

Reflective Writing

There are a variety of reasons you might need to write reflectively. When you apply for jobs, undertake self-evaluation at work or whilst studying, or when writing a journal or blog you will need to write about your skills, experiences and personality traits. Whilst you are studying at college, you should complete a portfolio which will involve a lot of reflective writing.

What is reflective writing?

Reflective writing can be summarised as looking back at something, thinking about it and learning from it. This could be an event, an idea, or even an object. It is not simply describing something but exploring it. You probably think reflectively all the time without even realising it. Have you ever been late for college and thought “next time I’ll leave 5 minutes earlier”? Then you have thought reflectively!

You have performed an activity, reflected on what happened and thought about how to improve upon it next time. When you do it in your personal life it probably seems easy, you might not even notice you’re doing it. However, when someone asks you to write reflectively you may feel unsure how to do it.

How do you write reflectively?

When writing reflectively it can often be helpful to think about it in depth and from different points of view, this will help you to gain a full understanding of it. While doing this you will be able to think about what this means to you – that is what makes it reflective. There are lots of questions you can ask yourself which will help you to think reflectively.

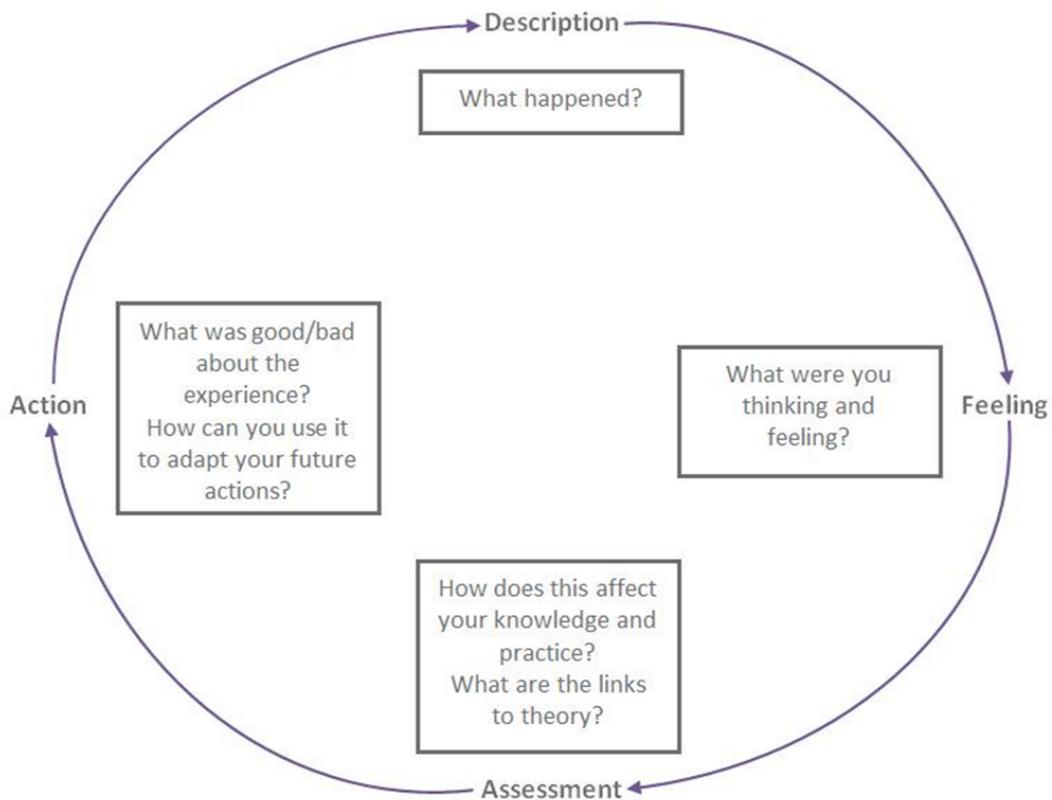
- Is it an important part of your academic or working life?
- How did you feel about what you did/saw?
- Has it given you insight that you did not previously have?
- Did it reveal anything about you as a learner/worker?
- Are there any implications for your future work?
- Is there anything you would do differently in the future? Why?
- Has it allowed you to develop or more easily identify your skills?

The kinds of questions listed here make reflective writing a lot more personal than most of the other types of writing you will be expected to do at college or work, but just because it is about you doesn’t mean it is easy. It is often hard to write about yourself because you need to be able to pick out your strengths and weaknesses.

This can sometimes feel like you’re being a show-off or that by pointing out your weaknesses you will show yourself in a negative light. Learning to think reflectively may help you to overcome these concerns.

Stages of Reflective Writing

The process of thinking reflectively can be broken down into 4 stages which are illustrated in the diagram below:



Thinking about it in this structured way may help you to feel more comfortable saying positive or negative things about yourself. Remember, if you are writing for college you will be relating your experiences back to what you have learnt in class, if you are writing for an application form or CV then you will relate it back to your skills or experiences. This will allow you to be objective about the more personal elements of your working and learning practices.

Using reflective language?

When you write reflectively there are some key differences from how you would write the rest of your college assignments. The table below lists some of them:

Reflective Writing	Academic Writing
Personal	Impersonal
Your own views	The views of others
1st person	3rd person
Active voice	Passive voice
Contemplates	Argues
Find solutions	Compares and contrasts

When you are used to writing objectively, in the 3rd person (“It can be argued that...”) it can seem very strange to suddenly start using “I” in your work. However, if it is something that happened to you, something that you felt, saw or did, then you can speak in the 1st person.

The purpose is to reflect on your own experience, not the experiences of others, which is how you would usually approach your college assignments, so it is perfectly valid to use 1st person pronouns such as “I”, “we”, “me” and “us” in your work.

However, it is important to remember that your reflective assignments should still be academic. They should not be informal in style in the same way you would write an email or a text message to a friend. They should still follow a coherent structure with a clear beginning, middle and end.

The next section provides examples of how to organise your language in reflective writing. This should help you to construct your sentences and keep your structure coherent.

Reflective vocabulary

It is important to include language which highlights the various stages of the reflective process. You should begin by including a brief description. Be careful to keep this fairly short by only focusing on the significant details, such as who, when, where, why and how.

The phrases below will help you to show how you interpreted the issue being discussed:

For me, the	meaningful	aspect	was
	significant	element	arose from
	important	issue	happened when
	relevant	idea	resulted from
	useful	experience	
		learning	

You should then try to tell your reader how this affected you and your understanding:

Previously	I	thought	that
At the time		felt	why
At first		knew	how
Initially		noticed	if
Subsequently		questioned	
Later		realised	

Following this, try to explain why you understood it in that way:

This	might be	because	of
	is perhaps	due	to
	could be	explained	by
	is probably	related	

You can then tell your reader how this has allowed you to develop your practice or understanding:

Having	reflected on	I now	feel
	analysed		think
	read		realise
	understood		wonder
	developed		question

And what effect it will have on your future practice or understanding

I	can	now	improve(d)
	will	to	understand
	have		gain(ed)
	am able		better
			use
			develop

Using evidence in reflective writing

When writing reflectively for your college work remember that you are trying to make links between what you learn from your reading and lectures with your practical experiences. If you are writing for an application you still need to make links between the skill or ability you are discussing and your previous experiences of using them. Both what you do and what you know can be used as evidence, but they should be linked together. This will help you to present a full representation of your experience and practice.

There are three key things you should remember when you are writing reflectively:

Be selective: Don't try to write about every single incident or observation. Pick out a few key aspects or examples and reflect on your understanding.

Discuss: Talking to others will help you to deepen your understanding and explore a range of different views.

Evidence: You should back up your arguments with evidence even when you are speaking from personal experience. In your college work this will come from your reading and in applications from your previous experiences of using your skills and abilities.

Why is reflective writing important?

Writing reflectively will allow you to develop an understanding of how you learn and what you know. This understanding of your own knowledge is called metacognition. Metacognition means thinking about thinking.

Being aware of your own thought processes, behaviours and learning habits will allow you to develop better ones. You will be able to identify your strengths and weakness, and recognise where you have skills and where they may need further development

This will enable you to become a more successful learner or improve upon your practical skills in the workplace

It will also help you to tell your lecturers and employers what you're good at or why you are valuable. This can also aid you when writing job, college and university applications as you will be better equipped to explain why you are a suitable candidate.

The following section contains information on the different types of reflective writing you might undertake and tips on how to approach them.

Reflective Writing Formats

Reflective Essays

As with all essays you should begin by examining the question and identifying any direction words. This will help you to determine the main event or experience you need to reflect upon, and how you should approach it in relation to your studies. You should structure your essay clearly with an introduction, a main body and a conclusion

Introduction

In your introduction you should set the scene for your essay. This will involve providing a description of the event – who, what, when, where and why it happened. You should also note down the main issues you have identified, and provide a brief explanation of how they will be addressed throughout your essay.

Main Body

The main body of your essay should be made up of a few paragraphs. Each paragraph should address one key issue, and it is a good idea to use the stages of reflective thinking as the basis for your structure:

- Describe the issues identified
- Discuss your feelings about it. Was it good or bad?
- Assess how it affects your understanding or practice and how it can be linked to your learning
- Explain how it will affect your actions

As with all of your other college assignments, you should make sure you link each paragraph to the next. This will help to ensure your essay has a coherent structure

Conclusion

Your conclusion should draw together all of the main points covered in your essay. You should aim to explicitly answer any questions which have been raised by linking directly back to the title of the essay. Try to summarise the most significant things you have learnt from the process. It is important to end by summarising any actions you will take to improve upon your future knowledge and practice.

For more information on essay planning and writing please pick up a copy of our Writing guide.

Reflective Journals

You will sometimes be asked to keep a record of your learning processes. Keeping a journal will allow you to make a timely record of events, feelings, reflections and practice. The act of keeping a journal can allow you some freedom in terms of how you log your records. You can use images, sound and video files, and written records to log your journal.

The flexibility of a journal means you can capture evidence, ideas and thoughts in a wide variety of ways which can make it very practical to log your thoughts at the time. However, always check with your lecturer as they may have specific formats they would like you to follow.

Although reflective journals can allow you a lot of freedom, there are some guidelines you should try to follow regardless of format:

- Try to set aside regular time to make your journal entries, as well as spur of the moment logs
- Try to avoid censoring your accounts, be honest about your thoughts, feeling and actions
- Style, grammar and organisation are not the main concern, but if you are submitting the document do proofread it beforehand
- Keep your journal in a safe, secure place, particularly if you are using sensitive or confidential data
- If you are talking about people in your reflective work, make sure you do not mention them by name unless you have their permission to do so

One of the key benefits of keeping a reflective journal is it allows you to easily identify patterns and significant events. This can give you detailed insight into your knowledge and practice. Even if you have not been asked to keep a journal, it is often a good idea to have one for your own purposes.

By reflecting on yourself you can become a better, more productive learner or practitioner.

PDPs

A PDP (personal development plan) is a log in which you reflect upon your personal achievements and progress. It is used to help you to set yourself targets and reflect on how your current and past achievements will allow you to progress on to your future goals.

It helps you reflect on your skills and abilities and make informed choices about your future. Unlike a journal, it is a structured way of reflecting which uses questions, prompts, activities and organised discussions.

Your lecturer will usually direct you to materials and the timeframes within which you will achieve specific elements of the PDP. Whilst at college you may be asked to use Mahara to construct your PDP. Mahara is a piece of software with which you can build an e-portfolio, allowing you to collect, reflect on and share your developments and achievements online

Blogs

A blog is a type of website on which information is regularly published. The uploaded entries of text and images are known as posts and are listed in chronological order, with the newest post at the top of the webpage.

Who writes and reads a blog?

A blog is usually created by a single person known as a blogger, although they can be run by groups with several authors contributing to one blog. They cover a diverse range of topics including politics, arts, education and personal interests.

Blogs can be open for anyone to read or restricted to authorised individuals. Some blogs allow readers to leave comments on the posts.

How would a blog help with my coursework?

Blogs are a useful way of storing research ideas and thought processes, along with receiving constructive feedback on your work. Writing regularly for an online audience can help improve your writing skills. If you prefer to work visually, blog posts can contain mainly images and can be a useful method of recording and presenting the progress of your work, for example, an artwork or design project. Remember, just as with other formats, it is important to maintain confidentiality when writing for an online audience.

Setting up a blog is fairly simple and free through sites such as Wordpress and Blogger. If required, some blogs can be password protected to allow access to authorised readers only which would be particularly useful if a blog was being used as a communication tool for group work.

Personal statement for college

You may have to complete a personal statement during the application process for college or other study. This helps lecturers decide who is best suited to the course, identify the candidates who are most enthusiastic and it allows you to explain why you are applying to the specific course.

When you apply for your course, you will have seen the following information assisting with what to put in your personal statement:

Your statement can be no more than 4000 characters including spaces. You have 30 minutes to complete this section, if you think you will take longer than this then please click on the save button, at the bottom left hand corner of the screen (it looks like a computer disk), to ensure you do not lose any information.

Previous page	Further Information	Next page
<p>* Please tell us any relevant information to your application, which is not given elsewhere in the form. For example; REASON FOR COURSE CHOICE, CAREER OBJECTIVES, RELEVANT PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT, SOCIAL INTERESTS AND HOBBIES or SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENTS. You must enter something here but there is no particular length it has to be. Please remember that some courses do not hold interviews and the more you tell us about yourself here, the easier it is for us to assess your application.</p>		

Personal statement for UCAS

The UCAS personal statement is a 47 line (or 4000 character) piece of writing that allows you to tell the universities and colleges you are applying to why they should offer you a place on the course.

In order to do this successfully, you need to convey your passion and enthusiasm for the subject to the admissions tutors, as well as demonstrate your suitability for the course.

UCAS has an excellent website that will guide you through every step of the process, including a personal statement worksheet, mind map and timeline. To visit the site go to www.ucas.com

It is recommended you use this site to help you write your personal statement. Below are some top tips that will help you during this process:

- Don't copy someone else's statement. UCAS use detection software that allows them to check all applications. Students found cheating will have their application rejected and it looks really bad to the prospective colleges and universities – if you cheat at your personal statement they will think you will do the same for essays and submissions. This is known as plagiarism – you can find out more about this in our Referencing guide
- Proof the document before you send it to check the spelling, grammar and punctuation – it creates a poor first impression if there are easily avoidable mistakes
- Check the Course Entry Profile before you write your statement as this will help give you some ideas of what to include in your statement
- Remember to concentrate on why you're applying and why you're suitable for the course

Personal statement for CVs and job applications

Your personal statement in your CV should give an overview of the relevant skills you've gained whilst studying and during work experience. This section should be positive, focusing on key areas that employers look for.

A well written statement should be concise, written in the 1st person and be between 50 and 200 words. Remember to check for character or word counts if you are applying online, they should give you an indication of how long the statement is expected to be.

Remember you can use a covering letter to include interesting and engaging information which will encourage employers to read your CV fully. For more information, see our Searching and Applying for Jobs guide.

As a general rule, it's best to break the statement into three sections:

Who you are

For example:

As a recent graduate from Dundee and Angus College, with a HNC in Childcare, I have undertaken several work placements within local nurseries such as Scallywags and Oranges and Lemons. These placements have enabled me to develop not only specific childcare experience, but also a valuable and transferable skill set in this sector.

The above opening statement has allowed the recruiter to quickly identify your qualifications, and also shows that you have had relevant experience and core transferable skills

What you can bring to the organisation

For example:

During a placement with Scallywags, I worked within the baby room contributing to projects such as the award-winning Sensory Garden. I also played a key role in the evaluation of this project, developing a questionnaire suitable for both parents and children and participated in focus group project meetings. Utilising my excellent communication skills, I developed and maintained successful relationships with both the nursery staff and the parents.

When you apply for a job there will usually be a person specification, in which they describe the exact skills and qualities they are looking for. The example above allows an employer to easily identify the relevant skills you have and an example has been provided of how that skill is used in practice.

Your career aim

For example:

I am looking to secure a position in a nursery, where I can bring a positive, enthusiastic and caring attitude and develop my current skill set further. Your organisation is the type of supportive, child-focused environment in which I can see myself developing my skills and knowledge.

This section will tell your potential employers that you have a serious interest in working in that area. It will also tell them a little bit about your personality and character traits, and how they relate well to the specific role and organisation.

A final word

This guide should have covered most of the examples of reflective writing you will be expected to do for work or college, but there may be some other occasions where you will be asked to write reflectively. By following the advice in this guide you should be able to write reflectively in any context. However, if you are unsure of how to approach a reflective task always ask your lecturer or a member of the Learning Resources team for help.

Further reading

The Learning Resources team offers several guides to help you with your studies. Below are some of the guides that will be helpful when constructing your essays and assignments.

