

Reflective Writing

Reflective writing encourages 'metacognition' (thinking about your own thinking) to help you engage more deeply with your learning and development. It helps you to review your progress as a learner and/or practitioner and consider how you might apply, or already have applied, what you have learned to aid your future development. Reflective writing may be set as an assignment, or you might be asked to keep a reflective log for your own purposes. You don't need to write in order to reflect, but it is a good way to 'think out loud' and keep a record of your reflections, and also to demonstrate to lecturers and employers that you can learn from your own experience and evidence development. Reflective writing has some key differences with traditional academic writing, but also some characteristics that are familiar.

Different kinds of reflective writing

There are several different types of reflective assignment, and therefore more than one way to write reflectively. Your assignment might fit clearly into one of these types or blend elements of more than one.

Critical Incident Analysis

This form of reflective writing is common in professional practitioner subjects such as Health and Social care or Teaching. It asks you to look closely at a single event from your own practice (for example, on a placement) that you've identified as challenging in some way. The aim is to analyse why it was challenging for you, evaluate your decisions and actions at the time and identify ways to change your practice or learning which could be implemented in similar circumstances. You might choose to structure a critical incident analysis around a reflective cycle such as Kolb or Gibbs.

Reflective Report

The reflective report is looser in focus and structure than the Critical Incident Report. You might choose to focus on one or more events over a period of time, focussing on an aspect of your practice or emerging themes. The incident or events you select needn't necessarily be a challenging ones, simply something you would find it productive and interesting to reflect on. You could use a chronological approach, base it on one of the reflective models, or decide on a thematic approach, around different aspects of your learning.

Demonstrating Professional Attributes

This type of assignment focusses very much on identifying and evidencing your development, often to specific attributes. It is closely related to the kind of writing you would do in a job application, professional accreditation or annual appraisal. The focus here is about drawing on your experience across your studies or a placement or volunteer work to show how you have developed and met certain criteria, rather than analysing and evaluating your own responses to a challenging incident. A reflective model might be helpful to prompt you to spot opportunities to reflect on and unpack them, but this assignment type is likely to be structured around the attributes you are reflecting on rather than the incident or model.

Reflective Journal or Learning Log

This is an ongoing activity often for the duration of a period of training and development, for example, on a placement or course. It is related to a diary or blog in that it is structured around regular, chronological entries, perhaps weekly. Its purpose is to help you develop the habit of reflecting regularly on your learning during this time to help you get the most out of it. You might be asked to submit the whole of your journal or a sample of entries from it as a portfolio, for assessment. It might be helpful to use a reflective model to underpin each entry.

Case Study

Case studies can be reflective if they are drawing from your own experience, rather than examples from elsewhere. The aim is often to demonstrate that you have understood a theory, concept or model by applying it to your own practice and showing how it explains, typifies or predicts it. A case study is a case example of something in particular, so theory and practice will need to be in balance, and your own experience needs to be directly related to and clearly reflect your understanding of the wider principles.

Reflective Writing Style

Personal

The key difference between reflective writing and most forms of academic writing style is that you are writing in the first person 'I'. Your voice is very present in the text because you are writing about yourself. You have to write 'I' when you are describing things that you did, thought and felt, and things that happened to you: "I did", 'I decided', 'I was frustrated', 'he said to me'. You also write 'I' when you are reflecting on these past events in the present, so you can write 'I think', 'I will', 'I now understand' 'I need to'.

Formality

You are also often quoting or paraphrasing things that you or others said and writing about perceptions and feelings and other 'real life' things that are hard to scientifically quantify or characterise. Your language can therefore be a little less formal than in traditional academic writing: 'he was really annoyed' 'I don't think it matters that much', 'it was just too important'. Reflective writing is still a professional form though, so it needs to keep some formality and neutrality.

Critical analysis

Writing in the first person in a slightly less formal tone can sometimes lead us to overlook the need to be objective and unpack your reasoning for the reader. Reflection can then become a descriptive, unselective account of everything that happened, or a series of unsubstantiated statements which are easy to say, but too generic or too sweeping to be credible.

Reflective writing is still quite academic in that it is critical, reasoned and evidenced, demonstrating higher level thinking beyond description, and your style will demonstrate this. To be critical of your own experience doesn't mean criticising your own performance but to ask yourself critical questions to unpack it fully for yourself and the reader, such as

- Why is that significant? How is it relevant?
- How do I know that? What makes me think that?
- What do I mean by that?
- Why did that happen? What explains that?
- Am I sure of that? How else could I see it?

To help you answer these questions, you will be using evidence and often academic literature as part of your account.

Using Evidence and Theory

You will be presenting evidence in the form of concrete examples from your experience, but these still need to be analysed and interpreted, just as you would for evidence from scholarship and research. Rather than just a list of things you've done with your own assessment of how successful they were, you need to explain and interpret these examples to show how they demonstrate your development and how you know they were successful (or not). It is useful where possible to include external forms of evidence, such as feedback from other people or tangible, measurable outcomes.

You may also be interpreting your experiences in the light of theory, using academic research or professional frameworks to help explain and analyse your experiences, contextualise them in the light of what we know more generally to see if your experience is common, unusual or meeting the criteria, and help underpin your decision making. Reflective writing doesn't always have references to literature in it as it's mainly about you, but bringing in some theory might be helpful, depending on the assignment type.

For more guidance on your learning, book a 1-2-1 tutorial with one of our Writing Development Centre tutors or visit our website for more activities and resources <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/library/resources-and-study-support/writing-development-centre/>

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