

# Narrative Nonfiction: Reflective Essay

## Learning Targets

- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.
- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.
- Interpret figures of speech (e.g., hyperbole, paradox) in context and analyze their role in the text.
- Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

## Writing a Reflective Essay

We often gain new insights and knowledge by living through experiences, but we also do the same by reflecting on and communicating those experiences in writing. A **reflective essay** is a type of personal narrative in which writers share insights and observations about life, often through presenting a problem and exploring how it was resolved (or left unresolved) as a result of the writer's experiences. This type of writing draws upon personal experiences and imaginative thinking. It provides rich opportunities for recollection of past, present, or imagined experiences and thoughtful reflection on these experiences. Sometimes, by going through the process of revisiting a past event and considering how it helped us to grow and change, we understand our own experiences better than ever before—and, through our writing, we can allow others to do so, as well.

To develop your skills as a non fiction narrative writer, you will engage in a series of activities in which you work with your teacher and with your classmates to construct two model reflective essays. You will then use these models to construct your own reflective essay.

## ACTIVITY 1

## Discovering the Elements of a Reflective Essay

### Before Reading

1. You have probably read and written personal narratives. What are some common elements of good personal narratives?

## LEARNING STRATEGIES

Think-Pair-Share, Brainstorming, Marking the Text, Generating Questions, Graphic Organizer, Drafting, Rereading, Adding, Substituting, Self-Editing/Peer Editing, Sharing and Responding, Marking the Draft, Writer's Checklist

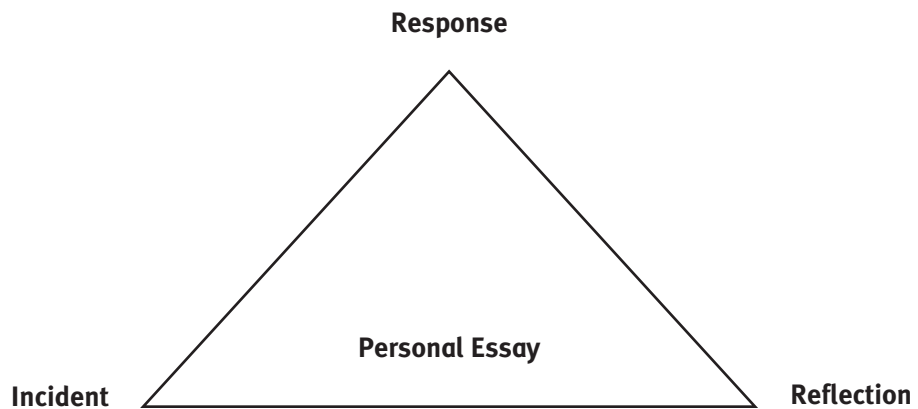
## ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

A **reflective essay** is a type of personal narrative in which writers share insights and observations about life, often through presenting a problem and exploring how it was resolved.

### During Reading

2. A reflective essay is a kind of personal narrative in which the writer reflects on the significance of an incident. Most reflective essays are structured to include three parts:
- Incident: a description of an experience or situation.
  - Response: the writer's initial or immediate thoughts and feelings in response to the incident.
  - Reflection: the writer's reflection on the incident, after some time has passed and he or she is able to thoughtfully consider the importance of the incident or situation to his or her life. This may include awareness of one's own earlier limited understanding of an event.

The illustration below shows these elements in graphic form



3. Mark the word *Incident* on the graphic organizer with a highlighter or colored pencil. Now use a different color to mark the word *Response*. Finally, use a third color to highlight *Reflection*.
4. Using the colors you chose, mark the text throughout, identifying instances where the writer describes what he did, what he felt, and what he later learned or realized.

## SAMPLE TEXT

# New York City

by Khan Shoieb

## My Notes

- 1 We are accelerating past 60 on the bridge, headed from the depths of Queens into Manhattan. The dusty meter is switched off, windows rolled down, wind raging through my hair. I am sitting in the front seat of a battered and archaic Ford Crown Victoria. The car is bright yellow. My father is driving, and I see fatigue in his eyes, but I am only eleven and thrilled finally to be tagging along. The cab smells of manufactured lilies from an aerosol can, always overdone and stuffy, and the engine drones on while I fiddle with the cold metal of the ashtray. Nestled in the grey leather of my father's taxi, I coyly peer out across the river at an ethereal city that has stolen my heart. Tonight, when Manhattan is doused in a steamy fog, the metropolis seems more and more distant as we drive closer. I fail to make out any of the skyscrapers through the impenetrable mist; instead, every few seconds, like the revolving beacon of a lighthouse, a few white flashes emerge from the soupy haze of the night, daring me to come forward.
- 2 My father is not a simple man, but a man who keeps it simple. Work hard, he says. Grab the opportunities that come to you. As I get older and we grow further apart, however, this seemingly clichéd counsel of his gradually contorts itself into an agonizing burden.
- 3 I learned his story in fragments from my mother. Refusing to heed the warnings back home, he immigrated to New York City at the age of twenty-three, leaving behind his widowed mother and a promising career as a journalist to try and give his children a better life. He settled in the city, but far from the "city" as I would come to know it, for Manhattan is not the origin of dreams, but only their destination. Instead he found a small tenement in Queens between the Spanish and the Greeks, and temporarily took up driving a taxi twelve hours a day while he raised his family and tried to reboot his career.
- 4 What was once "temporary" has become permanent and what was once an American Dream has become an Immigrant Reality.
- 5 I can recall very little from my early childhood with any clarity aside from a few moments with my father. I remember he used to work a double shift on Sundays and took Monday off to rest, so that every once in a while, if I was lucky enough and had behaved myself, he might reluctantly take me atop the Empire State Building. We would arrive just as the sun was setting. I was too young to have been able to see anything, so he would hoist me up high and let me clutch dearly to the diagonally crossed wiring before us. Far above the concrete streets, where ordinary hopes and dreams suddenly seemed trivial, I asked my father everything about New York. It was there, grasping that fence on the 86th floor, that I truly learned of my city, more from the sound of my father's voice than the actual words he spoke. And if I was patient enough, he would whisper to me in native tongue of his one reporting assignment in Casablanca and the day he started to dream of a world beyond his homeland, and in particular New York. The city, it seems, has a way of simultaneously promising everything and nothing.
- 6 My father has never voiced a complaint about what has become of his fate in New York. But in stark contrast to our days atop the city—a time when more possibilities lay ahead for him—today I can sense the slightest tinge of regret in his voice. He has grown quieter as he has aged, perhaps from the strain of unforgiving work, but also perhaps because he has begun to think in hypotheticals. Whether he regrets his decision to come to New York, I will never know for sure, but one fact alone stands. My father never went back.

### My Notes

- 7 The words “work hard” warrant a different meaning when they come from someone who has sacrificed that much for you. The guilt continues to drive me apart from my father, probably because I am not the man he is. I can tell that he silently hopes to live out his American Dream vicariously through his children. I am scared to shoulder that kind of responsibility, to try and live out a glorious American Dream for my father, but too ashamed not perpetually to want to do it for him as well. His sacrifice, however burdening, will always serve as a powerful source of inspiration for me.
- 8 The days of me tagging along while my father drives his taxi and the two of us going atop the Empire State Building together are long gone, but whenever I think about what lies ahead, the memories are suddenly resuscitated. I cannot help but hope that one day for me, unlike my father, New York City stands as a symbol of all that I could do and not all that I couldn't.

### After Reading

When you have finished reading, respond to the questions below, which examine how Shoieb structures his essay. Be prepared to discuss your answers with your classmates.

5. The author opens his reflective essay with an incident from his childhood, written in present progressive verb tense (“We are accelerating ... I am sitting . . .”). Why do you think the author starts this way? What does it reveal about his point of view?
6. Paragraphs 2–3 provide exposition on the father’s history. How do these paragraphs complicate the essay? How do they impact the tone?
7. The fourth paragraph is a single sentence. Why do you think the author made this choice?

8. Paragraph 5 is the longest in the essay and introduces another incident. How is this paragraph similar to and/or different from paragraph 1? How does it impact the essay's focus and tone?

9. How do paragraphs 6–7 advance the central ideas of the essay? How do they impact the essay's tone?

10. The conclusion of a narrative essay typically serves to explore the change in the narrator's point of view as a result of his/her experiences. Sometimes the writer makes the significance of the event explicit, directly stating what was learned. Other writers choose to imply the significance, suggesting rather than stating what was learned. Still others leave the significance ambiguous or even unresolved. What approach does Shoieb seem to use? How does this impact the essay's overall tone?

11. Is the writer's use of symbolism and/or structure to advance his central ideas in the essay effective? Why or why not?

### Check Your Understanding

12. How does Shoieb structure and sequence his essay to build to its complex overall tone?

### ACTIVITY 2

## Writing a Reflective Essay as a Class

**WRITING PROMPT:** Consider a time when something happened to you that taught you a lesson about yourself or about life, a lesson that your audience might benefit from learning. Write a narrative about your experience encouraging others to think about this lesson. Be sure to think about the elements of a good story that make it engaging and entertaining—in other words, what makes the reader want to keep reading it. Develop your story with descriptions and details, and use your voice as a storyteller to relate the incident(s), your response(s) at the time, and your reflection(s) on the significance of the experience. Use feedback from your peers to help you strengthen your narrative and clarify its significance to you. Your essay should meet the following requirements:

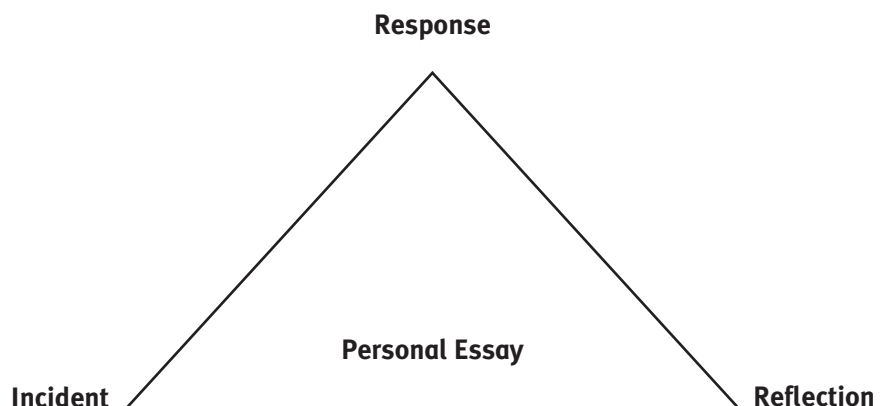
Be sure to

- Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation
- Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone
- Use narrative techniques such as dialogue, pacing, description, and reflection to develop the experiences, events, and characters
- Include descriptive techniques such as precise diction and sensory and figurative language to convey vivid pictures to your readers
- Provide a conclusion that reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative

### Prewriting

As your teacher models the process of creating a reflective essay, you will be expected to take notes and participate by adding ideas of your own.

1. Use a graphic organizer to help brainstorm ideas for topics that are inspired by this narrative.
2. As your teacher tells you several stories out loud, take notes on each one, focusing on which one seems the most interesting and why.
3. As your teacher retells the narrative you have selected, take notes on the incidents, responses, and reflections included, recording these on the graphic organizer.



4. To further develop the narrative, use the strategy of the reporter's questions (*who, what, when, where, why, and how*) to brainstorm questions that will help create a more detailed retelling of the incident, response, and reflection. List your questions here. Record answers in the appropriate place in the graphic organizer as your teacher responds to them.
5. Scan the example reflective essay again, marking the text for descriptive techniques—precise, descriptive details; sensory images; figurative language; symbolism; and active, vivid verbs or verb tense—Shoieb uses to present the incidents in his narrative. With these in mind, where could your teacher use similar techniques to present the incident(s) more vividly or symbolically?
6. Think about the tone of the unfolding narrative. Is it humorous, thoughtful, regretful, nostalgic? Jot some ideas about the tone. Place this thinking in the center of the graphic organizer. How could diction, imagery, and the use of reflections be used to further develop the tone throughout?

## Drafting

7. In preparation for drafting the introduction, revisit Shoieb's opening paragraph and note how the precise descriptive details and compelling verbs create a scene with symbolic dimensions. Think about how you can make vivid, effective language choices in the class essay as you construct an opening paragraph together. Be sure to include the following elements in the opening
  - An engaging introductory technique (*e.g.* a vivid description, a symbolic anecdote, some dialogue, a reflective statement, a sharp contrast)
  - Context (establishing the problem, situation, or conflict that is central to the essay)

8. You have examined how one author develops ideas in the body of a narrative by
  - Establishing a point of view and revealing how it develops over time
  - Using a variety of descriptive techniques to convey vivid pictures and suggest symbolic significance
  - Including responses and reflections to express the impact of experiences and incidents on the narrator's point of view
  - Sequencing and structuring an essay to build toward a particular tone and outcome.

With these techniques in mind, work with your teacher and your classmates to draft the body of your narrative essay.

9. One important narrative technique not used by Shoieb is dialogue. Think about where doing so might strengthen his essay. Then identify spots where using dialogue or indirect quotations might strengthen the class essay. Consider how these choices will contribute to the tone of your essay as well.
10. As Shoieb shows, writers can add depth to an essay by using symbolism. What elements of the class essay could be considered symbolic? Where could additional descriptions, responses, or reflections be added to further develop symbolism?

## Narrative Nonfiction: Reflective Essay (continued)

11. The conclusion of a narrative essay typically serves to offer the resolution achieved by the writer. What approach makes the most sense for this story and why? As you draft the conclusion with your teacher and classmates, be sure to:
  - Link the closing clearly to the contents of the narrative, including its tone
  - Clarify how the central ideas of the narrative link together
  - Offer reflection on the extent to which a resolution was achieved
12. Like reflections and your conclusion, a good title can help a reader to understand the significance of a narrative experience. A good title also:
  - Suggests (or states) the focus of an essay
  - Grabs the reader's attention
  - Establishes the tone of what follows
  - May link to a specific quote, image, or detail included in the text

With these criteria in mind, brainstorm possible titles for this narrative. Be prepared to explain why your title might be a good one for the essay.

### Check Your Understanding

13. Now that the class essay has been drafted, refer to the Learning Targets and Writer's Checklist to help determine how well the essay meets the expectations. After looking at these,
  - Underline three descriptive choices that help to develop the tone of the narrative.
  - Highlight sentences or phrases that present the narrator's point of view at the time the incidents or experiences occur.
  - With a different color, highlight several sentences that reflect on what was meaningful about or learned from this experience, revealing the narrator's changing point of view.

#### ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

A **paradox** is a statement that may seem self-contradictory or nonsensical on the surface but contains an underlying truth.

### Revising for Language and Writer's Craft

Writers of texts that offer complex or unresolved perspectives on a subject often use a rhetorical device known as **paradox**. Paradox refers to a statement that seems self-contradictory or nonsensical on the surface but that, upon closer examination, may be seen to contain an underlying truth. Because they create a sense of initial confusion for readers, paradoxes can be used by writers to draw attention to a key observation or to provoke readers to see something in a new way.

Consider the following classic examples, using the space provided to explain what you think is implied by the paradox:

"The swiftest traveler is he that goes afoot."  
(Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854)



“Perhaps this is our strange and haunting **paradox** here in America—that we are fixed and certain only when we are in movement.”  
(Thomas Wolfe, *You Can’t Go Home Again*, 1940)

“Men work together . . . whether they work together or apart.”  
(Robert Frost, “The Tuft of Flowers,” 1897)

## Practice

Now consider these examples from Shoieb’s essay. For each, explain not only what the contradiction implies but also how it links to the central ideas of the essay. Note: as a check for understanding, not all may be true paradoxes:

“. . . the metropolis seems more and more distant as we drive closer.”

“My father is not a simple man, but a man who keeps it simple.”

“What was once ‘temporary’ has become permanent . . .”

“The city, it seems, has a way of simultaneously promising everything and nothing.”

As you create your own reflective essays, consider spots where using a paradox may help to engage the reader, express the narrator’s sense of confusion or conflict, or clarify the central ideas in the text.

14. Using the Language and Writer’s Craft activity as a resource, work together to identify spots where the writer could add a paradoxical statement to increase the sense of conflict, to emphasize a key thought, or to engage the reader more effectively.

## Editing

15. After presenting your revisions to the class and hearing the revisions of others, it’s time to polish the final draft of the narrative essay. Consider all of the elements listed in the Language category of the Scoring Guide at the end of this workshop and correct any errors you find. Share corrections with your classmates.

### ACTIVITY 3

## Writing a Reflective Essay with a Peer

**WRITING PROMPT:** With a writing partner, your task is to write a reflective essay that reflects on an incident (or incidents) that has had a significant impact on you. In particular, consider how other juniors could benefit from hearing about how you have been impacted by this experience. As you craft your essay, think about what makes a story engaging and entertaining, and remember the following characteristics of good narratives:

Good narratives

- Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and establishing a point of view
- Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone
- Use narrative techniques such as dialogue, symbolism, description, and reflection to develop the experiences, events, and characters
- Include descriptive techniques such as precise diction and sensory and figurative language to convey vivid pictures to your readers
- Provide a conclusion that reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved and how the point of view changes over the course of the narrative

### Prewriting/Drafting

1. Revisit the list of topics you brainstormed in Activity 2. Further brainstorm specific experiences you might write about for your essay, then tell your partner your story ideas. After you've selected your topic, retell the story while you partner takes notes.
2. Plan the structure of your reflective essay. You might use the graphic organizer from Activity 2, but consider other approaches that may better serve your effort to convey your message to your reader. If you plan to include more than one incident, determine how you will sequence them and why. Be sure to balance incident(s), response(s), and reflection(s) throughout the essay.
3. Brainstorm and answer reporters' questions to flesh out your plan. Then brainstorm detailed images and figurative language that you might use to enhance your essay. Add these to your planner in appropriate spots.
4. Identify a symbol that you could use for effect. Where and how could you weave it into your structure? How could you refer to it in more than one spot to help pull your essay together?

5. Use Shoieb's sample and your class-constructed model to help you draft an opening that engages your reader while establishing your point of view and introducing the problem, situation, or conflict that is central to the narrative.
6. Use your prewriting notes to help you draft the body of the narrative, describing the incident(s), your responses at the time, and the reflections you would later understand or learn. Work with your partner to decide how best to structure the body and use transitions to build coherence.
7. Reread your narrative and consider what type of conclusion or closing to include:
  - Should you explicitly state what you learned from the event?
  - Should you imply what was learned?
  - Should you offer a complete, partial, or inconclusive/ambiguous sense of resolution?

Whatever approach you take, make sure to reveal the significance of the incident and how your point of view has been impacted by it.

8. If you haven't already done so, brainstorm possible titles for your essay. Use feedback from your partner and the criteria for good titles (from Activity 2) to choose the best possible title.
9. Participate in sharing and responding to refine your draft. Mark the draft using the same techniques you used in Activity 1 (highlighting and underlining), and offering comments using the criteria and examples below. Feedback should concentrate on the following:
  - What the first draft does well ("I like the way your opening draws us in and makes us wonder how you got there.")
  - What questions seem unanswered so far ("You say this event changed you, but I don't really get how.")
  - What suggestions you have for how your peers could improve their reflective essay. ("Try some dialogue for the scene with the babysitter instead of just summarizing what she said.")
10. Use the feedback to revise your essay, responding to what your partner has identified as significant questions or concerns.

## Peer Review

11. Working in a small group, use the Revision Checklist on the following page and feedback from your readers to make sure that you have included the essential elements of a reflective essay. Revise as needed, responding to their questions, concerns, and suggestions.

## Narrative Nonfiction: Reflective Essay (continued)

### Reflective Essay Revision Checklist

Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Is the context (the situation, conflict, or problem) made clear in the beginning?</li><li>• Does the essay stay focused on a specific event or sequence of events?</li><li>• Does the experience have a clear impact on the narrator's point of view?</li></ul>
Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Does the writer use a variety of techniques—characterization, dialogue, sensory descriptions, figurative language, and so on—to create vivid descriptions in the narrative?</li><li>• Are any details included that are unnecessary or distracting?</li><li>• Does the writer clearly express his or her feelings about the events at the time they occurred?</li><li>• Does the writer provide moments of reflection about what was learned or would be later understood?</li></ul>
Sequence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Do the structure and sequence of the narrative create a clear, coherent flow of ideas?</li><li>• Do paragraph breaks and a variety of transitions effectively signal shifts and connect incidents, responses, and reflection?</li></ul>
Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Does the ending follow logically from the events of the story?</li><li>• Does the closing clarify the extent to which the central conflict, situation, or problem is resolved for the writer?</li><li>• Is the impact of the experience on the writer's point of view made clear?</li></ul>

12. Look for places where paradox could be use to enhance the tone or capture the sense of conflict in the essay. Use this technique at least twice, highlighting or underlining when you do so in your draft.

### Revising/Editing

13. After meeting with your peer reviewers and hearing their feedback, work with your partner to revise and edit your reflective essay. Produce a final draft of your polished work.
14. Use available resources as you edit your narrative and prepare it for publication.

#### ACTIVITY 4

## Independent Writing

**WRITING PROMPT:** Write a reflective essay on an incident of your choice that has a clear focus and which communicates the impact the experience had on you. Consider an experience that is important to you and that other eleventh-grade students could benefit from hearing (other than the topic chosen for Activity 2 and Activity 3). Use the Learning Targets and the writer's checklist to guide your writing. Also, look over the Scoring Guide on page 14 to review what the expectations for the assignment are. Your essay should meet the requirements listed in the learning targets for narrative essays.

- Engage and orient the reader by establishing a point of view and setting out a problem, situation, or observation
- Use a variety of techniques and transitions to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole
- Use narrative techniques such as dialogue, pacing, description, and reflection to develop the experiences, events, and characters
- Include descriptive techniques such as precise diction, and sensory and figurative language to convey vivid pictures to readers
- Provide a conclusion that reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative and clarifies its impact on the narrator's point of view.

Use the process, examples, goals, and revision strategies from your previous activities to accomplish your task. You might also revisit the graphic organizers that you've used previously to help you plan and revise your writing.

# Narrative Nonfiction: Reflective Essay (continued)

## SCORING GUIDE

Scoring Criteria	Exemplary	Proficient	Emerging	Incomplete
<b>Ideas</b>	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>recreates an incident with well-chosen details and a reflective point of view</li> <li>uses a variety of techniques (e.g., symbolism, paradox) to develop the narrative</li> <li>incorporates insightful commentary on the importance of the experience and its results</li> </ul>	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>recreates an incident with relevant details and a reflective point of view</li> <li>uses narrative techniques to develop experiences, events, and/or characters</li> <li>reflects on the importance of the experience and its results</li> </ul>	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>recreates an incident using irrelevant, minimal, and/or repetitive details and an unclear point of view</li> <li>contains little or no use of narrative techniques</li> <li>contains limited reflection on the importance of the incident</li> </ul>	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>recreates an incident by summarizing and/or presents an unclear point of view</li> <li>contains little in the way of narrative techniques</li> <li>contains perfunctory reflection</li> </ul>
<b>Structure</b>	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>provides an engaging beginning that introduces the narrator's problem or situation</li> <li>uses sequencing, transitions and a variety of techniques to create a coherent whole</li> <li>concludes with an ending that insightfully reflects on what is experienced and resolved</li> </ul>	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>provides a beginning that introduces the problem or situation and a narrator and/or characters</li> <li>uses sequencing, transitions and techniques to create a smooth progression of events</li> <li>concludes with an ending that follows from and reflects on what is experienced</li> </ul>	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>contains a beginning that is unclear and/or does not directly relate to the story</li> <li>presents disconnected ideas and limited use of transitions and techniques</li> <li>contains an ending that is disconnected, unfocused, and/or non-reflective</li> </ul>	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>contains a beginning that does not relate to the story</li> <li>presents limited use of transitions and techniques to ensure smooth progression</li> <li>does not conclude or has an ending that is unfocused, and/or non-reflective</li> </ul>
<b>Use of Language</b>	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses figurative language, including paradox, to create a distinctive effect and develop a compelling tone</li> <li>correctly uses a range of verb tenses to create specific effects</li> <li>demonstrates command of conventions of standard English</li> </ul>	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses figurative language, including paradox, to create strong descriptions and a clear tone</li> <li>correctly uses a range of verb tenses to add variety</li> <li>demonstrates command of conventions</li> </ul>	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses figurative language, ineffectively or without establishing an effective tone</li> <li>uses a range of verb tenses but may include some errors in usage</li> <li>demonstrates limited command of conventions; errors in grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and/or spelling interfere with meaning</li> </ul>	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses weak or inadequate sensory detail, and figurative language, and/or lacks any use of paradox or a clear tone</li> <li>numerous errors in verb tense undermine clarity</li> <li>includes multiple errors that show limited command of conventions; delete the semi-colon and add that seriously impair meaning</li> </ul>