

### WHAT'S AHEAD?

In this workshop, you will write a **personal reflection**. You will also learn how to

- gather and organize details
- reflect on the meaning of an experience
- use figurative language
- combine sentences to add sentence variety
- check subject-verb agreement

# Writing a Personal Reflection

Imagine that you receive an application to a college you really want to attend. One section asks you to write a thousand-word essay about a life experience that has prompted you to study a particular subject. What will you write? How will you write it?

This kind of essay calls for writing a **personal reflection**—an autobiographical narrative reflecting on an experience in your life that has helped make you the person you are today. People write personal reflections to share their experiences and life lessons with others. Some writers are famous people, telling the stories of their private lives. Other writers are simply ordinary people with extraordinary tales to tell. Still others have ordinary tales to tell but an extraordinary ability to tell them. In this Writing Workshop, you will learn how to choose an important experience you have had and to write a personal reflection describing that experience in an interesting way.

## Prewriting

### Choose an Experience

**Who Are You?** To find an experience to use as the topic for a personal or autobiographical narrative, you should begin by exploring the experiences in your life that have made you who you are. You can think of the important experiences that have changed your life as **defining moments** because they have helped define your character. Follow the suggestions below to start thinking of experiences to write about in your personal reflection.

- **Look through old photo albums, diaries, and scrapbooks.** Take a few hours to look through them and stir up old memories. Write down notes about experiences they make you remember.

- **List your hobbies**—the things you like to do. Then, think about the experiences in your life that got you interested in these hobbies. What about those experiences made them meaningful to you?
- **Interview a parent, teacher, or friend** to see whether these people remember any experiences that they think were important in your life. You might also ask what they find interesting about you. Then, you can think about any experiences in your life that may have helped to make you interesting.
- **Carry a notebook** with you for a day or two. When you find yourself thinking of interesting experiences from your past, you will have a handy place to write them down.

When choosing an experience in your life to write about, there are three things you should keep in mind.

- **The experience should be one important to you.** If it is not very significant to you, you will have a hard time interesting your reader.
- **The experience should stand out clearly in your memory.** Make sure you can remember the major details of the experience—they will form the core of your personal reflection.
- **The experience should not be too personal or too private to share.** Others will be reading your narrative. Make sure your topic is one you are willing to share with them.

After you have brainstormed a list of possible experiences, choose three or four that are of special interest to you. Show the list to your friends, parents, or teachers and get their opinions on which one would be the most interesting for them to read. Once you have chosen one of the experiences from your list, you are ready to begin.

## Consider Purpose, Audience, Tone, and Voice

**The Big Picture** To write an interesting personal reflection, you must have a clear idea of your **purpose, audience, tone, and voice**. These will be the main forces that influence the choices you make while planning, writing, and revising your work.

**Purpose** The main **purpose** of a personal reflection is to express yourself. You examine an experience in your life and explore your thoughts and feelings about it. Unlike a diary or a journal entry, this is writing in which your purpose is also to write something that you can share with others. You must not only reach into yourself but also try to reach *out* to others.

**TIP** Do not reject an experience as a topic just because you do not immediately remember every single detail about it. Often, details from your memory will surface over time as you continue to think about past experiences.

**Audience** It is especially important to have a specific **audience** in mind as you compose your personal reflection. That means you need to choose an appropriate audience *before* you begin writing. For example, if you are writing about an experience that involves a relative of yours, that relative might be an appropriate audience for your personal reflection. However, if you are writing an autobiographical narrative to send in with a college application, the choice is clear: Your audience is any college admissions counselor who might read the narrative. Before you begin writing, try listing everything you know about the audience for whom you plan to write. Here are some questions to help you form a clear mental image of your audience and what they will want to see in your personal reflection.

- Who might benefit from reading my personal reflection?
- What kinds of things will this audience be expecting to read?
- How are my audience's experiences similar to mine? How are they different?
- Which people and places will be familiar to my audience? Which will I need to explain better?
- Will they understand or disapprove if I use informal language?

**Tone** **Tone** is the feeling or attitude you, the writer, convey about your topic. In a personal reflection, how you *feel* about the experience should come through clearly. For example, if the experience was funny, you should choose words and examples that are light and amusing—ones that give your narrative a humorous tone. Because personal expression is informal, you will also use first-person pronouns: *I*, *me*, *our*, and *we*.

**Voice** Isn't it great that your friends recognize your voice when you telephone them? **Voice** in writing is the unique sound and rhythm of a writer's language. By letting your own voice show through in your writing, you make the reader know that there is a real person behind the words on the page. Trying to adopt the voice of someone else (for example, by using overblown, pretentious language) often is a mistake because it will make your writing sound insincere.

## **Gather Details**

**Putting the Pieces Together** Gathering details is like sorting pieces of a complicated jigsaw puzzle. You reach into a box that holds hundreds of brightly colored parts of a picture. Your task is to turn the pieces over and see which ones fit into the section of the picture you are working on—with that picture in mind at all times as you work. Similarly, you

should keep in mind the “big picture” for your personal reflection while you work on connecting all of its particular details.

**Events** After you have selected your topic, brainstorm a list of events central to the telling of the narrative—events that you need to relate so readers will understand and share the experience with you. Include **narrative details**, which tell about specific actions and events. List the events **chronologically**, in the order that they happened. One writer created the list of events below when she began gathering details for her personal reflection.

#### Events List

- I watched others practicing tae kwon do and imagined that I could do it, too.
- I met an instructor who taught me techniques.
- I practiced hard.
- I entered a competition.
- My mom and dad saw me compete for the very first time.

**People and Places** Next, make a list of people and places you will need to include in your narrative. Who, besides yourself, played a part in your experience? Where did the experience take place? Use **descriptive details** to paint a clear image of the experience. What did the people look like? What did they say? What did the place look like? What did you hear there? Notice that most of these questions deal with your senses. When you describe details of sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste, you use **sensory details**, which many of your readers will be able to identify. Other descriptive details include **figurative language** (such as **similes** and **metaphors**) and **factual details**. Below is an example of a list that includes a mix of details.

#### People and Places List

- **Me**—shy, not very confident, age 13, physically unimpressive
- **People in the class**—graceful, like swaying trees
- **Gwen**—college student, strong and swift, friendly smile
- **Derek and Tamara**—brother (17) and sister (15), older, popular, smart
- **Mom and Dad**—protective, amazed at what I did, proud
- **YMCA**—pool, activity rooms, picnic place—really hot
- **Practice room**—both youths and adults, white uniforms, noisy

#### TIP

Sometimes meeting with a small group of your peers to discuss the events you are focusing on helps you remember details better. If you use this strategy, be sure to employ effective **listening strategies**.

- Ask clear questions.
- Respond appropriately to others' questions.
- Be an empathic listener by responding to feelings, not just to facts.

**Thoughts and Feelings** To make your reflection truly personal, you should let your reader know what you were thinking and how you felt during the experience. At times, this will appeal to similar thoughts and feelings your reader has had in other situations. At other times it will give readers an insight into thoughts and feelings with which they may not be familiar. Use actions, appearance, and dialogue to show externally what is going on with you internally. For example, to show that she was terrified of sparring, a writer might say that her knees were “like mashed potatoes.” Here are some thoughts and feelings one writer wrote down while preparing a personal reflection.

#### Thoughts and Feelings List

- Envy—imagined being graceful, perfect techniques; afraid to join the group
- Surprise and fear—knees shaking, needed a compliment
- Accomplishment—Mom and Dad proud; photo in the newspaper; a good match

#### Reference Note

For more on **interviewing**, see page 910 in the Quick Reference Handbook.

**TIP** **Interviewing** other people who were involved in the experience will refresh your memory about details of the experience and give you different perspectives from which to view the experience.

**Dialogue** The final kind of detail is dialogue—another narrative detail. Because you are telling a story, you should use dialogue to add variety and to make the people in your narrative more real to your readers. Try to remember who said what, and use their own words. Keep in mind that **dialogue should fit the speaker and can be informal** (for example, it can include slang and sentence fragments). Here are a couple of pieces of dialogue one writer recorded.

#### KEY CONCEPT

#### DIALOGUE LIST

What happened?	What did they say?
Gwen was encouraging.	“Why don’t you come help me practice? I could teach you some other techniques.”
Friends teased me.	“Here comes Jackie Chan!”

## Put It All Together

Collect all your details and gather them in a chart like the one below.

Who or What	Details
<b>Events</b>	
I watched others practicing tae kwon do and imagined that I could do it, too.	Others practicing kicks, blocks, and stances I just watch, practice at home where no one can laugh at me
I met an instructor who taught me techniques.	Gwen offers to help; pretends that I am helping <u>her</u> I am scared; do it anyway because she is so friendly
I practiced hard.	Tough exercise; lots of sore muscles Eventually earn some belts
I entered a competition.	Confident; ready to show the world that I am good enough
My mom and dad saw me compete for the very first time.	They hear my name on loudspeaker See me in the ring
<b>People</b>	
Me	Shy, not very confident, age 13, physically unimpressive
People in the class	Graceful, like swaying trees
Gwen	College student, strong and swift, friendly smile
Derek and Tamara	Brother (17) and sister (15), older, popular, smart
Mom and Dad	Protective, amazed, proud
<b>Places</b>	
YMCA	Pool, activity rooms, picnic place—really hot
Practice room	Both youths and adults, white uniforms, noisy

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<b>Thoughts and Feelings</b> Envy  Surprise and fear Accomplishment	Imagined being graceful, perfect techniques Afraid to join the group Knees shaking, needed a compliment Mom and Dad proud; photo in the newspaper—a good match
<b>Dialogue</b> Gwen was encouraging.  Friends teased me.	“Why don’t you come help me practice? I could teach you some other techniques.” “Here comes Jackie Chan!”

#### COMPUTER TIP



Try dimming your screen while you are brainstorming a list of details at a computer. Because you will not see any typing mistakes you make, you will be able to focus more on the details themselves rather than on your typing ability.

#### KEY CONCEPT

List as many details as you can remember. When you write your personal reflection, you will not necessarily use all of the details that you put in this chart, and you can always add other details as you write. Remember, the goal of collecting details is not to make your notes perfectly grammatical or flawlessly neat—it is to write your ideas down as they come to you. However, make sure they are clear enough so that you will understand the notes when you come back to them.

## Reflect on the Meaning of Your Experience

**That Was Then, This Is Now** A personal reflection about an experience should convey the significance of the experience. **Your readers should clearly see a difference between the way you were before the experience and what you became after it.** Your narrative will not be a personal reflection if it does not include actual **reflections**—your thoughts and feelings—about the significance of the experience you describe.

Give background information early in your personal reflection. Readers will not be able to recognize the change in you if they do not know what you were like before the experience. Unlike thesis statements in many essays, your thesis statement, which directly states the significance of your experience, does not appear in your narrative’s introduction. Instead, you only hint at the meaning of your experience through the details of your background information. For example, if your introduction says, “When I was fourteen, I never really cared about sea life. Until then, I had never

seen a humpback whale,” readers should sense that your reflection will be about how seeing a humpback whale changed your views on sea life. Save the direct statement of the significance of your experience for the conclusion of your narrative—after your readers have had a chance to share in your experience and possibly determine for themselves how it changed your life.

## THINKING IT THROUGH

### Interpreting Meaning

Use the following Thinking It Through steps to reflect on the meaning of your experience. One writer's responses are shown as an example.

- **STEP 1** Ask yourself if you were somehow different at the end of the experience. If so, what were you like at the beginning? How exactly did you change?

*In the beginning I was shy and not very confident. I didn't ever really do my own thing. By learning tae kwon do, I think I became more confident.*

- **STEP 2** Ask yourself whether you learned something new about yourself. What was it?

*I never realized how much I was comparing myself to my brother and sister—like I was living in their shadows. I think I even unconsciously thought my parents didn't think I was anything special because I didn't have the achievements Derek and Tamara had.*

- **STEP 3** Ask yourself if you learned something new about other people, human nature, or life in general. What was it?

*I learned that my parents were proud of me no matter what. I was the one who needed to accomplish something on my own to feel like a real person.*

- **STEP 4** Write one or two sentences about the meaning of the experience. These will become the focus of your essay. You can use a simple sentence structure like one of these to get started:

- At first, I \_\_\_\_\_, but afterward I \_\_\_\_\_.
- I realized that \_\_\_\_\_.

*At first, I was shy and lacked confidence, but afterward I was more self-assured. I realized that I had felt myself to be only a shadow of my older brother and sister, but now I had an accomplishment of my own to prove I was my own person.*



# Writing

## Personal Reflection

### Framework

#### Introduction

- Start with an interesting opener.
- Provide background information.
- Hint at the meaning of the experience.

#### Body

- Relate the events.
- Include details about people, places, thoughts, and feelings.

#### Conclusion

- Reflect on what the experience means to you.

### Directions and Explanations

**Capture Your Readers' Interest** Include an interesting thought or image to grab your audience's attention.

**Provide a Glimpse of You Before the Experience** Give enough background information to provide an impression of what you were like prior to the experience.

**No Mixed Signals** Give your readers a clue about why this experience was important.

**Watch the Clock** Structure your essay so that your readers can follow it easily. Use **transitional words** or phrases to signal chronological order. If you feel adventurous, provide flashbacks.

**Solid as a Rock** Provide a solid basis of **narrative details** to help your readers see what happened. Write about people and places, but also describe thoughts and emotions.

**A Large Palette and Beautiful Canvas** Use **descriptive details** to paint vivid images. Provide a variety of **sensory details**. Where appropriate, include **figurative language** to show things from a new perspective.

**Drive It Home** Let your readers know how you feel now. Use this portion of your narrative to reflect on how this experience changed you.

### YOUR TURN 5

#### Writing a First Draft

Using the above guidelines, write the first draft of your personal reflection on an experience. For an example of an essay that follows the same guidelines, see the Writer's Model on the next page.

# A Writer's Model

The following short essay, which is a final draft, closely follows the framework on the previous page.

## Kicking Shyness

My whole way of looking at the world began to change around the time I turned thirteen. That May, my parents began taking the family to a local YMCA. We could swim, play softball, and visit with other families. Without admitting it to myself, I always seemed to live in the shadows of my older brother and sister. However, beginning with those hot summer days at the center, I started to lose track of what my brother and sister did—because for the first time in my life I was too busy doing my own thing.

After about a month, I found a tae kwan do class and was mesmerized as I watched men and women, boys and girls practice moves and spar with each other. The room was filled with swishing white uniforms and the roar of *ki-hop* yells. I imagined I was one of these people, timing my strokes perfectly, blocking so gracefully, sneaking in the winning point. In reality I spent weeks blending into the wall farthest from the others, shadowboxing at home behind locked doors, too afraid to join the others.

Then, after weeks of my watching, one day it happened. The *sabom-nim* (instructor), a college student named Gwen who moved as if gravity did not apply to her, called to me just as I was about to sneak out the door. "Hey, wallflower! Why don't you come help me practice some of my blocks?" she asked. I told her that I was not part of the class, but she insisted. "I promise I'll only block your moves. No counter-moves until you're ready—and I can teach you some other techniques, too." If Gwen had not been so friendly, I might have tried to escape. Instead, I found myself on the mats, outfitted in all the protective gear. My knees were like mashed potatoes, my heartbeat thundering in my head. There was no place to go but forward—head tucked safely behind my pads so that I could barely see. After a few minutes, though, I started to relax and enjoy myself. "See?" Gwen said afterward. "Once you've loosened up, you're a natural." That was the

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### INTRODUCTION

Interesting opening

Background  
information

Hint at meaning

### BODY

Event 1  
Sensory details

Thoughts

Narrative detail

Event 2

Dialogue

Sensory detail  
Figurative details

Actions show  
thoughts/feelings

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Event 3  
Narrative detail

Figurative detail  
Dialogue

Narrative detail

Event 4  
Narrative detail

Feelings

Narrative detail

Thoughts/feelings

CONCLUSION  
Thoughts/feelings  
Significance of  
experience

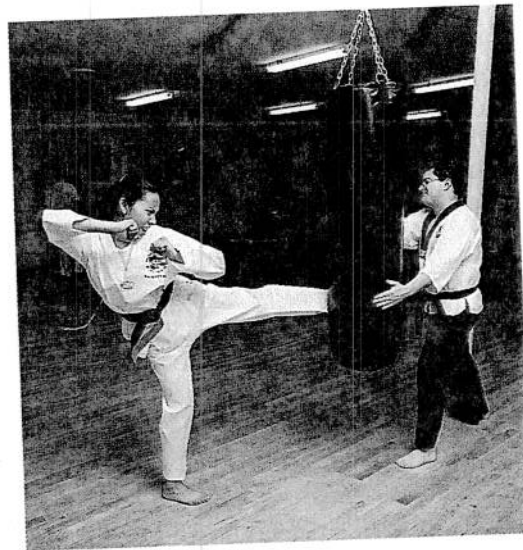
right thing to say, then, because I needed praise.

That night, I convinced my parents to let me enroll in the class. I memorized all the moves: *ahre maggi* (down block), *guligi cha-gi* (hook kick), *poom sogi* (tiger stance), and so on. Believe me, this "natural" never worked so hard in her life. There is no doubt about it—tae kwon do is a tough, aerobic workout. Sometimes my muscles felt like limp noodles by the end of the day. My friends thought I was crazy. "Here comes Jackie Chan!" they would tease. Eventually, though, I was not just graceful but good enough to earn a yellow, then orange, and eventually a green belt.

My mother still likes to tell the next part of this story. The following March, I had invited her, Dad, and my brother and sister to the center one Saturday for the spring tournaments—not telling them that I was competing. While they were looking for me on the bench, they were surprised to hear my name blared over a

loudspeaker. However, their shock was not over. Finally they noticed their younger daughter, poised confidently in the ring, waiting to spar in her first competition match. What a match it was! I didn't win, but I did get my picture in the newspaper (a close-up of my determined face) and had the reward of my parents' amazed and proud faces.

Looking back, I realize now that my parents did not need proof to think I was worth something—I did. I needed an accomplishment all my own, and tae kwon do was it. I learned confidence and greater respect for myself, not from winning, but from trying. From then on, I felt like a real person, not just a shadow.



## A Student's Model

In the following reflection, Tabitha Henry of Weston High School in Cazenovia, Wisconsin, describes a personal experience that is familiar to many of us. Notice how she begins with background information that hints at what is to come.

### My Last Goodbye

My life was perfect when I was twelve years old. I had a family, including my sister, Chrissy, and a little brother, Patrick, whom I loved greatly. Spring was coming, and I was excited about another summer with Grandma. She and I did a lot of things together. We used to talk to each other, go shopping, tell each other our secrets, and garden together. She was retiring this year, so that meant more time with her.

Then, on April 11, 1994, at 10:00 P.M., we were all going to bed when the phone rang. My mom answered; my uncle was calling to say that Grandpa had just taken Grandma to the hospital. . . .

My life fell apart that night. The next morning I was told that Grandma had had a heart attack and that she was gone. My heart stopped at that moment. I tried to be strong, but even my father cried. I just kept asking myself, "Why her?" I was so mad that I had not even gotten to say goodbye. I still thought that I could keep my feelings hidden until someone said of me, "This is the one that will miss her the most." I couldn't control my feelings anymore. I burst into tears. It finally hit me: She was gone forever. All I had left were memories in the garden—the hours we spent planting flowers and taking care of them. Although my aunt and I later tried to work the garden, it just was never the same.

I believe that my grandma is a star watching over me, just like she would be if she were still here. No one could ever fill that part of my heart that died with her. Still, my grandma would have wanted me to be strong and happy like her, even though there are good times and bad. My family and friends love me for who I am and support me for what I do, as I know my grandma would, too.

### INTRODUCTION

Background  
information

Hint at what is  
to come

### BODY

Event 1  
Narrative detail

Event 2  
Narrative detail

Dialogue

Thoughts/feelings  
Figurative detail

### CONCLUSION

Figurative detail

Significance of  
experience