

Assigning Reflective Writing

Tennessee Teaching and Learning Center

"How To" Pedagogies #1



WHAT IS REFLECTIVE WRITING?

Reflective writing develops critical thinking skills, because RW has a reflective dimension. Critical thinkers make evaluations about our own and others' assumptions and judgments. Students can use reflective writing to think about assumptions underlying belief systems, examine rationales for action, test these rationales from various perspectives, and think about future consequences.

The purpose of reflective writing is to engage students in deep thinking in which they make personal connections to what they are learning and think critically and creatively through these connections in ways that help them transfer knowledge.

The personal element is helpful in engaging students with the academic content, and to enable to them to relate new learning to old patterns of thought.

Students need a clear rationale from you, the teacher, about the value of this writing assignment and about how the assignment will help their learning. They will also need to know how their writing will be assessed.

A SAMPLE reflection about a class service project in an elementary school:

"It is so strange to take the school I went to growing up and compare it to this school. They do so many things differently and it is hard for me to understand why they cannot change and be just like my old school. I really need to consider that there are many reasons that the school's hands are tied against changing.... The overall county, as we saw when we were in [class] makes just \$30,000 a year, my county makes \$80,000. That alone makes a huge difference...."

HOW CAN I ASSIGN REFLECTIVE WRITING?

Journal: students write periodic entries throughout a semester. Formal reflection elements (see back page) can be emphasized. Journals are useful for reflecting on course content. You can also have students reflect on a **critical incident** related to their learning.

Learning Diary: similar to a journal but can involve group participation and collaborative reflection.

Log Book: often used in disciplines such as science where students run labs. The log of activities can include formal reflection elements.

Reflective Note: often used in law. A reflective note encourages students to think and write about personal reactions to an issue raised in a course.

Peer Review: usually involves students showing their work to their peers for feedback. Peer review and self-assessment can be designed to contain elements of formal reflection.

The "How To" pedagogies series are quick reference pages that define and describe active learning methods to increase student engagement. Each handout provides basic information and references to get you started.

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HOW DO I ASSESS REFLECTIVE WRITING?

Provide students with guidelines so that they know what needs to be included in their reflection piece—and be sure to set expectations high. Students should avoid “diary” writing and instead aim for critical reflection. Consider presenting them with four elements:

Element 1: Description. Students should describe the learning context (whether this is a completed reading or other assignment, a service experience, or a field experience). Students record what they know already, what they have observed, and what data and information they have gathered.

Element 2: Analysis and Interpretation. Students should examine reasons behind the context of the learning situation. How do they interpret the learning situation? They also record their personal reactions, feelings, thoughts, and choices—including their hunches. They analyze potential factors and contextual aspects.

Element 3: Meaning and Application. Students think deeply about possible meanings. Why did this seem like a significant event to reflect on? What have they learned and how have they improved? How might future thinking, behaving, and interactions change? What questions remain?

Element 4: Implications for Action. Students now make future plans for action. What can happen differently next time and how can different conditions increase the likelihood of more productive learning and interactions? Students can consider implications for their future behavior and implications for their career paths.

References

Bean, J. (2001). *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Brookfield, S. (1987). *Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Doyle, T. (2008). *Helping Students Learn in a Learner-Centered Environment*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

DESIGN A GRADING RUBRIC AND DISTRIBUTE TO THE STUDENTS. A rubric is usually designed as a grid, listing grading criteria with descriptions of levels of achievement for each criterion. For example, a criterion for element two of a reflective writing assessment (analysis and interpretation) might look like this:

Reflective journal criteria 2: make connections between assigned readings and a week of service, particularly in terms of reasons for choices people make

Level 1	Student makes one connection between a reading and context, without full elaboration.
Level 2	Student makes one or two connections with some elaboration and analysis of a reading and real context.
Level 3	Student makes connections creatively, drawing on specific texts and extrapolating to his or her own experiences.
Level 4	Student makes strong connections in challenging ways, finding relevance in real contexts and explaining complex reasoning through the texts.

Contact the **Tenn TLC** for more information, workshops, or consultations at 974-3807 or tenntlc@utk.edu. Visit our site: <http://tenntlc.utk.edu>.
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