

Reflective Writing

Reflective writing encourages ‘metacognition’ (**thinking about your own thinking**) to help you engage more deeply with your learning and development. It helps you to review your progress as a learner and/or practitioner and consider how you might apply, or already have applied, what you have learned to aid your future development. Reflective writing may be set as an assignment, or you might be asked to keep a reflective log for your own purposes. You don’t need to write in order to reflect, but it is a good way to ‘think out loud’ and to demonstrate to lecturers and employers that you can learn from your own experience and show your **progress**. Reflective writing has some key differences with traditional academic writing, but also some characteristics that are familiar.

Different kinds of reflective writing

There are several different types of reflective assignment, and therefore, more than one way to write reflectively. Your assignment might fit clearly into one of these types or **include** elements of more than one.

Reflective report: it is looser in focus and structure. You might choose to focus on one or more events over a period of time, focusing on an aspect of your practice or emerging themes. The events you select needn’t necessarily be challenging ones; simply something you would find productive and interesting to reflect on. You could use a chronological approach, base it on one of the reflective models, or decide on a thematic approach, around different aspects of your learning.

Reflective journal or learning log: this is an ongoing activity often for the duration of a training or a period of development, for example, on a course. It is related to a diary or blog in that it is structured around regular, chronological entries, perhaps weekly. Its purpose is to help you develop the habit of regularly reflecting on your learning so that you get the most out of it. You might be asked to submit the whole of your journal or a sample of entries from it as a portfolio, for assessment. It might be helpful to use a reflective model to support each entry.

Reflective writing style

Personal: the key difference between reflective writing and most forms of academic writing style is that you are writing in the first person ‘I’. Your voice is very present in the text because you are writing about yourself. You have to write ‘I’ when you are describing things that you did, thought and felt, and things that happened to you: ‘I did’, ‘I decided’, ‘I was frustrated’, ‘he said to me’. You also write ‘I’ when you are reflecting on these past events in the present, so you can write ‘I think’, ‘I will’, ‘I now understand’ ‘I need to’.

Formality: you are also often quoting or paraphrasing what you or others said, and writing about perceptions and feelings and other ‘real life’ experiences that are hard to scientifically measure or describe. Your language can therefore be a little less formal than in traditional academic writing: ‘he was really annoyed’ ‘I don’t think it matters that much’, ‘it was just too important’. Reflective writing is still a professional form though, so you need to keep some **professional tone** and **clear expression**.

Critical analysis: writing in the first person in a slightly less formal tone can sometimes lead us to overlook the need to be objective and explain your reasoning for the reader. Reflection can then become a descriptive,

unselective account of everything that happened, or a series of unsupported statements which are easy to say, but too general to be convincing. Reflective writing is still quite academic in that it is critical, reasoned and **supported by evidence**, showing higher level thinking beyond description, and your style will demonstrate this. To be critical of your own experience doesn't mean criticising your own performance but to ask yourself key questions to understand it fully, such as: Why is that important? How is it relevant? How do I know that? What makes me think that? Why did that happen? What explains that? Am I sure of that? How else could I see it? To help you answer these questions, you will be using evidence and often academic literature as part of your account.

Using evidence and theory: you will be presenting evidence in the form of clear examples from your experience, but these still need to be analysed and explained, just as you would for evidence from research. Rather than just listing what you've done with your own judgement of how successful it was, you need to explain and interpret these examples to show how they demonstrate your development and how you know they were successful (or not). It is useful, where possible, to include external forms of evidence, such as feedback from other people. You can also reflect on your experiences by connecting them to academic research or professional ideas. This helps you explain and analyse what happened, and see how your experience compares to broader knowledge - whether it's typical, unusual, or meets certain expectations. While reflective writing is mainly personal and doesn't always need references, using theory can strengthen your analysis and support your decisions, especially if your assignment requires it.

Adapted from: Newcastle University (no date) *Reflective writing*, Academic Skills Kit. Available at: <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/academic-skills-kit/assessment/assignment-types/reflective-writing/> (Accessed: 29 March 2026).