Recognizing the importance of narrative writing at the secondary level for all learners, the authors of the CCR Anchor Standards for Writing developed the following standard: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences. Narrative writing conveys “experience, either real or imaginary, and uses time as its deep structure. It can be used for many purposes, such as to inform, instruct, persuade, or entertain” and includes creative fictional stories, memoirs, anecdotes, and autobiographies (National Governors Association, Appendix A, p. 26). Furthermore, it increases students’ ability to write “visual details of scenes, objects, or people; to depict specific actions (e.g., movements, gestures, postures, and expressions); to use dialogue and interior monologue that provide insight into the narrator’s and characters’ personalities and motives; and to manipulate pace to highlight the significance of events and create tension and suspense” (CCSS, Appendix A, p. 23).

In addition to explaining the skills and knowledge pertinent to narrative writing that students are to master (CCSS, Appendix C), the CCSS clarify the ways teachers are to prioritize their instruction of narratives. Table 3.1 outlines the percentage of instructional time that teachers should devote to the teaching of narrative, informational, and argumentative writing in the upper grades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Narrative</th>
<th>Informational</th>
<th>Argumentative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Often overlooked is the very important footnote that the percentages reported in the table reflect the sum of students’ reading and writing across all disciplines, not just in ELA settings. As the table and footnote indicate, the CCSS mandate that teachers spend significant instructional time teaching narrative writing, which decreases in the upper grades, as students acquire the ability to produce narratives.

A key departure from earlier standards is the emphasis in the CCSS on the complex nature of narrative writing. In the CCSS documents, narrative writing becomes more formal and academic in the upper grades. Its language demands call on students “to communicate clearly to an external, sometimes unfamiliar audience” (Appendix A, p. 26), to produce numerous narratives “over short and extended time frames throughout the year” (Appendix A, p. 26), and to use complex language and rhetorical forms to convey meaning precisely and effectively.

**WHY PRIORITIZE NARRATIVE WRITING WITH ENGLISH LEARNERS?**

Narrative writing plays a critical role in the CCSS and has tremendous potential in helping ELs develop their English and succeed in ELA coursework in the secondary grades. At a particularly difficult time in their lives, when they might worry that their limited resources in English could conceal their cognitive abilities and capability of expressing themselves, narrative writing enables ELs to make use of their community knowledge and previous linguistic resources, including their knowledge of informal oral English, their first languages, and diverse varieties of English. It builds directly on what they know. It even allows them to evaluate their experiences in the United States, leading to the development of their personal identities and identities as writers (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Beyond this, it provides teachers with ways to inventory what ELs know about language and writing, build on student knowledge, and familiarize themselves with their students’ cultures, communities, and experiences.

Although the CCSS present narrative text after informational/expository and argumentative texts, we have reversed this order for these reasons: (1) to build on ELs’ existing knowledge of genres and text structures, previous knowledge, and linguistic resources; (2) to motivate them; (3) to provide a strong basis for their development of other types of writing; and (4) to contribute to their reading development and understanding of literature.
All students have ideas for stories that they have gained through their life experiences and are able to utilize their previous knowledge to develop narratives. As a number of researchers have pointed out, by the time children enter kindergarten, most students in the United States are familiar with narrative texts and are able to link real events to stories they have heard (see, e.g., Heath’s 1986 seminal article). Like monolingual English speakers, ELs often are highly familiar with narratives, since this text type often is presented to them through oral and written stories in their homes, schools, and communities (Schleppegrell, 2009). Narratives represent shared understandings of human experience and, as such, are a culture’s “coin and currency” (Bruner, 2003, p. 15), essential in communicating real-life experiences. Children engage in language play and fantasy talk, and they learn to interact with others, for example, jointly discussing toys, pictures, and activities. By the time they reach adolescence, they have gained a variety of narrative skills, which they have learned naturally in everyday communicative environments. Through their discussions, they have learned what appropriate topics are, how to stay on topic, how to give enough information to their audiences, and how to communicate acceptably, expressing themselves coherently (Snow & Beals, 2006).

Many other researchers also have emphasized the pivotal role of narratives in motivating students and building their confidence as writers. Hillocks (2007), for instance, argues that narrative writing is inherently interesting to learners since it allows them to write about meaningful experiences, reflect on them, bring these experiences into perspective, and learn from them. Teenagers, especially, use narratives to explore their own identities, the way they see themselves. Consequently, they are generally highly motivated to write about the stories of their own lives and the lives of others. Like Hillocks, expert education researcher Ann Mechem Ziergiebel (2013) argues, “Whether stories are read or written in school or out of school, students become engaged and motivated by just a turn of a phrase, a voice, an image, or a character, conflict, setting, or theme” (p. 140).

Narrative writing not only motivates students to write; it is the key to their progress in learning other types of writing, such as persuasive and report writing (see, e.g., Fredricksen, Wilhelm, & Smith, 2012). It helps students develop audience awareness, organizational skills, and the ability to select and use specific, concrete details, all of which are key in informational and argumentative writing. Narrative writing also helps students develop vocabulary,
morphology, and sentence structure, leading to improved sentence variety. It elicits a wide variety of linguistic features, including a full range of cohesive devices; complex noun phrases and descriptive clauses, phrases, and words; and verb tenses (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). These language features form a foundation for the development of other types of linguistic skills (Uccelli, Hemphill, Pan, & Snow, 2005). Ultimately, narrative writing contributes to students’ ability to read literature critically. As Hillocks (2007) points out, it allows them to “understand more fully how the works of professional writers are constructed” (p. 1) and identify from their reading the particular techniques that will be useful in their own writing.

All students, and particularly ELs, have much more difficulty learning to write informational and argumentative texts when they have not first learned to write narrative texts. They have, in the past, had limited exposure to informational and argumentative texts and limited opportunities to discuss and compose them. Also, they often do not identify with the topics of informational and argumentative texts and lack the personal experiences and background knowledge to relate to these topics to the same extent as they identify with the topics of narrative writing. Hence, we discuss informational and argumentative writing last, given the challenges these two types of texts present to both teachers and students.

THE LANGUAGE DEMANDS OF NARRATIVE WRITING

Narration, the telling of factual and imaginary stories, creates a clear picture in the readers’ minds of something that happens, with a setting, characterization, and plot. Short stories, personal essays and letters, diary entries, biographical works, and travelogues all contain narrative writing. Their basic purpose is to entertain, although they also may be written to teach, inform, or even change attitudes. When organizing narratives, writers generally include a title, as well as an introduction, in which the characters, setting, and time of the story are established; a body, in which the complication involving the main characters is conveyed; and a concluding section, in which the resolution of the complication is communicated.

Writers often begin their narratives with short, timeless phrases (Long ago in a far-off land), generic settings, and generic characters. They generally convey the events using either a chronological ordering or a series of flashbacks. Following the principle of “showing, not telling,” they evoke the five senses, provide dialogue, and describe events using multiple vivid examples to reveal theme,
plot, resolution, and characterization. They use a variety of sentence structures and may use hyperbole or deliberate exaggeration to make their writing dramatic or humorous. Although there are variations, most writers begin narratives with the present tense and switch to the past tense when describing the elements of stories and then back to the present tense when writing their conclusions. They generally avoid the passive voice, using action verbs like *scream*, *bounce*, and *speed* to show what is happening. The vocabulary varies greatly, but often includes emphatic words (cer-\textit{tainly}, *truly*, *definitely*) that convey certainty; onomatopoeic words, like *buzz*, with sounds imitating their meaning; and specific words (like *orchid*) instead of general words (like *flower*).

**CHALLENGES OF NARRATIVE WRITING FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS**

Many ELs and others have difficulty learning to write the types of formal, academic narratives required by the CCSS. They often acquire the ability to tell informal stories orally, and these types of stories give no indication of the relative timing of events. In contrast to these informal stories, academic ones provide adverbial time markers like *first*, *then*, or *next*, as well as adverbial time clauses that create complex relationships between events and indicate when events take place. Students’ informal narratives may contain unclear references, include irrelevant information, lack a central idea that unifies the text, and omit key components, such as the introduction or evaluative elements. They may lack the formal organization of narratives required in academic writing, and they may include vernacular forms of English grammar and learner English such as the use of adjacent words instead of possessive adjectives (like *John house* instead of *John’s house*). Learners may produce informal narratives largely because they have not yet been taught how to write academic ones and because they tend to use the language resources with which they are most familiar. Rather than penalize students for their lack of knowledge of the required features of academic narratives, it is a good idea to teach them these features and ways to incorporate informal language into the rich dialogues contained in their narratives.

Learning to incorporate dialogue is enormously challenging for ELs who may have entered U.S. schools at a grade level where it is assumed that they already know how to punctuate dialogue and incorporate it into their writing as a device to support ideas and add key information about stance, beliefs, facial expressions,
and actions. Learning to use indirect quotations (such as *John told him to run*) is one of the most difficult linguistic skills ELs need to learn, because in order to produce these indirect quotations they must be able to construct complex sentences with verb complements (like *to run*). These problems are confounded since ELs are still learning to adhere to English subject–verb agreement and verb tense consistency rules. Many ELs who have lived in the United States for many years delete third person -s forms, since this form does not exist in the dialect of English they have learned (Labov, 1972). Many also do not use verb tense endings such as the -ed ending on “talked.” Hence, when introducing quotations, they might write, “Today John yell come here,” deleting verb endings after *yell* and the required punctuation marks.

Particular challenges for ELs at the intermediate levels of English learning include understanding and following the principle of showing, not telling; using a variety of sentence structures, especially those with participles, prepositional phrases, and gerunds; switching between verb tenses; establishing cohesion (e.g., through transition words and other more subtle linguistic features like sentence complexity and pronouns); incorporating noun modifiers (especially phrases and clauses) to convey precise details; maintaining pronoun consistency; and using vivid and specific vocabulary, and fixed expressions (including phrases like all of *a* sudden, not all of *the* sudden, or, on the *other hand*, not on the *another hands*).

English learners at the beginning levels of English proficiency have all the above challenges but also have many problems forming sentences and using basic vocabulary. Without adequate word knowledge, students are challenged to narrate experiences. For example, to be meaningful, most narratives must include evaluative statements, and these statements require considerable vocabulary knowledge. Actions make most sense when writers know the actors’ motivation and intentions, and stories are more engaging when they relate the actors’ emotions and desires and the narrator’s reactions. Beginning-level ELs’ narratives tend to discuss simple emotions or desires of the characters—happiness, sadness, fear, and anger in the case of emotion, and what they want or like in the case of desires. Their restricted vocabulary prevents them from providing more effective evaluations. This can be frustrating to ELs, who are in no way cognitively deficient and whose developing knowledge of English prevents them from showing what they know and expressing critical meaning. Their instructors need to help them express more complex emotions like surprise, guilt, or jealousy and
to refer to the characters’ cognitive states (e.g., what they believe, know, or are thinking about). Beginning-level learners have limited fluency and accuracy, and require much scaffolding (e.g., narrative templates, sentence stems, word and sentence banks, pictorial supports, and graphic organizers).

TEACHING THE ELEMENTS OF NARRATIVE WRITING

Whether students write narratives to develop real or imagined events, they will need to develop a plot or story line, organize an event sequence, introduce a narrator and/or characters, create a setting, use narrative techniques and relevant descriptive details to capture the action and convey experiences and events, and provide a conclusion that resolves, follows from, or reflects upon the narrated experiences or events. Those are the basics. Emma Coats (n.d.), former employee at Pixar, an animation film studio currently owned by the Walt Disney Studio and producer of films such as *Toy Story* and *Finding Nemo*, tweeted 22 handy rules of storytelling that teachers can access in a slideshow format to help students make the most out of their stories. Here are some of our favorites:

1. Why must you tell THIS story? What’s the belief burning within you that your story feeds off of? That’s the heart of it.
2. If you were a character in this situation, how would you feel? Honesty lends credibility to unbelievable situations.
3. What are the stakes? Give us a reason to root for the character. What happens if they don’t succeed?
4. Putting it on paper lets you start fixing it. If it stays in your head, a perfect idea, you’ll never share it with anyone.

After students write their narratives, they can vote on which of Pixar’s rules they found most helpful. ELs have rich and heartfelt stories to tell, but they will need assistance with developing the elements of narrative writing. The following strategies and activities can make the task of narrative writing more accessible.

**Story Mountain Activity**

Every story must have a beginning. The start or exposition is where the characters and setting are established. During this part of a story, a conflict usually is introduced. After the characters and the
main circumstances are introduced, a problem often arises that puts the character in crisis. This is the rising action of the story. It typically is followed by a climax or high point that involves a major challenge or dark moment the characters must overcome. This often includes a turning point in the story. Following the climax, the story begins to wind down. During the falling action, we see the results of the characters’ actions or decisions. This leads to the resolution or denouement (“unraveling”) where the story concludes, often conveying a lesson or theme.

One way to make these plot elements more comprehensible to ELs is to introduce the concept of a story mountain, a user-friendly simplification of Aristotle’s W-diagram. Figure 3.1 introduces the Story Mountain formula.

Since the best way to learn how to write narratives is to read them, students can read a number of narratives and work in groups to fill out the Story Mountain before using the graphic organizer to sequence their own narratives.

Older students and more proficient students can experiment with the Plot Poem, an example of which is shown in Figure 3.2 about the novel The Kite Runner (Hosseini, 2003).

Challenges that ELs might face when participating in the Story Mountain activity include describing results of the characters’
actions and decisions with causative verbs such as *cause*, *allow*, *influence*, *force*, and *make*, which are used to indicate that someone or something helps to make something happen. As indicated by the following sentences, causative verbs are used in different grammatical patterns that are similar enough to confuse students: John *enabled* him to tell the truth; She *forced* him into confessing; and Paul *made* his brothers clean the kitchen. Students also may find it challenging to learn transition words such as *hence*, *consequently*, *therefore*, and *as a result*, especially when these words are used as sentence interrupters that are set off by commas: Mabel’s decision to give her friend some lunch money, *therefore*, demonstrated her kindness.

**Faces Vocabulary and the Character Evolution Timeline Activities**

“Characters are the heart and soul of every story” (Donovan, n.d.). They are an essential element in making a story compelling. When Katniss Everdeen volunteers to take her sister’s place as a tribute in *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008), we are struck by her bravery and resolve. And when she is lifted into the arena and beholds the Cornucopia at the start of the games, we feel her

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**Figure 3.2. Plot Poem**

1. **Exposition:** With a phone call Rahim Khan gives the story a push
2. **Setting:** back into the tumult in the shadow of the Hindu Kush.
3. **Protagonist:** American Amir, the princely writer, with a guilty heart
4. **Inciting in:** must go and make amends or be forever torn apart.
5. **Antagonist:** Class warfare, religion, and politics battle for his soul.
6. **Conflict:** He must face the truth head-on to again be whole.
7. **Rising:** Baba is dying of brain cancer, the wedding cannot wait.
8. **Action:** Soraya cannot produce children. Oh what a cruel fate.
9. **Crisis:** “Hassan is my brother!” That pain was only fleeting.
10. **Climax:** Amir stands up for Hassan and takes a brutal beating.
11. **Falling Action:** He cuts through the red tape and saves Hassan’s heir.
12. **Resolution:** Sohrab now has a father and mother who will care.
13. **Theme:** A man can stand up for himself at any time.
14. **Theme (2):** It is never too late to be good again, no matter what the crime.

trepidation and root for her as she runs for cover, convinced that her strength of character will enable her to overcome challenges and to prevail. As mentioned previously, English learners may be frustrated by their limited ability to depict personality traits or express complex emotions that would give their characters more depth. One way to help them move beyond happy, sad, mad, and glad, popularized by English teacher Nelma Anselmi is to present them with the Faces Vocabulary Chart (www.pinterest.com/pin/459015386993518541/). This chart includes 41 facial expressions in alphabetical order from aggressive to withdrawn. These faces can be explicitly taught in relation to literature students are reading and can be cut up and put into envelopes for students to sort (negative to positive, synonyms/antonyms, degrees of an emotion, i.e., happy to ecstatic, etc.). A chart of facial expressions with the adjectives removed also can be given to ELs along with a word bank. Students then select which adjective from the word bank best describes each expression, thus enhancing their repertoire of emotion words.

To help ELs develop their vocabulary expediently, teachers are wise to first teach them high-utility sensory words that the students can use frequently in their narratives and other genres, words that they do not already know, as well as words with big word families. To prevent students from confusing words, it is probably a good idea to present just a reasonable number of words to students and to teach them word sets that are not similar in appearance or do not overlap in meaning, for example, arrogant, miserable, lonely, frustrated, and so on. Once students have expanded their vocabulary, they can develop a Character Evolution Timeline.

A Character Evolution Timeline enables a reader to review the sequence of events that occur in a text and to plot it out graphically, much like one would with a storyboard. However, in the graphic display, the reader can chart a character’s changing emotions by selecting: (1) a facial expression to reveal the character’s emotions during key events; (2) a quote that illustrates why or how the character experiences this emotion; and (3) a symbol to characterize that emotion. Beneath the quote, the reader can write an interpretation of the impact of the event on the character in his or her own words. This is a great exercise in character analysis, analyzing an author’s craft, and forming interpretations. Figure 3.3 includes a Character Evolution Timeline for the character of Rachel in “Eleven” by Sandra Cisneros (2002) and illustrates the range of emotions she experiences on her 11th birthday when her teacher, Mrs. Price, forces her to wear an ugly red sweater that isn’t hers.
Once students, as readers, have traced a character’s emotional evolution in a model text, they can use the timeline strategy to plot out their own story lines as writers and to record emotions in relation to event sequences and even to record ideas for dialogue and interior monologue.

Character Evolution Timelines provide teachers with excellent opportunities to teach students parallel structure, challenges for all students, but especially for ELs. Writers use parallel structures, the same pattern of words, to indicate that two or more ideas are more or less equivalent in importance. Generally, when writing Character Evolution Timelines, the event sequences are written consistently in one tense, the present tense or past tense, as in: *Like*
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a turtle, Rachel wants to retreat into her shell. The only thing she can do to protect herself is to withdraw. Other challenges learners encounter in the Character Evolution Timelines include subject–verb agreement issues (especially if the student chooses to use the present tense) and concerns pertaining to using appropriate word forms (more specifically, expressing a range of emotions with words of the correct part of speech—surprisingly, surprise, or surprising).

Said Is Dead Activity

In the same way that ELs may be limited by their ability to express a range of emotions, they also may have difficulty writing dialogue between characters that flows and departs from a typical “he said; she said” structure. It is not appropriate to “kill” off the word said until ELs are familiar with the conventions of writing dialogue, have practiced reading dialogues in mentor texts, have orally read dialogues in pairs to familiarize themselves with the turn-taking involved, and have attempted writing simple dialogue exchanges. But when the teacher determines students are ready, she can introduce the tombstone in Figure 3.4 and post it on the wall.

Beneath the area that says “survived by,” students can add words to use instead of said, for example, cried, fussed, grunted, moaned, mumbled, roared, shrieked, wailed, and so on. Students can consult the tombstone as they develop their narratives, write dialogue, and add dialogue tags. Teachers will want to teach or review the meanings of these words, as it is likely that ELs will not know them. They will find it helpful to give ELs repeated opportunities to match the meanings of the words with emotions, and to show students how to use the words that are appropriate alternatives to “said” to express emotions (like excitement, anger, agitation, sadness, happiness). They also will find it effective to teach words that can occur next to the alternative words, for example, “My brother mournfully wailed, ‘Oh no!’ as his favorite toy fell from the window onto the street below” or “Erick shrieked in horror, ‘Fire!’”

Punctuating dialogue is particularly challenging for ELs, and teachers will want to take the opportunity to teach (or reteach) students effective ways of incorporating dialogue. Another challenge ELs may face is how to incorporate words from informal English (and possibly even words from their home languages that are translated) into their dialogues when writing for an unfamiliar audience. Teachers will want to demonstrate ways to do this. For example, teachers might present the following unpunctuated excerpt from “Eleven” and ask students to work in pairs to punctuate the
dialogue. The teacher might say, “Rewrite the paragraphs I give you including the correct punctuation—capital letters, periods, commas, question marks, and quotation marks. I have included the correct punctuation in the opening quotation for you as a model”:

“Whose is this?” Mrs. Price says, as she holds the red sweater up in the air for all the class to see it’s been sitting in the classroom for a month not mine says everybody not me.

Vocabulary of the Senses, Word Wall and Showing, Not Telling Activities

Sensory/descriptive writing is based on concrete details. Writers gather information through all five senses and use those details to present a word picture of a person, place, object, or event. The goal is to choose precise words to enable the reader to visualize what is being described. One way to begin developing sensory descriptive
language is to create a Vocabulary of the Senses Word Wall in the classroom, as shown in Figure 3.5.

The teacher might begin with a sensory experience, such as popping popcorn, where students can see the hard kernels transformed into fluffy white puffs, hear the sizzling of the oil and the tiny explosions of kernels popping, smell the aroma of melted butter, and feel the crunchiness of each morsel as they happily munch on the delicious snack. As the students read narratives in class, they can add “juicy” descriptive words to the word wall. When they compose narratives, they can select vocabulary words from the different sense categories to make their writing more precise. Beginning writers tend to rely most heavily on the sense of sight, so the teacher should encourage them to include the other senses in their writing as well.

Once students are familiar with sensory descriptive language, the teacher can introduce the concept of showing, not telling. She might begin by saying the following:

When writers show and don’t just tell in their writing, they use rich, descriptive language to dramatize what is happening and provide concrete details that paint pictures in readers’ minds. Here are two examples, one of telling writing and one of showing writing:

*Context:* In Gary Soto’s (1990) story, “Seventh Grade,” Victor enrolls in French class because he wants to impress Teresa, the girl he has a crush on. When Mr. Bueller, the teacher, asks if anyone in class knows how to speak French, Victor raises his hand, even though he doesn’t really know how to speak the language. So, Mr. Bueller says something to Victor in French. Now, Victor is really in a tight spot.

Gary Soto could have just told us how Victor felt. He might have written a few telling sentences such as the following:

*Telling:* Victor was really embarrassed. He knew he was going to look stupid. But he was stuck. So, he uttered a few pretend words in French.

Here’s the showing description that Soto actually wrote:

*Showing:* “Great rose bushes of red bloomed on Victor’s cheeks. A river of nervous sweat ran down his palms. He felt awful. Teresa sat a few desks away, no doubt thinking he was a
fool. Without looking at Mr. Bueller, Victor mumbled, ‘Frenchie oh wewe gee in September.’”

This shows us that Victor was embarrassed without directly telling us. It is much easier to picture in our minds how he looked and felt when Mr. Bueller put him on the spot.

After providing this example, the teacher might ask students what words or expressions they could use to dramatize the word nervous in the sentence The student was nervous before the test. They might say hands shaking, twisting a lock of hair, biting bottom lip, feeling butterflies in the stomach, swallowing hard, and so forth. Writing in front of the class, the teacher could compose a sentence showing that the student was nervous before the test.

Example: Chewing on the end of his pencil, staring down at his test booklet, the student felt butterflies begin to take flight in his stomach, and he swallowed hard.

For writing warm-ups, the teacher could put a telling sentence up on the board for the students to work on, reminding them not to use the telling word in the sentence. For example:

The teenager was bored.
The birthday party was fun.
The blind woman was terrified of unfamiliar places.
She was very happy when the boy gave her a Valentine.

As students become more fluent and at ease with showing, not telling, they can form groups and compose telling sentences for other classmates to dramatize. Additionally, they can act these out in front of the class.
English learners may well understand the teacher’s explanation of showing and not telling without themselves being able to show and not tell, largely because they are still learning the descriptive vocabulary and sentence structure to do so. They benefit from intensive vocabulary instruction that supports the lesson as well as from sentence-combining exercises related to incorporating modifiers, for example, including absolute phrases (word groups that modify entire sentences) such as, “The hikers rested before the fire, their cold hands shaking in the frosty air”; gerunds (verbals that function as nouns) such as “Finding a needle in a haystack would be easier than completing the marathon”; and participles, which are verbals used as adjectives and end in either -ed or –ing, such as “The crying child screamed for her mother” (-ed), or, “Teens interested in studying French should travel to France” (-ing). It should be noted that all these structures are challenging even for advanced English learners and should be taught in reasonable sets, usually one by one, over time. In general, they should not be presented together all at once, to avoid confusing or overwhelming students. ELs will have particular difficulty learning -ed and -ing participial forms (e.g., interested and interesting) when these forms are presented together and their meanings and uses not explained. Many ELs may not previously have been taught these forms and may be learning them for the first time.

Theme Collage Activity

Most narratives contain a theme—a lesson, message, or key idea that the writer wants to communicate to a reader. Although some writers directly state the theme, others convey the message more subtly, leaving the reader to make inferences and draw conclusions about the deeper meaning of the text. In other words, they might show the big idea through characters’ actions, interactions, thoughts, and emotions rather than telling their reader what the point is. In a large-scale research study in an urban school district where 93% of the students speak English as their second language, students in grades 6–12 had great difficulty understanding, identifying, and analyzing theme—confusing theme with plot, character, setting, and topic (Olson, Land, Anselmi, & AuBuchon, 2010).

One way to help ELs understand what a theme is, is to characterize the topic of a narrative as the What and the theme as the So What? The teacher might explain this as follows:
A story’s theme is different from its topic or subject. The topic is simply what it’s about. The theme is the author’s point about the topic. However, to identify a theme, sometimes it helps to generate a list of topics or big ideas in a story. Common topics for themes that you’ll find in stories are usually abstract nouns that deal with human relationships and include terms like alienation, belonging, courage, family, friendship, hope, identity, prejudice, respect, revenge, trust, and so forth. Think of a topic as the What of the story and the theme as the So What? Therefore, a theme statement must be a complete sentence (with at least a subject and a verb) that states the author’s message about life or about human relationships. A good theme statement applies to people in general, not just to the specific characters in the story. Here are some examples of theme statements:

- Prejudice is a destructive force in our society.
- Growing up means taking responsibility for yourself.
- It is important to accept people for what they are on the inside and not the outside. (Olson, 2011, p. 342)

Next, students can be given a story to read, work collaboratively to identify a number of topic words that relate to the text, and then develop a theme statement that best expresses the message. Once they have articulated their theme statement, students can search through magazines or the Internet to find visuals that communicate their chosen themes. These visuals can be displayed as a collage along with the key topic words and the theme statement. Figure 3.6 includes a Theme Collage for “Eleven,” by Sandra Cisneros, a story about a young girl and the humiliating experiences she faces on her 11th birthday.

Once ELs are better able to understand theme in the literary and nonfiction texts they read, they will have a clear idea of how to communicate a lesson, message, or key idea in their own narratives. Their teachers’ scaffolding of challenging language features will help them succeed. English learners have special challenges communicating theme statements if they lack the vocabulary and grammatical structures to do so. Theme statements often involve using the dummy word *it* (as in *It is critical to understand people’s true feelings*), which has no lexical meaning but does have a discourse grammatical function, foregrounding information. Foregrounding is the practice of making words stand out from
surrounding words. While using dummy subjects such as there, it, and here can make writing vague and unnecessarily wordy, dummy subjects are essential in a range of writing, and ELs can face challenges learning to use them if not instructed.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: WRITING NARRATIVES ABOUT THE ARRIVAL

In her sheltered English class attended by ELs in grades 9–12, Teresa Ozoa wanted to create an opportunity to put the minilessons she had taught her students about narrative writing to use by engaging them in giving voice to a rich and evocative wordless picture book called The Arrival, by author/illustrator Shaun Tan (2007), that she knew would resonate with them. This graphic novel, which resembles a weathered and worn family picture album, chronicles the story of an immigrant who leaves his native country under the shadow of some sinister threat in search of a new homeland for his family. Divided into six chapters, the book takes readers along with the protagonist on his journey, through his trials and tribulations as an outsider in a new and foreign environment and his ultimate assimilation. Tan, an Australian-born writer, strives to
create empathy in his readers for the plight of his character. “In Australia,” he remarks, “people don’t stop to imagine what it’s like for those refugees. They just see them as a problem once they’re here, without thinking about the bigger picture. I don’t expect the book to change anybody’s opinion about things, but if it at least makes them pause and think, I’ll feel as if I’ve succeeded in something” (Margolis, 2007).

Tan may have underestimated the power of his images. Through the universal immigration story they represent, Ozoa’s students re-lived their own departures and arrivals and embraced the generosity and many kindnesses depicted in the book.

To begin the lesson, Ozoa introduced the idea of immigrants’ dreams, especially coming to America, and asked her students to discuss their own hopes, expectations, and apprehensions before coming to the United States. Then, using a document camera, she engaged students in a picture walk through the book, calling upon students to access cognitive strategies, such as making predictions, tapping prior knowledge, forming interpretations, and reflecting and relating, as they constructed the gist of what was happening in each section of the book. For example, in the departure section of the story, the image of a dragon’s tail haunts many of the pages. Students made an inference that some type of threat or menace was forcing the protagonist to flee his homeland. When the protagonist, a father who temporarily leaves his wife and daughter behind to seek a new life for the whole family, enters his new country in a port reminiscent of Ellis Island, he experiences difficulty communicating, finding housing, seeking food and a job, understanding the language, and so on. At this point, Ozoa asked students to do a quick write describing an event or emotion from the book they could relate to personally. For example, Jun Yamamoto wrote:

The episode of the man having trouble to explain himself in the inspection at the immigration office reminded me of my experience when I first came to the United States. The pictures show the man tries to explain himself and his family in the inspection to enter the country, but he has trouble to explain and he looks very frustrated. When I came to the United States two years ago, I had trouble to answer the questions that were asked by an inspector and to explain myself since I couldn’t speak English at all. I was really confused and frustrated that time because I couldn’t say what I wanted to say and I was alone. The inspector looked scary and I could see a gun with
him. I was terrified by him and I literally couldn’t speak. (Jun Yamamoto, 2014. Reprinted with permission)

Once they completed their visual journey through *The Arrival*, Ozoa placed students in small groups and asked them to select eight pages of their choice to bring to life by adding written narration, dialogue, interior monologue, action words, and sensory details. Students generated a first draft that they exchanged with another group of students who (1) highlighted in yellow all of the dialogue and interior monologue; (2) highlighted all of the sensory details in red; (3) wrote one compliment about the narrative; and (4) wrote one suggestion for improving the draft. Their finished narratives were published on the classroom bulletin board along with the pages from the book. The following is an excerpt from one group’s work:

Jaffar was in a crowd of people trying to find a way or understand how he was supposed to get off the ship. When suddenly he realized that one of the crew members was saying, “Opp tip top gooz” and Jaffar thought to himself, “He must be pointing the way off the ship.” The crew members opened the door and everybody got off the ship. After the travelers got their suitcases, the port was full of people. And they all found their way off the port. (Seyed Ali Hosseini, Arash Azarmehr, and Armin Abidnejad, 2014. Reprinted with permission)

Ozoa noted, “My students’ narratives were surprisingly powerful and set the stage for a culminating unit I implemented on ‘How to Achieve My American Dream.’”

English learners face many challenges in this Putting It All Together Narrative activity. Our analysis of EL students’ quick write assignments pertaining to *The Arrival* reveals the most common language problems of ELs: sentence structure errors, verb tense mistakes, punctuation issues, and vocabulary.

**WRITING THE PERSONAL NARRATIVE**

Although the K–5 CCSS place an equal emphasis on narrative, informational, and argumentative writing, the percentage of narrative writing decreases in grades 6–12. As a result, the majority of
narrative writing students compose is more likely to involve real experiences and events that are relevant to students’ lives rather than purely fictional ones. Personal narratives usually include an element of reflection regarding the significance of what is “experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative” (National Governors Association, 2010, p. 16). What follows are three sample prompts for personal narrative writing that engage students in dramatizing significant events in their lives and reflecting upon their impact.

**Prompt: The Memory Snapshot**

Select a photograph that you associate with a significant memory. It can be a picture of you at any age, of another family member (or the whole family) or other significant person, of a vacation, or of an important event, a special place, and so on. (If you have a vivid mental snapshot inside your head that you do not have a photograph of but that you very much want to bring to life, this is OK.) Think about why you chose your snapshot—tangible and/or mental. How and why did the experience it depicts make a lasting impression on you?

Your task will be to create a written mental snapshot that captures your photograph in words and creates a *you are there* feeling in the reader. Use the magic camera of your pen to zoom in on your subject and pinpoint rich sensory details (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and movement). Remember that you can make your snapshot a “moving picture” by adding action and dialogue. Also, give the reader a more panoramic view of thoughts, feelings, and big ideas to create a frame for your specific details.

You will be writing an autobiographical incident account about your memory/snapshot. An autobiographical incident focuses on a specific time period and a particular event that directly involves you. Your goal is not to tell about your event but to show what happened by dramatizing the event. You may write in the present tense, as if your event were happening now, or in the past tense to describe your incident as a recollection.

Figure 3.7 presents a sample Memory Snapshot paper entitled “One Minute of Destruction” about the earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011, which an English learner composed in her sheltered English class and framed for the class Gallery Walk, where students read one another’s narratives and place a Post-it® with a kind comment around the edges of the draft.
Prompt: Watermarks

A watermark is a mark on a wall, building, or measuring stick indicating the height to which the water has risen. The mark could be the result of a regular, recurring motion as in the tides, or it could be made by a catastrophic event like a flood. In other words, a watermark is an event that has made a lasting impression.

Choose one of the important watermarks in your life that you would like to share with the class and the teacher. In a two- to three-page essay, first catch your reader’s attention (“hook”) and identify the watermark. Then describe the event that caused it,
selecting important details to show the situation. Connect these with transitions. End your paper by explaining how this event is important to you today (Starbuck, in Olson, 1992).

Prompt: “When I Was Young in . . .” Narrative

After reading When I Was Young in the Mountains, by Cynthia Rylant (1982), a book that describes the author’s childhood spent with her grandparents in Appalachia during the Great Depression, select a special memory from your childhood to write a narrative about. Emulating Rylant’s style, repeat the phrase, “When I was young in . . .” throughout your narrative. Below is an excerpt from Moy Kiev Ung’s reminiscence “When I was young in Phnom Penh” from an 8th-grade English language arts class taught by Liz Harrington:

When I was young in Phnom Penh I went to the main river in front of the castle to watch firework. I would go around buying cotton candy or juicy spider snacks. I was also holding a pink balloon. When I was young in Phnom Penh I would go and catch the little tadpoles at the small river and would later release it. When I was young in Phnom Penh I went riding elephant with my family in the park. The elephant was hairy and would eat the peanut I fed him. Its cries was so loud I had to cover my ears. (Moy Kiev Ung, 2014. Reprinted with permission)

BLENDBING GENRES: THE SATURATION RESEARCH PAPER

The CCR Anchor Standards for Writing remind us that students “need to know how to combine elements of different kinds of writing—for example, to use narrative strategies within argument and explanation within narrative—to produce complex and nuanced writing” (p. 11). One way to help students blend genres and to meet the CCSS Research Standards is to ask students to conduct a historical investigation of a famous figure (artist, politician, sports hero, religious leader, scientist, etc.) and to select a pivotal event in that person’s life to dramatize in a saturation research paper (D’Aoust, 1997). After researching the person and event and creating a one- to two-page expository summary of the event, students take on the persona and voice of that person and
write a historical fiction in the first person, dramatizing the event in the character's own words. Students can write in the present tense, as if the events were happening now, or in the past tense as a recollection, but the point is to create a you are there feeling in the reader. To add an element of reflection to the historical fiction, students are challenged to show, and not tell, why that event was especially significant. The excerpt below includes the opening scene of Jennifer Cheng’s Saturation Research Paper in Rachel Gorman’s 9th-grade literature and composition class. The paper focuses on the execution of Anne Boleyn, followed by the beginning of the flashback of the events leading up to this “moment of awakening” narrated by King Henry VIII, including a citation from *The Love Letters of Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn* (Bach, 2010). Despite the obvious EL errors, this paper is remarkably sophisticated in its use of dialogue, interior monologue, flashback, and descriptive language.

**Moment of Awakening**

“You can say something to the audience before you die,” one of the executioners said. It sounded like a command, not an announcement. Her long black hair covered her face, and her voice sounded hollow and sharp. “I can’t accept the crime of which the kind and nobleman charged me. Even if I die, I curse the king forever,” she said hoarsely.

“Enough!” the executioner stopped her. I watched as the executioner pressed her on the gallows and spit next to her. An uproar from the audience got louder and louder.

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Anne Boleyn was a beautiful and mysterious girl. She didn’t care about whom she talked with, but showed to others what she wanted, clearly and proudly. Too many women around me followed my leadership, said what I wanted to hear, or even betrayed their own minds, just because they wanted to get benefits from me.

I spent many months obsessed with Anne. After a while, I get used to writer letter to her. Then the writing of letters to Anne Boleyn became a habit. I received some what comfort by her letters. The words I chose became more specific and strong. I wrote quietly:
Dear Anne,

In turning over in my mind the contents of your last letters, I have put myself into great agony. Since I met you at the first time, I have been for above a whole year stricken with the dart of love, and not yet sure whether I shall fail of finding a place in your heart and affection. I beseech you to give me an entire answer to this my rude letter. No more, for fear of tiring you.

Ever yours,
H.R. (Henry VIII Letters)

Soon, Anne wrote back to me, but she didn’t give me an answer. Day after day, I tried to ask her answer about being my mistress, but she just avoided the question. I couldn’t endure this uncertain relationship anymore. I wrote a letter again,

Although, my mistress, it has not pleased you to remember the promise you made me when I was last with you—that is, to hear good news from you, and to have an answer to my last letter; yet it seems to me that it belongs to a true servant.


PROVIDING STUDENTS WITH FEEDBACK ON DRAFTS

When helping EL students edit their draft narratives, teachers will find it valuable to teach or review verb tense. Verb tense endings are difficult for students to hear in speech, because they are rarely pronounced clearly and sometimes EL students’ classmates do not use endings in informal oral communication. Also, ELs often can communicate what they want to say without them. In narrative writing, verb tense can be especially tricky, since effective writers deliberately use verb tense in dialogues as it is used in oral language, to convey realistic communication that is representative of specific dialects. Moreover, they often switch to the literary present, for example, when introducing titles of literary works and when making evaluative statements and moral judgments in their concluding paragraphs. Teachers can teach verb tense using timelines and teaching only the key verb tenses that students need to use, reminding students to switch verb tenses only when they have an
excellent reason for doing so. Helping students match verb tenses to time markers (like *now*, *yesterday*, and *last summer*) in their own and their classmates’ writing is especially effective.

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**To Sum Up**

- Narrative writing is a genre used to convey experience, either real or imagined, and serves many purposes, such as to inform, to instruct, to entertain, and to persuade.

- The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts recommend that teachers spend anywhere from 35% of instructional time (in the primary grades) to 20% of instructional time (in the secondary grades) on teaching narrative writing.

- Narrative writing has tremendous potential in helping ELs develop their English proficiency and succeed in their coursework by leveraging their community knowledge and previous linguistic knowledge, including informal oral English, to express what they know, and it provides English teachers with a way to inventory the skills ELs have in reading and writing, build on student knowledge, and familiarize themselves with their students’ cultures, communities, and experiences.

- Researchers emphasize the pivotal role narratives play in motivating students and building their confidence as writers by allowing them to write about meaningful experiences, reflect on these experiences, and bring them into perspective.

- Narrative writing also serves as a gateway to learning other types of writing, such as persuasive and report writing, as it helps students to develop audience awareness, organizational skills, and the ability to select and use specific and concrete details.

- Narrative writing contributes to students’ ability to read literature critically and identify the particular techniques that would be useful in their own writing.