

# Evaluating Your Work

*Adapted by Mike Meade from Evaluating Your Work by Mirabelle Walker (2004).*

## 1 Introduction

You've started work on your project and now you're actively developing your project topic and project plan. You're beginning to realise you're at the start of a big endeavour, one that will last almost a year and one where you will, largely, need to be self-motivated and take responsibility for what you do and when you do it.

So how do you know whether you are on the right track – whether what you are doing is useful and relevant? How do you know you are doing the right thing at the right time? In short, how do you evaluate your own work – both the process of doing it and the outcomes when you have done it?

The ability to stand back from what you are doing and evaluate its effectiveness and usefulness is an important one for graduates to have, and one employers of graduates rightly expect. So it's a valuable ability for you to develop, quite consciously, as you do this project. And that's true whether you feel you are already fairly competent at this sort of thing or whether this is the first time you have met the idea.

In Section 2 'Before you can evaluate' and Section 3 'Carrying out the evaluation', I discuss how you might evaluate both your progress while you are working on your project and the outcomes of your project. Then in Section 4 'Evaluating what you write' I look specifically at how you might evaluate the written work you have to submit during the module – your TMAs and your project report (EMA).

## 2 Before you can evaluate

### 2.1 Goals, target dates and standards

If you are going to evaluate your own work as you progress through your project, you first need something to evaluate the work against. You need some goals, some target dates for meeting those goals and some standards for knowing whether you have met the goals adequately. Once you have these, you are in a position to start evaluating your progress and your achievements.

What's more, you need goals, target dates and standards not just for the whole project but for individual phases and tasks within it: for your search for relevant and useful documents; for drawing up your project plan; for writing a piece of code, running a simulation, designing an experiment or whatever you need to do as part of your project; for working on your project report; and so on.

Where, then, do these goals, target dates and standards come from? Some come from the module team. For example:

- some target dates come from the cut-off dates for your TMAs and the submission date for your project report
- a standard for your project work, and the report you will write about it, comes from the requirements and learning outcomes laid out in the assignments and [Study Guide](#)
- standards for your TMAs come from what the module team says about each of them. (Though the standards may not be explicitly stated – they may only be implied in the wording – they will always relate to the learning outcomes.)

The majority of goals, target dates and standards will, however, have to be formulated by you yourself. There is more about this in [Planning and Organising a Project](#).

But I'd like to suggest there's more to your planning than simply drawing up some lists of tasks and then scheduling them, useful though this is. I'd like to encourage you to think clearly about what you are proposing to do before you launch into doing it – to think about why you are about to undertake your next task and what you hope to achieve. I shall refer to this sort of thinking as 'reflection before action'.

## 2.2 Reflection before action

I'm using the term reflection to refer to a purposeful thinking through of something before starting it. In no sense is the way I'm using 'reflection' meant to refer to just musing about some vague ideas – though subconscious thought processes can provide some inspiration during reflection, especially if you allow time for them to do so.

To me, then, the idea of reflection before action suggests taking time to think about why I am embarking on a course of action, what I want to get out of it, how much time I will allow for it, and so on. I find it useful to be clear on points like these before I actually start doing an activity. Of course, I can't expect to see exactly how things will work out, so I may well have to revise my original views as I progress. But nevertheless my reflection before action helps me to avoid going off-track and wasting time and effort. It also helps me to know when enough is enough – when I've done as much as I need and can move on.

I would most strongly encourage you to reflect before acting at the start of each phase of your project, and preferably also as you start each task. Ask yourself questions like these.

- Why am I proposing to do this? What do I need to get out of it? How does it fit with my work on the project as a whole?
- How am I going to set about doing this?
- What relevant resources do I already have? How can I use them? What others do I need?
- How long will I allow myself to do this work? What is my target date for completing it?
- How will I know when I have achieved my goal, and done so to a satisfactory standard?

You should note the outcomes of each reflection before action in your project log because you may need to refer to them to answer one or more of the TMAs. There is more about keeping a log in [\*Planning and Organising a Project\*](#).

### Example 2.1 How one student reflected before starting his literature search

In this example, notice how the student's reflection led to some things he needed to do and to a couple of target dates he was setting himself, and how he picked them out in his log in bold so that he could see them clearly. This enabled him to go on to start a plan for his next stage of the project.

---

#### Answer

##### Reflection before action

*Why am I proposing to do this? What do I need to get out of it? How does it fit with my work on the project as a whole?*

I'm doing it because I have to for the next TMA! The module team say I need to find some references. Must remind myself how many. I don't see the point, but I have to do the search, so I suppose I may as well make the most of it. Maybe I can find something that helps me to make my tentative ideas for this project more concrete. Maybe I'll be inspired by something I find. (I wish!)

If I can find something like that, the search will fit with my work on the project just fine. If I can't, then at the moment I'm not sure just how it fits. Maybe this will become clearer once I start?

*How am I going to set about doing this?*

I wish I knew! My ideas are still so fuzzy for the project. I wonder if there are any **key words or phrases** I could focus on in the search? That ought to help. How about lawn mower and robot, for starters? I'll leave a bit of a space here to add any more words or phrases I come up with. **Must think more about this.**

*What relevant resources do I already have? How can I use them? What others do I need?*

Well, the web is an obvious place to start. But isn't there something about **literature search** here in the module's online resources? **Must look at that first!** And I'm lucky I live in a big city with a good central library – must remember to call in and see what they have. Maybe *New Scientist*, good newspapers, that sort of thing, will be useful while my ideas are so fuzzy. Not sure I'll find anything, but worth trying for an hour or two. **Friday evening**, perhaps?

Not sure what other resources I may need – should become clearer once I've started searching.

*How long will I allow myself to do this work – what is my target date for completing it?*

Easy: I have to have done the search by the TMA's submission date. But don't I have to write up something about one document I find? So I'll put a **target date** for completing the search a **week ahead of the TMA date**.

*How will I know when I have achieved my goal, and done so to a satisfactory standard?*

At the simplest level, when I find the number of references the TMA asks me to find. Though I suppose they have to be good ones – that must be what satisfactory standard means here. I'll check with the learning outcomes to find out what's needed. That's tricky. I'm not sure what I mean by good ones. Maybe that will become clearer once I've started. If not, I'd better **ask my tutor** – or perhaps there will be a discussion on this one in the **online forum**.

## 3 Carrying out the evaluation

### 3.1 Reflection during action

If you have set up some goals, target dates and standards for yourself before each phase and task of your project, you will be able to evaluate your work both during each phase or task and at the end of each phase or task. I will now describe 'reflection during action'.

I'll look first at evaluating your work while the work is actually in progress. This requires a process that is often called 'reflection during action' or 'reflection in action'. Again, reflection refers to a purposeful thinking about what you are doing, with an implied intention of changing if the outcome of your reflection suggests you need to do so.

In some ways, reflection during action is the most difficult sort of reflection, because it asks you to examine your working processes at a time when you are actively engaged with them. But if you can learn to do this, you will become a more effective worker.

#### Example 3.1 How one student reflected during action

In this example, you can see how reflection helped a student revise her working practices when she got into problems with an assignment.

This particular student was studying one of the Open University's language modules, but what she has to say is relevant to your project work.

---

#### Answer

##### Reflection during action

For this module, I discovered fairly quickly that short and frequent periods of study were much better than fewer but longer ones, and I planned my study on that basis.

Towards the end of the module I had to write an extended essay, one that was some four or five times as long as any previous essay on the module. I continued with my short-but-frequent study pattern, but became increasingly frustrated. The ideas for my essay refused to gel. So I took time out to reflect on what was going wrong, and why.

I had to disengage from my repeated, and abortive, attempts to write the essay so that I had a space in which to reflect on the processes I was using. This led me to what the problem was. Short chunks of time, however frequent, were simply not long enough to enable me to weave together my ideas – first in my mind and then on paper. I needed to rearrange my study schedule to give myself some longer periods of study time.

As soon as I changed my study pattern in this way everything began to fall into place and I was able to write the essay. But I might have gone on trying to study in the short periods that had worked so well earlier if I hadn't deliberately disengaged to reflect on what I was doing and why it was going wrong.

The questions you need to ask yourself for your own reflection during action will depend on the particular project task you are engaged with, but here are some examples.

- Is what I am doing now going to get me to my goal – or is it just a sideline?
- Could changing how I'm working help me to get this task done better or more quickly?
- Am I on track for finishing this task when I'd planned, and if not, what am I going to do about it?
- Do I have some other resources I could draw on to help me?
- If I feel something is going wrong but can't pinpoint what, would talking about what I'm doing with a sympathetic friend help me to uncover the problem and find a solution?
- Suppose my tutor could see what I'm doing – the process, not the outcome. What feedback and mark do I think he or she would give me? Can I use this imagined feedback to improve what I'm doing? How could I improve that imagined mark?

Remember, it can be helpful to allow time for your subconscious thought processes to come up with ideas to supplement those of your conscious thought processes.

You may need to refer back to your reflections for one or more of your TMAs. You should note the outcomes of your reflection during action in your project log.

## 3.2 Reflection after action

Finally, there is the evaluation you will want to carry out after you have completed a particular phase or task of your project. This requires reflection after action, and is an invaluable opportunity both to learn from your experience and to improve what you have produced before anyone else sees it.

Here are some useful questions for you as you look back over your work.

- What went well? What can I learn from that for the rest of my work on this module?
- What didn't go so well? How did I recover from my problems? What can I learn from that for the rest of my work on this module?
- Right at the end of your work on the module another useful question is: What would I do differently if I did the project again?

The crucial questions about the outcome(s) of your work are:

- Have I reached an acceptable standard, both according to what the module team and my tutor have told me and according to my own judgement?
- Have I met the learning outcomes for this piece of work?
- If not, what am I going to change?

You may need to refer back to your reflections for one or more of your TMAs. As with reflection before action and reflection during action, you should note the outcomes of your reflection after action in your project log.

## 4 Evaluating what you write

In Sections 2 and 3, I have given some guidelines for evaluating your progress through the project and the results of your work. An important part of your work is the written information you submit as TMAs and the project report. If you do a good project but write it up badly, you will not get the credit your project work deserves. How, then, can you write up your work effectively? What I want to do here is stress the need to evaluate both your writing process and its outcome.

*Writing, Structuring, Styling and Editing Reports* addresses the issues of evaluating what you write.

Once you have gone through the writing process, your next task is to evaluate your first draft and subsequent drafts as well if you need to write several.

Whether you have written a project proposal for TMA 01, described your work to date for TMA 02, produced a draft report for TMA 03, or written the report itself, you will have needed to do the following tasks.

- Choose appropriate content and make sure it is accurate and draws appropriately on your sources.
- Choose an appropriate structure.
- Choose an appropriate style and technical level.
- Observe any guidelines about length.
- Use correct English.

I have used the word appropriate in several of the above items. But how do you know what is appropriate? The answer is that it depends on your audience – who the document is intended for – your purpose and your medium.

### 4.1 Identifying your audience, purpose and medium

In this module, your medium is given: it's the written word. But what about your audience and your purpose?

For the TMAs, your audience is your tutor and you should be addressing him or her. So you are addressing an expert in the general topic area of your course but not necessarily in all the details of your specific project. Remember too, your tutor needs to be sure you understand what you are writing.

Your purpose depends on the TMA. It is likely to be a mixture of purposes: to describe, to explain, to inform and to persuade. If this last item surprises you, think for example about your project proposal: you wish to persuade your tutor that you are proposing a worthwhile project. Crucially, in every TMA you also need to persuade your tutor that you are speaking with authority when you talk about your project – that you understand what you are talking about.

For the project report (EMA), you need to remember it will be double-marked and that, unlike your tutor, the second marker will not already be familiar with any of the work you have put into the project. So you should address an expert in the general topic area of your course but one who has no familiarity with the history of your work and may well not have detailed familiarity with the precise topic area you have chosen. Also bear in mind both your tutor and the second marker will need to be sure you understand what you are writing about.

As with the TMAs, your purposes in the project report will be a mixture of: to describe, to explain, to inform and to persuade.

## 4.2 Questions to ask yourself

When you evaluate what you have written, you need to imagine you are the reader of the document. Try to see it through their eyes. Then use the list at the start of Section 4 as a checklist, but turning each item in it into a set of questions. For example, the first item in the list, choose appropriate content ..., can be turned into the following set of questions.

- Have I chosen appropriate content?
- Have I included everything I need to?
- Have I met the learning outcomes?
- Is there anything irrelevant I should cut out so that what I am writing is properly focused?
- Am I sure everything I say is accurate?
- If I have gone beyond general knowledge in the subject area, have I backed up what I say with evidence from my own work or reference to some authority in the subject?

### Activity 4.1

Try to turn the other items in the list at the start of Section 4 into a set of useful questions you could ask yourself when evaluating your document.

---

#### Answer

#### Reminder of tasks

List of tasks for evaluating drafts:

- Choose appropriate content and make sure it is accurate and draws appropriately on your sources.
- Choose an appropriate structure.
- Choose an appropriate style and technical level.
- Observe any guidelines about length.
- Use correct English.

#### Here are my suggestions for some questions.

- Have I reached an acceptable standard, both according to what the module team and my tutor have told me and according to my own judgement? If not, what am I going to change?
- Does what I have written need a title, and if so have I chosen an appropriate one? Does the document need to be divided into sections, and if so have I chosen an appropriate order for them, numbered them, chosen appropriate titles and made sure the content of each is coherent and related to the title? If I read down the contents list, does it tell the story of the document clearly? If the document does not need to be divided into sections, have I made sure I lead the reader through the content in a logical order? Are my paragraphs focused? Do I have a strong beginning (maybe as an introductory section) and ending (maybe as a concluding section)? Do I need to write a summary? Is there material that should be in one or more appendices? Have I placed any diagrams, tables or similar material appropriately so they can be seen from the related text?
- Is my style appropriate for the type of document I am writing and for my intended audience? Or is it too formal – or too informal? Is its level of formality consistent throughout? Is my technical level appropriate for the intended readership, or should I be putting in more detail or more explanation – or cutting some out?
- Have I stuck to my given word length, if any? If not, what will I add or subtract to achieve the right word length?

- Is my English correct? What tools do I have to help me, for example a spellchecker, and how can I best deploy them? Am I aware of their limitations, for example a spellchecker will not indicate that I have used 'now' when I meant 'not'?

It is difficult for anyone to evaluate something they have written immediately after writing it, but after a couple of days it is usually possible to do so. So I suggest you put aside your draft of each of your TMAs and your project report for a day or two and then, armed with a list of questions like those associated with the above activity, go through the draft carefully and make any changes you find are necessary. This is an important part of the writing process and can make all the difference between a merely mediocre piece of writing and a really good one.

## 5 Conclusion

No-one finds the sort of evaluation I have described here easy to do at first – whether it is reflection before, during and after action, or the critique of something written. But, as with many other skills, practice does help. And, as I stressed at the beginning, the ability to evaluate your work is an important attribute for graduates.

The final questions in the list in [Subsection 3.2](#) were:

- Have I reached an acceptable standard, both according to what the module team and my tutor have told me and according to my own judgement?
- Have I met the learning outcomes for this piece of work?
- If not, what am I going to change?

I would go as far as to say a student's ability to face up to and answer these is a sign of their maturity as a learner and their readiness for graduation.