

## ANU Academic Skills

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## Reflective writing for ANU+

As part of your assessment for ANU+ you will write short reflections. For every 20 hours of volunteering you do, you'll submit 200-300 words reflecting on your volunteering experience against one of the development outcomes. The development outcomes are:

1. Inclusion and awareness of diversity
2. Self awareness
3. Community and global engagement
4. Communication skills
5. Personal and social responsibility
6. Resilience
7. Leadership skills and understanding of organisational dynamics

The purpose of reflective writing for ANU+ is to develop your awareness about how you can best approach the workplace challenges you face. Reflective writing helps you to

- Identify your strengths and areas for improvement
- Evaluate strategies and plan for next time
- Manage yourself and your expectations
- Identify your achievements and goals

## Keep a journal

Reflective writing is highly personal, as it's about your experiences, your feelings and responses to those experiences, and your ideas about what you can do better or differently in future. While you volunteer, you will face many different experiences that you can reflect on later. The tricky thing will be to remember all the experiences, so keeping a journal or log book is helpful.

At the end of each shift, note some key points about experiences that you can write about later. Note down also which of the development outcomes those experiences could relate to, as this will help you to identify themes for your reflections. Here are some useful questions to consider in your journal:

- Which experiences stood out to you today as particularly difficult, complex, successful, and/or surprising?
- What happened?

- What did I do?
- Why did I do it?
- What worked or didn't work?
- How did it make me feel?
- What made the events difficult/complex/successful/surprising and why?
- What could I do differently/the same next time? Why?
- Which development outcomes do today's experiences relate to? Why?
- Why is this experience important to your professional development?

A useful process to follow when writing your notes or draft reflections is to do the following:

1. Retell – what happened?
2. Relate – how does it relate to the development outcomes?
3. Reflect – what did you learn from the experience? Why is it important? What will you do with this knowledge in future?

The next section shows how you can develop these notes into your final reflections.

## Writing the reflections

Reflective writing is very different to the type of writing that you usually do in academic essays or reports. Reflective writing is also not about describing ideas, solving simple problems, or summarising ideas from other people. Instead, it's supposed to be about what you personally have learnt from your own first hand experiences.

Common problems with reflections include

- Trying to address too many development outcomes and events in one reflection
- Not giving enough detail about what happened and how you responded
- Not explaining why you think your future plans will be useful

A good idea is to just focus on *one* development outcome, and just one or two events per reflection. Take the time to explain your thoughts in detail, so that someone can easily follow what happened, how you responded, and why this experience is important to your professional development.

When you write a reflection, you should structure it to emphasise your key idea. Here is a suggested structure for a one-paragraph reflection:

- Topic sentence: What is your overall reflection and how does it relate to the development outcome/s?
- Next sentences: Evidence: Retell, relate, reflect
- Concluding sentences: How did you reach your overall reflection and why is it important?

Now we'll go through some examples to see what to do and what not to do. In the analysis columns you can see what makes the reflections appropriate or not.

### Example 1: A reflection that is too general

Example	Analysis
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<p>Communication skills are an essential part of any workplace. According to Smith (2008, p. 13), communication skills include verbal communication, non-verbal communication like body language and eye contact, and other methods such as emails, phone calls and media releases. The reasons why communication skills are important to companies vary depending on the company type (Patel 2016, p. 45). For example, for a telecommunications company, communication between staff and clients is important to maintain the company's reputation (Ashton 2010, p. 60). As one author emphasises, "clear and positive communication between a spokesperson and the client base ensures that the company remains in good standing" (Zhang 2015, p. 38). Communication between managers to service delivery staff is also essential ...</p>	<p>This example is very general, it doesn't give the student's own personal experience. It is more like an essay, with references to academic sources. Note that you're not expected to use academic sources in your own reflections.</p>
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### Example 2: One that tries to fit too much in

Example	Analysis
<p>Before I started volunteering, I thought I knew a lot about communication skills. However, I quickly realised that communication is very difficult. I learnt this through my interactions with my manager and my fellow volunteers. I also learnt it when I had problems dealing with customers. For example, I realised that when I communicate with customers, I have to speak slowly and also give them written information to take away later. I also developed good resilience from my volunteering experience. For example, I learnt to be resilient when my manager gave me critical feedback on my work, and when my fellow volunteers did not do what I asked them to do. I feel like I developed good leadership skills during my first 20 hours because I took charge of a few different projects, such as the website refresh and the advertising program. These are complex tasks, and I've been given the task of delegating work to the team. Therefore I have learnt much already in my first stage of volunteering!</p>	<p>The first two sentences are good because they indicate the student learnt about communication skills.</p> <p>However, the remaining sentences do not explain clearly <i>how</i> the student learnt those skills. What happened with the manager? What happened with the fellow volunteers and the customers? How did the student learn about the need to speak slowly with customers? A reflection should tell the story of what happened.</p> <p>This reflection tries to cover three development outcomes (communication skills, resilience and leadership skills). It is too much, since the reader doesn't get a full picture of what happened and how the student developed each of those skills. You're better off just focusing on one or at most two outcomes per reflection.</p>

### Example 3: A clear example

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<p><b>Developing communication skills in Volunteers Australia</b></p> <p>During my first 20 hours at Volunteers Australia, I learnt that effective communication can be difficult when staff rely on emails. For example, in my first few hours, my manager emailed me to ask that I file a form. However, they didn't explain where the files were. Because I was new, I felt embarrassed at taking up the manager's time, and I didn't want to ask a stupid question. So, I emailed my peer to ask if they knew where the file was. However, my peer took a couple of hours to respond, and they didn't know where the file was either. I realised that I had to ask my manager. Since I was feeling shy, I emailed the manager rather than talking to them in person. It took the manager an hour to reply to me. All in all it took me over four hours to find an answer to a simple question. I am worried that this made me seem lazy. Next time, I would like to avoid this situation. So, I want to try different methods of communication, and I want to ask questions early on. When my manager next asks me to do something that I am unsure about, I will either phone them or go to ask them in person. My manager is friendly, so I think they will be happy to answer my questions in person. Asking questions will show my manager that I am proactive and care about completing my tasks correctly. In sum, this experience has shown me that relying solely on emails is not an effective communication strategy, and that emails need to be supplemented with verbal communication to clarify expectations, save time, and show that I am dedicated to the work.</p>	<p>This title is informative as it states which development outcome (communication skills) the student will focus on.</p> <p>The topic sentence explains the key reflection – that the student has learnt about the difficulty of email communications. Note that the student introduces both the development outcome (communication skills) and the main example (emails).</p> <p>After the topic sentence, the student explains what happened, how it made them feel, what they did and why they did it. Note that the student explains what happened step-by-step. This helps the reader to easily follow the events.</p> <p>The student then reflects on what they would do differently next time and why. This shows that the student has learnt from their experience. By identifying and giving a rationale for strategies to try next time, the student shows their professional growth.</p> <p>Finally, the student sums up their key reflection. Note that the concluding sentence, like the topic sentence, reminds the reader of the development outcome (communication skills) and what they have learned. The student also reflects on the usefulness of what they have learned.</p>
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