

## Reflective Writing for Professional Identity Formation

developed by

Pamela Schaff, MD, PhD Katherine Gibson, MD, and Erika Wright, PhD

### Professional identity formation:

“A physician’s identity is a representation of self, achieved in stages over time during which the characteristics, values, and norms of the medical profession are internalized, resulting in an individual thinking, acting, and feeling like a physician.”

From [Reframing Medical Education to Support Professional Identity Formation](#) by Cruess et al.

### Reflective capacity:

“Reflective capacity, an essential competency for clinical reasoning, patient–physician communication, and professionalism, encompasses skills of metacognition and emotional awareness as students explore the complexities of physician–patient interactions and develop a reflective professional self.”

Reflective writing allows learners to “examin[e] and illuminat[e] critical experiences within PIF, thus helping provide insights into the longitudinal development of professional identity (as distinct from professional development). Training to foster PIF is both experiential and contemplative.”

From [Professional identity formation in medical education for humanistic, resilient physicians: pedagogic strategies for bridging theory to practice](#) by Wald et al.

### Two hour session for medical students:

At the Keck School of Medicine at USC, medical students take part in a two-hour session titled “Who am I? Who are We? Professional Identity Formation in Medical School,” which takes place during the week that students spend on campus prior to their clinic placements. This session is co-facilitated by a clinician educator and a humanities educator (PhD in literature).

1. Students read two stories by physician writers (Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Baptism by Rotation* and a contemporary story<sup>1</sup>), then participate in writing and classroom discussion, for example:
  - Read the story “[I Need a New Stethoscope](#)” by Jenni Levy
  - Where do you see yourself in this story? Note specific moment(s) in the text.
  - Writing prompt: Write a paragraph or two beginning with the phrase, “I need a new...” Think about a time in your clinical or teaching practice when you felt you’d outgrown [something] or when [something] no longer “fit.”
  - Share with your neighbor
  - What did you hear or what did you write?

---

<sup>1</sup> *Baptism by Rotation* is read by students on all rotations. The second story is chosen for themes evocative of students’ experiences based on progress through the academic year, current events, or other considerations. Selections have included *Family Summons*, by Amy Cowan, *Laundry*, by Susan Onthank Mates, *A COVID State of Mind*, by Ibrahim Sablaban.

2. In the final Family Medicine clerkship narrative assignment, we ask students to identify elements of their professional identity formation as they consider who they are becoming, and who they want to be. For this assignment, the prompt is:

*This exercise is meant to be an opportunity to reflect on the richness and intensity, the joys and the struggles, of clinical practice, and on your own journey this year. Please tell us a story about what you've learned this year—a story about your own process of becoming a physician.*

We tell students that they may write reflectively about their experiences with patients or clinicians; they may choose to write creatively (a short story, a poem); they may write from the point of view of a patient whom they've encountered; they may choose to submit a painting or other art work (performance or visual) and if they choose the last option, to also submit a paragraph explaining their work by the due date and bring their work to share at the Wrap-Up.

3. End of clerkship final narrative reflections are read and responded to in writing by the clerkship director and the clinician educator who led the two-hour session in Week 1, acknowledging common themes and sharing their own experience/perspectives pertaining to professional identity formation (imposter syndrome, growing confidence, difficult encounters, medical error, joy of connection/making a difference, bearing witness, health system challenges, etc.).
4. Several final narratives are selected (with students' permission and agreement to read aloud) to be shared and discussed during clerkship wrap up. Discussion illuminates how perspective-taking, reflection, and self-examination are clinical skills that foster empathy, narrative competence, and effective practice, and offers students a way to think about how they can identify and hone tools for their own reflective practice.
5. During "Transition to Clinical Practice" (orientation to clinical rotations) in the following year, selected narratives are shared by students with rising clinical students. This is an opportunity for rising Year IV students to share stories of their own professional formation with learners at a critical time of transition.