Writing a Reflective Essay

Some discoveries that you read about, such as the detection of a distant solar system, make headlines around the globe. Other discoveries are smaller and more personal, such as Emily Dickinson’s discovery that “The Soul selects her own Society—.” Writing a**reflective essay** leads to discoveries, too. When you write about an experience from your life—the white-water rafting trip you took this summer or your first driving lesson—you explore the meaning of the experience and your beliefs about life in general.

Prewriting

Consider Your Purpose

**Sense of Purpose**    Before you start thinking of your life experiences, think about why you are writing so that you can pick the best experience. Your **purpose** in writing a reflective essay is to express and explore your thoughts and feelings. You’ll not only discover and share the **significance** of the experience you describe, but you’ll also go beyond the specifics to show how it compares and connects to the beliefs you hold important and to the ideas you have about life.

Choose an Experience

**Sifting Through Memories**     Think back on the experiences that have been important in your life. The experience you write about might be something as simple as feeding a pet or overhearing a conversation; however, it must be an experience that has taught you something about yourself or the world. For example, feeding a pet may have taught you responsibility and compassion for all living things. Journals, diaries, and photo albums are good places to look for significant experiences. You might also try reading published reflective essays, such as memoirs or biographies, for ideas. Think of your **audience** when selecting an experience to explore—be sure you’ll feel comfortable sharing the experience with the people who will be reading your essay.

Reflect on Meaning

**The Heart of the Matter**   Once you’ve chosen an experience to explore, spend some time reflecting not only on what the experience meant to you at the time it occurred, but also on what it means to you now. As a springboard for reflection, ask yourself the questions in the left-hand column of the chart below. Look also at one student’s answers in the right-hand column. These answers are based on her experience doing community service at a retirement center.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| REFLECTION QUESTIONS | |
| **Questions** | **Answers** |
| **What did I feel during this experience?** **What did I feel when I thought about it** **shortly afterwards? How do I feel about** **it now?** | At first I felt dread and disappointment at having to spend my spring break doing community service. Later, I felt pleasantly surprised. When I think about it now, I feel grateful. |
| **What did I learn about others and** **myself from this experience?** | I learned that you can find friends in unexpected places and that you might find that you have things in common with people who seem very different from you. |
| **How did this experience influence what** **I believe about people or life in general? How have my beliefs changed ordeveloped since then?** | I came to believe that life is unpredictable—something you don’t want to do may end up being something you enjoy. Since then, I try to keep an open mind about new situations. |

**Sum It All Up**   Answer the questions in the chart above. Then, write a sentence that sums up the significance of your experience. This sentence will appear at the end of your essay, but writing down your ideas now will remind you of the larger meaning you want to convey to readers. Every detail you include in your essay should help communicate the importance of the experience. The following example shows what the student writer learned while working in a retirement center.

|  |
| --- |
| I’ve gained a new belief: Life is unpredictable, and sometimes an experience brings you a surprise—a new perspective. |

Recall and Record Details

**A Detailed Account**   Now, gather the details that will bring the experience to life and will convince your readers that it is significant. First, list the individual events that made up the experience. Here are some suggestions to help you recall as many events as you can.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **•** | Close your eyes and visualize the experience. |
| **•** | Discuss your experience with a friend or family member. Talking about it may help to bring it all back. |
| **•** | Allow yourself to daydream by looking through photos or souvenirs of the experience. |

Next, add details to your list that provide a more complete picture of each event that made up the experience. Use **narrative and descriptive** **details** that flesh out the sequence of events by describing the people involved and the places where the events took place. The following chart gives explanations and examples of these types of details.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ADDING NARRATIVE AND DESCRIPTIVE DETAILS | |
| **Types of Details** | **Examples** |
| |  | | --- | | **Narrative details** |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | • | tell the actions, thoughts, and feelings of the people involved | | • | Include **dialogue**, words spoken by people involved in the experience, and **interiormonologue**, your internal flow of thoughts | | |  | | --- | | “Are you in there, Mrs. Anderson?” I called, after knocking on her open door at the Summerdale Retirement Center. |  |  | | --- | | All I could think was, “This is going to be a long week.” | |
| |  | | --- | | **Descriptive details** |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | • | Describe **appearances** of people involved | | • | describe the **setting** | | • | use **sensory language** that appeals to the five senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch) | | Mrs. Anderson had curly hair, smooth skin, and eyes crinkled with age. The staff at the center had decorated the hallways for the Fourth of July. On the door hung a huge, white straw hat with shiny red and blue strings of stars and red, white, and blue streamers. |

Arrange the Details

**Truth and Consequences**   Once you’ve recalled the events and details of your experience, decide how you’ll organize them. Often, reflective essays use **chronological order—**the order in which events occurred. Within that order, though, writers may arrange details **spatially** or in **order of importance** to describe a person or a place.

Look at the following example to see how one writer organized her essay to give an early hint at the significance of her experience and to create a sense of how her reflections have deepened over time. Notice that she plans to start her essay in the present and then use a **flashback** to skip backward in time. She’ll use chronological order within the flashback to recount the experience. Finally, she’ll conclude her essay with further reflection and some thoughts on life in general.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Begin with most recent visit to the center. | → | Flashback to first day I went to the center. | → | Event 1: Secretary asks me to get Pierre, the parrot. | → | Event 2: Meet Mrs. Anderson. We share stories. | → | Relate the significance of the experience. | |