

Thinking on Paper

FORGET ABOUT MAKING AN ARGUMENT—THE REFLECTIVE ESSAY IS ALL ABOUT ENTERTAINING YOUR CURIOSITY By Sarah Montante



The reflective essay is the luxury assignment of papers. It gives you the opportunity to explore an event or a topic in any way that interests you, without having to prove anything to your reader. It's easier to write than a personal essay because you don't have to analyze yourself, and it's often more fun because you get to incorporate other people's thoughts and ideas.

So what is a reflective essay? Simply put, it's thinking on paper. Every reflective essay begins with an occasion for reflection, an event or experience that makes you stop and think. It could be something as dramatic as a political protest or as mundane as a sunrise—as long as it sparks a question in your mind.

The essay describes the occasion for reflection and then explores a question about it. The purpose of the essay is to share a provocative experience, allowing the reader to follow the meanderings of your mind.

Let's say that you went to the beach one morning and saw cigarette butts and soda bottles that the tide had washed in, and a pair of fish that had been caught and left on the sand. Let's say that the sight of those freshly caught fish abandoned on the beach made you think about how much people waste. This would be a great topic for a reflective essay.

> WRITE IN THE MOMENT

To write it, you would first want to describe the occasion itself—the smell in the air, perhaps the usual saltiness mixed with the sweet but noxious odor of something rotting. You would want to make the litter visible by describing the faded labels on the plastic soda bottles, the way that the paper has long dissolved from the outside of the cigarettes, leaving nothing but the gray, frayed filters. And then you would show your reader the fish, their scales still shiny, their bodies firm and plump. The fresh blood implies that they were



caught just this morning. They are a good catch—a little small but still edible—and you wonder why anyone would catch them with no intention of eating them.

And so you come to a question: Are human beings taking more than their fair share from the earth? Now that you have thrown the doors wide open to reflection, you can incorporate ideas and information that take you beyond your own experience. You might include a quote from an ancient philosopher that talks about the place of human beings in the food chain, or reports from modern-day environmental scientists who are worried about the rate of consumption of the rain forests.

➤ YOUR ENDGAME

At the end of the reflective essay, you will want to draw some conclusions about your experi-



ence or about the general topic. Since you aren't writing a formal argument or a persuasive essay, you don't have to worry about hammering home your point the way you would in a formal conclusion. All you want to do is close the loop on your thoughts. How have you been changed by the experience of examining this topic? Maybe there is some change in your own life that you can demonstrate to tie the essay together—perhaps you have decided to be a part of a local beach clean-up crew, or maybe you have decided to recycle more in your house. Maybe not. The change you've experienced may be purely abstract; you might be newly aware of the fragility of the environment and feel a greater respect for the other organisms that inhabit it. Your reflective essay will *reflect* your thoughts and ideas.

HOW TO REFLECT

YOUR ESSAY SHOULD PRESENT A PROVOCATIVE EVENT TO YOUR READER AND MAKE YOUR THOUGHT PROCESS CLEAR

- **Choose an occasion.** Think back on the significant events in your life that changed you or helped you form your opinions. Write down all the moments that come to mind and then choose the one that feels most vivid to you.
- **Make it real.** Your first task is to make this event come alive for the reader. Use sensory language and plenty of concrete details. Try to make the experience thought-provoking for your reader.
- **Pose a question.** Tell your reader exactly why this experience made you stop and think and what it made you curious about. Be sure that your question is broad enough that you can explore it in an essay and that it is about the topic, not about you.
- **Explore.** Do a little research to find out what other people have to say about your topic. Do you agree with them? Do you find their perspectives interesting? Incorporate two to three other ideas into your essay.
- **Draw a conclusion.** The reflective essay should demonstrate a thought process that begins with a question and ends up somewhere else. You don't necessarily have to answer the question, but you should show development in your thinking about the topic, even if it means coming to a new question at the end.

STAY TUNED:
Next month, *LC* shows you how to write the perfect introduction.