

APPENDIX 5: Good and bad critical reflection

(Taken from: Cottrell, S. 2011. Critical Thinking Skills. 2nd Ed. Palgrave, Hampshire.)

Aspect	Good critical reflection	Poor critical reflection
Experience	Draws on personal, group or workplace experience as a means of testing out theory or learning new lessons, looking at experiences with a critical eye.	Assumes 'experience' is an end in itself; that one's own experience is typical of others' without good evidence that this is so; that experience equates to 'insight', without bringing a critical eye to it.
Personal responsibility	The best critical reflection demonstrates integrity both in focussing on one's personal role, such as the assumptions brought to a situation or actions taken or omitted, and in taking responsibility for the consequences of these.	Poor critical reflection finds ways of deflecting blame onto other people or the context itself for the way events unfolded. Alternatively, personal responsibility is addressed in a superficial way, so that the relation of action and consequence is not considered in depth. It is also poor practice to assume personal responsibility and guilt for matters that are not simply down to oneself.
Focus	Selects a focus such as a particular time-period, set of events, specific kinds of incident or examples of interactions.	Rambles around or covers too many dimensions so it isn't clear what the focus of the reflection is.
Scale	The focus is broad enough to offer challenge and meaningful insights but can be reasonably explored in the timescale and word limit.	Is either too narrow to provide the insights needed or too broad to look at things in any depth.
Direction	However it may start, good critical reflection begins to take direction as the person starts to identify, and then focus on, selected themes for closer attention.	Rambles or hops about rather than finding a direction.
Depth	Delves below the surface: it picks up on initial thoughts and insights, analysing these further with the aim	Is superficial. It doesn't demonstrate any interest in burrowing beneath the surface to understand more.

	of gaining deeper insights or broader applications.	
Challenge	Usually tackles a difficult area or enters difficult terrain, such as matters that are personally difficult, or issues that are complex and don't lent themselves to easy answers	Tends to stay within safe territory or deals with difficult issues in a superficial way or doesn't seem to take the person forward in their understanding.
Theory	Draws on relevant theoretical standpoints, research, or established professional practice in ways that demonstrate how these have helped understanding. Where relevant, it relates the particular incident to broader social and political issues.	Draws only on the person's own ideas experiences and anecdotes, or makes superficial passing references to theory and research.
Critically	Brings a searching, critical eye to the focus of the reflection, to emerging insights, and to any theories or sources of information. This critically is used to take the person forward in their understanding of the core emerging issues, such as by challenging their own ideas and actions, or showing how their experiences supports or challenges existing knowledge.	Is preoccupied mainly with describing situations, content or events. May include critical analysis but this doesn't seem to be used in a way that really develops an understanding of the core emerging issues.
Insight	The reflection takes the person forward in their understanding, such that they can make more sense of their situation, work or study, manage better within it, do things differently, apply understandings to new contexts etc.	The reflection gives little indication that the person has moved forward in their understanding of the context or issue, or self-knowledge.
End-points	The process of reflection may take the person in many different directions. However, by the end, they have stood back, drawn out the key messages of what they have learnt, and summarised these as conclusions or recommendations.	The reflection reads more as description of a process or rambling free association. The lessons learned are not drawn out clearly as conclusions or recommendations.
Audience	If this is to be used in academic, work or public contexts, the writing up of reflection demonstrates a sound understanding of ethical considerations and stylistic or	The reflection is handed in or made public without all due care being taken to ensure that confidentiality and other data protection issues area addressed; no thought is given

	academic contentions that may apply. Issues of confidentiality have been addressed appropriately.	to how to make the reflection manageable for others to read.
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