# Reflective Writing

## What is reflective writing?

At university, reflective writing is a technique that allows you to consider any experience associated with your studies – everything from a work placement to a group presentation – in order to learn from it. You may choose to keep a private learning journal in which to reflect informally on such experiences during your course. Alternatively, you may be given a specific reflective writing assignment. In both cases, the process involved is the same.

## The reflective process

In higher education and graduate employment high value is placed on the skill of being a reflective learner. This means that students can:

* Critically evaluate their learning.
* Identify areas of their learning that require further development.
* Make themselves more independent learners.

 

There are various ‘models’ of how the ‘reflective cycle’ works, however the basic stages are as follows:

1. **The experience:** the activity or event you wish to reflect upon.
2. **Reflection/observation:** what went well, what didn’t? How you felt about the outcome. Had you done this activity before? What struck you most about the experience?
3. **Analysis/evaluation:** why didn’t everything go as expected? What could you have done differently? What did you learn about yourself, the activity, or the associated theory?
4. **Action plan/improvement:** based on this knowledge, what will you do to improve the outcome in a similar situation in the future?

This process can be repeated in a constant cycle of improvement and increased self-knowledge, especially if you keep a learning journal, whether privately or as part of your course.

## Private learning journals

These are entirely your domain, allowing you to reflect on any aspect of your studies. As reflective writing begins with ‘the experience’ a learning journal entry (for example, exploring your concern over how you allocate your time) may begin with ‘I ran out of time today…’. You may then consider whether parts of your course are worrying you, what study methods are (or are not) working for you and whether there are any learning issues you feel you need to address. The results of your reflections may be a to-do list of learning priorities – ‘get organised with folders’, ‘join reading group’ etc. In a private journal, the style and content of what you write is, of course, entirely up to you. By contrast, formal assignments, set as part of your course, will have specific requirements.

## Reflective writing assignments

Whether the assignment comprises an ongoing reflective journal charting your progress across a module, or a single piece of work reflecting on a specific experience, such as a work placement or group presentation, common principles apply.

**Purpose:**reflective writing assignments are designed to help you develop, and demonstrate, your ability to:

* Think critically about your own skills and practice.
* Analyse rather than just describe.
* Use evidence to illustrate your reflections.
* Apply what you have learned.

If you know reflective writing will be required on a specific event or experience, make a log (journal type entry) of the event to capture your early reflections, ready to explore in more detail afterwards.

As reflective writing is a technique to help you learn and improve, it can be helpful to reflect on pivotal decisions, or aspects of an experience, that you found difficult or challenging – or in which you made mistakes. This will provide good raw material for you to demonstrate your use of the reflective technique to turn negative experience into a positive plan for the future. Additionally, you may reflect on why something went particularly well, so that the positive outcome may be duplicated in future.

**Basic principles:** reflective writing assignments are different from standard essays in that, for example, parts of them may be written in the first person, ‘I felt that I should have…’. However, despite this element of informality, common academic practices apply, including the need to:

* Follow the guidelines.
* Answer the question.
* Present your work within an organised structure.
* Use clear, coherent prose.
* Support your observations with reference to academic literature and evidence.
* Demonstrate critical analysis (see ‘Critical thinking’ study guide).

**Linking theory and practice:** critically exploring the link between what should have happened in a given situation (according to the relevant theory), and what actually *did* happen, offers a level of practical insight into a topic that a standard essay cannot. Accordingly, it is a key requirement of a reflective writing assignment. You need to ask:

* Did the experience help me understand the theory?

‘It helped me understand why best practice guidelines suggest that…’

* Did the theory prepare me well for the experience?

‘According to theory xxxx I was expecting the parent to…. But instead…’

* Did the experience and the theory match up?

‘The theory didn’t allow for the eventuality of… In practice…’

* Were there conflicts between the experience and the theory? What were they?

Reflective writing, therefore, allows you more fully to assess and evaluate the theories you have learned about in lectures/seminars.

**Structure:** Although you should always follow the instructions provided by your school or lecturer, the main components of a reflective writing assignment may be as follows:

Introduction: briefly describing the experience on which you will be reflecting (such as a work placement, a presentation you made, an article you read). What was the event? Where? When? Who was involved?

Main body: comprising a series of well-structured paragraphs.

* For a short assignment, these may comprise the four stages of the reflective process (experience, reflection, analysis, action plan) for a single experience or aspect of it.
* For longer assignments the paragraphs might each address a different aspect of the experience (reflecting on a group presentation it could be your planning process, your team dynamics, your own performance) each containing the reflective process within it.

In both cases, your analysis and ideas should be supported with reference to relevant theories, case studies and other academic evidence, all of which should be accurately referenced.

Conclusion:summarising what happened, how you felt about it, the key things you learned and how you will use this knowledge to move forward.

**Remember: reflective writing is a tool that you can use to enhance your learning.**

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