REFLECTIVE WRITING

Learning Centre, University of Sydney - http://sydney.edu.au/stuserv/learning_centre/

Reflection is a core skill for your university work. What it means will depend on your particular assignments, the subjects you are studying, your discipline area of study, and so forth. This resource will introduce you to different kinds of reflective writing at University, the types of assignments that call for reflective writing, different levels of reflection, some language strategies and example texts.

What is reflective writing?

The word 'reflection' is often used as a broad term that covers a variety of writing practices at University. In most cases at University, you are required to link your reflection – whether on a problem, your practice, your values, or society – to theories. Different types of reflection the focus can be on one or more of these aspects.

Types of reflective writing

1. **REFLECTION:** when you ask questions about something you would like to better understand, e.g. a problem to solve or an issue to consider.

2. **REFLECTIVE PRACTICE:** when you reflect on the relationship between practice in your area of study and the theories you are being introduced to.

3. **CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION:** when you consider how you are situated within broader social and institutional contexts, and to identify assumptions that you have not been aware of, challenging questions and issues.

Types of reflective writing assignments

Critical reflection is often assessed through a wide variety of tools, such as learning and reflective journals, reports, reflection papers, case studies, or narratives. These types of assignments are increasingly popular in applied disciplines such as marketing, business, accounting, nursing, health sciences, social work or education.

While different disciplines tend to have different approaches to critical reflection, most tend to focus on a central **'case'** which is often written around a particular or problematic story sometimes referred to as a **'learning event'** or **'critical incident'**. This usually involves observations of the critical incident/case, which could be a person, an event, policy or scenario. Various factors, themes or problems are then analysed with reference to an appropriate theory, framework, policy or methodology. These types of reflective assignments are often referred to as ***analytical.***

Another common type of reflective writing is ***problem-oriented***: in addition to including all the above-mentioned elements, this type also requires you to draw appropriate conclusions in the form of suggestions for change, for instance, *improvement* of policies or making *recommendations* to take a course of action. These types of assignments often involve an understanding of ethical components of particular applied disciplines, for instance, education, social work or nursing.

Prompts for reflective writing

For a critical reflection, based on specific 'events' (or possibly 'critical incidents'):
1. Describe the event (what, when, where, who?)
2. Why have you chosen this event /s to reflect on?
3. What kinds of emotions does this event involve (e.g. at the time)
4. What actions did you take:
> *a.* at the time.
> *b.* subsequently.

To think more deeply and critically, and to see connections between ideas:
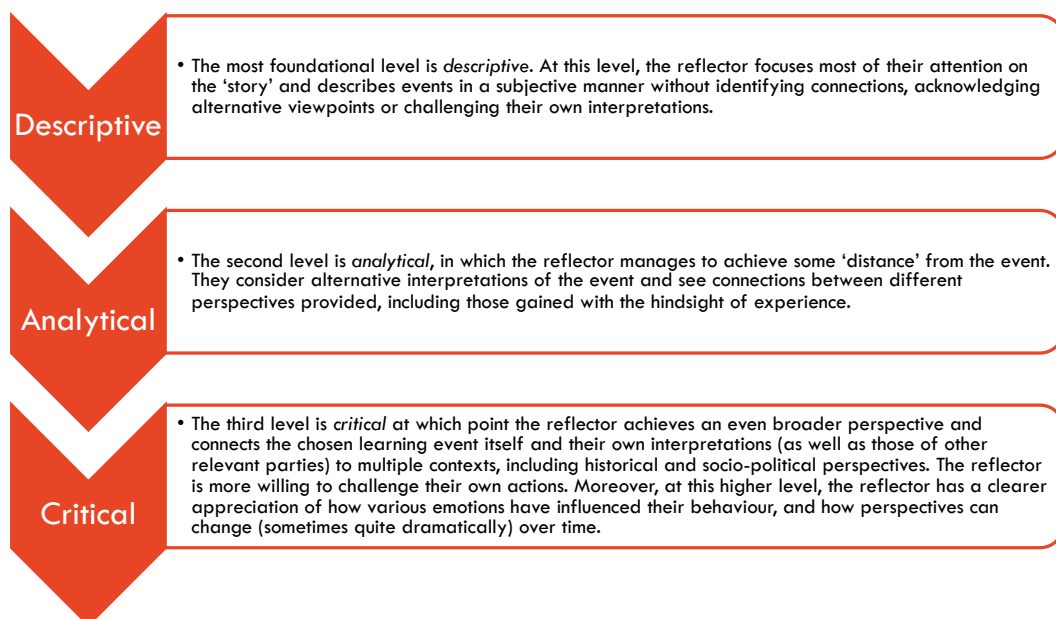- Has the way you see the event changed over time? Why?
- Can you connect the event to broader contexts, e.g. socio-cultural, historical, political?
- Can you think about the event in light of broader contexts (e.g. social, cultural, historical, political, etc.)?
- Can you challenge or question your own responses and/or actions during or after the event, or those of other people involved?
- Are there any unanswered questions or dilemmas raised in your reflection on the event, e.g. conflicting interpretations, gaps in your knowledge?
- What have you learnt based on your reflection and how might this new learning influence your future actions?

(Adapted from Fook & Gardner, 2007)

Levels of reflection

When you reflect, you can do so at differing levels. Which is appropriate will depend on the requirements of your assignments. Three levels have been identified (Moon, 2001, 2003): *descriptive*, *analytical* and *critical*. At all three levels, you will need to describe the event itself, e.g. providing details about *what*, *where*, *when*, the event took place and *who* was involved, but you will also identify the emotions involved.

Levels of reflection – from descriptive to critical reflection

Descriptive
- The most foundational level is *descriptive*. At this level, the reflector focuses most of their attention on the 'story' and describes events in a subjective manner without identifying connections, acknowledging alternative viewpoints or challenging their own interpretations.

Analytical
- The second level is *analytical*, in which the reflector manages to achieve some 'distance' from the event. They consider alternative interpretations of the event and see connections between different perspectives provided, including those gained with the hindsight of experience.

Critical
- The third level is *critical* at which point the reflector achieves an even broader perspective and connects the chosen learning event itself and their own interpretations (as well as those of other relevant parties) to multiple contexts, including historical and socio-political perspectives. The reflector is more willing to challenge their own actions. Moreover, at this higher level, the reflector has a clearer appreciation of how various emotions have influenced their behaviour, and how perspectives can change (sometimes quite dramatically) over time.

In many of your reflective writing assignments, you will be required to write at either the second (analytical) and third (critical) levels. Reflections at the descriptive level tend to be more like diary entries, and are not usually appropriate for university assignments.

Example of reflective writing

Critical reflection essay in Social Work (extract)	Stages / function	Level of reflection
The incident occurred during my first fieldwork placement, in a children's service. I was given the opportunity to assist a caseworker, Rose, in her work with the Jackson family – parents: Jason and Mary and their three children [all names have been changed]. The family history included alcohol abuse by the parents and concerns regarding the children including very poor school attendance and apparent malnutrition. The key stakeholders of the case – including Max's school principal his counsellor and youth worker from his supported accommodation service – had been invited to a case study planning meeting and Max and his parents were also attending. The meeting was held in the conference room of the agency. It ended up being a very long meeting. Everyone was being given the chance to put forward their views as to Max's progress and supports that would be useful for him in the future. My role was to take, as far as possible, verbatim notes, as was often the practice at that agency.	*Background/ Context* introduces the context of the research and describes the critical incident introduces the main participants or researcher and other key stakeholders	*Descriptive*
About half an hour into the meeting, <u>Max began to 'become difficult', swearing and asking if he could leave because it was 'so boring'.</u> He left he room several times to visit the bathroom. At one point, Max's youth worker said, "Max, that language is inappropriate. We have all gone to the effort of being here today, we are all here for you. Please at least listen to what we have to say'. It came to the time when Rose asked, 'so what would you like to see happen, Max?' <u>Max replied, angry, 'I'd like to go back home, but it's not as though you're all listening to me, is it?"</u> Rose explained that she was sorry he was feeling upset, and that the meeting would be finished soon. A few final comments were made, and the meeting was brought to an end.	*Case problems/ Problem Identification* presents a sequence of events that may begin in a usual fashion but then change to include events that are unusual or problematic (complication)	*Descriptive*
When I reflect on the main themes or patterns emerging out of my narrative, there is a clear emphasis placed on notions of participation, dialogue and collaboration. This emphasis reflects an increasing interest in integrating strengths-based approaches into child protection practice. Workers are encouraged to reject a 'paternalistic posture', whereby professional work is defined as the articulation of expert knowledge, in favour of allowing clients to seize some control over decisions that are critical to their lives (Saleeby, 1997, pp 7-8). *(Adapted from Tseris, 2008)*	*Analysis & Discussion** application of key theoretical concepts/ framework to analyse the incident/case/event	*Analytical* *Critical*

*In some texts the Analysis and Discussion stages will be fused in one paragraph/section; in longer assignments they might be written as two separate sections. The Analysis & Discussion are the sections where we would typically find 'critical reflection' and evaluation linked to theoretical frameworks or policies.

Language strategies

	Strategy	Description
1.	**EVALUATIVE VOCABULARY (and grading words)**	Words that can be interpreted as positive or negative Words that intensify the meaning of other words
2.	**MODALITY**	Words that express degrees of certainty, frequency or obligation
3.	**EVIDENCE:**	Attributing or projecting claims to outside authorities in a specific or general w
	(a) Attribution	
	(b) Endorsement	Attributing claims with more or less support or certainty
4.	**LOGIC:**	
	(a) Comparison	Language to introduce similar ideas or results in order to support the writer's evaluation
	(b) Contrast	Language to introduce contrasting ideas or results in order to support the write evaluation
	(c) Concession	Resources that allow the writer to acknowledge opposing positions without giv the undue weight
	(d) Conjunction & logical connectors	Resources that help link ideas, arguments and evidence in a logical way

Example:

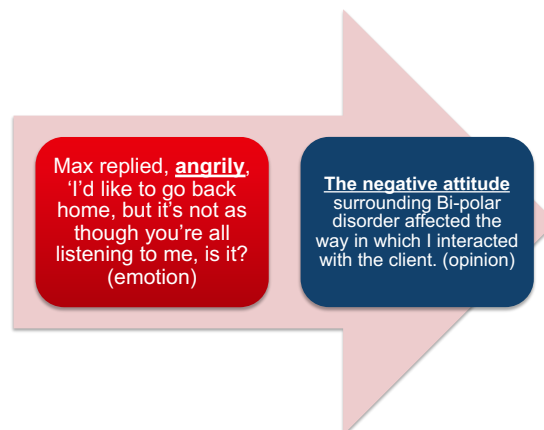| evaluation & *grading* to show self-awareness |
| :---: |

Analysing my behaviour and expectations of others with **an open mind** has led to *some* **astonishing realisations**. I was **surprised** that my *long held* belief that *the vast majority* of the world adopted individualism as a value was **incorrect.** […] **My lack of cultural knowledge** led to my use of a direct communication style which is in *stark* contrast to the *commonly* indirect Chinese style and **may** have offended the group members due to my **unintentional** effect of **making them loose face** to each other (Fox 2008, p.49-50). On reflection my **selfish** and **misguided** behaviour is **likely** to be **detracting** from **the very goal I** *so seriously* **wish to achieve** which is to obtain a **good** grade.

LOGIC

EVIDENCE: attribution

modality

In reflective assignments there is often a shift from **emotion** to **opinion** as writers shift from the description of cases/learning events to analysis and reflection:

Max replied, **angrily**, 'I'd like to go back home, but it's not as though you're all listening to me, is it? (emotion)

The negative attitude surrounding Bi-polar disorder affected the way in which I interacted with the client. (opinion)

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APPENDIX 1: Types of reflection

	DESCRIPTION	ASPECT/S	TYPICAL ASSIGNMENTS
REFLECTION	In its broadest sense, reflection can simply involve you asking questions about something you would like to better understand, e.g. a problem to solve or an issue to consider.	Theory	• More traditional essays or reports The focus is on ideas, e.g. theories, frameworks, arguments, etc.
REFLECTIVE PRACTICE	Reflection is often used to mean 'reflective practice', in which you are asked to reflect on the relationship between practice in your area of study and the theories you are being introduced to. Sometimes you will be asked to reflect on the relationship between your practice and the theories you are being introduced to. The end-result of your reflection can be that you will improve or change your practice in some way.	Theory and Practice	• Case studies The focus is theories, etc., but with respect to what other people are doing (i.e., others, not you) • Reflective reports The focus is theories, etc., but also on what you are doing/have done, not necessarily others.
CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION	With 'critical' reflection, you are not only required to reflect on your practice (as above) but are being asked required to consider how you are situated within broader social and institutional contexts, and to identify assumptions that you have not been aware of, challenging questions and issues, conflicts, and so on. There is an increased emphasis on understanding how your socialisation influences your behaviour and issues such as the relative power and privilege that we might or might not have, depending on the social groups to which we belong. The end-result of critical reflection should be more insight into yourself as a social actor but it might also involve a change in your practice (attitudes, and so on).	Self, Practice and Theory	• Critical reflection reports • Learning journals • Reflective sections within essays or reports The focus is on what you are doing/ have done, but very importantly why and should not only you, but whether our institutions, workplaces and social structures need to be changed.

APPENDIX 2: Additional example of reflection

Reflective report in Education (extract from analysis/discussion section)
Ultimately, this lesson plan took much more work than initially thought, however, once we began to delve into the research and theories regarding this stage of development ideas for activities and general lesson layout came almost instantly. While it may have come across confrontational, we believe this to be a necessary feature of our lesson in order to break through the stage of egocentrism that year eight students would be currently experiencing. As Moshman (2011) pointed out, there is no universally accepted definition of identity and this is the message that we hope that our lesson, in conjunction with the other three lessons in our series would portray to the students and that they would leave the lesson series with a greater appreciation of what makes them an individual and gives them their personal identity. Activities such as the collage and word box activity are age appropriate, and carry many subtle messages regarding students' knowledge of themselves. As stated by Erikson (1968), identity is formed through an acceptance and unity of past life events and of future events. The collage along with the box activity and the lesson as a whole helps adolescent students of this developmental stage to consider what about their past and futures defines them, and hence leads to a clearer understanding of their personal identity.   *(Used with student permission)*

Reflective journal in Business Studies (extract)
A weakness I consistently exhibit as a team member is a conscious form of behaviour known as discounting. Discounting involves devaluing the ideas and opinions of other group members due to a self-belief that your own thoughts are superior (Langhout, Rosselli & Feinstein 2007, p. 150). I used discounting sporadically during group discussions and only in the aim of achieving the highest level of success in the task at hand. It is widely accepted that culture is multidimensional with visible elements such as behaviour being a manifestation of the hidden and core elements of a culture (Solomon & Schell, p.47). The hidden value that underpins my behaviour of discounting is individualism. Individualism involves a preference to act independently and to put an individual's own interests before any group interests (Parker, pp. 194-196). The main reason I have used discounting in the past is to ensure that I get the best marks possible at university which can be classified as my individual objective. The broader objective this links to is success in life. Doing well at university has been shown statically to positively impact upon a person's career, health and material wealth in a generalised case (Todaro & Smith 2009, p.373). I therefore used discounting behaviour in the aim of achieving my own individual objective which I justified to myself by claiming it was similarly helping the group achieve its objective.   […] Australia's history plays another role in Australia's core culture through its history of immigration (Encarta Encyclopaedia 2009a). […] Some of Australia's national heroes are also responsible for developing individualism. Sir Donald Bradman who is arguably the most famous sporting hero in Australia was made famous for his outstanding individual cricket batting record (ESPN cricketinfo 2009). […] Individualism has consequently evolved from two main areas of core culture, its history and its heroes.   *(Used with student permission)*