

**Developed by: Meredith Martin, PhD for PSY400 Developmental Psychopathology**

### **Personal Reflections**

I like to provide my students with opportunities to complete brief, less-structured writing at various points throughout the semester. This is an opportunity for me to communicate directly with students and to get a sense of their understanding of the course. It's also an important exercise in student's goal-setting and self-reflection.

I've included two sample reflection pieces – one I give at the very start of the semester and one I give at the very end – from a small (35-student), upper-level elective course I teach in Developmental Psychopathology. At the end I've included a bank of comments I often give to students as feedback. I often supplement these more general comments with a brief, specific note to let them know I read what they have said.



## Initial Reflection

For your first assignment, I want you to read the syllabus, skim through the textbook, and take some time to think about what you hope to get from the course this semester. The purpose of this assignment is to set some personal goals for your learning. This is an opportunity to begin building some connections between your expectations, career aspirations, and/or personal goals and the material we'll be discussing.

Write a 1-2 page essay in which you reflect on what you hope to take away from this course. **Your essay should clearly state one or two personal goals you have for this course and how you will/hope to meet these goals.** These goals can be related to anything – personal, educational, professional – whatever it is that you hope to do or take from this course.

To get you thinking, here are a few questions you might consider/discuss:

- What do you hope to get out of this course?
- What are you most/least excited to learn more about?
- Are you coming into this class with prior knowledge (e.g., other courses, experiences) that might shape the lens with which you take in this material?
- Do you anticipate any obstacles to your learning in this course? How might you overcome them?
- How might the material we are going to cover be personally useful to you?

You do not need to answer all or even any of these questions. Unlike other assignments this semester, this is a *reflection piece*, which means that you don't need to support your arguments with research or evidence. **It is okay to write this assignment in first person. I would like to hear your voice in this reflection.** I do want you to fully explain your thinking, however. Your goals and your explanation for how you plan to meet these goals should be specific.

### Essay guidelines:

- Length: 2-3 pages, double-spaced, Times New Roman
- Please write a *thoughtful* reflection – actually take the space to think about this question!

GRADING RUBRIC: Assignment #1 will be graded as follows:

- 0 = **Not turned in**
- 5 = **Incomplete.** Student did not meet the bare minimum guidelines (e.g., did not articulate at least one goal for this course, wrong page limits, instructions) for the assignment as outlined.
- 8 = **Adequate.** The student completed the assignment (i.e., met the bare minimum requirements), but the quality was not high enough to warrant an “excellent.” Signs of poor quality include: multiple spelling or grammatical mistakes, failing to clearly articulate one’s ideas, making vague/broad generalizations.
- 10 = **Excellent.** The student met all of the guidelines and their work was of good quality. Work clearly illustrates the students’ engagement with the material and contains minimal mistakes.



## Final Reflection

For your final assignment, I want you to take some time to process the semester and to think about how developmental psychopathology may apply to your own life. The purpose of this assignment is to discuss and make connections between your own thinking about development and psychopathology, and how society and popular culture view these issues. Then, I'd like you to discuss ways in which the knowledge you acquired in this course may influence how you think about these issues going forward.

Write a 2-3 page essay in which you reflect on what you have learned this semester. Consider your answer to this question: ***What have I put into this course and what will I take from it?*** Think about our areas of emphasis during this semester: Psychopathology as normal development gone awry, the multiple contexts (school, family, peers) in which people live and grow, and the idea of multi- and equi-finality. **Your body paragraphs should connect one or two of these concepts to an actual situation in your life or in the broader world.** In other words, each body paragraph should explain how this new knowledge has shaped or influenced how you think about child psychopathology. Your discussion should be specific and provide examples. Your examples can refer to your personal life or to broader cultural issues.

Keep in mind, this reflection is not an evaluation of the course. You will do that in another format. Rather, this essay is a reflection on your own process and progress. **It is okay to write this assignment in first person. I would like to hear your voice in this reflection.**

### Essay rules and guidelines:

- If you talk about specific concepts in developmental psychopathology (and you should!), please provide short definitions of the concept before you discuss them. It should be apparent by your discussion of them that you understand what they mean.
- Organization: There should be one main idea developed in each body paragraph, one example from your life or broader culture, and an explanation of the example. Short, effective transition sentences are also expected.
- Length: 2-3 pages, double-spaced, Times New Roman. Include citations if you use information from an outside source. Put any references, in APA format, at the end of your essay. You are not required to reference outside sources
- Please write a thoughtful reflection.

GRADING RUBRIC: The Reflection will be graded as Follows.

- 0 = **Not turned in**
- 10 = **Incomplete**. Student did not meet the bare minimum guidelines (e.g., page limits, instructions) for the assignment as outlined.
- 20 = **Adequate**. The student completed the assignment (i.e., met the bare minimum requirements), but the quality was not high enough to warrant an "excellent." Signs of poor quality include: multiple spelling or grammatical mistakes, failing to clearly articulate one's ideas, failing to indicate an adequate understanding of the material, not drawing clear connections to the reading.
- 25 = **Excellent**. The student met all of the guidelines and their work was of good quality. Work clearly illustrates the students' engagement with the material and contains minimal mistakes.



## Samples from my Feedback Bank for Initial Reflection (Goal Setting)

### When the student shares something they want to learn more about:

- If this is an area that you want to learn more about, I will make an effort to discuss some of this work in more detail when we get to [the specific sections].
- There may be other ways to incorporate [topic of interest] into the material. I'll give it some thought!
- That's an interesting point. I hope you will feel comfortable sharing some of these insights into [topic student brought up] in our class discussions.

### When student shares their career goals:

- This is an awesome career goal! Although we don't spend a lot of time specifically focused on [topic], I hope both the general developmental psychopathology framework and our specific focus on other mental disorders will directly inform your future work.
- What area of psychology are you thinking about? I'd love to speak more with you about your career goals and what you are considering.
- I hope you pay particular attention to [relevant content], as this will be highly relevant to your future career!

### When student states a personal goal for the semester:

- I think this is a great goal and I hope that the class structure, reading, discussions, and activities will help to support you in this process as well.
- I hope you find these concepts personally useful. Whether we're talking about personal struggles, mental illness, or personal fulfillment, I believe that the science of developmental psychopathology can give us a framework for making sense of our life experiences. I'll be curious to see if you find it useful for you!
- If students leave this course with one thing I hope it's to be informed and think critically about the popular cultural and media messages we receive about mental illness.
- This is an excellent goal - and one that will really help you moving into graduate school [or whatever career goal they've shared].

### When student admits a challenge/states a strategy to overcome anticipated challenge:

- I am glad to hear you're already making efforts to work on this! I've posted study guides to help narrow your reading - and keep in mind that the vast majority of exam questions will reflect information that we've covered in class as well as in the text.
- This is a common challenge. Be thinking about how I might be able to help you with this.
- This is a common challenge. I encourage you to [specific advice].
- I think that's a great strategy to overcome this challenge. I also encourage you to try [specific strategy].
- You might also think about [specific strategy].



**When student makes connection/references another related course (or sometimes sharing that they're non-majors):**

- Those classes will really help you in this course. I'll be curious to see what you find overlaps and what seems different!
- It sounds like you bring a unique perspective to this material. I am excited to hear what you have to offer our class discussions.
- Thank you for sharing this with me! I really appreciate your insight and I think you have some really excellent goals. I hope you'll feel comfortable bringing your expertise in [specific area] into assignments and class discussions.

**Three Special Circumstances:** In the years I've been teaching this course, there are three things students bring up that I feel warrant a more in depth and careful response. Here are three examples of how I've addressed these issues. I know they are pretty long – but I feel these issues are so important to establish clear guidelines and dialogue that I want to set a very clear tone for the rest of the semester. I typically take this format and adjust it to the specific situation of the student as needed.

**1. A student discloses a personal mental health issue (often this comes up as the student is expressing concern about how they can “handle” discussion of a personally relevant topic in the class):**

Thank you for this incredibly thoughtful piece of writing. You made some insightful points and I feel the need to share some of my thoughts with you as well.

You have proposed some excellent strategies for getting the most out of this class while attending to your own needs. It is incredibly important to me that my students practice self-care. As you mention, I think there is real value in challenging yourself to engage around difficult, personal topics - especially if you plan to enter this field. At the same time, this is hard work! Maintaining an awareness of your own needs and limits is equally important. I hope you view this course as one step in the continuous process of personal and professional growth. By this, I mean, that it's ok to proceed at the pace that's right for you. Maybe that means challenging yourself to face everything this class covers and maybe that means being selective about what you engage with.

With this in mind, I would like to suggest some additional strategies to support your success in this class and your self-care.

(1) Please be thoughtful about what you choose to share (particularly your own personal mental health history) with the class as a whole. Keep in mind that it is not a private or confidential space, nor is there a trained therapist there to help manage your or others' responses to this disclosure. That is not a suggestion to refrain from participating in discussion (unless you wish to do so). If you want to participate but don't wish to disclose personal information, you might try to practice an "academic" (what does research say about this) perspective rather than a "personal" (what have I experienced) approach on the topics presented, at least when engaging



publicly with your fellow students. Again, this is up to you - I simply want you to be intentional about the context and way in which you disclose.

(2) You may want to review the topics we will cover - by reading the textbook and/or powerpoint slides - before coming to class. I typically remind students of this before we discuss maltreatment, suicidality, and self-harming behavior, but regardless of the topic there is always the potential for the information to be overwhelming, particularly for those with a personal history of experiences with these topics. Sometimes it's the surprise of being confronted with something you weren't prepared for that is the most distressing. If you have a "heads up" about what we'll be discussing, it will not only reduce the likelihood of that surprise, it will allow you to make informed decisions about whether and how you should participate in class.

(3) You, and any student in this class, are welcome to come and go as needed with no penalty. The only exceptions to this are exams (see the syllabus). But otherwise, I am trusting students to manage their own self-care. If there is a point where you feel pressed beyond your healthy limitations, you may quietly leave. No one has to know why or for what. I won't call you out. (I may check in with you via email just to make sure you're ok, but you are not obliged to disclose anything about your reasons to me).

The last thing I want to mention is that it is ok to be angry and offended by something another student says - or something that I say! I believe that challenging one another's thinking, offering an alternative perspective, and even letting the person know that what they said or did hurt you are all acceptable ways of learning together. It doesn't have to be happy and comfortable all the time. In fact, real learning rarely is! I never want you to feel responsible for challenging others' perspectives - that's my responsibility. But you are welcome to express, publicly or privately, your feelings about it, even if those feelings are negative.

I am happy to speak with you about this or any other issue at any time. I'm glad to have you in the class and I look forward to hearing more from you in class and on assignments.

**2. A student says that a goal of taking this class is to better understand a family member's/friend's diagnosis (often this is stated somehow as "I want to know how I can better help them):**

Thank you for sharing your goals with me. I also feel the need to share a few of my thoughts with you. During the semester, I would like you to keep the following things in mind. You probably already know all of these things, but it doesn't hurt to be reminded.

(1) You are not (yet!) a trained and licensed therapist. Although I absolutely applaud the goals of becoming more informed about issues that your loved ones are dealing with and I want you to take this information and apply it in your own life - just keep in mind that taking this course will not provide you with the ability to diagnose or solve mental health problems for yourself or others.



(2) Being a loving and supportive partner/family member is important. If nothing else, I hope this course helps students to be more empathetic, informed critics of popular messages about mental illness and advocates for those with mental illness. This is consistent with the goals you write about here. I just want you to keep in mind that it is not your responsibility to heal or take on others' mental illness, even those you love very much. Being a supportive advocate involves listening, accepting, encouraging, and connecting others to resources such as licensed therapists or medical professionals.

(3) Don't forget to practice your own self-care! Even those trained to work in the mental health field can find it overwhelming and stressful. Sometimes even the simple act of listening to the struggles of those we love can be a lot to handle. In your desire to be supportive, don't forget to pay attention to your own needs and boundaries too.

Again, from what you've written and your career goals, it sounds like you are already well aware of these important points. I simply find it is useful to be reminded often.

**3. When a student discloses concerns about diversity/inclusion (This has come up most frequently from a student who identifies as a member of a marginalized group expressing concern about the impact of conversations with their peers). I've provided an example based on race here, but I would write something similar for any concern related to inclusion:**

Thank you for sharing this! I believe your thoughtful comments deserve some additional response from me.

Specifically, I want you to know that I believe that the greatest responsibility for fostering meaningful conversations around the systemic racism, ethnocentrism, White privilege, and prejudice that permeate both the mental health and developmental literature lies with me, as the instructor of this course. It is my responsibility to bring in multiple perspectives, to represent many voices, and to be critical of the biased systems that we are working in. It is also my responsibility to challenge my students' misconceptions and biases.

I recognize that, as a White professor, I still have a long way to go. I am still very much learning how to foster these important conversations. I can't promise you that other people in this class, including myself, will never say stupid, ignorant things. I also can't promise you that all of your White peers will leave this class having a deep understanding of their privilege. But I can promise you the following:

(1) I care deeply about these issues and will continue to actively further my own education, both of my own biases and how to better foster an inclusive, anti-racist classroom through reading, attending workshops and training, and peer mentorship (a process I have already begun).

(2) I will continue to address various systems of oppression as they relate to the course material throughout the semester through class discussions, presenting research, and case studies.



(3) I will never call on you or any other student to share your personal experiences, thoughts, or perspectives around any issue. I will also not penalize any student for not speaking up in class. To the best of my ability, I will take responsibility for challenging students' assumptions and misconceptions, and offering alternative perspectives.

(4) If you ever wish to, know that I will welcome and respect any feedback you have for me in whatever form you wish to share it, publicly or privately. I will create multiple opportunities throughout the course for students to offer anonymous feedback.

(5) Although I sincerely hope students will feel comfortable speaking to me about this or any other issues related to this course, I recognize that speaking up, particularly offering criticism of a professor who gives you a grade, is inherently risky. Therefore, I will not assume that any student's silence means that I'm doing a good job. I will continue to find ways to improve regardless.

I ask that you, in turn, practice self-care. Clearly you are already thinking deeply about this. I hope that you will focus your time and energy on getting what you need as a student in this class. If that means taking on the listener role, I fully support you. If that means participating in discussions, I support that too. If it means calling me out when I say something you disagree with, I support this as well. I am grateful to have you in this course and I look forward to hearing more from you in assignments and in class this semester.

