



STUDY GUIDE

REFLECTIVE WRITING

WHAT IS REFLECTIVE WRITING

Reflection involves looking back and evaluating your actions, in light of the relevant literature in your subject, with a view to improving your practice, task or analysis.

Note: Concepts of 'reflection' may vary among disciplines but you will usually be asked to write a reflective essay where relatively complex (often practical) tasks are concerned.

The purpose of reflective writing is to interrogate your own learning and demonstrate the ability to apply theory or conceptual processes to your practice or task in a meaningful way. Whether you're training to be a health specialist, a lawyer, a scientist, a business person, an engineer, a teacher, a historian or any other professional, you will be expected to be a reflective practitioner. This means questioning your everyday practice and implementing new knowledge gained through this reflection in your job/research/study.

In this guide, you will learn:

- **Purpose** of reflective writing
- **Elements** of a reflective essay
- **Differences** between a standard undergraduate essay and a reflective essay
- **Tips** for a great reflective essay and examples

Elements of a reflective essay

As with any essay, it is important that you consult your brief for specific guidelines, but usually, a reflective essay:

- **Demonstrates your familiarity with relevant literature**
- **Shows ability to think critically and evaluate the existing sources**
- **Makes connections between the literature and your experience (practical tasks)**
- **Reflects on your practice/experience and creates deeper meaning**
- **Understands how aspects of your practice are relevant to the literature**
- **Values your experience, shows how you learn from it and makes recommendations for future action/practice**

For additional help contact the **HE Study Support team** on **01803 540780** or email **hestudy@southdevon.ac.uk**

THE REFLECTIVE CYCLE

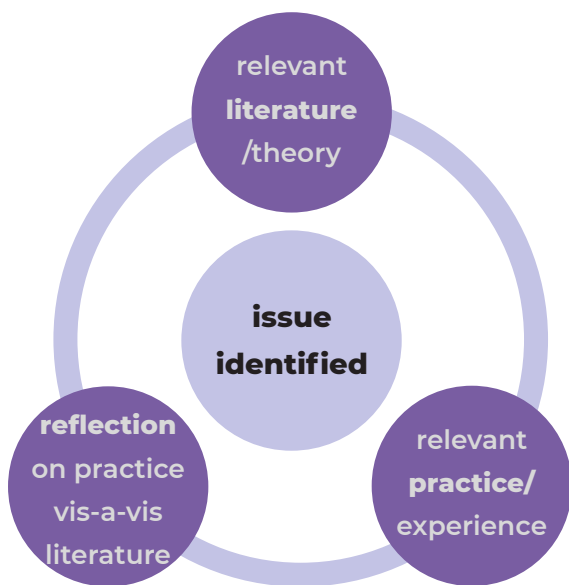


Fig.: The reflective cycle (adopted from Burns and Sinfield)

A reflective cycle such as this one (compare with Gibbs, 1988) can be used to develop each point or in each paragraph: introduce the identified issue, refer critically to theory/literature, provide examples from practice, comment on the relevance of the experience to the literature, and show the implications, so you can move on to the next point.

Note: Alternatively, you can begin with an example from your practice and use the cycle to reflect on it and refer back to the literature. Both approaches can be used in the reflective essay, as appropriate.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STANDARD AND REFLECTIVE

	Standard Essay	Reflective Essay
Subject	A research problem-oriented analysis; an often abstract and theoretical discussion of a specific topic.	A less specified and often self-selected discussion of your own practice/experience with relation to the existing literature.
Evidence	External. Uses primary sources and data largely created by others.	Uses primary sources created by others (documents, data, etc.) as well as yourself (your own observations).
Voice	An impersonal and objective discussion, written in the third person.	Often asks for your own perspective; usually written in the first person.
Knowledge	Shows familiarity with the existing scholarship on the subject.	Combines scholarship and your original points derived from the task or experience.
Introduction	Introduces concepts and outlines an argument.	Introduces concepts and indicates how they relate to own experience or learning.
Conclusion	Relatively predictable. Draws the various threads of the discussion together.	May focus on the personal learning points. Often includes recommendations for future practice.
Referencing	Often a mix of primary and secondary sources.	References to literature and own primary sources (notes from practice).
Bibliography/ Reference List	Formatted in the style appropriate in your subject.	Formatted in the style appropriate in your subject.

TIPS FOR A GREAT REFLECTIVE ESSAY

GOOD NOTES:

Keep a journal and record interesting things that happen in your practice/task – they will become your database of examples. Comment on them and try to reflect as you go. This is your private record and usually will not be assessed.

LITERATURE:

Consult your module reading list and choose a combination of books and journal articles that will allow you to get familiar with the most recent and relevant literature on the subject.

When reading literature, make notes on the recurring themes and points of disagreement. They will be very useful when reviewing the existing theories.

GO DEEP:

Go beyond mere description and use the critical thinking model to develop a deeper analysis. Limit description to elements that need reflective comment.

EMOTIONS:

Recognise your emotions and feelings with regard to the task /practice and consider their role and influence. BUT: refrain from venting your frustrations; again, be constructive.

TOPIC:

Think what topics/problems interest you most in your subject and decide in what ways they are relevant to your practice/experience.

PLAN:

Think strategically: plan your essay, stagger your reading, schedule any necessary meetings (with lecturer, peers, team members, librarian, etc.).

BE CONSTRUCTIVE:

Your critical assessment of practice/experience does not imply focussing on the negatives. While questioning your choices, try to stand back, consider alternative viewpoints and demonstrate how you can learn from the experience, both good and bad.

JOURNEY:

Keep an open mind about what you have learned from your practice /experience. Remember that not everything has to be immediately 'useful'. Try to demonstrate a sense of journey – intellectual, professional, personal – gained in the experience.

STYLE:

Use the past tense when writing about your experience ('I felt') and present tense when referring to the literature ('Smith suggests').

EXAMPLES OF REFLECTIVE WRITING

Example 1

The role of the community health team I was part of in this task was to offer the most appropriate package of care for the patient after her release from the hospital. It was important to ensure that the patient's independence was maintained (Foster, 2014) while providing the best support in terms of safety and nutrition (NHS England, 2015). I found the home visit slightly uncomfortable as it was difficult for me to strike a balance between showing care and not being too imposing. Instead of talking so much I could have focussed more on listening and encouraging the patient to express her preferences. Next time I will try to be more receptive to the patient's wishes and concerns.

Example 2

The experience of working in a school showed me how difficult it is to be objective and detached about the behaviour of the children. Elements of subjectivity constantly challenged my commitment to treating all children fairly and equally and I spent a lot of time getting frustrated at their behaviour and blaming their parents, writing angry rants in my journal. I felt like I could not really understand their backgrounds, I could not appreciate their circumstances coming from a well off middle class family. Having read (Education Endowment Foundation, 2019) I found the six steps to improving behaviour a really good way to understand and manage pupils behaviour. I wish I had approached the children with a more open mind. This may have resulted in a much better class room experience for them and myself.

Recommended resources

Brockbank, A. and McGill, I. (1998) *Facilitating Reflective Learning in Higher Education*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Burns, T. and Sinfield, S. (2008) *Essential Study Skills: The Complete Guide to Success at University*. (2nd ed.) London: Sage.

Moon, J. (2004) *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning: Theory and Practice*. London and NY: Routledge Falmer.

Shön, D. (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. London: Jossey-Bass.

AND FINALLY:

Remember that the reflective essay is a unique piece of academic writing in that it involves a level of self-disclosure. This allows you to personalise it and make it more interesting!



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