

A short guide to reflective writing



What is reflection, and why is it important?

Reflection is a purposeful activity in which you analyse experiences, or your own practice/skills/responses, in order to learn and improve.

Reflection in academia

We reflect quite naturally in our day to day lives, thinking about things that have happened, why they happened, whether we handled them well. In academia, you may be asked to formalise your reflections to show that learning is taking place.

This may involve:

- Reflecting on your own professional or academic practice
- Scrutinising an experience and the way you dealt with it
- Evaluating a project or experiment and considering how to do it better next time
- Reflecting on things you have read and linking theory with practice/reality

‘It is not sufficient to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting on this experience it may quickly be forgotten, or its learning potential lost.’ (Gibbs, 1988, p9)

Helping yourself to reflect

Keeping a reflective learning journal

You may want to consider keeping a learning journal, as a form of informal, regular reflection. Below is an example of one way of approaching it.

Example entry in a learning journal

<i>Event</i>	<i>Attended first ever seminar</i>
<i>What did I learn?</i>	<i>Discussing ideas made me realise there are many ways of reading a piece of literature. I was surprised by other people's interpretations, but the ones who convinced me were those who linked their interpretations to specific parts of the text.</i>
<i>What went well?</i>	<i>Made some contributions. They were mainly responses to other people's ideas but I was glad I took part and it made me think more deeply about the novel.</i>
<i>What could I have done better?</i>	<i>Could have been braver in forming own interpretations. Had a preconception that there was a right or wrong way to read the text. In future I want to open my mind more.</i>
<i>Long-term implications</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>* Now realise that there are many ways of reading a text - and if you can find evidence, you can convince people of your perspective</i> <i>* Useful for essays - putting forward a unique viewpoint is possible as long as you have persuasive reasoning.</i>

Models of reflection

There are frameworks that you can use to aid your reflective process. Alternatively, you may want to create your own. It needs to be a set of questions that you can ask yourself about an experience, plus a process by which you apply and learn from your reflection. Here are just two examples of models of reflection:

1

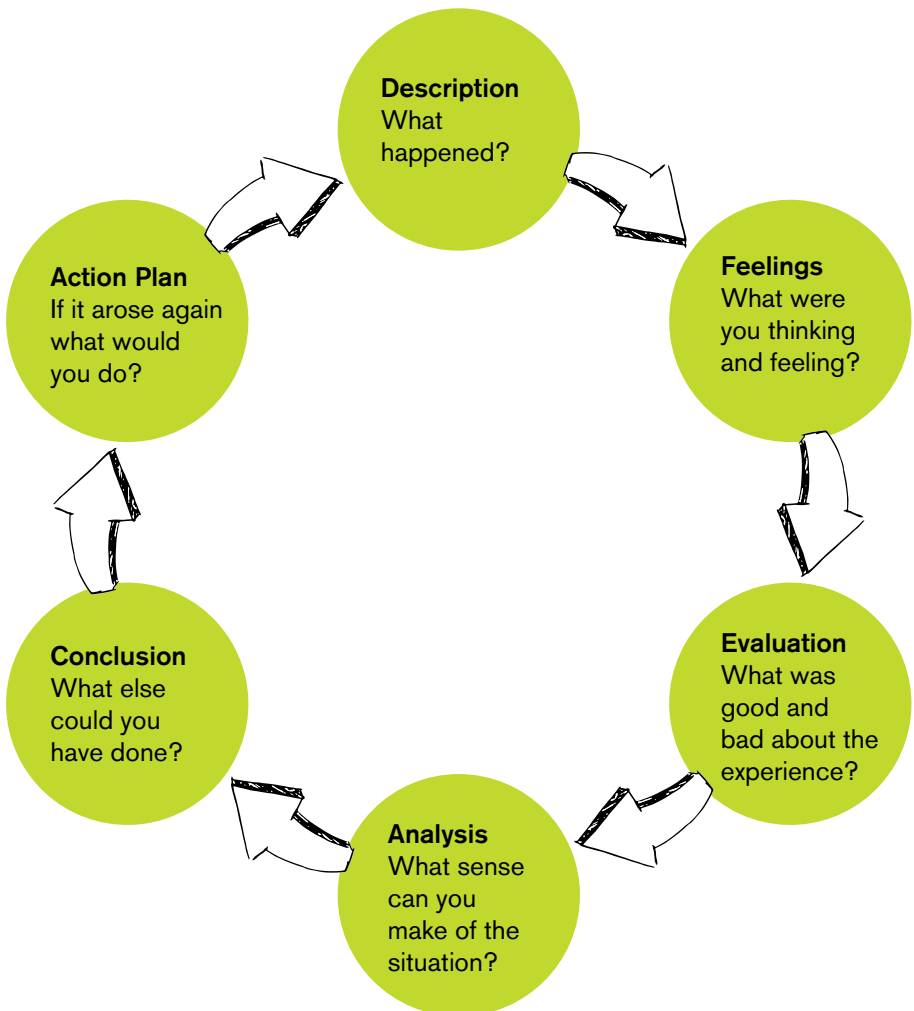
Reflection before, during and after a learning process (Schön, 1983)

Before an experience	During an experience	After an experience
What do you think might happen?	What's happening now, as you make rapid decisions?	What are your insights immediately after, and/or later when you have more emotional distance from the event?
What might be the challenges?	Is it working out as I expected?	In retrospect how did it go?
What do I need to know or do in order to be best prepared for these experiences?	Am I dealing with the challenges well?	What did I particularly value and why?
	Is there anything I should do, say or think to make the experience successful?	Is there anything I would do differently before or during a similar event?
	What am I learning from this?	What have I learnt?

2

Gibbs' Reflective Cycle

Graham Gibbs (1988) created a reflective learning cycle, including the role of feelings:



Reflective writing for an assignment

Writing reflectively for the purposes of an assignment should not involve merely describing something that happened. Nor does it mean pouring out everything you think and feel in a totally unstructured way. Reflective writing requires a clear line of thought, use of evidence or examples to illustrate your reflections, and an analytical approach.

You are aiming to strike a balance between your personal perspective, and the requirements of good academic practice and rigorous thinking. This means:

- developing a perspective, or line of reasoning
- demonstrating that you are well informed, have read relevant literature and reflected on its relevance to your own development
- showing that you recognise that situations are rarely simple and clear-cut
- writing about the link between your experiences/practice and your reading
- writing in an appropriate style.

As an example, consider the extract below, which is from a nursing student's reflective essay. Consider how the writer develops a line of reasoning based on their own thoughts and experiences, and then links it to wider reading.

Please remember: different disciplines have different requirements and styles. This is an example of just one approach.

Example Extract

During term one I found myself inwardly questioning the reliability and validity of scientific journals, as I came across conflicting studies and contradictory data in our weekly research and feedback sessions.

I was surprised at how other members of the group appeared to automatically trust the content of peer-reviewed journals and I sometimes felt that what was presented back to the group was accepted as factual as long as there was a reference attached.

This prompted me to read into what I now realise is referred to as publication bias and has been

widely documented in recent years. For example, Dawes (2005) argues that, although reputable journals adopt a robust peer review process, articles still get published with significant flaws:

'Journals have to publish to survive and they want to publish articles that deal with topical important issues of the day. Sometimes this imperative overrides the critical review process.' (Dawes 2005:6)

Furthermore, Brooks (1997:46) highlights the fact that statistical significance increases the likelihood of a researcher's work being published, which might tempt some researchers to tamper with the data.

I did not want to appear cynical to the rest of the group and kept these concerns to myself, which on reflection I perhaps could have volunteered for discussion. Instead I felt that in order to construct an accurate care plan at the end of each scenario I had to adopt a more robust approach in selecting appropriate journal texts.

After these realisations, I found it more helpful to employ the use of meta-analyses and systematic reviews for assessing research. I found that using systematic reviews saved time searching through numerous journals, and I found the Cochrane Library a useful electronic information source.

Conclusion

Reflection is a useful process even if you have not been set a specific reflective assignment. It helps you to make sense of and learn from your experiences.

Many degrees involve assessed reflective writing. This is to allow you to demonstrate that you can think critically about your own skills or practice, in order to improve and learn. It is important to analyse rather than just describe the things you are reflecting on, and to emphasise how you will apply what you have learned.

Further reading and references

Books:

Gibbs, G (1988). **Learning by doing: a guide to teaching and learning methods.** Oxford: Further Education Unit, Oxford Polytechnic.

Honey, P and Mumford, A (1986).
In Mumford, A, **Effective Learning.**
London: IPD.

Schön, D (1983). **The reflective practitioner: how professionals think in action.** New York: Basic Books.

Williams, K, Woolliams, M and Spiro, J
(2012). **Reflective Writing.** Basingstoke:
Palgrave MacMillan.

Online resources:

Open University, Skills for OU Study. **Be aware of your habits.** [online]. Available at:
[www2.open.ac.uk/students/skillsforstudy/
be-aware-of-your-habits.php](http://www2.open.ac.uk/students/skillsforstudy/be-aware-of-your-habits.php)
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Plymouth University, Learning Development.
(2010) **Reflection** [online]. Available at:
[www.learningdevelopment.plymouth.ac.uk/
LDstudyguides/pdf/11Reflection.pdf](http://www.learningdevelopment.plymouth.ac.uk/LDstudyguides/pdf/11Reflection.pdf)
[Accessed 5 July 2012]

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