relate with literacy (such as reading, writing, speaking, or learning a language, etc.). Explain why you chose to write about this experience. *(one paragraph, around 5 sentences)*
2. Reflect upon the larger meaning, lesson, or insight you gained from this experience. Your reflection will help you construct the narrative’s argument. *(one paragraph, around 5 sentences)*
3. Outline ideas for the structure of your narrative *(can be in bullet point or note form, one sentence for each element of the narrative arc):*

Table 1: Narrative structure

| Aspect of the Narrative   | Notes |
|---|-------|
| <b>Exposition:</b> introduction, background, and setting                        |       |
| <b>Rising action:</b> details that build toward the central conflict/idea/issue |       |
| <b>Conflict:</b> main external event or internal conflict/idea/issue            |       |
| <b>Falling action:</b> details that build toward the resolution                 |       |
| <b>Resolution:</b> insight and lesson learned from the experience               |       |

### ACTIVITY ON NOTICING WRITERS’ CHOICES IN SAMPLE LITERARY NARRATIVES

One way to teach the structure and style of a literacy narrative is to engage students in noticing writers’ choices in sample students literacy narratives.

Below are excerpts from students' narratives that illustrate ways to open and close a literacy narrative.

### EXAMPLE OF AN OPENING PARAGRAPH (LEENA)

I arrived at Istanbul Airport on a sunny summer day in July. I headed outside eager to see a place I had only seen on television and heard of in newspapers. I felt a sudden breeze of warm air. I was overwhelmed with the sounds of cars beeping, and tour guides calling for their clients' attention. "Çabuk lütfen," said the traffic police to the taxi drivers, which means "quickly please," as they blocked the way while they loaded the car with the passenger's luggage. We soon arrived at the hotel, where the concierge greeted us. "Welcome to Istanbul," he said...

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does the writer set up this scene?
2. Which sensory details do you notice (sight, sound, touch, smell, taste...)?
3. What examples of imagery (descriptive language) do you notice?

### EXAMPLE OF A CLOSING PARAGRAPH (MALAK)

My journey with *The Alchemist* was more than just a literary experience; it was a transformational change...*The Alchemist* unveiled the alchemy of literature, turning words into gold, and in doing so, it awakened a love for reading that I did not even know existed, a love that continues to enrich my life with every page turned and every story explored. *The Alchemist* holds a special place in my heart as the book that made me fall in love with reading, and I am forever grateful to it for the enduring passion it ignited within me.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What literacy experiences does the writer draw on?

2. How does the writer connect her experience to a larger lesson or meaning?

### **EXAMPLE OF A CLOSING PARAGRAPH (FARIS)**

Language is built not just on words but on expression and non-verbal communication... Language is just another tool to show expression of desires and thoughts, and since different perspectives give rise to different languages, it is important to have patience to harness this idea... [Language] transcends words; through appreciation of different ideals and perspectives and coming together as one to acknowledge these differences... Even things such as smiles, waves of hand and gestures help to build trust and rapport between the parties in communication and fulfill the primary purpose of language, even if the lexicons differ altogether.

### **QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION**

1. How does the writer define and explore the concept of literacy and language? Does the writer conceptualize language as a collection of words or as something more?