

# Identity Narrative Assignment: How Writing About Students' Identities Shapes Their Writerly Voice

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## Introduction

As an international graduate student and a second language user of English, I understand how important a writerly voice is in my own writing process. I initially assumed that English-speaking students already possessed distinct voices of their own. However, when I began teaching writing at a Midwest research university, I quickly discovered that most first-year writing students tended to mimic the voices of the authors they read. The reading materials, authored by a diverse array of writers, both English and non-English, significantly influenced the students' writing. Recognizing this pattern, I realized that merely imitating these voices would not serve my students well in the long run. If they aim to voice their opinion, they will first need to develop their "voice." On this note, I felt a strong imperative to teach them how to develop their own unique voices in their writing.

After Fall 2022—the term I joined the department as a PhD student and Graduate Teaching Assistant—I had an idea about designing an assignment. The first thing I wanted to do was to get to know my students better and personally. They are not numbers, but people. They are people with no tabula rasa, but a diverse range of stories. I wanted to hear their stories to help them write on what matters to them. Also, as an international Muslim female student of color, I was somehow suffering from an identity crisis. I set foot on the land of duality where my minority identity mattered to me as much as my identity as a writing teacher. On these notes, I developed an "Identity Narrative" assignment.

In a typical college composition course, students write a literacy narrative paper in which they narrate stories about any kind of literacy they have developed since childhood. When writing about their literacy, students often draw upon authentic and personal experiences. The nature of the narrative assignment is designed to bring out students' agency and voice in their writing. Current scholarship is concerned with how students write about writing in their literacy narrative papers (Carpenter and Falbo). Eldred and Mortensen note, "When we read for literacy narratives, we study how the text constructs a character's ongoing, social process of language acquisition" (512). I concur with Mary Soliday that "in focusing upon those moments when the self is on the threshold of possible intellectual, social, and emotional development, literacy narratives become sites of self-translation where writers can articulate the meanings and the consequences of their passages between language" (511).

While the literacy narrative, a well-researched and widely discussed genre in composition studies, helps students bring their literacy visions into their pages, it is not directly addressing concerns related to their identity which, I believe, has a great impact on their writerly voice. Recent articles also explore how creating better writing assignments help students meet the larger course learning outcomes (Rank and Pool). Keeping the importance of assignment design in mind, I have created a unique narrative assignment titled “Identity Narrative” for my writing students, which primarily aims to help them find their writerly voice through the understanding of their identity.

The “Identity Narrative” assignment, like most narrative assignments, aims to help writing students develop their own unique writing voice and style while enhancing their genre awareness and rhetorical understanding. It is unique for its ability to encourage students to critically reflect on their identities and their connection with their writerly personas. The assignment does not intend to replace the literacy narrative assignment; rather, it aims to be the first narrative assignment in a composition course. This approach allows students to initially discover their own writerly voice, rooted in their identity and self-perception, and subsequently use that unique voice in later assignments. Therefore, my paper including my assignment add nuanced contributions to the scholarly discourse on writerly voice and student identities, focusing on expanding the conversation rather than merely identifying gaps. My purpose is to introduce a new assignment into the vibrant field of our discipline. This paper presents a unified concept of a writer’s voice by demonstrating how the “Identity Narrative” assignment helps students reflect on their personal stories, backgrounds, and identities, thereby developing their unique writerly voices. This research is significant and valuable for writing instructors seeking to enhance their syllabi and course content by designing assignments that are both useful and impactful for students.

### **Literature Review: Voice, Identity, and Assignment Design**

When I began teaching in the U.S., I was heavily influenced by Donald Murray and his works. Donald Murray writes about four responsibilities of a writing student: i. A student must find his own subject because a student writer must have something to say, ii. A student should be able to “form his own opinion” to convince his readers, iii. A student must write in a way that he “earns an audience” and iv. A student must “write in many forms to know the appropriate genre” of writing what he must write (120-1). He also shares four responsibilities of writing teachers: i. A teacher must create a “psychological and physical environment in which the student can fulfill his responsibilities, ii. A teacher must enforce a deadline to foster more frequent and rigorous writing, iii. A teacher needs to cultivate “a climate of failure” to normalize students’ drafts and missed attempts and iv. A teacher needs to be a “diagnostician” who would listen to his students’ problems and then diagnose their papers instead of looking for spelling mistakes and grammatical errors (121). Based on Murray’s suggestions, I designed the “Identity Narrative” assignment to help my students explore and write about different aspects of their identities. This assignment is primarily intended for first-year composition students. Its goal is to teach the concept of writer’s voice, which students

will develop by reflecting on and writing about the diverse facets of their identity. In my teaching, this assignment was instrumental in encouraging students to move beyond traditional narrative writing. By guiding them to reflect on their identities, I was able to foster a deeper connection between their personal experiences and their writing process. Murray's emphasis on the importance of self-reflection in writing resonated with me, helping me shape this assignment as a way to build both their confidence and their ability to express themselves authentically.

The writer's voice is an important phenomenon in the field of composition studies. Sherry Seale Swain writes, "voice grows out of the soil of student writing, not from drills, lectures, or admonitions, not from workbooks or textbooks. Voice emerges during the composition process, a by-product of writer's focus on content, purpose, diction, style, and audience" (33). Though the spoken language is different from the written language, in writing, it is still possible to inculcate a writer's own unique voice. Composition scholars have written about voice in writing in several journals as I have addressed in the following paragraphs. However, there are rarely any discussions on how to teach voice to the students. What kind of writing assignments are helpful? How can teachers write their feedback on students' scripts that will not mute their voices? How can students revise their papers by retaining their writer's voice there? Can students even know that they have a writer's voice that is related to their social and personal identity?

When students write, they usually tend to emulate the voice of the sample texts. They write what they are required to, but they often weave in their own perceptions and ideas into their writing. When they become professional writers, as Findley writes, they often establish their identities as "nonauthors and non-owners" in their writing (434). Hiding the authorship often leaves the writers in disillusionment and distress. Readers only read the written piece without acknowledging the challenging work and even sacrifices the writers have made in the composition process. William Carpenter and Bianca Falbo find that "students' identities as writers are formed first by extrinsic responses to their texts rather than by the content of their texts themselves" (105). They did their research on 130 literary narrative samples written between 1999 and 2001 to compare narratives of fresh writing students with the returning ones. For fresh writing students, success in their academic writing forms their writerly identity. For the returning ones, the process of writing indicates the identities of them as writers. They write, "speak to the important role that reflective practices play in students' improved awareness of themselves as individuals who think, read, write, and speak in the world" (107). Though it is a frequent practice in college composition courses to have the students compose reflective notes, many students still struggle with writing about their writing processes.

On this note, Rebecca Gemmell suggests that keeping and maintaining a writer's notebook is a great idea to develop a writer's voice in academic writing. Though journaling in a notebook is more of a reflective writing practice, a student writes more autonomously when they acknowledge their own voice. Gemmell finds that students write thesis statements that "presented a clearer stance," use personal experience to support their claim, be more aware of their audience and witness the larger goal of

writing (67). Using a notebook as an assignment or in-class activity changed students' perspectives about class and writing. She also finds that putting students' opinions into the classroom discussion has freed their voices and prepared them better for college education. An assignment that offers a free space for students to author their personal stories is useful for them to find their own voice because a student's writerly voice is closely tied to their personal identity.

The idea of identity comes in two basic categories: individual/personal and plural or group/social identities. Personal identity develops the way people uniquely define themselves. The "I" is personal. On the other hand, social identity refers to people's self-categorizations in relation to their groups or communities. The "we" is social. Travis L. Dixon uses both Social Identity Theory and Social Categorization Theory synonymously and writes, "Our personal identities can become tied to our perception of our own group in relation to other groups" (249). He argues that the level of importance of a group-category depicted in a media content impacts the individual's favoritism. Michael Hughes et al. define Social Identity Theory as "a multifaceted social psychological theory of how people's self-conceptions as members of social groups influence intergroup behavior and group processes" (26). When students are asked to write their life stories about the identities they are assigned to and claim, they write both personal and collective stories. In their stories, their families, educational institutions, teachers, peers, and any sort of negative and positive sponsor comes along with the memories of challenging experiences.

Therefore, it is important to have students compose personal stories. Sometimes, students have issues that prevent them from becoming better writers. They often struggle with forming their writerly voice. It happens increasingly often to multilingual and other marginalized students who already have a struggle translating their thoughts from one language to the other. For multilingual students, having a voice of their own, which they can use in their writing, is liberating. They develop critical language awareness, which liberates them from the shackle of white language supremacy. When students write life-writing or autobiographical narratives, they can resist standard English and incorporate multiple languages and dialects to claim their own unique writerly voice. On the contrary, when students practice academic writing or research-based writing and aim to get published in mainstream publication platforms, they understand the power of standardized convention of English language and emulate the genre of research writing and write accordingly. Through my assignment, I aim to foster a pedagogical practice that helps students develop their own voice and feel confident and comfortable about it.

For marginalized writers, Nancy Mack points out, "Having grown up in a culture full of misrepresentations, marginalized students need to question how they want to be represented in their writing. If they are not permitted to testify for their lives as writers, marginalized students might as well have never come to the university." Therefore, having a valid space, like a writing assignment, is important to let marginalized students

write about themselves in their voice because “marginalized students must be seen and heard as complex individuals” (Mack).

María P. Carvajal Regidor writes about how educators and teachers can help college students handle their traumatic literacy experiences better and become better writers and second language users. Since multilingual students find it challenging to always stay grammatically “correct,” Regidor suggests that one of the effective ways to encourage students is to exclude the concept of grammatical accuracy from the idea of “good” writing as it only conforms to the white language supremacy.

But how can educators know that students have diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds? It is not suggested that educators should “assume” their students’ identities or backgrounds or thought processes. In this case, assignments like “Identity Narrative Assignment” serve as a safe zone for the students to comfortably disclose their identities; as Mack writes, “writing assignments need to be enlarged to include the cultures and identities of students.” When students understand that the teacher is only interested in their stories, they have less fear of judgements or grammatical errors. Hence, they gradually develop a writerly voice in the writing process. However, teachers need to be aware of the learning environment which can potentially stimulate and reintroduce trauma. My primary goal is to help my students develop their own unique writerly voice stemming from their own life stories. Thus, I remain mindful of the prompts (see Appendix 2) I provide before they write, the questions (see Appendix 3) I ask after they write and offer my feedback after they turn in their final draft.

Nevertheless, why do writing teachers care about the voice of their students? It is because the voice that comes through personal writing is important, powerful, has the ability to reinforce social justice, and “may empower social change” (Case and Hunter). Teaching voice through personal writing is one way to be an empathetic teacher. Colleen A. Ruggieri writes about the importance of personal writing in discovering the power of students’ voices. Personal writing, to Ruggieri, is a wonderful way to encourage expression that can “create peace in students’ minds and hearts” (48). She notices that students, despite writing personal assignments, find no personal connection to their work when they are asked to write after being encouraged to find a similar voice in the works of other authors. Most of the time, students do not use the “voice lens” to read a text. Peter Elbow, in “Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries,” explains why reading a text using the voice lens is useful. He claims that readers tend to read a written work more when they hear a voice from it. We sometimes offer mentor texts to our students to emulate the style of an established writer. However, it is crucial to help students identify and practice their own writerly voice first and then read multiple mentor texts. Students find better connections with the mentor texts that are close to their own voice because there is an inevitable connection between the voice and the self.

Another way of helping students find their writerly voice is to encourage them to write more and in their own way. Donald Murray writes, “I have my own way of looking at the world and my own way of using language to communicate what I see. My voice is the

product of Scottish genes and a Yankee environment, of Baptist sermons and the newspaper city room, of all the language I have heard and spoken” (67). So, when students write, they use the voice that has existed in them since their childhood. A writing assignment only helps them to articulate in their voice. Assignments are the vehicle to travel through students’ minds and brain and understand their thoughts. Ann N. Amicucci and Michelle Neely write about how teachers understand students and their voices in writing. They write that “students’ positions as aged, gendered, raced, classed, bodied individuals shape how they approach the task of writing” (Neely and Amicucci, “Knowing Students”). They ask teachers to “bring the subject of voice construction into the classroom explicitly to teach students how to navigate the challenges of writerly voice” (Neely and Amicucci, “Knowing Students”). The best subject to bring voice into the classroom is students’ own lives. Blitz and Hurlbert highlight the importance of understanding and responding to “the personal and cultural implications of what each student is telling us, the uniqueness of each student, of each life” (29). The “Identity Narrative” creates the opportunity for students and teachers to have a dialogue to know each student from their unique embodied experiences and identities.

The inspiration for creating the assignment comes from the research of Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner, who claim that personal connections promote meaningful writing experiences to undergraduate students (320). They designed a writing project for undergraduate students from three different universities and collected their samples. Then they applied a grounded theory approach to find “personal connection” coded in their responses. The findings of their study prove that first, students find writing projects meaningful when they can connect their writing to their personal factors (329). Second, students find the writing project meaningful when they can relate their writing to their peers, family members and friends (331). Third, students find their writing project meaningful when they can connect to their topics or subjects (331). However, they also emphasize the importance of creating a relevant and meaningful writing project. I thought if I could create an assignment that motivates students to write about their stories, experiences, and how they shaped their identities, my students would benefit.

The importance of designing a meaningful writing assignment is, thus, crucial for writing teachers. Elliot Jacobs finds that “Effective place-based writing assignments are process-focused, inquiry-based and genre-specific” (50). He argues that process-based writing is reflective, observational, and personable. It is like environmental literature. It allows students to reflect on their subjective experiences, and perceptions of land. When students find their connection with land and environment, they find themselves speaking meaningfully about themselves without even mentioning themselves directly. The “Identity Narrative” allows students to reflect on their childhood experiences, environments, backgrounds, and personal connections with the surroundings. However, the assignment works on the students at its optimum level when the assignment is clearly instructed to the students.

Different instructors make various choices while writing a writing assignment. Allison Rank and Heather Pool use Bloom's taxonomy as an inspiration for offering writing instructors a typology linked to course objectives to reduce the confusion and confused writing responses of the student writers. They suggest that assignments should be linked to course objectives and evaluated accordingly. Free-writing and ungraded assignments offer a wonderful place for students who struggle with their thoughts and are willing to receive feedback to further improve their writing. Whether free-writing or guided writing, it is important to begin an assignment with a broader primary question followed by other secondary questions. Among several prompt categories, Rank and Pool write about an additional prompt category called "reflect," which tests students' ability to assess their own views and opinions about their writing process and progress. When I designed the assignment, I focused more on the "reflect" category in rubrics as the assignment requires students to constantly reflect on their lives.

In the appendix section of my paper, besides the prompts and general set of questions I ask students at the conference, I have included the abridged assignment sheet, which has learning outcomes related to the College Composition course learning outcomes, and "reflect" prompt category to allow students to use the process of metacognition to write about their own identities as constructed and perceived. The genre-based approach was instrumental in preparing this assignment. Irene Clark writes that writing assignments "can be viewed as a performance-oriented text genre, the purpose of which is to generate particular understanding and action that will ultimately lead to a subsequent genre--the college essay" ("Genre Approach"). The goal of the "Identity Narrative" assignment is to help students find their writerly voice by reflecting on their lives.

### **How I Proceed with the Assignment**

I introduce the assignment on the very first day of the course. I begin by introducing myself and sharing aspects of my background, intentionally highlighting key elements of my identity that have shaped my writerly voice. After an informal introductory session with the class, I organize a reading session and group work to engage with the assigned texts (as outlined in the assignment sheet). Next, I display the assignment sheet on the screen and guide the students through it. Following this, I lead a brainstorming session, encouraging them to think about their responses. My students then jot down key points they wish to explore in their writing. I reassure them that their thoughts and voices are safe with me.

After building the bridge of trust and comfort with my students, I use a few prompts (see Appendix 2) to guide my students to think about their identities and backgrounds. After the students submit their "Identity Narrative" assignment, I conduct a mini-interview session with them to hear their speaking voice. Though I maintain a conversational tone throughout the talk, I prepare the questions I want to ask them beforehand (see Appendix 3).

## My Observation & The Success Story

Reading the identity narrative papers of my students is a real reward I experience when I check their scripts. I do not look for spelling mistakes or grammatical errors. All I search for is their stories because the stories are unique to each student. The constellation of the story is what helps me know my students better and help them better in their writing process.

When my students meet me briefly after their first draft, I encourage them to talk about their identities more. Sometimes, when students speak, they say something which they have not addressed in the written responses because they write for their classmates and instructor under the impression of being judged. In the conference, I provide a non-judgemental conversational environment for them by encouraging them to speak as much as they feel comfortable with. It is important to hear students out. However, it is also crucial to deal with their personal stories in a delicate manner. I always believe that care and respect are earned. When I respect students' personal space and sense of boundary, they feel cared for and more comfortable with me. As a result, it happened to several of them that the conversation made them think of adding more details to their draft. In such cases, students revise their draft and resubmit it after the conversation. I do not treat students' drafts as a final product. This gives my students more confidence in writing in their own unique and comfortable voices.

I have noticed that students have a diverse range of experiences in their lives. They come from different sociocultural and economic backgrounds. Deep inside, they want to tell their own stories and write about something that matters to them. They do not want to conform to the White language supremacy. The Conference of College Composition and Communication (CCCC) position statement on White Language Supremacy writes, "WLS assists white supremacy by using language to control reality and resources by defining and evaluating people, places, things, reading, writing, rhetoric, pedagogies, and processes in multiple ways that damage our students and our democracy." My goal was to create a more inclusive learning environment for my students so that their personal and linguistic identities are safeguarded.

When students write narrative or reflective essays, they write more comfortably, and thus, use more colloquial expressions. "This Ain't Another Statement, This is a Demand for Black Linguistic Justice" encourages teachers to "stop using academic language and standard English as the accepted communicative norm." Keeping the demand in mind, when I encourage my students to write in their own way, meaning in their own voice, they write with more interest. I tell them that the number of heads does not matter to me, but the number of voices does! So far, my students remain interested in participating and interacting with the class because they know they are part of the discourse community.

The mini-interview session helps me know about how my students want to proceed with the voice they have developed in one assignment. They show interest in writing other



assignments with the same level of comfort and ease. This reflection helps me to move forward and introduce the concept of genre awareness.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

To write this paper, I did not want to conduct empirical research. I wanted to share this assignment and my personal experience with the reader community of this journal. In my future research, I plan to conduct an IRB-approved study to empirically show my readers how the “Identity Narrative” assignment works to help students develop their writerly voice stemming from their sense of self and identity. From the inception of this assignment to writing this paper, I have developed a new pedagogical strategy, which is to have group conversations among my students. I will do it for my future research to show how students themselves learn from reading from and conversing about their “Identity Narrative” assignment. As a writing teacher, it is my heartfelt responsibility to create a more inclusive learning environment for my students coming from a diverse range of backgrounds and help them develop a voice of their own. I am happy to know how it works for other writing teachers if they plan to incorporate it into their writing courses.

## Appendix 1

### Identity Narrative Assignment

In this first assignment, you will explore your personal experiences and reflect on key moments that have shaped your identity. Through reading a diverse range of narratives, we will analyze how writers use storytelling to develop their unique voices. This assignment serves as a foundation for you to situate your identity within different writing contexts and discover your own distinct writerly voice.

#### Assignment Goals:

- Use self-assessment and reflection to identify the important experiences and influences of your own literacy development
- Use elements of narrative storytelling in your writing
- Both *describe* events, people, or experiences and *reflect on or analyze* the significance of those events, people, or experiences to your development as a writer, reader, and thinker
- Locate and assess implicit and explicit biases.
- Critically examine the biases and think of handling them with caution in the writing processes.

#### Relevant Readings:

- “Talking Back” by Bell Hooks
- “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” by Gloria Anzaldua
- “How Identity Shapes My Writing”
- TedTalks provided in the class

#### Audience and Purpose

Every piece of writing has an audience—a specific reader the writer aims to reach. In academic settings, many papers are written for the classroom community of writers and readers. For this assignment, your primary audience is yourself and your instructor. You are encouraged to write openly and authentically about your identity, perspectives, and biases, knowing that this is a space for honest self-reflection.

#### Assignment Goals:

- Use self-assessment and reflection to identify the important experiences and influences of your own literacy development
- Use elements and techniques of narrative storytelling in your writing
- Both *describe* events, people, or experiences and *reflect on or analyze* the significance of those events, people, or experiences to your development as a writer, reader, and thinker
- Locate and assess implicit and explicit biases.

### **Learning Outcomes:**

- Reflect on individual experiences and challenges related to identity by addressing insights about self-perception, beliefs, values, and how they evolve over time.
- Choose appropriate conventions, writing tone and style, and document design for a range of genres, situations, purposes, and audiences.
- Use evidence, some of which may be derived from personal experience and field research, to demonstrate an awareness of a larger conversation and multiple viewpoints surrounding an issue.
- Analyze the societal constructs, stereotypes, and biases that influence identity narratives.
- Enhance written communication skills by articulating complex identity-related concepts clearly, persuasively, and ethically.

### **Requirements:**

- Students are encouraged to write at least 500 to 700 words.
- No work citation is required unless it is needed to clarify a context or situation.

### **Deadlines:**

- Week 1: Submit the First Draft of Identity Narrative for peer review
- Week 2: Meet the instruction for a brief conversation and Discuss the Memo
- Week 2: Submit the Revised Identity Narrative after the conversation

## Appendix 2

### Identity Narrative Prompts

1. How do you identify yourself? You may discuss demographic aspects or any other identity that feels most meaningful to you.
2. Do you see any part of your identity as contrasting with societal expectations? If so, how does this contrast shape your perspective?
3. What has influenced the development of your identity? How have your experiences and exposures shaped who you are today?
4. In what ways does your identity influence your perception of the world?
5. Do you think your identity introduces any biases in your thinking or writing? If so, how do you plan to navigate or address these biases in your writing process?

## Appendix 3

### Possible Questions to Ask Students in the Conference

1. Can you recall your first writing experience? What did you write, and what motivated you to write it?
2. As you worked on your Identity Narrative Assignment, did you notice your voice being shaped by your identity? How did your personal experiences influence the way you told your story?
3. How do you think your writing differs from that of someone with a different social or personal background? Can you share an example or two?
4. When reading texts by a diverse group of writers, how does your personal identity shape your understanding and interpretation of their work?
5. How has the Identity Narrative Assignment helped you reflect on the connection between your identity and your writerly voice? What insights did you gain about yourself as a writer?

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