

# Reflective Essays

What is a reflective essay? Typically, you write a reflective essay in response to a text you have read, an event you have attended, or another experience you have had. The essay focuses on describing the event, text, or other experience, discussing what you learned from it, and speculating on how you could apply what you learned.

## Purpose

Reflective essays are designed to stimulate your learning by asking you to think about ("reflect on") what you learned from a particular text, event, or experience. The process of thinking consciously about your learning deepens and reinforces that learning.

## Setting Yourself Up to Reflect

If you know in advance that you will be reflecting on a text or experience, take some time beforehand to set yourself up to reflect on it afterwards. Write down some notes about your expectations, as suggested by the questions below:

- What expectations do you have about the text, event, or experience? What do you expect it to be like? What do you expect to learn from it?
- Are there any questions you have at the outset?
- Is there any aspect of this text or experience that you expect to be challenging for you?

You can refer to these notes later, when you compose the reflection.

## Engaging with the Text, Event, or Experience

As you are reading the text or participating in the experience, ask yourself these questions:

- Is it similar to or different from what you expected?
- How is it answering the questions you had at the outset?
- Is there anything you find to be challenging about this text, event, or experience?
- Are you engaged by the text, event, or experience? If so, what is engaging to you?
- What, if anything, do you think you are learning from this text, event, or experience?

In other words, think consciously about how the text, event, or experience meets your expectations, raises or answers questions, poses challenges, or provides an opportunity to learn.

## Writing the Reflection

Now it's time to write down your reflections. Remember that reflective essays are meant to deepen your thinking about a particular assignment or experience, so your own thoughts, feelings, and insights matter here.

A reflection can be divided into four phases, each of which can be a section of your essay:

1. Describe: What was the text, event, or experience? If it was a text: who wrote it, and what was it about? If it was an event or experience: when did it occur; who was there; what went on?

2. Interpret: How did the text, event, or experience meet your expectations (or not)? What questions did it raise for you? Was there anything you found to be particularly surprising, meaningful or challenging? If so, what was it?
3. Evaluate: What did you learn from this text, event, or experience?
4. Plan: How do you think you can use what you learned during this text, event, or experience in the future? In what situations could you use what you learned?

### *Style, Tone, Length*

- A reflection is an essay, so provide full, thoughtful responses to the questions in your instructor's prompt.
- The style and tone of your reflective essay should match the purpose of the overall assignment. This is a personal essay meant to showcase what you learned from the text, event, or experience that you are writing about. You can use the pronouns "I," "me," and "mine."
- Describe the text, event, or experience fully, using plenty of descriptive words. Include enough detail for your audience to understand that you were engaged with the text, event, or experience that you are reflecting on; the reader should come away with the understanding that you learned something from the text, event, or experience you are writing about.
- Citations are only necessary if you are referring to a specific text, and even then, your citations are not the focus of the reflection. For a reflective essay, *you* are the main source of evidence. Always check with your instructor about what citation style to use, if relevant.
- Reflections might vary in length from 1 to 10 pages depending on the class, instructor, and purpose of the assignment.
  - The length of your reflection will depend on your instructor's instructions for the assignment.
  - The best source of information on length is your professor, so find out what the word or page-count is from them.

## References

RMIT University Library Learning Lab. (n.d.). *Writing an academic reflection*.  
<https://emedia.rmit.edu.au/learninglab/content/writing-academic-reflection>

University of Birmingham. (2015). *A short guide to reflective writing*.  
<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/libraryservices/library/asc/documents/public/short-guide-reflective-writing.pdf>