

WRITING YOUR CRITICAL REFLECTION

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Writing reflectively develops your awareness of how you created a poem, story, script or piece of creative non-fiction. It deepens your understanding of your writing process and acknowledges the literary influences that fed into and shaped your writing.

It's a myth that poems and stories are created in a burst of inspiration without any conscious thought or effort. Certainly, instinct plays a wonderful part in the creative process, but just as important is the self-aware part of your brain that makes technical decisions about voice and point of view; that experiments with structure and form to bring about desired results; and that studies and applies the secrets of other texts. It's this side of your brain that you need to draw on when writing your critical reflection.

Critical reflections are easy to do badly. This can be because the task is dashed off at the last moment, without taking the time required to reflect on your writing process or to support your points fully enough. A critical reflection should be as densely packed with specific, well-supported points as an essay. There can be a tendency for description (simply stating what you did), rather than analysis (saying why you made certain changes; judging whether you were successful or not in achieving your aims; clearly identifying the merits and faults of your writing). As with any piece of writing, a critical reflection needs to be clearly structured, drafted, revised and proofread. In other words, you'll need to start reflecting, taking notes and writing before the night of your deadline!

To cultivate a reflective mindset early on, it'll help if you keep drafts of your work and the feedback you receive. You might want to keep a writing journal (Virginia Woolf did it – you can read excerpts [here](#)). In it, you can record the stages of producing a piece of writing, the decisions you make, how you respond to feedback, any problems you encounter and how you overcome them. You could also keep a log of your reading, research, and what you learn in class. You'll then be able to draw on this material when writing your reflection.

The Value and Aims of Critical Reflection

For your lecturer:

- To understand where your work has sprung from, your aims for the piece and how it fits into the larger picture.
- To evaluate your growth as a writer by understanding how you've drafted and redrafted a text and the reasons behind your artistic and technical decisions.
- To gauge how well you've engaged with the writerly issues, themes and techniques studied in class and in your reading.

For you:

- To become more aware of all the decisions, experiments, failures, rewrites, changed ideas and killings of darlings that go into making a good piece of writing.
- To develop your awareness that writing springs from multiple sources.

- To become skilled in using the correct technical and critical vocabulary so you can analyse your own work and that of your peers.
- To develop your ability to comment in a writerly way on your writing process.
- To learn from your experiments, successes and failures, and so grow as a writer.
- To identify what is strong in your writing and where you need to improve.
- To develop your ability to read as a writer.
- To comment on your authorly aims and intentions.
- And – eventually – to be able to place your writing in a wider literary, theoretical, cultural, social, historical or political context.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

The following questions will help you to think reflectively about your work and writing process. Brainstorm and free-write your answers. Think deeply and carefully. You can then use the most insightful, revealing answers when writing your reflection.

Contextualising your writing

- What influenced you as you wrote and redrafted? Jot down every single thing that has shaped your writing. Mind-mapping might be useful here so that you can see all the streams and currents that have fed into your work.
- Which writers – poets, authors, playwrights – work in similar ways to you?
- Did a particular novel, poem, memoir, film, piece of music or journalism, work of art or photography, radio programme, documentary, TV show or play influence your writing? And if so, how exactly? Go into detail.
- Did you do any research? Any fieldwork, interviews or trips to galleries or museums?
- Did any creative writing exercises, seminar discussions or books on the craft of writing guide or inspire you?
- What else fed into your writing? For instance, family stories, travel, childhood memories, lectures on other courses, overheard conversations.
- What form is your piece? Poem, short story, creative non-fiction, script, etc.
- What genre do you see your work fitting into? For instance, for fiction, this might include Young Adult, fantasy, crime, literary, historical, children's, and so on.
- How does your writing fit into a wider literary, theoretical, cultural or political context?

Analysing a specific piece of writing

- What sparked the initial idea for your piece?
- How did you write the piece? In one swift outpouring or painstakingly sentence by sentence? Did you edit and revise as you went or at the end?
- How has your piece evolved throughout the writing process?
- What were your original goals and vision for the piece and how successfully do you think you've achieved them?
- What technical decisions did you make and why? Perhaps you wrote in the present tense to give your story a sense of immediacy. Perhaps you narrated your story from an unusual point of view (a woodworm's, a ghost's) to show what is familiar from a

different angle and draw the reader in. Think about structure, point of view, voice, imagery, form, lines, metaphor, punctuation, layout, etc.

- What problems did you encounter and how did you overcome them?
- What feedback did you receive from your tutor and peers? How did you incorporate this feedback? What feedback did you reject and why?
- After redrafting, are there still areas that you think need improvement?
- How do you feel about the final version?
- How might you develop this piece in the future?

Reflecting on your process and growth as a writer

- What have you discovered about your writing process this trimester?
- What are you drawn towards writing?
- What works for you?
- What do you find most challenging?
- What experiments did you try out? What worked? What didn't? What did you learn?
- What will you do differently next time?
- Where is there room for you to improve your writing?
- What was the moment of greatest learning for you this trimester? What breakthrough moments did you have?
- What key insights into the craft of writing fiction/poetry/scripts/creative non-fiction have you had?
- What would you like to write next?

TIPS

Ensure your reflection is **structured clearly and logically**. Some lecturers may require a fully referenced, semi-formal essay that follows a set structure. A 500-word critical reflection might involve three paragraphs, the first discussing context and influences, the second analysing the creation of a few of your portfolio pieces, the third reflecting on your writerly process and progress. Other lecturers may encourage more creativity of structure and form (for instance, a letter to your tutor or even a poem reflecting on the process of writing your poem!). Always follow your assignment guidelines and your tutor's instructions carefully.

Generally speaking, go for a **semi-academic voice**, half-way between the formal one you'd use in an academic essay and your everyday speaking voice. You'll be using 'I' a lot – it's hard to discuss your writing process without using the first person! It may help to imagine you're writing a (slightly formal) letter to your tutor. Be honest and truthful. An exploratory, curious, interested tone is appropriate as you weigh up and reflect on your writing. Own up to your difficulties. A reflection is not the place for arrogance – though please do point out what you consider to be the strengths of your work. A good reflection is one that recognises both the merits and limitations of a piece of writing, rather than simply asserting that the work is brilliant. Probably avoid non-academic words like "brilliant".

Aim to position yourself as **an observer and analyser of your writing process and of how a particular piece evolved**, rather than as a teacher explaining a text to a student or a critic reviewing a text. A critical reflection is not a literary theoretical critique of your portfolio story

or poem, but an account of how you arrived at that final, polished version. It charts the journey of your writing from initial idea through various drafts to finished manuscript.

Be as **specific and concrete** as you can. Support each point you make with examples from:

- the drafts and final version of your writing (quote the line, sentence or word)
- your course reading, novels, poems and books on writing (quote and reference following MLA guidelines)
- your tutor's and classmates' feedback.

Be selective. Instead of trying to write about every aspect of your piece or every item in your portfolio, comment in depth on the most significant aspects. Focus on just a couple of poems. Creative pieces that you struggled over, drafted and redrafted until you were happy, may well produce more interesting reflective analysis than a haiku that came out perfectly first time.

CRITICAL REFLECTION CHECKLIST

Once you've written a draft of your reflection, set it aside for a day or two before revising it with the help of this checklist:

- Is it well-structured with a clear division into paragraphs? There should be one topic per paragraph.
- Is it detailed and is every point supported?
- Are technical terms used frequently and accurately?
- Do you communicate clearly and concisely what you want to say?
- Is it coherent? In other words, does it make sense? Read it aloud and see!
- Is the tone appropriate?
- Is MLA (8th edition) referencing used?
- Is presentation immaculate? Have you proofread, run a spell and grammar check and made sure you are following the correct formatting guidelines?

Remember, a strong critical reflection is one that brings precise, conscious awareness to where your poem, story, script or memoir has come from, how you've crafted it, and where it fits into the larger literary picture. Writing one is excellent practice in communicating the aims and context of your work to others – useful for future applications and discussing your poetry at readings – and will help you grow as a creative writer. Happy reflecting and writing!

INSPIRATIONAL REFLECTIVE READING

[“Souls on Ice”](#) by Mark Doty. A wonderful reflection on the process of writing a poem.

[Excerpts](#) from Virginia Woolf's writing diary.

George Orwell's essay [“Why I write”](#).

Deborah Levy's *Things I don't want to know* (2018). Reflections on the writing life.

Writers at Work: The Paris Review interviews, edited by George Plimpton, Secker and Warburg, 1985, 1987.

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- Levy, Deborah. *Things I don't want to know*. Penguin, 2018.
- Orwell, George. "Why I Write." *The Orwell Foundation*, 14 May 2019, www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/why-i-write/.
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