

Developing a Reflective Essay

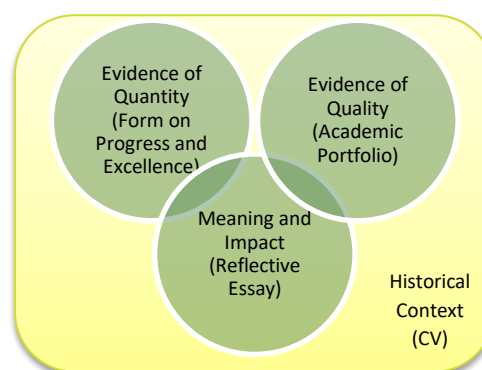
Three Key Points

1. A reflective essay is not simply a narrative account of your CV.
2. A reflective essay outlines how the previous and current accomplishments represent excellence, by explaining the significance, meaning, and impact of those accomplishments and how they fulfill the university's conception of the rank or action sought.
3. A reflective essay is limited to five pages, firm.¹

Introduction

College of Human Medicine (CHM) faculty members applying for reappointment, promotion, tenure and continuing status should carefully review the requirements for their application. Applicants are responsible for familiarizing themselves with the specific application criteria, policies, procedures and documentation required in their department's reappointment, promotion, tenure and continuing status guidelines. All university and college forms, instructions and documentation requirements can be found at <https://humanmedicine.msu.edu/faculty-staff/faculty-affairs/promotion/index.html>.

All CHM faculty members are required to submit a reflective essay as part of their application for promotion, tenure or continuing status. Reappointments in the tenure and continuing academic specialist systems and applications for Designation B status for UNTF² positions also require a reflective essay. The reflective essay is the narrative story of the **impact and/or meaning** of the faculty member's accomplishments. It summarizes information provided about the **quantity** of accomplishments during the review period, enumerated on the Form on Progress and Excellence, and about the **quality** of those accomplishments, illustrated in the Academic Portfolio. Along with the CV, which provides historical context for the accomplishments during the review period, these three components are the core of the faculty member's application.



At each step of the review process, reviewers add to the dossier. For some actions, external reviewers with experience and expertise in the field provide commentary on the faculty member's contributions to that field. Department RPT committees incorporate commentary from external reviewer letters with information about the faculty member's expected role, annual review feedback, and evidence of accomplishments and provide a recommendation to the chair based on department criteria. The chair conducts an independent review, taking into account the committee's advice, and is responsible for advancing the department's recommendation to the college. Similar college-level processes based on the college-level criteria and departmental commentary result in a recommendation by the dean to the university.

¹ Guidelines for promotion in the prefix system suggest about 2 pages, given the limited scope of activities and expectations that must be addressed. For all other actions, 4-5 pages is typical.

² Union of Non-tenure Track Faculty. Designation B status provides a rolling five-year appointment on the portion of the appointment that is UNTF eligible. See [Recommendation for Designation B Appointment in the Union of non-Tenure Track Faculty \(msu.edu\)](#).

Approaching Your Essay

To be effective and efficient in the preparation of your reflective essay, you need to consider the rhetorical context:

- Who is my *audience*?
- What is my *purpose*?
- What are the conventions of this *genre*?

Keeping the *audience* in mind informs your decisions about what to say and how to say it. In fact, consider the audience throughout your work on your dossier, not just the reflective essay. Seek insights from mentors and supervisors about how reviewers at each level use the criteria to make their evaluations of the content of the dossier. The audience for the reflective essay is the **external reviewers**, who are others with expertise in your field, **the review committees**, who are your colleagues at the department and college levels, the **chairperson**, and the **dean**. Depending on the appointment system and action sought, there may also be reviewers at the university level, including the **provost**.

The *purpose* of the essay is **to make the review process easy on the reviewers**. The less the reviewers must work to piece together a clear and concise overall argument that you have met the expectations for the action you are seeking, the easier their job will be.

Any literary *genre* has conventions for form, style and subject matter. Following those conventions helps a reader engage with the substance of your portfolio quickly and helps you accomplish your purpose for producing it. See the [Organization and Submission](#) section of this document for the things that will make your essay familiar, intelligible and useful to your reviewers.

Getting to work

From the outset of a career or new career direction, a faculty member should be thinking about how they briefly describe the intended significance, impact or meaning of their work. Whether you use this when meeting new colleagues at a professional event, as a biographical introduction when presenting to a group, or if you should find yourself in an awkwardly long buffet line with a senior leader or celebrity in your field, you should be able to talk for about 90 seconds on:

- ☐ Who you are as a medical/public health educator and/or biomedical/public health researcher
- ☐ What unique contribution you make, or hope to make, to your field

Start a document with the points you know you want to make when you have this kind of opportunity and time constraint. Periodically, maybe as part of your annual review reflection, read it and update it. Over time, while staying concise, focus on finding the words to describe:

- ☐ Why you do what you do
- ☐ What led you to where you are now
- ☐ What difference you hope to make
- ☐ How you can tell if you are making that kind of difference

Beginning in the first year of your appointment at the current rank or first year in the relevant review period, study the conceptual definition of the rank or status you are seeking:

- The conceptual definition of associate professor and professor, along with the conceptual definition of the standard for the award of tenure, can be found in the Faculty Handbook, in [an annual memo from the provost](#).³
- The conceptual definition of senior specialist can be found in the [Academic Specialist Handbook](#), especially 4.3.3.5 Promotion to the Rank of Senior Academic Specialist.
- The conceptual definition of Designation B status can be found at [Recommendation for Designation B Appointment in the Union of non-Tenure Track Faculty \(msu.edu\)](#).

Study this language carefully. Think about how the points you have been listing along the way to describe the significance, impact and meaning of your work address the ideas in the definition. Note which parts of the definition align well with the work you have been doing, and which are not yet as evident or well-articulated.

Early in the review period, you should also begin to study the college-level criteria for the action you are seeking. These criteria can help you find activities you should be pursuing and evidence you should be collecting, especially where there is not yet a match between your work and the conceptual definition of your next review action. As you incorporate those things into your work, you can start to update your notes document and work these things into those professional networking events, speaker introductions, and awkward buffet line conversations, refining as you go. Similarly, study your department-level criteria or position-specific criteria, where those exist.

All faculty are expected to make contributions to the university's mission, values, and strategic priorities. These efforts should be interwoven and enhance other areas of faculty accomplishment. Significant involvement in areas related to these efforts can be viewed as a metric for advancement. Accordingly, think about how your evolving notes capture ways that you have contributed to these goals.

The COVID-19 pandemic's impacts may be part of your story, both of what led you to where you are now and what you plan to do in the future. Jot notes about this in your notes document.

Organization and Submission

If you have been making the notes suggested in the previous section, preparing the reflective essay amounts to editing those to comply with the guidelines for the *genre* in this section, keeping in mind the tips on *audience* and *purpose* described earlier.

Length

Each applicant's essay will vary as a function of appointment type, assigned effort, and action sought, among other considerations. Across contexts, the provost's office specifies a **five-page essay**⁴ which is a **firm limit**, despite there being longer examples⁵ available on the MSU website as of the last update of this document.

³ While the memo specifically addresses these concepts in the tenure system, the expectation in other systems is that the conceptual threshold for excellence is the same, even if the scope of work or effort allocation is different. See [Promotion of Fixed Term Faculty \(msu.edu\)](#), for example.

⁴ Promotions in the prefix faculty system require an abridged form, described as a "reflective essay of no more than two pages." See https://humanmedicine.msu.edu/faculty-staff/faculty-affairs/file/CHM_Guidelines_for_Prefix_Faculty_Promotion.pdf.

⁵ In general, think of these as *examples*, not *exemplars*. Notice how long ones feel, as opposed to shorter ones, and how other choices the authors made affect you as the reader. Your approach should not be to pick one of these and copy it, but to use them as an anthology of how others have approached the writing task, for consideration as you make your choices.

Structure

In most places in the dossier, achievements and impacts are separated into sections for instruction, scholarship, and service. You could organize your essay this way too, but you could also take this opportunity to highlight how those efforts are interrelated and choose a different structure.

Be Mission-minded

You want to make sure that the full range of your work and its impact on the university's mission, values, and strategic priorities is described throughout your essay. This may include efforts such as: inclusive teaching practices; research that explores underrepresented topics or communities; expanding access and opportunity; reviewing policies to ensure fairness; fostering respectful dialogue across differences; and creating spaces or programs that support and elevate marginalized voices.

Impacts of COVID-19

A separate [COVID-19 Impact Statement](#) is allowed and encouraged, and as a separate document there is no prescribed limit on its length. Some applicants choose to submit a separate document, while others incorporate relevant details into the reflective essay. Some don't mention it in the dossier at all. The provost's office is very clear that they want and need to hear the stories of the impact of COVID-19 in the short and long term, but they are also clear that presenting them in any form is optional.

Content and Style

The provost writes, "The reflective essay should not be a narrative of the individual's CV, but rather provide information on how previous and current accomplishments represent excellence." You may notice from the examples that longer essays are not necessarily better. Effective essays often tell a story, taking the reader on a journey from what led the faculty member to their current work to what has been unique, significant, impactful or meaningful about it, and perhaps ending with hints at what they will plan to do next. They do not include long lists of accomplishments, because the names and even the numbers of achievements do not capture the significance or meaning of those achievements, especially for those reviewers outside your field. All the details of the work and achievements are available elsewhere in the dossier, in the Form on Progress and Excellence, the CV and the Academic Portfolio. So, when you pick details to include in the essay, think of it as purposeful sampling to support your argument that you meet the conceptual definition of the action sought, not enumeration of all the relevant facts. We don't want reviewers all tired out from wading through the same content multiple times; we want your case to be clear, concise, relevant, and obviously strong.

Getting Help

Mentors can help with guidance throughout the review period on allocating effort to ensure a successful case and on reviewing your notes or essay draft periodically during the review period to provide advice.

As you near your submission deadline, consider sharing materials with a peer on a similar timeline to get a fresh set of eyes on your materials. Peers can help with general feedback on the clarity of arguments in the essay and quality of the writing.

The MSU Writing Center can provide help to improve your writing. See [Services – The Writing Center \(msu.edu\)](#) for options.

The CHM FAD Office is available throughout the career life cycle for advice on college criteria and processes, tips for organizing materials, and information about college and university faculty development resources. Contact us at chm.fad@campusad.msu.edu or (517) 432-8722 to arrange free one-on-one consultation.