

Week 1—Reading 3: A Letter from TATA Indigo to Future BiSci 3 Students

From one student to another, I can tell you that this course is unlike any other course you've taken. Why? BiSci 003 is a class that allows you to be more than just a student – it gives you the opportunity to be *you*. In this class, you are more than a student with a brain that the professor needs to fill with facts that you memorize. In this class, *you* become your own focus of study! You might be wondering what exactly I mean by this, and if you are, that's great! Think about it like this. When was the last time you gave yourself permission to think long and hard about your beliefs? As in, *really* think.

Now, here is what I mean by *you* being *your focus of study*. You will be encouraged throughout the semester to learn more about yourself through a reflective journaling process. In the journal you've purchased, you will be prompted to work with lecture-related questions and reading-based assignments that ask you to reflect on important issues as they relate to your beliefs, opinions, and feelings. Sounds fun, doesn't it? (It is. Trust me.) So yes, in this class, your opinions, your thoughts, your feelings, your curiosities, and all other things that are *yours* matter. Your *life* matters. Because BiSci 3 involves so much reflective work, it is fair to say that *you*, dear reader, are your focus in this class.

Maybe you're saying to yourself, "okay... this is... different..." and if you are, good! It's the truth. This really is a one-of-a-kind course. Something that separates this course from others is the strong reliance on reflection. More specifically, we require you to do both handwritten and typed reflections in your journal every week. The term "reflection" can seem pretty vague. It can even seem daunting. But I will try my best to show you that it isn't scary and that it is quite a focused practice. You probably kind of know what it is already.

So, what exactly do we mean when we talk about reflection? A good reflection practice takes time to develop, and it is no different in this class. For us, reflection entails the following: The first thing reflection needs is *time*. Not every question you'll be asked can be thought about and answered in 15 minutes. Some questions will encourage you to think really hard, and we encourage you to embrace this. Allow yourself to be stumped, puzzled, and even frustrated. Give yourself time to work through whatever comes up. Give yourself time to explore *you*. An answer will come, and what you discover will be worth sharing. If this seems new or different, hear (well, read) me out. Chances are, when you need to think really hard about some challenging aspect of your life, the first thing you do is *slow down* – you put the brakes on your thoughts, plans, responsibilities, etc., so you're free from distractions. To add on, both you and your TA will be able to tell when you rushed through a response. Providing a BS response takes time, so why not give yourself permission to dedicate just a bit more time to crafting your true response?

This leads me to the next thing reflection needs – honesty. In this course, it's very difficult to receive a good grade by writing about what you think we want you to write. In order to do well in this course, make a point to answer every prompt honestly, regardless of how different, strange, quirky, bold or whatever else your thoughts might be. Practicing honest, consistent

writing will not only help you earn a quality grade in this course, it will also help you in other areas of your life, too. This is really about allowing yourself discover your own truth. Fun stuff.

Something else that reflection requires is effort. Though this is implied by the other requirements, it is *super important*. The saying “you get out what you put in” rings true for this class. If you dedicate time, are honest, and put effort into your assignments, this class will be awesome and you will learn a lot about yourself. You’ll become “the author of your own Hero’s Journey.” On the other hand, if you don’t dedicate as much time, provide BS responses, and half-ass your work, this class could be a drag, and pretty much a waste of time for both you and us.

Reflection, if done earnestly and consistently, will lead to improvement, just like any other activity you put your time into. In other words, the more you practice reflection and the harder you work at it, the better you will become. With this in mind, your TA will expect to see steady improvement when s/he collects your journals every two weeks. If you put in the time and the effort, it will not go unnoticed.

The last key piece required for successful reflection is *meta-cognition*, which means developing the ability to *think about what you’re thinking!* To illustrate what this means, let’s take an example that fits within BiSci. Say you were asked: “Are humans superior to earthworms?” and you immediately respond “humans are *obviously* way superior to earthworms... why is this even a question?” Though this question may seem ridiculous, and because its seeming ridiculousness means it is no longer deserving of your time, you might think that you’re finished and that you have fully answered the question. But, you aren’t done. You’ve actually just gotten started. You’ve successfully provided your initial response—i.e., that “humans are definitely superior to earthworms”, and this will be your jump-off point for *meta-cognition*. Again, Reflection begins when you start to *think about your thinking*. So, for the earthworm versus human example, meta-cognition could look something like this: You slow down and ask yourself some questions... “Where does my opinion that humans are superior to earthworms come from? Why am I so certain that this is the answer? Who says that this is true? How do I know? What does *superior* even mean? Are there ways that earthworms might be superior to me? What can earthworms do that I can’t do? Where did my belief in human supremacy come from, anyway? How does this belief benefit me? What prevents me from being more curious about this topic?” Questions like these surface as we work on thinking about our thoughts and delving more deeply into our initial reactions to BiSci questions.

From what I’ve written so far, I hope that we now have a mutual understanding when it comes to reflection. Simply writing down your initial thoughts and opinions and feelings without thinking about them more deeply is not enough. That being said, your initial thoughts serve as your necessary starting point – the place where your reflection begins. After this comes meta-cognition where you give yourself time to slow down and think... to be curious... to be patient. The questions and prompts in your journal are really cool and thought provoking. Reflection is really about thinking about *why* you think and feel in the ways that you do with regard to the questions and topics that will be raised in your journal.

One final thing: We will be reading your journal entries, and we would really, (*really*) appreciate clear penmanship. To say it another way, clear writing (to the best of your ability) is required.

Even if your handwriting isn't the neatest, we ask that you slow down while writing your journal entries. Rushing can have a pretty big impact on the clarity of one's thinking, which may make it difficult for us to understand what you wrote. And if you love to use pencils, please please *please* make your lines dark.

Right now there is a shroud of mystery around BiSci, just like there is around any other course you take. The shroud is there because you have yet to experience the course. But having read this letter, along with the syllabus and the "Is BiSci for You?" reading, you know that this course has lectures twice a week and a small group lab meeting once a week. You know that you have a journal and that there are questions and activities that you are asked to complete every week. You know much of the work in this class is to be handwritten. You know more about what reflection is and what we expect of and from you. You know that thinking outside and beyond "the box" is crucial. You know that there is so much to discover here. Lastly, you know that I, along with the entire BiSci teaching team, stand behind and beside you, ready to do all that we can to make this course stimulating, challenging, and transformative for you.

If you have any additional questions, see if the answer is in the syllabus. If it's not, please ask any of the TATAs, TAs, Doc, or Jen for help.

And there you have it! You, friend, are about to experience the semester you choose to create. I hope you create a great one!

With excitement for what your experiences will bring,

Indigo