

Reflective Writing

What is the purpose of reflective writing?

Many courses require students to write reflective accounts of their performance on different aspects of their courses. This gives them the opportunity to think more deeply than they otherwise would about what they found easy or difficult and why, and what they could do differently in the future. The purpose is to enable students to keep improving throughout their courses.

What should be included?

- **What?:** First of all, it is important to provide some context or background to the activity or event upon which you are going to reflect. Think about what the reader will need to know in order to understand what happened and your role within it. Beware, however, of going into unnecessary detail.
- **Reaction:** Make brief notes of your emotional response to the activity in which you engaged. Was it difficult? Were you interested in finding out more? Were you anxious about a particular aspect? Think about the effect this had on your performance.
- **Evaluation:** Record what went well or badly. Were you better at some aspects than others? How do you know? Give evidence. This might be feedback from peers or tutors. If you are reflecting on a workplace setting, such as a teaching or nursing placement, you might be able to use the reactions of your students or patients as a ways of evaluating your performance.
- **Analysis:** Ask yourself why things went well (or didn't go well!). Try to explain this using theory or other kinds of literature.
- **Future:** The main reason for writing a reflection is to help you improve in future. Therefore, it is not enough simply to note that something went well or badly. Use what happened to come up with a plan for what you will do in a similar situation next time. What have you learnt? Would you change the way you do things?

Initially try writing in response to the above headings. After a while you can decide which particular headings you would like to continue to use in your own logs in order to ensure that they are useful to you and that they meet any assessment criteria that your tutor has indicated. You may also need to change the structure of this plan to make it appropriate to your assignment. For example, if you are required to reflect on a number of activities, it may be best to evaluate and analyse each of them in turn and then write up your future plans in one section at the end. It might also be useful (or required) for you to base your reflection on a reflective model. See the recommended reading in the 'further development' section for references to the most commonly used models.

Common Problems (and how to avoid them)

Leaving it to the last minute

Often you will be required to reflect on something that happened over a period of a few weeks or a term. For example, you may be asked to reflect on your performance in a whole module or on a placement. Therefore, it is important to make notes regularly otherwise when you come to write your reflection at the end of the experience you will probably have forgotten what happened.

Insufficient Focus

Usually you will be asked to reflect on a specific aspect of your performance. This might be your communication skills, for example. Make sure you keep the focus of the assignment in mind when writing.

Writing Style

It is generally acceptable to write in the first person (i.e. you can use “I”) in reflections even though this is not usually the case in other types of assignments. This is because reflections require you to write specifically about yourself. However, the style should still be formal and you should still reference your work appropriately.

Too descriptive

When writing a reflection, it is tempting to go into great detail about what happened, but if you adopt this approach you will end up with something very descriptive. Instead, try to be analytical. Why did things happen the way they did? What are the implications?

Bias and prejudice

When writing about yourself, it is sometimes easy to allow your own biases and prejudices to creep into your work. Don't forget that a reflection is still an academic piece of work. You need to avoid making generalisations and back up your claims with evidence.

Honesty is the best policy!

When writing reflectively it can be difficult to be honest, especially if something has not gone as well as you'd hoped. Remember, you will not lose marks for admitting that you found something difficult. In fact, this will give you something to write about, especially if you can analyse why you struggled and what you've learnt from the experience.

Further Development

A number of writers have developed 'reflective models' that you can use in your own reflections. These models often consist of a series of questions for you to answer. Your tutor may request that you base your reflection on a particular model. The most common ones are listed below:

Brookfield, S.D. (1995) *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Gibbs, G. (1988) *Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods*. Oxford: Further Education Unit, Oxford Polytechnic.

Johns, C. (1995) Framing learning through reflection within Carper's fundamental ways of knowing in nursing. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. 22 (2), 226-234.

Moon, J. (1999) *Learning Journals: a Handbook for Academics, Students and Professional Development*. London: Kogan Page.