

# 9 A prolective writing assignment in Advanced General Psychology for Leaders

## Letter to the Future Self

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### Introduction

Instructors often encourage reflection to help students make sense of past experiences. However, the use of reflection for planning future behavior, or prolection, is less common. The Letter to the Future Self (LFS) is a prolective writing assignment used in Advanced General Psychology for Leaders at the United States Military Academy. The assignment can easily be adapted for use with civilian students and in other psychology or leadership education courses that include personal development goals, such as becoming more grateful or preparing for student leadership positions.

### *Reflection vs. prolection*

Reflection is an essential and complex part of transformative learning.<sup>1</sup> It typically involves recalling past experiences and emotions and then connecting them in new ways with existing knowledge to form a different or more sophisticated understanding of the targeted information. Reflection is useful for making sense of past experiences, for understanding current situations, and for planning future action, although the processes and challenges associated with each type of reflection vary given the differences in temporal dimensions.<sup>2</sup> Adopting a retrospective versus an anticipatory focus when using reflection is common, given the tendency for people to consider reflection to be a backward-focused process as opposed to one focused inward or forward.<sup>3</sup> Reflecting for the purposes of future planning helps orient people toward the desired outcomes that they wish to approach; we call this prolection because the emphasis is primarily on looking forward. This focus may be especially useful because it encourages the person to envision and plan for possibilities regarding how future events might unfold.<sup>4</sup> Sharon Edwards argues that what she calls reflection-before-action and reflection-beyond-action, both of which would represent prolection, are important in nursing education to help students

1 Schnepf, Jerry, and Christian Rogers. "Evaluating the acceptability and usability of EASEL: A mobile application that supports guided reflection for experiential learning activities." *Journal of Information Technology Education: Innovations in Practice* 16 (2017): 195–214.

2 Van Manen, Max. "On the epistemology of reflective practice." *Teachers and teaching* 1, no. 1 (1995): 33–50.

3 Conway, Paul F. "Anticipatory reflection while learning to teach: From a temporally truncated to a temporally distributed model of reflection in teacher education." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 17, no. 1 (2001): 89–106.

4 Seligman, Martin E.P., Peter Railton, Roy F. Baumeister, and Chandra Sripada. "Navigating into the future or driven by the past." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 8, no. 2 (2013): 119–141.

prepare for future interactions with patients.<sup>5</sup> Whereas reflecting on the past may be a well-practiced behavior for many students, they may need more prompting and guidance in how to engage in effective profection. As such, a prolective assignment for cadets in a psychology class at West Point may help students learn to plan for future actions as they anticipate an upcoming transition to their first official leadership role at the academy.

Engaging in a prolective educational assignment using an epistolary or letter-writing form offers a novel and potentially valuable means of engaging in the process. Although the first author has used letter-writing assignments in this and other psychology courses in the past, this pedagogical approach does not appear to be as common as other formats, such as the use of journals, diary entries, or blogs. Still, writing letters to various audiences, whether it be the self or others, has proven useful in communicating about difficult topics in psychology and in women's studies classes.<sup>6</sup> More generally, writing letters can lead to benefits for the authors. For example, writing letters of gratitude is associated with increased happiness and better author well-being.<sup>7</sup> When the future self is the audience, a letter can be used to target self-understanding and self-development. Given that plebe (freshman) cadets have not yet assumed their first leadership role at West Point, forecasting their thoughts and actions in a letter to their future selves may prove especially helpful when they receive their letters back just days before becoming formal leaders for the first time. This timing allows for just-in-time intervention before they begin the new role.

### ***Plebe and team leader roles in West Point***

During plebe year, cadets are surrounded with different leadership examples from upper-class cadets to Army officers with 10 or more years of service. First they learn how to follow, then they gradually gain greater levels of responsibility and authority. The first official leadership role is that of a team leader; as a Yearling (sophomore), cadets are charged with the morale, health, and welfare of a single plebe. Team leaders advise, mentor, develop, and care for this plebe in their personal, professional, and academic development. Daily, team leaders inspect their plebe's uniform, barracks room, and ensure that their subordinate is adhering to all the standards expected of USMA cadets. These inspections require leaders to know the standards in detail and give the team leaders practice on making confident corrections. Upholding standards is an essential part of being an Army leader, and this is the first formal opportunity cadets have to practice these skills.

Beyond these basic inspections, team leaders conduct weekly training sessions, called Fourth Class Development Time (FCDT), where the team leader teaches a series of topics they determine to be relevant to the plebe's professional development. Team leaders

5 Edwards, Sharon. "Reflecting differently. New dimensions: Reflection-before-action and reflection-beyond-action." *International Practice Development Journal* 7, no. 1 (2017).

6 Chamberlain, Kerry, and Stephen Burrough. "Techniques for teaching critical reading." *Teaching of Psychology* 12, no. 4 (1985): 213–215; Charlesworth Jr, John R., and John R. Slate. "Teaching about puberty: Learning to talk about sensitive topics." *Teaching of Psychology* 13, no. 4 (1986): 215–217; Junn, Ellen N. "'Dear Mom and Dad': Using personal letters to enhance students' understanding of developmental issues." *Teaching of Psychology* 16, no. 3 (1989): 135–139; White, Aaronette M., Marcia Wright-Soika, and Monica S. Russell. "Epistolary connections: Letters as pedagogical tools in the introductory women's studies course." *Feminist Teacher* 17, no. 3 (2007): 204–224.

7 Toepfer, Steven M., Kelly Cichy, and Patti Peters. "Letters of gratitude: Further evidence for author benefits." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 13, no. 1 (2012): 187–201; Toepfer, Steven M., and Kathleen Walker. "Letters of gratitude: Improving well-being through expressive writing." *Journal of Writing Research* 1, no. 3 (2009).

know that they need to develop their plebes but must decide what their subordinates need to be successful. Creating a plan that highlights the strengths of an individual while tackling their weaknesses is difficult, and this is what over 1,000 Yearling cadets are learning through experience every year. Each team leader already possesses a mental model for this FCDT based off their own experience; however, they must think critically about how to create a thoughtful and individualized plan for their plebe.

The critical thought and emotional intelligence required to be a good team leader is the same required to be a successful Army officer. The team leaders must understand their subordinates' strengths and weaknesses and know how to inspire them to become leaders of character. They must be able to empathize and understand the struggles and anxieties of day-to-day plebe life. While each team leader was a plebe only a few months prior, they may have forgotten what it felt like to be the subordinate with no experience; they may no longer understand their plebe's point of view.

### Assignment overview

As a precursor to writing the letter, plebe cadets first complete a psychometrically sound online assessment of their character strengths, called the Values in Action (VIA) inventory. The inventory is freely available at [www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/](http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/). This highly reliable assessment rank orders 24 different character traits, such as honesty, authenticity, and bravery, in terms of strength.<sup>8</sup> According to the survey website, more than 8 million people worldwide have completed the VIA inventory, a testament to the survey's wide-scale popularity. Cadets then write the 6–7-page LFS, addressing two of their top strengths and providing illustrative examples from their own lives. After, they coach themselves on how to use those strengths when they become USMA team leaders. They also target two of their weakest strengths for improvement. Specifically, they coach themselves on how to develop these strengths using specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-based goals.<sup>9</sup> They weave relevant psychology theories and course concepts throughout the letter, allowing them to connect course material to their own lives. Cadets address the letters to themselves, seal them in envelopes and return them to the instructor, who holds onto them until Yearling year begins. Just as cadets are about to become team leaders, they receive the letters in the mail. The arrival of the letters at this critical point allows for a just-in-time intervention where they remind themselves of what is most important and how to use their strengths.

Cadets are given the following verbal guidance to communicate the purpose and intended outcomes of the assignment:

- Remember that this letter is for *you* – make the future version of yourself the best version that you can based off what you have seen thus far at West Point and what you have learned in this class. What can you do to develop yourself so you are ready to be the best team leader possible?

8 Christopher P., and Martin EP Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

9 Doran, George T. "There's a SMART way to write management's goals and objectives." *Management Review* 70, no. 11 (1981): 35–36.

- You understand what it is like to be a plebe, but by the time you are a team leader you will have grown as a leader/person and will no longer have the same point of view that you have now. This letter will show how and what you were thinking during your plebe year.
- You will get this letter just as you are about to embark on your first formal leadership position. That way you can remind yourself of what you considered to be important and recall what it felt like to have a plebe’s point of view. What are the most important things to tell the *future you*?

**Grading rubric**

The LFS grading rubric details categories and point allocations currently used for the assignment. These allocations are easy to amend to match individual instructor preferences and can be tailored for use in different contexts or courses. Table 9.1 contains the grading rubric currently in use for the LFS in PL150 at USMA.

Table 9.1 Letter to the Future Self grading rubric

PL150 Letter to the Future Self Grading Rubric – 50 points			
Part 1 – The following requirements do not net points but could result in penalties if not included or completed as specified	Deductions		Comments from Instructor
Completion of VIA Survey – copy of survey results attached			
Copy of this rubric submitted with letter			
Submitted electronically by 4:00 p.m. on due date (10% penalty for each 24 hours late)			
APA compliance			
Follows letter format			
<b>Part 2 – Elements of the LFS that address two of the top three character strengths</b>	<b>14 points possible</b>		
Strength 1: Identification, explanation, and example of strength (1), identification, definition, and explanation of course concept (3), how to use the strength as a team leader and why you should retain it (3)	7 points		
Strength 2: Identification, explanation, and example of strength (1), identification, definition, and explanation of course concept (3), how to use the strength as a team leader and why you should retain it (3)	7 points		
<b>Part 3 – Elements of the LFS that address two of the bottom three character strengths</b>	<b>30 points possible</b>		
Weaker strength 1: Identification, explanation, and example of strength (1), discussion of why it is critical to develop (3), identification, definition, and explanation of course concept (3), how to use the strength as a team leader (3)	10 points		
Concrete plan for how to improve in this area – using SMART goals (must address each of the 5 aspects of SMART goals)	5 points		

(Continued)

Table 9.1 (Continued)

Weaker strength 2: Identification, explanation, and example of strength (1), discussion of why it is critical to develop (3), identification, definition, and explanation of course concept (3), how to use the strength as a team leader (3)	10 points		
Concrete plan for how to improve in this area – using SMART goals (must address each of the 5 aspects of SMART goals)	5 points		
<b>Other</b>	<b>6 points</b>		
Writing, grammar, flow, organization etc.			
Cited at least two outside scholarly sources, discuss/integrate them well			
Intro, conclusion paragraphs			
	<b>Total</b>		

### Unique elements and possible adaptations

The LFS is unique not only because it incorporates profection, but because cadets receive a copy of the LFS in the mail during the week before their team leader roles commence. Reintroduction of the LFS at this critical point serves several purposes. They are reminded, in their own voices, of how they viewed the team leader role while they were still in their first year at West Point, and they can reflect on their developmental progress. As such, the LFS is a rich prolective writing assignment that can also serve practical purposes to promote leader development and empathy for new cadets.

Instructors at civilian institutions who teach psychology or leader development courses can easily adapt the LFS assignment for a variety of purposes. For example, psychology students in courses anywhere from introductory to advanced undergraduate levels may benefit from prolective writing with regard to their personal development. Students may wish to develop a more optimistic outlook on life, or they may wish to become more humble, grateful, or forgiving as individuals. The LFS offers one possible way that students might engage in the self-development process for direct personal gain, such as leading happier, healthier, or more satisfying lives.

In a leader development course, instructors could use the LFS but direct students to focus on their future leadership roles within their respective institutions. Students have many opportunities to engage in leadership roles during the college experience, where prolective planning could help them become more effective leaders. Some examples include student government officers or representatives, club or honor society leaders, sport team captains, residence hall assistants, peer counselors or tutors, social organization council members, or leaders within youth ministries. The LFS assignment offers broad appeal for instructors and students alike and affords many possible adaptations for use outside of USMA.

Instructors also may wish to collect data on student perceptions of the assignment and/or how completing the assignment has affected the authors. Although a formal assessment of the outcomes of the assignment is not available, feedback on informal course surveys suggests cadets believed the assignment to be valuable and they recommended using it

with future classes. Numerous cadets wrote spontaneous, positive narrative comments in anonymous end-of-course surveys regarding the assignment, and the first author received enthusiastic emails from several cadets shortly after they received the letters in the mail.

## **Conclusion**

The LFS is a practical, engaging, and useful assignment. It encourages students to engage in reflection for the purposes of planning future action, and this profection can be useful for self- and leader development. Students who enjoy the assignment could potentially make use of it on their own, such as when they anticipate other role transitions in the future. The LFS assignment can easily be adapted for use in different contexts, and the instructor and students might even decide together what would be the ideal time to return the letter back to the students in the future.