



English III

Narrative Nonfiction: Reflective Essay

Learning Targets

- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.
- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.
- Interpret figures of speech (e.g., hyperbole, paradox) in context and analyze their role in the text.

LEARNING STRATEGIES

Brainstorming, Marking the Text, Generating Questions, Graphic Organizer, Drafting, Rereading, Adding, Substituting, Self-Editing, Sharing and Responding, Marking the Draft, Writer’s Checklist

Writing a Reflective Essay

We often gain new insights and knowledge by living through experiences, but we also do the same by reflecting on and communicating those experiences in writing. A **reflective essay** is a type of personal narrative in which writers share insights and observations about life, often through presenting a problem and exploring how it was resolved (or left unresolved) as a result of the writer’s experiences. This type of writing draws upon personal experiences and imaginative thinking. It provides rich opportunities for recollection of past, present, or imagined experiences and thoughtful reflection on these experiences. Sometimes, by going through the process of revisiting a past event and considering how it helped us to grow and change, we understand our own experiences better than ever before—and, through our writing, we can allow others to do so, as well.

To develop your skills as a non fiction narrative writer, you will engage in a series of activities in which you work with your teacher to construct a model reflective essays. You will then use these models to construct your own reflective essay.

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

A **reflective essay** is a type of personal narrative in which writers share insights and observations about life, often through presenting a problem and exploring how it was resolved.

ACTIVITY 1

Discovering the Elements of a Reflective Essay

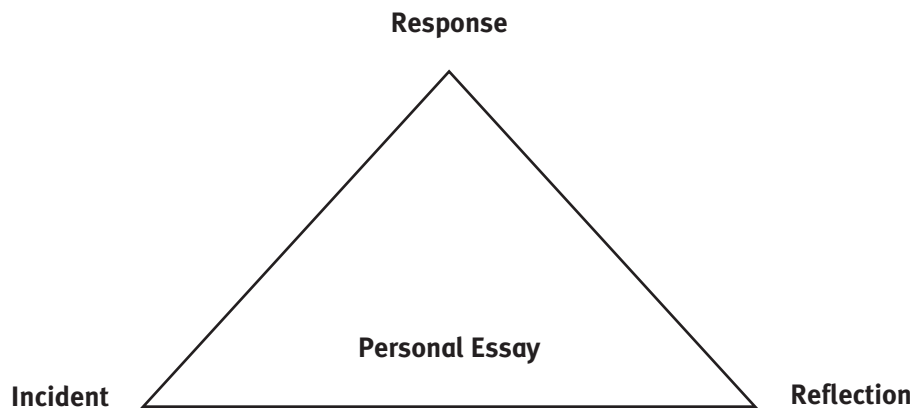
Before Reading

1. You have probably read and written personal narratives. What are some common elements of good personal narratives?

During Reading

2. A reflective essay is a kind of personal narrative in which the writer reflects on the significance of an incident. Most reflective essays are structured to include three parts:
- Incident: a description of an experience or situation.
 - Response: the writer's initial or immediate thoughts and feelings in response to the incident.
 - Reflection: the writer's reflection on the incident, after some time has passed and he or she is able to thoughtfully consider the importance of the incident or situation to his or her life. This may include awareness of one's own earlier limited understanding of an event.

The illustration below shows these elements in graphic form



3. Mark the word *Incident* on the graphic organizer with a highlighter or colored pencil. Now use a different color to mark the word *Response*. Finally, use a third color to highlight *Reflection*.
4. Using the colors you chose, mark the text throughout, identifying instances where the writer describes what he did, what he felt, and what he later learned or realized.

SAMPLE TEXT

My Notes

New York City

by Khan Shoieb

- 1 We are accelerating past 60 on the bridge, headed from the depths of Queens into Manhattan. The dusty meter is switched off, windows rolled down, wind raging through my hair. I am sitting in the front seat of a battered and archaic Ford Crown Victoria. The car is bright yellow. My father is driving, and I see fatigue in his eyes, but I am only eleven and thrilled finally to be tagging along. The cab smells of manufactured lilies from an aerosol can, always overdone and stuffy, and the engine drones on while I fiddle with the cold metal of the ashtray. Nestled in the grey leather of my father’s taxi, I coyly peer out across the river at an ethereal city that has stolen my heart. Tonight, when Manhattan is doused in a steamy fog, the metropolis seems more and more distant as we drive closer. I fail to make out any of the skyscrapers through the impenetrable mist; instead, every few seconds, like the revolving beacon of a lighthouse, a few white flashes emerge from the soupy haze of the night, daring me to come forward.
- 2 My father is not a simple man, but a man who keeps it simple. Work hard, he says. Grab the opportunities that come to you. As I get older and we grow further apart, however, this seemingly clichéd counsel of his gradually contorts itself into an agonizing burden.
- 3 I learned his story in fragments from my mother. Refusing to heed the warnings back home, he immigrated to New York City at the age of twenty-three, leaving behind his widowed mother and a promising career as a journalist to try and give his children a better life. He settled in the city, but far from the “city” as I would come to know it, for Manhattan is not the origin of dreams, but only their destination. Instead he found a small tenement in Queens between the Spanish and the Greeks, and temporarily took up driving a taxi twelve hours a day while he raised his family and tried to reboot his career.
- 4 What was once “temporary” has become permanent and what was once an American Dream has become an Immigrant Reality.
- 5 I can recall very little from my early childhood with any clarity aside from a few moments with my father. I remember he used to work a double shift on Sundays and took Monday off to rest, so that every once in a while, if I was lucky enough and had behaved myself, he might reluctantly take me atop the Empire State Building. We would arrive just as the sun was setting. I was too young to have been able to see anything, so he would hoist me up high and let me clutch dearly to the diagonally crossed wiring before us. Far above the concrete streets, where ordinary hopes and dreams suddenly seemed trivial, I asked my father everything about New York. It was there, grasping that fence on the 86th floor, that I truly learned of my city, more from the sound of my father’s voice than the actual words he spoke. And if I was patient enough, he would whisper to me in native tongue of his one reporting assignment in Casablanca and the day he started to dream of a world beyond his homeland, and in particular New York. The city, it seems, has a way of simultaneously promising everything and nothing.
- 6 My father has never voiced a complaint about what has become of his fate in New York. But in stark contrast to our days atop the city—a time when more possibilities lay ahead for him—today I can sense the slightest tinge of regret in his voice. He has grown quieter as he has aged, perhaps from the strain of unforgiving work, but also perhaps because he has begun to think in hypotheticals. Whether he regrets his decision to come to New York, I will never know for sure, but one fact alone stands. My father never went back.

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My Notes

- 7 The words “work hard” warrant a different meaning when they come from someone who has sacrificed that much for you. The guilt continues to drive me apart from my father, probably because I am not the man he is. I can tell that he silently hopes to live out his American Dream vicariously through his children. I am scared to shoulder that kind of responsibility, to try and live out a glorious American Dream for my father, but too ashamed not perpetually to want to do it for him as well. His sacrifice, however burdening, will always serve as a powerful source of inspiration for me.
- 8 The days of me tagging along while my father drives his taxi and the two of us going atop the Empire State Building together are long gone, but whenever I think about what lies ahead, the memories are suddenly resuscitated. I cannot help but hope that one day for me, unlike my father, New York City stands as a symbol of all that I could do and not all that I couldn't.

After Reading

When you have finished reading, respond to the questions below, which examine how Shoieb structures his essay.

5. The author opens his reflective essay with an incident from his childhood, written in present progressive verb tense (“We are accelerating ... I am sitting . . .”). Why do you think the author starts this way? What does it reveal about his point of view?
6. Paragraphs 2–3 provide exposition on the father’s history. How do these paragraphs complicate the essay? How do they impact the tone?
7. The fourth paragraph is a single sentence. Why do you think the author made this choice?

8. Paragraph 5 is the longest in the essay and introduces another incident. How is this paragraph similar to and/or different from paragraph 1? How does it impact the essay's focus and tone?

9. How do paragraphs 6–7 advance the central ideas of the essay? How do they impact the essay's tone?

10. The conclusion of a narrative essay typically serves to explore the change in the narrator's point of view as a result of his/her experiences. Sometimes the writer makes the significance of the event explicit, directly stating what was learned. Other writers choose to imply the significance, suggesting rather than stating what was learned. Still others leave the significance ambiguous or even unresolved. What approach does Shoieb seem to use? How does this impact the essay's overall tone?

11. Is the writer's use of symbolism and/or structure to advance his central ideas in the essay effective? Why or why not?

Check Your Understanding

12. How does Shoieb structure and sequence his essay to build to its complex overall tone?

ACTIVITY 4

Independent Writing

WRITING PROMPT: Write a reflective essay on an incident of your choice that has a clear focus and which communicates the impact the experience had on you. Consider an experience that is important to you and that other eleventh-grade students could benefit from hearing (other than the topic chosen for Activity 2 and Activity 3). Use the Learning Targets and the writer’s checklist to guide your writing. Also, look over the Scoring Guide on page 14 to review what the expectations for the assignment are. Your essay should meet the requirements listed in the learning targets for narrative essays.

- Engage and orient the reader by establishing a point of view and setting out a problem, situation, or observation
- Use a variety of techniques and transitions to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole
- Use narrative techniques such as dialogue, pacing, description, and reflection to develop the experiences, events, and characters
- Include descriptive techniques such as precise diction, and sensory and figurative language to convey vivid pictures to readers
- Provide a conclusion that reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative and clarifies its impact on the narrator’s point of view.

Use the process, examples, goals, and revision strategies from your previous activities to accomplish your task. You might also revisit the graphic organizers that you’ve used previously to help you plan and revise your writing.

Narrative Nonfiction: Reflective Essay (continued)

SCORING GUIDE

Scoring Criteria	Exemplary	Proficient	Emerging	Incomplete
Ideas	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> recreates an incident with well-chosen details and a reflective point of view uses a variety of techniques (e.g., symbolism, paradox) to develop the narrative incorporates insightful commentary on the importance of the experience and its results 	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> recreates an incident with relevant details and a reflective point of view uses narrative techniques to develop experiences, events, and/or characters reflects on the importance of the experience and its results 	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> recreates an incident using irrelevant, minimal, and/or repetitive details and an unclear point of view contains little or no use of narrative techniques contains limited reflection on the importance of the incident 	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> recreates an incident by summarizing and/or presents an unclear point of view contains little in the way of narrative techniques contains perfunctory reflection
Structure	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> provides an engaging beginning that introduces the narrator’s problem or situation uses sequencing, transitions and a variety of techniques to create a coherent whole concludes with an ending that insightfully reflects on what is experienced and resolved 	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> provides a beginning that introduces the problem or situation and a narrator and/or characters uses sequencing, transitions and techniques to create a smooth progression of events concludes with an ending that follows from and reflects on what is experienced 	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> contains a beginning that is unclear and/or does not directly relate to the story presents disconnected ideas and limited use of transitions and techniques contains an ending that is disconnected, unfocused, and/or non-reflective 	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> contains a beginning that does not relate to the story presents limited use of transitions and techniques to ensure smooth progression does not conclude or has an ending that is unfocused, and/or non-reflective
Use of Language	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses figurative language, including paradox, to create a distinctive effect and develop a compelling tone correctly uses a range of verb tenses to create specific effects demonstrates command of conventions of standard English 	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses figurative language, including paradox, to create strong descriptions and a clear tone correctly uses a range of verb tenses to add variety demonstrates command of conventions 	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses figurative language, ineffectively or without establishing an effective tone uses a range of verb tenses but may include some errors in usage demonstrates limited command of conventions; errors in grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and/or spelling interfere with meaning 	<p>The reflective essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses weak or inadequate sensory detail, and figurative language, and/or lacks any use of paradox or a clear tone numerous errors in verb tense undermine clarity includes multiple errors that show limited command of conventions; delete the semi-colon and add that seriously impair meaning