



Writing Sidewalk Reflections



Open Sidewalk Project

How to Leave Your Mark on a Book's Journey

A Sidewalk Reflection is what you leave when you discover a book—or when you set one free.

It's not a book review. It's the story of you and this book, at this moment.

✨ WHAT IS A SIDEWALK REFLECTION?

A Sidewalk Reflection is your contribution to a book's living archive—the collection of voices, moments, and places that accumulate as a book travels from reader to reader.

The Golden Rule:

"A Sidewalk Reflection is not about being a good writer. It's about being a good witness to the moment when a book found you—or when you had the courage to set it free."

Your reflection becomes part of the book's journey—a breadcrumb trail for future readers showing where this book has been and what it has meant to people along the way.

Why Reflections Matter

- **They connect strangers:** Your words reach people you'll never meet
- **They build trust:** Seeing others participate encourages new readers to join
- **They tell stories:** Each reflection adds to the book's living narrative
- **They locate the book:** Future readers see where it's traveled
- **They create community:** Readers respond to each other across time and space



THE THREE TYPES OF REFLECTIONS

There are three moments when you might leave a Sidewalk Reflection. Each has a slightly different purpose.

1. Setting Free Reflection (When Releasing a Book)

You write this when you're releasing a book into the wild for the first time or passing one forward.

Example:

*"I'm setting *The Alchemist* free on the Blue Line train in Chicago. This book found me during a career change when I needed to trust the journey instead of demanding certainty. I'm leaving it here hoping someone else who's standing at a crossroads will find exactly what I found: permission to follow an unknown path. — Set free in Chicago, November 2024"*

2. Discovery Reflection (When Finding a Book)

You write this the moment you discover a book in the wild, before you've read it.

Example:

"Found this on a park bench in Denver while waiting for a friend who was running late. I almost didn't pick it up—I'm not usually a fantasy reader—but the person who left it wrote 'This will change how you see small moments.' That line made me curious. Taking it home to find out if they were right. — Discovered in Denver, November 2024"

3. Passing Forward Reflection (After Reading)

You write this when you've finished the book and are releasing it to continue its journey.

Example:

"The person who left this on the train was right—I needed to hear about trusting the journey. I picked this up three days before deciding to quit my job and move across the country. This book didn't tell me what to do, but it reminded me that uncertainty is part of every meaningful path. Setting it free at the Portland airport. May it find someone else who needs permission to leap. — Passed forward in Portland, December 2024"



REFLECTION PROMPTS

Not sure what to write? Use these prompts to get started. You don't have to answer all of them—just pick what feels right.

When Setting Free

Why now?

"I'm setting this book free because..."

- I've held onto it long enough
- It changed something in me
- Someone else needs it more than I do
- It's time for it to keep moving

What it meant:

"This book taught me..."

- About myself
- How to see differently
- Something I needed at exactly the right time

Your hope:

"I hope whoever finds this..."

- Finds what they need in these pages
- Discovers it at the perfect moment
- Feels less alone

When Finding

The discovery:

"I found this book..."

- On a bench in [location]
- While I was [what you were doing]
- At exactly the moment when [context]

Why you picked it up:

"I chose this one because..."

- The title caught my eye
- The previous reflection resonated
- I've been meaning to read this
- Something told me to take it

The moment:

"I found this at exactly the right time because..."

- I'm going through [situation]
- I needed something to read on the train
- This topic has been on my mind

When Passing Forward

Your experience:

"This book meant...to me"

- More than I expected
- Everything at this moment in my life
- A different perspective I needed

Connection to past:

"The person who set this free said [quote their reflection] and they were right because..."

Your wish:

"I hope the next reader..."

- Finds the same comfort I did
- Sees themselves in these pages
- Keeps this story traveling

WHAT NOT TO INCLUDE

Spoilers

Don't reveal plot twists, endings, or major surprises. Future readers deserve to discover the story fresh.

Instead: "This book has a twist I never saw coming" or "The ending changed everything I thought I knew"

Personal Contact Information

Don't include your phone number, email, home address, or full name. Keep it safely anonymous.

Instead: Use first name only or remain anonymous. Let the book and its journey be the connection.

Negative Reviews

If you didn't like the book, focus on who might enjoy it rather than tearing it down.

Instead: "This wasn't my style, but if you love [genre/theme], you might find something here"

Pressure or Requirements

Don't demand that readers leave reflections, read the book a certain way, or pass it to specific people.

Instead: Invite gently. "If this book moves you, I hope you'll leave your mark on its journey too."



LENGTH GUIDELINES

There's no rule about how long a reflection should be. What matters is authenticity, not word count.

One Sentence Can Be Powerful:

"Found this the day I needed it most. — Denver, November 2024"

A Paragraph Can Tell a Story:

"I discovered this book on a rainy Tuesday at a café in Portland. I'd just quit my job that morning and had no idea what came next. The previous reader wrote 'Trust the unknown.' I spent three hours reading in that café while the rain pounded outside, and by the time I left, something had shifted. This book didn't give me answers, but it gave me permission to not have them yet. Releasing it at Powell's so another seeker can find it.
— Portland, November 2024"

Typical Length: 50-150 words (2-5 sentences) is perfect

WRITING TIPS

1. Be Specific

Vague: "This was a good book."

Specific: "This book helped me understand why my dad never talked about his childhood."

2. Locate Yourself in Time and Place

Time and place matter. They situate the book's journey.

Example: "Found at Sea-Tac Airport, Gate C7, November 2024" or "Released on my last day in Brooklyn before moving West"

3. Connect to the Previous Reader

Acknowledge what came before. It creates continuity.

Example: "The person who left this wrote 'Read Chapter 7 slowly.' I did, and now I understand why."

4. Think About the Next Person

What might they need to hear? What invitation can you offer?

Example: "If you're exhausted from pretending everything is fine, this book sees you."

5. Write in Your Own Voice

Talk like a friend, not a book critic. Use your natural language.

Formal (skip this): "This novel explores themes of identity and belonging through lyrical prose."

Natural (do this): "This book made me cry on the bus. Worth it."

SPECIAL SITUATIONS

What if I didn't finish the book?

That's okay! Reflect on what you did read and why you're passing it forward.

"I got halfway through before life got busy. This deserves a reader who can give it full attention. If you love slow-burn mysteries, take your time with this one. — Released in Austin, November 2024"

What if I want to keep the book?

Then keep it! You can still log a reflection explaining why this book is staying with you.

"I found this at exactly the moment I needed it. It's not going back into circulation—it's staying on my shelf where I can return to it. But I wanted to mark this moment: found in Chicago during the hardest week of the year. This book reminded me I'm not alone. — Kept in Chicago, November 2024"

What if I've never read this book before?

Perfect! That's what Discovery Reflections are for—capturing the moment you find it.

"Found this on the L train. I've never heard of it, but the cover caught my eye. Taking it home to see where it goes. — Discovered in Chicago, November 2024"



QUICK CHECKLIST: BEFORE LOGGING YOUR REFLECTION

Ask yourself:

- Did I avoid spoilers?
- Did I keep my contact info private?
- Did I locate myself in time and place?
- Did I write in my own voice (not like a critic)?
- Would this reflection help the next reader?
- Did I acknowledge the previous reader (if there was one)?
- Am I being authentic rather than performative?



REMEMBER

Your Sidewalk Reflection doesn't have to be perfect. It doesn't have to be poetic. It doesn't have to be long.

It just has to be **true**.

You're not writing for an English teacher or a book critic. You're writing for the stranger who will find this book next—maybe in a week, maybe in a year. You're leaving them a breadcrumb, a postcard, a moment of connection.

That's all a Sidewalk Reflection needs to be: proof that this book touched someone, somewhere, somehow.



YOUR REFLECTION JOINS A LIVING ARCHIVE

Every reflection you leave becomes part of a book's permanent record—a trail of voices, cities, and moments that show where stories travel when they're set free.

Future readers will see your words. They'll know this book was in [your city] in [your moment]. They'll know it mattered to someone.

Thank you for adding your voice to the journey.

Open Sidewalk Project

Making books travel farther

opensidewalkproject.org

Leave a reflection: opensidewalkproject.org/add-your-reflection-form/:

opensidewalkproject.org/books-in-motion/

Document Version: 1.0 - Writing Sidewalk Reflections Guide

Last Updated: November 2025

License: Creative Commons - Free to use and adapt for Open Sidewalk Project activities