

ELS

Effective Learning Service



Reflection

What is reflection?

“...the way that we learn from an experience in order to understand and develop practice”

(Jasper 2003)

We reflect on everyday problems and situations all the time: What went well? What didn't? Why? How do I feel about it? Reflection is a means of processing thoughts and feelings about an incident, or a difficult day...and gives us a chance to come to terms with our thoughts and feelings about it.

Reflection can be particularly useful in dealing with a difficult or challenging situation. 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 realise I was upset because...' This type of more focused reflection can lead to a new way of reacting in or approaching a situation next time.

When you think and write reflectively as part of your academic studies, you are expected to record the process of your reflection, and identify and evaluate the learning that comes from it.

Whatever you are reflecting on, the following points are important:

Reflection is an exploration and explanation of events – not just a description.

Reflection often involves revealing anxieties, errors and weaknesses, as well as strengths and successes.

It is usually necessary to select just the most significant parts of the event or idea on which you're reflecting. Don't try to tell the whole story, or you will end up only describing rather than reflecting.

It is often useful to reflect forward to the future – when you might do something differently as a result of reflecting – as well as reflecting back on the past.

What is involved in reflection?

“Reflection is part of learning and thinking. We reflect in order to learn something, or we learn as a result of reflecting, and the term ‘reflective learning’ emphasises the intention to learn from current or prior experience” (Moon 2004).

Reflection is a type of thinking aimed at achieving better understanding and leading to new learning. All of the following are important aspects of the reflective process:

Making sense of experience

We don't always learn from experiences on their own.. Through reflection, we can analyse experience, actively attempting to 'make sense' or find the meaning in it. This should lead to learning.

‘Standing back’

It can be hard to reflect when we are caught up in an activity. Reflection provides a way of 'standing back' from the emotions and quick judgments made at the time, in order to develop a clearer view or perspective.

Repetition

Reflection involves 'going over' something, often several times, in order to explore what happened from different points of view.

Deeper honesty

Reflection is associated with 'striving after truth'. Through reflection, we can acknowledge things that we find difficult to admit at the time: feelings or thoughts we might have chosen to ignore at the time, particularly if we felt unsure or worried about what others might think.

‘Weighing up’

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

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.

Understanding

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

Making judgements

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

What is reflective writing?

Reflective writing is evidence of reflective thinking. In an academic context, reflective thinking and writing can be organised into three stages:

- identifying the subject of reflection (often an event, something that happened, a critical incident on a placement, or the progress of a group project);
- looking closely at what happened, including your thoughts, feelings and reactions at the time; analysing what happened in depth, or from different perspectives, often using theory from your subject to explore and understand the event;
- thinking carefully about what you have learned from the whole reflective process and how your understanding has developed, and finally, identifying key points to take forward for future development, both personal and professional.

Reflective writing is more personal than other forms of academic writing, but still needs a formal structure. It should be possible to identify the different stages of reflection (as above) in the way you might write reflectively about an event. This is possible within one short paragraph, such as the one below..

Short example of basic reflective writing:

Although the atmosphere within the group was co-operative, no-one seemed willing to make decisions about how to divide up tasks. Eventually I stepped forward and drew up a list of tasks and people, but I was aware that this might be seen as an unfair way to proceed. I realised I was pushing people to act, but I felt it was important that we started to work on the project as soon as possible. The issue of how groups make joint decisions is important. Smith (2009) comments on the importance of consensus in group decision-making, and how this contributes to 'positive interdependence' (Johnson 2007, p.45). Establishing this level of co-operation in a group can be difficult, however. Although we had a successful outcome, we should maybe have found a way to include everyone in the process of decision-making at the start. In future groupwork, I will probably suggest this and be aware of how that will help group dynamics from the start.

Structuring reflective writing

Reflective writing, in a diary or your own notes, can be unstructured and still very useful in helping you explore an idea or experience. However, in formal academic writing, your tutor will expect to see a well-structured piece of work.

Even in a short paragraph, such as in the previous example, you can see three broad stages: description, exploration and analysis, and outcome or conclusion:

Description (keep this bit short)

- What happened?
- What is being examined?

Although the atmosphere within the group was co-operative, no-one seemed willing to take decisions about how to divide up tasks. Eventually I stepped forward and drew up a list of tasks and people but I was aware that this might be seen as an unfair way to proceed.

Exploration and analysis

- What is most important/interesting/relevant about the event/incident?
- How did you think/react at the time?
- Why?
- How can it be explained further eg with theory?

I was aware I was pushing people to act, but I felt it was important that we started to work on the project as soon as possible. The issue of how groups make joint decisions is important. Smith (2009) comments on the importance of consensus in group decision-making, and how this contributes to 'positive interdependence' (Johnson 2007, p.45). Establishing this level of co-operation in a group can be difficult however.

Outcome/conclusion:

- What have I learned from this?
- What does this mean for my future actions/decisions?

Although we had a successful outcome, we should maybe have found a way to include everyone in the process of decision-making at the start. In future groupwork, I will probably suggest this and be aware of how that will help group dynamics from the start

The above is only one short example of how a reflective paragraph might be structured. Depending on what you are reflecting on, the exploration of theory can be far more extensive. It can be useful to think of stage 2 as including:

- analysis of your thoughts, feelings and reactions
- identification of a key issue which you can then 'theorise' – ie do a little research on – in order to improve your understanding.

Getting started: Keeping a record of your experience

- Take brief daily notes, when you are on a placement or over the course of a project.
- It is important to write something every day, so that you remember the things that went well, as well as the things that did not go so well.
- it is **important to note things that went well**. Understanding why something went well is important if you want to influence an experience positively in the future.

A useful structure for these notes is a simple 3-stage model:

What? Note what happened and when - basic details

So what? This is how you felt and understood what happened at the time – this could include your feelings, anything that surprised you, and anything else that seemed important/useful /significant/interesting/puzzling about what happened. This could also include noting *why* you felt as you did.

What next? You may, for example, decide to ask a supervisor on placement about something that happened, or check the theory on something you saw on placement...or try to do something differently as a result of the experience.

An example of notes kept in a placement diary:

What? - 4th day on placement....working with radiographer - elderly man who couldn't hear very well. I had to tell him how to stand by the bucky, but he didn't seem to hear me and was getting anxious. Radiog then put it very simply - noticed how she made sure he was looking at her before she spoke. He calmed down and xray image OK.

So what? - feel a bit tense and annoyed - also, felt unsure about what to do...difficult when you are being watched. I realised I should have used better eye contact and not just repeated what I was saying, but wanted to show I knew the right words too.

What next? - made me think about non-verbal communication. I wanted to show I knew the technical word, but I was not thinking about this from the patient's viewpoint. I'll watch more closely how radiographer uses body language in future and pick up some tips.

A final reflective account, based on these notes, might start like this:

1. first sentence introduces main point

2. brings in theory for support

(1) A key learning point from my placement concerned the importance of non-verbal communication in establishing a rapport with a patient. (2) Burke's (2007) discussion of the effective use of body language with elderly patients helps me understand (3) an experience I had during a radiography session with an elderly (78) year old man with some hearing loss. Although I had tried to explain clearly several times how I wanted him to stand closer to the machine, he was becoming distressed. In my haste to complete the process, I failed to realise that he could not hear my instructions clearly. The radiographer present stood in front of the patient, establishing clear eye contact. She then gestured, using herself to demonstrate how she wanted him to stand. He understood straight away and the image was successful. (4) Although at the time I had felt it was important to explain the procedure, using technical language, my focus on doing this had distracted me from seeing the effect my body language was having on the patient.

3. brief outline of event - not too much detail!

4. concludes paragraph, reflects back and focus on key issue of body language

The next paragraph develops the author's thinking about body language:

1. new point about body language

2. next 3 sentences compare 3 authors - make point it is hard to combine knowledge and instinct

(1) Understanding body language means we should also be able to read the patient's body-language correctly as well as be aware of our own. (2) However, according to Stein et al (2011) it can be difficult to feel confident in this more instinctive aspect of radiography practice. Research into placement experiences of novice radiographers (Stennard and Jones 2009) identified that appropriate use of body language was an area that the students felt less confident about, as they felt they needed to show verbal competence, especially in the use of correct terminology. In addition, Brown (2006) argues that student radiographers need to be encouraged to trust their instincts, as well as observe good practice. (3) After reflecting on this topic, I now realise how much practice is required to develop this balance. Skilled radiographers make communication seem straightforward, but I am aware that I need to observe them in action carefully to develop these skills myself.

3. writer sums up what she has learned and what to develop next

Notes 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...

At the time I thought...looking back, I can see that...

Vocabulary to use in reflective writing

Here are a few suggestions for words and phrases you could use in reflective writing. These suggestions are structured according to the 3 stage outline suggested at the start of this guide.

Be aware that using these words and phrases will not necessarily make you more reflective!

1. Description (keep this bit short)

We do not recommend any particular words or phrases for the descriptive part of your reflection, as there is such a variety of possible situations, events and ideas that you might be reflecting on.

However, it is worth remembering that when you describe an event, it will be described using the *past* tense. If you then identify an idea, for example a theory or model you might be reflecting on, it is usually best to use the *present* tense e.g. Gibbs' model of reflection **identifies**... (not **identified**)

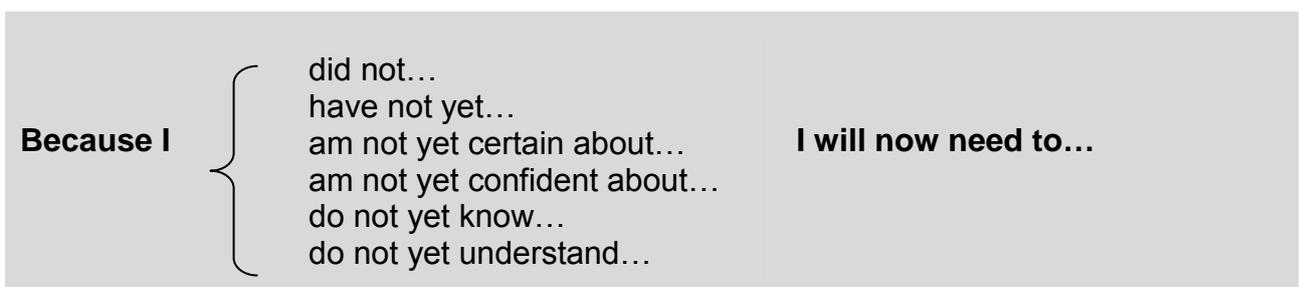
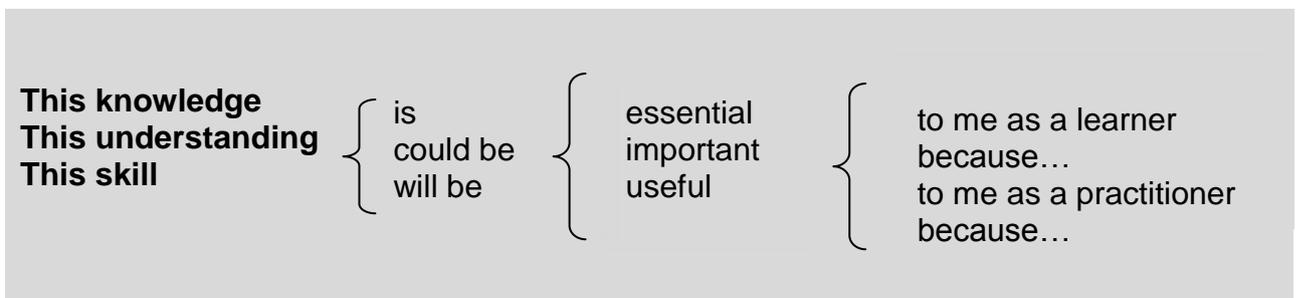
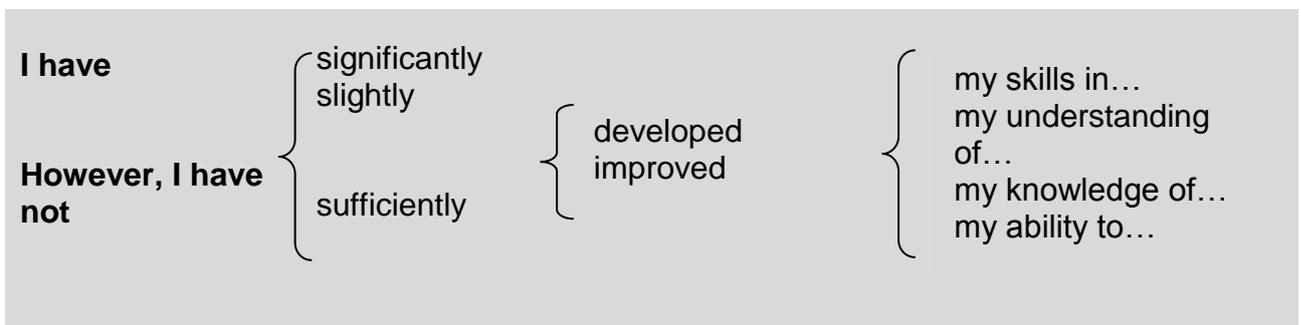
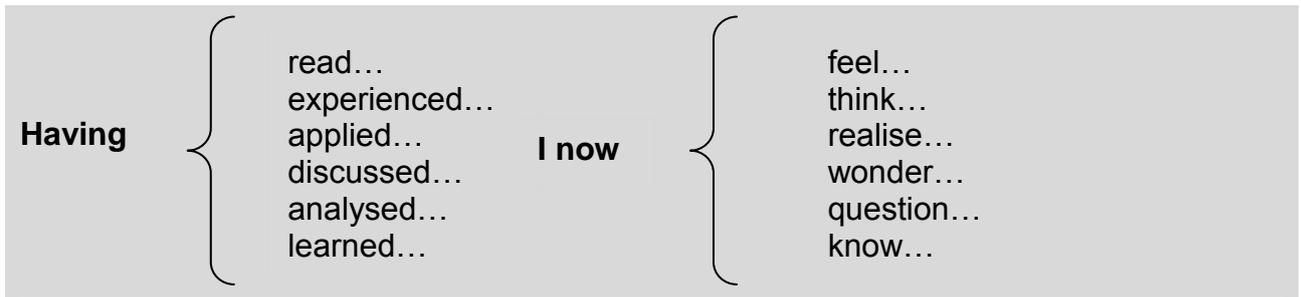
2. Analysis and interpretation

For me, the most	{ meaningful significant important relevant useful	{ aspect(s) element(s) experience(s) issue(s) idea(s)	{ was (were)... arose from... happened when... resulted
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Previously At the time At first Initially Subsequently Later	}	I	{ thought (did not think)... felt (did not feel)... knew (did not know)... noticed (did not notice)... questioned (did not question)... realised (did not realise)...
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This	{ might be is perhaps could be is probably	{ because of... due to... explained by... related to...
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3. Outcome/conclusion



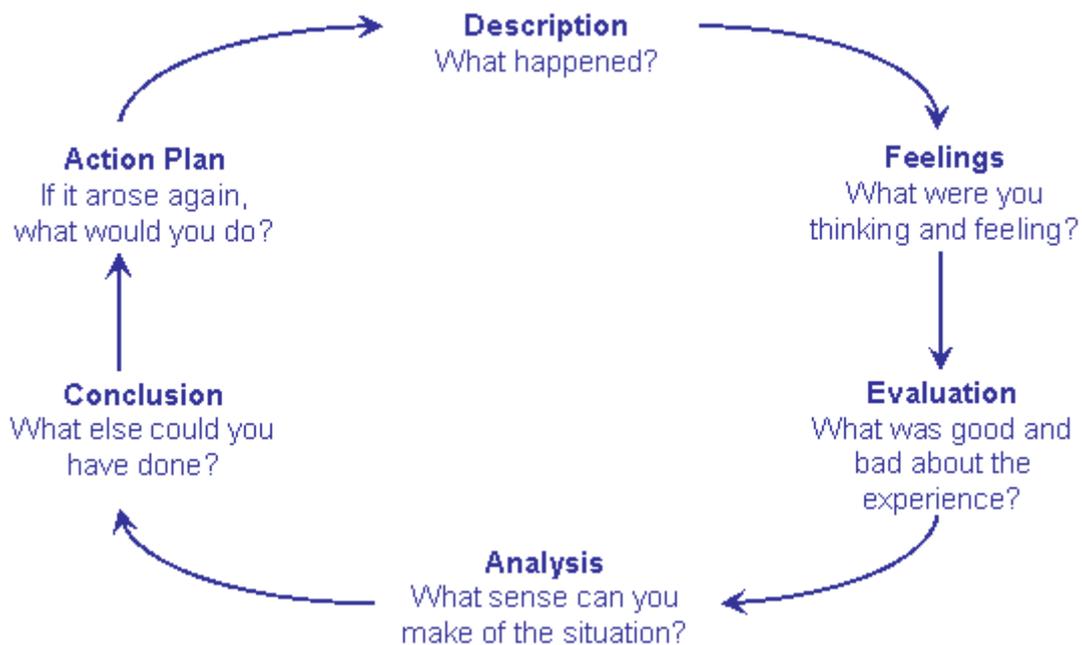
Models of reflection

You may be asked to use a particular model of reflection to focus your thinking and writing.

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

A model commonly used in the health professions is Gibbs' model of reflection (1988). It is also a useful model for you to apply in other disciplines.

Gibbs' model of reflection (1988)



The questions on the next page have been developed to help prompt further thought at each stage of the cycle. These are not questions that have to be answered as such; they are designed to help you think about the subject of your reflection from different angles.

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, has your understanding of your feelings changed your view of the situation?

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?

More models of reflection

Although the basic aims of the reflective process remain the same, it is worth investigating and understanding a few different models for yourself. You might find a different approach helpful in providing new angles for your reflection. The three below are some of the most commonly discussed:

Kolb's model of experiential learning

Kolb's model identifies the stages by which a person moves from practice, then develops new understanding through reflection on practice. Learning takes place when the lessons learned and reflected on from practice help create a new understanding or 'theory', which can then be applied further in practice. In this way, experience informs next steps, and leads to improved practice.

Johns' model of reflection

This model, used mainly in the health professions, uses a series of cue questions to break down an experience and encourage reflection on different aspects of an experience.

Bourton's model

Bourton identifies three main stages in the reflective process, used earlier in this booklet, which he terms 'What? So what? and Now what?' These stages can provide simple but useful starting points for reflection.

Further reading:

COTTRELL, S., 2003. *The study skills handbook*. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

COTTRELL, S., 2003. *Skills for success*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

JASPER, M., 2003. *Beginning reflective practice*. Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes.

MOON, J., 2004. *A handbook of reflective and experiential learning*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.