

## **Reflective writing**

Reflective writing is a type of assessment that goes by many names:

- Journal or diary entries
- Portfolios
- Narratives
- Reflections on practice or placements
- Blogs

They may also be part of assessments such as:

- Online discussion forums (in Stream)
- Group work and group or peer evaluations

These assignments ask you to be reflective and to write your responses to an experience (for example a reading, a teaching experience, a nursing or social work placement). You may need to describe the experience or summarise the reading, but this is not the reflection. The reflection or journal needs to make links between the experience, yourself and the concepts or theories in the course you are studying and any criteria that were developed in relation to the task(s).

### **Why are they used?**

Reflective assignments are seen to encourage deep and evaluative thinking; reflection helps people become better at what they do. Because reflection is part of learning in the workplace, reflective assignments allow you to be 'real', to identify your own values and assumptions and demonstrate your personal and professional development.

### **Reflection on a reading or tutorial topic**

A reflection based on a reading consists of your analysis of your reactions to the reading: what it made you think about; whether it helps you understand or be able to explain some aspect of your own life or the life of someone else whom you know well; does it relate to an event that has been in the media recently? Did it make you research further because it was so new, interesting, exciting, or complex? You may also discover that you find yourself writing on how a particular reading opened up your thinking about writings on the same topic by other authors.

You can help yourself by thinking about the content from different perspectives:

- Personal
- Social
- Organisational
- Cultural
- Other members of the team/group involved

### **Reflection on a placement**

A reflection based on a placement or field trip experience needs to focus on the outcomes for you, personally and culturally, and possibly for others (for example students or clients). You will probably reflect on successes and problems, and therefore what you learnt from the experience and what effects that learning will have on you and your interactions in various situations in the future. Your reflections will have links to course concepts as you will be evaluating your experience through the theoretical constructs that are relevant. You will also use relevant theories and concepts when you explore other possibilities and solutions. Possible perspectives for analysis include:

- Internal (personal) factors that you control
- External (environmental) factors
- Short term and/or long term consequences
- The roles and positions of others and power differences
- Social and cultural differences
- Process versus outcome
- Theory versus practice

Reflective tasks are challenging. Make sure you keep track of your thoughts, ideas, problems, and solutions regularly. Some lecturers will want evidence of your record-keeping. You will write a much better reflective assignment when you have your notes to work from rather than trying to brainstorm a whole lot of thoughts about what happened over a period of weeks.

Reflective analysis can be organised in two stages and five steps:

#### **The first stage of reflection**

1. Focus on an experience or event
  - What was outstanding or meaningful, negative or positive?

- Brainstorm ideas for five minutes
  - Then consider each idea for follow up
  - Other ideas may emerge, so consider them too
  - Talk about the experience to stimulate a range of perspectives
2. Describe the experience
- Consider the sequence, outcomes, feelings
  - Use free writing for 10 minutes
  - Create a draft that is filled with your thoughts; that explores some ideas more than others
  - Use this as a basis for a later draft that will bring in more conclusions as you continue to reflect
3. Conduct an evaluation / critical analysis
- Why did the event(s) occur in that particular way?
  - What factors contributed to the outcome?
  - Did you achieve your goals?
  - Did your goals change?
  - Did other people achieve the set goals?
  - Were there any problems with resources?
  - How did your actions influence the situation?
  - How did other people impact on the situation?
  - How did the situation affect you?
  - Could you have reacted differently?
  - If you had, what might have happened?
  - Why did you react in that way?
  - How might this experience affect you in the future?

### **The second stage of reflection**

4. Seek out your key points and the issues of significance
- The data you collected in step 3 allows you to identify the important aspects of your reflection on your learning.
  - You may find that you have formed new attitudes or values.

- Did you learn anything about yourself that was unexpected?
- What changes do you expect to make in yourself or your work?

5. Identify solutions for similar events

- Develop a new perspective by conceptualising the situation differently
- Communicate the results of your reflection clearly

The reflective process is also often seen as a cycle as it is through this process that people use their learning and strive to improve by making deliberate changes to their behaviours or trying new approaches. It is very much part of the professional development process in many workplaces.

## **Format**

Although the format of these assignments is more informal than most academic writing, it does not use slang expressions. Usually, you do not have to cite or reference the sources that you use in your reflections. You will also write in the first person as you are writing about yourself. Include explanations but be explicit and do not repeat yourself. Read and follow the lecturer's instructions about length, style and referencing.

Revise and edit your reflective assignment as you would any other. Check for repetition: remove unnecessary examples; also remove information about yourself that is not relevant; if you are reflecting on a placement remember to consider people's privacy and remove personal details about other people.

The good thing about a journal or reflective assignment is that there is no one right answer as each person will have different responses. The important thing is that your reflection links the material you are studying to yourself and the real world in some way.

## **How are reflective assignments marked?**

This depends on the lecturer and how the assignment fits with the other assessments in the paper. However, what the lecturer is looking for are the links you have made between the material and yourself and your experiences. Here is an example from one paper where students are required to do this type of assessment, followed by an analysis of each section:

*Each student is expected to write a weekly journal entry of approximately one typed A4 page. Students are asked to reflect on their responses to each of the eight readings.*

*(This sets the expectation for length and number of reflections.)*

*They can include feelings and should consider the reading's impact on their other units of study or other readings, their experiences within the university and their world outside the university. They can describe a train of thought that occurred after or whilst they read.*

*(This sets the task and gives a broad description of reflection.)*

*Students should try to identify their own values, attitudes and beliefs that they think underlie their reactions to the readings and to reflect on how these might affect their learning and changes or affirmations in beliefs.*

*(This gives some more details about what the students should consider as they reflect.)*

*The highest marks will be given to those students who reflect at several levels:*

- *the reading to their study and learning in this and/or other papers*
- *the reading to the outside world*
- *the reading and personal/cultural/attitudinal reactions*
- *the reading and social/cultural/political reactions*

*(This gives further information on the perspectives students could use and that several perspectives should be included for each reflection to gain good marks for the assignment.)*

*The journal should not be a summary of each reading. You do not need to provide references for these journal entries.*

*(This is a statement of what the lecturer does NOT want.)*