

## WRITING SAMPLE: NARRATIVE BIOS

For this project, entitled “What’s My Back Porch Vista?” employees were asked to describe their “back porch vista,” a place they want to end up at, real or imagined.

Allyson Brunetti  
**The Amalfi Coast, Southern Italy**

In conversation, it's clear that Allyson Brunetti's back porch vista is not only the dazzling tourist destination known as the Amalfi Coast. While she certainly has her heart set on vacationing in Positano ("That's my pool," she says of Fig. 3), the *Costiera Amalfitana* has to share her affections with nearby Naples and Bari.

Allyson's maternal grandparents, Dominic and Concetta Lariccia, were Neapolitan, coming to the U.S. via Ellis Island. Much of the Lariccia family still lives in Naples. On the opposite coast is the city of Bari, home to Modesto and Evelyn Brunetti, Allyson's paternal grandparents.

Ultimately, it is the thought of going to Naples with her mother Ramona that seems to lend Allyson's whole vista a special air. In fact an Italy trip seems imminent, as she talks of significant time in both Naples and Positano: "We're talking about more than a week; I'm not a tourist. These are my people. I want to see what it's like to live there"

## The Thing About Positano

About Positano—arguably the most sublime of Amalfi towns—John Steinbeck famously wrote: “It is a dream place that isn’t quite real when you are there and becomes beckoningly real after you have gone.” Certainly, the more you look into the place, the more you encounter this alluring, otherworldly theme. But hasn’t tourism eroded the mystery? Steinbeck suggested the place has certain features that conspire to protect its aura—one of which is its terrain: “Positano is never likely to attract the organdie-and-white linen tourist. . . . I dare any dame to dress like this and climb the Positano stairs for a cocktail. She will arrive looking like a washcloth at a boys’ camp.” Here’s just a few local particulars that add to the enigma of Allyson’s favorite spot:

1. **Mythic Presences.** In Homer's *Odyssey*, as Odysseus and his crew approach the islands known to be the domain of the mysterious Sirens, Odysseus begs his crew to tie him to the mast so he can be exposed to their ancient song of seduction without forfeiting his life. According to local tradition, those islands lie just off the Amalfi Coast.

2. *The Posa Posa Miracle*. Meaning “Put down, put down!” *posa, posa* was the tempestuous word of the Divine Mother herself to a band of Saracene pirates who had abducted a beloved icon of the Virgin Mary from the church of Byzantium. The unlikely return of the stolen icon to a small fishing village on the Amalfi Coast and the miracle that inspired it are still celebrated by Positanians today.

3. *Gross Domestic Potion.* Travelers along the 25 mile Strada Statale 163 will find ample evidence of another local staple of euphoria and transport: the lemon trees. The region's many terraced gardens and distilleries are responsible for much of the world's limoncello liqueur. That's lemon booze.



Ginger Wallace

**The Great Smoky Mountains, USA**

Ask Ginger about how she and her husband Corey first got together, and she'll throw you for a loop: "We never met." The same could be said for her relationship with the Smokies: The youngest of four in a family of hikers, Ginger Wallace wasn't yet making memories when she first met the Tennessee-North Carolina Appalachians. Friday afternoons with a loaded car and heading for Sevierville from their Knoxville home, Ginger's fondest family memories involve camping trips to Cades Cove, Smokemont, and Rockmont:

"I remember the campfires most of all. We saw a whole different side of my parents then. Just relaxed, telling stories." Fall 2014 marks the ten-year anniversary of Ginger's own family hiking tradition: a late-year, ten-day hike with Corey that has all the marks of a personal pilgrimage: "It's my time to step back and reflect on the year. There are some things you will never learn unless you separate yourself. You have to disconnect."

**Taking a Measure of Myself**

To hear these reminiscences of family campfires and days spent following the sound of a distant stream, you wouldn't guess that Ginger Wallace is scared of the Smokies.

One of Ginger's childhood friends was playing hide-and-seek somewhere in the Park when he got separated from his parents. "They never found him," she says quietly. Ginger was six at the time, but the memory of the tragedy, the neighborhood banding together, the search teams, the confusion and grief, have clearly stayed with her:

It gave me a deep appreciation for just how aware you need to be of your surroundings, because you can get turned around like nothing. So I always have that sense of . . . you just have to be careful.

Is it a sense of the place being wild, as fundamentally unlike the human world? "You just have to respect it. You can't frivolously take off and expect everything to be alright." Discovering a traumatic memory behind Ginger's vista reminds me of Rainer Maria Rilke's definition of beauty:

For Beauty is nothing but the beginning of a terror that we are still just able to endure . . .

And if Ginger has learned to endure remarkably well, she in large part has her husband Corey to thank for it. A geologist, a consummate planner, and a seasoned backpacker, Corey's more intrepid manner on the trail has pushed Ginger beyond her limits and caused her to find reserves of trust. Indeed, the abandon with which Ginger pursues the mountains today is testament to the fact that she has forged a vital part of her identity there. Neither is she alone in her instinct to turn the outer reaches of nature to the purpose of inner work. Immanuel Kant's famous depiction of the sublime extends similarly in both directions:

Bold, overhanging, and as it were threatening rocks; clouds piled up in the sky, . . . These exhibit our faculty of resistance as insignificantly small in comparison with their might. But the sight of them is the more attractive, the more fearful it is, provided that we are in security; and we willingly call these objects sublime, because they raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height and discover in us a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature.

Kant never did fit this idea—the idea that being overwhelmed by nature brings us to a true estimate of ourselves—into a philosophical system. But what about Ginger? Doesn't she find it strange that a place so dangerous and impersonal as this—a place that could tear a child from his parents—should make her feel calm? Silence. And then, with the suggestion of a twinkle in her eye, the indomitable Ginger Wallace deadpan: "Dudn't make sense does it?"