

EXPRESSIVE WRITING



Expressive writing is the kind of writing you do when your primary purpose is to explore and communicate your own personal experience, your own opinions about things, your own response to the world, including the world of reading. The purpose of this kind of writing is to invite readers into your sphere of existence, into your field of vision, inside your mind, up close to your feelings and your experiences. It may be an intimidating form of writing, but also a liberating one—it is always profoundly generous, demonstrating your willingness to share something of yourself. Other kinds of writing may allow you (or require you) to stay hidden in the shadow of your subject, but expressive writing puts you right out in front. This is pretty obvious in the following example. Notice how different the same subject, “protest,” can be approached when you consider writing about it with three completely different purposes in mind. Notice the one that focuses on the writer:

Expressive: My first political awareness began in sixth grade, when I donated \$1.00 for a metal bracelet with the name of a soldier who was missing in Vietnam. This awareness eventually spawned a protest when I decided I would stay seated during the pledge of allegiance in our school assembly.

Expository: Public protest against our involvement in Vietnam helped bring that war to an end.

Persuasive: Our occupation of Iraq is fuelling a costly and bloody insurgency that has put our troops disproportionately in harm’s way. It’s impossible for our military to carry out reconstruction while remaining an occupying force that poses a target for this insurgency; therefore, those who protest the war believe we should withdraw our troops immediately.

Each of these purposes suggest a completely different way to write about *protest*. In an expressive piece of writing, you are writing to share something about yourself (which you may discover as the process of reflecting and writing brings that something forth); you are writing to share that discovery with your readers.

You may wonder if readers will be interested in reading about you, about your individual experience, about your reflective thoughts and meditations. The answer is that we are. We most definitely are. In fact, personal writing is probably the most enjoyable, most popular form to read and to write. Students who take classes like this usually report that this is the kind of writing they valued most, they enjoyed the most. And it’s the same for readers. What’s the appeal?

We are always looking for the inside view. The interior picture. When you provide that, you are satisfying our desire to learn more, to know more than what we can learn up here on the surface of things. That's why the novel is such a popular form of literature. It takes us on that journey inside. A great novel, even a merely good one, takes us deep inside the mind and the soul of its main character, and that is satisfying. Memoir does the same thing, except the story it tells is true rather than fictional.

The chapter in *The Bedford Guide* that most directly deals with expressive writing is chapter 4: "Recalling an Experience" (pp. 47-62). Reading this chapter should help you prepare to write an expressive paper.

In addition to this chapter in the *Bedford Guide*, you can use the supplemental materials we'll explore in this unit to write an effective response paper. Your observations about the reading you do (or the films we view) may spark an expressive paper that explores the broad topic of identity. You can use your reading/viewing creatively. When your way of reading something makes it especially rich and meaningful to you, your reflection on it (what you write about it) can become the site of self-exploration, self-discovery, and, like we said before, an excellent basis for an expressive paper which shares that discovery with curious readers. It may be that you deeply identify with one of the characters or ideas, or feelings expressed, and you explore that. It may be that one of the characters particularly repulses you, and you explore that. It may be that the events described make you reflect on a similar experience, or it may be that you want to imaginatively project yourself into something you've read and discover where that takes you. You may draw comparisons or contrasts between yourself and the things you read about; it's very natural to synthesize what you know with what you read. You may want to explore how the reading expands your thinking in some way, how it adds to your experience.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EXPRESSIVE WRITING

- **Style:** First person point of view (p.o.v.) makes will make your writing feel personal, more human. Beyond using the first person p.o.v., the challenge is to find the voice—the vocabulary, the sentence style, the tone of our words—that will make your personality come alive on the page. Your goal is help your readers to see you as a human being, not a piece of paper.
- **Content:** The rhetorical strategies very useful for developing expressive content are description and narration. These strategies are useful for other purposes, too, but they are especially great for helping readers appreciate your perspectives and your experiences. Description and narration make readers feel like they can participate, like they can be "right there." **Description** is the strategy you use to create a vivid mental image by using sensory language, connotative language, figurative language. The more creative the language is in getting us to see or hear or smell or taste or touch or understand something vividly, the better. Imagery is the heart of description. Make readers see what you see, imagine what you imagine. Take creative risks with your language to make sure you're understood. The better the description, the more effective the expression. **Narration** is "storytelling." If you are recalling and recreating an experience, give some thought about the best way to provide the experience for your readers. Do you need to use dialogue? Should you map out which scenes you want to describe in detail and which ones you can quickly summarize so your story is well-paced? Do you need some quick details to describe the people in the story so they'll be vivid for readers and not just names that evoke no particular image? Finding the quick characteristic detail that really describes a person without being long-winded can be a challenge.