

Reflective writing is new to most people. The comments below point to the confusion around reflective writing when it is part of a course and is assessed in some way:

- ▶ *'I thought I wasn't supposed to use "I" in my writing.'*
- ▶ *'I'm not putting what I really think if it's going to be assessed!'*
- ▶ *'They say to reflect on the link between theory and practice – but what does that mean?'*
- ▶ *'Can I say what I think without backing it up with references?'*

*For students who have never experienced reflective practice, it is hard to see the experience in a personal and analytical way.
(Lecturer, Product Design)*

You can see the opposite pulls when reflective writing is a required part of a programme. Tutors are aware of it too, and try to resolve it in a number of ways.

For example, tutors may:

- ▶ want to know that an informal private log or diary exists, that you add to it regularly, but they do not directly assess the contents

- ask you to respond to specific questions that draw on your 'private' record or recollections
- ask you to select incidents or experiences from your private records, and to write about them to show how they have contributed to your learning.

On further reflection, this experience highlights a series of faults with my actions ... I should have used my initiative and checked. (Ben p55)

Your writing is personal, but not private

'Reflection' means different things in different disciplines

In all subjects you need to think reflectively about what you learn. Part of your training as a student is to familiarise you with the specific ways of thinking in your discipline:

... trying to make a connection between what was up on the board or in the notes, and something that I actually experienced in real life (p59).¹
(Electronic Engineering student)

A good healthy dose of cynicism – keep your mind open in case new data comes in (p60). (Biological Sciences lecturer)

... weigh different situations and find a middle road ... you're having to account for things that the theory hasn't accounted for (p62).
(Economics lecturer)

The first fundamental thing to grasp is that all is not what it seems to be (p63). (Media and Communications student)

We expect students to develop personal skills of analysis independent of other critical authorities.
(English Literature lecturer)

Reflection isn't navel-gazing. It's about moving on to an outcome.
(Hospitality lecturer)

We show how our ideas develop – why we did it, what we meant by it, who influenced us, how we changed things.
(Creative Arts student)

It's a way of helping us to make sense of our experiences, linking to theory and research, to help us develop our practice ...
(Health and Social Care student)

We have to say what we have learnt about our own practice as a teacher and what we are going to do to improve the way we teach. (Education student)

You've got to know yourself. You can't apply for a job unless you do. (Careers adviser)

¹ The source for the comments with page numbers is Entwistle (2009).

Getting started on reflective writing

The common thread that runs through all these is the whirring sound of thinking: stepping back to think and reflect is a conscious and deliberate process.

Reflection is the route to making sense of it all.



Reflective writing tasks are different too

You may also be required to demonstrate reflection in specific writing tasks, or in a 'reflective' style of writing. These too will differ from subject to subject – both in the content (what you write about) and in the process (how you write). The first step is to look at what you have been asked to do.

The task: how is it described?

Tutors set tasks that are tailored to the needs and practices of the particular discipline you are studying. They are described in a variety of ways:

Diary **Journal** Learning log Reading log Lesson evaluation
E-portfolio Reading portfolio Log book Blog Action learning
Artist's notebook Research log Field log Podcast
Design report Annotated bibliography Lab notebook
Simulation Critical incident report Work placement diary
Discussion forum Observation Self-assessment
Reflective statement
Practice portfolio **Reflective essay**

The emphasis will differ from one course to another, but in all these forms of writing you are likely to include an element of reflection on:

- ▶ yourself
- ▶ how you learn
- ▶ how you learn from what you have done, thought, experienced and created
- ▶ how your knowledge and understanding have developed through your reading
- ▶ how you link theory and practice
- ▶ how your learning shapes further learning, your practice, work placement or employment.

In short, your writing will be about how you, your understanding and your skills develop and change over time.

Getting started on reflective writing

11

What guidance have you been given?

You will often be given headings or questions to guide you as to what you are expected to write **about** and how you should **structure** your work.

For example

Diary: six diary entries

The online diary will be based on a series of questions and discussion points introduced in class and developed through reflection, assignments and discussion with class peers.

Each entry should be about 250 words.

Diary entry 1

- ▶ Are there any patterns in the way I work as a learner in classes at school/ college/university?
- ▶ What approaches and methods work best for me?
- ▶ What approaches and methods work least well?
- ▶ How might this understanding help me as a teacher?

Advanced Methodology of Foreign Language Teaching, undergraduate

This gives you clear advice on the content and structure. Now look further through your course materials to see **how the task is assessed**. For the task above this includes:

- Demonstrating awareness of the connections between your own learning experiences and the practice and principles of good teaching.

This gives you some really useful guidance. The task is an invitation to reflect on how you learn. **It isn't enough just to describe** or '**tell the story**' of your learning. You must also show that you can **pick out** what you have learnt from the classes and your reading, and that you are **reflecting on** how you might **apply** this learning to your eventual practice.

For example

Don't tell the story!	Select and apply
I set up a listening activity with the children. They listened to a news clip and numbered four pictures in the right order. The activity finished in 5 minutes although I planned it for 10 minutes.	The listening activity, a news clip about polar bears, really interested the children but I was so focused on the exercise I didn't give them a chance to talk about it and finished too quickly.