

Study Skills: Reflective Writing

Video transcript

Have you just received your first reflective writing task at university? Or maybe you have written a reflection before, but you weren't quite sure what your lecturer expected from you. New students usually know about the more common types of academic texts, like essays and reports, so some can be surprised the first time they are asked to write about their own thoughts and feelings.

This video will introduce you to reflective thinking and reflective writing.

So, what is reflective thinking?

Reflection is more than daydreaming and it's more than just thinking. Reflective thinking has a **focus**: you usually focus on something that you have experienced or learned. For example, you may reflect on a group project or on your readings in a unit.

Reflective thinking is a **process**: you don't allow your mind to wander aimlessly. Instead, you go through stages in your thinking or ask yourself a series of questions. In fact, your lecturer may give you a reflective thinking model to follow.

Finally, reflective thinking has a **goal**. Ultimately, you reflect to develop your self-awareness and deepen your understanding of something. Your reflective tasks at university may have a practical outcome, such as a list of recommendations to improve something, or a plan of action to apply a theory.

Now, many models of reflective thinking exist and are used in different disciplines. Common examples that you might meet at university include: The Gibbs Reflective Cycle, the Kolb Reflective Cycle, or the DIEP model by Boud, Keogh and Walker.

When you have a reflective task to complete, make sure you know which model of reflection your lecturer requires you to follow and make sure you understand what each stage means. Ask your lecturer if you are not sure.

We don't have time to look at each of the various models in this video, but they do share some similarities. So, we will look at an adapted version of the Driscoll "What" model. This adaptation will get you started because the three simple stages in this model are common to other longer reflective models.

So, when reflecting, you consider three types of questions. Put simply, they are: *What? So what? What next?* When you answer the question *what?*, you need to describe the learning experience.

At this stage of the reflection, you answer questions like: *What is the theory you are reflecting on? Or if it was an experience, what happened? What did you see or hear? How did it make you feel?*

When you answer the question *so what?*, you need to interpret or evaluate the experience. At this stage of the reflection, at this stage of the you may answer questions like: *How can you explain this? What are the positives, negatives or other implications? How does this compare to your previous experience or knowledge? What have you learned? What theories relate to this?*

When you answer the question *what next?*, you need to plan for the future.

At this stage of the reflection, you answer questions like: *What will you do differently in the future? How will you use this new understanding? What else do you need to know or learn?*

So, we have reviewed reflective thinking ... let's now consider the question: what is reflective writing? You may encounter many different types of reflective tasks at university. They could include tasks like blogs, learning journals, logbooks for experiments or technical projects, reflective essays reflective notes for Law, or reflective reports on practicums or internships.

So, when you have a reflective task, read your instructions carefully and make sure you understand what type of text your lecturer requires.

Turning now to the features of reflective writing. Let's look at a text written by an Education student.

In my practicum, I had trouble getting the kids' attention. I yelled at them, so I felt like a terrible, useless teacher.

Now, this student may be honestly describing their experience and their strong emotions, but this is NOT a good example of reflective writing. Reflective writing is personal, but it must still be professional.

Let's improve this text.

First, we don't use slang. So, we should replace *kids'* with *students'*. Second, we need to use more professional language. So, we could replace *yelled at them* with *raised my voice*. Third, we may need to describe our emotions, but we don't use emotive or overly strong language. So, we should replace *like a terrible, useless teacher* with something more professional, like *very discouraged about my teaching skills*.

Now we have improved the language, let's look at this example again. Remember - when we write reflectively, we answer the questions *what*, *so what* and *what next*.

We can see these example sentences answer the question, *what*. They describe the experience and how the student felt about it. It is entirely descriptive. The student now needs to expand the text to answer the other questions.

For example, to answer *so what* they could add: *This may be because I didn't consider classroom management in my lesson plan. Not addressing this will affect my development as a teacher.*

Here the student is interpreting the experience by trying to explain what happened and consider the implications.

Then to answer *what next* the student could add: *So, I will speak to my mentor about useful classroom management strategies.*

Here the student uses the experience to plan their professional development.

This is a very simple example. In real reflections, you will think more deeply than this. However, this example shows how you can move beyond description in your reflections and give attention to

deepening your understanding and learning. This habit will stand you in good stead throughout your studies and into your professional life.

If you'd like to learn more about reflective thinking and learning, here are references for each of the models we have mentioned.

Continue through the materials if you would like to learn more about reflection and reflective writing.

And don't forget! If you would like more help, speak to a Language and Learning Advisor.