

LEARNING AND INFORMATION SERVICES

Guide to Reflective Writing

What is reflective writing?

Reflection is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (2012) as “The action or process of thinking carefully or deeply about a particular subject, typically involving influence from one's past life and experiences.” Reflection is a way of enabling self-development and deeper learning by looking back at an experience so as to learn from it and then move forward. A person may discuss learning from an experience; reflective writing takes this a stage further by putting the reflection into the more permanent and structured format of a written account and linking it to academic theory.

Why write reflectively?

Reflecting on an experience (“Reflection on action”) can help you to make links between theory and practice and between your past and present knowledge. Reflecting on, and learning from your experiences can help you to avoid repeating mistakes and move away from acting automatically without thought: it will help you to identify the successful aspects of an experience, and any useful principles which can be applied to other situations.

Reflective Writing:

- provides a way by which you can make best use of an experience (turning surface learning into deep learning)
- can be used to record your progress throughout your study at University
- can improve your performance by using the outcome of reflection to inform future practice
- is a means of learning by making links between theory and your practice
- is a skill which can continue to help you develop professionally after leaving University

Types of reflective writing

Reflective writing can take different forms. It may be an assessed piece of work that you write for your course in which you include academic theory. Another type of reflective writing is a diary or journal (a learning log) which is written solely for your own benefit, in which you record your thoughts and experiences about your learning experience on a regular basis.

Features of reflective writing

Describing what happened and how you felt is only a small part of reflective writing. The emphasis as you write should be on your analysis and exploration of the experience. Reflective writing differs from most academic writing in that you will use the first person (“I”) to describe the experience and your feelings. Most reflective writing for assignments will also include an academic element so you should



write in the first person ("I felt...") for your own account and in the third person ("Jones (2010) suggests that ...") for the theory.

Use the past tense when writing about what happened and how you felt as you are looking back on the experience (e.g. "I felt..."), but when referring to any academic theory, use the present tense as these ideas are still current (e.g. "Jones argues that...").

As in academic writing, reflective writing requires the use of formal language, arguments supported by evidence, and fully referenced information resources.

Reflective writing looks to the future. You need to show how your reflection on what happened in the past will inform your future practice.

Your analysis of the experience should be linked to academic theory in order to give it credibility.

Getting started with reflective writing

Reflective writing can be more challenging than other forms of writing as it involves writing about feelings (anxieties and mistakes, as well as successes). Describing an event can help you to start writing. The next step is to then ask yourself questions about this event:

Description – What happened? Who was there?

Interpretation/analysis - What did I feel? Why did I respond in the way I did? What are the most important/relevant aspects? How does it link to theory? What went well/what didn't?

Outcome/evaluation - What have I learned? What would I change?

There are various models you can use to help you reflect (Kolb and Gibbs, for example) but if you are required to use a particular model then use that.

Getting started with a learning journal

Your learning journal should not just describe your learning experience, but record your thoughts and feelings about your learning – what you find difficult/easy, how you manage challenges, how your attitude towards learning has changed or developed. Lecturers' feedback could be used to list any improvements in your work or areas that you need to work on in more depth. Try to get into the habit of reflecting on your learning for all of your modules. Reading the chapter on studying effectively in Stella Cottrell's book (see Further Reading) can help you to think about how you learn.

Tips

- Try to stand back from the event and be as objective as possible. You should be as careful in your reflective writing as you would be when writing any other assignment
- Be aware that your reflection on an event can change with the passage of time. As you reflect more and acquire more knowledge then your views may change. Your writing may also be affected by your emotional state at the time of your writing
- Start to write as soon after the event as you can. Delaying your writing may make it difficult for you to recall exactly what happened and how you felt, so your account will not be entirely accurate



- Be honest and admit to any anxieties and mistakes
- Select and use only key events and moments
- Use reflection as a positive that will help you to develop yourself and your skills

References

The Oxford English Dictionary [online] (2012) Oxford: Oxford University Press [Accessed: 4 January 2012]. Available at: <<http://www.oed.com/>>.

Further Reading

Bolton, G. (2010) *Reflective practice: writing and professional development*. 3rd ed. London: Sage.
Cottrell, S. (2008) *The Study Skills Handbook*. 3rd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Williams, K. & Wooliams, M. (2012) *Reflective writing*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.



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