AN INTRODUCTION TO WRITING
ELI 103

WRITING A PERSONAL NARRATIVE
English Language Institute
King Abdul Aziz University
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

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English Language Institute, King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah

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An Introduction to Writing

Writing a Personal Narrative

ELI 103

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In this level, you will be able to:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Make a rough outline of your story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Describe your personal experience from YOUR point of view (3 short paragraphs or more).</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Articulate what a thesis statement and its components are.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Describe a personal experience in a linear sequence of time using a variety of time expressions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Express your point of view of the whole experience in writing a thesis statement (one sentence).</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Use logical time order to organize your ideas (before, during &amp; after).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Set the scene and provide background to details and specific details (at least two time clauses/ past continuous).</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Use time expressions to link between sentences and paragraphs (Time clauses with While, When, Before, After/ Time phrases/ Linking words with Meanwhile, First, Next, Later, Then, After that) at least 5 linking words/ phrases).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Select 1 of 8 topics to write about a personal narrative.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Ask yourself questions to generate ideas for writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Identify common mistakes in your own and others’ writing and correct them (e.g. organization, past simple/continuous verb form, punctuation, time-clause structure).</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Section 1: Getting Started

A. Understanding Personal Narrative

Part 1
Read the following story about a family’s vacation in Spearfish, a city in the USA, and match the headings with the paragraphs.

the beginning  the middle  the end

My Last Vacation

1. _____________________

On the third day, the sky suddenly turned dark. Then we heard the news. It was hurricane season. We were worried because we didn’t know what to do. We immediately ran to the grocery store and bought food and water. At the store, many people were standing in a long line. The hurricane came that night. However, when it started, we were in the holiday home. We stayed indoors and had a good time. We cooked and played games. After the hurricane ended, everything was calm but very wet. We learnt how to have fun in hard times.

2. _____________________

My last vacation in Spearfish, South Dakota, in 2011, was very interesting. My family decided to go there because we wanted a nice place to go sightseeing. The night before we went to Spearfish, my two brothers and I gathered in the living room to think of what things to take for the vacation. Then, we checked Google maps and read a guidebook about the city. However, we were so excited and we didn’t pay attention to information about weather.

3. _____________________

When we arrived in Spearfish, the weather was so beautiful and the sun was shining. The air was just refreshing and pleasant. We had a lot of fun the first two days. We had breakfast in a restaurant with a nice view on a lake. Then, we went hiking around the suburbs of the city. While we were walking around, we passed by a shop selling natural, healthy food. We had wonderful frozen yoghurt. The next day, we drove to the zoo and visited the museum.
**Part 2**
In small groups, read the text again and answer the following questions.

1. Why did they decide to go to Spearfish?

2. What did they do before they went to Spearfish? How did they feel?

3. Was the weather nice when they arrived?

4. How did they feel in Spearfish?

5. Why did they feel worried on the third day?

6. What did they do when the hurricane started?

**Part 3**
You have just read a personal narrative about a vacation in a city. Now, look at the meaning and organization of this narrative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERSONAL NARRATIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A personal narrative is a piece of writing that tells a story from the writer’s opinion. This opinion is clearly mentioned at the beginning of the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It should have a beginning, a middle, and an end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The events are told in logical order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is written with details about feelings that relate to the writer’s opinion mentioned in the beginning of the story.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ORGANIZATION OF PERSONAL NARRATIVES
The organization of the narrative looks like this:

**Introduction:** It’s the main idea that has a statement about the main event and the writer’s opinion.

**The beginning:** It’s about what happened before, for example, why did you go there? What things did you do first? Who was there with you? How did you feel?

**The middle:** It’s the second part of the story. For example, when did it start? Did you move places? Where? What was it like? What else did you do next? Who was with you? How did you feel?

**The end:** It’s about how things suddenly changed. For example, what things changed? How did you know? How did you feel? What did you do to solve the problem? Who was there? What did they do? Where did you go? How did you feel after all?

**The conclusion:** It’s about what you learnt from that experience. Are you the same person after that experience?
Practice 1

Go back to the same story about a family’s vacation in Spearfish (page 3). In small groups, discuss the questions that follow. Your teacher will help you.

Part A
Write out the sentence that shows the main event and the writer’s opinion of that event.

Main event

Writer’s opinion

Part B
When did the events of the story happen?

Part C
The events of the story took place in different places. Find these places. Then write the events of each part of the story below in the order they appear in the text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Places</th>
<th>Series of events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The beginning</td>
<td>gathered in the living room</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The middle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The end</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
B. Select a Topic

Topics

When choosing a personal experience to write about:

- Choose one that occurred in a short period of time in the past;
- Choose one that you have a strong emotion or opinion about; and
- Choose one that you can describe in detail.

Choosing Your Topic
Read the following topics. Select one of them to write about. Look for topics that you are interested in.

1. Your first visit to another city/country
2. The last trip you went on
3. The best vacation you have ever had
4. Your first day at school
5. Your best day at university
6. The last celebration you attended
7. Your worst visit to a shop
8. The worst meal you have ever had in a restaurant

C. Ask Yourself Questions about Your Topic

Ways to Develop Your Topic

One way to think of ideas is to ask yourself questions about the topic and then write the answers in one note. Ask questions using these wh-words (who, what, when, where, why and how).
Here are some examples of questions and answers to help you develop your topic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Who...?</strong></th>
<th>me – my family – my two brothers and I – we – many people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>When...?</strong></td>
<td>in 2011 – The night before we went to Spearfish – Then – After the hurricane ended – the first two days – Then – While we were walking around – The next day – On the third day – Then – that night – when it started – When we arrived in Spearfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Where...?</strong></td>
<td>in Spearfish – South Dakota – a nice place – in the living room – indoors – around the suburbs of the city – a shop – to the zoo – the museum – to the grocery store – at the store – in the holiday home – in a restaurant with a nice view on a lake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Why...?</strong></td>
<td>because it was a fun thing to do – in order to feel better – so that I could get a better job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How...?</strong></td>
<td>Excited – had a lot of fun – worried – had a good time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Your turn**  
Work alone. Use the Questioning Worksheet next page to help you remember the events of your story.
# QUESTIONING WORKSHEET

Ask yourself some of the following questions about your topic and answer them. You can add more questions if you want.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions about details</th>
<th>Answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intro</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was the main event?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think of it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The beginning</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where were you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What happened/ did you do first? Where/ When did you do them?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who was there with you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did they do?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you/ other people feel?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The middle</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where were you next?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What happened/ did you do next? Where/ When did you do them?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who was there with you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did they do?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you/ other people feel?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The end</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What happened later?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What things changed?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you know?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you feel?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where did you go?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did you/ other people do then?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who was there?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you feel after all?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who was there then?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did the people tell you then?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The conclusion</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What did you learn from the experience?</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
D. Discuss Your Experience with Others

TALKING TO GET IDEAS
When you tell another person about your experience, you will have the opportunity to develop your ideas. Your partner will also ask you questions. In this way, you will develop and think of a lot of additional ideas and details.

Use your Questioning Sheet (page 9) again. With a partner or in a small group, take turns telling about your experience. Follow these steps.

1. Tell what your experience was and how you felt when it happened.
2. Explain what happened from the beginning to the end, using specific details about places, events and feelings.
3. Ask if your experience and details are clear.
4. On your Questioning Sheet, write down the questions your partner(s) ask you. Answer the questions immediately.
5. Write down your answers on the Questioning Sheet.
## Section 2: Preparing Your Writing

### A. Make a rough outline
Use your Questioning Sheet to complete the outline template below. You can write sentences, phrases or key words about your opinion, events, places, feelings, or any dialogues you remember from the story.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. MAIN EVENT &amp; PERSONAL OPINION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>II. THE BEGINNING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actions and details ( when, where, who, what, why, and how (feel))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>III. THE MIDDLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actions and details ( when, where, who, what, why, and how (feel))</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
IV. THE END
Actions and details (when, where, who, what, why, and how (feel))

THE CONCLUSION
What did you learn? Are you the same person after what happened?
B. Compose the main event and opinion of your story

**MAIN EVENT & OPINION STATEMENT**
The main event and opinion statement is clearly told in the first sentence of the story. In stories, the main event is something that happened. The opinion is a description of your emotions and feelings about that event. It shouldn’t be a detail or a fact.

For a short composition, you can just give one comment. Look at this example.

**Main event:**
- Who? Me
- What/ where? Last vacation/ Spearfish, South Dakota
- When? May, 2011
- **Opinion:** very interesting

**CORRECT STATEMENT:**
My last vacation in Spearfish, South Dakota, in 2011, was very interesting.

**INCORRECT STATEMENT:**
I went to Spearfish two years ago and the weather was pleasant. (fact and detail)

**Your turn**
Write the main event and personal opinion for your story. Remember to write who, what, where, and when in the statement.

For example:
Who...? all my family and I
What/ where...? The first day of Eid Al-fiter/ in my grandfather’s house
When...? two years ago
Opinion? absolutely delightful

The first day of Eid Al-fiter when all my family gathered in my grandfather’s house two years ago was absolutely delightful.
C. **Provide the beginning for your story**

**The Beginning**

The beginning is a background (place, time, the people and their expectations, and feelings) for the action. It is usually after the statement of main event and personal opinion. It is about what happened before the action started. (Why did you go there? What things did you do first? Who was there with you? How did you feel?)

**In the following example, the beginning is underlined.**

My first boat trip with my uncle, in April 2006, was really the worst trip in my life. I was only nine years old when uncle Sameer visited us one day and convinced my mother that I was old enough to go on a boat trip in the Red Sea. My mum wanted to give me a sweater and a jacket for the trip, but my uncle said there was no need for all that. For the whole night before the trip, I was dreaming of colourful fish and the beautiful lights of the city. I was so excited.

**Practice 1**

Read the following beginnings for stories. Underline the statement of main event and opinion. Then, write out the **time, place, people** and **feelings** into the table below.

1. The first day of Eid Al-fiter when all my family gathered in my grandfather’s house two years ago was absolutely delightful. One of my uncles was a student in the US, another one was a pilot and two uncles were in Riyadh, so it was a bit difficult for our family to meet. Two weeks before Eid, my dad and I called everyone to arrange for the reunion. Everyone was excited and loved the idea of the reunion. However, more than 45 people came to our grandfather’s house.

2. My first few moments at the Tabuk airport were the most dramatic in my life. I was ten years old at that time, and my parents were moving from Jeddah to Tabuk for their new jobs. I was very excited about living in a new city, but I was totally surprised by what I saw.

3. My first day at King Abdulaziz University was very interesting. The day before I went to University, I was so excited about moving from a small school to a huge university. I wanted to look nice, so I went to the mall and bought new clothes. Then, I went to the hairdresser. All night long, I was thinking of the new friends I was going to make and the teachers I will see. Everything went as expected.
4. My ever best trip was when my friends and I went to Abha last summer. It was a three-day trip. On the first day, we were looking forward to a fun day. We drove all the way up the mountain. It was a pleasant drive. On the road up to Abha, we passed the honey sellers and the farmers who were selling their delicious fruits. We also met other people who were going camping and had a nice company on the road. We watched monkeys playing in the trees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Beginning 1</th>
<th>Beginning 2</th>
<th>Beginning 3</th>
<th>Beginning 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling</td>
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</table>

**Your turn**

Decide if your story needs more background information. If so, add additional notes to your rough outline.

For example, add more information about time, place, the people who were there, their feelings and expectations.
D. Use time order to organize your ideas

**ORGANIZING USING TIME ORDER**
The middle and the end of a story are normally organized using time order. Time order means that the events and actions follow the order in which they occurred in time. Time words and expressions help the reader follow the actions in time order. For example:

*After* we drove all the way up to the mountain, we were a bit tired, but happy. *As* we were driving slowly, one of our friends spotted a nice area for camping. It had a nice view on a green valley. *Next*, we all agreed to stop there because everybody liked the place. *Then*, everyone had a job to do. Some people agreed to set the tent and furnish it, and others volunteered to make lunch. It was a barbeque lamb. *Later, when* lunch was ready, it was about sunset and everyone was hungry. We had our lunch and enjoyed watching the sunset.

**Practice 1**
Read the following narration, “My First and Last Camping Trip”. Write a number in each of the blanks to indicate the correct time order of the sentences. The first sentence is numbered for you.

**My First Trip to Armenia**
I had a frightening experience on my first trip in Armenia a year ago. My family wanted to go camping. I was afraid of the idea of sleeping outdoors in a tent in the mountains, but I made up my mind to go anyway.

----- When I looked through the keyhole, I saw a big brown bear nearby.
----- The next day I decided that I never wanted to go camping again.
--1-- When we got to the campsite, a man told us to be careful of the bears that came out of the woods at night.
----- I had a great time, until the third night.
----- I was so frightened that I decided to spend the rest of the night in the restroom.
----- My heart was racing, and I prayed that the door was strong.
----- When I got to the restroom, I heard sounds coming from the woods.
----- It was about 3:00 am, and I had to go to the restroom, which was on the top of the hill, about thirty yards from our tents.
----- While I was watching, the bear came closer to the restroom and started sniffing around it.
**Your turn**
Look at your rough outline. Organize the actions and details in time order. Then write the middle and the end of your composition, using time words or expressions to make the time order clear. Focus on content and organization. You can correct grammar when you revise.

**E. Include Plenty of Actions and Specific Details**

**USING DETAILS**
The beginning, the middle and the end of a story tell the actions, using specific details to make the actions come alive for the reader. These details support the main idea and help the reader picture in his/her mind moment by moment. These specific details are normally adjectives that come from

- what you see,
- what you hear, or
- what you feel.

**Practice 1**
Read the first part of “Stuck in the Mud”, which was adapted from a student composition. For the rest of the story, read each pair of sentences and choose the one that describes the actions more clearly or gives better details. Be prepared to identify the words in each answer that make the sentences clearer and more detailed.

**Stuck in the Mud**

On the way from the Grand Canyon to Phoenix, Arizona, two years ago, my husband and I had a wonderful experience when our car got stuck in the mud. This may sound strange, but let me tell you my story. We decided to take a short cut on a dirt road. We saw some black clouds forming ahead, but we didn’t think much about them. We didn’t realize that we were heading for trouble.

1. a. Within ten minutes, it started to rain hard, with strong winds.
   b. Soon the weather turned very bad, and there was rain.

2. a. Huge amounts of dirty water turned the road into a river, and we got stuck in the soft mud.
   b. Lots of water came down; there was water everywhere, and we couldn’t drive any further.

3. a. We tried to get out for a long time, but nothing happened no matter what we did.
   b. We tried to get out for six hours, with no success, and nobody passed by.

4. a. When it started to get dark, we became worried and soon afterwards I lost hope.
   b. When it started to get dark, we felt very bad and later we felt even worse.

5. a. Then we saw a light somewhere in the distance.
   b. Then we saw some light coming from the other side of the hill.
6  a. With new hope, we climbed up over the muddy hill and met a young couple.
   b. Feeling better, we went to look for the people and yet met a young couple.

7  a. Luckily, we had a four-wheel drive truck and pulled our car out of the mud.
   b. Luckily, they had a truck and they helped us.

8  a. After that, they were very kind and offered to help us in any way they could.
   b. After that, they offered to accompany us until we reached the paved road.

9  a. We had several more problems along the way, but each time they helped us.
   b. We got stuck again many times along the way, but each time they pulled us out.

10 a. I was happy when our terrible experience was finally over.
     b. I was happy when I finally saw the lights of civilization.

**Your turn**
Check the beginning, the middle and the end of your story that you wrote before.

- Do you have plenty of action and specific, supporting details?
- How can you add more specific, supporting details?
F. Write a Conclusion

THE CONCLUSION
A conclusion ties the entire composition together and gives closure. A narration may conclude in one or more of the following ways.

- A restatement of the main idea
  - As we hiked down, we reminded each other of the beauty and peace we had experienced.

- A related thought, such as what you learned or how you changed
  - The fear from that night will always remain with me, but the experience taught me how to act in this kind of situation. The key is to keep cool and stay away from isolated places at night.

- A look to the future
  - I want to keep this peace in my heart forever.

Practice 1
Follow these steps to analyze the composition below and its conclusion.

1. Underline the statement of main event and opinion.
2. Put parentheses () around the beginning.
3. Underline the action verbs in the beginning, the middle and the end.
4. Put two lines under the conclusion.
5. Identify what type of conclusion it is: a restatement, a related thought, or a look to the future.

My First Day at School

My first day at school was a horrible day. I was six years old and it was time to go to school, or actually to be away from my family for about 6 hours every day. The day before schools started, my mum explained that there would be a big playground and a lot of kids to play with. In the morning, I wore the best clothes I had. Then, my brother walked me to school because it was near our house. However, I wasn’t happy with the idea of staying away from home with people I don’t know.
When I arrived to school, my brother left me alone at the gate. There were really so many kids in the playground, but no one asked me to join them. Some of them were older than me, and they didn’t want me to join them. I didn’t want show that I was crying, but I couldn’t. Meanwhile, a teacher came and guided me to a classroom.

When I went to the classroom, I felt that it was like a prison. No playing was allowed there. It was so boring because it was all about learning a song. At that time, I didn’t want to sing. All I wanted was to be with my family. After the first two hours, everyone went back to the playground. When I was watching the boys playing there, one of the boys came and offered me a sandwich and asked me to play together. That time, I was so happy that I found a friend. When I came back home, I told my family that I had a nice day at school and that I made a few good friends to play with. I learnt that I had to be patient.

**Your turn**

Write a conclusion for your narrative composition. What type of conclusion is it - a restatement, a related thought, or a look to the future?
G. Put together the first draft
As you have worked your way through section II, you have written all the pieces that you need for your short story: (1) the statement of main event and personal opinion, (2) the beginning, (3) the middle, (4) the end and (5) the conclusion.

You are ready to write your First Draft. Put these pieces together to create the first draft of your story. Then add a title.

Please, refer to your Writing Composition Booklet.
Section 3: Revising Your Writing

REVISING
When revising your writing, you make changes to improve the content and organization of your draft. You can add material, or move material from one place to another.

PEER FEEDBACK
When you have a classmate read your first draft, you can get useful feedback. You can find out what a reader thinks is unclear, poorly organized, or not well written. This will give ideas about how to improve your draft.

Benefit from peer feedback
Exchange drafts with a partner. Read your partner’s draft and check it using the Revision Checklist below. At this point, don’t check grammar. Then give your partner feedback.

REVISION CHECKLIST √
1. Does the draft have any places that are unclear?
2. Is the draft organized clearly, according to the outline you made in Section II, A.
3. Is the draft free from irrelevant sentences?
4. Does the draft need more supporting details?

C. Make revision decisions
Using the revision Checklist, decide on the changes you want to make. Mark the changes in your first draft.

D. Write the second draft
Write the second draft of your composition, making changes and improvements. You are ready to write your Second Draft. Please, refer to your Writing Composition Booklet.
Section 4: Editing Your Writing

A. Check for past time verbs

**ACTION VERBS AND TENSE**
Most narrations contain many action verbs. Since narration describes an event from the past, most of the action verbs appear in one of the past time verb forms: simple past or past progressive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Simple past regular</th>
<th>Simple past irregular</th>
<th>Past progressive (was/ were + verb + ing)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Action in the past</em></td>
<td><em>Action in the past</em></td>
<td><em>Action in progress in the past</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>happened</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Practice 1
Fill in the chart with examples from the sample compositions at the beginning of this chapter. Write at least three examples in each column.

Practice 2
Edit the following narration for verb errors. There are 13 errors. The first one is marked for you.

**My Worst Visit to a Mall**

1 When I went shopping for fruit in a grocery store in Germany I was shocked. The store looked very similar to what I was used to, so I feel comfortable going about my business normally. I was selecting peaches and put them into a paper bag when a tall woman ran towards me screaming angrily. I honestly don’t know what the problem was. Because I didn’t speak German, I couldn’t understand her or speak up for myself. I feel confused. It turned out that customers are not supposed to select their own fruit. Instead, the clerk is supposed to choose it and put it into a bag for the customer. It was just a normal case of misunderstanding in a new culture.
**Your turn**
Check your composition for correct past time verbs. Mark any corrections.

**PEER FEEDBACK**
Remember, it is often easier to see errors in other students’ writing than in your own. So it is a good idea to let a classmate read your composition and find errors that you would probably miss. Editing a classmate’s paper is also a good way to improve your own editing skills.

Meet with a partner and exchange drafts. Read your partner’s draft, and check for the verb errors or errors in punctuating direct quotations.

**B. Write the final draft**

Write your final draft, making the changes you have noted on your second draft. Take all that you have learned and the feedback from your teacher and other students and write your final draft.

You are ready to write your **Final Draft**. Please, refer to your **Writing Composition Booklet**.