

# Guide for Writing in Education

## About Writing in Education

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Writing plays a critical role in the growth of your educational ideas, helping you both deepen your understandings about the complex events that take place in schools and classrooms and share your observations and ideas with others. Writing in education classes serves a wide variety of specific purposes, depending on the audience, the author's intentions, and the specific assignment at hand. As a result, there is no simple or singular approach to writing in education. For example, you may be asked to reflect on what you have learned from an experience or to apply your ideas to new situations. Or you may be asked to create a case study of a specific student's behaviors so that a team of concerned supporters can help him or her face a difficult situation. Whatever the assignment, your first step is to thoughtfully consider what you are being asked to do and then begin to gather your ideas, evidence, and experiences. Once you have some ideas in mind, you will find it much easier to begin the actual writing task.

Two suggestions will make your life as an educational writer much more rewarding.

First, you might think that because you have spent much of your life up to now in school settings, this gives you special insight into what is going on. But be careful; even twelve years of apprenticeship in schools as a student does not provide you the background to understand the complex relationships and events that you will encounter as a teacher. So while you might start by remembering what happened to you as a student, you must work to change your perspective to that of the teacher who is responsible for the classroom environment.

Secondly, all writing tasks in your educational program require a significant amount of thought and effort. Don't wait to begin your assignment until you have time to write. Start right away thinking about the ideas and problems you are considering. Talk with your classmates and those professionals you come in contact with about your ideas and listen to theirs carefully.

## About this guide

This guide contains  
the following sections:

- About Writing in Education
- Types of Writing in Education
- Common Assignments in Education
- Evidence in Education: A Note on Research
- Citations & Formatting
- A Note on Peer Review

*The Disciplinary Writing Guides are designed to provide an introduction to the conventions, or rules, of writing in different subjects. These guides have been designed by Southwestern professors to help you understand what will be expected of you in your classes.*

# Types of Writing in Education

One secret to writing well in education classes lies in understanding the four most important types of writing you will use: reflective, analytic, persuasive, and procedural. Since two or more of these types of writing are frequently combined when you complete any specific assignment, more detail about each is provided below so you can see how each is used. In the next section, you will find descriptions of several typical assignments that show how these kinds of writing can be combined to produce effective and meaningful responses to most of your educational writing assignments.

## Reflective Writing

Reflective writing represents the most common type of writing you will encounter. A reflective assignment will typically ask you to think

back over events and ideas that you have encountered in your coursework and placements and then explore and/or explain those events or ideas. Reflections should not include exhaustive descriptions; tell just enough of what happened to provide the reader with sufficient context. Then you should elaborate on a few critical ideas that inform your thinking. A reflective writing assignment usually asks for a brief description of the idea or event (what happened), an interpretation of that event (why do you think this happened or what do you think it means), and an outcome (what you have learned). Reflective writing is more personal than most types of academic writing; in fact, the use of the first person pronoun “I” is encouraged. You will want to include your thoughts about your anxieties, fears, errors and weaknesses along with your strengths and successes.

## Analytic Writing

Analytic writing is more formal and structured than reflective writing. You may be asked to read, analyze, and respond to a research

article or book about education theory or practice. You will need to clarify a thesis and then provide supporting arguments with evidence to back up your claims. To generate a powerful analysis, you should respond to the

assigned text based on your experience or prior knowledge in combination with information from other sources. In some special situations, like writing case studies, you will analyze data you or others have collected and make recommendations for future actions. For more information on analytic writing, you might see Louisiana State University’s webpage “[Tools for Analytical Writing.](#)”

## Persuasive Writing

Persuasive writing may be the most challenging type of writing in education courses. In a persuasive essay, you set out to

convince the audience that your position, often contrary to a popular opinion, is reasonable and worthwhile. For example, you may be asked to write an op-ed piece about a film, documentary, news story, or educational policy decision that impacts schools and teaching. One essential early step is to identify your audience: whom are you trying to persuade? A persuasive essay for the general public may look very different from an essay intended to convince fellow teachers about an issue.

Persuasive writing works best when you know your audience and can anticipate how they might disagree with what you propose. This will enable you to provide convincing counterarguments that appeal to the hearts and minds of your readers. To keep your readers engaged, it helps to look for common ground. If you can get the audience to agree with something, you can then establish clear facts and values that they find hard

to disagree with in order to convince them of something they may not have believed when they started reading. You may cite experts, research, or the opinions of others to support your position. In any case, you want to present your ideas with confidence and clarity; no one will care what you think if they sense you don't believe it yourself. Finally, a persuasive essay ends with clear and logical conclusions based on the information provided. For more information on how to write an effective persuasive essay, you might check out the powerpoint "[Effective Persuasion Presentation](#)," available at the website of Purdue University's Online Writing Center.

## Procedural Writing

Procedural writing is most commonly encountered in advanced educational coursework in the form of lesson or unit plans. These plans require you to detail how you will proceed with your instruction, including the steps you intend to follow, what you expect your students to learn, and how you will know that they have met your expectations. Specific instructions for completing these writing tasks are usually provided and should be carefully considered before you start planning.

# Common Assignments in Education

## Reflecting on Observations and Lessons

Reflective writing is a powerful tool when used well, and many of your assignments will ask you to reflect on ideas or events that come up during your placements and classes. For example, you might be asked to reflect on an observation of a teacher or classroom, or to write a "Critical Incident Report" on something that happened while you were in a school. Once you begin to teach, you will also be asked to reflect on your efforts to plan and teach your classes. These writing assignments offer opportunities to think more deeply about what has taken place, to think about what you now understand or still do not understand, to discuss conflicts and frustrations, and to consider alternative strategies that you might have tried or will try in the future.

When you are writing a reflection, remember that **you** are the primary audience for your writing, so honesty and openness are always the best approach to self-examination. If you are not sure what to write about, ask yourself what about the experience means the most to you, or what makes you feel the most satisfied. You might also write about what has been the most difficult, challenging, or frightening. By examining any of these reactions more deeply, you are growing in your ability to respond and anticipate the many strange and wonderful things that make teaching so exciting.

**A word of caution:** You might think that anything goes when you are writing about your own experiences and ideas, that whatever you write is valuable and acceptable. After all, these are your ideas, aren't they? But don't be fooled. What matters is not just what you think, but how you present, examine, and support your ideas. Most problems and issues you will encounter in education have been carefully considered and sometimes even researched by others. Be sure to consider what others have already written when you start to reflect; you will not find **the** answer, but knowing what others think will enrich your own ideas. Every statement should be backed up with some sort of evidence or rationale. The more thoughtful you are, the better your reflections will be.

## Responding to Assigned Readings

In a reading response, you are asked to analyze an assigned text. To start, you should include a very brief summary of the reading: what are the big ideas? Then you might respond with questions, thoughts, feelings, and ideas that the text generates. In short, you are writing an essay about the reading and, as in any essay, you must argue a thesis. You should not simply repeat the ideas of the author under review, but develop your own argument about the reading.

Reading Responses should include the following steps, although you need not address them in the order listed below:

- Summarize the big idea of the required text. (One or two sentences will work; you need not repeat the whole work).
- Interpret the author's meaning. (What is the author trying to show?) Ask questions about the text. (Why did s/he write this? What examples can you think of to support his ideas? To challenge them?)
- State your opinion about the ideas in the text and provide support. (What are your thoughts about the big ideas? Why?)
- Connect the text to your own experiences.
- Present your personal thoughts or ideas.

## Writing Case Studies

When you write a case study, you analyze information and data that you or others have collected concerning a specific situation and create a case history to share. In a number of courses, you will be asked to collect systematic and intentional observation data from your placements, analyze this data, and generate a case study report. Your report will include a full discussion of your findings about the case and include recommendations for improving learning opportunities and outcomes.

## Writing a Lesson Study or Action Research Report

These are reports on activities that occurred in your classroom, either a self-study (action research) or a collaborative study of teaching (lesson study). Each of these involves specific components that will be outlined in the specific assignment, but they will always require you to plan and carry out the collection of data in a classroom setting. These types of assignments require you to combine three or even all four of the types of writing described above, so they are often the most complex types of assignment you will encounter. Typically, you will be asked to do background research on the topic or issue you are exploring, and then provide: an account of what you did (procedural), a presentation of the data you collected (analytic), a narrative of what you learned (reflective), and a conclusion with some sort of argument about the overall value of the activity (persuasive, although this is the least important of the four here). You should read the notes below about how research should be used in educational assignments and the style guidelines most commonly used. These types of assignments start with a thorough research review, and attention to the quality of your sources makes your assignment meaningful and useful.

## Writing Lesson Plans

If you plan to certify to teach, you will be asked to write lesson plans in many different classes. Lesson planning lies at the heart of good teaching, and written plans represent the most structured writing assignments you will do in education classes. A good lesson plan describes all the critical elements of your teaching plan, including what you intend for your students to learn, how the lesson will proceed, and how you will know that your lesson reached your goals. **In good lesson plans these three elements (objectives, instructional activities, and assessments) are very clearly connected, and they inform each other.**

Many lesson planners argue that the best lessons start from a clear statement of the intended outcomes. This is called “**backward design**,” and is a good process for beginning teachers to use when starting to learn how to plan their lessons. Once it is clear what you want your students to be able to do and know at the conclusion of the lesson, you can easily state your intentions (often called “instructional objectives” or “student learning outcomes”). Then you can construct a series of activities that students will experience in order to reach the outcomes. The instruction sequence can take many forms, from very direct instruction such as lectures and questioning to more student centered activities like discussions and projects. Thinking through the steps the students will go through in the lesson is an essential part of teaching, and it takes thought and practice.

One additional idea that must be taken into consideration in the development and writing of a good lesson plan involves planning how each student will be engaged during the lesson. Every student is different. Some need additional supports and encouragements; others require more time and direction. For each student to be successful, the plan must allow for these differences. **Planning for each student’s success is called “differentiated instruction.” Articulating how the lesson will meet each the different needs of each student is a critical part of quality lesson planning.**

## Evidence in Education: A Note on Research

A very large body of literature supports the field of education, including many journals, books, and conference papers. These writings cover research dealing with almost any imaginable educational problem or situation. Frequently, as you complete your educational assignments, you will be asked to consider what researchers have to say concerning your assignment. But even when not specifically asked to do so, it is important that you **always** consider and cite research as you try to better understand educational claims, ideas, and procedures. There is absolutely no reason to ignore the thoughtful and insightful writing of others, nor should you believe that your ideas are either original or well formulated if you have not tried to find out what others have to say.

However, it is likely that you will find almost every position imaginable somewhere in the literature and it is well known that people tend to agree with research and opinion pieces that align with their already formed ideas. It is indeed exciting to find an article that agrees with your thinking, and you might be inclined to stop searching right then. Be careful of doing this; this is called looking for confirmatory evidence to back up your ideas. Some scholars actually argue that you should instead look for research that proves you wrong. If you cannot find it, your argument grows stronger and more likely to be useful. But unless you do an exhaustive survey of all the literature, this can be difficult to demonstrate. In order to be sure that you have not simply found confirming evidence, you should look for multiple independent sources in the literature that deal with your topic. Of course, the more sources you examine, the better you will be able to assess your own ideas and those of others.

# Citation

Most formal education writing follows the American Psychological Association (APA) style.

Online information about APA style rules for formatting, quotations, and citation can be found online in the [“Student Resources”](#) section of the Debby Ellis Writing Center website.

You can purchase an APA style manual, or hard copies are also available in the library or the Debby Ellis Writing Center.

## A Note on the Value of Peer Review

You may be asked to participate in peer review on almost any assignment in education. In the beginning, you may consider peer review as the blind leading the blind. After all, how can you learn from someone who may actually be a less articulate writer than yourself? However, research strongly supports the practice of peer review in undergraduate classes, reporting it has significant benefits for both the reviewed and the reviewer (Nicol, Thomson & Breslin, 2014). It enables both writers and reviewers to engage in the evaluation of ideas, presentation, and reflections of one another, providing a substantial feedback system that results in improved efforts and understanding. And it allows for writers to apply criteria for supporting their responses to one another. Further, it shifts the control of the timing, quality and amount of feedback onto the shoulders of the writers who participate.

Keep in mind that during peer review no one is judging you or your work. You might be tempted to ignore or otherwise dismiss the critique and suggestions of your peers. Just remember, **the purpose of peer review is to help you improve upon your initial efforts, no matter how good they originally were.** Peer input enables you to approach the writing task from a broader picture of the possibilities.

Nicol, D., Thomson, A., & Breslin, C. (2014). Rethinking feedback practices in higher education: a peer review perspective. *Assessment and Evaluation in Education* 39(1): 102-122.