

How to Write Reflectively

In many Seattle School assignments, you are asked to write about your personal experiences. It can be hard to use experience in graduate-level writing when many of us have been told not to. This article offers tips for incorporating experience into your writing at The Seattle School.

Examples of Reflective Prompts

You may hear reference to “reflection papers” in your courses, but this label alone won’t tell you all you need to know about an assignment. Let’s look at some examples of reflective prompts:

1. An assignment asks us to write solely about our personal experiences regarding a topic (e.g., What beliefs, values, and norms have you inherited from your family?; What were you taught about God growing up?; What is your learning style?). For this paper, we will write about our own experiences, without the use of other sources.
2. An assignment asks us to apply concepts from class to our experience (e.g., How do given psychological models help you understand yourself?; What is your theology and how is it reflected in your life?; How do you relate [or not] with a character from a given piece of media?). For this paper, we will use sources to illuminate aspects of our lives.
3. An assignment asks us to employ experience as a form of evidence alongside other sources (e.g., Write your own theology of creativity; Reflect on how class materials inform your understanding of abuse). In this paper, we will use our experiences like any other source, allowing our experiences to speak in concert with scholarship.

Reflective Thesis Statements

You should write a thesis statement, even in reflective writing. A thesis is, in essence, *the point* of your paper. In reflective writing, this is your space to answer the question: What have you learned about the paper topic through self-reflection?

First-Person POV & Academic Writing

In reflective writing, the first-person point of view is essential, but that doesn’t mean reflective writing is “informal.” All of your class assignments are, in some sense, “academic,” meaning that your writing must be organized and clear (more on that below).

Structuring a Reflective Paper

How you use experience in a paper impacts how that paper might be organized. Some questions to consider:

- Will you include one “scene” from your life or multiple? How much narrative description is appropriate?
- Does it make more sense to organize the paper around key ideas or key “scenes”? How might each option support your thesis/argument?
- Will you intersperse analysis as you are telling the story or include it after you have finished the telling?

Don't be intimidated by all these considerations! Play around. Shuffle bullet points on your outline. Print your paper, cut it up, and rearrange the paragraphs on the floor. See what arises. Our writing has a spirit of its own, and we can discover surprising things when we let it speak back to us.



Why Write Reflectively?

So far, we have focused on technical elements of reflective writing—concrete strategies for composition and revision. But there is more to the act of writing than the mere mechanics of structure and style. Let's discuss the reasons for and objectives of writing reflectively.

Dialoguing With Oneself

No one writes in isolation. Even if no one else ever reads what you wrote, there is still one reader—you. At its most basic level, writing is an encounter between different parts of oneself.

By writing, we frame our experiences within one particular perspective, which emerges from a shifting constellation of factors—personal background, the ideas we've received from others, and the events that have happened to us and how we responded (and continue responding) to them.

When we write a reflective draft, we are faced with a simulated second self—the self on the page who speaks our experiences back to us in the words we gave it. But writing is an open-ended process that can always be revised. For example, we can ask ourselves:

- What does the current narrative arrangement “say”? What is its point / theme / perspective / argument / thesis?
- What facts, events, feelings, or interpretations did you omit from this draft due to word or page limits? How would swapping them out change the paper’s perspective?

Asking such questions helps us become reflexive about our self-narration and opens new ways to understand ourselves. Still more, when we incorporate academic theory into our reflective writing, we can also use different theoretical lenses to emphasize different aspects of our lives.

Reflecting Forward

Don’t be mistaken that reflective writing is only ever oriented toward the past. By critically analyzing ourselves, we can ask questions about the present and future, and we can change our actions based on this analysis. Professors may ask for such reflections in class papers:

- How has thinking through the theological or psychological aspects of your life changed how you want to live? What new experiences does this reflection invite you to pursue?
- Based on what you’ve learned through research and writing, what new practices can you adopt from now on in your life and/or future work?

Reflective Insights for All Genres of Writing

All of this is a far cry from the average view of academic writing, which perceives class papers as rote demonstrations of learning, churning out fully formed drafts from our preconceived ideas.

The writing we do in class isn’t just a means to earn a certificate or degree; writing asks us to practice deep, integral learning. It prepares us to live and work in the world by calling us to reckon with what our learning demands of us, what our new understandings call us to *do*.

Writing can change us, and once it has changed us, our writing will change, too. It is a dialectical, back-and-forth motion of growth and transformation. This may not be noticeable at first, but the more we practice a receptive stance toward our own writing, the more we become attuned to the deep reflexes of the heart that shift and change nearly imperceptibly through the entanglement of living and reflecting.