

Unit 4: Forms of Prose

Lesson 1 Personal & Reflective Writing

In this lesson you'll read some examples of personal and reflective writing, and learn to write and evaluate your own piece of reflective writing.

Personal and reflective writing is an excellent way to collect your thoughts on a subject and decide what else you'd like to learn about it. It can be an excellent way to begin a more formal academic project and can occasionally even be used for a piece of academic writing.

Personal and reflective writing also provides valuable practice in common elements of writing, such as tone, diction, effective introductions and conclusions, and the use of narration.

In college, it's important to write well enough so you can demonstrate your knowledge of the subjects you're studying. This is true of written essay exams in political science, research papers in history, academic arguments in English, and even in more technical kinds of writing, like biology lab manuals. The writing skills you master in your academic work will serve you well as you communicate your ideas in your life after college, for example in office memos, in correspondence to colleagues or clients, in written suggestions to decision-makers, and even in job application letters. All of these kinds of writing involve communicating specific ideas or information to a specific audience . a professor, an instructor, a colleague, a potential client or employer. But many people successful writers will tell you that the majority of the writing they do is for an audience of one. They write for themselves. This kind writing is very different from academic or professional writing, but it does serve a very real purpose. We usually call this kind of writing personal writing. We can also call it reflective writing, because it gives us a chance to examine ourselves, our thoughts, our feelings, and our dreams, or even our understanding of an idea or concept. Writing in a reflective way is like holding a mirror up to our ideas: it reflects our own thinking. In this tutorial, we'll talk about some of the elements of personal and reflective writing that make it different from other kinds of writing. We'll also talk about some benefits of this kind of writing, and some strategies for writing in this manner.

Many factors make personal or reflective writing different from the other kinds of writing you'll do in your college career. Let's look at a few of these factors. In most college writing, you need to produce an argument. That is, you'll need to have a specific, original idea that makes some focused, relevant statement about your subject matter. Usually this argument is clearly stated early in the essay. In personal writing, however, things are different. This kind of writing has a much more flexible definition of argument. Sometimes the argument isn't clearly stated. The reader must decide exactly what he or she is supposed to learn from the piece. And sometimes it just doesn't have an argument at all. We might think of personal or reflective writing as a meditation on a subject, more than an argument about it. Personal writing often takes a less formal approach to discussing a topic. In fact, it often lets writers' ideas dictate the structure and organization of the writing, rather than requiring that the ideas fit a certain form. For example, an academic argument on the topic of gun control would probably require a certain focused statement about the topic. A writer might choose to do a 'pro' or 'anti' gun control piece. Or he might find some common element relevant to both sides of the issue, such as a concern for personal safety or personal freedom. In an academic argument, this writer would be expected to do research and present it as evidence supporting the ideas in his essay. A personal or reflective essay on this topic, however, might look very different. Rather than finding statistics on gun crime, for instance, a writer could tell a story about an experience with gun crime; perhaps a personal experience, or something that happened to a friend, or even something the writer read about in the newspaper. By the way, stories like these are called anecdotes. But that's not the end of the difference. After all anecdotes can also be used as evidence in argumentative writing. The thing that makes personal and reflective writing really different lies in what is done with the anecdote. In argumentative writing, the writer needs to make sure that the audience will be able to see why the story supports his or her point of view. The audience may need to be shown, explicitly, how this story relates to the larger argument. In personal or reflective writing, however, writers can leave all that up to the audience. Rather than making sure the story supports another idea, personal writers only need to make sure the story relays their thoughts or feelings about the subject. As we can see, the use of evidence is one of the greatest differences between argumentative and personal or reflective

writing. In fact, one can usually tell whether a piece is personal or argumentative by looking at the kinds of evidence provided. The general rule here is that writers of academic arguments must make use of other people's ideas to build up their own ideas. They must quote from authorities on their topic, for example, or refer to books that are well known. This provides their audience with information, as well as giving their 'writerly' persona, or ethos, more credibility and authority. Each of the writer's ideas or opinions should be supported by the ideas or opinions of people who have some kind of authority on the topic. Personal writers, however, don't need to draw on anything but their own ideas, opinions, and experiences. That's because reflective writing isn't about the rest of the world; it's about the writer, and only the writer. Remember that reflective writing is like a mirror reflection: what the mirror reflects is you, and only you.

Personal or reflective essays aren't required to synthesize the ideas of others in the way that more formal kinds of academic writing are. It may seem from this that personal writing is easier than academic writing, but that's not necessarily true. Not having to fit all your ideas into support for a certain argument does give you a little more freedom about what to say. If you do some reflective writing after a day of research at the library, for example, you might not want to use an argument to guide your thinking at all. But you do still want to have a purpose in writing, even if that purpose is just to familiarize yourself with what your thoughts are on your topic. In fact, this is one of the most common functions of personal and reflective writing. For example, after a day of researching the life of Frederick Douglass, you might want to take some time to write about your impression of what you've learned about him. So you might do a paragraph or two on what you think his personality would have been like and a couple of paragraphs on what his contributions were to the political environment of his time. You'll find that writing just for yourself to collect your thoughts on a subject gives you a great deal of focus about what you know and what you *think*, about your topic. But perhaps even more importantly, it gives you an idea of what you *don't* know . or what you *want to know*—about your topic. This kind of personal writing helps you understand what you've learned, and it gives you a better understanding of what you want to learn as you continue to explore and develop your topic. As a result, this kind of writing can be very helpful in the early stages of a more formal research project. Personal and reflective writing can be an excellent foundation for a formal academic writing project. But there's a larger, more fundamental benefit from writing this way. When you write in a personal or reflective mode, even for an audience of just yourself, *you are writing*. You're putting your thoughts into words. That practice always helps to improve not only your writing, but also your thinking. Writing is much like playing a musical instrument: the more you do it, the better you get. Personal and reflective writing helps you to develop your writing skills. As those skills develop, you learn to trust your own language more. As you grow to trust your own language skills, your confidence increases, and you're able to make your writing and your thinking more sophisticated and interesting. Finally, personal and reflective writing is valuable because it relies on certain elements that are also important in more formal academic contexts. Because a personal essay is primarily concerned with the thoughts of one person, the element of persona is very important to this kind of writing. Writers who specialize in personal and reflective writing for audiences larger than just themselves must be skilled at communicating their personality to their audience. This can be done in subtle ways, but just as in any other form of writing, the personality of the author has to be carefully constructed. To effectively communicate a persona to an audience, personal writers must work with such form-related issues as tone and diction. They must also give careful consideration to more content-oriented issues, such as what information or details to put into the introduction and conclusion. In addition, personal and reflective writing often makes great use of narration, that is, telling a story. In fact, sometimes this kind of writing looks very much like a short story. Academic writing usually requires more than simply telling a story, but the ability to relay a story quickly and

efficiently is an invaluable skill for any serious writer. Personal and reflective writing is one of the best ways to hone this skill. So we can see that personal and reflective writing performs many functions on its own, as a unique form of writing. But it's also a very valuable form of writing to learn for improving your formal, academic, or argumentative writing.

One of the great masters of the personal essay was Michel de Montaigne, a French writer who lived in the sixteenth century. Montaigne is generally credited with having invented the essay. His personal essays in particular show us a great deal about just how useful this kind of writing can be in today's world. In some cases, a Montaigne—like personal essay could even be used in a formal academic context. Montaigne usually began his essays with a personal observation. He might present a meditation on some recent event or provide a detailed description of an interesting object. He might even describe some everyday occurrence like sitting down to a meal or taking a bath. But these observations served only as an introduction. He moved from there to a discussion of something more intellectually challenging, such as politics, religion, or science. Montaigne's essays show us the value of an introduction that gets the reader's attention with vivid imagery and interesting ideas, but this isn't the greatest lesson we can learn from his work. What's most important in Montaigne's essays, at least, what's important to the modern writer of personal or reflective essays—is their structure. Or, actually, their *lack* of structure. Montaigne's essays focus on certain topics, as do more formal types of writing. One essay, for example, is about Catholicism, another about friendship, another about the microscope, and so on. But rather than beginning his essay from the point of having done all his research, as today's more formal essays do, the structure of these essays do something different. They follow Montaigne's own process of discovery, as he learned more about the topic. His exploration of how a microscope works, for example, begins with a description of a small insect. He then described doing research on this insect, including anatomical drawings and information he came across. These drawings led him to want to learn more about the device that helped people see things clearly that were too small to see with the naked eye. Through all this, Montaigne went on long tangents, describing whatever objects or idea is most important to him at the time. Montaigne wasn't concerned so much with presenting an argument as he was with *portraying the process* by which his ideas evolved. Because of this characteristic, his particular brand of exploratory essay is reflective and personal. Like a mirror, it gives an image of a particular person at a particular point in time—a time at which *learning* is occurring. In some cases, a Montaigne—like essay might be appropriate for academic purposes. Professors will often ask students to describe the process by which they came to their understanding of the subject matter of a particular assignment, or even of the course material as a whole. In these cases a personal essay might be appropriate as an academic assignment. But even if you never submit a personal or reflective essay for credit in a college class, this kind of writing can help you better understand your own learning. It provides a means by which you can describe your own unique process of discovering new knowledge, and your own unique descriptions of the world as you see it.

Much of your college reading and writing will involve texts that follow some disciplinary form; they'll follow the rules of argument of a certain discipline. A report on the Black Plague written by a biologist, for example, will look very different from an essay written on the same topic by a historian. Even though they'd address the same topic, each of these professionals would structure their writing according to the conventions of the discipline in which they're working.

A scholar or a student writing an academic essay in the field of history must adhere to a certain argumentative structure, a certain type of rhetorical stance, and a certain way to organize facts. A scientist must write like scientists. In fact, most professional and academic writing is like this; when we write, we almost always have to follow some kind of pre-established structure.

But in one mode of writing—the personal essay—authors are free to make up their own rules. In a personal essay, writers can tell a story, present a fact (or a whole lot of facts), offer observations, or do just about anything else they find effective or interesting. Because of this, personal essays vary greatly in what they say and how they say it.

But one thing that all personal essays have in common is that, just as in more formally structured forms of writing, every author of a personal essay *has a reason for writing one*. Regardless of the mode of writing or the topic addressed, every piece of writing has a purpose—something that the writer wants the audience to do or to think after they've finished reading.

In this Independent Study you'll examine two pairs of essays. The first pair is Lars Eighner's "On Dumpster Diving" and Joey Franklin's "Working at Wendy's." The second pair is Nancy Mairs's "On Being a Cripple" and Alice Walker's "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self." Before you read these pieces, you might want to spend a few minutes browsing through each of them. Think about the title of the essays, and skim just enough to get a feel for the tone and style used in each of them. Speculate about what you think each author's purpose in writing might be and who their intended audience is. Take notes about the ideas and questions that come to you as you read.

Print the following list of study questions and answer them as you read each essay. The questions are in two forms; a longer version with sub-questions and a shorter version. The answers to these questions will take some thinking about. They may not be obvious the first time you read these pieces, which means you may need to re-read part or all of the texts to be able to answer the questions fully. Give full answers to the questions; if you give short answers you short-change yourself.

Long Version of Study Questions

Included beneath each question is a set of hints or strategies for answering the question.

1. What is this text about?

To answer this question you need to:

- For each paragraph list a word or phrase that identifies the point of the paragraph
- Collect your notes and phrases to create a summary of the piece

2. How is the text structured?

To answer this question you need to:

- Identify which of the writer's statements or observations function as claims, premises, reasons, evidence, and conclusions
- Be able to describe the structure or composition of the essay, including movements in and out of personal narrative
- Read for relationships between sentences and paragraphs

3. How would you describe the language of the text?

To answer this question you need to:

- Examine the syntax, diction, tone, and figures of speech used by the author

- Be able to describe the effect of each of these elements

4. To whom is the text addressed? How do you know this?

To answer this question you need to:

- Use historical or contextual evidence to speculate about intended audience
- Identify the speaker's purpose in writing
- Identify the speaker's tone

5. What effect does the text have on the reader?

To answer this question you need to:

- Identify rhetorical strategies used by the author
- Examine your emotional and intellectual responses to the text
- Figure out how the rhetorical strategies create the intellectual and emotional effects

6. What is the text arguing?

To answer this question you need to:

- Consider the writer's purpose—what she or he wants the audience to do or think after reading the piece
- Read for implied meaning
- Read for the relationships between sentences and paragraphs
- Look at the structure, language, subject to see how these elements work together to produce an argument

7. Is the text effective at its goal? Why?

To answer this question you need to:

- Identify the point or argument of the text
- Consider the rhetorical strategies at work in the text
- Determine whether the strategies work to supplement the point or argument

Short Version of Study Questions (for printing):

- 1. What is this text about?**
- 2. How is the text structured? How does the writer organize personal narratives, observations, and reflections in relation to more factual or argumentative elements?**
- 3. How would you describe the language of the text?**
- 4. To whom is the text addressed? How do you know this?**
- 5. What effect does the text have on the reader?**

6. What is the text arguing? Is this argument made explicitly or implicitly?
7. Is the text effective at its goal? Why?

* * * * *

Lesson 1 Assessment(s)

- Complete 4.01 Discussion: Personal and Reflective Writing
- Complete 4.01 Quiz: Personal and Reflective Writing