

Reflection



Reflection is an everyday process. We reflect on a range of everyday problems and situations all the time: What went well? What didn't? Why? How do I feel about it?

We don't usually follow a formula for this, it just happens as feelings, thoughts and emotions about something gradually 'surface'. We might choose to do something differently, or not, as a result of reflecting, but reflection is essentially a kind of loose processing of thoughts and feelings about an incident, a meeting, a day – any event or experience at all.

Reflection can be a more structured way of processing in order to deal with a problem. This type of reflection may take place when we have had time to stand back from something, or talk it through, as in: 'On reflection, I think you might be right', or 'On second thoughts, I realised he was more upset than me.'

Structured reflection

If we consciously reflect, maybe as part of our work or family role, there tends to be a rough process of 'How did it go? What went well? Why? What didn't? Why? What next?' Examples might be of a football coach reflecting after a match, a teacher reflecting on a lesson, or simply a parent thinking about how best to deal with a teenager. In this kind of reflection, the aim is to look carefully at what happened, sort out what is really going on and explore in depth, in order to improve, or change something for next time.

This brief guide will look at what is meant by reflection, suggest forms of structured reflection to improve the way you learn, and also outline how to use a model of reflection to structure a reflective assignment

Key elements of reflection

Reflection is a type of thinking associated with deep thought, aimed at achieving better understanding. It contains a mixture of elements:

1. Making sense of experience

We don't always learn from experiences. Reflection is where we analyse experience, actively attempting to 'make sense' or find the meaning in it.

2. 'Standing back'

It can be hard to reflect when we are caught up in an activity. 'Standing back' gives a better view or perspective on an experience, issue or action.

3. Repetition

Reflection involves 'going over' something, often several times, in order to get a broad view and check nothing is missed

4. Deeper honesty

Reflection is associated with 'striving after truth'. Through reflection, we can acknowledge things that we find difficult to admit in the normal course of events.

5. 'Weighing up'

Reflection involves being even-handed, or balanced in judgement. This means taking everything into account, not just the most obvious.

6. Clarity

Reflection can bring greater clarity, like seeing events reflected in a mirror. This can help at any stage of planning, carrying out and reviewing activities.

7. Understanding

Reflection is about learning and understanding on a deeper level. This includes gaining valuable insights that cannot be just 'taught'.

8. Making judgements

Reflection involves an element of drawing conclusions in order to move on, change or develop an approach, strategy or activity.

Reflection and learning

Reflecting on your learning, and as part of your learning, can help you take an objective view of your progress and see what is going well and what needs working on. Whatever form your reflection takes, it should initially involve you examining your feelings about an experience, then identifying areas to develop and starting to think about ways to do this.

Regular or daily reflection

Regular reflection helps after an 'event' such as a presentation, completing an essay, or just a difficult day. Using a few basic questions as a framework, like the ones below, can help you structure your own reflections about how you are doing.

- How did it go? How do I feel about it?
- What went well, or OK? Why?
- What was not so good? Why?
- How could this have been done differently?
- What should I change or work on for next time?
- What would be the first step?

Benefits:

- You can acknowledge immediate feelings, then stand back from them
- Reflection helps you see what went well and focus on the positive side of an event as well as the more negative
- Helps you develop a problem-solving approach, rather than avoiding thinking about difficulties
- Very helpful to reflect when you receive feedback on an essay, as a way of using the feedback to change or develop your approach

Keeping a reflective learning journal

For assessment

You may be asked to keep a reflective journal to accompany a work placement, which you will later use to inform a written assignment. You may be asked to keep a journal for assessment, to include comment on lectures, performances and production work as part of a theatre production course. In all cases where work is assessed, make sure you are clear what content and format your subject tutors expect in your journal.

For yourself

A private reflective journal is useful in itself. Unlike the rest of your academic work, a private journal is not judged by anyone – you write for yourself, and the process of writing often helps you clarify your thoughts and feelings, and work out ways of dealing with difficulties.

What do you write?

Anything you are thinking and feeling at a particular time, related to your studies:

- Your feelings about the course, tutors, progress
- Challenges and difficulties
- The way you tackle things – your strategies
- Things you find out about yourself
- Thoughts about how you learn best
- Ideas arising from your studies
- How different areas of your studies link up
- How your studies relate to real life
- Questions, observations, things that stick in your head

Benefits:

Explore ideas

Writing just for yourself means you can write freely – thoughts and feelings are expressed in a relaxed, informal way. You can make jumps in your thinking and explore connections between thoughts. This makes your journal-writing a creative process that encourages you to develop new ideas.

Develop your writing style

Writing regularly in a journal helps you develop and experiment with your own writing style. Putting ideas into words is a crucial academic writing skill. It takes practice to develop a style you feel comfortable with, and a journal is a good place to take some risks and try out different 'voices'. You don't have to write a lot at once, but it does help to write little and often, preferably every day.

Build confidence

It helps your confidence to look back over a journal and see progress, how you have dealt with difficulties, and how your ideas have moved on.

Record

It is very useful to have a note of issues, queries and concerns you might want to raise with a tutor or other students. A journal is an important record for checking back, and can help you plan next steps.

It can help to use and adapt a framework for ideas to develop your informal reflections.

Sample framework for reflective questioning

1a Generally, how well am I doing in this unit?	1b On what am I basing this evaluation? My marks? Tutor feedback? Other ways?
2a In this unit, I'm best at: What makes me better at these aspects?	2b How do I know what I am best at?
3a To do better in this unit , I need to improve: What stops me doing as well as I could?	3b How will I bring about an improvement? What are the first steps? Timescale for improvement:
4a What have I learnt, or improved, already since starting this unit?	4b How do I know this? How do I measure what I've learnt? How long it takes? My level of confidence? My understanding? My level of enjoyment?

Reflective writing for assessment

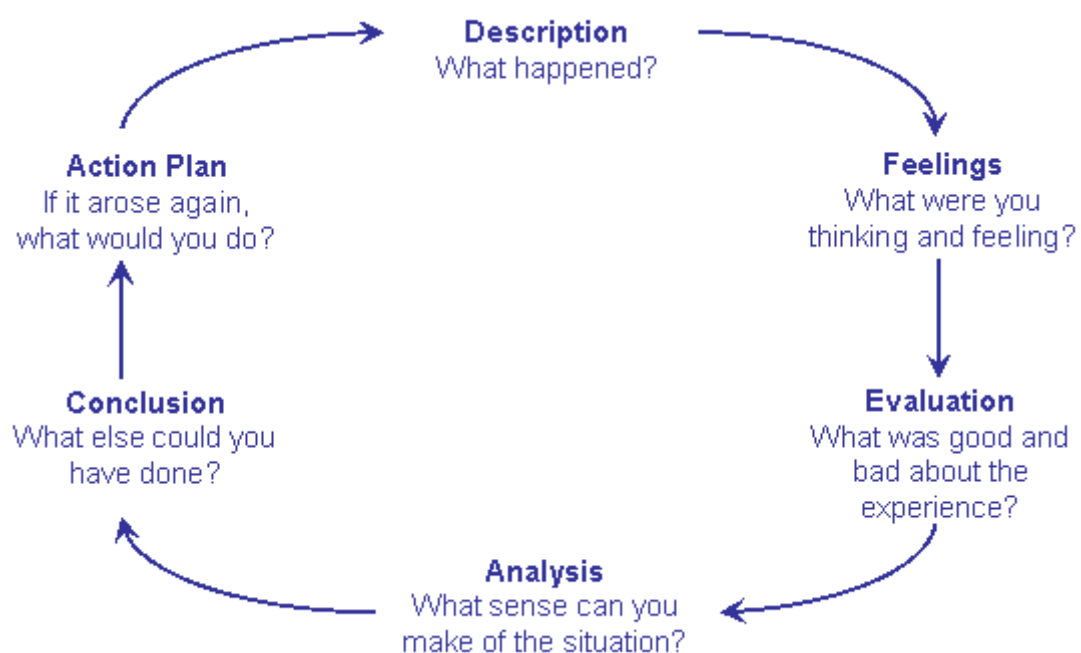
In many subjects, the health professions in particular, you will be required to produce reflective assignments. You may reflect on a single incident or interaction such as an interview. You may be reflecting on a lengthy process, such as a group project. The subject of reflection will affect the way you structure your final assignment, but the basic stages of the reflective process will be the same:

- **Description** – what happened?
- **Feelings and Analysis** – how did it go? Why? How did you feel about it? What was behind your feelings and actions?
- **Theory** – What was really going on? What needs to be looked at again, done differently next time?
- **Action** – What should be done next time? How?

In more formal reflective writing, where your work is being assessed, it is important to use a framework. There are several formal models of reflection which can be used. A model commonly used in the health professions is Gibbs' model of reflection (1988). An outline of this model is given here, with a breakdown of the types of questioning involved at each stage, to give an idea of the depth that effective reflection requires.

Note: Before using any model of reflection in an assignment, check with your subject tutors for any preference.

Gibbs' model of reflection (1988)



Questions to consider at each stage of Gibbs' cycle.

Description

- What happened? Give a concise, factual account
- Provide relevant details, aims of exercise and what actually happened.
- Aim to put the reader in the picture.

Feelings

Identify and examine reactions, feelings and thoughts at the time.

It is important, although often difficult, to be honest about these.

- How can you explain your feelings? What was affecting them? Did they change? Why?
- How did they affect your actions and thoughts at the time?
- Looking back, have your views on this changed?

Evaluation

Look at the judgements you made at the time about how things were going.

- What was positive? Negative? What made you think this?
- Try to stand back from the experience to gain a sense of how it went.
- What made you think something was good or bad?
- Examine your own judgements and what contributed to them. How do you feel about them now?

Analysis

In this section of the reflection, you need to examine the experience in depth, and start to theorise about key aspects. Try to identify an overarching issue, or key aspect of the experience that affected it profoundly, which needs to be examined for the future. For example, an aspect of communication or time management might have played a central part in the outcome.

- How was it flawed this time? In what way? Why? How should it work in this situation?
- What ideas or theories are you aware of which look at this? Does theory about this aspect help you make more sense of what happened?
- Could you use theory to improve this aspect in the future?

In this section, you need to fully examine and make sense of factors affecting the situation, and exploring ways to change and develop these.

Conclusion

Sum up the key things learned through the reflective process, the main factors affecting the situation, and what to improve. This section might include naming specific skills that need developing, or aspects of organisation to improve. You might identify new knowledge or training which is needed.

Action plan

This should be a practical section

- What could you do differently next time and how could you prepare for this?
- What areas need developing or planning? What resources do you need, and where would they be found?
- What steps will be taken first?

Note on reflective writing style

Reflective writing is more personal than general academic writing.

In reflective writing you can use the first person –‘I’ and ‘We’ – to describe your feelings and thoughts, and what affected them. At the same time, a reflection should be calm and thoughtful in tone. You are examining feelings after the event, and should not sound ‘in the grip’ of them, however strong the emotions were at the time.

Don’t say:

‘I didn’t like the way she spoke in the group. She was too bossy and it upset people’.

This sounds as though you are still annoyed, and you do not attempt to examine why you felt like this. You also make a judgement – ‘she was too bossy’ - and an assumption – ‘it upset people’ – without giving evidence for either. The word ‘bossy’ is too emotive here and upsets any objectivity.

Do say:

‘At the time, the way she spoke to the group annoyed me because I think I resented the way she seemed to tell us what to do. Looking back, I realise I did not have any clear ideas myself at the time, and her confidence made me feel less certain about my own ideas...’

This makes it clear that although you were annoyed at the time, you are able to stand back and examine your feelings with honesty and detachment. You are also distinguishing between how you saw things then and how you see them now. The tone is calm and objective.

Useful phrases for reflective writing:

I think...I felt...I was aware...I realised...I was uncomfortable about...Looking back, I now think...

Resources and further reading:

A very useful and detailed discussion of each stage of the Gibbs model can be found in:

- *Reflection and ePortfolios* by Alison Goulbourne, available at: <http://www.qmu.ac.uk/eportfolio/reflection.htm>

For additional reading about reflection:

- Cottrell, S. 2003. *The Study Skills Handbook*. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Cottrell, S. 2003. *Skills for Success*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Reflection and Personal Development Planning

The Personal Development Planning process provides a structure that helps you plan your personal, professional and career goals effectively. In particular, PDP helps you reflect on your experiences and skills as a learner, build evidence of your development, and use both reflection and evidence in the effectively in the future, such as when you apply for a job. Employers in particular are interested in the depth and maturity that the reflective PDP process can help you bring to your application and interview.

ePortfolios

An ePortfolio provides a framework that helps you reflect on your learning and collect evidence of that learning. At QMU there is an online tool (PebblePad) which can help you develop, store and share not only online portfolios (eportfolios) but also diaries (blogs) and CVs. PebblePad also links to useful and supportive guidance on reflection, career planning and writing a CV.

For further information: <http://www.qmu.ac.uk/eportfolio>

Final points on becoming more reflective:

- Build on the way you reflect already. Try becoming more aware of how, when and why you reflect on things.
- Put time aside to reflect, even if only a few minutes, on a regular basis
- Try using a structured approach. Use some of the ideas and the framework in the leaflet as a starting point for developing your own methods
- If you keep your own 'reflective journal', read over them on a regular basis – look for themes
- Consider how far you are reaching any short-term goals you set yourself as part of reflecting
- Find approaches that suit you and your course
- Look for changes in yourself, your actions, attitudes, confidence
- Recognise your achievements, however small they may seem