

Reflective Writing

A Brief Overview of Reflective Writing

Reflective writing allows writers to assess their growth—or room for growth—within specific genres and pieces of writing. Reflective writing can take a number of forms: it can be a letter to the professor, an essay about one’s writing, or a formal artist’s statement.

In most creative writing classes, the purpose of reflective writing is to assess your growth as a writer by documenting your writing and revision process, your struggles and successes as a writer, and your past and future goals for writing. Creative writing professors use these reflective pieces to better understand you as a writer as well as to understand how the pieces you wrote throughout the term have evolved.

Audience

Typically, your professor is your primary audience. However, other audiences might include your classmates, readers of a portfolio of your work, and yourself. Ask your professor or check your assignment sheet/syllabus for specific information about the audience for your piece and the form it must take (letter, essay, artist’s statement, etc.).

Writing Process Tips

Reflective writing is about you as a writer and your processes in creating a piece (or number of pieces) of writing. Therefore, it’s important that you keep track of your drafts and feedback (from classmates, professor, and others) throughout the semester—you will need some way of reminding yourself about the process you underwent before arriving at the final version(s) of your piece(s). To ensure you can write the best reflection possible:

Draft and Revise

Draft and revise throughout the term; it stands to reason that the best reflective narratives are those by writers who have developed their ideas over time, documenting their processes and perspectives.

Write Full Drafts

Write full drafts of pieces to submit for workshops. The more you write for the workshop, the more useful and specific feedback you can get—and the more opportunity you have to try new things with your writing, which will give you much more to say in your reflection. It is certainly valid in a reflective narrative to talk about which pieces you developed and why, and which you decided not to work on, and why. But it’s much more compelling—and reflects a greater depth of thought—to write about things you experimented with in a single piece, and rejected or developed along the way.

The purpose of reflective writing is to assess your growth as a writer and to determine how your pieces have evolved throughout the term.

It is important to keep track of your drafts and feedback throughout the semester. This will help you in your reflective writing.

Example Reflections

OK: “I turned it into workshop unfinished and then people gave me some ideas for the ending so I tried one here but I don’t think it’s working.”

Better: “I tried this and it didn’t work, so I tried this, and then tweaked that, and then....”

The latter example walks readers through a more intricate--and therefore more thoughtful--process.

Example: “I turned it into workshop unfinished and then people gave me some ideas for the ending so I tried one here but I don’t think it’s working” is honest. But it’s better to write more specifically about your process: “I tried this and it didn’t work, so I tried this, and then tweaked that, and then....” The latter example walks readers through a more intricate—and therefore more thoughtful—process.

Be Specific

Be very specific about the choices you made as a writer. It is one thing to describe the changes you made. It is quite another to explain why you made those changes and how you went about doing so.

Example: “Readers said it was slow so I cut out some parts” is fine, but consider how much more specific and reflective this is: “Classmate X mentioned, and several people agreed, that the story dragged in the middle scenes. I realized that the tone didn’t match the action. I had these wordy, long sentences while my characters were running from the police. The sentences made the writing feel slow and surreal, and that wasn’t what I was going for, so I trimmed the scene and changed some word choices.”

Potential Focus Areas

The following questions facilitate reflection and can inspire ideas for writing a self-analysis. Try freewriting some answers to these prompts.

About You As A Writer

- How has your writing changed throughout the semester?
- Where is there room for you to improve your writing?
- What are your goals as a writer overall?
- How do you feel about your use of language in your writing?

Related to a Specific Piece of Writing

- Why did you choose to develop this piece over others?
- What were your goals for this particular piece? Did you achieve those goals? (For example, if you tried to emotionally captivate your readers, did it work?)
- How has this piece changed throughout its progression?
- Did you use different writing strategies in an attempt to gain readers’ interest?
- How do you feel about the end product?
- How might this piece improve if you were to continue working on it?
- What genre-related characteristics have you addressed? (Did you show awareness of the genre your work fits?)
- If you’ve left a piece unfinished or consider it “abandoned,” for what reasons did you leave it behind? (This helps show that you’ve considered the piece and have not just set it aside out of laziness, but rather have decided that it’s not going where you want it to, but perhaps was a nice attempt to get where you intended.)

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The second statement is more specific and reflective.

Focus Areas

When writing reflectively, always consider focusing on:

- You as a writer
- Points of concern with a specific piece of writing
- Details about your writing process

Related to Your Process

- How did you incorporate feedback? What feedback clashes with your visions for this piece? What feedback helped you to realize your vision for this piece?
- Did you take command of the characteristics addressed for other students' writing during workshops? Did you make use of your suggestions for improvement in others' writing in your own piece?
- Would others read through the end of this piece for enjoyment?
- What do readers think about your piece? (Do they find that it's original, adventurous, intriguing, etc.?)

Prompts for Writing Consultations

The most important thing to discuss during a consultation is why the writer made the specific choices he or she did in writing the piece. Such a conversation will help the writer to think more deeply and reflectively, and will lead to a more detailed narrative.

- Why did you write the [characters, plot, scene] in this way?
- Why did you choose to [begin or end] the piece in this way?
- What about this piece changed during the revision process, and why?
- What problems did you encounter when first writing this piece, and how did you work through those?
- What critiques did you receive from classmates and your professors when writing the piece? Which did you reject, and why? Which did you use to revise, and why, and how?

To evaluate whether the narrative is reflective and detailed enough:

- Is the narrative coherent? That is, although it addresses a writer's process and perhaps several creative pieces, does a theme or a "big picture" point emerge?
- Is the writer specific about what feedback was incorporated, what process was followed, what vision was pursued in writing specific pieces throughout the term?
- Is there enough detail throughout the piece? Where might the writer explain why a part of the writing process, or a specific critique, or a specific struggle was integral to the writing that emerged?