

Content focus: [Students](#)

Academic writing: a practical guide

[Academic writing](#)[General writing skills](#)[Types of academic writing](#)[What does my feedback mean?](#)

Reflective writing

Writing reflectively is essential to many academic programmes and also to completing applications for employment. This page considers what reflective writing is and how to do it.



What is reflection?

Reflection is something that we do everyday as part of being human. We plan and undertake actions, then think about whether each was successful or not, and how we might improve next time. We can also feel reflection as emotions, such as satisfaction and regret, or as a need to talk over happenings with friends. See below for an introduction to reflection as a concept.



Reflection in everyday life
An introduction to being reflective

< 1 > : Google Slides

Reflection in everyday life [Google Slides]



A quick guide to reflective thinking and writing
A brief introduction to reflective thinking and writing in degree level studies.

The language of reflective writing

Reflective academic writing is:

- almost always written in the first person.
- evaluative - you are judging something.
- partly personal, partly based on criteria.
- analytical - you are usually categorising actions and events.
- formal - it is for an academic audience.
- carefully constructed.

Look at the sections below to see specific vocabulary types and sentence constructions that can be useful when writing reflectively.

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▲ Language for exploring outcomes

A key element of writing reflectively is being able to explain to the reader what the results of your actions were. This requires careful grading of language to ensure that what you write reflects the evidence of what happened and to convey clearly what you achieved or did not achieve.

Below are some ideas and prompts of how you can write reflectively about outcomes, using clarity and graded language.

Expressing uncertainty when writing about outcomes:

- It is not yet clear that...
- I do not yet (fully) understand...
- It is unclear...
- It is not yet fully clear...
- It is not yet (fully?) known...
- It appears to be the case that...
- It is too soon to tell....

Often, in academic learning, the uncertainty in the outcomes is a key part of the learning and development that you undertake. It is vital therefore that you explain this clearly to

the reader using careful choices in your language.

Writing about how the outcome relates to you:

- I gained (xxxx) skills...
- I developed...
- The experience/task/process taught me...
- I achieved...
- I learned that...
- I found that...

In each case you can add in words like, 'significantly', 'greatly', 'less importantly' etc. The use of evaluative adjectives enables you to express to the reader the importance and significance of your learning in terms of the outcomes achieved.

Describing how you reached your outcomes:

- Having read....
- Having completed (xxxx)...
- I analysed...
- I applied...
- I learned...
- I experienced...
- Having reflected...



This gives the reader an idea of the nature of the reflection they are reading. How and why you reach the conclusions and learning that you express in your reflective writing is important so the reader can assess the validity and strength of your reflections.

Projecting your outcomes into the future:

- If I completed a similar task in the future I would...
- Having learned through this process I would...
- Next time I will...
- I will need to develop.... (in light of the outcomes)
- Next time my responses would be different....

Reflective writing for employability

When applying for jobs, or further academic study, students are required to think through what they have done in their degrees and translate it into evaluative writing that fulfils the criteria of job descriptions and person specifications. This is a different style of writing, the resource below will enable you to think about how to begin this transition.



Translating academic reflective writing into employment applications
A guide for translating academic reflective tasks into writing for employment applications.

There are also lots of resources available through the university's careers service and elsewhere on the Skills Guides. The links below are to pages that can offer further support and guidance.



Reflective writing: employability skills
Resources from the Careers and Placements Service on how to write for employability.

Careers and Placements Service resources

Lots of resources that relate to all aspects of job applications, including tailored writing styles and techniques.

When showing the reader how you will use your learning in the future, it is important to be specific and again, to use accurate graded language to show how and why what you choose to highlight matters. Check carefully against task instructions to see what you are expected to reflect into the future about.

Summary

When reflecting in academic writing on outcomes, this can mean either the results of the task you have completed, for example, the accuracy of a titration in a Chemistry lab session, or what you have learned/developed within the task, for example, ensuring that an interview question is written clearly enough to produce a response that reflects what you wished to find out.

Language choices are important in ensuring the reader can see what you think in relation to the reflection you have done.



▲ Language for interpretation

When you interpret something you are telling the reader how important it is, or what meaning is attached to it.

You may wish to indicate the value of something:

- Meaningful
- useful
- critical
- essential
- useful
- superfluous
- non-essential
- essential

E.g. 'the accuracy of the transcription was essential to the accuracy of the eventual coding and analysis of the interviews undertaken. The training I undertook was critical to enabling me to transcribe quickly and accurately'

You may wish to show how ideas, actions, etc. relate to the outcome.

YOU MAY WISH TO SHOW HOW IDEAS, ACTIONS
OR SOME OTHER ASPECT DEVELOPED OVER
TIME:

- Initially
- subsequently
- previously
- over time
- in sequence
- eventually
- quickly
- slowly
- advanced
- prior
- later
- earlier

E.g. 'Before we could produce the final version of the presentation, we had to complete both the research and produce a plan. This was achieved later than expected, leading to subsequent rushing of creating slides, and this contributed to a lower grade'.



You may wish to show your viewpoint or that of others:

- thought
- did not think
- considered
- noticed
- expressed
- said
- articulated
- stated
- intervened
- realised
- expected
- did/did not do something

Each of these could be preceded by 'we' or 'I'.

E.g. 'I noticed that the model of the bridge was sagging. I expressed this to the group, and as I did so I noticed that two members did not seem to grasp how serious the problem was. I proposed a break and a

Summary

There is a huge range of language that can be used for interpretation, the most important thing is to remember your reader and be clear with them about what your interpretation is, so they can see your thinking and agree or disagree with you.

▲ Language for analysis

When reflecting, it is important to show the reader that you have analysed the tasks, outcomes, learning and all other aspects that you are writing about. In most cases, you are using categories to provide structure to your reflection. Some suggestions of language to use when analysing in reflective writing are below:

Signposting that you are breaking down a task or learning into categories:

- An aspect of...
- An element of...
- An example of...
- A key feature of the task was... (e.g. teamwork)
- The task was multifaceted... (then go on to list or describe the facets)
- There were several experiences...
- 'X' is related to 'y'

There may be specific categories that you should consider in your reflection. In teamwork, it could be individual and team performance, in lab work it could be accuracy and the reliability of results. It is important that the reader can see the categories you have used for your analysis.

Analysis by chronology:

- Firstly
- Over time
- Subsequently
- At firstly

- Consequently
- Initially
- Later
- Stage 1 (or other)

In many tasks the order in which they were completed matters. This can be a key part of your reflection, as it is possible that you may learn to do things in a different order next time or that the chronology influenced the outcomes.

Analysis by perspective:

- I thought
- I learned
- I felt
- I considered

These language choices show that you are analysing purely by your own personal perspective. You may provide evidence to support your thinking, but it is your viewpoint that matters.

- What I expected from the reading did not happen...
- The Theory did not appear in our results...
- The predictions made were not fulfilled...
- The outcome was surprising because... (and link to what was expected)

These language choices show that you are analysing by making reference to academic learning (from an academic perspective). This means you have read or otherwise learned something and used it to form expectations, ideas and/or predictions. You can then reflect on what you found vs what you expected. The reader needs to know what has informed our reflections.

- Organisation X should therefore...
- A key recommendation is...
- I now know that organisation x is...
- Theory A can be applied to organisation X

These language choices show that analysis is being completed from a systems perspective. You are telling the reader how your learning links into the bigger picture of systems, for example, what an organisation or entity might do in response to what you have learned.

Summary

Analysing is a key element of being reflective. You must think through the task, ideas, or learning you are reflecting on and use categories to provide structure to your thought. This then translates into structure and language choices in your writing, so your reader can see clearly how you have used analysis to provide sense and structure to your reflections.

▲ Language for evaluation

Reflecting is fundamentally an evaluative activity. Writing about reflection is therefore replete with evaluative language. A skillful reflective writer is able to grade their language to match the thinking it is expressing to the reader.

Language to show how significant something is:

- Most importantly
- Crucially
- Imperative
- Significantly
- The principal lesson was...
- Irrelevant
- Consequential
- Fundamental
- Insignificant
-
- In each case the language is quantifying the significance of the element you are describing, telling the reader the product of your evaluative thought.
-

For example, 'when team working I initially thought that we would succeed by setting out a plan and then working independently, but in fact, constant communication and collaboration were crucial to success. This was the most significant thing I learned.'

Language to show the strength of relationships:

- X is strongly associated with Y
- A is a consequence of B
- There is a probable relationship between...
- A causes B
- C does not cause D
- A may influence B
- I learn most strongly when doing A

In each case the language used can show how significant and strong the relationship between two factors are.

For example, 'I learned, as part of my research methods module, that the accuracy of the data gained through surveys is directly related to the quality of the questions.

Quality can be improved by reading widely and looking at surveys in existing academic papers to inform making your own questions'

Language to evaluate your viewpoint:

- I was convinced...
- I have developed significantly...
- I learned that...
- The most significant thing that I learned was...
- Next time, I would definitely...
- I am unclear about...
- I was uncertain about...

These language choices show that you are attaching a level of significance to your reflection. This enables the reader to see what you think about the learning you achieved and the level of significance you attach to each reflection.

For example, 'when using systematic sampling of a mixed woodland, I was convinced that method A would be most effective, but in reality, it was clear that method B produced the most accurate results. I learned that assumptions based on reading previous research can lead to inaccurate predictions. This is very important for me as I will be planning a similar sampling activity as part of my fourth year project'

Summary

Evaluating is the main element of reflecting. You need to evaluate the outcomes of the activities you have done, your part in them, the learning you achieved and the process/methods you used in your learning, among many other things. It is important that you carefully use language to show the evaluative thinking you have completed to the reader.

[close all](#)



Varieties of reflective writing in academic studies

There are a huge variety of reflective writing tasks, which differ between programmes and modules. Some are required by the nature of the subject, like in Education, where reflection is a required standard in teaching.

Some are required by the industry area graduates are training for, such as 'Human Resources Management', where the industry accreditation body require evidence of reflective capabilities in graduates.

In some cases, reflection is about the 'learning to learn' element of degree studies, to help you to become a more effective learner. Below, some of the main reflective writing tasks found in University of York degrees are explored. In each case the advice, guidance and materials do not substitute for those provided within your modules.



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▲ Reflective essay writing

Reflective essay tasks vary greatly in what they require of you. The most important thing to do is to read the assessment brief carefully, attend any sessions and read any materials provided as guidance and to allocate time to ensure you can do the task well.



Planning and writing an academic reflective essay
Advice and guidance on writing an academic reflective essay



Assessment of reflective essays
Find out how reflective essays are assessed and how you can use knowledge of assessment

to improve your grade.

▲ Reflective learning statements

Reflective learning statements are often attached to dissertations and projects, as well as practical activities. They are an opportunity to think about and tell the reader what you have learned, how you will use the learning, what you can do better next time and to link to other areas, such as your intended career.



Why do a reflective learning statement?

A rationale for doing a reflective learning statement and consideration of the skills you will develop.



Example reflective learning statement

An example with commentary to offer guidance for success.



A checklist for reflective learning statements

A checklist to help ensure your academic reflective learning statements are as good as possible.



▲ Making a judgement about academic performance

Think of this type of writing as producing your own feedback. How did you do? Why? What could you improve next time? These activities may be a part of modules, they could be attached to a bigger piece of work like a dissertation or essay, or could be just a part of your module learning.

Five main questions to ask yourself

when reflecting on your academic performance.

1. Why exactly did you achieve the grade you have been awarded?

Look at your feedback, the instructions, the marking scheme and talk to your tutors to find out if you don't know.

2. How did your learning behaviours affect your academic performance?

This covers aspects such as attendance, reading for lectures/seminars, asking questions, working with peers... the list goes on.

3. How did your performance compare to others?

Can you identify when others did better or worse? Can you talk to your peers to find out if they are doing something you are not or being more/less effective?

4. What can you do differently to improve your performance?

In each case, how will you ensure you can do it? Do you need training? Do you need a guide book or resources?



When writing about each of the above, you need to keep in mind the context of how you are being asked to judge your performance and ensure the reader gains the detail they need (and as this is usually a marker, this means they can give you a high grade!).

▲ Writing a learning diary/blog/record

A learning diary or blog has become a very common method of assessing and supporting learning in many degree programmes. The aim is to help you to think through your day-to-day learning and identify what you have and have not learned, why that is and what you can improve as you go along. You are also encouraged to link your learning to bigger thinking, like future careers or your overall degree.



Examples of a learning diary,
blog and record of learning
Ideas of how you can record
and reflect on your learning to
support your reflective
thinking and overall learning.

[close all](#)



Other support for reflective writing

Online resources

The [general writing](#) pages of this site offer guidance that can be applied to all types of writing, including reflective writing. Also check your department's guidance and VLE sites for tailored resources.

Other useful resources for reflective writing:



[Skills Guide: Reflective writing](#)
A look at writing reflectively as an employability skill



[Referencing Styles: a Practical Guide](#)
Advice and examples to help you use your department's referencing style correctly.



Appointments and workshops



[Writing Centre](#)
Personal advice and guidance on all aspects of academic writing. Open to all students.



[Skills development workshops](#)
A range of academic skills workshops from the Library, Academic Skills Community, Maths Skills Centre and Careers.