

# The Reflective Essay for Creative Projects

---

by Henry Jankiewicz  
Writing Program  
Syracuse University

## Definition

The Reflective Essay, about fifteen pages long, is designed to engage you in reflecting deeply and insightfully about your work and representing these insights to a reader. Some artists and designers adopt a “tacit” approach to the act of making. They believe that the work should speak for itself, and that to speak of the act of creation is to demystify or denigrate it. However, as an Honors student, you are expected to be able to write articulately to the university community and beyond about the meaning of what you have produced and how you have produced it.

## Voice and Stance

One key factor for connecting with your subject matter is to find a productive stance and voice. It is usual for this type of piece to adopt the role of maker and address readers in the first person: “I made this, and I will explain why I decided to make it the way I did.” Professionals discussing their work often construct themselves as engaged and self-aware practitioners who are interested in the conceptualization of a project.

## Content

Here are four key aspects of your work you might discuss. Thinking along these lines will help to get into a proper, expert stance.

(1) Reflect on the artistic choices you made in the process of creating your project. Even some slightly different decisions or circumstances would have made it turn out very differently. What lay behind your decisions? Was there a conscious theory at work? A moment of serendipity? Did a situation force a decision? Was there a critical turning point or crisis?

(2) Although much work is stunningly original and inventive, no artist’s work is made out of thin air. Whose work has influenced yours? Whose work have you studied and loved? What taught you to be able to do what you have done? How has your work emerged from what you know about your field or the work of others? What is your relationship to them? Who else is doing work alongside you at this time and how does your work relate to theirs?

(3) Reflect on what your work means to you. Is there anything you want to say about its meaning to others? What effect would you hope your work to have on the world? Is there a particular effect or change you hope to stimulate in your audience?

(4) As the producer of an Honors Capstone Project, you have one important specialized readership--the evaluators who will review your work for the Honors Program. For this audience, arrange your reflection so that you represent the full shape of your project from start to finish. Mention your time frame, what kinds of obstacles you encountered, and what changes you had to make. However, do not dwell on mundane obstacles and details (see what to avoid below).

(5) Acknowledge and thank those who helped you.

## **Strategies to Follow:**

Here are some possible strategies for locating your proper purpose, material, voice and stance for the essay: Of course, you could not do all of these things, nor are your choices limited to this list. Choose what most suits what you want to say.

Clarify and elaborate the main problem.

Explain how you found your artistic approach and how you applied it.

Compare or contrast your approach with other possibilities.

Explain where your work is positioned in relation to aesthetic or theoretical debates in your field.

Does your stance have a label (expressivist, abstract, traditional, representative)? What does that label mean to you?

Explain the personal values you bring to bear on the work.

Explain your treatment of the subject--what conscious strategies did you adopt?

Discuss the major decisions you had to make that determined the shape and progress of your work.

Explain any stylistic idiosyncrasies or departures from standard conventions.

Explain why the work is organized as it is.

Discuss any limitations you imposed or what theoretical angles you ignored.

Discuss the intellectual obstacles and problems you encountered.

Underscore your purpose.

Identify other work or people whose work influenced yours; what similarities and differences obtain between their work and yours?

Define your audience.

Explain the significance of this work to you; relate personal experiences only that help the reader understand it.

Tell the readers how you would like them to comprehend the work.

Clarify your relation to the project, and the project to the reader.

## **Some Tendencies to Avoid:**

(1) Resist the inclination to represent yourself as a student or amateur. Of course, you are at a disadvantage compared to professional practitioners; you cannot position your work on a continuum of life-experience or in a stream of ongoing production. Nevertheless, some Honors projects do arise out of deep experience or extraordinary access to resources. Be strategic in examining the elements of your experience that echo professional interests.

(2) The essay should not be an exhaustive chronicle of the process you went through to complete your project. You might be tempted to discuss frustrations with red tape that hindered your access to equipment, or any number of situations that made your heart stop by threatening your project. However, such descriptions can easily depart from the specific significance of the project, and become more like glimpses into a writer's diary, which would have a purpose altogether different from that of a reflective essay. One student photographer writes about the shutter jamming and mishaps in the darkroom, while another discusses how her work constitutes a particular interpretation of the art of photography, defines how she perceives the relationship of choice of subject to chance, and how certain shots were reactions to established schools of practice (even though her shutter might have jammed, too). The first writer comes across as a conversationalist; the second comes across as a design professional who is serious, thoughtful, and articulate about her work.

A litmus test for including material is the question: Am I helping to improve my reader's understanding of the meaning of my project?

(3) Avoid using the essay as a site for self-criticism. It is fine to express some satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a project, or explain why some dimension is missing, to help a reader understand how the work relates to your intentions. This is another means to bring you and the reader into a relationship with the work. However, wherever this function drops out of sight, self-criticism devolves into an apology and can undermine your credibility. Similarly, do not overindulge in autobiography or self-analysis; keep the focus on enriching the reader's understanding of the work.

## Some Points to Remember

Address the reader directly in the first person ("I").

Explain how and why you made the choices you did and what strategies you

adopted; place yourself in relation to others' work and reflect on the meaning of your project to yourself and others.

Adopt the persona of a designer and thinker.

Introduce your project more than yourself; speak of yourself only to give perspective to the work. Your values, for instance, may be interesting to most readers, since they influenced your approach. The same is not true of your eating habits during work breaks.

The essay is not for autobiography, story-telling, or self-critique. It can include any of these elements, but only in the interest of illuminating the project.

Consider describing the full scope of your work for honors reviewers, even if it involved radical changes of Advisors, topics, or departments.