Chapter 4. Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Manage your writing process through flexible, recursive stages
- Identify how complex writing tasks require writers to monitor multiple challenges and choices
- Use reflective practice throughout your project to improve your writing
- Apply a pattern of reflective practice to improve your insights about your own writing: define a challenge, *explore* options, *act* to implement a reasonable strategy, and *learn* from your experience

When someone asks you, "What's your writing process?," you probably have an answer that includes at least two or three steps you've practiced in school (such as outlining, drafting, and editing) and maybe a few steps that are part of your specific writing story, like "Find my flow" or "Drink a lot of coffee." When your process works for you, there's no need to mess with success.

As you encounter more challenging writing in school, in your workplace, or in your community, you may need to rethink your idea of a "writing process." Longer or more complicated projects may require you to go back and forth between familiar steps, to implement new steps, or even to turn your process upside down: in some genres and contexts, writers start by writing the conclusion or final results, and then work backward to the introduction.

Moreover, you know that even now, your writing process doesn't always work smoothly: like all writers, you *frequently struggle and revise*, and sometimes you may feel as though you are so stuck or confused that you have "writer's block." When you're stuck, you need to find strategies to step back from your process and choose another path, like a driver finding an alternate route to avoid a flooded road. This "stepping back" process is part of reflective practice, and is a crucial skill for advanced writers to know. When you keep a flexible attitude about the processes you use as a writer, and develop strategies for stepping back to define and explore your situation before trying a new approach, you can gain fluency, efficiency, and confidence even when faced with a complex or difficult writing task.

4.1 Build a Flexible Writing Process

You may have heard people talk about "the writing process" as if it were a single, smooth pathway toward success. Yet that's not universally true. Several threshold concepts can help us expand our idea of a single writing process:

Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

Good writers frequently struggle and revise

Since writing is difficult for many writers, and the expectations for success depend on the exact audience or context, a writer's main job is to persist through difficulty.

Advanced writers study and reflect on their writing

Writers study writing just as chemists study chemistry and musicians study music—and advanced writers use repeated reflective practices to understand our own work.

For instance, since *good writing adapts*, writing processes vary: one writer composing three different writing projects will likely choose a unique sequence of actions for each—as would three different writers each working on a similar project.

You may also have heard, or even stated yourself, that the best writing process is one that happens organically when a writer "just gets into the flow" and doesn't think too hard about it. However, we also know that *good writers revise* and that *advanced writers reflect on their writing*. That is, writers make plans, get stuck, try out new approaches, go back to an earlier step, receive feedback that helps us adapt, and restart our writing, often several times in a longer project—or even in a single paragraph! Advanced writers succeed not by "just doing it" but by stepping back frequently to reflect on our goals and needs: we identify multiple steps for our writing process, create a plan that fits our needs and context, and adapt that plan as we go forward.

Break a writing task into key steps

Like managers, chefs, and pole vaulters, writers succeed by combining multiple small actions into their larger projects. Managers don't just "manage well" in some vague way; they break down their work into smaller steps, find which ones they need to improve on, and work on those.

In a very simple model, writers set aside time for planning, composing, and revising, while remembering that we may need to use this approach *recursively*: that is, going back and forth between steps.

You probably already have some ideas about how to break these steps down even further. While tapping out a text to a friend doesn't require a complicated process, completing your organic chemistry lab report (or drafting your proposal for an ethnographic study of online communities of Minecraft players) will likely include more discrete steps, often repeated at several points during your work as a writer.

- **Set goals** and select a focus for your project so that you know where to go and what it will take to succeed.
- **Inquire** about your topic or issue so that you know exactly what to say.
- **Organize** your ideas for your document so that each section helps present ideas clearly to your reader.
- **Generate** the paragraphs, sentences, words, and visuals of your whole document.
- **Revise** your draft to improve your communication and fix errors.
- **Reflect** on your progress and your challenges to identify your most successful strategies.

For that quick text message, you might only need two steps, *compose* and *send*. For a semester-long senior project in sociology or film studies, you might need

even more steps, such as *propose, plan, design, collaborate, organize, generate, analyze data, review, edit,* or *present*.

The more steps we articulate, the easier it is to see how each writing process can be different. Some writers prefer to start by generating ideas, using a "freewrite" mode that helps them discover what they want to say—but some writers like to use that approach near the end of a project to explore a particularly complex idea or generate additional details. Some writers conduct initial research, then organize via an outline, and then realize they need to inquire again about one aspect more thoroughly. Often writers revise late in their process, but it can be equally valuable to revise early, such as when narrowing a research question to gain clearer focus.

Experiment with steps and structures

If you're feeling stuck about "what step to do next," remember that *any step is possible*, regardless of where you are in your writing process, even steps you've already taken. Instead of giving in to "writer's block" and heading to the fridge, advanced writers are more likely to succeed when we work on a different step, shift to a new gear, or experiment with a strategy even if it might not work. After all, if your options are "give up and feel like the writing is failing" or "try something else that might feel uncomfortable but might actually help," doesn't it make sense to at least give a new idea a try?

- **Work on a different step**. Suppose you originally decided that you would write your whole outline and then do your research, but you're stuck at Point C in your outline. Instead of getting frustrated, you can flip the script: take a 20-minute research trip to see if any of the titles that come up in your library's database give you better ideas about the structure of your document.

- **Shift to a new gear**. Imagine that you're working on a report that has a very clear four-part structure, but Part 2 isn't going smoothly, and Part 3 looks tough. Instead of staying stuck, you can step out of the project entirely for a few minutes: write about your ideas as if you were sending a few texts to a friend or writing a series of haiku poems, or take 5 minutes to dictate possible ideas into your phone.

- **Encourage your experimental side**. What if you are the kind of writer who *always* freewrites first, always starts with a title, or always finishes one section before starting another—but your favorite strategy is not working today? Instead of trying to force old strategies into new projects, give yourself permission to experiment, just for today: jot an outline on a sticky note, write "Add Title Here" at the top of the page and move on, or try writing just the first two sentences of each paragraph and then skipping forward.

Your alternative plan or experiment might not work—after all, most scientists will tell you that many if not most of their experiments fail—but writers like scientists learn as much from the failures as from successes. When you treat your writing process as experimental, you lower your stress level and give yourself opportunities to expand your repertoire of strategies that might possibly work.

Explore 4.1

Name two different writing projects that you are involved in this week. These could be informal tasks involving communicating with your friends or family, or longer tasks for your job or your classes. For each one, create a list of possible steps that fits the project: remember that your steps can be in any order, can be repeated, and can include steps that match your own writing story. Then write a sentence to explain the reasons your two lists are different from one another, and finish with a sentence about how you could change one process if needed: what alternate step can you imagine trying if you get stuck?

Practice

- To practice an **alternate first-step**, try an approach from Six Structures if you usually prefer freewriting, or try an approach from Seven Generations if you usually prefer a straightforward outline.

- To **take a break** from your writing while still making progress, try a mind-shift approach such as 3D Mind Map, Inner Three-Year-Old, or Values Freewrite.

  NOTE: These Practice features provide links to exercises in Chapters 23 through 29. If you are reading this book in print, you can find an alphabetical list of exercises at the end of the book. The list includes the section in which each exercise can be found.

Learn

- To learn more about **your writing story**, see Chapter 1, Reframing Your Story About Writing.

- To learn more about **how writers fail productively**, see Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits.

4.2 Build a Reflective Writing Process

When we think of writing as a verb—a dynamic communication between writer and reader(s)—it's easier to understand how many choices and challenges writers face. Once writers are settled into the composing process, we still need to consider our own confidence or motivation as we address disposition problems; we

might have to investigate our audience's needs as we address rhetoric problems or deepen our research as we encounter knowledge problems. And because your writing story is unique, you might find other problems that you want to solve: lab-report problems, roommate distraction problems, culture-crossing problems, campaign strategy problems.

As if that weren't enough, a successful writer often has a lot of work to do even before the first word is typed, and that work continues for some time after the last revisions are completed. Experienced writers—like experienced mathematicians, baseball managers, and nurses—do a lot of analysis in our heads before we write, speak, or act. This blend of in-head decision-making and precise action is often called *reflective practice*: experts can assess a scene, diagnose a weak spot, invent a response, act, reassess, and alter their actions as needed almost without noticing any of those steps.

Reflection is a *metacognitive* skill: it helps you *think about your thinking*, as a rough definition of the word suggests, and also helps you *think about your learning* so that you can improve. While "reflection" can be used for relaxation or solitary introspection, reflective practice is an active sequence of observation, analysis, and action grounded in the situation around you. Reflective practitioners gather evidence about their current experience: What is going well? What is not going well? What are the likely causes of any difficulty? Then, when they have a reasonable hypothesis that explains the situation, they take deliberate action, deciding what to continue and what to change.

Identify common patterns of reflective practice

Writers benefit from learning key strategies for this reflective process of noticing, analyzing, and deciding how best to proceed in our writing tasks. Professionals often reflect without knowing that's what they're doing, but as you build your reflective practice skills, you will benefit from slowing down and using specific steps to hone your awareness and analytical skills.

You may already have used reflective practice at the end of a writing project—or after a soccer tournament, a new product launch, or an opening night performance. Professionals often take time to look back on a completed effort and assess what worked and what didn't: they *reflect to improve*. But reflective practice isn't just for post-game review. Building on our earlier plan-compose-revise model, we can identify key points throughout a writing project where reflection increases writers' awareness, creates wider opportunities, helps us get unstuck, and lets us transfer what we've learned to the next project.

> Reflective practice begins with **prediction**: identifying the goals and variables of a situation, considering the challenges, and

anticipating the resources and strategies that will most likely contribute to a successful outcome.

Reflection also helps in the middle of a process, as writers **problem-solve** by defining a problem, exploring options, trying an alternate action, and assessing if the new approach worked.

Reflecting to **improve**—at the end of a section, draft, or complete project—is not just about assessing past challenges and successes, but also about deliberately defining or redefining your writing principles so that what you have learned will help you in your next step or project.

When you are working on a familiar writing task for familiar readers—scribbling a quick shopping list for a family member, for instance—you might not need to reflect much to decide how to proceed. You can just grab a scrap of paper and write. But when your writing task is more complicated, or the stakes are higher, or you're trying to learn a new strategy, you'll benefit from taking a little extra time for deliberate reflection at multiple stages of your work.

Finally, it's important to remember that you already reflect to predict, problem-solve, and improve in many areas of your life, and the results are usually positive. For instance, if you were trying to improve as an archer, you wouldn't just draw an arrow and shoot blindly, hoping it would work out. Your prediction might include how you aim, and how your aim takes into account the distance and size of the target, as well as your strength and bow capabilities.

Explore 4.2

Describe something you have some expertise in and yet are always trying to improve: this could be a professional task, a long-time hobby or sporting skill, a type of school assignment, a personal goal or project. First, set the stage in a sentence or so: what is the task or action, and what would improving at it look like? Then describe in a few sentences any ways that you use reflection throughout the process: What do you look over or predict before starting a new project, stage, session, or action, and what factors do you take into account? How do you step back to notice and redirect your efforts to problem-solve in the middle? What kinds of reflecting do you do after you act: which factors strongly affect your success or improvement, and how do you account for them in your recent effort?

As you draw the arrow back, you might notice the wind shifting, and adjust your aim to compensate. If you still didn't hit the target, after all that preparation, you wouldn't just shrug and assume the universe was against you. Instead, you'd consider exactly what went wrong: your reflection might include your judgment about whether you overestimated the power of your shot or underestimated the

strength of the wind, as well as your plan about what to do differently on your next shot. The same skills are useful in many settings, including writing.

Reflect to address "free-range" writing tasks

If you've mostly been succeeding as a writer without worrying about reflective practice, you might reasonably wonder why you should try it now; it may seem like a lot of work to add to your already busy life.

One answer has to do with the ways that your writing tasks are becoming more complex these days, and the ways in which you are being granted more responsibility and oversight. In many of your former classrooms, writing assignments were chosen, defined, and evaluated by someone other than the writer. An instructor probably told you the topic, length, goal, and structure of the writing task you must complete, and explained exactly what criteria you must meet by what date to be successful.

Outside of classrooms—even in tasks as straightforward as a quick social media post—you know that writers have much more freedom, and take on much more risk, as we select our own topics, structures, and evidence. We need to create and present our documents based on our best sense of what readers will enjoy or find satisfying, and then we wait for a few readers, or a thousand readers, who may have a wide range of expectations, to tell us if we made a successful connection.

Scholars often discuss the difference between a controlled task, like a straightforward classroom writing assignment, and an uncontrolled, "ill-structured," or "wicked" problem. In considering this difference, you might imagine the contrasts between encountering a few tame animals on a farm or in a children's petting zoo, and encountering wild animals out on the range in the US Great Plains, on the broad veldt in Zimbabwe, or in the deep rainforests of Brazil. A petting zoo can be both an enjoyable experience and a fantastic learning opportunity for people who have not worked with live animals before. But to move from petting a pony in a pen (a controlled task) to encountering a hungry leopard in a jungle (a free-range task), most of us would need new ways to identify challenges, prepare resources, and adapt to changing conditions.

Your school assignments and even your writing tasks at work may vary, from having a most of the structure tightly controlled by others to having most or all of the decisions left up to you as the author. You can start to recognize ill-structured, "free-range" problems—in writing tasks or in other areas of your life—by watching for key characteristics. For instance, most free-range problems:

- Are difficult to identify or classify
- Are interconnected with other problems and fields of study

- Require you to learn new information or strategies as you proceed
- Demand a combination of strategies or approaches
- Can have multiple positive outcomes from which to choose
- Often involve multiple failures before a workable solution is found/chosen

In order to solve a free-range problem successfully, you can't use a "just do it" approach. Instead, you need to identify all the relevant elements of each problem, and use a multi-step, reflective process to deliberately work your way through.

Integrate reflective practice into your writing process

While finishing assignments for school has helped you develop your abilities to plan, draft, and revise clearly structured tasks, your current and future writing work is likely to involve more choices and steps. It can be both exciting and stressful to hold more responsibility as a writer. Certainly it's exciting and motivating to be able to write about an issue or approach that fascinates you, or to work with a genre (such as song lyrics or video script) that you enjoy composing. To avoid feeling overwhelmed by that freedom, though, writers benefit from adding reflective practice to our writing process.
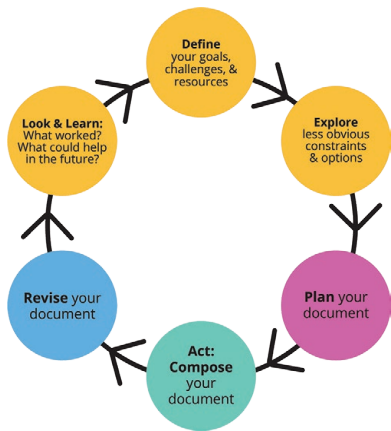
It might help to imagine the ways that teachers who have been creating writing assignments have been doing some of your reflective practice for you. That is, rather than asking *you* to predict what the key factors would be, adapt to unusual problems and make final decisions about what you had learned, they carried some of that workload themselves to help you focus on a skill you were learning, in much the same way that a zoo designer makes a safe place for people inexperienced with wildlife.

For instance, a child at a petting zoo starts with a very small set of choices as they make a plan (should I pet the pony or go visit the ducks?); then they take a brief action (pet the pony), and finally decide if the action was enjoyable enough to be worth repeating or if they should change it (next time, ducks!).

Similarly, a writer working in a controlled setting will develop a straightforward plan to write a five-paragraph response to an assignment to "argue your point about global warming," because that's what the instructor indicated; they will

complete a draft; and then they may review the essay for errors and make small corrections so that each paragraph has a topic sentence and the thesis sentence is in the right place. In this case, an instructor held the responsibility for the reflective practice in order to make a complicated task more straightforward. That is, the teacher defined the topic and approach; they chose a length, focus, and structure that they believed would be appropriate for their students given their current resources and knowledge; and after reviewing the essays they decided whether their students had learned the right skills or needed more practice before the next assignment.

However, most advanced writing—like most professional work—is more complex than writing a formulaic essay, and tasks often start without a classroom instructor to wrestle with the reflective analysis of all the variables. In the chart below, you can see how a biologist in the rainforest, an engineer reviewing business-park development blueprints, and a writer assigned to create an organization's newsletter all have to start at the top of the cycle outlined above and work through all the steps.

	Biologist	**Engineer**	**Writer**
Define the goals and challenges	What animal made that noise? Is it dangerous?	Is the building structure suitable for its predicted uses?	How do we reach out to members: print or online?
Explore constraints and resources	Do I have tools to fight, places to hide, or speed to run away?	Will alternatives cost too much? Do we have time for changes?	Do we know what stories interest members? Is our web design software up to date?
Develop a plan	Escape plan	Remediation plan	Storyboard plan noting authors, topics, and visuals
Act strategically	Move away	Redesign	Write and publish
Assess and revise	There's still a noise getting closer: move further away	The neighboring building needs to be redesigned, too: make a second plan	Only 20% of members read the newsletter: add more relevant content
Look, learn, and transfer	Consider finding a better hiding place next time	Consider having fewer buildings at higher quality for the next project	Consider hiring a new part-time researcher for the next issue
Define the next problem	Now it's raining	Now there's a new lot-size regulation	Now there's an increase in younger members who prefer videos

The reflective steps here are crucial: if you don't have a tour guide, a senior engineer, or a teacher to identify and adapt to all of the factors and variables for you, then you need to integrate that work into all of your own actions. You also need to look for ways to apply what you learn in one situation to improve your work in the next situation—or in another context entirely. Scholars talk about this as *transferring* your learning. You can transfer to a similar situation (the engineer working on another office building a few blocks away) or to a more distant situation (the newsletter writer composing a more formal annual summary statement for donors).

Thus rather than think of reflection as something that someone else does, or that happens only at one point in our work on a "free range" writing project, advanced writers seek to integrate reflective practice with our actions. This helps us improve not just at writing "what the teacher assigns," but at writing *everything*: lab reports this year, a resume next year, a story about your cousin's new restaurant for a local food blog the year after that. To become a writer who operates confidently in complex situations, and who improves this year and over a lifetime, you need to gain strategies for integrated reflective practice.

4.3 DEAL and Delve: Strategies for Reflective Practice

Reflective writing usually has a single audience member: you write for yourself. That doesn't mean that you can let yourself off the hook, though. To develop a *productive habit* of reflective practice, not just a new way to procrastinate on your writing task, you need to develop strategies that bring you insights rather than only stating obvious facts. If you haven't used metacognitive strategies much before, you may find it helpful to use a "DEAL and Delve" approach to help you learn about and improve your writing in ways that you find valuable.

DEAL with it: Define, explore, act, & learn

The moves of reflective practice can eventually become second nature, especially when a task is familiar. After all, a world-class saxophonist doesn't track whether he's exploring or acting in the middle of a jazz improvisation, and a skilled cardiologist doesn't pause in the middle of her surgical procedure to stare off into space while she decides what she's just learned. A bystander might think that these experts are bundles of pure action: notes pour into one room, while scalpels and clamps are deftly applied in the other. But what enables both professionals to adapt to changing circumstances (such as a low-energy audience or a weakened artery) is their constant switching between action and consideration, between practice and reflection.
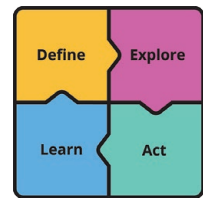
However, while you are developing your skills as a writer and a reflective practitioner of writing, you can benefit from engaging in some key moves deliberately, one at a time. Most guides to reflective practice acknowledge that the practitioner—in our case, a writer—needs to begin by stepping back and assessing the current situation as objectively as possible. What is happening, could happen, or might need to happen? Like any expert, writers benefit from having thorough data about the work we are doing or trying to do. Once the situation is more clearly mapped, the writer needs to consider a range of options, because the key point of reflective practice is to find non-obvious choices that can improve one's performance. (If the best way were obvious, you probably wouldn't need reflection!)

Then the writer can return to action—locating source material, typing away at a keyboard, or reorganizing an outline—by selecting a step or resource identified in the earlier surveys. Finally, the writer needs to check in metacognitively to think about the learning: what's the takeaway they can apply to this task and to future situations?

One way to think about these steps is through a DEAL framework:

- **D**efine the situation.
- **E**xplore the opportunities.
- **A**ct based on the choices you just made.
- **L**ook and **L**earn from your experience.

These steps will vary a bit across a writer's reflective practice, but the moves are consistent enough to comprise a recognizable, memorable pattern that can help you be deliberate about your reflections while you're learning.

Predict	Problem Solve	Improve
Define your rhetorical context • Writer's goals • Audience/community expectations • Genres, modalities, & styles	Define the problem • Rhetoric: Goals/Expectations • Knowledge of subject • Writing steps/strategies • Dispositions • Other	Define what worked this time, and what did not
Explore other constraints • Subject knowledge • Writing strategy knowledge • Dispositions	Explore strategies that could help • Adapt a prior solution • Change the order or focus • Try a new strategy • Gain feedback or resources	Explore immediate revisions as well as connections to principles • What is "good writing" for this project, and how can you revise to bring your draft closer to this ideal? • What do good writers do for this kind of project, and generally? • What strategies do you have/need for future projects?

Predict	Problem Solve	Improve
Act to acquire resources and implement strategies	Act: Try one alternate approach	Act: Revise your current project, and anticipate how you will adapt to future writing tasks
Learn what pathways are most productive for you as a writer • . . . based on past successes • . . . based on new circumstances	Learn whether the new strategy helped	Learn what principles and adaptations help you succeed as a writer

For specific examples of how to use these steps in a current or upcoming project, see the Guides in the next section.

Delve: What, how, why, & so

In addition to using the DEAL framework to remind yourself to move between consideration and action, you want to develop a habit of reflecting *as precisely as possible*. If you go to a doctor and define your situation as, "I don't feel well," it may take them a long time to figure out how to help you; if you tell a doctor, "My lower back hurts when I sit down but not when I'm standing," they will provide relevant treatment more quickly and accurately. Similarly, if you predict that a key factor in your project will be "doing extended research," you will have a harder time identifying beneficial resources than if you define that research specifically: "I need to go beyond finding general information about Brazilian property laws; for example, I would like to find current data about the daily life of citizens of Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*."

You don't need to write hundreds of words to delve into your innermost experiences, if you can build a habit of moving directly into sentences that help reveal your precise situation or opportunities. You may find it helpful to nudge yourself toward more specific, in-depth reflection using a "what-how-why-so" sequence of questions; in addition, you can prompt yourself to add a "*because . . .*" phrase, a "*for example . . .*" or "*such as . . .*" phrase, or a "*therefore . . .*" phrase to your explanation.

In the example that follows, watch how the writer moves from a general description of a problem-solving reflection, to some more specific explorations of the precise challenges they face, to a specific action that could improve this particular document. In the end, this reflection only takes four sentences, but because the sentences move into *why* and *how*, and focus on specific issues, the writer finishes with more awareness and a clear plan, not just for this project but for other projects.

	Name it . . .	**. . . and be as specific as possible about challenges or opportunities**
What is or might be difficult now? What did you do previously? What do you plan to do?	*Writing a conclusion is hard . . .*	*. . . especially since this project requires me to explain a good solution to a complex business problem.*
How do you feel while doing it? How did you previously decide what to do? How else could you proceed with your writing?	*I always feel confused about what I should write at the end . . .*	*. . . for example, should I state a big new idea, or just repeat smaller ideas I've already discussed?*
Why is it difficult or easy now? Why did you choose this rather than another approach? Why do you want to improve on this?	*It's hard because I want to have a big impressive conclusion, but I'm also worried . . .*	*. . . because I'm new to this field and I don't feel qualified to propose a brand new solution.*
So what strategies, resources, or support might help you out? So what changes might help you solve (part of) the problem?	*I could aim for more of a middle ground . . .*	*. . . for example, by looking at some examples in business magazines of reasonable changes, or asking my instructor for sample proposals I could review.*

As you practice reflection and prediction, your early efforts might take you more than four sentences, and some sentences might take you a few minutes to write: after all, *thinking about how you write* and *thinking about how you can write better* is high-level brain work!

No single strategy will work for all reflective practice, any more than a single process works for all writers. For straightforward projects, being precise about "what" you're experiencing as a writer might be enough to help you move forward. In a more complex project, or when you are feeling particularly stuck or frustrated, you might reflect at more length, and you might lean more towards "how" and less toward "why," depending on your topic or goal. If you practice using some or all of this sequence, you can move more quickly to perceptions that will aid you in your current and future projects.

The more you focus your attention on what's complicated or difficult to articulate, rather than being satisfied with an initial or obvious answer, the deeper and more transferable your learning will be. With regular reflective practice, you will improve your awareness and increase the learning you gain from this metacognitive work.

4.4 Guides for Reflective Practice

The guides in this section can help you *practice reflecting*, so that you develop a stronger habit of *reflective practice*. They use the DEAL framework to help you practice specific moves: Define, Explore, Act, and Learn. Not all writers need to answer

all the questions: you may find some of them resonate with you more strongly than others overall, or some that connect directly to your experience with your current project. You may find it helpful to glance at some questions, to write short responses to others, and to delve more fully into one or two at each stage.

Predict your writing situation and challenges: Guiding questions

You can use some or all of the questions in this guide before you begin writing to predict your opportunities and challenges—or use these questions at any point in your writing process when you get stuck want to consider the overall situation of your project.

This guide is arranged in the DEAL structure. In order to increase the benefits of your reflections, you may wish to remind yourself to *delve* beyond your first general thoughts using a "what-why-how-so" approach.

1. Define your rhetorical context

    a. What are your main purposes supposed to be in this writing task: What do you need to do or show for your readers? How do you know that's your goal?

    b. Who are your primary and secondary audiences, and what do you know they need from you? What might make connecting with your readers easy (or challenging)?

    c. What is/are the possible genre(s) of this writing task? What main expectations do readers have about this genre—and what benefits or restrictions does this genre give you?

    d. What modality or writing style will best suit this project, given your goals and your readers' needs?

2. Explore writing strategies, opportunities, and constraints

    a. What are the overall challenges of this task?

    b. Given the rhetorical situation you outlined above, what are some strategies that can be particularly helpful?

        i. Explaining a simple process is different from proposing a complex change: what strategies can help you in achieving your main purpose(s)?

        ii. Persuading a knowledgeable, skeptical reader differs from persuading a trusting friend: what strategies might you select to help you connect?

        iii. Identifying specific evidence about an experience you know well is different from locating and learning information about an issue you aren't familiar with: what strategies will help you write with authority and confidence?

     iv. Composing in a familiar genre, modality, or style is different from learning new structures as you compose: what strategies will help you meet your own and readers' expectations for this project?

c. What one or two elements of this task seem easiest or most familiar to you? Why? Give an example of a factor or approach that might be similar to one you've successfully used before:

     i. *Acquiring and applying subject knowledge*: gathering information, determining your breadth/depth of information, providing good analysis, checking assumptions

     ii. *Using steps and strategies* productively: setting writing goals, generating material, organizing material, revising the document

     iii. *Managing your dispositions*: gaining confidence, finding motivation, allotting time and resources, being persistent and openminded

     iv. *Other* elements from your writing story or writing principles

d. What one or two elements of this task seem most difficult or least familiar to you? Give an example of a factor or approach that might be new or complicated for you in this task:

     i. *Acquiring and applying subject knowledge*: gathering information, determining your breadth/depth of information, providing good analysis, checking assumptions

     ii. *Using steps and strategies* productively: setting writing goals, generating material, organizing material, revising the document

     iii. *Managing your dispositions*: gaining confidence, finding motivation, allotting time and resources, being persistent and openminded

     iv. *Other* elements from your writing story or writing principles

Explore 4.3

Use Question 1 to identify a few key aspects of your goal and audience. Then write at least two sentences responding to prompts from Question 2, to help predict the challenges that you predict will be important for you to keep in mind as you plan this project. If you are responding to a formal writing assignment, include at least one direct quotation from your writing assignment description or directions to explain more about the rhetorical context you are predicting.

Learn

- To refresh your understanding of a writing task's **rhetorical situation**, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.
- To **articulate possible difficulties** that accompany a rhetorical situation, refer to the chart in Chapter 5, Planning a Writing Project.

3. Act to identify or acquire resources you may need

a. What internal resources—your previous experiences, successful writing projects, writing strategies or principles, or working habits—do you already have that you can use as you encounter challenges in this writing task?

b. What external resources— your relevant current knowledge, peer or professional community, or other information sources close to hand—do you already have that you can refer to as you encounter challenges in this writing task?

c. What internal resources—writing strategies, productive dispositions, or process steps—might you need to improve or adapt in order to succeed with this task? This is a good point to pay attention to challenges you have faced before as a writer, and plan to change your approach or tell yourself a positive story to improve your experience.

d. What external resources—model documents, audience information, data, analyses, expert perspectives, production tools, or reader feedback— might you need to acquire in order to succeed with this task? Which ones might be trickiest or take the most time to locate?

e. How will you manage your time constraints with this task? Which elements will take the most time to complete? Where in your schedule do you spot conflicts building up, or opportunities to complete steps in this task?

4. Look and learn

a. If you completed an "Improve" reflection for an earlier assignment, which of the principles or strategies you suggested then seem most important or appropriate to try to follow now?

b. If you have completed a writing task like this in the past, what did you learn from your successes/failures there that you can apply here?

c. If you have not completed a writing task quite like this one, how can you adapt something you've used before to these new circumstances?

d. At what point(s) do you usually get stuck or feel frustrated when you write, and what can you try this time that might help you out?

Explore 4.4

From Question 3, answer at least one of the "have resources" questions and one of the "need resources" questions to take the first steps in acting on your plan. Then review Question 4 and answer at least one of the "look and learn" questions. If you are responding to a formal writing assignment, include at least one direct quotation from your writing assignment description or directions to explain an opportunity or constraint you are predicting.

> ### Learn
>
> - To fully consider **your prior and current resources** for completing a writing project, see <u>Chapter 5, Planning a Writing Project</u>.
> - To articulate ways to **use past failures** as well as past successes to guide your reflection, see <u>Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits</u>.

Solve problems as you compose: Guiding questions

You can use some or all of the questions in this guide during your composing process if you get stuck or have questions—or you can use these questions at any point in your writing process when you want to focus on identifying new strategies to solve a specific writing problem.

This guide is arranged in the DEAL structure. In order to increase the benefits of your reflections, you may wish to remind yourself to delve beyond your first general thoughts using a "what-why-how-so" approach.

1. Define the problem

Remember that writing problems overlap—a confidence problem that seems rooted in your dispositions can be related to a knowledge problem—so it doesn't matter much whether you give a "right answer" as long as the definition feels useful to you.

a. Is it a *rhetoric problem*? These problems have to do with determining your goal/focus/stance, meeting the audience's needs, writing in this genre, or choosing your presentation mode/style.

b. Is it a *knowledge problem*? These problems have to do with gathering subject-matter information, determining your breadth/depth of information, providing good analysis, or checking assumptions.

c. Is it a *steps or strategies problem*? These problems have to do with setting writing goals, mapping your writing process, generating material, organizing material, revising the document, or using a specific strategy like integrating sources, responding to a counterargument, or using complex sentence structures.

d. Is it a *disposition* problem? These problems have to do with gaining confidence, finding motivation, allotting time and resources, or being persistent and openminded.

e. Is it *another* problem? Consider elements from your writing story or writing principles to help you identify why you're feeling stuck.

2. Explore strategies that could help you

It has been said that "Acting the same way but expecting different results" is a sure way to set yourself up for failure. As you explore strategies for taking action, try to identify several possibilities, including some that you haven't tried before or don't generally use for this kind of writing problem.

    a. What is a resource, strategy, or approach you've tried successfully before when faced with a similar problem?

    b. What's a strategy suggested in this textbook, either in a chapter you recently read or in the guide to writing exercises, that could help you here?

    c. Do you think you need document-level strategies (narrowing/broadening your focus, changing your emphasis, reorganizing your structure, connecting with your audience) or paragraph- or sentence-level strategies (clarifying arguments, strengthening evidence, using more appropriate or powerful language, adjusting to meet genre or design expectations)?

    d. If you have received peer review comments, what responses identify points where you're succeeding, which you could replicate elsewhere in the document? What comments did you receive—and what comments did you give someone else—that help you identify a possible new approach?

3. Act: Experiment by trying **one** alternate approach

    a. Give yourself at least 20-30 minutes of active writing (or other strategy) to fully explore the new approach (set a timer if it helps!): your brain needs time to shift from the prior state to your new way of thinking.

    b. Keep a growth mindset as you use your new strategy: Remember that *writing involves strategies more than talent*, so give yourself encouragement for trying something new, rather than focusing too much on self-critique or word-level editing.

4. Look and Learn

    a. Take a minute at the end of your experiment to identify at least one benefit that you *might have gained* in this current project from trying this strategy.

    b. Stay open to the possibility that "success" may not look exactly as you imagined: you might be solving a problem you didn't initially identify, you might have improved your attitude even if the writing still feels challenging, or you may be making progress even if it's taking you a slightly different direction than you planned.

    c. Identify other parts of this task where you might apply a similar solution.

    d. Recognize how one of your writing principles or part of your writing story may be relevant to your experiment.

e. If you're still stuck, that's okay: Remember that struggling is normal, and that you can try another strategy, work on another section, or walk away and come back later with a fresh mind.

Explore 4.5

When you get stuck or frustrated during composing, begin by using Question 1 to step back and define the problem as specifically as you can: this may take you two or three sentences or more (using a "what-why-how-so" approach can be very helpful here). Before you decide on an action or solution, use one or two prompts from Question 2 to challenge yourself to explore at least two or three choices: something you've tried before, a strategy recommended by your instructor, or a writing exercise in this book. Remember to take a minute after you try your solution to reflect on an item from Question 4: what did you learn that is helpful, and what is still tricky to solve?

Practice

- To solve rhetoric problems by reconnecting to your purpose or understanding your audience's needs, see Audience Switch, Backtalk, Elevator Speech, or Magic Three Choices.
- To solve knowledge problems by digging past your initial beliefs, see Believing/Doubting, Mind the Gap, or Question Ladders.
- To solve steps or strategies problems by changing your typical process, see Add/Move/Change/Delete, Inside Out, Seven Generations, or Write it Worse.
- To solve disposition problems by **telling yourself a new story**, see Funny Story, Remix/Mashup, or Values Freewrite.

Learn

- To learn more about growth mindset, see Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits.
- To learn more about assessing your own writing progress, see Chapter 9, Reviewing a Written Draft.

Improve as a writer and transfer your learning: Guiding questions

Use this reflection guide after you have composed most or all of your document. You can use these questions to improve the current project as well as to identify principles and strategies you can use in future writing projects. Or you can use these questions at any point in your writing process when you want to understand how this experience will help you improve generally as a writer.

This guide is arranged in the DEAL structure. In order to increase the benefits of your reflections, you may wish to remind yourself to delve beyond your first general thoughts using a "what-why-how-so" approach.

1. Define what worked and how you addressed challenges while writing

a. If you wrote a reflective prediction regarding this writing project, take a look back at what you wrote. What was the most accurate prediction you made about this writing task? What factor or challenge most surprised you?

b. While you were composing this document, what exact writing problem was most difficult for you, and how did you cope with it?

c. If you participated in peer review, what was one comment you received, one comment you gave another peer, and/or one approach you saw a peer use in their writing that will help you continue to improve as a writer?

d. What kinds of writing approaches—rhetoric, knowledge, steps and strategies, disposition, or other—do you feel you had the most success with this task, and which category was most challenging?

e. What was the most effective *new* strategy, principle, or resource that you used as you completed this project?

2. Explore principles that you can adopt, adapt, or reaffirm

a. If you've been working on your writing story, listing writing principles, or composing a writing theory, can you identify at least one of your fundamental writing strategies that served you well again here?

b. Would you say that you made the most improvement as a writer at the whole-project level (narrowing/broadening your focus, finding relevant secondary sources, organizing your points, connecting with your audience) or at the paragraph or sentence level (clarifying arguments, strengthening and integrating evidence, addressing assumptions or counterarguments, adapting to a genre/modality, using more appropriate or powerful language)?

c. Identify an upcoming writing task that is similar to this one: what's one approach, strategy, or resource that worked for you this time that you can transfer to the new task ("near transfer")?

d. Identify (or imagine) a writing task in a very different course, field, or context: what's one approach, strategy, or resource that worked for you this time that you could imagine using for that task ("far transfer")?

3. Anticipate future actions: Plan for your next writing task

a. Consider how you *planned* this project, how you *composed* your document, and how you *revised* your work. What's one strategy from each stage that you want to try to use again?

b. Consider how you managed your dispositions or habits of mind (building confidence, finding motivation, allotting time and resources, or being persistent and openminded) during this project: What's one approach or step that went well that you want to keep using, and what is a step you can try to foster even more productive habits in your next writing project?

c. If you had to adapt your current document to another audience, genre, or goal, what might you choose and how would your strategies or approaches need to change?

d. If you were giving advice to a less experienced writer about completing a task like this one, what would be your top 2-3 recommendations?

4. Look and learn: Update your writing principles

e. How has your experience with this writing task reaffirmed the value of one of your writing principles or theories? (Remember that you can consider a personal principle such as "I always try to find some creative examples," a threshold concept such as "Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts," or a more specific writing strategy, such as "Review other examples of this genre.")

f. How has this writing task prompted you to change or add to your writing principles or theories—what new approach or view seemed helpful, or what earlier approach didn't seem to work as well this time?

Explore 4.6

Answer at least two of the "define" questions and one question each from "explore," "anticipate," and "learn." Include direct quotations *from your own writing project* to help explain at least two of your answers.

Learn

- To learn more about **responding to peer review** comments, see Chapter 10, Revising from Feedback and Reflection.
- To learn more about building **your theory of writing**, see Chapter 12, Creating Your Writing Theory.

4.5 Focus on Equity: Reclaim Agency Through Reflective Practice

Just as productive habits of mind cannot remove all writing challenges, reflective practice won't create more hours in the day, change your supervisor's unreasonable demands, or reduce racism or other discrimination that may be limiting your access to resources or approval. You or other writers around you may still

face inequitable access to important resources that support successful writing, as noted in Chapter 1, Reframing Your Story About Writing. If you are considering what action to take to address inequities directly, some of the steps listed in Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits, may be useful to you.

Reflective practice can be one of the tools you use, however, to succeed as a writer even in a community or profession that distributes resources unequally.

> **Reflecting to predict** can help you understand—or ask more precise questions about—what is expected of you. Research shows that experts in most fields have unarticulated assumptions about what "good writing" looks like: they may know it when they see it, but they don't always describe precisely what they're looking for. This lack of transparency can be a particularly heavy burden for students who are among the first in their families to go to college, students from different cultural or language backgrounds, and students who face racism or other systemic bias in schools or communities. (This is sometimes called an "invisible curriculum.") Using reflective practice as you start a writing project won't fix a completely unfair grading system, but it will help you identify unstated criteria and opportunities: the more you know about your readers' expectations, the goals you must accomplish, and the resources available to you, the more successful your writing will be. And if you share the results of your investigations, what you learn may increase other writers' success as well.

> **Reflecting to problem-solve** can help you build and maintain a growth mindset, which helps you continue to improve as a writer even if people around you believe in stereotypes that say you can't succeed. Every time you identify a challenge, select a new strategy, and make progress solving a problem rather than giving in to "writer's block," you prove to yourself that you have important ideas and powerful strategies for communicating them.

> **Reflecting to improve** can help you stay in touch with your core values, even when those values aren't shared by all of your readers or evaluators. Writing in a way that aligns with your principles and values will help your motivation, confidence, and persistence, which will in turn improve the final version of your project. You may also be better able to sort out productive feedback from background noise: if you are committed to providing thorough evidence or engaging with a peer audience, you can put more of your energy into improving based on suggestions in those areas, and worry less about comments critiquing your apostrophes or

pronoun agreements. Finally, when you can describe your own path to improved writing, you can assist others in identifying ways to make their writing better, and thus help others gain access to confidence and resources.

You may also find yourself *reflecting toward community action*: An exclusionary practice might not directly affect you, but you may be able to serve as an ally to others by informing the community or the classroom about barriers, providing affirmative support to other writers, or even asking an instructor or supervisor for a change in policy.

Overall, your reflective practice will increase your agency: your ability to decide how, where, and when to invest your valuable time in improving your writing. Your new insights will also help you become the kind of leader who states expectations clearly, fosters others' growth, and creates opportunities for diverse writers improve and succeed.

4.6 Make Reflective Practice a Writing Habit

We've all been there: a writing project is due in a week, a day, or an hour, and we're stuck staring at a blank page or a blinking cursor. If you have been practicing reflection, though, there's no need to panic; you can step back, take a deep breath, and assess your situation. Asking the simple question, "So, what seems to be my situation here, and how could I address it?" can put you back in control. If you're at the beginning of a project, you have even more opportunities for success: asking "Do I have any challenges I should look out for, or any resources I can tap into?" can help you address issues head-on, rather than letting them pile up at the end of the project. And if you *must* finish a project at the last minute, you can still build in short breaks to reflect on your writing process.

A feeling of "writer's block"—which is just a dramatic name for "being stuck"—often hits when we succumb to the "allatonceness" of a writing project, to use writing scholar Ann Berthoff's term. When you instead use reflective practice to step back a minute, identify one piece of the situation, and consider your options, you can then choose a strategy to help you take action to keep your project moving forward. And the more you try to identify challenges, explore options, and solve problems when you're stuck, the better you'll become at predicting them before they occur, solving them when they do occur, and improving your writing so that the next task, while perhaps still tricky, won't seem so overwhelming. When reflective practice becomes a habit, all of your other habits and practices benefit as well, and you become a writer who can adapt to any task that the world of writing presents to you.