

Basics of Reflective Essay Writing

Writing the Reflective Essays

The three parts of this document reviews a year's worth of writing skills. Read everything very carefully and make sure to email me with any questions. This document contains hyperlinks. This means that you can navigate to a website to read more about a topic. Please do so! To open a hyperlink, hold down the "ctrl" key and click with your mouse.

Suggestion: Read this document now, and then read it again AFTER you write your reflective essay, checking to make sure you're following all the "rules" here.

Hopefully these ideas are not completely new to you. If they are, really spend some time reading some websites about writing that I recommend BEFORE writing a reflective essay. In addition, continue visiting websites and working on your writing throughout the course.

Remember that writing is personal and it's never perfect. I changed this document about 50 times! And it's still not done. We're all here to learn and you'll be amazed how quickly this all becomes second nature to you. Don't worry!

Difference between Reflective Essay and Discussion Board

You might have the same or similar questions for the Reflective Essay and the Discussion Board. Please note that only the Reflective Essay needs to be an *academic essay*. The discussion board is less formal.

The Writing Process

The common way to teach writing and do writing is to do it in a [process](#). It's the "natural" way of writing.

It's very important to use drafts to write your reflective essays.

This means that you take several steps when writing. I have a suggestion for the general steps:

- 1) Read the materials for the course with the reflective essay question/s in mind. Take notes on places where the readings address the question/s so you can use your notes later in your reflective essay.
- 2) Start with a general outline (either in your head or on paper). This should include your [thesis and topic sentences](#).
- 3) Write a rough draft (write it as completely as you can).
- 4) Review the readings and lectures again.
- 5) Review your paper and add information where you are missing important details paying attention to the two-page limit. Make sure you've answered the questions.
- 6) Check the structure (thesis, topic sentence, body paragraphs).
- 7) Make sure you have good [transitions](#).
- 8) Check the citations.
- 9) Check the grammar / spelling / punctuation.



You may go back to any step, repeat steps, rearrange steps or add steps. These are just the basics. Regardless, try to give yourself at least a day for the paper to “rest” before looking at it one last time before submitting it. I know this is a lot to ask because of the time frame, but please do try.

As the semester goes on, use my comments on previous papers to make a list of your common errors. Use websites to get ideas on how to correct them and then edit for those errors specifically. See how many changes you can make on your own. Always edit and proofread before you submit your reflective essay.

Hints for writing your reflective essay – Essay Structure Explanation

All of your reflective essays will be in response to a question or questions. Usually there are several related questions that you need to answer. You can often get more ideas about responding to a prompt by looking at websites that discuss tests that require you to [respond to a prompt](#). When you write your reflective essay, you need to write an essay containing an introduction paragraph with a thesis, several (3 or 4 is usually good) body paragraphs and a conclusion paragraph.

General guidelines for length:

- introduction paragraph = 3 to 4 sentences (including thesis)
- body paragraphs = 8 to 10 sentences
- conclusion paragraph = 3 to 4 sentences (same length as introduction)

The thesis and topic sentences of your body paragraphs are critical. The thesis needs to restate the questions in the form of an answer that you will explore more in the body paragraphs. You must have a thesis. A thesis must have a topic (from the question) and a controlling idea (the idea that you will prove to your reader). To understand what I mean, it might be good to look at some examples:

Question prompt:

Why do you think the age of compulsory English education in your country has been lowered? What do you think are some benefits of starting English language instruction early? Are there any disadvantages of an early start? Are your schools and teachers prepared to handle teaching English to young learners? Explain your views and provide examples for support based on your own teaching context. (If the age of compulsory English has not been lowered, explain why not and discuss the other questions.)

Possible thesis statement #1: **The age of compulsory second language learning has been lowered in the US for several reasons, demonstrating the benefits and disadvantages of doing so, including the preparedness of schools and teachers.**

Note: Since I am writing about the US, I altered the prompt slightly.

(Topic = lowering of second language learning; Controlling idea(s) = several reasons / advantages and disadvantages / preparedness)



BP TS #1: First, the reasons for lowering the age of second language learning in the US are numerous.

BP TS #2: Lowering the age of second language learning has many benefits.

BP TS #3: Despite these advantages, there are some disadvantages to consider.

BP TS #4: The main area of concern with lowering the age of second language learning is in the preparedness of schools and teachers.

Notice how the topic sentences repeat the important words (topic / controlling idea) from the thesis. This helps connect your paragraphs.

I know what you're thinking: "This will make me sound like an obvious idiot. This is too direct! Too structured!"

Don't think that way. First of all, the ideas we are exploring are complicated. Anything you can do to simplify them is going to help your reader. Making very clear, very direct thesis statements and topic sentences is the easiest way to do this.

Remember – your goal is to show complex ideas in a simple way. You need to help your reader as much as possible. Don't worry about "sounding dumb". You're not going to.

When writing your [thesis](#), make sure you don't "announce" what you will do in the essay. Avoid phrases like:

- I will
- This essay will
- I would like to show

When you do this, you only give the topic. You aren't giving the controlling idea.

Here is an example of an **ineffective** thesis:

The course effectiveness can be explained in the following terms.

By using the word "following", the thesis is unfinished. It doesn't give the complete idea, so you reader is left wondering what you will discuss. It would be better to say:

This course was effective because of X, Y and Z.

In the thesis above, the topic is the "course", the controlling idea is that it was effective" and the sub-topics are the three reasons X, Y and Z (whatever they are). This thesis tells us that there will be three body paragraphs, one about each sub-topic.

The type of structure I've discussed is very expected by a native-speaking English speaker when they read academic writing. It's true that you wouldn't do this with more "creative" writing, but with this type of writing, you really need to do it.



So try it. It's a particular style that is used in academic writing. That's what we're doing, so work on that structure.

Here are a couple more examples:

Question prompt: Explain the approach(es) that you should take in your classroom based on what you read about the characteristics of young learners based on the video, lecture, and readings. What kinds of activities and materials do you think are the best for young learners of English? What type of classroom environment do you think is ideal for YLs? Is it possible to build an English-speaking environment in your class from the first day? Explain. Use examples from your context to support your point of view.

Possible Thesis: In my class of 5th graders in Maryland, I have several approaches, activities, materials and classroom environment that I find most effective, creating an English-speaking environment from the first day.

BP #1: In the first place, there are two approaches that work well with my students.

BP #2: As part of these approaches, I use activities that engage my students and use many learning styles and all for skills.

BP #3: To create these activities, I choose materials very carefully.

BP #4: The fourth component of my classroom is its environment.

BP #5: Using these approaches, activities, materials and environment helps create an English-only environment from the first day.

Notice that I:

- Make it clear WHO my students are
- Include all of the question prompt information in my thesis
- Break down the questions so each paragraph answers another part
- Connect the idea of the previous paragraph(s) to the next by using phrases that refer back

Now, once you get that down, you'll need to make really nice body paragraphs. Let's look at an example of a nice one:

Regarding songs, it is advised that students get familiar with key vocabulary through real objects, pictures or actions. They repeat the song lines and eventually use props, puppets, and motions to illustrate the meanings of the song lyrics. For example, in my classroom, we before we read a story about a caterpillar, we learn a song about how they start life as a worm (we wiggle around), then pupate (we pretend to sleep) and then emerge as butterflies (we fly around flapping our arms). Besides this, another way to encourage ownership of the language is to ask learners to substitute words or phrases in the song lines with their own words (Linse, 2006).



This technique helps learners acquire the language by moving from mere repetition to freer practices. Eventually, learners could be asked to write their own lyrics to the tune of the song. In addition, in order to maximize oral production, song lyrics could be exploited the same way as a written text. Actually, Davanellos (1999) points out that "anything you do with a text, you can do with a song" (p. 13). In this regard, Davanellos (1999) suggests exploiting three stages, including pre, while and post- phases. The ultimate goal of making students go through those three stages is to make them acquire and use the language. As a pre-activity to a song about food, for example, teachers could ask pupils to name any foods they know. Then, teachers could tell them the names of the foods mentioned in the song. Finally, as a post-stage task, the learners could be asked to have a pair dialogue about the kind of foods they like. In short, teachers would gain efficiency by using songs; however, there are also other tools that are worth considering.

Now isn't that a fantastic body paragraph? There are specific examples from the writer and quotes and paraphrases from the readings. It's really nicely developed and carries the reader along from one example to the other.

Note also that a body paragraph should have about 8 to 10 sentences. Having that number doesn't guarantee that you have made a good paragraph, but it is a helpful guideline.

One last comment: even if you find abbreviations in the prompt, you have to spell them out the first time you use them for the reader to understand. Example: **young learners (YLS)**

Giving details (examples) in body paragraphs

You want to be able to give details in each body paragraph (this is where details go – not in introduction or conclusion). You should make sure that **EVERY** body paragraph in **EVERY** reflective essay uses at least one source and provides at least one SPECIFIC example from your experience. So, if you have three body paragraphs, you'd have a minimum of 6 examples (3 from readings and 3 from your own experience) and a maximum of 12 (if this many, they would have to be short).

What if you don't teach kids? No problem. You can make friends with someone who does teach, observe their class and talk to them throughout the course. Alternatively, you can make **YOUR** example about the people that you **DO** teach or that you **DID** teach in the past.

What do I mean by a **SPECIFIC** example? Simple: talk about one particular activity, one particular student or one particular class. Do not make general statements when giving your examples.



Here is a paragraph that DOES NOT have specific details (this is an undeveloped paragraph that would not be good to submit):

A key method that has been highlighted during the course has been the use of thematic plan as a tool to present language in a meaningful and contextualized way. In this regard, teachers are expected to give real-life instructions, integrated the 4 skills communicatively, promote learner autonomy, use experiential and project-based learning (Lobo, 2003). Primary school teachers in Madagascar have already been given a list of themes to be used with their young learners. What needs to be done is to design integrated lesson plans that are based on these themes.

Looking at the above paragraph, you'll see that it is a good start. It has a nice topic sentence (with [topic and controlling idea](#)), the paraphrase and citation are correct and it develops the topic sentence. But the last 2 sentences are general. There are no specific details. Don't you want to know WHAT themes the teachers have been given? I do! And don't you want to know HOW they are going to design the integrated lesson plans? Wouldn't you like an example? I would! Adding that would make this a complete paragraph.

Here is another example of a poorly developed paragraph:

It was really special to learn the use of drama in the classroom. This is one of the activities I implemented with a group. It was a good beginning for me. The groups did a good job. I was surprised by their effort and excellent development. I really did not expect what they did. It was amazing to see them acting and having the chance to take other roles. They had the chance to be someone else. And as stated in the handouts, students are free to speak and are not afraid with the characters they are interpreting. I was really proud of them. This is an activity that reflects students' interest in progressing and doing things well.

This paragraph has two problems. I've highlighted one of them. Do you know what it is? And do you know the other problem?



The highlighted problem is plagiarism, right? What source does it come from? We don't know. It needs a citation. (Part 2 of this document discusses more about citing.)

The second problem is that there is no specific detail. What drama did the children do? What surprised this teacher? What roles did they take? What topic was so interesting for them? Because the teacher does not give us examples, we are left wondering. Details would satisfy us!

Finally, notice the content of the sentences in the beginning of the paragraph. They basically say the same thing. They repeat information instead of building an idea. Be wary of that!

Conclusion Paragraph

Conclusion paragraphs should be the same length as your introduction paragraph – about 4 sentences or so. It should summarize your main points, restating your thesis. You want to start with a conclusion transition so that it's clear you are starting the conclusion. Something like:

therefore	all in all	In short
in a word	on the whole	In conclusion
what we have, then	in sum	To summarize
in summary	in brief	finally
to conclude		

Formatting Correctly

As long as we're talking about EVERYTHING, let's talk about formatting your document.

- Type the document in Microsoft Word (please, do not type your essay in the Comments section of the submission). This means that you must open your own document, type it, format it, save it and then "Attach" it to the Comments section of the submission. Do not type or copy and paste your essay into the Comments section. If you have any questions, you can consult the document on Blackboard entitled "How to submit Reflective Essays"
- Margins: 1" on top, bottom, right and left. You can set the margins under "File" and "Page Setup".
- Type your name, the assignment number, the course name and section and the due date of the assignment in the upper left hand corner of the first page only. Do not indent.
Example:

John Doe

Reflective Essay #1

January 3, 2012

- Indent the essay part .5" for the first line of every paragraph. To do this, you can usually just hit the TAB key for the first paragraph. This will leave your heading in the right place. DO NOT use the space bar. You can also do this under the "Format" menu (above). Go under "Paragraph"
- Left align (NOT full alignment) – this makes the lines uneven on the right side, but easier to read because spacing in between words is normal.



- Times New Roman font, size 12, black color. That's what this is. Never use **bold** or *italic* letters.

Reasons your reflective essays will be returned for rewriting

Don't be discouraged if I ask you to rework your essay. Writing takes practice and many of us have been too busy teaching to be writing essays! Perhaps you do it in your spare time, but I'm guessing that you don't. So here are some reasons why you might be asked to rework a reflective essay:

1. Not answering all parts of the question prompt
2. Writing an answer that contains mostly things unrelated to the question prompt
3. Writing less than one page (because it will not be developed enough)
4. Not writing an essay (introduction paragraph, several body paragraphs and a conclusion paragraph)
5. Not providing specific examples from your experience that relate to the readings
6. Presence of any kind or amount of Plagiarism
7. Poor or no thesis statement and topic sentences
8. Lack of proper reference list
9. Grammar errors that are too frequent and impede in comprehension ("major" errors)

Follow this guidelines before submitting each of your REs and you will be almost set!
And now... enjoy writing your reflective essays!

