

REFLECTIVE WRITING

Reflective writing engages your own experience in some way. Assignments requiring a reflective response can take many forms depending on the course for which they are written and its purposes. One common form of reflective writing seeks to shape a dialogue between your own experience and the subject matter of a course. This may involve a reflective response to a text, to a question raised by the course, to a class discussion, etc. This dialogue can deepen understanding both of your own experience and the subject matter of the course.

Reflective writing is frequently troubled by a tendency to slip into the anecdotal. Reflective papers will be stronger if you try to **distinguish a reflective response from an anecdotal one**. Anecdotal writing describes experiences and narrates stories without a clear sense of purpose or without establishing a clear relationship between these stories and the text (or question, or discussion) you are responding to. The following suggestions for **transforming anecdote into reflection** can be adapted to a variety of reflective assignments.

Try thinking of reflective writing as involving two distinct stages or steps:

1. Reflective writing makes you more aware of your own experience. You will learn to pay attention to it, to notice it, to begin to describe and narrate it. The first step towards writing reflective prose is to locate aspects of your experience that respond to the text/question/discussion at hand. This process will probably be open-ended, associative, experimental and exploratory; it will probably also generate more material than you need to write your paper. It is tempting to leave the narrations and descriptions generated by this initial process in a largely anecdotal form.
2. After this initial exploratory process, reflective writing goes on to do something more. Having located relevant aspects of experience, reflective writing takes that experience and uses it. It does more than recount experience; it uses narrated experience to deepen understanding of the subject at hand: both the text (or discussion, etc) and your experience may be illuminated. A reflective essay selects, orders, and shapes experience to interact in a focused way with a text (or discussion, etc).

Here are some possible ways of using your experience to deepen understanding:

- You might explain how a text illuminates your experience. Is there some part of your experience that you see anew? that makes new sense? that is less of a problem? more of a problem? Does the text fail to illuminate your experience? why?
- Your experience might also open up the text in some way. Does your experience challenge the text (reveal gaps, problems)? Does your experience corroborate the text? augment it? extend it? modify it? complicate it? suggest alternate ways of seeing things?

This is the analytical moment in reflective writing. When you use the text to illuminate your own experience, or your experience to illuminate the text, you engage in a host of analytical activities: asking questions (how and why), making connections, seeing relationships, finding a focus, and selecting the most appropriate examples from a range of related experience.

When you come to write your draft, it is essential that you not only describe or narrate your experience but also **explain** the relationships you see between your experience and the text. Be explicit rather than implicit in your presentation of the relationships and connections you see.

Writing remains **anecdotal** if:

- it tells stories and describes experiences without explaining how these stories interact with the text.
- it relies on loose sequential organization: "and...and also...and then..." It lists the experiences evoked by the text.
- it lacks a clear focus or purpose that shapes the storytelling.

Writing becomes **reflective** when:

- it asks questions, makes connections, and sees relationships between text and experience
- it explains those relationships clearly and explicitly.
- it selects aspects of experience to interact purposefully with the text.

Some assignments may ask you to use a model of theological reflection. These remarks about reflective writing do not assume any particular model of theological reflection; they should be adaptable to a variety of such models. This approach to reflective activities tries to identify the analytical procedures involved so that you can better use a particular model of theological reflection.