

Reflective writing

In this guide:

- **Purpose** of reflective writing
- **Elements** of a reflective essay
- **Differences** between a standard undergraduate essay and a reflective essay
- **Tips** for a great reflective essay and **examples**

Your notes:

What is reflective writing?

Reflection involves looking back and **evaluating** your actions, in light of the relevant **literature** in your subject, with a view to **improving** your practice, task or analysis.

Note: Concepts of 'reflection' may vary among disciplines but you will usually be asked to write a reflective essay where relatively complex (often practical) tasks are concerned.

The purpose of reflective writing is to interrogate your own learning and demonstrate the ability to apply theory or conceptual processes to your practice or task in a meaningful way. Whether you're training to be a health specialist, a lawyer, a scientist, a business person, an engineer, a teacher, a historian or any other professional, you will be expected to be a reflective practitioner. This means questioning your everyday practice and implementing new knowledge gained through this reflection in your job/research/study.

Elements of a reflective essay

As with any essay, it is important that you consult your brief for specific guidelines, but usually, a reflective essay:

- ↪ demonstrates your familiarity with **relevant literature**
- ↪ shows ability to **think critically** and **evaluate** the existing sources
- ↪ makes **connections** between the literature and your experience (practical tasks)
- ↪ **reflects** on your practice/experience and creates deeper meaning
- ↪ **understands** how aspects of your practice are **relevant** to the literature
- ↪ **values** your experience, shows how you **learn** from it and makes **recommendations** for future action/practice



The reflective cycle

A reflective cycle such as this one (compare with Gibbs, 1988) can be used to develop each point or in each paragraph: introduce the identified **issue**, refer **critically** to theory/**literature**, provide examples from **practice**, comment on the **relevance** of the experience to the literature, and show the implications, so you can move on to the next point.

Note: Alternatively, you can begin with an example from your practice and use the cycle to reflect on it and refer back to the literature. Both approaches can be used in the reflective essay, as appropriate.

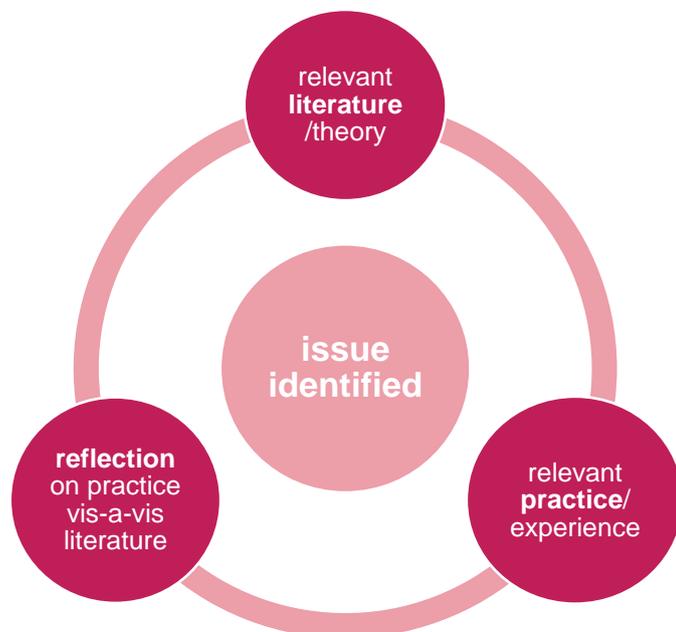


Fig.: The reflective cycle (adopted from Burns and Sinfield)

Basic differences between a standard essay and a reflective essay

	Standard essay	Reflective essay
Subject	A research problem-oriented analysis; an often abstract and theoretical discussion of a specific topic.	A less specified and often self-selected discussion of your own practice/experience with relation to the existing literature.
Evidence	External. Uses primary sources and data largely created by others.	Uses primary sources created by others (documents, data, etc.) as well as yourself (your own observations).
Voice	An impersonal and objective discussion, written in the third person.	Often asks for your own perspective; usually written in the first person.
Knowledge	Shows familiarity with the existing scholarship on the subject.	Combines scholarship and your original points derived from the task or experience.
Introduction	Introduces concepts and outlines an argument.	Introduces concepts and indicates how they relate to own experience or learning.
Conclusion	Relatively predictable. Draws the various threads of the discussion together.	May focus on the personal learning points. Often includes recommendations for future practice.
Referencing	Often a mix of primary and secondary sources.	References to literature and own primary sources (notes from practice).
Bibliography/ Reference List	Formatted in the style appropriate in your subject.	Formatted in the style appropriate in your subject.

Tips for a great reflective essay

Good notes

Keep a journal and **record** interesting things that happen in your practice/task – they will become your database of **examples**. Comment on them and try to reflect as you go. This is your private record and usually will not be assessed.

Literature

Consult your module reading list and choose a combination of books and journal articles that will allow you to get familiar with the most recent and relevant literature on the subject.

When reading literature, make notes on the recurring **themes** and points of disagreement. They will be very useful when reviewing the existing theories.

Go deep

Go beyond mere description and use the **critical thinking model** to develop a deeper analysis. Limit description to elements that need reflective comment.

Journey

Keep an open mind about what you have **learned** from your practice/experience. Remember that not everything has to be immediately 'useful'. Try to demonstrate a sense of journey – intellectual, professional, personal – gained in the experience.

Topic

Think what topics/problems interest you most in your subject and decide in what ways they are **relevant** to your practice/experience.

Plan

Think **strategically**: plan your essay, stagger your reading, schedule any necessary meetings (with tutor, peers, team members, librarian, etc.).

Be constructive

Your critical assessment of practice/experience does not imply focussing on the negatives. While **questioning** your choices, try to stand back, consider alternative viewpoints and demonstrate how you can learn from the experience, both good and bad.

Emotions

Recognise your emotions and feelings with regard to the task/practice and consider their role and influence. **BUT**: refrain from venting your frustrations; again, be constructive.

Style

Use the **past tense** when writing about your experience ('I felt') and **present tense** when referring to the literature ('Smith suggests').

Examples of reflective writing:

Example 1

The role of the community health team I was part of in this task was to offer the most appropriate package of care for the patient after her release from the hospital. It was important to ensure that the patient's independence was maintained (Foster, 2014) while providing the best support in terms of safety and nutrition (NHS England, 2015). I found the home visit slightly uncomfortable as it was difficult for me to strike a balance between showing care and not being too imposing. Instead of talking so much I could have focussed more on listening and encouraging the patient to express her preferences. Next time I will try to be more receptive to the patient's wishes and concerns.

Example 2

The experience of working on producing a historical film has shaken my faith in history as an objective and detached record of the past, in the most classic Rankean sense (Green and Troup, 1999). Elements of subjectivity constantly challenged my commitment to telling the 'truth' and I spent a lot of time getting frustrated and writing angry rants in my journal. I felt like we were 'just playing' and couldn't appreciate the larger truths I was in fact discovering in the process. Having read Rosenstone's (1995) take on the role of film in history, however, I found the exercise a really good way to understand how history is told. I wish I had approached the task with a more open mind. This may have resulted in a much better film.

And finally... Remember that the reflective essay is a unique piece of academic writing in that it involves a level of **self-disclosure**. This allows you to personalise it and make it more interesting!

Reference list

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