



Reflective writing

Reflective writing is an increasingly common form of academic writing. It encourages you to explore your personal responses to a given topic or situation, and supports your development as an active learner.

In addition to being an important academic skill, structured reflection is a useful practice for long-term personal development and growth. It is also an important part of regular professional practice in some fields, such as medicine and education.

Good reflective writing should critically engage with and form links between your experiences and existing literature.

Reflective writing requires you to:

- be open, transparent and constructive about your own thoughts and feelings
- connect your experiences with scholarly research and theory
- write for an academic audience using technical vocabulary
- express yourself in a narrative, honest and personal way.

Note that examples are very valuable in reflective writing: they provide something concrete and tangible that you can then connect to theories and principles.

There are several models of academic reflection. In an assignment you may be given a specific model to use, or you may have the freedom to choose a model yourself. This guide covers two common models: the Rolfe framework and the Gibbs cycle.

You'll see examples of what reflections can look like, and key questions to consider as you complete your own reflection.

The Rolfe Framework



Figure 1: The 3 components of the Rolfe framework.

Image long description: Three headings, each with three guiding questions. What (...were the main ideas? ...did you originally think of the topic? ...were most important aspects for your experience?); So what? (How does the idea fit with or challenge your own beliefs? How did your theoretical knowledge play out in a practical context? What theories or other resources can help understand what you have experienced?) Now what? (What questions remain / come up? How has the reflection changed your perspective? How do you plan to improve or continue learning in the future?).

The Rolfe framework captures the essence of most reflective models, and its 3 clear components make it easy to remember.

What?

What situation or information are you responding to? This could be a new theory or concept you discussed in class, a challenging scenario at work, or something you have learned over the course of the semester.

So what?

Why is it important, or how can you explain the issue? This section is where you might engage with other research; or connect your thoughts, feelings and experiences with course material.

Now what?

Now that you've understood the issue and can explain your experience with reference to relevant research or course material, how will you respond to similar scenarios in the future?

Example: Rolfe framework reflection on challenges in a group work project

What?

Tasks were shared out amongst members of my team. Unfortunately, the tasks were not seen as equally difficult by all team members, so some felt they had to work harder than others. For example, some thought that writing the conclusion was the easiest task because it just meant summarising everyone else's work. However, the person writing the conclusion said it was more complicated, and in any case, they had a tighter timeline because they had to wait for everyone else to get their sections ready before being able to finish the conclusion.

So what?

This perception of unfairness led to low team morale and was a risk to our final mark. Social interdependence theory recognises a type of group interaction called 'positive interdependence', meaning cooperation (Johnson & Johnson, 1993, cited by Maughan & Webb, 2001); and many studies have demonstrated that "cooperative learning experiences encourage higher achievement" (Maughan & Webb, 2001). As our group morale was low, we were not cooperating well.

Now what?

Ultimately, our group achieved a decent mark, but to improve our achievement we perhaps needed a chairperson or a shared 'mission statement' to help encourage cooperation early. In future group work (in my studies and at work), I will suggest this in order to ensure a more positive team experience.

The Gibbs Cycle

Another common model for reflection is the Gibbs cycle, which is broken up into more specific components than the What/So what/Now what-model.



Figure 2: The stages of the Gibbs cycle.

Image long description: The 6 stages of the Gibbs cycle are shown in a circular diagram. Each stage is connected to the next by an arrow. The stages shown are: Description: what happened?; Feelings: what were you thinking and feeling?; Evaluation: what was positive/negative about the experience?; Analysis: what else can you make of the situation?; Conclusion: what else could you have done?; Action Plan: if it rose again, what would you do?.

The stages of the Gibbs cycle are Description, Feelings, Evaluation, Analysis, Conclusion, Action Plan - and back to Description.

The Gibbs model can be particularly useful for ongoing professional reflection and development, as each reflection has an explicit 'action plan' section for future reference and engagement.

Example: Gibbs cycle reflection on clinical rotation (adapted from Kiron Koshy et al., "Reflective practice in health care and how to reflect effectively" in *International Journal of Surgery Oncology* (2017) 2:e20)

Description

I was involved in a patient confrontation when an elderly patient wanted to be discharged home. She was under our general surgical team for a head injury and observation after a normal CT head. She had been told that she was medically fit for discharge but still awaiting home modifications: her house had been deemed unsafe and needed banisters to be installed. The issue was raised with me by chance as I was doing other things on the ward. I explained this to her and although she remained annoyed she did not seek further clarification.

Feelings

At the time I felt rushed and frustrated. I had a lot of other work to be done and this was distracting from that. She had already been told she was waiting for the

Occupational Therapist to report back on progress of home modifications in the morning. I understood why this was difficult for her but did not think I would be able to do anything to help.

Evaluation

The morning ward round was quite rushed and so our explanation was limited to telling her we were waiting for the Occupational Therapist's advice. I can understand from her point of view this may have meant very little, and so my explanation of what exactly we were doing may have relieved some frustration. Having been waiting up to this point, it is no surprise she continued to be angry but may have been accepting of this plan.

Analysis

I think my explanation of the sequence of events (Occupational Therapist referral > home visit > report written > funding sourced > contractor sourced > access to home arranged > modifications made) was very good, and the patient seemed happy with this, although I did not give a rough idea of how long the process would take. It may have been useful to have spoken to the Occupational Therapist to ask what progress had been made to feed back to the patient.

Conclusion

Although the information I gave the patient in the ward round was correct, it was not understandable to the patient. If this had all been quickly clarified in the morning, the patient would have been happy throughout the day and not caused a problem later on.

Action plan

To avoid a similar situation in the future I will speak to the other health care professionals on the ward to get a rough idea of how long occupational interventions such as this and other community interventions take to start. This means that when future patients are medically fit I can spend a moment in the morning informing them of what needs to be done and how long it may take. Hopefully this will allow me to address patient concerns early to avoid them becoming an issue when it is too late.

Example: Gibbs cycle reflection on challenge in group work (adapted from University of Edinburgh ['Gibbs' Reflective Cycle'](#))

Description

We divided the assignment into sections according to people's strengths. When we came together on the due date to piece the assignment together we realised we wrote in different styles, so we had to rewrite the assignment to make it more coherent. We had only given ourselves enough time to write our individual sections, but we did not plan time to rewrite if something went wrong. We had to put in a

significant amount of extra work at the last minute, and two members of the group even had to drop their evening plans.

Feelings

Before we realised we still had a lot of work to do, I was happy and thought we had been smart when we divided the work. When we realised we couldn't hand in the assignment, I got frustrated and had little motivation to do the rewriting. When I found out that a couple of people from the group had to change their evening plans, I ended up feeling guilty about my lack of motivation. I decided to commit to the project properly and not let the team down. Looking back, I'm satisfied that we put in the work, although the final stage was very stressful.

Evaluation

Despite the last-minute rush, one very positive aspect of the process was seeing that each group member produced good quality work for the agreed deadline. Moreover, everyone coming together in the final stage to fix our mistakes was a good sign of the group's work ethic. The thing that clearly hadn't worked up until that point was that we assumed we wrote in the same way, and therefore the overall time plan of the group failed.

Analysis

Dividing work according to individual strengths is useful. Belbin's team roles (2010) would suggest something similar. The reason piecing work together didn't work was we had no plan for what the assignment needed to look like. We were all so focused on finishing our sections that none of us thought to ask what the final assignment was supposed to look like. The last part can be explained by 'groupthink' (e.g. Jarvis, 1991), where members of a group make a suboptimal decision because individuals are afraid of challenging the consensus.

Conclusion

I will continue to have people self-identify their strengths and possibly even suggest using the 'Belbin team roles'-framework with longer projects. However, I learned that when a group divides work, we must plan how we want each section to look – having done this would likely have made it possible to finalise the assignment without much or any rewriting. Lastly, I learned that we sometimes have to challenge the decisions we seem to agree on in the group to ensure that we are not agreeing just because of groupthink.

Action plan

When I'm working in a group next time, as an ice breaker I will suggest we talk about our strengths. If we decide to divide work, I will insist that we set our expectations first. I might suggest writing a section together, so that we have a reference for when we are writing our own parts. I will also ask how we can challenge or review our initial decisions so that we avoid groupthink. If I have any concerns, I will tell the group. I

think by remembering I want the best result possible will make me be able to disagree even when it feels uncomfortable.

General tips for academic reflection

- Keep a learning journal. Take some time regularly to write down your responses to concepts and activities. This will have the benefit of letting you monitor your own learning, and will also serve as valuable notes for writing reflective assignments.
- Don't be fooled by word counts! Reflective writing assignments are often shorter than research essays or lab reports, but still require considerable analytical effort.