

Tip Sheet:

Writing a Strong Reflective Essay for Reappointment, Promotion, or Tenure at MSU

Introduction

This tip sheet is designed to help faculty prepare the *reflective essay*; an element of the required materials submitted as part of a reappointment, promotion, or tenure package at Michigan State University. The reflective essay is a faculty member's chance to place their work into the greater context. It is a key component of the file. For faculty seeking promotion to associate or full professor, the reflective essay is sent to external reviewers who help MSU assess the quality of the body of work. For all faculty, the reflective essay is reviewed by those who signal to MSU leadership whether advancement is merited. This tip sheet covers best practices and common mistakes seen in the reflective essay, and should be helpful to candidates assembling their packages, faculty mentors, and unit leaders.

Best Practices in Reflective Essays

The reflective essay should be written for two audiences. One audience is the faculty member's disciplinary peers. Upon reading the essay, disciplinary peers should have a strong sense of how the faculty member contributes to the discipline. In conflict with the disciplinary focus, and much harder for many faculty is a need to write for a second audience - intelligent people who are not well-versed in the discipline. Non-disciplinary reviewers may be your colleagues in the unit, but more importantly, they come from the college RPT committee, the Dean's council, and the Provost's Office. To communicate with non-disciplinary reviewers, the faculty member needs to avoid or explain jargon and place their work within the broader social context. Why is the work important? How is the faculty member contributing through the work? What is innovative about the program? How are impacts on broader society measured? Work to convince the reader that the faculty member is a strong contributor to the discipline, the unit, the university, and society.

How can a faculty member meet the needs of both audiences? The disciplinary peers should be able relate to a lay interpretation of the work, and a discussion of major outputs answering key disciplinary questions. The second audience will look to the external reviewers' letters to verify the importance of the outputs and other contributions and focus on how the program evolved and supported the mission of the university.

Discussion of research is a key component of the reflective essay, but other components are also crucial. A good reflective essay conveys the synergy among the various components of the faculty member's assignment (e.g., teaching and service, not just research). We discuss each of these in turn.

Research often commands the lion's share of attention in the review process. Research and its impacts on society set MSU apart from other institutions and so the presentation of a well-crafted, cohesive, and easily understandable statement of research accomplishments is quite important. The faculty member should tell the story of the research. Key areas to discuss are the rationale for the research themes, how they are contributing, and where the faculty member sees their work progressing in the next few years after promotion.

On teaching, it is important to convey the thinking behind pedagogical approaches and student impacts, not simply report student evaluation summaries. Provide some context. Was the teaching aimed at students who were under-prepared? This might help reviewers understand low evaluations or student numbers. Were students well prepared for the next course in the sequence? Were new courses or labs developed, or new teaching techniques implemented? Explain how teaching approaches were refined and improved during the review period, and how the research program outputs support teaching. Did students alter their career aspirations as a result of the course? Was there any mentoring of students outside the classroom or scholarship by students as a result of teaching? Did the faculty member take on a teaching assignment on short notice? Did the faculty member reflect on their teaching by contributing to the scholarship of teaching and learning?

If the faculty member has an Extension or Outreach appointment, readers should come away with an understanding of which problems the Extension work is addressing, how the problems were identified, and how the work is addressing the problems. Did Extension or Outreach result in behavior change? How does the research contribute to Extension or Outreach work?

Significant leadership and service activities can be included in the essay; for most faculty not at the rank of full professor, these are a minor part of the assignment and therefore should not occupy a major share of the essay. Ideally, statements about leadership or service show how the work enhances or arises from the scholar's disciplinary contributions. For example, "I convened the first-ever workshop on XYZ resulting in..." is stronger than "I was program chair at our annual conference." Service drawing from disciplinary expertise that benefits broader society is also excellent to highlight. For example, during the pandemic, a team of MSU faculty developed a more efficient way to test for COVID, benefiting all students and faculty.

The reflective essay should fit within the published space guidelines. The writing style should be academic but not overly heavy. When a chart, table, or well-designed graphic image can make a point, it can be a good way to convey the work.

If the faculty member somehow shifted their program during the review period, the reflective essay can be a way to convey why the shift occurred (e.g., new topic arose that was not current at time of last action, or they stepped into a void created by a colleague's departure). At MSU, the standard is for reviewers to be instructed to ignore time-in-service as they complete their assessment, so it is not necessary to explicitly address an extension of a tenure clock or a long period between promotion to Associate and seeking promotion to Full Professor.

Faculty should write their first draft the essay well in advance of the unit deadline. They should share it with their mentoring committee, their unit leader, and other supporters to gain feedback. It may be worthwhile to also seek feedback from acquaintances who are faculty members in a different discipline to gauge how well it reads to non-disciplinary peers. A great reflective essay typically goes through several drafts based on feedback.

A faculty member submitting for consideration for promotion to Associate Professor should look to the future when deciding whether to include last-minute outputs in their CV and essay. It is tempting to add new material when something good happens, but the faculty member should bear in mind that anything included in the dossier for Associate Professor is considered outside of the review period when the individual seeks the next promotion. If the faculty member's mentors feel the dossier is sufficiently strong without the new outputs, it is smarter (and less work) to hold the material for the time when they are seeking the next promotion, to Full Professor.

Common Mistakes in Reflective Essays

Reviewers will have the faculty member's CV. It is therefore a waste of space to reiterate the many small accomplishments and committee tasks that occupy faculty. Space is limited so it should be used to convey the big picture and landmark accomplishments not apparent to someone reading the CV. For example, if the faculty member won a major award, it can be listed on the CV but the essay can talk about the significance of the award and the work that was recognized. The reflective essay can discuss what motivated the work, why there was an award, and how the work changed lives. On the other hand, if the award was not as significant, it can be listed on the CV only.

The reflective essay is a space where bragging is encouraged. However, it is dangerous to overstate roles in claiming excellence. For example, if the faculty member was part of a large team that obtained a \$10M grant, it is important to report the candidate's percentage credit on the grant, not just the total amount. Grant amounts that diverge from the Office of Sponsored Programs (OSP) records are dangerous to report. The faculty member should request a copy of OSP's grant records and double check figures. Similarly, the document should be clear on roles. If the faculty member was a collaborator on a grant but not a co-PI, the essay should not say they were a co-PI. Faculty should cross-reference their CV and their reflective essay to make sure any facts are consistent across the two documents and within the reflective essay. This is harder to do than it may seem, as the faculty member's outputs change as the year advances. A last consistency check before submitting is recommended.

Micro-font or excessively narrow margins used to fit an overly long document into the allotted space don't fool anyone and most often serve as a comment on the writer's ability to convey their excellence succinctly.