National 5 Writing Portfolio

Reflective writing

The aim of the notes below is to give some detailed advice about the content and style of a reflective essay. These notes will also include your planning and thought processes and it will be the basis for discussion about your work with your teacher.

Reflective Writing

While all reflective writing has to be based on true personal experience(s), simply giving a blow by blow account of what happened is never going to produce an effective piece of writing. Choose a memory or an incident which will allow some honest and interesting reflection. Aim to convince the reader that the incident genuinely means something to you, that you have learned something from it. It’s your attempts to explore your thoughts, feelings and reactions that matter in this type of writing. Try to use some of the techniques you see in the literature you read yourself or study in class, for example creation of mood and atmosphere, appropriate tone, effective word choice and sentence structures, etc. Also, if your reflections are going to sound mature, then the vocabulary and the language need to be fairly adult as well.

Reflective
Reflective writing will aim to interest or give pleasure, rather than purely convey information about an experience. It will concern itself, usually, with a single idea, insight or experience and will include some reflection on knowledge, thoughts or feelings created by this.

SQA National 5 Candidate Guidance
Selection of topic

There are several issues to consider:

1. Originality does help an essay to stand out. With this in mind, it is worth rejecting common topics such as school shows, sports events, descriptions of family events. . .

2. Select a topic which lets you recreate a convincing impression of a single incident. Then reflect on it.

3. Reflective Essay Topics(use if desperate)

   - A scene or incident which evoked feelings / changed your life.

   - An aspect of present day life which arouses your indignation and offends your sense of justice.

   - Being let down / having to change your life / the role of chance in life.

   - Thoughts and impressions on:
     - flicking through a photograph album
     - turning out the attic
     - listening to old records
     - seeing old films
     - going back to an old school or home

   - ‘The young should be ambitious’. Discuss, with reference to yourself.

   - The roles I play / learning to live with other people / odd one out.

   - ‘Wish I didn’t know what I didn’t know then.’

   - An obsessive interest / a cause you would die for.

   - The Future: Reasons for Hope or Despair
Select three potential topics and discuss them with your teacher

1. ________________________________________________________________

2. ________________________________________________________________

3. ________________________________________________________________

Teacher feedback

Your final topic
### Planning

The main requirements of the reflective essay are that it will:

- be genuinely contemplative; its personal tone, for example, may be confidential, amused, concerned, indignant
- communicate to the reader a clear sense of the writer's personality
- not merely offer the product of reflection, but engage the reader in the writer's process of reflection through a distinct authorial voice or stance
- where more than one idea, insight or experience is involved, through the writer's treatment give unity to these.

### Essay Plan

Your plan should include a range of paragraphs which should have a main focus:

- Descriptive
- Narrative
- Sections of well written dialogue
- Reflective (although the process of reflection should permeate the essay)
Some more specific advice on planning

Planning example 1

Aim for a minimum of 900 words and a maximum of 1000

** The focus of this type of essay should be how a personal experience, or several linked experiences, made you think about other, less personal, wider issues.

** Start with the specific experience, and involve the reader in the events. Start right at the incident.

Spend some time describing the event and your feelings at the time.

Aim to develop description of setting and actions and emotions.

Remember to show not tell

200-300 words approx

** The next section should expand upon your feelings at the time and then your feelings about the experience, looking back.

What have you learnt? How has this changed you?

Compare it to other events that you have been part of and look at how you reacted and how the events affected you. How and why were they similar or different?

This is the first stage of the reflection. It can be quite simplistic as it is just a starting point.

200-300 words approx

** The final section should focus on the ‘wider’ picture, and should include some philosophical reflection and contemplation. Use the above section as a stimulus.

Identify the main themes of your experience and then shift the focus from you to the wider community/country/world.

Where else do similar situations occur? How do other people deal with similar situations? Does it make you question previously held beliefs? Does it make you
question the way you handled your experience? What could you learn from similar situations?

Try to make some abstract comment about the experience and the main theme – comment on the philosophy behind it, as well as the specifics of the experience. Throughout the reflection, you should refer back to your experience from time to time and link it into your conclusion.

300 words approx

** You should also include a conclusion. This should be a final piece of reflection a final chance to sum up the event and your feelings.

Planning example 2

(same length 1000 words)

☞ **Part One -** start with a brief description from the heart of the action.
  
  o Concentrate on setting an atmosphere and describing your own senses.
  o Be deliberately vague, but not confusing, don’t give too much away.
  o Grab the reader’s attention

☞ **Part Two – 1st brief bit of reflection.**
  
  o Think and describe briefly how the incident has affected you.
  o Use hyperbolic and emotive language
  o Speak directly to the reader
  o Use rhetorical questions

☞ **Part three -** describe the incident clearly
  
  o Start right at the beginning of the incident
  o Concentrate on showing emotions through speech and actions
  o Describe and develop – atmosphere, imagery and try to use pathetic fallacy
  o Aim for 3-400 words on this part
Part Four - full, detailed reflection

- Start with how you now feel and think about the incident
- Did you over-react? Has it changed or affected you?
- Does it still have an effect?
- Can you link it to any other incidents and compare and contrast them in terms of your actions, reactions and their affect upon you.
- **Then** – try to broaden out the reflection
- Relate the incident to the wider world
- Be philosophical
- Compare your event to much larger/ more important or catastrophic events and analyse how this makes you consider the event and your reaction.
- Link it to less important events you have gone through that seemed hugely important at the time but now seem rather trivial. Compare, contrast and analyse them.
- Try to look at yourself honestly.
- You can use humour and be self-deprecating and a little mocking
Checklist of writing features

I have:

- Effectively created a setting and atmosphere using a range of literary techniques
- Created “hooks” to keep the reader engaged
- Created a clear authorial voice which engages the reader
- Not included irrelevant details
- Used emotive language
- Used sophisticated vocabulary
- Checked the accuracy of my work in terms of grammar and punctuation. The standard required is 100% accuracy
- Been mature and sophisticated (philosophical) in my reflection
- Created an identifiable tone at appropriate moments
- Concluded with reflection which has been the end of a process of reflection which permeates the essay
Brownie Points

I had felt proud of that moment, standing tall at the pulpit soaking up warm applause. My first attempt at public speaking had been a success. At least that is what I believed then, as an eight-year-old girl and for years later, still too young and naïve to understand the ignorance that surrounded me and had generated much of the applause.

Each term of primary school had finished with a service at the local church. My memories of attending most of them are now a blur of singing hymns, mumbling a prayer and looking forward to the holidays that would follow. But the importance of this one preserves it in my mind.

With the strongest lungs in the class, I had beaten fierce competition and had been chosen to read a sermon at the Easter service. My reward: a photocopied passage from the Bible, enclosed in a plastic folder to protect it from those inevitable accidents that occur in every schoolbag. I would read the first passage in the service, the most important and most prestigious in the mind of any eight-year-old. Determined to impress my audience I had devoted all my energy to the task, memorising the passage within two days.

With practice in voice projection I had begun to almost spit out words, propelling them to the back of the living room over the noise of the TV and action fights. If my parents smiled with approval I would be content and would agree to rest my lings. I had felt proud that they had smiled with mechanical precision each time. Only years later I realised the frustration they must have felt. They had been proud of me and still willing to listen to my programmed performance dozens of times each day, despite not understanding a word of what they heard.

As an eight-year-old, I believed my parents would be able to overcome any difficulty that I could imagine and it had been impossible to understand that they could not read, write or understand English. All I had known was that they were proud of me and that was all that had been important. Looking back years later, I had felt bad for putting them in that position.
but later realised that it hadn’t been important to them to understand my reading. They had been proud that I would be standing in a church reading from the Bible, mastering a language that they had never learnt. It had been a novelty that had remained the centre of family jokes for years to come.

The day that I had later remembered with annoyance soon arrived. As we were being shuttled four hundred yards to the church, my audience were already filling the pews. I only remember a blur of proud parents eager to applaud the unveiling of the papier-mâché Jesus as I walked up the aisle to an uncomfortable bench, separated from my class.

From my seat, I had seen my mum arrive and disappear somewhere in the gallery. I knew she felt uncomfortable intruding on a strange place of worship.

When the service finally began the mumble of the minister had been lost somewhere in my head.

‘And now we have a lovely sermon read by….’

It’s me, I’ll begin to get up slowly…..

‘….. to remind us of the story of Easter.’

…. don’t want to smile too much, it’ll look unprofessional.

For years later I remembered what exactly what happened after these thoughts. Now I only remember standing at the pulpit ready to begin reading, not understanding why some parents had nudged each other on seeing me, mumbling with what I later realised to be ignorance. I had checked that nothing had been tucked in the back of my kameez and wiped my mouth. There had been nothing to cause embarrassment and I had decided to focus on reading loud and clear.

As I looked at the audience, I could see mouths moving. Later I learnt what they said.

‘Is she allowed to come inside a church, is it not against their religion?’

‘…. it’s good that the school gave her a part in a Christian service.’
Adults who had seemed so important to me as an eight-year-old had soon judged me from the colour of my skin, making no effort to listen to the performance that I had perfected them. When I was old enough to realise what their questions had meant, their ignorance had annoyed men and made me doubt an entire childhood experience. Occasions when I had been asked to deliver talks on the month of Ramadan or on the festivals in the Muslim calendar had segregated me from the class and I had begun to think why. Perhaps I had been used as a prop in the school’s subtle attempts at racial equality. Including the only Asian pupil in the church services would be seen as a commendable effort that would gain brownie points in race relations, at my expense.

I had accepted my applause with modesty, trying to look humble and not overwhelmed by the appreciation of the audience. I had even felt flattered with the attention after the service. Some parents had asked questions about my ‘costume’, asking if I had to wear it at all times. Not understanding fully what the fuss had been about, my reply had been confused but still ignored amidst other parents inquiring about the diversity in Asian music and the secret to making perfect pakoras.

Perhaps the novelty of a Muslim girl in full costume reading a scripture from the Bible in a church had overwhelmed some parents but the relaxed approach of their children now seems ironic. For most people, I had looked the same that day as I had any other. Wearing a shalwar kameez outfit had been a regular sight and not a topic of conversation for anyone at school.

Looking back, the sense of achievement I had felt as an innocent eight-year-old later disappeared with the reality of knowing that the quality of my performance had not been the sole reason for the applause. The parents that I had aimed to impress with my talents later did not see so important, only a trivial detail in what has become a tainted memory. They were only the first of many people who would judge me for the colour of my skin, in the years that followed that service.

SADAF DIN

Broughton High School, 1998
From Mud to Maternity

It should have been romantic – a spring day, a barn, a girl – but it wasn’t! If I had been writing a proper story, clichéd though it would be, I would be planting clues which would indicate that such a romantic event would inevitably lead to a marriage and the birth of children. Thankfully, I discovered before it was too late; clichéd though this is, real life is not like that – well mine isn’t.

A Saturday afternoon has a special feeling to it; I always feel at ease knowing that most people are probably enjoying time off somewhere; perhaps shopping or visiting relatives, or spending an afternoon in the garden, or just sitting in the house. On my Saturday I had been taken to a barn. This barn was surrounded by mud like some kind of moat, although I was not sure whether this was to keep me out or the sheep in. We crossed the mud, and scaled the fence that separated the barn from the rest of the farm. The barn was a wooden construction with corrugated iron acting as roofing. It was pleasantly airy – as barns go – but I could imagine that it would be cold in there during the winter or early in the morning.

Despite the fact that I lived next to a farm, I was somewhat uneasy. At home, it could at times feel like a reverse-role zoo: the animals watched us doing everyday things like making coffee through the windows instead of watching them doing every day things as chewing the cud. They would look up and their heads would turn to watch us, as they carried on chewing with a fixed ‘what-are’ they-doing’ expression. Occasionally after the grass had been cut, the local animals would assemble at the fence waiting for us to empty the magic hover-mower bucket. I did like the smell of freshly cut grass, although I would never admit that I found it appetising. I was being stared at with the ‘what are they doing’ look as I jumped down from the fence and onto the hay which covered the floor of the barn.

This was the closest I had been to these psychotic animals without the relative safety of a fence. I was not sure whether it was the animal on two legs (me) or the animal on four legs (them) that were more apprehensive. My human companion seemed more at home: she would have to be as it was her family’s turn to check the ewes every so often over the next week. I had never understood how small farms organise such things. All the ewes in lamb from various farms in the area were taken into one barn, and each group of owners would take responsibility of looking after all of the ewes for one week. This carried on until all the ewes had given birth.
Now the ewes were being inspected for signs of approaching birth. This involved merely looking at a ewe and judging whether she looked uncomfortable or not. If she looked uncomfortable, then we would try to move her, whereas the rest would move clumsily out of the way to the opposite side of the barn. One ewe displayed all the early portents of impending birth. However, ewes are apparently prone to giving false signs. As a result we waited for ten minutes, sitting on a wall watching the rest of the world doing their normal Saturday afternoon things, to see whether it was a false alarm.

This would be another place where romantic connotations could begin to emerge, but were merely talked and my ignorance about everything to do with farming came to the fore. After she felt that I had embarrassed myself enough, she returned to the barn to have another look at the ewe. I trailed at a ‘safe distance’. It does sound terrible – scared of sheep – and I feel terrible writing about it just now, but things always seem simpler afterwards. However, when actually faced with nervous, fast-moving, unpredictable animals, the situation feels a little different – or at least it did to me.

Much emphasis is placed on the pains, stresses, and unpredictability of human others around the time of childbirth; as far as I knew, the ewes could be experiencing the same thing. Perhaps for the last few months they had been experiencing an uncontrollable desire for grapefruit, only being sheep they would not know what a grapefruit was and wouldn’t be able to ask for one if they did. Perhaps they were experiencing mood swings. When their time came, would they damn all rams to hell? Let’s face it; all ewes are single mothers who get no help at all from the government. It suddenly occurred to me that a political party does not rule a constituency, only the people who live there. It also suddenly occurred to me that I had stood deep in thought in a barn full of sheep and nothing had attacked me. I must be overcoming my fear.

I stood aimlessly in the barn, leaving my friend to check the ewes. It was safer that way; she knew what she was doing and I had already demonstrated that I had no clue. She was an expert in her field. The results came back negative – ‘not today’. This was a relief: partly because premature birth by even one day is very bad for a ewe, but mostly because I had heard that giving birth is messy and I would have warranted a change of clothing on the part of the audience. I would also felt as if I was intruding on an important event that I really did not have the right to attend, which I suppose was true.
As recompense, I was shown some lambs born in the early hours of the previous morning. The lambs actually have much more of an ‘ahhh’ factor than their parents – who have more of an ‘Ohhh, no…get off my foot’ factor. Years of primary school colouring-in and Easter Services had meant that lambs had been etched in my psyche as representative of spring: re-birth, Easter new leaves on trees, chocolate eggs, birds creaking about in roofs, lambs. Lambs are humorous, whereas their parents create the impression that they do not have enough intelligence to be humorous – their two brain cells have not yet collided – even accidentally.

One of those lambs was murdered a month afterwards. It had been allowed outside with its mother and a fox ‘got’ it. The unfortunate remains were found two days later and it was given a short informal burial. I felt that this showed the ruthless side of Mother Nature’s character, the part that environmentalists never mention. There is a reason that environmentalists are rarely also realists, the reason being that nature can be as cruel as people can. The sad thing is that had the lamb survived, it would probably not have been kept because it was male.

I made the mistake about asking about this blatant sexism: males are only economically useful for breeding and the farms already had rams for that. The younger males would probably be sent to the slaughterhouse. I wonder what feminists would say about that.

Feeling not entirely at ease with my masculinity – and still with no hint of romance in the air – I trudged back down one on the Lanarkshire’s famed red roads to the house, my wellies squelching amiably from collected maternity, mud and hay. I now know I’m no Burt Lancaster. I’ve experienced the mud: I don’t want to experience the maternity!

MATTHEW COCHRANE

Biggar High School, 2000
A friend once told me that you are what you read, you are as much as words allow you to be. After thinking about it I realised that she was right: our reality, culture and society built on words. They describe the world around us, they are fundamental to law, philosophy and all learning; words form relationships between people, they trigger…. they build thoughts and ideas.

However, if you take morality and examine its two basic ideas, asking what is ‘right’ and what is ‘wrong’ in terms of the words, the task becomes extremely frustrating as you realise that you are trying to explain a word by using other words.

My mother often reverts to her native Gaelic tongue when she can’t find a word she needs in English. It is interesting that sometime there is no word or phrase in English capable of fully explaining certain Gaelic words. And Gaelic is not alone in this. Most, or perhaps, all languages have certain words and ideas peculiar to them which we find difficult to comprehend. The story is told that when Captain Cook sailed into Sydney Harbour in Australia, the Aborigines on the shore did not see the galleon for sometime because it was something they had never seen before and had no word for.

The culture of the American Indian readily accepts spirits and ghosts as part of their lives. Their culture and society is different to ours because of their unique language. Ghosts are a reality to American Indians because of their words and ideas, just as Captain Cook’s galleon was incomprehensible to the Aborigines. It seems that each society maps out the boundaries of its own reality by the language it uses.

But does the character of a society spring out of the language it uses or vice versa i.e. is the language a product of the character?
I have an aunt and two uncles who are all deaf since birth but can communicate by sign language. It occurred to me one day that when I am conscious of my own thoughts I am aware of them as a string of words but how do my aunt and uncles perceive their thoughts? The thinking process must work without the use of language and perhaps it could be argued that we limit its potential by our emphasis on whichever, if any, language we speak. It is, however, interesting that Helen Keller, born deaf and blind, was an angry and frustrated human being until her teacher, Anne Sullivan, put her hand under a pump and wrote ‘water’ on her hand. She gave Helen Keller a tool to help her describe experience.

Any knowledge we acquire in the first few years of our lives is gained through our own experiences when we learn to use our senses to correlate information. Then as we grow up we discuss experiences and emotions with one another. But if you have never heard of the word for a specific emotion, could you still feel it? Could you experience jealousy if you didn’t know the word or had never heard it discussed? The answer is probably ‘yes’ and having the words helps give us a sense of control over the powerful emotions.

The use of language varies from ‘labelling’ i.e. nouns, to its highest expression, poetry. According to Dylan Thomas ‘A good poem is a contribution to reality. The world is never the same once a good poem has been added to it. A good poem helps to change the shape and significance of the universe, helps to extend everyone’s knowledge of himself and the world around him.’

Language has always been inseparably linked to the act of creation. Without words our thoughts have no form, the past and the future lose their significance. We could not speak of memories or plans, relationships could not develop fully.

The Bible speaks of God as the Word, ‘In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’. The creation story in Genesis tells of the earth which was ‘without form, and void’, as thoughts are when we have no language to express them. The earth does not take form until God speaks, ‘And God
said Let there be light; and there was light.’ It is significant also that Adam’s first act was to name the creatures in the garden.

Language is what sets us apart from the animals. Noam Chomsky, an American philosopher and Professor of Linguistics, has asserted that, ‘Language is a uniquely human characteristic. Each person has programmed into is genes a faculty called universal grammar.’ Although we are biologically similar to animals we are capable of rationality and logic. ‘Man is only a reed, the weakest thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed’, is a mathematician and thinker Blaise Pascal’s summing up of man.

But words can sometimes be the most dangerous weapons of all and can be used to control our way of thinking. Words like ‘slut’ and ‘nigger’ have power; they mould our attitudes and behaviour. Just because we may not use these words ourselves does not detract from the power they wield. The very fact that the words exist in our language is enough.

I was with a group of friends once they noticed a girl wearing a short skirt. The boys passed comments which included the word ‘slut’. What they were doing was directing their inability to accept their own sexuality into an attack on the girl. This is why, I believe, there are so many derogatory names for women concerning sexuality. We would do well to remember Orwell’s warning, ‘If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.’ For many years language has been used against women and it is ironic that the changing roles of women in the workplace and elsewhere have been coupled with an increase in the use of aggressive language by women themselves.

Language is a source of human creative potential, and yet we continue to abuse it and use it as a weapon against our fellows.

‘In the beginning was the word,’ not just any word but the Logos, both Alpha and Omega. And this above everything else is what makes language so significant and why we should handle it with respect and the utmost care.

RUTH MACPHERSON

Dingwall Academy, 1993