

## Strategies for Self-Reflective Writing

### 1. Understand the role of self-reflection in “writing to learn/learning to write”

In self-reflective (reflexive) writing, you couple personal experience with careful observation (Berens & Rosen, 2007, p. 145) and/or critical thinking about an aspect of your experience. For example, you might write about *how* you developed as a thinker, writer, or researcher; or *how* a particular process or event unfolded for you. The key is that this writing *engages* you. As well as sharing insights with readers, reflective writing is increasingly becoming “an important component of intellectual work” (p. 146). In many cases, self-reflection is a means of argumentation in which you use your experience to make a point about the importance of a particular event, process, or form of knowledge.

Even though reflective writing might look at times like a story, you do have to plan and structure it: clarifying your purpose, understanding your audience, and building in a main point, stance, or thesis.

### 2. Take a “subject position”—

Reflective writing also involves being aware of how you might be affecting the research. In disciplines that use qualitative research methods (i.e. interviews, observations), as a writer you often acknowledge and describe your role and your own experiences in the research process. This shows that you’re aware of being part of the process, that it’s impossible to be “a disembodied researcher” (Giltrow, Burgoyne, Gooding, & Sawatsky, 2005, p. 209), and that your choices of method—even your presence—can and do shape the outcomes of your research. The “subjective research” approach also exposes the relevant social, political, and cultural elements that make up everyone’s experience (p. 210).

### 3. Write as a “subject”—

As a self-reflective writer taking a “subject position,” it’s best to use a personal narrative style. However, two preconceptions about academic writing sometimes act as obstacles:

Obstacle 1: Seldom or never include personal opinion or experience.

At times, personal experience can serve as a very powerful form of proof or evidence in academic writing. Deciding whether to use it depends on the discipline or field you’re writing in, as well as the topic and purpose of the assignment. When you do invoke personal experience, make sure it’s helping you fulfill a larger academic purpose, such as supporting an argument or helping to make an abstract theory more real. As for opinions, these are beliefs that haven’t been proven, so by themselves they aren’t sufficient grounds for argumentation. But articulating your opinion about an issue can be an excellent starting-point for helping you develop a workable, provable thesis.

Obstacle 2: Never use 'I'.

Professional academic writers can and do use the first person. “I” can make your style clearer and your tone more assertive. If you have authority or expertise on a topic, the first person allows you to claim that sense of authority. At times, using “I” helps you to position yourself with respect to an argument or issue, or let you explain clearly how your work compares with others’.

However, you must be careful not to use the first person unnecessarily or inappropriately. In some disciplines, particularly the sciences, academics may consider “I” stylistically inefficient or ethically biased. Instead of writing “I designed an L-shaped container,” you might need to say “An L-shaped container was designed.” If you’re unsure about whether to use “I,” double-check the requirements and purpose of your assignment and your audience’s expectations.

#### 4. Emphasize the first-person/active voice—

Fourteen undergraduate students agreed to participate in this study. I intended to interview each of them four times over three years, but three of the students dropped out before they finished their degrees. Therefore, I have less information about the student’s experiences as fourth-year students than as second- and third-year students.

##### **ACTIVE VOICE →**

**I** (subject/agent/doer of action) ... **intended** (verb/action) ... **to interview each of them** who/what?)

*The subject or doer of action is most important (establishing subjectivity in this study).*

Compare this with a passive example—

Each student was to be interviewed four times over three years . . .

##### **PASSIVE VOICE →**

**Each student** (object) ... **was to be interviewed** (verb/action) four times ... [by whom? –agent not stated]

*The object of the action is most important (it might not matter who did the interviews, or we might already know).*

The passive voice is not “wrong”; at times it may be your most precise and concise choice. But because the passive voice often omits the performer of the action (agent), overusing it can defeat the purpose of self-reflective writing.

#### *References*

Behrens, L., & Rosen, L. (2007). *Writing and reading across the curriculum (Canadian ed.)*. Toronto: Pearson Longman.  
Giltrow, J. L., Burgoyne, D., Gooding, R., & Sawatsky, M. (2005). *Academic Writing: An Introduction*. Peterborough, On: Broadview.