

Writing Spaces

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Using Reflection and Metacognition to Develop Your Half Essay

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Using Reflection and Metacognition to Develop Your Half Essay

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Overview

I created an exercise for first-year writing students titled Using Reflection and Metacognition to Develop Your Half Essay because I wanted my students to use reflection recursively, as a tool to strengthen the analysis in their essays while they were still engaged in writing the essays themselves. This half-essay reflection exercise is a practical application of what Taczak and Robertson recommend in their chapter of Yancey's *A Rhetoric of Reflection*. In "Reiterative Reflection in the Twenty-First-Century Writing Classroom: An Integrated Approach to Teaching for Transfer," Taczak and Robertson write that "reflection encourages students to put what they are learning into practice while also serving as a way to set goals and move forward in their writing ability...more robust reflection begins with the invention or planning stages of writing and continues during the writing itself, in addition to involving a looking back after the writing is completed, or at each completed draft..." (43-44).

In order to create an opportunity to incorporate this intentional recursive reflection in the earlier stages of their writing, when it might be most helpful, the students were asked to pause after writing the first half of their papers and answer a series of questions to prompt them to reflect upon what they had written. In the activity, the students were asked to locate the most powerful moments of insight in the half essay and then add several sentences of deeper analysis to extend their thinking in those moments. Next, I prompted students to reflect upon what still needed work in their essays. The students then reflected on how effectively they were responding to the prompt, and what other sources they could incorporate. I reminded the students about the specific instruction in writing they had received—

the recent in-class lessons, the resources they had reviewed—and asked them to reflect upon how they could directly apply what they had learned when writing the second half of their papers.

Lastly, in order to emphasize the portability of this activity, I asked the students to reflect about how they could transfer the work they did in this exercise to future writing projects. This final element of the activity applies three of Anne Beaufort’s “four moves teachers can initiate... [based on] what the current research in cognitive psychology suggests for facilitating transfer of learning.” These three interconnected moves, as described by Beaufort in her chapter of *A Rhetoric of Reflection*, “Reflection: The Metacognitive Move towards Transfer of Learning,” are:

1. Broadly frame the course content as knowledge to go, that is, make explicit references to broad applications for the course content in other arenas of life... 3. Introduce reflection about deep structures, broad concepts, and process strategies as tools not only for getting writing done for an immediate rhetorical situation but for transfer of learning to future writing tasks. 4. Invite application of learning to new tasks, drawing on mental models, deep-structure knowledge, and an inquiry process for learning. (26-27)

I’ve been using this exercise for the past several years in first- and second-year writing courses, and it has been gratifying to see how positively students respond to it in class and in their feedback on my course activities.

Time Commitment

25 minutes

Materials

Students need to bring at least half of their assigned essay, as well as

some way to write on the paper itself or access the margins of their document online.

Activity Process

- First, students will locate the most powerful moments of insight in their half essays—the most incisive, original analysis that represents their unique contribution to the topic. It can be inspiring for students to think of this part of the exercise as mining their own generative ideas that drew them to the prompt in the first place. Next, they will extend their analysis in those places by writing 2-4 sentences of deeper analysis of those points, right on the essay itself. Ask students to address the implications of what they're saying in order to generate richer analysis.
- Next, students write about what still needs work in their half essay. They can discuss grammar, argument, quotations, analysis, introduction, transitions, etc. They need to identify the major subject areas for them to focus on as they continue writing the paper as well as the writing skills they are working to improve. Ask students at this point to refer back to the instruction in writing they have received so far in the course, including the reference materials and texts on writing they have studied.
- Now, students are asked to revisit the sources they selected for the paper. What sources could they still incorporate in order to enrich their treatment of this topic? Are there a few more articles they'd like to reread and quote from in this paper? If they were inclined to add several more sources, what might they choose?
- At this point, students are asked to consider the unwritten part of this paper and plan out the ideas they're going to include to finish this essay. Students are asked to locate

something they're looking forward to writing about in the full draft of the paper.

- Next, students are asked to plan when they will finish this paper and encouraged to manage their time so that they will not be completing the paper under stress.
- Finally, students are asked to share their responses in small groups and also spend some time in these groups discussing how they can transfer this self-reflective work to future writing projects. Students are reminded of the demonstrated value of setting themselves a deadline to write part of an essay, then following these steps to reflect upon how they can deepen their treatment of the topic and set themselves up to do their best work when finishing the paper.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity will:

- Use metacognition to gain awareness of their writing processes and habits
- Practice reflection recursively to develop their writing strategies as they are engaged in a composition project
- Expand their analytical writing abilities by using inquiry to generate analysis
- Recognize the portability of this activity for future writing contexts and take ownership of transferring these learning strategies to other coursework

Learning Accommodations

- Students may complete this activity after class if they need extra time.

- This activity can be presented in multiple formats to include in-person instruction and asynchronous, digital delivery.

Works Cited

Beaufort, Anne. "Reflection: The Metacognitive Move towards Transfer of Learning." *A Rhetoric of Reflection*, edited by Kathleen Blake Yancey, University Press of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado, 2016, pp. 23–41.

Taczak, Kara, and Liane Robertson. "Reiterative Reflection in the Twenty-First-Century Writing Classroom: An Integrated Approach to Teaching for Transfer." *A Rhetoric of Reflection*, edited by Kathleen Blake Yancey, University Press of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado, 2016, pp. 42–63.