

Writing Assessment Handbook

**California Assessment
Program**

Grade Twelve

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Reflective Essay

(Originally written for high school teachers and students.)

The reflective essay was given definition by the essays of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne. In choosing to call his pieces "essays," literally "trials," Montaigne focused on writing as exploration and discovery, not writing as final thoughts on established truths. Perhaps this kind of writing as a recognized genre could have emerged into Western culture only after the decline of medieval scholasticism and the reliance on external authority. Writers could explore their own ideas, their own lives, finding new authority within private insight and experience.

Essay writers have charmed and challenged thoughtful readers from Montaigne's time on: Addison and Steele, Lamb, Hazlitt, Virginia Woolf, E. B. White, Joan Didion, and Russell Baker are among those whose essays accurately reflect the tastes and views on world events and issues of their times. Today, reflective essays range from the philosophical treatises of renowned thinkers to the thoughtful, even timely, humorous and trivial probings and musings of local newspaper and magazine columnists. Students will find in the essays of our day a mirror for our time.

Importance of the Reflective Essay

The writing of a successful reflective essay requires the ability to see connections. Moving from a personal experience or a general concept, the writer must explore possibilities, try out ideas, and reach beyond personal implications to a larger, more general significance.

Seeing connections is a central component of problem solving, one of the critical aspects of thinking. In reflection, writers are challenged to abandon trite ideas that they cannot validate against their own experiences. Reflection leads beyond such superficial understanding as "We will all die sometime"; beyond wishful understandings, "I hope everyone will want peace"; and beyond moralistic imprints, "We should be kind to one another." It asks for understandings that delve into and explore what we have in common—the universal truth of what it means to be human beings.

With its focus on the writer's search for a meaning applicable to the human condition, the reflective essay is a close kin to other kinds of writing. Autobiography narrates a meaningful personal experience; the reflective essay uses this experience to talk about life in general. Speculation about causes and effects, conjectures about the "whys" and "what-ifs"—the reflective essay uses these speculations as a prod for explorations. Interpretation looks for meaning; the reflective essay uses these meanings to reach understanding.

Evaluation proclaims a judgment; the reflective essay explores the ramifications of judgments. Using so many different types of writing and thinking, the reflective essay emerges as a rich, challenging type of writing.

Reflection should not be thought of as a quality of mind limited to the academically sophisticated, however. As a cast of mind, reflection begins very early, probably before speech. Although California does not assess the writing of the reflective essay until high school, it assumes the practice of teaching reflective discussion, keeping journals, and writing essays during the entire schooling process. The importance of the reflective thinker in our society cannot be overemphasized.

Characteristics of the Reflective Essay

The style of the reflective essay generally is open, natural, and intimate. While its subject often is stimulated by a small incident, its reasoning is thoughtfully analytical and its intentions philosophical. The writer's skill in balancing these dichotomies determines the quality of the reflective writing.

Inspired by an observation or a personal occasion, a reflective thinker makes connections between the stimulus of experience and idea and explores those connections in the light of other experiences, often arriving at new dimensions of the original thought. Reflective writing shows a process as much as a product, achieving for the writer, and often for the reader, a sort of epiphany, an "ah ha!"

Characteristics of reflective writing, then, include the occasion, the stimulus for reflection, plus the written reflection that extends its meaning for the writer. The exemplary reflective essay is marked by a personal voice and a style that effectively convey the writer's thoughtful considerations.

The Occasion

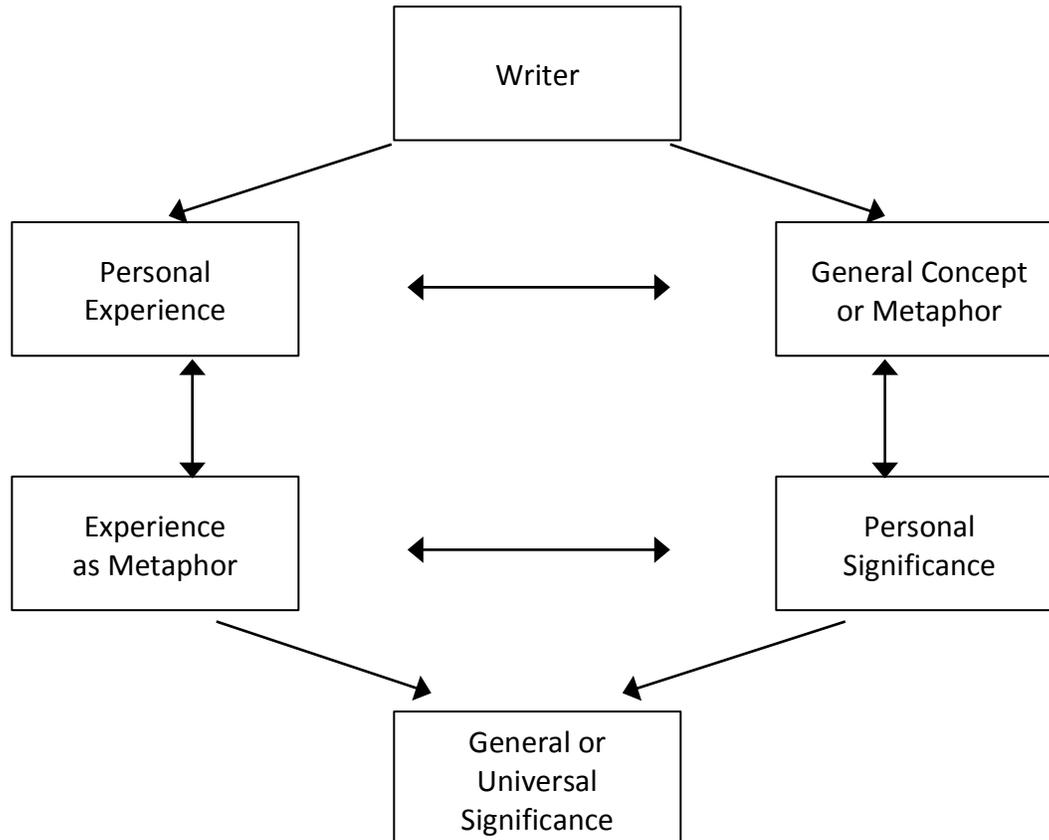
Reflective essays are grounded in the concrete. An ordinary thing seen, done, read, overheard, or experienced can trigger the writer to explore what that occasion might say about the human condition. Occasions for reflection might stem from the observations of a natural phenomenon to a musing over the meaning of a familiar proverb. These occasions become stimuli for the writer to interpret the world in microcosm.

The Reflection

The best reflective writing is exploratory. It uses the specific occasion to explore an abstraction that becomes evident to the reader as the subject of the paper. Writers try out this abstraction, turning it over to see it from several angles, thinking about it long enough to probe its meanings.

Because of the exploratory nature of the reflective essay, a pattern of thinking emerges as the reader reads and the writer writes. Analysis of hundreds of student essays shows that several patterns seem to be typical of the flow of thinking in and out of the following areas:

Patterns of Reflection



Examples of how various patterns work in reflective essays include:

- Narrate a single experience and move in and out of it along the way, reflecting on the significance of various details. The experience becomes a metaphor for a statement about life in general.
- Narrate a full incident, choosing details and images carefully to portray the personal meaning that comes to exemplify a larger understanding of human experience
Present a web of related experiences or observations that show, by their interrelatedness, a theme underlying common human experiences.
- Begin with a general concept (a quotation, proverb, or general experience) and test personal experience against it, reflecting on how each experience relates to the general concept. The reflection is refined more fully with each incident against which it is tested.

It is crucial to remember that identified patterns are just that-identified, not prescribed before the writing. By its very nature, the reflective essay assumes patterns that exhibit configurations of thinking. When exploring an idea, a writer must not be constrained by externally imposed patterns of thought. The fact that thinking in writing does assume patterns that can be

identified underscores the importance of teaching habits of thinking, then allowing these habits full rein through thoughtful, reflective assignments.

Whatever organization or thought pattern emerges, the writer's reflections give broader meanings to personal narration and bring focus to the essay. Reflection creates insights--perhaps not new awareness but reawakened or deeper awareness. In the best papers, there is a clear change in chemistry of the writer's view of the world, an epiphany for the writer and perhaps for the reader.

Voice and Style

General readers as well as teachers are affected by the ways in which writers convey their ideas. In the reflective essay, voice and style are significant factors. Because the reflective essay tracks the process of thinking something through to a new awareness, the voice of the writer must be clearly discernible. The primary considerations in thinking about style -- that elusive yet integral aspect of writing-- are appropriateness, precision, and control. Together, voice and style infuse the reflective essay with the personality of the writer.

Rhetorical Effectiveness Scoring Guide for Reflective Essay

Reflective essays derive from the personal experience of the writer. But beyond the description and narration involved in communicating that experience, reflection requires probing into what this experience can show about the writer's life in particular and, more importantly, about the writer's ideas of life in general.

The writer of a reflective essay works to see connections between experience and ideas, to test out thinking about an idea in the light of other experiences, and to arrive at new dimensions of the initial thinking.

Reflective essays are grounded in the concrete. An ordinary thing seen, read, or experienced triggers the reflection and leads to exploration of an idea. Occasions for reflections cover the range of personal experience from observations of natural phenomena, to recalling or witnessing events or to encountering a provocative idea in a novel or on the screen.

While the *rhetorical* aspect of the assessment focuses on the distinctive features of writing types, the *effectiveness* aspect guides us to look carefully at the more comprehensive features of coherence and style. Coherence, a sense of organization, flow, and focus, is essential to all good writing. The coherent essay has a clear direction, each section flowing naturally from the preceding one. Coherence is demonstrated to readers through emphasis, organization, and repetition achieved through recurrences of language, syntax, and ideas. Style, for the purposes of this assessment, is observable in two written language features: (1) *sentence control* and (2) *word choice or diction*. In assessing the effectiveness of style, the primary considerations are *appropriateness, precision, and control*.

Unlike observational writing, which focuses on conveying one's personal perceptions, or autobiographical incident, which involves narrating an incident and evaluating its significance, reflective essays move to a different level of abstraction. The writer of a reflective essay ultimately reveals that the subject of the essay is, in fact, an abstraction, such as truth, beauty, patience, injustice. Reflective writers explore the meaning of this abstraction for themselves and for people in general. It is this people-in-general aspect of reflection -- exploring the larger social implications of an idea -- that is the hallmark of the reflective essay. It involves students in a unique kind of experience-based thinking.

The flow of thinking in exploring an idea may take shapes such as the following:

- The writer may first present the occasion (narrate a full incident or describe an observation), choosing details and images carefully as a way to ground the reflection that follows. The reflection then moves off on its own, perhaps with some reference to the initiating occasion.

- The writer may launch an occasion but then move in and out of it along the way, reflecting on the idea it suggests.
- The writer may construct a web of related, often parallel experiences that serve as the stimulus for reflection.
- The writer may focus first on a single occasion and then draw associations between it and other related experiences that build to an ultimate idea about people or the world at large.
- The writer may begin with an idea from a quotation, proverb, or general experience and test concrete personal experience against it, reflecting about how each experience relates to the idea. The reflection is refined more fully with each example until the idea has been tested from various angles.

Whatever thought pattern emerges, the writer's reflections explore the meaning of the occasion beyond the personal to the general.

Students who lack experience reading and writing the reflective essay usually respond in limited ways to prompts: (1) they fail to ground their reflections in concrete observations or personal anecdotes or do so only superficially and then write a conventional "expository" essay about the idea in the topic; (2) they narrate a relevant personal experience but then neglect to explore the idea it suggests or do so only briefly, often in a moralizing way; or (3) they write a meditation rather than a reflection, turning an idea over and over but not grounding their ideas in personal experience.

Score Point 6 - Exceptional Achievement

Occasion for Reflection. The writer of a six-point essay memorably presents the occasion for reflection (a thing seen, read, or experienced), often with the fine detail of the naturalist or autobiographer. Though it does not dominate the essay at the expense of reflection, the occasion is nevertheless presented in extended, concrete detail. Whether it be an anecdote or an observation of nature or a literary text, the occasion grounds the entire essay in concrete experience.

Writers of six-point essays may use such strategies as the following to ground their reflections:

- Describe an animal, object, or phenomenon, using concrete language rich in sensory detail.
- Record specific behaviors, properties, or actions, often using narrative strategies such as pacing, dialogue, or movement.
- Cite a quotation—poetry, prose, or proverb.
- Construct a web of related, often parallel experiences that serve as the stimulus for reflection.

Reflection. In a six-point essay the reflection or the idea suggested by the occasion is exceptionally thoughtful and convincing. The reader is impressed by particular insights. The writer is clearly thinking freshly, originally, and honestly about the idea and has left commonplaces and clichés behind. The reflection tends to be extended, reflecting a serious, almost tenacious, probing and exploring of the idea.

The reflection may include generalizations about the writer's personal experience (signaled by "I" and "my") or more abstract commentary (signaled by "people," "they," and the editorial "we") about the idea and its broader implications. (For brevity's sake, these two types of reflections can be referred to as *personal reflection* and *general reflection*.)

Personal reflection may be understood as the first step away from narration of personal experience toward the reflective essay's characteristic idea abstraction of general reflection. Most essays scored six will have some explicit, insightful general reflection. In some notable papers, however, the writer's presentation of the occasion is at the same time a reflection. In these papers the general reflection is implicit, embedded in phrases or clauses that cue the reader to move beyond the specific occasion to the abstraction that underlies it. The tone, established by a distancing of self from occasion, clearly conveys the reflective nature of such essays. Though exploratory, the reflection seems to find a direction and reveals discovery or deepening insight, sometimes expressed as wonder, without a sense of conclusiveness.

The six-point essay shows the writer's exceptional control of a range of sentence structures. These writers consistently use language with precision, appropriateness, and imagination, drawing on specific concrete language, sensory description, and details to draw the reader into the exploration.

Score Point 5 - Commendable Achievement

Occasion for Reflection. Like a six-point essay, the five-point essay presents an extended concrete occasion. The occasion does not dominate the essay at the expense of reflection. A five-point essay lacks only the vividness and impact of a six-point essay.

Reflection. The writer engages in extended, thoughtful reflection. As in a six-point essay, the writer includes at least some general reflection. The occasional five-point essay establishes a reflective tone by an effective distancing of self from the occasion. The five-point essay, however, will not carry it through so conclusively. The personal reflection and general reflection are serious and honest but lack the intellectual leaps and freshness of a six-point essay. The essay reaches beyond obvious statements about the occasion and idea. The reflection is not entirely predictable.

A five-point essay shows the writer's ability to use words appropriately. Word choice may show less versatility and imagination than in the six-point essay; however, the diction is still consistently strong and controlled. The writer exhibits sustained control of a variety of sentence structures, and the essay reveals direction or purpose, although without the insight of the six-point essay.

Score Point 4 - Adequate Achievement

Occasion for Reflection. The four-point essay presents a concrete occasion but may lack the detail or specificity of a five- or six-point essay. The language, though appropriate, may be somewhat conventional and predictable. A full fledged incident may dominate the reflection. It strikes the reader as a strong and interesting occasion.

Reflection. Reflection will indicate a serious attempt to explore the idea suggested by the occasion but may be less well grounded in that specific occasion. Some details may seem extraneous, interrupting the forward exploratory movement of the essay. The essay shows a sustained control of sentence structure, but it may have less variety than the five- or six-point essays. The reflection may be intelligent but predictable or commonplace. The connection may seem tangential. The writer may rely on personal reflections about the occasion but will still include at least a brief general reflection. A four-point essay may be characterized by thoughtfulness rather than by discovery.

Score Point 3 - Some Evidence of Achievement

Occasion. The writer presents an occasion, but it may either be brief or dominate the essay. What appear at first reading to be occasions may actually be examples chosen to illustrate an initial generalization. The writer may rely on general rather than specific language.

Reflection. The essay may have a meandering, rather than purposefully exploratory, quality. Although the reader can understand the major ideas, there may be irrelevant details, digressions, and/or repetitions. The three-point essay may rely on personal reflection to the exclusion of general reflection. Reflection will seem obvious or even superficial, often taking the form of moralizing.

Some three-point essays will offer only extended reflection about the idea in the prompt, with little grounding in an occasion. The essay may seem generally competent and the reflection may be as interesting as in a four- or five-point essay, but the writer has not yet learned that reflection must be carefully grounded in an occasion.

Other three-point essays will begin with what sounds like the end point of reflection, a conclusion or generalization that becomes the stimulus for recounting one or more illustrative examples.

Score Point 2 - Little Evidence of Achievement

Occasion. The occasion may be brief or it may dominate the essay. There may be no occasion or the essay may be all occasion, with little reflection.

Reflection. If there is an occasion, the reflection may be additive or unfocused. It may be very brief and simplistic, and some details are irrelevant. The overall structure of the essay is weak. Some two-point essays may be extended personal or generalized reflections on a topic with no grounding at all in an occasion. The writer exhibits little control of sentence structure, and the word choice is limited. Some words may be inappropriate or inappropriately used.

Score Point 1 - Minimal Evidence of Achievement

Occasion. If there is an occasion, it will be very brief and devoid of specificity or concreteness.

Reflection. No reflection is indicated. There may be brief and superficial attempts at definition or statements of opinion rather than reflection. The paper lacks organization, and there are frequent lapses in sentence sense, resulting in confusion for the reader.

Unscorable - Inappropriate Response

Off topic. No response. Written in a foreign language.