

Writing in the Disciplines

Strategies for Reflexive Writing**1.** Understand the role of self-reflection in “writing to learn/learning to write” —

In reflexive (self-reflective) writing, you couple personal experience with careful observation (Berens et al., 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, reflexive 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 reflexive writing might look like a story, you do have to employ rhetorical strategies 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” —

“Reflexive writing ... mandates that the student be aware of how he or she is affecting the research.” (From “Fieldworking” —Purdue University: <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~mgould/106eth/whatis.htm>). 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, 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 reflexive 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 "I" 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.

For more information about the use of "I" and personal experience in academic writing, try the University of North Carolina Writing Center:

http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/should_I_use_I.html

4. Emphasize the first-person/active voice—

I eventually interviewed 14 women although, because of their changing circumstances, I was not in the end able to interview all of the women during all of the three years. I interviewed the women four times during the period of their degrees ...

ACTIVE VOICE →

I (subject/agent/doer of action) ... **interviewed** (verb/action) ... **14 women** (who/what?)
Subject or doer of action is most important.

Compare this with the passive voice—

Fourteen women were interviewed over three years, although because of their changing circumstances, it was not possible to interview all of the women over the three years. The women were interviewed four times during the period of their degrees ...

PASSIVE VOICE →

14 women (object) ... **were interviewed** (verb/action) ... [by whom? –missing agent]
Object of action is most important. Passive verb takes form of TO BE + past participle.

References:

Behrens, Laurence, et al. *Writing and Reading Across the Disciplines. Canadian ed.* Toronto: Pearson Longman, 2007.
Giltrow, Janet, et al. *Academic Writing: An Introduction.* Peterborough, On: Broadview, 2005.