

Narrative Poetry

What is narrative poetry? Narrative Poetry is a poem that tells a series of events using poetic devices such as rhythm, rhyme, compact language, and attention to sound. In other words, a narrative poem tells a story, but it does it with poetic flair! Many of the same elements that are found in a short story are also found in a narrative poem. Here are some elements of narrative poetry that are important:

- character
- setting
- conflict
- plot

Read these examples:

Papa's Fishing Hole

I place my tiny hand in his
as we walk to Papa's Fishing Hole.
I hand him a wiggling night crawler
fighting for his life.
The deadly hook squishes
through the worm's head,
and I watch the brown guts ooze out.
Papa throws the pole's long arm back
and then forward.
The line lands in a merky spot
along the reedy shore.
Now I get to reel it in.
Nothing yet, he says.
He casts again. I reel it in.
Still nothing.

Three time's a charm, he says.
He casts.
A strike.
We turn the crank together.
The fish jumps from the water
and his colors form a rainbow
as he arches his body above the reeds.
My Papa handles him
with the skill of a master
as I stop helping to watch him work.
A stiff jerk, a quick reel, a stiff jerk again.
The fish doesn't have a chance, I yell.
I know. I know. I know, he says.

-Elisabeth D. Babin

Babin, Elisabeth D. "Papa's Fishing Hole." Tempest. Spring 1994. 27.

The Lie

Mother is in the hospital
for an operation
and Grandma Sanderson
has come to take care of us.
She's strict.
If I'm two minutes
late from play,
she grips my wrist tightly
and swings me to a chair
to think about it.
I skin my knee
and get a deep cut.
She looks worried.
"When you go to school,
ask the nurse what to do."
On the way home,
I remember I've forgotten.

I know this is more serious
than being late from play.
I imagine a spanking,
early to bed for a week,
or extra work on Saturday.
She asks me what the nurse said.
"Wash it very carefully
with soap and water,
dry it, put on vaseline
and then place a band-aid over the top."
(That's what Mother
would have said,
except she'd use
iodine which stings.)

-Donald Graves

Graves, Donald. "The Lie." Baseball, Snakes and Summer Squash. Honesdale: Boyds Mill Press, 1996. 43-44.

Choose **one** of the poems and answer the following:

Who are the characters in the poem?

What do you know about the speaker in the poem?

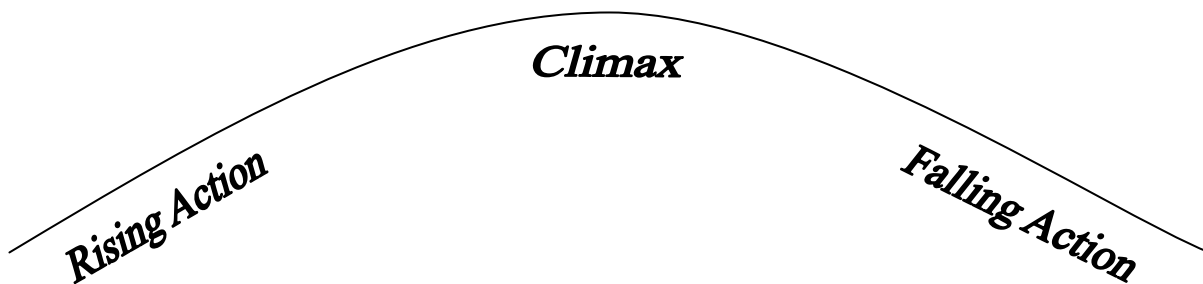
What character traits does each of the characters have? What evidence in the poem shows this?

What is the setting of the poem? (time and place)

What types of conflicts occur in the poem? (hint: there is more than one)

What is the mood of the poem?

Draw a small plot line. Tell what happens in the beginning, middle and end of the poem.



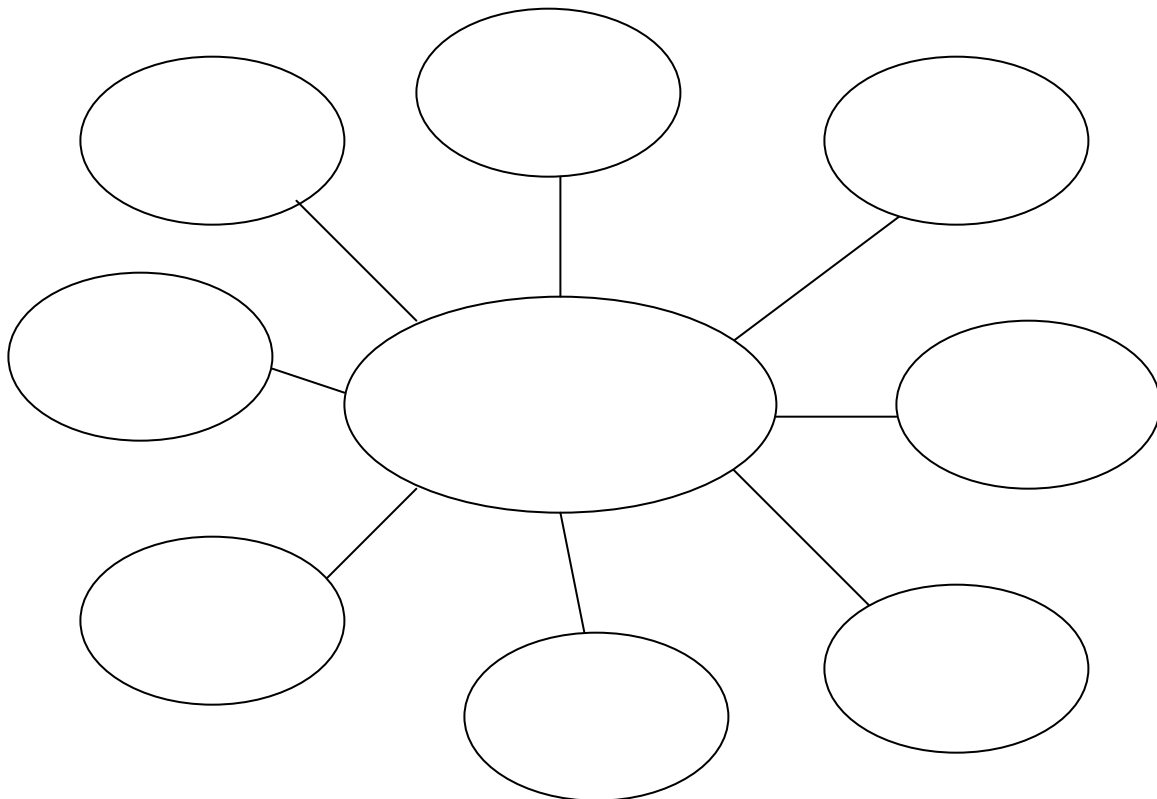
Writing narrative poetry

When writing narrative poetry a good place to start is with your own life's experiences. Choose experiences that can be captured in a snapshot. Do you have a favorite photograph of you playing baseball when you were 6 years old? Or, how about the funny picture on your first birthday with you face full of cake? Maybe you can remember funny moment from a special vacation, or a moment with a grandparent that is very memorable. Remember, these are moment in time—not the whole event. A poem (unless you are writing an epic poem) captures snapshots, not 5 hour academy award winning movies!

Brainstorm 5 different “snapshot” experiences that you may be able to write a narrative poem about.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

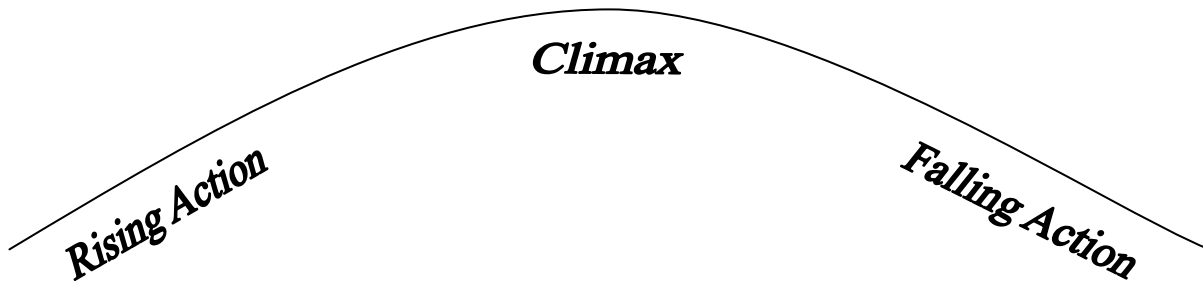
Next, gather sensory details about that experience. The best way I have found to do this is through clustering idea. Remember that not ALL the ideas need to be used in your poem, but don't leave hole in the poem that would prevent a reader from connecting to your poem.



Now that you have your images, choose character for your poem. What is he or she like? Who will be the speaker of the poem?

The next step, just like in when writing a short story is to determine the conflict. What are the inner and outer conflicts in the even that you have chosen? How is the conflict resolved?

To identify plot in you poem create your own plot line below.



Now, craft the lines of your poem. If it doesn't come together in the first draft, that's okay. Narrative poetry always takes a couple of drafts to get the spirit of the poem down on the page. Remember to include a wonderful title that adds to the meaning of your poem.