

Writing reflectively

Reflective writing at university

Many university courses require students to engage in reflective writing tasks to help them analyse practice and theory, and consider their own place in that context.

Reflective writing may be required for such things as professional portfolio entries; learning journals; logs or workbooks; part of personal or professional profiles; evaluating project work or practical work (e.g. placements) or directed assessments.

What is reflective writing?

Reflective writing requires you to look back at (reflect on) an experience or situation and offer your perspectives on it.

Reflective writing is about analysing, reconsidering and questioning experiences within a framework, e.g. in Education, applying learning theory to a classroom experience, or in Medicine, reflecting on your clinical approach to a patient.

Reflective writing encourages you to consider *why* things occur, to evaluate situations and to apply critical thinking and problem solving skills. It gives you practice at self-analysis: considering what occurred, what worked, what didn't and what you might do differently next time, with the aim of learning from the experience.

Writing reflectively: it is about you – putting the 'i' in reflection

Academic writing tasks usually require you to support your main points with references to literature and take an objective perspective largely without personal 'I' or 'me' references. Reflective writing, by contrast, involves recording *your* views, reactions, impressions or observations, using 'I' and other personal pronouns.

In reflective writing, the use of 'I' is not only acceptable, but expected.

Reflective writing, however, needs to be more than a description of your observations or thoughts, or a simple summary of what happened in a situation. E.g.:

In yesterday's class 'Emily' helped 'Emma' solve the Keystone Puzzle, which is great as she had not been able to do it before.

More than merely summarising what happened, it involves critically evaluating such experiences, thinking about the connection between theory and practice, and linking these ideas with what you have learned from your coursework and reading and elaborating on it. It also asks you to reflect on what you have taken out of the experience in order to further inform practice.

Reflection goes far beyond just describing what we do, to thinking about *why* we do things and to whether they have gone as we thought they would, why we think they may have worked well, and how we might do them differently next time (Brookfield, 1995).

To do this effectively, we need to take the perspective of an 'external observer'.

Reflecting on practice

Reflective writing may ask you to consider the link between **theory** (what you study, discuss and read about at university) and **practice** (what you do, the application of the theory in the workplace). Reflection on practical contexts enables you to explore the relationship between theory and practice in an authentic and concrete way. Examples:

1) Education reflection on a placement class:

*Yesterday's class brought **Vygotsky's concepts of scaffolding and the 'significant other'** into sharp focus for me. Without instruction, 'Emily' was able to scaffold 'Emma's' solving of the Keystone Puzzle without directing her or supplying her with the answer – she acted as the 'significant other'. **It really highlighted for me** the fact that I do not always have to directly be involved in students' learning, and that students have learning and knowledge they bring to the classroom context.*

- ✓ Links theory to practice.
- ✓ Clearly states where learning occurred

2) Environmental Sustainability reflection:

*The lectures and tutes this semester **have broadened my views** of what sustainability is and the different scales by which we can view it. **I learned that** sustainability is not only something that differs at an individual level in terms of how we approach it ourselves, but also how it differs in scale. We might look at what we do individually to act sustainably, such as in what and how we recycle, but when we think about how a city or state does this, we need to consider pollution, rubbish collection and a range of other systems that point to sustainability on a much larger scale.*

- ✓ Clearly states where learning occurred
- ✓ Elaborates on key issues
- ✓ Gives examples

You are generally required to de-identify actual people you have observed or dealt with on placement or work experience. You can do this by using 'pseudonyms' (other names, not real ones), initials or even numbers, so that real identities are withheld. E.g. *It was great to observe 'Kate' try to ... / I observed G's reaction to this ... / Student 4 felt that this was ...*

Note that the style in both of these examples is quite simple and direct. Also note that 'Vygotsky' is not cited as it part of reflection where the focus of the writing is on the application, not an exploration, of theory. Reflective writing at times will require you to reference sources when the focus is more on the theory (see next section).

Reflecting on theory

Another form of reflective task may be purely theoretical, where you are asked to consider texts you have read, or ideas you may have discussed in tutorials, and reflect on them. This form of reflective writing is more of a theoretical / ideas-based response paper and will likely require some referencing. E.g.:

*Comparing the approaches of **Mayr and Ulich (2009)** and **Laevers (2005)** to what 'wellbeing' means for the early childhood setting was **very illustrative in that I discovered** they seek to do similar things but within different frameworks. Analysing the two constructs highlighted that the detail in Mayr and Ulich's framework provided a much richer framework in defining and measuring wellbeing than Laevers' does.*

- ✓ Clearly states where learning occurred
- ✓ References correctly
- ✓ Considers what the theory has shown

If the emphasis is on your interpretation of theory, it may be enough to mention (not cite) the source. E.g.:

***Diamond** proposes that human exploitation of the environment led to societal collapse in the area as a result of resource depletion. However, **Hunt** argues that that a range of factors, including introduction of new fauna, may have led to this. **What I learned** from this was ...*

- ✓ Refers to theorists
- ✓ Considers what the theory has shown

Language features of reflective writing

You can / should refer to yourself through the use of personal pronouns when reflecting on experiences or expressing opinions. E.g.:

***I** conducted the first class with the mentor teacher and **we** took the students through the activity. It seemed to **me** it was successful at first, however, after discussing it with **my** mentor, **I** realised that ...*

References to people (i.e. *I, me, you, we*) are removed or less frequent when referring to the theory. E.g.:

*Analysing the two constructs highlighted (**for me**) that the detail in Mayr and Ulich's framework provided a much richer framework ...*

The 'for me' reference is not needed as the emphasis, in this case, is on the content not on you.

The actions (verbs) are usually those of expressing feelings and thoughts, e.g. *felt, thought, considered, experienced, wondered, remembered, discovered, learned* E.g.:

*On the ward rounds yesterday, I **felt** Mr G's mobility had noticeably improved from last week. This may be due to the altered physio program we have implemented and it allowed me to **experience** a real **feeling** of satisfaction that I had made a real difference.*

When reflecting, as in 'standard' academic writing, the language is usually cautious with tentative words such as *may, perhaps or might*. See use of 'may' in the previous example.

Checklist: questions to ask yourself about your reflection

In order to check if you have actually reflected with depth, rather than merely summarised, it may help to ask yourself the following questions:

- ✓ What happened? Have I provided detail about this?
- ✓ Is it about the experience or me?
- ✓ What critical moments or events occurred?
- ✓ Were there any 'light bulb' moments which led to learning? What did I learn or get out of this experience?
- ✓ What positives can I take out of this? Why?
- ✓ What were the negatives? Why? What would I change next time?
- ✓ Was there evidence of theory in practice? How?
- ✓ How can I *explain* this situation?

Works cited

Brookfield, S. (1995). *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. Oxford: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Further resources

Gillet, A., Hammond, A., & Martala-Lockett, M (2009). *Successful academic writing*. London: Pearson Education.

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Robertson, K. (2005). Reflection in professional practice and education. *Australian Family Physician*. 34(9), September.

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