

Sample Reflective Writing Pieces

Critical Response by James Walsh

When it came time to select the stories for my final portfolio, I knew which two I would be selecting within minutes. Though I love my first workshop story, it was never really a viable option for class revision. To start, it still doesn't have a title and I can't think of any word or phrase that could possibly convey the idea behind it. You would have received the second chapter of "Untitled," which makes me feel like a poor writer. Plus, I don't know how to make serious edits to a story that is incomplete. How can you make thoughtful revisions for a story that isn't even a tenth of the way done? So "Madman's Parade" and "Forbidden Fruit" were the obvious choices. ¹

I began revising "Madman's Parade" shortly after I wrote the story in order to submit it to the Oldenburg Competition on campus, but I only finished the piece recently. I listened to the comments made during class and on the response papers to try to mold this piece into something beyond the raw and deranged whimsy I had put on the page. ² My first goal, as suggested by ³ Jessica Barton, was to make sure to correct any lines that were grammatically incorrect or unbearably awkward so that the merely eccentric phrasing would stand out. There were many such lines that I loved during the original draft, but I now realize are detrimental to the overall pacing of my work. It was a worthwhile experiment though and I created some great lines through this bizarre foray into madness. I'm pleased with the way the prose looks and sounds aloud. ⁴

Originally, the piece had greater elements of the stream of conscious technique, but because of the character's mental state, so many elements of the plot were unclear. With the revision of the language, I was allowed to wade through the esoteric meaning in certain segments. Workshop readers related that many details about Louis were hazy. They wanted to know about his age, his past, his family and why he was in the hospital. When they began making these suggestions, I'll admit I was a bit worried. I had no idea how I was going to convey information like that while still maintaining the psyche I had created. At first it wasn't easy. Though I inserted more about the father, the mother, and his age during the Oldenburg draft (which sounds very historic and British), not until this current incarnation was I able to find my answers. I knew I wanted the father to murder the mother - the way I had imagined her, she wouldn't have allowed Louis to be committed under her watch - but his motives were unclear. His own mental instability, though maybe not extremely clear, is hinted at to the best of this character's ability. The father is the deranged doppelganger of our hero, showing the dangerous side of mental issues, and portrays a true sociopath. I wanted little more than that because Louis had limited contact with his father and wouldn't know the details of the man's life.

The character of the redheaded suicide case became more prominent, though I never allowed any interaction. Louis is primarily isolated, so this one instant

1: The author begins by clearly identifying which pieces he's chosen to revise but without feeling the need to pretend that everything he produced in the class is equally complete or polished.

2: Because the author has already completed multiple drafts, the piece has had time to become stronger, and the author has more to say about his revision process.

3: Nice specific reference to a suggestion and resulting revision.

4: The phrase "worthwhile experiment" works great here. Many creative writing drafts contain such elements, but it takes revision and self-awareness to see them as such.

would be the most he even saw of the girl. Still it has a profound affect on him. This is another reason why he enters the outside world: to save someone else from a human monster. It connects to his desire to save anyone he can after witnessing the horror of his mother's death. I tried to integrate the idea without reworking the story too drastically. He is still inquisitive and easily distracted but he is a man on a mission, one he doesn't necessarily know how to complete. It's slightly cluttered but I feel that it has the potential to work. Only a reading audience will truly know though. 5

Another area that received major reworking was the final scene in the orchard. In the first draft, Louis' personality and dialogue began to conflict with his character traits. Going back, I tried to morph the lines into something that he would not only say but into sentences that were coherent with his new goal. He interacts more with the raven-haired girl, and shares a greater connection with her among the singing trees. This is the third ending I have completed, and I am most satisfied with this version. It combines some of the strong elements of the first ending with the fulfilled connection that people wanted out of the original draft. The Oldenburg draft was actually worse in this respect. It seemed trite and was handled with the craft of an amateur writing a first person story without a concrete ending. It irritated me that I wrote it that way, but my current ending slightly makes up for it. 6

I feel like this piece is relatively solid and I may even consider sending it out for publication. Black Warrior Review comes to mind as a possible venue for this piece, but I'll read it at least once more before I send it out.

With "Forbidden Fruit," there was a struggle to properly revise, and even with the version I am submitting in this portfolio, I feel that not enough time has passed for proper reflection. 7 I only came up with a good idea for "Little Mischief" last Tuesday, so this piece, which received numerous critiques during the workshop, is nowhere near ready. My first task was to pare down on the needlessly verbose prose that stifles the story. The story is often overwritten, which is a tendency that shows up in my writing from time to time. Intellectual insecurity prompts this problem in early drafts, especially when my plot or characters seem inadequate. It is a sort of overcompensation that has to be abolished during later revisions, and that all took time. Sentences like, "Never was he allowed to sully his taste buds with such tripe," sounds inappropriate for a story with a young main character. If I were to say, "sully," or "tripe" to a 10 year old child, I would get a blank and confused stare. So anything beyond a middle school level would be pushing it. That's not to say I've completely altered the language because some phrases have really tickled my fancy, but I've done my best to eliminate certain awkward moments. 8

Another culling of awkward portions came in the form of the grandfather's hiding place. There were some major sexual overtones to the key's hiding place that did not work out the way I wanted. Originally, it was supposed to be a sign of coming into adulthood (I don't even know how I construed it as that) instead of being the peculiar masturbation line that ended up on the page. I look at that and wonder how I could have thought it was anything other than weird when I wrote it. It changes the tone of the piece and makes the whole thing odd (especially with digging in his grandfather's pants). A better and more symbolic place was needed, so I decided to place it at the bottom of his grandfather's shoe in a false rubber sole. It suggests growth and following in his grandfather's footsteps towards maturity. The boy stumbling across it by accident, not really intending to find it there, suggests a similar concept regarding growing up: sometimes it just happens.

"Forbidden Fruit" takes its influence from an African myth about the trickster god Eshu stealing from the Creator god's garden, and so I tried to keep a mythic feel to the prose. This put some of my tendencies toward formality to

5: While the piece is still a work-in-progress, the author gives plenty of specific information about how it has evolved. He also describes his overall goal for these particular revisions: he's trying to balance the "madman's" narrative voice with the need for clarity.

6: Again, the author references multiple revisions, not all for the better. This is a healthy part of the revision process, but not one the student will have time for if s/he doesn't start revising until the last minute.

7: Acknowledging this is good and appropriate—the length of a semester is often, even usually, not enough time to figure out a piece completely.

8: You can be loyal to phrases or elements you love too much to revise away. You can acknowledge reader feedback without taking every suggestion.

good use. During the second draft, as mentioned earlier, I toned down the pompous prose and replaced it with authoritative and distant prose, as if a story was being related from a storyteller, bard or griot. I mention the myth itself in the story, giving a knowing nod to anyone familiar with the tale. This is something I feel works well in the revision. **9** Some of the child protagonists from other stories this semester (especially Jessica DeWent and Kristopher Snyder's stories) inspired me to have a young protagonist as well. They told tales about young boys without getting too caught up in the semi-limiting first person perspective. **10** I could tell my mythical inspired story in a way that wasn't distracting for my reading audience.

9: Great example of how the author took something away from other workshopped stories.

10: The myth information provides a nice window on the author's process.

A less than satisfactory revision is with the mother. People in our class suggested that the mother was a contrived and flat-character who operated as little more than plot-hole filler. Looking back at the first draft, she was a cog and to some extent she still is, but at least she's a more convincing cog. I gave her background and greater agency in the life of Artie, having her be the result of his relative isolation within the story. Trying her best to care for him in her own paranoid way, she put him in a home schooling program. Artie's lack of visible friends is solved by this move, as is the question about his isolation from other sweets and why he has little else to occupy his time. She also is able to confront both Artie and his grandfather, bending both to her will when they are needlessly inconsiderate of the other. She's not quite there yet, but I'm more confident with her motivations. Her altruism stands out more than her prior reactionary whining. The ending is also drastically different, and allows the mother to mediate the conflict between the two and reveals the grandfather's decision as a ruse. It shows her uncompromising love for the two of them, even when they do terrible things to each other. Sure the grandfather's worse but in this game of escalating one-upping, someone has to put it all to an end.

I don't feel that this piece is done yet, but I have made enough revisions so it has at least made steps in the right direction. I'm still clinging to the idea that the grandfather should disappear but I have no idea what that means for the story. What does Artie get out of it and what does it build up to? He was envious of the product, but now he understands what goes into it. **11** The ending may not be quite right yet, but in a month or two, I may finally get what I need to do with it all. As I stated earlier, I only recently realized what to do with "Little Mischief," and the boars story is still a mystery (as far as what I should seriously revise in it). The workshop comments have played a pivotal role during my revision process thanks to the help of many smart and savvy readers. I'm thinking about sending this current draft to those on the revision list to see what they think.

11: Even if the author doesn't yet have the answers, he's asking the right questions.

Personally, I prefer more overt styles than the minimalist works that stem from the Hemmingway school of writing. I want what I read and what I write to have a flare. I love storytellers, characters, and people who tell their tales in interesting and distinct turns of phrase. It's something I like to experiment with in my own writing and dialogue. I playfully write, toying with words and phrases and euphemisms. I take some of this from Mark Twain, who speaks brilliantly within numerous different vernaculars, something I have always wanted to do. I feel that each person, though sharing a common language, speaks his/her own unique variation. We all use different phrases, have different understandings of words and a different repertoire to pull from due to personal history. Over Winter Break, I read Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, a book that plays with language in a completely different way than anything I've ever read from start to finish. Nabokov draws from English in a way that fits the character and shows his utter brilliance. My vocabulary increased exponentially just by reading his one book. So, I challenge myself while writing to use words I would be afraid to initially put onto page. **12** This definitely affects how my style turns out, though I need to learn to add some minor constraint so as not to discourage potential readers. I'd like to maintain

12: The author mentions specific authors and techniques he admires, and directly connects them to his own writing aims.

a balanced medium, where I can forward intellectualism and write stories. This goal may be a bit too lofty or pompous but it is one I feel to be important.

13

When I attempt humor, I tend to draw from the Kurt Vonnegut and Douglas Adams while mixing in elements that may be akin to Chuck Palahniuk (I'm not sure because I haven't read his work...I've heard the legends though). The absurdist elements of both Vonnegut and Adams are heavily displayed in my work though they originate from earlier exposures to Monty Python and The Tick's Ben Edlund. As I read more, hopefully by other current humorists, I will integrate techniques from their work to solidify my comedic voice. 14

Right now I'm not pinned down to any specific genre, though I'm trying to walk down a line that borders genre and literary fiction. This sometimes leads me to be a bit heavy-handed with my conclusion, holding onto a morose tone that really destroys much of my work. When I actually allow the story to flow instead of trying to force something upon it, my writing actually turns out ten times better. Some of this, I'm sure, is a product of the revision process. All of my work is less than spectacular the first time around but after several run-throughs, I begin to get an idea of where everything is going and how I need to get there. 15

As I writer, I really hope that my voice hasn't evolved as far as it's going to go. Last year, my writing style was more absurd and overt with the imagery, almost sending the reader into an image induced coma. I hope that in the next few years, I'll work through my own weaknesses, honing my craft in substantial ways. Maybe down the road, my prose may be fundamentally different, growing as I grow through my life. 16 I'd also like to keep in contact with writers here as a way of growing outside of academia. As you implied in the portfolio requirement list, a writer should strive to keep changing, just like any other human being should.

Hopefully you feel that these revisions and analyses are quality. I feel that I've put solid effort into it all and I thank you for giving me the chance to do so.

The author is very thorough and detailed throughout this reflection letter. In his descriptions of revisions he's made, he talks about both specific changes and about his goals in making those changes. He always goes beyond "The workshop told me to do X so I did X."

He also makes it clear that he's been thinking about these stories for a long time and has had time to make and even discard a long series of changes. Stories take time, and the author has given himself the time he needs to make both a stronger story and a stronger reflection.

The last several paragraphs of the letter, about the author's influences and overall writing goals, are especially impressive. Not every reflection assignment will ask for this material, but it shows that the student is as savvy a reader as he is a writer. Instead of just listing authors, books, or stories he likes (or dislikes), he talks about why, and about how specifically they have influenced his work.

The student also has a lot of self-awareness and self-deprecating things to say about his own writing process and work. He can poke fun at himself, but he also shows that he cares enough about his writing to invest real time and effort into it.

13: The author is able to articulate an overall goal he has as a writer.

14: There's nothing wrong with "lofty," but the author shows here that he's interested in comedy, too. Both his writing and his reflective letter show his range.

15: The author is self-analytical about not only his individual stories, but also about his writing process.

16: Who the author is now as a writer is not who he will eventually become. He can take pride in what he has accomplished while acknowledging that everything, and every writer, is a work in progress.

Critical Introduction by Jessica DeWent

I've kept a journal since I was about six. The first journal I ever had was one my mom bought from a dollar store. A picture of a golden retriever puppy was printed on the cover, a photo taken straight-on as it tumbled forward over a patch of grass. I filled the journal with little pointless things. Things about roller-rink birthday parties and Girl Scout badges and my dad's smelly feet and the way my mom would sing over the roar of the vacuum as she cleaned our apartment, things that were written for the act of writing them rather than for later reading. There are pages and pages of words scribbled in journals beneath my bed at home, and I've never actually stopped to wonder who I was writing to, to wonder what I was writing for. **1**

Writing about myself, about my life in a journal, has been a far different experience than doing so in an essay. I never expected anyone to read what I wrote in that golden-retriever journal, and I don't quite know why I wrote in it. Maybe it was a way of talking to myself, a way to relay back what was happening in my life so I could get a second chance to evaluate things. Maybe it was so I wouldn't forget what had happened, so I could hold in my hands a page that had it all written down before the memories were lost. Sometimes I think it was mostly to be like Harriet the Spy, to write down everything I could about those around me, to watch people and imagine what they were like. The reason, or perhaps the lack of reason for the entries, gave me a freedom I never really noticed until I tried to write about my life for an audience.

Crafting a piece about my memories for an audience has been an experience much different than I ever expected. It has forced me to step out of myself, to try and remove myself from the sequence and form a story out of those events that seem most poignant. I think the best way I can picture it is like this: say everyone's life is a movie, an uncut, constantly rolling film with no script, no lighting, nothing. Writing a memoir or personal essay is to jump out of the film, to hold the roll in your hands and examine it, copying and pasting the scenes that seem to go together, changing the lighting and focus here and there, making things louder and other things softer, adding background music but never changing original dialogue, original sounds. It is in this way that I've tried to construct my personal essays, weaving those scenes that make most sense when together. **2**

Writing pieces about my life with the notion that others will read them has also been slightly discomfoting. Most times it makes me feel a little narcissistic. Handing out pieces about my life has almost been like hanging up a giant self-portrait somewhere and holding an exhibition for it, expecting people to look at it, scratch their chin and say, "now that's something." I find myself wondering: who am I to assume that people are going to want to read about my life, and how can I assume that it is interesting at all? I can't say that I haven't gotten over these things, and they still haunt me in a way that makes me very self-aware while writing memoir-types of pieces. However, I can say that I'm getting more comfortable with the process.

Talking to other writers has been reassuring in this respect. I'm surprised to learn that so many other students have similar concerns, especially when all the pieces I've read for class have been ones I've found so interesting and profound. The self-consciousness is part of the experience, a part of the presentation of something so personal. **3** While I don't know that I'll ever get over accusing myself of being completely self-absorbed when writing memoirs, it's comforting to find that I'm not alone in thinking these things.

My first portfolio piece, "Preserves," exemplifies the most revision work I've done for this semester as well as the piece I've put most thought into. I wrote this as my first flash piece, and I didn't know what it was going to turn into. I

1: The author begins her letter with great specifics and images. That isn't required for this kind of assignment, but a professor is like any other kind of reader; we enjoy being entertained and given evocative details.

2: The author is grappling vividly and deeply with what exactly the genre of nonfiction is, and with her changing relationship to it.

3: The author doesn't have to pretend that she's entirely comfortable with writing memoir; indeed, she identifies self-consciousness as an important part of the work, and something she shares with fellow writers and classmates.

have always known I wanted to write about watching someone die from the inside out from the perspective of kid-me, but never had the guts to try until this semester. That whole experience has affected me more than any other in my life and has profoundly shaped my way of thinking about death for the worst. It was a traumatic and difficult thing to see. This piece really helped me not just as a writer, but as a human being struggling to understand death. I never really knew what to make of the whole death/Alzheimer's experience. Writing this piece forced me to think about it, and to reevaluate and sometimes relive things. It was more of a thinking process and the creation of this has really made clear to me what exactly I think about dying as a whole. While seeing my grandpa suffer was a negative thing, I've learned something very positive about life that I never knew before. This was a piece of writing that has probably been in the making for years, not on the page but somewhere in my head. 4

Going into this I knew I wanted to use the process of making jam with the deterioration of my grandpa, but I didn't really know it was going to form the shape that it did. I wrote snippets of it when I could, writing them separately because I had no clue how to write them together, and then weaving them through and hoping that the pattern worked. The original piece was longer and had another scene that was neither taking my grandpa out to eat nor making jam. It was another gas station scene of the time I had bought a rotten banana from a gas station in Georgia. In the end it did not seem to fit, and although I liked it, it was more distracting than anything else. It was a darling that needed to be killed. 5

The revision of this piece included the killing of more, smaller darlings, some rearranging of furniture, and an additional scene. I spent a few weeks away from this piece and upon coming back, realized that the middle jam-scene was one whose home was actually more towards the ending. It was more of a summation than a pinnacle point, and in terms of semantics it detailed the process that was last in the making of jam. Placing that moment in the middle did not feel right. Moving that paragraph to the end left me in need of a middle jam-scene if I was to follow the pattern. I wasn't quite sure where to come up with one. I decided to describe the sounds of the jars as they cool and seal. It's a really neat sound, the popping of the brass lids. I thought it was something worth writing about, and tried to make it lend over into the theme I was working to convey. Moving the middle jam scene to the end, I had to modify a few things to make it seem more conclusive. I described the jars filled with violet and focused in on the way the color shines through the glass. Saying something about the glass was really important to me. It emphasized the sterility of something that stays ripe forever, and how natural it really is for humans to go through dying. 6

While I know that there is more I'd like to do with this piece, most particularly the introduction, I feel that it is the very first piece I've ever written that I am content with. I'm not truly happy with it, but I feel like I've expressed myself in this piece more strongly than in any other I've written. It's the first piece of my own writing that I kind-of like.

The second piece in my portfolio is my magazine article. I was not very confident in knowing how to go about this assignment, but I learned a lot in the process of trying. 7 Having a venue to write for made me much more conscious of my audience and how to adapt my writing for those that would be reading my work. Writing for a magazine helps to hone in on the type of person you are writing for as well as the style with which you should be writing. The magazine is almost a tool to help define and shape a piece for publication. While it is helpful to have some direction, it can also be frustrating. For once, I'm not writing for myself or for a professor, but rather for a larger audience. With that comes a lot of pressure to appeal to many different types of people.

4: *Two things here:*

1) *This is a piece the author has struggled with for a long time, both on and off the page, and that shows in the piece itself and in her ability to speak so articulately about the process of writing about it.*

2) *Writing "Preserves" has had therapeutic value for the author, but she doesn't use that as the criterion for a successful piece. She's done a great job of confronting personal experiences and then thinking about how to provide that same emotional journey to her audience.*

5: *The author invokes Forster's "kill your darlings" advice, showing that she can apply the vocabulary of writing craft and workshopping to her own work.*

6: *This is a great example of a specific revision that the author has analyzed in terms of pattern, pacing, and theme.*

7: *The author clearly isn't as fond of this piece as the first, but she's going to show us what she learned in the process of writing it.*

This pressure affected my writing quite a bit. I think I felt very timid while writing which led me to stray from giving any sort of opinion. In giving only the completely factual information I knew of, I began to form a very repetitive piece. I didn't want to say anything unless it was pure fact, so I said the things I knew to be true many times in many different ways. ⁸ Although I didn't realize this while writing it, it is blatantly obvious to me now. Distance from the piece has really helped me to put it into perspective and to see it as others may have seen it.

8: The author gives detailed information about how the assignment shaped her approach to the piece.

There was repetition not only in content but in words and phrases as well. Most of this was easy to fix. I gutted out the piece as much as I could and reworked only what I hadn't already said. ⁹

9: Not all revisions are complicated and open-ended. Here, simply cutting unnecessary material fixed the most obvious problem.

The other struggle I had with this piece was learning how to weave together descriptive prose with more informational text. I'd like to believe that the two can thrive within the same piece; however I don't know that I've had quite enough practice yet to have done a good job of demonstrating it. My introduction and ending were things written more for me, I think, while I let my prospective audience determine the tone of the essay's body. In revisiting the essay, I tried to incorporate more imagery and detail into the more informative sections by showing examples of the facts I gave in the context of the market. Instead of merely saying that food from farmer's markets is fresher, I added a mini-scene showing how bright the fruits and veggies are in color. I tried to use the "show don't tell" philosophy for the revision work in hopes that I could create a semi-narrative informational article that people would find pleasing to read and learn from. ¹⁰

10: This second challenge is harder to solve, but the author offers specific steps she's taken.

I think the biggest thing I'm taking away from this semester is that sense of self-awareness in what I write. Non-fiction holds the writer to a certain accountability that fiction does not; because what we are writing is true, we must express it in a way that relays the story as accurately as possible. Keeping this in mind, it can be scary at times to express information in creative ways. However, I think that it can be done. Creativity, imagery, and description aren't things limited to fiction writing. They have just as much a home in non-fiction, in memoirs and in essays. I think with practice I will learn more about how to strike a balance between the two that makes me more comfortable with writing non-fiction in an way that is both effective and expressive. ¹¹

11: The author is also a fiction writer, and here she shares interesting observations about the relationship between the two genres and her work in both.

This is a very good reflection overall, with two elements that really stand out. First, we can tell by descriptions like the golden retriever on the journal cover, or the sound of popping jar lids, that the author is a very good writer who's taken the time to make even her reflective letter something special. The non-creative writing we do in creative writing classes doesn't have to be boring.

Secondly, the author is thinking about larger issues like the genre of nonfiction, about what it means to write about our lives and try to make (rather than assume) them interesting to an audience. Rather than restricting herself to listing specific revisions, she offers larger ideas about writing, her purposes in writing, and her goals in different genres.