

Assigning Reflective Writing

Reflective writing assignments allow the students to demonstrate learning and also reinforce their learning by inviting them to recall, analyze, and apply what they have discovered. Reflective writing assignments are also a tool to help you gauge what areas the students are particularly interested in or have questions about.

Here are six tips for making reflective writing assignments more effective:

1. **Ensure that the students are familiar with the topic** covered in the learning experience. In particular, if you ask them to reflect on the topic from a different or unusual angle, make sure they feel comfortable with their basic knowledge of the topic first.
2. When a learning experience concludes with reflective writing, **ask the students to write their reflection immediately after the learning experience**, while their learning, insights, and questions are still fresh. Waiting until the next class session may let the students' ideas and understandings cool off, making it hard for them to engage fully in reflection.
3. **Remind the students that good writing uses detailed examples.** Encourage them to think like reporters, capturing the who, what, why, where, when, and how of the examples they provide in their reflection. When the assignment asks for personal examples, encourage the students to explain why that example resonates with the assigned reflection topic. You may wish to share with them the following examples to illustrate the contrast:

Too general: I remember my aunt's wedding very well. It was nice weather, and lots of my family came to celebrate. It really felt like God was blessing my aunt and uncle's marriage.

More specific: My aunt was married on a beautiful autumn day, with the sun shining through the red and gold leaves. Lots of family traveled from far away to celebrate, even my great-grandparents. They have been married for sixty years and have always been a model of Christian marriage for our family. So even though they are not in good health, they believed it was important to witness to my aunt and uncle's marriage. Then as the priest read the Nuptial Blessing, the sun came through the church's skylights and shone directly on my aunt and uncle—it looked like a blessing from God himself, and my aunt and uncle were both crying tears of joy. Today we see lots of advertising about planning the "perfect wedding," but my aunt and uncle's wedding made me realize that perfection can't be planned and that worldly perfection isn't the goal. A good marriage must come from and return to God and reflect the commitment of the couple to each other and their family.

5. **Ask the students to explain the connections between their thoughts in a concrete way**, reminding them that another person needs to be able to follow their thinking. Explain that in the moment, thoughts are often clear to the person writing. But when the writer goes back to the essay or when someone else reads it, the motivation behind specific references may not be as evident.
6. **Remind the students to conclude their essays with a summary that connects and resolves the ideas and examples.** Encourage the students to conclude by explaining how the topic or learning experience prompted their thoughts, feelings, or insights.

