

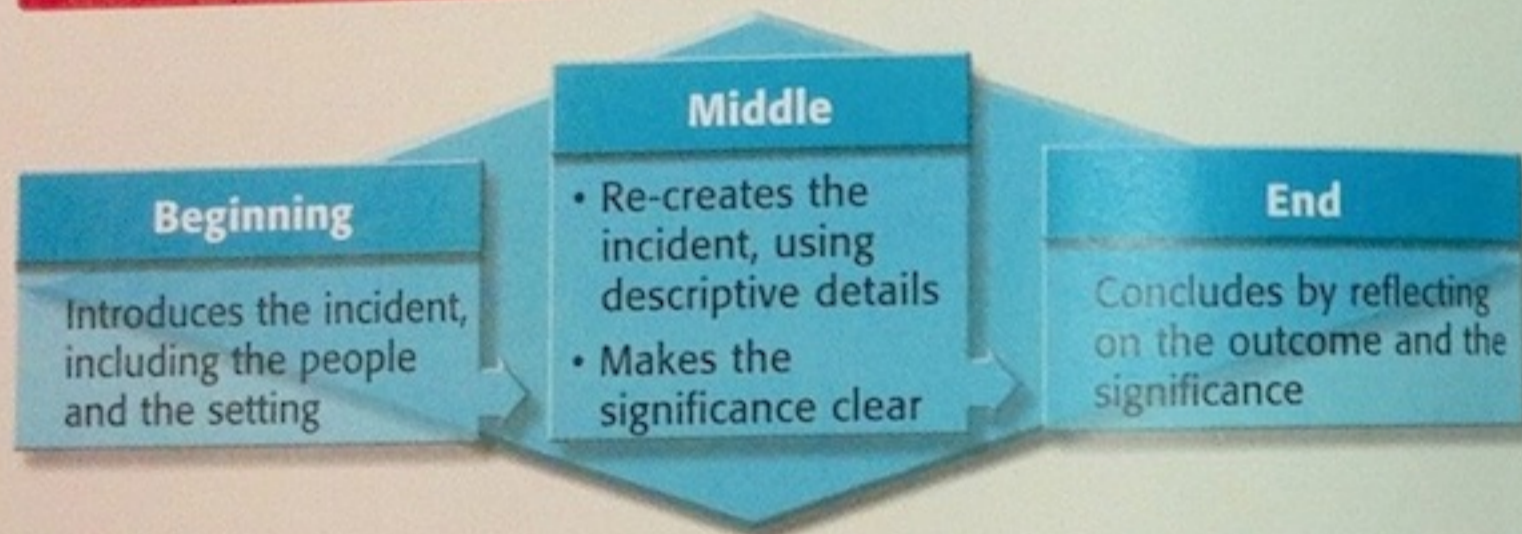
Autobiographical Incident

Learn What It Is

An **autobiographical incident** is a personal account of a significant event in your life. It can reveal an important part of your personality. Writers use these incidents in descriptions of their lives and in essays that reflect turning points in their views on issues.

Basics in a Box

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL INCIDENT AT A GLANCE



RUBRIC

Standards for Writing

A successful autobiographical incident should

- focus on a well-defined incident or a series of related incidents
- provide background information for the incident
- use elements such as plot, character, and setting as appropriate
- make the order of events clear
- use description or dialogue as appropriate
- include precise language and specific details
- show why the experience was significant
- maintain a consistent tone and point of view

See How It's Done: Autobiographical Incident

Student Model
Elizabeth Kim
New Trier High School

My Father the Dragon

As a child, I was curious about many aspects of my life. First, I didn't understand why my parents hadn't raised me in Korea, where all my relatives lived. I only knew that my parents immigrated to the United States after they married. Also, I was always curious about the Chinese zodiac, knowing that I am a rooster. When my father told me that he was a dragon, I thought how well the symbol fit him. Later in my life, I reached an understanding of my parents' hard work and sacrifice to raise a family and of the true meaning of my father's symbol.

One day when I was about 12 years old, my father came home tired and sore from working hard from six o'clock in the morning to six o'clock at night. He works at a small dry cleaners a block away from our house. Its old, shabby appearance seems almost lost and forgotten behind a new row of stores. On this day, I noticed his hand was bandaged. He seemed to be in a lot of pain. I felt confused because I always thought of my father as a strong man showing off his biceps and grinning proudly. When I saw my father in pain with bandaged hands, I was surprised. I used to think of him as a dragon—fierce, strong, and powerful, just like the zodiac. Suddenly that image faded away as I saw my dad with streaks of white in his hair, a frail and overworked body, and injured hands.

I asked him about his hands, and he told me that he had been fixing machines at the store and cut himself badly. He usually tries to fix everything himself. I asked him, "Why do you have to fix machines when you used to teach math in Korea?" I thought about the black-and-white pictures of his class wearing dark uniforms and my father looking handsome in his suit.

RUBRIC IN ACTION

1 The introduction suggests a purpose for retelling the incident.

Another option:

- Start by relating the incident itself.

2 Gives the background for the incident, including setting and character

3 Presents specific details to describe the main character

4 Includes dialogue and specific details to show significance of the event

Then my father told me how he had wanted to come to America because he had heard great things about it. He had dreamed of green lawns, picket fences, and friendly neighbors. He had dreamed about vacuums and different kinds of machines that would make everything easier. Most of all, he had dreamed that his children would grow up in this wonderful country and be happy. He only wanted the best for his children.

Then my eyes fell to look at the bandages on his hands, and I didn't see them as a weakness. I saw a whole new picture. My dad was still a dragon inside. This time, however, he had battle wounds. He had sacrificed his high-status job in Korea for his children and had come to America, knowing little English. He now works hard in a small cleaners. He cares more deeply about supporting and raising his children in a better environment than he cares about his own health or safety. He's determined to work hard so that the future of his children will be better than it would be in Korea.

Every day when he comes home from work, I look at my father proudly. I see a dragon.

5 Includes precise language and details

6 Uses transitional language to make the sequence of emotions clear

7 Shows why the incident is important

8 Indicates the writer's feelings about her father

Do It Yourself

Writing Prompt

Write an autobiographical incident describing an event in your life that has meaning for you.

Purpose To explore and explain

Audience Classmates, family members, other friends

1 Prewriting

Examine your memories. Pick an incident from your life that has meaning for you. To jog your memory, look at photo albums and page through old journals and diaries. Ask friends or family members what they remember. Create a "life line" showing high and low points, looking for an event that deeply affected you.

Focus on your purpose and audience. Consider how to tell the incident in a way that will hold the interest of your audience. Select just the parts that illustrate the purpose of your story.

Sketch out ideas. Where did the incident take place? Is there something special about the time or the place it happened? Who are the people involved? How do they look, act, and talk?

2 Drafting

Begin drafting. Start writing without being overly concerned with wording. Concentrate on the meaning of the incident rather than the details. You can fill in the specifics later.

Organize your ideas. Chronological order is often most appropriate for an autobiographical incident. You can consider using a **flashback**—that is, returning briefly to an earlier time—when it would be effective. Be sure to fill in background information the reader will need.

Elements of an Autobiographical Incident

Narration	Describes events or actions that occurred
Description	Brings scenes and people to life with detailed language
Dialogue	Shows the events through the characters' own words when possible

Wrap up your account. End with a statement or paragraph that makes the significance of the incident clear.

For friendly feedback from your peers, see p. 411.

3 Revising

TARGET SKILL ▶ Showing Action You can describe a person by showing that person in action. Your reader will then be able to form an impression of the person by observing the action. As you revise, review the rubric at the beginning of this chapter.

I felt confused because I always thought of my father as a strong man *showing off his biceps and grinning proudly*

4 Editing and Proofreading

TARGET SKILL ▶ Parallel Constructions Words and phrases that have the same function in a sentence should also have the same form. Avoid mixing different parts of speech or different kinds of phrases in a parallel list.

Then my father told me how he had wanted to come to America because he had heard great things about it. He dreamed of green lawns, picket fences, and neighbors *being friendly*. He dreamed about vacuuming with a machine and different kinds of machines that would make everything easier.

For more about parallel constructions, see pp. 379–380.

5 Sharing and Reflecting

After you have edited and proofread your autobiographical incident, find a way to **share** it with an audience. You might consider reading it aloud to your family or providing copies for your friends. Ask them to give you feedback on your performance.

For Your Working Portfolio As you **reflect** on your writing process, think of what you have learned about yourself and about the topic. Did writing bring back details you had forgotten? Did it cause you to change your mind about the incident? Did your readers' responses affect your process? Attach your answers to your finished work. Save your autobiographical incident in your **Working Portfolio**.

Real World Autobiographical Incident

Autobiographical narratives are found in the biography section of a bookstore. You might also find one in your own journal or diary. Some places you can find personal narratives include:

- magazines and newspapers
- diaries or journals
- speeches
- the Internet

Book

Fighting Fire

by Caroline Paul

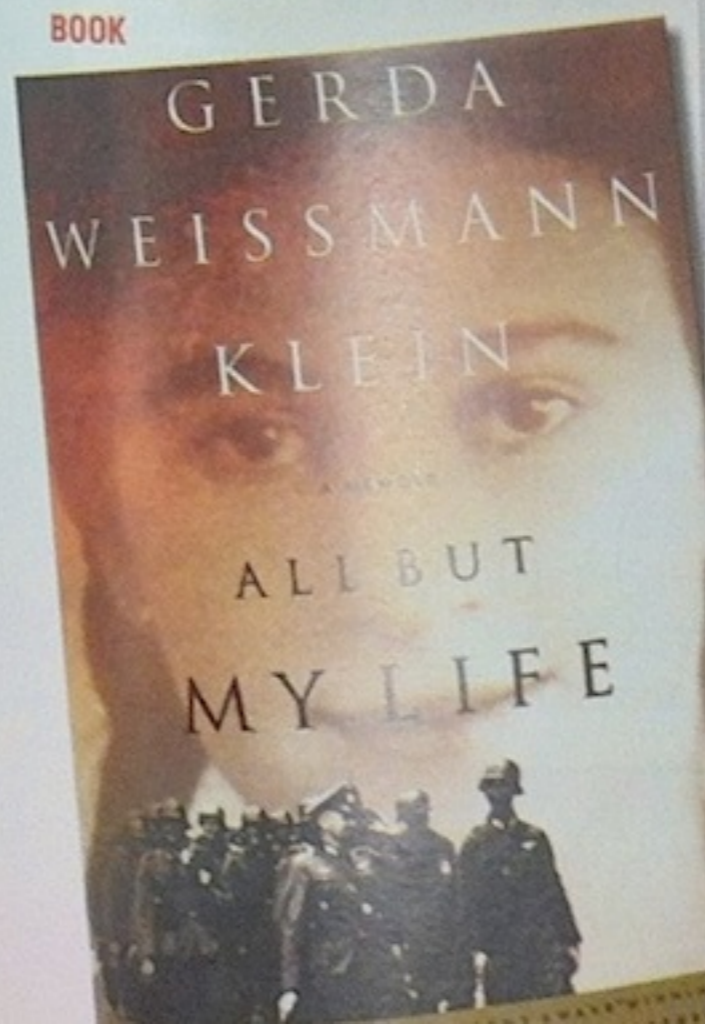
At the top of the stairs,
I cannot see my own hand
pressed against my air mask.
Hell must be like this, I think.
The nozzle is cool and definite
in my hand . . . I am first in,
where every engine person
wants to be, first in, with the
nozzle. In front of me is a chasm
of black and, somewhere, the
seat of the fire.

For a longer excerpt from this book,
see MODEL BANK, p. 634.



INTERNET PERSONAL HOME PAGE

BOOK



Location: _____

Welcome to my Web page!

I'm Kyle and I live in Connecticut. I've lived here for about three years, but before that I lived in Florida. It was tough, at first, getting used to life up here and making new friends, but now I love it almost as much as my old home. I've got one older brother and two younger sisters. I just started high school, so now I'm in the same school as my brother, which can be strange, but he's OK, I guess.

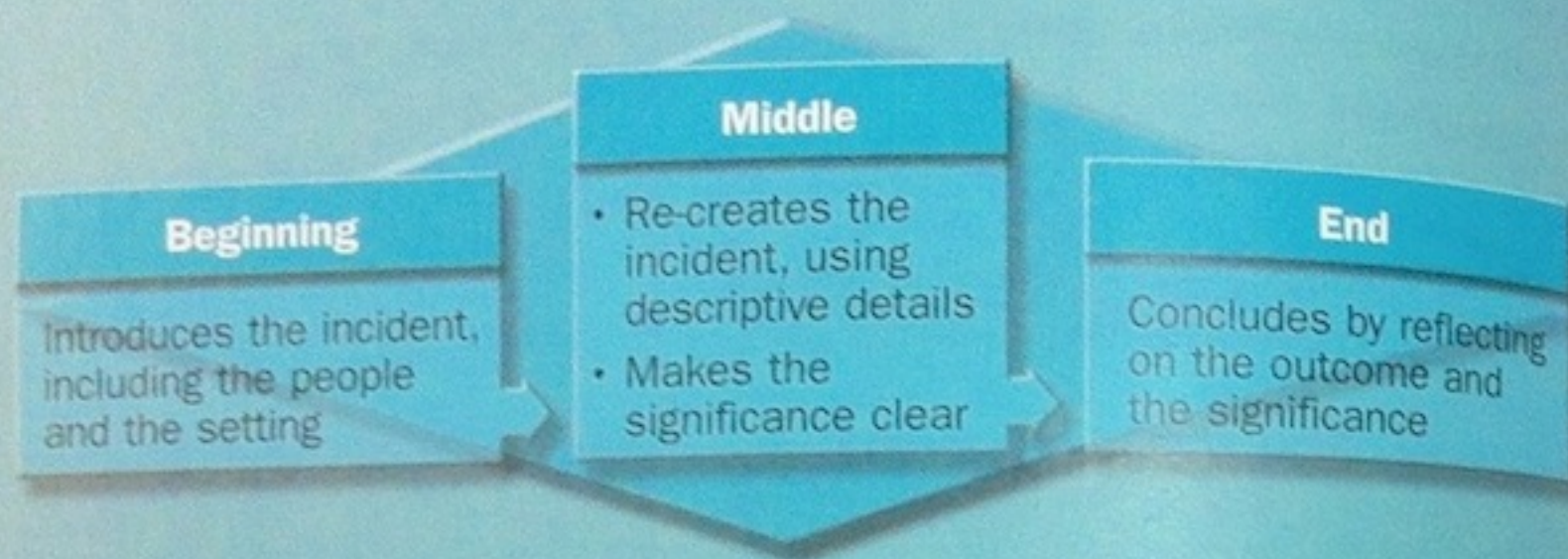
School Projects
Check out my latest school projects

School Sports
Baseball, basketball, and soccer

Hobbies
I am training my dog at obedience school

Student Help Desk

Autobiographical Incident at a Glance



IDEA Bank

Finding and Developing a Writing Idea

1. Remember specific objects from your past.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family pet • family photo • childhood toy • most-worn shoes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • baseball glove • swim goggles • post card of vacation spot • tape or CD recording
2. Think about special days.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thanksgiving • your birthday • a family member's birthday 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Year's Eve • school dance or game • last day of school • first day of spring
3. Learn from the pros.	<p>Many successful writers include autobiographical incidents in their writing. Here are a few to check out:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coretta Scott King, <i>Montgomery Boycott</i> and John Steinbeck, <i>Travels with Charley</i> (<i>Language of Literature</i>, Grade 10) • Barbara Kingsolver, <i>High Tide in Tucson</i> • Dylan Thomas, <i>A Child's Christmas in Wales</i> • Carl Sandburg, <i>Fair and Circus Days</i> 	

Purpose and Audience

Trust Me on This

Consider these questions to focus on purpose and audience:

- Would I like to read this if it were not my own experience?
- What part of my experience would most interest my audience?
- What feelings and information do I want to convey?
- What could I leave out and still have a good story?

Friendly Feedback

Did You Care?

Questions for Your Peer Reader

- What was the most interesting part?
- What details strengthened the writing?
- What would have made it more convincing?
- What could I have left out?



Publishing Options

Here Goes Something!

Print

- Publish your autobiographical incident in a local or school newspaper

Oral Communication

- Read your narrative aloud at a family gathering
- Record it to send to family and friends

Online

- Check out mcdougallittell.com for more publishing options

The Bottom Line



Checklist for Autobiographical Incident

Have I . . .

- | | |
|---|--|
| — provided a well-defined incident? | — made the order of events clear? |
| — shown why the incident was important to me? | — used dialogue and description as appropriate? |
| — given adequate background information? | — kept my purpose and audience in mind throughout? |