Reflective Writing

What is Reflective Writing?

Reflective writing is something that students are more and more frequently being asked to participate in as part of their degree programme, or following work placements. It is often an unfamiliar form of writing, which can be quite challenging.

In essence, reflective writing is an opportunity to demonstrate how you have gained experience and skills, or improved your practice, to your tutors (or others) by analysing specific events and actions you have been part of and using these to demonstrate that you are aware of your own personal development. This not only allows you to reflect on what you have done, but also to make informed decisions about how you will continue to develop. It also really helps to have this skill of reflection when it comes to CV writing and interviews!

How does Reflective Writing differ from normal academic writing? What is expected of me?

You have probably been told (possibly more than once) that you should never use ‘I’ in an academic essay. Reflective writing is different, as it expects you to reflect directly on your own personal experience, and so you will use personal pronouns and explain what you have done in detail. A reflective essay will want to know about your actions, and also your subjective thoughts and feelings about any situations you found yourself in, which is quite different from the purely objective and distanced writing that normal academic assessments expect from you.

However, this does not meant that a reflective essay or learning log should just be a long description of simply what you did and what you felt about it. As the aim of reflective writing is to encourage you to look objectively at your actions/feelings and think about what you learnt from it, you will need to think critically about what caused the situation and what you could have done to improve your performance. This can be quite a difficult, and even uncomfortable, process and requires a great deal of honesty about things that might not have gone so well. The great thing about reflective writing is that even if an event during your placement did not work in practice, it is how you think and move on from it which is important in the assessment!

Your degree and your placement/project are not divorced from your degree programme. This may be in terms of the knowledge you may have gained (and testing how this works in practice), putting the employability skills which study has given you to the test and also utilising the critical thinking skills you have gained to assess your own performance. The
hardest thing about reflective writing is often turning these critical modes of thinking on you!

While these are the general aims of reflective writing, there may be specific aims to any assessment depending on the module or part of the degree programme that you need to consider. Some reflective writing may want you to look at specific incidents, concentrate on linking theory to your practice or concentrate on identifying areas which you need to work and come up with a plan of action.

### Types of Reflective Writing/Assessment

There is no one set assessment for reflective writing. The assessment may be worth part of your module, or feed into another assessment that does, or simply be something which you have to complete. It may take the form of several other different types of assessment which you are already used to. In this case, you need to be careful not to turn it into a ‘watered-down’ version of one of these. Some examples might include:

#### Learning Logs/Journals

Learning logs/journals can be used in different ways. Sometimes they may be a formal part of your assessment, or sometimes they may form the basis of a later reflective assignment. The aim of a learning log/journal is partly to reflect on events and your actions as they happen, but also to chart your development as you learn.

Sometimes learning logs are stand-alone pieces of work. In this case, you need to be careful to put all of the details into your learning log, and make it clear for your marker what the outcomes of the learning experience were, as well as the actual events. Also, if these learning logs are going to be handed in, do not forget they are a piece of assessment and make sure you use appropriate language.

Some learning logs may be more for your own benefit or to inform a later piece of reflective assessment. In this case, make sure that you have enough of your thoughts and critical consideration of the events to include in the later assessment. If you do any reading which informs these thoughts, do not forget to include the relevant referencing information so you do not waste time later trying to find it.

#### Presentations

If you have taken part in a practical exercise or a work placement, either as part of a group or as an individual, you may be asked to give a presentation on what you have learnt in practice.

As a presentation is much more conversational, and sometimes interactive, than an essay or a learning log, it might be tempting to make this more about illustrating what you have done to your audience, rather than reflecting upon it. This is especially true if you have been on a
long work placement, in a lot of things will have happened! Nevertheless, your audience still want to see how you have critically reflected on your performance and actions to really learn from your experiences.

If you are using illustrative aids (such as PowerPoint slides) make sure that they are used to underpin the points at which you are looking at your learning, and are not just there for general description. For example, a slide on the background of your company or photographs of an event you took part in is only really relevant if you are using them to make a point.

**Reflective Essays**

Theoretically, this is probably the type of assessment that you are most used to. Much of what is expected of you in a normal academic essay is still expected of you in a reflective essay. You will still be expected to analyse what you are saying, reference any sources that you have used (and you should use sources) and have a clear structure to the essay.

Thinking about what you want to include in the essay, and how you will structure it, is often key to getting the reflection right. Think about all of the incidents or events that have most contributed to your learning. Are there themes in the things that they taught you that you can concentrate upon? Did they move you outside your comfort zone in some way? Are there ways in which you can link them to your degree programme? Did they make you think about how your prior learning worked in practice? Your essay should still select information and key incidents to make some kind of argument, or central point. It should not just be a recounting of events or your placement in the order that everything happened.

**Strategies to help you reflect.**

There are plenty of different models which you can use to help you reflect upon your experiences. As with any way of studying or thinking about material, there is no one right way of doing this. Some models may suit your way of thinking, others may seem particularly appropriate for the situation you find yourself in or the assessment you have been set. Some, such as the Skills Questionnaire, may be helpful if you are looking back over a long placement, or even if you are trying to decide what skills you have gained over your degree. Others, such as the Learning Cycles, may be more appropriate for filling in a Learning Log or preparing for a specific piece of assessment. These are just some examples (there are more examples in the literature in the ‘Further Reading’ section below). It is worth experimenting with these to find the ones you feel are most helpful.
The Skills Questionnaire

There is a questionnaire attached to this advice covering many of the most important skills you will need to become employable, and demonstrate to employers. If you are just starting a placement, fill in the questionnaire and keep it safe. You can then fill in the questionnaire again to chart your progress (possibly half way through a placement and at the end of the placement). Have you improved in some areas? Why?

The Learning Cycle

There are several models based on the learning cycle first proposed by Kolb (1984). The one below was proposed by Honey and Mumford (1986). They see each event from which you learn as part of a cycle. You act, observe, reflect on these observations, change you practice and then the cycle starts again. It may be particularly useful for thinking about your experience in a learning log.

![Learning Cycle Diagram](image)

(Williams, Woolliams and Spiro, 2012, p. 87)

This Core Model from Cottrell (2010) usefully also involves an ‘evaluation’ step in this cycle, which may be useful in deciding what events to include in a longer piece of reflective assessment, such as a presentation or essay. It also includes an ‘Apply’ stage, which is useful if you need to draw up an action plan.
Adapted from Cottrell (2012, p 207-8).

**A Flow-chart Approach**

If these cyclical models of reflection do not seem clear to you, or you feel you need more guidance, then this step-by-step flowchart may help. This is based on the Describe, Interpret, Evaluate and Plan model by Boud (1985). You may not need to fill in every box in this.

1. What happened/what did I do?
2. How did I feel/do I now feel?
3. Unemotional view, including causes.
4. What went well?
5. What went not so well?
6. How would I improve on this?
7. What did I learn?
8. What are my next steps?

2a. whose fault (if relevant)? How can I learn from this?
Linking Critical Thinking and Reflective Writing

The above models all try to point you towards thinking critically about your actions and feelings, and several of them try to put these events in the context of wider theory. Sound familiar? It is exactly what you should also be aiming to do when you write any kind of essay.

To make this clearer, look at the table below. It is adapted from Bloom’s Taxonomy of Thought. The column on the left shows the types of thinking that may be demonstrated in your reflective writing. These move from the simple and straightforward (description) to the complex types of thinking which require you to weigh up evidence (evaluation). At degree level, we obviously want to see more of the complex types of thinking, such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation. To help you along, the column on the right gives pointers as to how these might relate to reflective assessments. Look carefully at your reflective writing—which type of thought are you demonstrating?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode of thinking</th>
<th>Reflective Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Description</strong></td>
<td>Description of the background of the company/placement Events as they happened, but without in-depth investigation of how they occurred. Description of feelings about events, but without reflection on why this might be the case or how this is a learning opportunity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analysis</strong></td>
<td>Consideration of how and why events occurred. Consideration of the factors which made events a learning experience. Consideration of the factors which impacted on events to give positive or negative outcomes. Identifying the most important factors in any scenario.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Synthesis</strong></td>
<td>Bringing together theory from degree programme and practical scenarios to assess how this works in practice. Bringing together experience from more than one event/source to consider causes of events or give solutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation</strong></td>
<td>Assessing own actions and feelings to identify learning. Assessing quality of experiences and learning. Giving areas for improvement and assessing ways in which practice/skills/behaviours can be improved.</td>
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</tbody>
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Obviously, there will be a certain amount of description in your assessment, as you will need to outline what happened in order for any investigation to make sense. However, as in any essay, you should only include as much description as you need. Extraneous information about the company or simply recounting or events will not gain you any marks.
Examples of Reflective Writing

Here are some examples of reflective writing which demonstrate the various different types of thinking. Depending on the set assessment, you may do more or less of the ‘holistic’ thinking or ‘synthesis’, but you should be able to see how much more complex the writing is in the latter two passages than the excerpt labelled ‘Descriptive’.

There are comments given to one side of the excerpts (the highlighted descriptions match the relevant highlighted feedback) to give you an idea of the kind of feedback these kinds of writing tend to receive and their strengths and weaknesses. You might also notice that the excerpts which show more analysis are not afraid to say which things may not have gone so well, and what the writer learnt from this.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive</th>
<th>Is all of this detail relevant? Does your tutor need this background?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I was able to secure a placement for one year in the Human Resources department of the Liverpool John Lewis Store, which was formerly George Henry Lees and is part of the John Lewis Partnership. John Lewis is unusual as a major high street retailer, as all of its employees are also ‘Partners’ in the business, in which they take part in staff forums and councils, and also receive an annual bonus depending on the performance of the business. This was an idea espoused by Spedan Lewis, the son of John Lewis, when he took over the running of the Peter Jones stores in the partnership in 1914. The idea behind this organisation is that staff are more invested in the business and have a vested interest in seeing the business succeed. This can make working in the Human Resources department very different from working in other businesses without these arrangements. While I was at John Lewis, I was asked to contribute to the staff newsletter, the Gazette, as a student placement employee. I wrote a short piece on my experiences shortly before I left, which gained a good reaction from my immediate managers, although some other staff did question some of the observations that I made about the staff experience. I think that being involved in activities like this, which go beyond your basic role description, are important for enhancing your CV.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is clearly relevant, but how exactly did it impact on the role in HR? Did you find this was always the case? Why? If this did/didn’t work, how did it make you think about what you have learnt in your degree? What did it make you think about working in other businesses? This indicates you did indeed experience behaviour from staff which backed this up. Can you give an example? What were the different reactions? Why did they come about? How did getting praise from managers, but negative reaction from peers affect you? Did your peers have a point? Would you change what you wrote if you did this again? Why do they enhance your CV? What did the experience teach you? What skills did you gain or hone? What does it prove to future employers?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>
### Reflecting on and Analysing Individual Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I secured a placement for one year in the human resources department of the Liverpool John Lewis store in Liverpool. As part of the John Lewis Partnership, all employees are considered ‘Partners’ in the business, which includes being represented in forums and gaining bonuses based on the performance of the business. This idea behind this is that staff are more invested in the business and its success. This could make working in Human Resources both rewarding and difficult. It was very clear from our records that it helped the retention of staff, as some partners had been there for over 25 years.</th>
<th>Only as much background is included as is relevant to what is being reflected upon.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>However, as a new and temporary member of staff, it could make dealing with some longer serving partners difficult. I had to try and explain a change in the payment system to partners, and found that some longer serving employees were very resistant, even though the change for them was a minimal change to the pay day (and would help to avoid mistakes by giving a longer lead-in time for Payroll). It seemed that while being invested in the company meant that employees were invested in its success, some could also sometimes feel that their personal interests should be given a higher priority due to their longer-term knowledge of ‘how things work here’. This was a phrase used by one specific member of staff as I tried to explain the rationale behind the change, which he refused to accept. I had to pass him to my line-manager, which made me feel disheartened, as it should have been a routine discussion and I felt I had been dismissed due to a perceived lack of experience. Looking back, I should have pointed out to this member of staff that the changes had been disseminated to partners through the staff forums and generally positive comments had been received, thus demonstrating to this partner that equally long-serving members of staff were in favour.</td>
<td>Pros of situation noted, but these are not a learning experience, so are not dwelt upon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I also mentioned this incident in a piece which I had written for the staff newsletter, the Gazette, as I had been asked to write about any challenges I had found working there. My managers were very sympathetic to this situation, but some other members of staff felt that I was being disrespectful to longer-serving</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of the situation, why this came about and why it may have been difficult in this instance/in this business.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifies the issue with the member of staff, but is careful not to make it too personal.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looks at thoughts and feelings associated with the situation, with reasons, but does not dwell on these</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifies actions which could have helped and demonstrates an analysis of how the company works and how this knowledge could be used in this situation.</td>
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If I were to write the piece again, I would probably not include this, and it has made me more mindful of the loyalty that staff peers can have towards one another.

**Holistic Reflection and Analysis**

I secured a placement for one year in the human resources department of the Liverpool John Lewis store in Liverpool. As ‘Partners’ in the business, all employees are encouraged to become invested in the business through staff forums and business-performance related bonuses. This was not a type of business which I had come across in my studies, and so it was a change from what I was expecting. Studies have shown that staff who feel that they are rewarded beyond basic pay for work do show a greater loyalty to companies (Smith, 2007), and this was borne out by the large number of partners we had who had served over 25 years in the business.

While this has a positive impact on staff turnover, making the HR job easier in some ways, it did also mean that some longer-serving employees could be resistant to change, feeling that they had seen change fail before and knew how things worked best in their situation. I had to try and explain a minimal change in the pay-date for employees to one member of staff who made it clear that he did not feel I had enough experience. I was disheartened, as I had to pass this up to my manager and felt I had been treated dismissively due to a perceived lack of experience. I realised that in the particular instance, I could have pointed out that other, long serving members of staff had been positive about the change in staff forums. However, I also found out that the change had not been widely disseminated to staff not involved in the forums. Many studies into change management highlight the need for clear communication and direction in the case of change from senior staff (Pratchett, 2010; Priestley, 2011). While I had no influence over this in this instance, it has made me think about how HR departments communicate with staff.

Only as much background is included as is relevant to what is being reflected upon. Links current experience in practice with prior theoretical degree study. Demonstrates research into the situations and events/ theoretical background beyond just personal experience. Employing skills from degree. Is careful to show this in the light of their experience, and not just the actions of the company.

Analysis of the situation, why this came about and why it may have been difficult in this instance/in this business. Looks at thoughts and feelings associated with the situation, with reasons, but does not dwell on these. Identifies the issue with the member of staff, but is careful not to make it too personal.

Identifies actions which could have helped and demonstrates an analysis of how the company works and how this knowledge could be used in this situation.
I was also asked to provide a piece to the staff newsletter, the Gazette, about my experiences, in which I was asked to write about any challenges I had faced. I mentioned this incident, which elicited a good response from my managers, who were sympathetic, but some other staff felt it was disrespectful to longer serving members of staff. Again, with hindsight, I feel I should have written about this incident differently, including it as an example of something valuable I had learnt, rather than a disappointment.

Taking Your Reflection Forward

The whole of aim of reflective writing, and thereby forcing you to reflect is to give you this skill to take forward into your employed life. Indeed, being able to reflect and give concrete examples of your skills to potential employers is an invaluable tool in seeking employment. If you can successfully a reflective writing assessment, you should never struggle with the dreaded ‘Tell me about one of your weaknesses’ question! The ability for employees to be pro-active in identifying their own training needs and seeking out ‘Lifelong Learning’ is something that employers are coming to value increasingly (and, indeed, in some sectors it is an expected requirement). The reflective writing you do here is only one step on a journey which should last many years.

Further Reading


