

Critical Reflective Writing

When writing reflectively you, the writer, are the primary subject. As such, your own thoughts, feelings, and experiences should form the bulk of the examples you use. However, it is essential to understand that the purpose of writing reflectively is not merely to describe your experiences, but rather to *understand* your experiences and your reactions to them, with a goal of personal growth and transformation. Critically exploring your own values, beliefs, and practices, in a structured and explicit way, facilitates life-long learning and allows you to develop as a practitioner. As Maya Angelou said, “Now I know better, I do better.” As reflective writing is a formal academic genre, it is important that you still use published theory against which to reflect and analyse your experiences, with a coherent and cohesive written structure. For some people, critical self-reflection comes quite naturally, while for others it requires a bit more work. Here are four different models you can use, to make sure that you are not just superficially describing experiences but engaging meaningfully for personal development.

The 3 What's?

1. **The What?** A description of the experience - who, what, why, when, where?
2. **So What?** How was this significant to you? What were your actions or emotions?
3. **Now What?** What would you do differently? Why? What are key lessons you learnt?

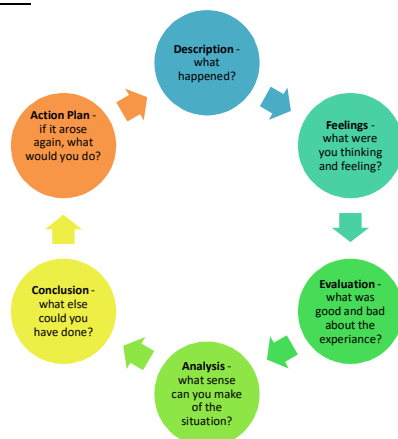
DEAL

1. **Describe** experience(s) objectively.
2. **Examine** experience from an academic perspective using theory.
3. **Articulate Learning**

The 4 Steps

1. **Recount** the experience.
2. **Describe** your thoughts, feelings and responses.
3. **Explain** why you reacted as you did.
4. **Discuss** what you would do differently in the future and why.

The Gibbs Reflective Cycle



The Reflective Process

Reflective writing is a process that facilitates a deep, transformative, and unique learning experience. The insights you will gain about yourself as you engage in the reflective process are not things that can be learnt in a book or taught in a classroom. It is therefore important that you work carefully through a drafting process to identify what you have learnt and how you have developed.

When you begin your reflection, you don't yet know what will emerge as important, so start with a broad general description of the experience you are reflecting on. As you write, you will find yourself drawn to describing certain aspects in greater detail than others. This is good, as it will start to help you identify which aspects of the experience were most significant for you.

Our thoughts and feelings motivate our behaviours and actions, and consequently the results of our behaviours will lead us to new thoughts, feelings, and hopefully new behaviours. Reflect on your thoughts and feelings prior to the experience. Next consider your thoughts and feelings during the experience, and finally after the experience. Firstly, ask yourself how your thoughts and feelings motivated your behaviour and actions? Next ask yourself if your thoughts and feelings have changed from before to during and then after the experience?

Moments of change often signal moments of learning. Focus on the moments at which your thoughts or feelings changed and explore these in more detail. How did your behaviour or actions relate to these moments of change? What kind of result or response did you receive from those around you? What worked well? What could be improved upon?

A critical academic reflection requires you to use academic literature to help you analyse your experience more fully. Consider what literature has to contribute to the analysis of your experience?

Finally, it is time to apply what you have learnt and plan for the future. If you were faced with a similar experience again, what would you do differently to achieve a better result or response? Try to develop a practical plan for how you will approach or do things differently in the future that shows evidence of your professional and personal development.

Reflective Language

When you write reflectively you are drawing on your own experiences, thoughts, and feelings to understand a situation and/or yourself more fully. However, you must remember that those who read your reflection will not have access to your memories and they will rely entirely on what you write to try and understand the experience as you describe it, empathise with your analysis, and be convinced of your personal and professional development. Therefore, as you write reflectively, you can consciously shift your language and tone to help your reader follow your reflective journey.

When describing

- Clarity is important. E.g. 'Some people' vs 'A few people'.
- Use meaningful descriptive words. E.g. Significant vs Important.
- Consider the context. Think about how you chose to describe your experience – what do your language choices tell you (and your reader) about your assumptions? Your biases? E.g. 'A vibrant, bustling area' vs 'An informal settlement' vs 'A squatter camp'

When writing about feelings

- Use 'thinking' and 'feeling' words. E.g. thought; realised; sensed; experienced; felt....
- Use personal pronouns to make it clear to the reader you are drawing on your own experiences. E.g. I feel...; I realised...; It became clear to me that...; My experience....
- Be consistent with the tone of the paragraph. E.g. try not to switch back and forth between the first and third person with a single paragraph.
- Use transitional language to make a sequence of events or realisations clear to the reader. E.g. then; next; subsequently; afterwards; finally; lastly...

When evaluating

- Use comparative language. E.g. similarly, unlike, previously...

When analysing

- Use disciplinary/technical language
- Use analytical language. E.g. because, as a result, critically, represent, support, imply...
- Integrate theory (and reference!)

When concluding

- Draw the reader's attention to noteworthy findings. E.g. The most important realisation was... The relevant issue is... The focus needs to be on....

When developing an action plan

- Use words that indicate the future. E.g. will, may, should, could....

Gibbs, G., 1988. *Learning by doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*.

Ryan, M., 2011. Improving reflective writing in higher education: a social semiotic perspective.

Teaching in Higher Education, 16:1, 99-111.

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