



University of Essex

Online



University of Essex Online Writing Guide Series

A short guide to Reflective Writing



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What is reflection, and why is it important?

Reflection is the ability to relate to one's own strengths and weaknesses (Hilzensauer, 2008). When we reflect, we consider and process thoughts and feelings, thinking about things that have happened and how we feel about them. We reflect on everyday issues all the time. Why did something happen? What went well? What went poorly? How could it be improved? And what might happen?

Reflection is part of learning and thinking. "We reflect in order to learn something, or we learn as a result of reflecting" (Moon, 2004: 80) and the term 'reflective learning' emphasises the intention to learn from current or prior experience.

"Reflecting on academic or professional practice in this way may make your personal beliefs, expectations, and biases more evident to you. This understanding of yourself should help you to carry out your studies more successfully, since it makes you aware of the assumptions that you might make automatically or uncritically as a result of your view of the world" (Open University, 2013: 1).

Reflection in academic work

In your academic work, you may be asked to reflect as part of an assignment. Typically, at the University of Essex Online, this would be as part of an essay or as a Journal Entry. Reflective writing evidences reflective thinking. It allows you to demonstrate that you can critically think about your own practice and skills to improve and learn.

In the academic context, reflection usually involves:

- Reflecting on your professional or academic practice (what it means to you as a learning or a practicing professional).
- Evaluating or analysing a project and considering how to improve for next time (do this in depth and from different perspectives with reference to a theory from your subject).
- Reflecting on ideas or reading material and linking theory with practice.

However, as there are many types of reflection, please always follow the guidelines given in your modules and by your tutors in your reflective writing.

Typically, reflective writing is:

- Based on your own experiences
- Includes your own view
- Written from the first person to comment on practice but uses third person to comment on research or theory
- Written in a formal academic writing style
- Includes citations and references
- Has a clear structure
- Uses terminology appropriate to your subject



Reflective writing skills

Step back and think about what happened and how it will relate to you before starting to write. You need to spot patterns and links through the experiences in your personal or professional life and your learning. This can be quite difficult.

In academic writing, we try to avoid saying “I”. However, in some reflective assignments, such as Journal Entries, you may need to use it because you are writing about your own experiences, feelings and thoughts. However, although reflective writing features the first-person voice, you should still use phrases such as ‘I think’ and ‘I believe’ sparingly. Any claims that you make need to be supported by evidence (the reading, learning process or experience) and clear reasoning as well as academic theory.

In some assignments, such as reflective essays, you may be asked to “reflect on your practice”. Be sure to follow the conventions in your programme and ask your tutor to clarify whether you should use the first person (“I”) or not in your assignment. It may not be appropriate in every type of assignment and should only be used when necessary.

Depending on the type of assignment you are writing, you may use past, present and future tense at various stages of your reflection; for example, when describing personal experiences that have already occurred, when articulating your current thoughts, and when describing what you plan to do differently in the future. It is important to reflect on past events as well as how you can apply the lessons you have learnt in the future.

Ensure your tone is balanced and measured throughout your assignment, even when writing about your thoughts and feelings. You need to be introspective, acknowledge your biases, and avoid being judgemental without providing insight.

Reflective models

There are several frameworks that can be used for reflection. In this section, we will examine three different models for reflective writing. The following models offer a starting point if you are not used to reflective writing. You don’t have to follow a specific model; you can also create your own.

The important point is to find an approach that works for you.

You may find this video useful: <https://youtu.be/Qol67VeE3ds>



The four-stage model

This is a four-step generic model which can be helpful if you are not used to reflective writing. Use the questions below as a starting point when writing to evidence your thinking process. You will start with context and a short description, move on to being analytical and finally evaluative. Each part is important, so remember to include each section. However, it is better to provide a short context and description and use most of your word count on analysis and evaluation.

		Reflecting on an experience, scene or learning	Reflecting on text (such as a journal article or book)
CONTEXT	Provide some background context to the experience, scene, text or learning.	Why did it take place? Who led the experience?	If you are reflecting on a text, (such as a journal article) outline the author, title and publication details. What is the significance? What is the background?
DESCRIPTION	Provide a brief description only. Do not go into the specific details or you will risk your entire writing becoming descriptive only.	Provide relevant descriptive information of the event.	Provide key ideas or arguments the author has made.
ANALYSIS	Analyse the situation, reading or learning.	How and why did it happen? How did it affect you or your learning? Interpret the situation drawing on your experience and academic frameworks or ideas from your field.	How has the author structured their argument? Why have they used certain conventions?
EVALUATION		Can you apply theoretical ideas or frameworks to this experience? What would have made a difference to the outcome? How will you or can you apply this to your development? How effective was the approach? What have you learnt and how will you apply that learning to your practice?	What are the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments made by the author? Remember to weave in your own experiences and perspective, and how it applies to you. How does what the author say relate to other authors and theories in the field?

Aim to keep your context and description section to 20-30% of the overall text and use most of the word count for your reflective analysis and evaluation.



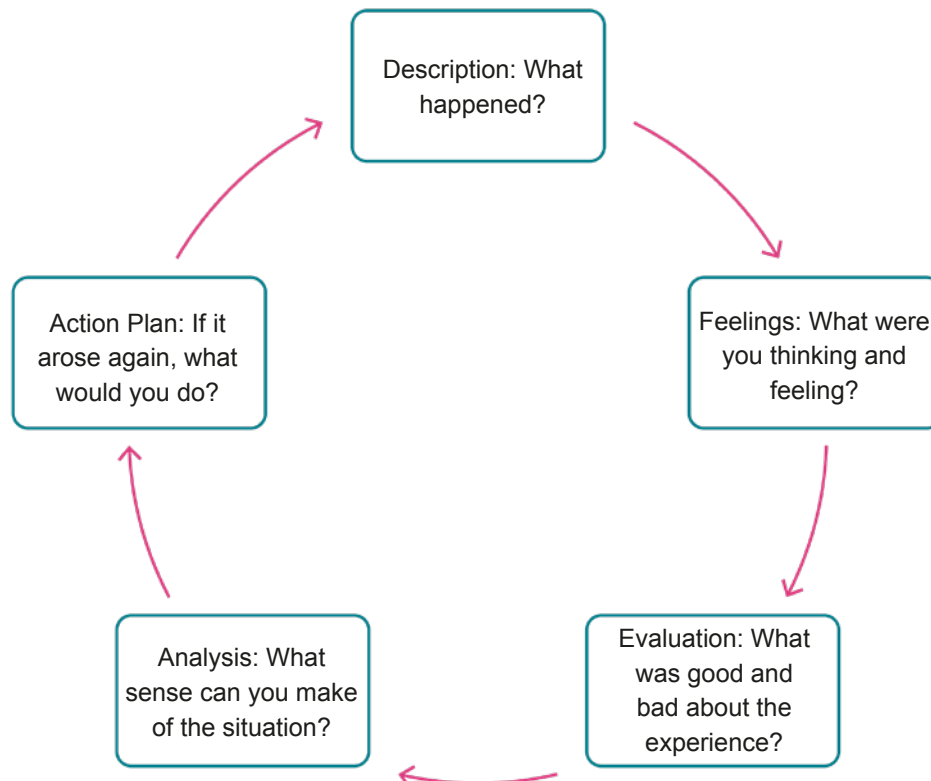
Key points to remember! Reflection is always personal to you. Write about your feelings and thoughts.

Reflection before, during and after a learning process (Schön, 1983)

Before an experience	During an experience	After an experience
What do you think might happen?	What's happening now, as you make rapid decisions?	What are your insights immediately after, and/or later when you have more emotional distance from the event?
What might be the challenges?	Is it working out as you expected?	In retrospect how did it go?
What do you need to know or do in order to be best prepared for these experiences?	Are you dealing with the challenges well?	What did you particularly value and why?
	Is there anything you should do, say or think to make the experience successful?	Is there anything you would do differently before or during a similar event?
	What are you learning from this?	What have you learnt and how will you apply that learning to future situations?

Gibbs' Reflective Cycle

Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988) is a cyclical set of questions which guide you through the event. Gibbs' Reflective Cycle is a very useful tool when writing reflective Journal Entries. However, it may not push you enough to think about your practice critically.





A short reflective Journal Entry example and how to improve on it

Example student entry:

Specific tasks were shared out amongst members of my team. Initially, however, the tasks were not seen as equally difficult by all team members. Cooperation between group members was at risk because of this perception of unfairness. Social interdependence theory recognises a type of group interaction called 'positive interdependence', meaning cooperation (Johnson and Johnson, 1993, cited by Maughan and Webb, 2001), and many studies have demonstrated that "cooperative learning experiences encourage higher achievement" (Maughan and Webb, 2001). Ultimately, our group achieved a successful outcome, but to improve the process, we perhaps needed a chairperson to help encourage cooperation when tasks were being shared out. In future group work, on the course and at work, I would probably suggest this.

References

Johnson, D., & Johnson, F. (2008) *Joining together: group theory and group skills*. New York: Pearson.
Maughan, C. & Webb, J. (2010) *Small group learning and teaching*.

Below, is the analysis of the reflective journal entry. The author has divided the writing into three distinctive sections, providing a good structure. The tutor comments and suggested improvements can be seen below.

1. Description Remember to keep this short! Tutor comment: In this example, no context has been provided and the description is too brief. The author should have expanded on this and explained the context to the reader.	 Specific tasks were shared out amongst members of my team. Initially, however, the tasks were not seen as equally difficult by all team members.
2. Analysis What is your interpretation of the event, idea or text? Remember to use academic references, theories and frameworks. Tutor comment: In this example, there is no clear connection between theory and the person's own experience. They should have expanded on this and included reflection on their personal feelings and thoughts in relation to the literature.	 Cooperation between group members was at risk because of this perception of unfairness. Social interdependence theory recognises a type of group interaction called 'positive interdependence', meaning cooperation (Johnson and Johnson, 1993, cited by Maughan and Webb, 2001), and many studies have demonstrated that "cooperative learning experiences encourage higher achievement" (Maughan and Webb, 2001).
3. Evaluation What is the outcome? What have you learned? Tutor comment: In this example, the student identified a problem and suggested a solution, but they have not indicated what they have personally learned. They need to provide deeper evaluation and outcomes of the evaluation. Reflection is about personal development.	 Ultimately, our group achieved a successful outcome, but to improve the process, we perhaps needed a chairperson to help encourage cooperation when tasks were being shared out. In future group work, on the course and at work, I would probably suggest this.

(University of Portsmouth, 2015)



Note that the author uses:

- First person which is expected in reflective writing but not in general academic writing.
- Third person when referring to the literature.
- A formal writing style.
- Citations and a reference list.
- A distinct structure.

However, they are using limited references to their own personal thought and feelings, provide no suggestions on how they would apply the lessons to their own development and fail to make clear connections between their own practice and the theories they are citing.

Further Reading and References

Hargreaves, J. (2013) *Reflective Practice*. Polity Press.

Gibbs, G (1988). *Learning by doing: a guide to teaching and learning methods*. Oxford: Further Education Unit, Oxford Polytechnic.

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