

How to write a reflective essay

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This guide looks at writing a reflective essay. A reflective essay is a relatively new requirement in some subjects, and requires the writer to think about their experience in a way which relates that experience to relevant theory and which may also involve questioning how you typically do something. Such an essay should integrate theory with personal or group practice, and often involves identifying the learning outcomes of a situation. Reflective essays are generally written about an area of professional practice relevant to the author, for example nurses might look at how they interact with patients on a ward. Reflective essays tend to be shorter than standard academic essays, and the use of 'I' or 'we' is acceptable (in contrast to normal academic style).

This link examines the differences between standard essays and reflective essays.

The Link Between Theory and Practice

Reflective essays are a way of understanding how theory can relate to practice. This means you need to approach writing such essays in a particular way:

Be aware of the need to relate practice back to theory. How did events compare with the predictions made by theoretical models How can events help you to understand theory

Learn to be selective: pick out those bits of theory which seem useful, and be prepared to identify the relevant parts of the events you are writing about

Discussion with others can help you throw light on events and relate theory to practice

Because reflective essays involve writing about your experience, it is good practice to keep a personal journal to document events and your reactions to them.

Writing Style for Reflective Essays

- It's normally fine to use the first person in reflective essays, as you are talking about your own experience, for the parts where you are describing what happened. However, in parts of the essay where you are discussing theory, your style should be appropriate.
- Even when using 'I' and 'we', try to avoid being overly emotional or subjective. Aim to use descriptions that everyone can understand in a similar way.
- When writing about your experiences use the past tense ("I felt..."). When writing about theory use the present tense ("Jones suggests that...")

Models of Reflection

There are a number of models of reflection upon practice which you can use to structure your reflective essay. It's recommended you use the one suggested by your tutor. A commonly used model is Gibbs' (see figure 1)

The six stages of the model can be used to shape your essay:

Description: what happened Set the scene, explain the context and who was involved. Describe the key incident you are concerned with

Feelings: how did you feel about what happened In contrast to a standard academic essay, you are expected to explore your emotions about the event. Bring out changes in feelings, for example during the event and afterwards.

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But be careful here not to be offensive, keep an academic distance in your style of writing.

Evaluation: this means looking at the incident / practice. How did you react? How did others react? What was positive and negative about the event? What changes happened as a result of the event (if any). This is a good stage to discuss any relevant theory.

Analysis: this section should develop from the evaluation. You will look in more detail at different aspects of the situation you are reflecting upon. You should also engage with theory here, applying it to the event.

Conclusion: here you make decisions about what happened – what could you have done differently? What did you do well? How could you have improved things or avoided negatives?

Action plan: this means planning what needs to be done to improve things in the future. Is there something you need to learn, training you need to do, or systems to be set in place?

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