

Tale of the Rodent

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A good narrative may be found in a seemingly insignificant event, as Roger Starr illustrates in "Tale of the Rodent." While both the action and plot are simple, the essay's meaning is complex. The scene is New York City.

Key Words and Phrases

gesture (1)	instincts (4)
erratic (2)	abandoned (4)
incongruous (3)	torrent (8)
intimidated (3)	supremely (9)

The startled movement of a young woman in one corner of the bus shelter indicated that something was wrong. She moved again, a gesture of discomfort, even fear. Then I saw what troubled her: an infant rodent—perhaps mouse, perhaps rat—a small ball of brown cotton, with a toothpick for a tail. It had somehow crossed Seventh Avenue, climbed the curb and was moving through the shelter and across the sidewalk. 1

I say moving rather than running because the creature was too compact to reveal legs. Its speed was so erratic, and its direction so changeable, that it could have been a battery-driven toy riding on a hidden eccentric wheel. Another woman gasped at the sight of the little thing, children pointed, men went out of their way to avoid it. 2

To me it seemed more incongruous than scary, not merely outnumbered by people but intimidated by the hardness of the world into which it had suddenly emerged. From where? In what soft place on the other side of this busiest highway had its mother gnawed a nest in a fortress of brick and concrete, glass and steel? 3

Between the legs of pedestrians, the animal darted to the door of a candy store. Its feeding instincts were sound, although it could not poke through the slit between the bottom of the glass door and the sill. The instinct that had taken it to that store made its adult role obvious. It 4

abandoned the candy store for the adjacent entrance to a large office building.

5 The superintendent, a bundle of keys hanging from his belt, was standing at the door. Rodent and superintendent vanished into the lobby, only to emerge moments later, animal first.

6 The superintendent kicked at it, driving the animal back to the sidewalk. Then he looked at me almost regretfully. Whatever the rodent might sometime become, the keeper of the keys **knew it was not** yet a fair match for the guardian of an office building.

7 The superintendent's kick must have hurt the animal; its movements became even more erratic than before. But to my astonishment, it crossed the curb and darted into the street, the **traffic** light in its favor. Unthinkingly wishing it safe passage, I saw it disappear beneath each passing car, then emerge again and move erratically onward.

The game—if game it was—was not to last. The light changed, releasing a torrent of cars across 44th Street, and when they had gone, the animal was left motionless on the pavement. No blood, no gore, just a tiny dead thing, hardly bigger than a large beetle, in the middle of the avenue, invisible to any passing motorist. Moments later my bus came and took me home to my apartment house.

I felt I had witnessed something small, but supremely serious.

Thesis and Organization

1. The **story** is presented chronologically, starting at the author's **first** sighting of the rodent and concluding with its death and the author's comment on the narrative. Examine the paragraphs in between to determine why the author breaks his paragraphs where he does.
2. Conflict is a key element in narrative. What is the nature of the conflict in this essay? If the subject is the rodent, who or **what** is the rodent in conflict with? What role does the narrator play in that conflict?
3. At what point in the essay does Starr bring in his attitude **toward** the rodent? To **what** extent does the narrator experience inner conflict? **How** would you describe it?
4. Starr **ends** the essay with a statement that can be phrased as a question. What does the narrative suggest in answer to the question, "**What** is it about the tale of the rodent that is 'supremely serious'?" The answer is the essay's implied thesis.

POINTERS FOR USING NARRATION

Exploring the Topic

1. **What point do you want to make?** What is the subject of your narrative? What assertion do you want your narrative to make about the subject? Is your primary purpose to inform, to persuade, or to entertain?
2. **What happened?** What are the events involved in the narrative? When does the action start? Stop? Which events are crucial?
3. **Why and how did it happen?** What caused the events? How did it cause them?
4. **Who or what was involved?** What does the reader need to know about the characters? What do the characters look like? Talk like? How do they think? How do others respond to them?
5. **What is the setting for your story?** What does the reader need to know about the setting? What features are particularly noteworthy? How can they best be described?
6. **When did the story occur?** What tense will be most effective in relating the narrative?
7. **What was the sequence of events?** What happened when? Within that chronology, what is most important: time, place, attitude, what?
8. **What conflicts were involved?** What levels of conflict exist? Is there any internal conflict?
9. **What is the relationship between the narrator and the action?** Is the narrator a participant or an observer? What is the attitude of the narrator toward the story? What feelings should the narrator evoke from the reader? What should be the attitude of the reader toward the narrative? What can be gained by using first person? Second person? Third person?

Drafting the Paper

1. **Know your reader.** Try to second-guess your reader's initial attitude toward your narrative so if that attitude is not what you want it to be, you can choose your details to elicit the desired reaction. A reader can be easily bored, so keep your details to the point and your action moving. Play on similar experiences your reader may have had or on information you can assume is widely known.
2. **Know your purpose.** If you are writing to inform, make sure you provide enough information to carry your point. If you are writing to persuade, work on your persona so that the reader will be favorably inclined to adopt your viewpoint. If you are writing to entertain, keep

your tone in mind. A humorous piece, for instance, can and probably will vary from chuckle to guffaw to belly laugh. Make sure you're getting the right kind of laugh in the right place.

3. **Establish the setting and time of the action.** Use descriptive details to make the setting vivid and be concrete. Keep in mind the reaction you want to get from your reader and choose your details accordingly. If, for instance, you are writing a narrative that depicts your first experience with fear, describe the setting in such a way that you prepare the reader for that emotion. If the time the story took place is important, bring it out early.
4. **Set out the characters.** When you introduce a character, immediately identify the person with a short phrase such as "Anne, my sister." If a character doesn't enter the narrative until midpoint or so, make sure the reader is prepared for the entrance so that the character doesn't appear to be plopped in. If characterization is important to the narrative, use a variety of techniques to portray the character but make sure whatever you use is consistent with the impression you want to create. You can depict a person directly—through appearance, dialogue, and actions—as well as indirectly—through what others say and think and how they act toward the person.
5. **Clarify the action.** Narration is set within strict time limits. Make sure the time frame of your story is set out clearly. Within that time limit, much more action occurred than you will want to use in your narrative. Pick only the high points so that every action directly supports the point you want to make. Feel free to tinker with the action, sacrificing a bit of reality for the sake of your point.
6. **Sharpen the plot.** Conflict is essential to narration, so be sure your lines of conflict are clearly drawn. Keeping conflict in mind, review the action you have decided to include so that the plot and action support each other.
7. **Determine the principle behind the sequence of events.** Given the action and plot you have worked out, set up an order. Now determine what principle should guide the reader through the events. Perhaps time is the element you want to stress, perhaps place, perhaps gradual change. No matter what you choose, make sure that the sequence has dramatic tension so that it builds to the point you want to make.
8. **Choose an appropriate point of view.** Your choice of grammatical point of view will depend on what attitude you wish to take toward your narrative. If you can make your point more effectively by distancing yourself from the story, you will want to use the indefinite pronouns associated with an objective point of view. If you want to get a little closer, use a limited omniscient point of view. On the other hand, if you can make your point most effectively by being in the story, use first