Reflective Writing Guide

“Reflection is a mode of inquiry: a deliberate way of systematically recalling writing experiences to reframe the current writing situation. It allows writers to recognize what they are doing in that particular moment (cognition), as well as to consider why they made the rhetorical choices they did (metacognition). The combination of cognition and metacognition, accessed through reflection, helps writers begin assessing themselves as writers, recognizing and building on their prior knowledge about writing.”
—Kara Taczak, “Reflection is Critical for Writers’ Development” (78) Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies

Reflective writing assignments are common across the university. You may be asked to reflect on your learning, your writing, your personal experiences in relation to a theory or text, or your personal experiences in an internship or other type of experience in relation to course readings. These are assignments, as Kara Taczak notes, that offer opportunities to solidify knowledge about our experiences and how they might relate to others’ experiences and existing research. Moreso, reflection can lead to more informed understandings of our own experiences and course content in ways that may make that knowledge more useful in future classes and practice. However, often reflective writing is not taught as an explicit writing skill and can be problematically treated as a less rigorous form of writing. Below are some broad writing tips that can help not only your reflective writing to be stronger, but also the reflective inquiry to be more meaningful.

Collect relevant evidence before you start writing.
Yes—we recommend using evidence in reflective writing! When connecting personal experiences to the readings, that means selecting quotes from the readings and then coming up with specific moments in your life that relate to those quotes. When reflecting on learning or growth, that might mean locating evidence (quotes) from your previous papers that showcase growth.

Be specific.
It’s really easy to see reflective writing as more informal or casual, and thus, as requiring less attention to details; however, strong reflective writing is very precise and specific. Some examples of statements that are too vague and meaningless include, “I learned a lot about writing this semester.” Or, “I feel like my experiences are exactly as Author B says in this quote.” Neither of these statements tells us much—they are a bit devoid of content. Instead, try to name exactly what you learned about writing or exactly how your experiences are related to the quote. For example, you might reflect, “At the beginning of the semester, unsure of how to summarize...
a text well, I was just describing the main idea of the text. However, after learning about Harris’ concept of capturing a writer’s “project,” I believe I have become better at really explaining a text as a whole. Specifically, in my last essay, I was able to provide a fully developed explanation of Author A’s argument and purpose for the essay as well as their materials and methods (that is, how they made the argument). For example, in this quote from my last essay,

*Focus on a small moment from your experiences.*
It’s hard to not want to recap our entire childhood or the full summer before something happened for context when sharing a personal story. However, it’s usually more effective to select a very specific moment in time and try to accurately describe what happened, who was involved, and how it made you feel and react. When writing about a moment, try to place readers there with you—help readers to understand what happened, who was involved, where it happened, why it happened, and what the results were. If this is a more creative assignment, you might even include some sensory descriptions to make the moment more of an experience for readers.

*Fully explain the quote or focus of each point.*
In reflective writing, you are usually asked to share your experiences in relation to something—a perspective in a text, learning about writing, the first-year experience, a summer internship, etc. When introducing this focal point, make sure you fully explain it. That is, explain what you think the quote means and provide a little summary for context. Or, if you’re reflecting on writing skills learned, before you jump to your learning and growth, stop to explain how you understand the writing skill itself—“what is analysis?,” for example. Usually, you want to fully explain the focus, explain your personal experiences with it, and then return to the significance of your experiences.

*Use “I” when appropriate.*
Often, in high schools, students are taught to abandon the first-person subject altogether in order to avoid over-use. However, reflective writing requires some use of “I.” You can’t talk about your experiences without using “I”! That being said, we’ve saved this advice for the bottom of the list because, as we hope the above tips suggest, there are a lot of important things that likely need explaining in addition to your personal experiences. That means you want to use “I” when appropriate, balancing your use of “I” with your explanation of the theory, quote, or situation you were in, for example.

*Reflection conclusions can look forward to the future.*
In the conclusion, you may want to ask and answer questions like:
- What is the significance of my experiences with X?
- What did I learn from reflecting on my experiences with Y?
- How might this reflective work inform future decisions?
- What specific tools or strategies did this activity use that might be employed in the future? When and why?
Write the reflection introduction last.
We always recommend writing introductions after you’ve drafted your entire essay—this allows you to actually introduce the specific essay you’ve already written (it’s easier to do and more likely to be strong). Reflective introductions have a little bit more flexibility. You do want to introduce the focus of your essay right away—and you might do that by naming it, by sharing a related anecdote, by naming a previously held idea/belief that has changed through learning happening during this course, or by explaining a reading or class discussion that make you curious about the focus you selected.