Reflective Writing

What is reflective writing in an academic context?

Reflective writing assignments give you the opportunity to gain further insight from personal and professional experience. Reflective writing should, therefore, reflect movement back and forth between the objective and the subjective, the world and your perspective on it. In order to convey your conclusions, insights, and opinions, for most reflective writing assignments you may choose to use the first-person perspective or ‘I’ voice. The most important aspect of engaging in reflective writing in an academic context is that you demonstrate a changed conceptual perspective.

What is the role of theorising in reflective writing?

The process of preparing a piece of reflective writing should lead to more than just an increase in your knowledge, as it should also deploy theoretical reading that challenges the concepts by which you make sense of this knowledge. When reflecting on an experience, you do not merely see more. Rather, you see differently. Theoretical reading helps you achieve this different way of seeing, which should be reflected in statements that communicate a commitment to action. Action represents the final stage of reflection (Atkins and Murphy 1994). Reflective writing helps you to translate the particular terms of an experience into the shared terms of a wider conclusion. This conclusion takes its initial cues from, but does not dwell entirely on, your personal and professional experience.

Reflective writing draws on:
- Your experience
- Your knowledge
- Your attitude
- Your perspective

You are the primary source
Getting started
You may wish to consider these questions:

- What experience do I want to discuss?
- How does this experience relate to my course of study?
- What have I read on this subject already?
- How can I use my experience to support my insights?
- What are the limits of my experience?
- How do these limits suggest opportunities for personal and professional growth through reflective writing?

The Gibbs Reflective Cycle (1988)

Description
*What happened?*

Action plan
*If it arose again what would you do?*

Feelings
*What were you thinking and feeling?*

Conclusion
*What else could you have done?*

Evaluation
*What was good and bad about the experience?*

Analysis
*What sense can you make of the situation?*
Example

Here is an example of a student's reflective writing:

*During an internship that I held over the summer holiday, several tasks were divided between members of my team. However, these tasks were not immediately understood as similarly difficult by everyone. Our morale was at risk because of this perceived inequality. Social interdependence theory distinguishes between a type of group interaction called 'positive interdependence', a form of successful collaboration (Johnson and Johnson 1993, cited by Maughan and Webb 2001), and many studies have demonstrated that 'co-operative learning experiences encourage higher achievement' (Maughan and Webb 2001). In the end, our team did achieve a successful outcome. To improve the process, though, we could have used a chairperson to encourage cooperation as the tasks were being distributed. If it seems appropriate in future group work, I might suggest making this addition to the team.*

This paragraph can be broken down into four basic components that should serve together as a conceptual starting point for drafting your own reflective paragraphs:

1. **Description**: *During an internship ...*
2. **Theoretically informed interpretation**: *Social interdependence theory ...*
3. **Outcome**: *In the end, our group did achieve ...*
4. **Action**: *If it seems appropriate in future group work ...*
Further reading


