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What Is Composition? Definition, Types, and Examples

By Richard Nordquist**Updated June 24, 2019**

In the literary sense, a composition (from the Latin "to put together") is the way a writer assembles words and sentences to create a coherent and meaningful work. Composition can also mean the activity of writing, the nature of the subject of a piece of writing, the piece of writing itself, and the name of a college course assigned to a student. This essay focuses on practicing how people write.

Key Takeaways

In writing, composition refers to the way a writer structures a piece of writing.

The four modes of composition, which were codified in the late 19th century, are description, narration, exposition, and argumentation.

Good writing can include elements of multiple modes of composition.

Composition Definition

Just like a musician and an artist, a [writer](#) sets the tone of a composition to his or her purpose, making decisions about what that tone should be to form a structure. A writer might express anything from the point of view of cool logic to impassioned anger. A composition might use clean and simple prose, flowery, descriptive passages, or analytical nomenclature.

Since the 19th century, English writers and teachers have been grappling with ways to classify forms and modes of writing so beginner writers can have a place to start. After decades of

struggle, rhetoricians ended up with four categories of writing that still make up the mainstream of Composition 101 college classes: Description, [Narration](#), [Exposition](#), and [Argumentation](#).

Types of Composition Writing

The four classical types of composition (description, narration, exposition, and argumentation) are not categories, per se. They would almost never stand alone in a piece of writing, but rather are best-considered modes of writing, pieces of writing styles that can be combined and used to create a whole. That is to say, they can inform a piece of writing, and they are good starting points for understanding how to put a piece of writing together.

Examples for each of the following composition types are based on the American poet Gertrude Stein's famous quote from "[Sacred Emily](#)," her 1913 poem: "A rose is a rose is a rose."

Description

A description, or descriptive writing, is a statement or account that describes something or someone, listing characteristic features and significant details to provide a reader with a portrayal in words. Descriptions are set in the concrete, in the reality, or solidity of an object as a representation of a person, place, or thing in time. They provide the look and feel of objects, a simultaneous whole, with as many details as you'd like.

A description of a rose might include the color of the petals, the aroma of its perfume, where it exists in your garden, whether it is in a plain terracotta pot or a hothouse in the city.

A description of "Sacred Emily" might talk about the length of the poem and the facts of when it was written and published. It might list the images that Stein uses or mention her use of repetition and alliteration.

Narration

A narration, or narrative writing, is a [personal account](#), a story that the writer tells his or her reader. It can be an account of a series of facts or events, given in order and establishing connections between the steps. It can even be dramatic, in which case you can present each individual scene with actions and dialog. The chronology could be in strict order, or you could include flashbacks.

A narration about a rose might describe how you first came across it, how it came to be in your garden, or why you went to the greenhouse that day.

A narration about "Sacred Emily" might be about how you came across the poem, whether it was in a class or in a book lent by a friend, or if you were simply curious about where the phrase "a rose is a rose" came from and found it on the internet.

Exposition

Exposition, or [expository writing](#), is the act of expounding or explaining a person, place, thing, or event. Your purpose is not to just describe something, but to give it a reality, an interpretation, your ideas on what that thing means. In some respects, you are laying out a proposition to explain a general notion or abstract idea of your subject.

An exposition on a rose might include its taxonomy, what its scientific and common names are, who developed it, what the impact was when it was announced to the public, and/or how was it distributed.

An exposition on "Sacred Emily" could include the environment in which Stein wrote, where she was living, what her influences were, and what the impact was on reviewers.

Argumentation

Also called [argumentative writing](#), an argumentation is basically an exercise in comparing and contrasting. It is the methodological presentation of both sides of an argument using logical or formal reasoning. The end result is formulated to persuade why thing A is better than thing B. What you mean by "better" makes up the content of your arguments.

Argumentation applied to a rose might be why one particular rose is better than another, why you prefer roses over daisies, or vice versa.

Argumentation over "Sacred Emily" could compare it to Stein's other poems or to another poem covering the same general topic.

The Value of Composition

A great deal of debate enlivened college theoretical [rhetoric](#) in the 1970s and 1980s, with scholars attempting to throw off what they saw were the confining strictures of these four writing styles. Despite that, they remain the mainstay of some college composition classes.

What these four classical modes do is provide beginner writers a way to purposefully direct their writings, a structure on which to form an idea. However, they can also be limiting. Use the traditional modes of composition as tools to gain practice and direction in your writing, but remember that they should be considered starting points rather than rigid requirements.

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