# Reading Autobiography: Reflective Writing as a Strategy for Online Engagement

Robert A. Griffin
University of West Georgia

## Author Biography
Dr. Robert A. Griffin is an assistant professor in the Department of Literacy and Special Education at the University of West Georgia, where he teaches graduate-level courses in TESOL and literacy education. Dr. Griffin's primary research interests involve exploring reading motivation and achievement for bi/multilingual students and striving readers and challenging deficit-oriented paradigms related to the skills and talents of diverse learners. He serves as co-editor of *GATESOL Journal* and has published on topics ranging from quantitative analyses of reading motivation among Latinx students to pedagogical pieces on authentic writing instruction and morphological awareness for diverse students.

## Goal of Activity
A reading autobiography is a reflective writing task I assign in my online graduate-level reading assessment and intervention course. This assignment provides students the opportunity to use writing to reflect on their past experiences as readers. Reflective writing can be a useful tool to engage online students (Liu, 2019). The reading autobiography is the first assignment in a comprehensive case study project students complete for this course.

As part of the case study, students must tutor a PK–12 student who exhibits difficulty reading (i.e., a *striving reader*). The case study project involves, among other things, administering assessments across literacy skills (e.g., phonemic and phonological awareness, fluency, comprehension, etc.) to determine attainable goals for the striving reader to achieve within a 10-week intervention period. Students implement research-based strategies during weekly structured tutoring sessions with the student to affect reading growth.

Before students begin working with a striving reader, they must first reflect on their own experiences with reading and memories of themselves as readers. Writing a reading autobiography prompts students to use their reading experiences—positive, neutral, or negative—to inform their work with striving readers. This reflective writing is also an empathy-building exercise. Empathy is crucial for teacher effectiveness, especially for teachers of ethically, culturally, and linguistically diverse students—those most likely to exhibit reading difficulties (Griffin et al., 2020; Warren, 2018).

Online learning brings with it several limitations. Connecting with students can be especially challenging in an online learning environment (Martin et al., 2019). To that end, this writing activity is designed to give students an outlet for self-disclosure, which can cultivate meaningful connections in the online learning environment (Faulkner et al., 2021; Raza et al., 2020; Song et al., 2019).

## Description of Activity
This reflective writing task is straightforward and could be adapted easily to various disciplines. Students write a detailed narrative about their experiences reading (or related to reading) as a child and young adolescent. The discussion may extend beyond their childhood and early adolescence, but the primary focus of the reflection should be on their early reading experiences and how their relationship with reading has evolved since. Among other elements, students may include memories of early reading, school-related reading, reading struggles or successes, mentors who helped and inspired them along the way, texts or genres they regularly read as children, etc.

## Reflection

Students routinely share how much they enjoy this writing assignment. While not a requirement, those who wish also post their autobiographies to a class discussion board and reply to each other's pieces. This self-disclosure works to bridge physical distance and establish meaningful connections in an online class (Faulkner et al., 2021; Song et al., 2019).

I also share my reading autobiography on the discussion board, as I affirm effective online instructors should also serve as mentors who actively seek ways to inspire students (Martin et al., 2019). I disclose my childhood struggles with reading to communicate the potential of the case study task that lies ahead:

> My parents, while well-intentioned, were not well educated, and they did not read to me during my formative early years. I was placed in a special class for struggling readers. Throughout my long, arduous, often painful journey through elementary school, I remember being stuck with the label of "poor reader." My sense of self-efficacy took a hit by this albatross I carried around my neck.

I document how, with the support of several teachers who chose to believe in me, I eventually reclaimed my self-efficacy. As a testament to those teachers' influence, I graduated as the valedictorian of my high school class, earned the highest academic achievement award given to an undergraduate, and now hold four degrees in the field of education. The impetus for my academic and professional success I attribute to teachers who looked past my early deficiencies and believed in me. Without them, I wouldn't be where and who I am today—a teacher of teachers. My students have the same potential to be mentors for striving readers who have been weighted with the "at-risk" label.

Like me, more of my students report childhood struggles with reading than the opposite. Even those who were avid readers growing up recognize others around them were not. The early reading challenges some students face are illustrated in the following excerpt:

> Growing up, I was surrounded by many people who did not value reading. My mother did not read to me as a child, and I was not introduced to reading until kindergarten. I can remember my kindergarten teacher calling us to the rug and reading stories to the class. I loved listening to the stories because it allowed me to hear about new and exciting things. Even though I loved listening to the stories, I could not read fluently . . . I had a tough time in first grade. My teacher would call on me to read the information on the blackboard, and I could not do so. The teacher labeled me a non-reader.

Opening up to others about these struggles takes courage, yet most students choose to share their autobiographies. The conservations that ensue on the discussion board have helped to create empathic bonds and shared understandings among peers in the class. I have noticed connections between students being made that both highlight their shared experiences and show how their experiences differ. For example, a student with a very different cultural background and experiences responded to the student in the excerpt above as follows:

> Reading about your challenges with reading growing up made me think of my little brother, who also struggled a lot with reading as a student. In truth, he still does as a young adult. I read everything I could get my hands on as a child. Reading was always easy to me . . . As a teacher, I need to always remember that reading does not come as naturally to everyone as it did to me as a child. I will keep the experiences you shared and my memories of my brother's hardships in mind as I work with striving readers.

As this except demonstrates, writing and sharing a reading autobiography better enables students to empathize with striving readers from all backgrounds. Opening the course with this reflective writing

exercise and giving students the choice to share their early reading experiences and respond to their classmates has helped to foster an engaging, meaningful online learning environment.

## References

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