



Reflective Writing Guide

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Contents

What is Reflective Writing?	2
What Reflective Writing is Not	2
How to Think Reflectively	3
Freewriting.....	4
Writing a Reflective Assignment	4
Reflective Language	4
Planning the Structure	5
Models of Reflection.....	6
Kolb's Reflective Model (1984)	6
Gibb's Reflective Model	7
Schon's Reflection Model (1991).....	7
Further Reading	8

What is Reflective Writing?



Reflective writing involves putting into writing your reflective thinking. The 'thinking' is the important part of the process, the 'writing' is simply documenting your thinking. It involves looking at an experience, analysing what happened and how it has impacted you and your work, and writing about how you will learn from and use this experience in the future.

Unlike other types of academic writing, reflective writing requires you to place your thoughts and opinions centre stage. Though the style may be different to other academic assignments it is still important to support opinions with evidence and analysis.

In her book on reflective writing Williams (2017, p.2) describes being reflective as being:

- Open to different ideas
- Curious and asking questions
- Patient to understand that the answer may take time to find
- Honest with yourself about your uncertainties, successes, and failures
- Rigorous in how you analyse your insights

In reflective writing you and your thinking are more visible than in other styles of writing. Your personal journey is the focus of the writing, what you have done and thought, changes to your mindset along the way and what you will do next.

What Reflective Writing is Not

Before beginning it is useful to look at the pitfalls of reflective writing.


Many people make the mistake of assuming that reflective writing involves looking at a situation and listing what happened, when, where and with whom. The assignment can often go along the lines of "I did this, and I did that with such a person in this place", following a timeline of events.

However, this is simply being descriptive. A descriptive timeline is good for putting your reflections into context but should only provide a short introduction to the wider reflection.



How to Think Reflectively

To be truly reflective you need to examine your thoughts and feelings around an experience or situation.

 Thoughts <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What were your thoughts during and after the situation?• Did you have any concerns?• Did your outlook change during the process?	 Feelings <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How did you feel both during and after the situation?• Were you comfortable?• Did you feel confident?• Were you worried or upset by particular details?
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You must not fall into the trap of being simply descriptive, typically a reflective piece is made up of a series of short descriptions that are then followed by a lot of reflection. Instead of taking the descriptive approach of what, when, who and where to be truly reflective you need to answer three questions:

Answer these questions to be truly reflective:

Why?

Why did you decide to act in the way that you did?

How?

How will you use what you have learned in future situations

So What?

You've learned something, what now? How does it help you?



Based on: Skills Team University of Hull (2015) Reflective Writing.
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QoI67VeE3ds&t=142s> (Accessed: 15 August 2022)

To help get you on the road to reflection it is a good idea to consult your learning objectives and outcomes for this section of the course. This will help you understand what is expected of you. Then make a list of questions relevant to the experience you are reflecting on, and which relate to your thoughts and feelings of the experience and that include the Why, How and So What.

Freewriting

Freewriting is a helpful process to engage in if you find yourself struggling to put words on paper for your reflective piece. Freewriting simply involves setting a timer for ten minutes and then just writing down whatever comes to mind around your topic during that time. You don't need to worry about structure, grammar or even if your writing is making sense. Once the ten minutes is up you can review what you have written and identify any points of interest that you can expand on for your assignment.

Writing a Reflective Assignment

In her book McMillan (2012) lists the following as key aspects of reflective writing:

- The writing style is personal rather than detached
- Reflective writing is a part of a thinking process rather than being the outcome of the process
- The subject matter is less controlled; much of the content depends on the writer rather than the title assigned by a faculty member

What you must remember when writing a reflective assignment is that you are still writing an academic assignment so you need to be as rigorous and thorough as you would be for any other academic assignment.

Reflective Language

The language to be used in a reflective writing assignment can often be confusing for participants. Normally academic assignments require the writer to be objective, whereas a reflective assignment requires you to be subjective. This table illustrates the differences between the two styles:

Objective Writing	Subjective Writing
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Based on a consideration of the facts• Avoids the use of the first person <p>e.g. "It has been shown that..."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Based on personal opinions and experiences• Requires the use of the first person <p>e.g. "I felt this was the right decision..."</p>

General language points

- Use 'I' and other personal pronouns; reflections are centred around you.
- Use subject-specific language and terminology; use the same language as you would in an essay, just centred around your own experiences.
- Use succinct and formal language.

With a reflective assignment you are evaluating a situation. It can be hard, when writing a reflective assignment, not to keep starting your sentences with the same words and language. Here are some phrases to help you vary the language you use:

For me...	Because of this I was	I have developed...
I felt...	prompted to...	I have learned that...
I believed that...	In this situation I could	Next time I would...
After thinking about it...	have...	I hope to be able to...

Planning the Structure

Like a normal academic essay, you can structure your reflective assignment into the three constituent parts of introduction, main body, and conclusion.

3 PART STRUCTURE

INTRODUCTION

- Identify and introduce the learning or experience that you will be reflecting on
- Why was it important
- Outline key themes

MAIN BODY

- Explore the experience
- Analyse and reflect on that experience
- Speak to the learning outcomes of the experience

CONCLUSION

- Restate your learning from the experience
- How will you change your behaviour based on the experience

For further information on planning assignments, breaking down your word count and paragraph structuring, please refer to our Assignment Guide [here](#).

Models of Reflection

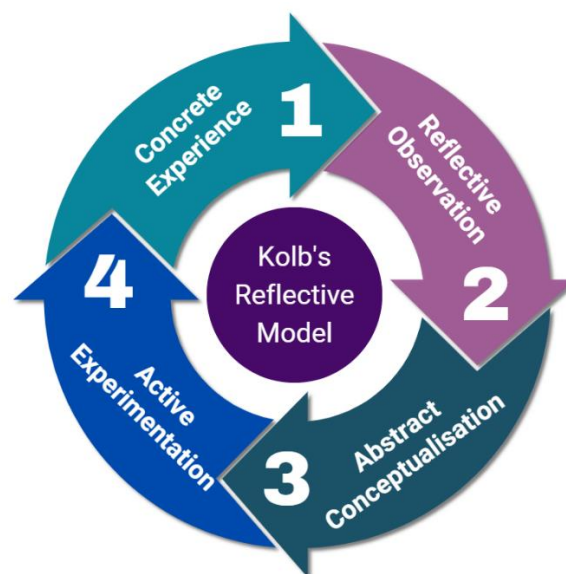
It can be very useful, when writing a reflective assignment, to use a model of reflection to help guide the structure of your writing. There are several models of reflection that you can use to help you structure your assignment and focus your thoughts. These include:

- Kolb's Reflective Model (1984)
- Gibbs's Reflective Model (1988)
- Schon's Reflective Model (1991)

Whichever model of reflection you choose make sure that you follow this model throughout your reflective assignment to maintain consistency. It is also important that you cite the model from the outset so that readers will understand the form behind your assignment.

Kolb's Reflective Model (1984)

Kolb's experiential learning model is made up of a four-stage cycle which can be followed from the point of having an experience and leads in the fourth stage to applying what you have learned from the experience.



1. Concrete Experience: think about and write down an experience reflecting on the situation, your feelings at the time and what you think about it.
2. Reflective Observation: ask yourself what worked well in the experience, what didn't work, how do you account for this, what shaped your experience.
3. Abstract Conceptualisation: take your reflection to a deeper level by trying to understand why you think the experience went the way that it did.
4. Active Experimentation: use your learnings from your reflection on the experience to plan how to react to a similar situation in the future.

Gibb's Reflective Model

Gibb's reflective model is a helpful way of breaking down your experience to structure it as a part of an assignment. It involves looking at the experience through 6 stages:



1. Description: describe what happened
2. Feelings: what were you thinking and feeling during the experience
3. Evaluation: what was good and bad about the experience
4. Analyses: what sense can you make of it
5. Conclusion: what else could you have done
6. Action Plan: if it occurs again what would you do differently

Schon's Reflection Model (1991)

The Schon reflective model breaks the process down into two stages, reflection in action and reflection on action.

Reflection IN action



- The experience itself
- Thinking about it during the event
- Deciding how to act at the time
- Acting immediately

Reflection ON action



- Reflecting on something that happened
- Thinking about what you might do differently if it happened again
- New information or theoretical perspectives gained that informs a reflector's experience and can be used to process feelings and actions

This model is particularly useful in situations where you need to think on your feet and try something different when a situation is not going the way that you planned.

Further Reading

McMillan, K. (2012) *How to Improve Your Critical Thinking & Reflective Skills*. [N.p.]: Pearson (Smarter Study Skills). Available at:
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=nlebk&AN=1417873&site=ehost-live&scope=site> (Accessed: 25 July 2022).

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Kate Williams, Mary Woolliams and Jane Spiro (2012) *Reflective Writing*. [N.p.]: Palgrave Macmillan (Pocket Study Skills). Available at:
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=nlebk&AN=1524142&site=ehost-live&scope=site> (Accessed: 10 January 2023).