

REFLECTIVE WRITING

What is Reflective Writing?

There are many definitions of reflective writing! For example, "Reflection is a **dynamic process. It is not about being passive, staying where you are and looking back - but an active engagement with knowledge and experience.** So, in reflecting you are able to **construct new and deeper understanding and to articulate knowledge in a more meaningful way**". (Nationalcollege.org.uk 2018)

TOP TIP

Everyone should find a definition that encompasses all aspects of reflection and that speaks to you. Have a clear definition in your mind before engaging in reflective practice and this may take a bit of reading before you find it.

Fundamental Questions of Reflective Writing

These questions demonstrate the fundamental ideas that reflective practitioners should be asking themselves. These questions form the basis of reflective practice.

Step 1 considers the following:

- **What** am I learning?
- **How** am I learning?
- How am I **using what I am learning**?
- What are my **strengths and weaknesses**?

Step 2 is a more reflective approach:

- What are my **learning priorities**?
- How can I **improve my learning**?
- How well am I **working towards my goals**?

Explicit & Tacit Knowledge

Explicit knowledge

This is what we see at the surface or in other words, **the 'obvious' thoughts and ideas.**

Tacit knowledge

This knowledge is a type of **subconscious knowledge** that's difficult to explain, especially when it comes to the word 'why?'. *For example, 'Why did you say that?' or 'Why did you react like that?'*. To be able to activate this knowledge, we have to **reduce our editing part of the brain and open up and let thoughts flow**. This is why reflective writing is so important. By using reflective writing, we can channel the 'Tacit Knowledge' and put it on paper. **We can do this by Freewriting.**

Freewriting

This is essential to the reflective writing process, and it can **help to develop a deeper more critical type of understanding**. In academia, you have to do a lot of structured and edited academic writing, however, when you freewrite you get to **forget about all the rules and just write**. Freewriting helps you to see more meaningful aspects of your learning that may not be at the surface. **It allows you to look at topics in more depth because you have the opportunity to move past all the surface thoughts.** Our thoughts and actions are based on tacit knowledge (unspoken or already understood knowledge).

TOP TIP

Freewriting is the same process as when you talk to a friend about an idea and then you have realisations about it. The key to freewriting is that it undoes the editing side of the process. You should engage in freewriting as often as you can. Try taking 10 min before going to bed and freewrite about how your day was. By doing this freewriting becomes a habit. You can look back and select the most significant aspects of your learning, and then you can structure and edit it.

Types of Reflection

Schön's Reflection Model (1991)

TOP TIP

When you are beginning reflective writing, make sure that you create a list of questions that are appropriate to the context you are reflecting on. It is a lot easier to answer than just statements.

Sczhon's Model, **breaks reflective writing into 2 types:**

Reflection IN action (at the time the event is happening)

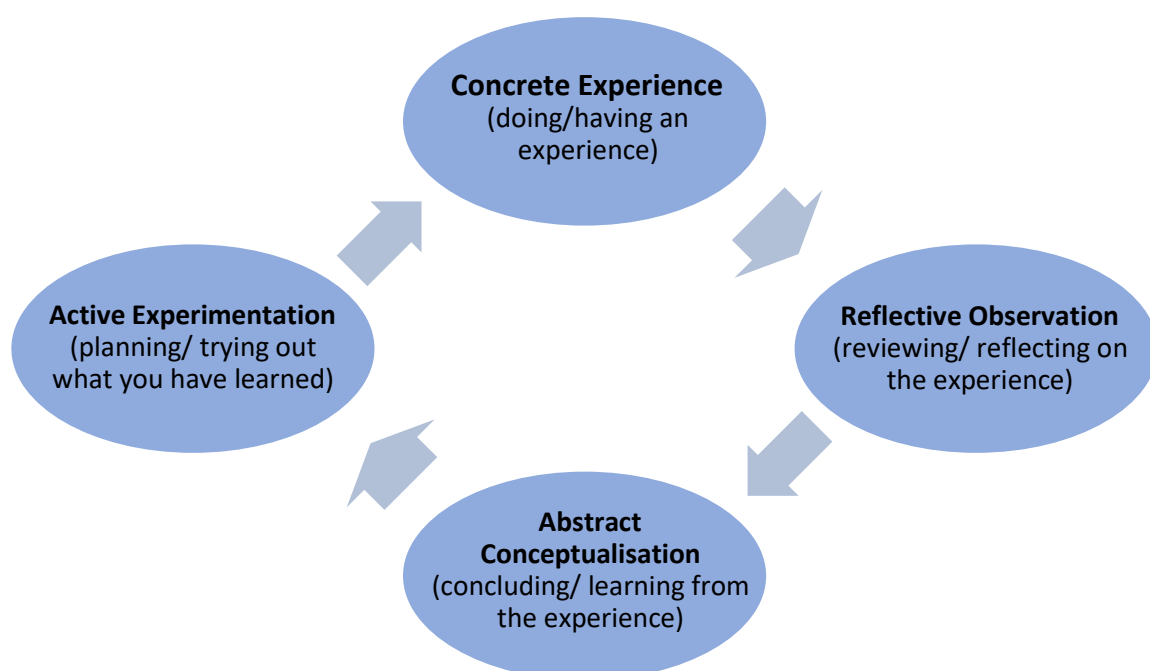
- The experience itself.
- Thinking about it during the event.
- Deciding how to act at the time.

Reflection ON action (after the event)

- Reflecting on something that has happened.
- Thinking about what you might do differently if it happened again.
- New information gained and/ or theoretical perspectives from a study that informs the reflector's experience can be used to process feelings and actions.

Kolb's Reflective Model (1984)

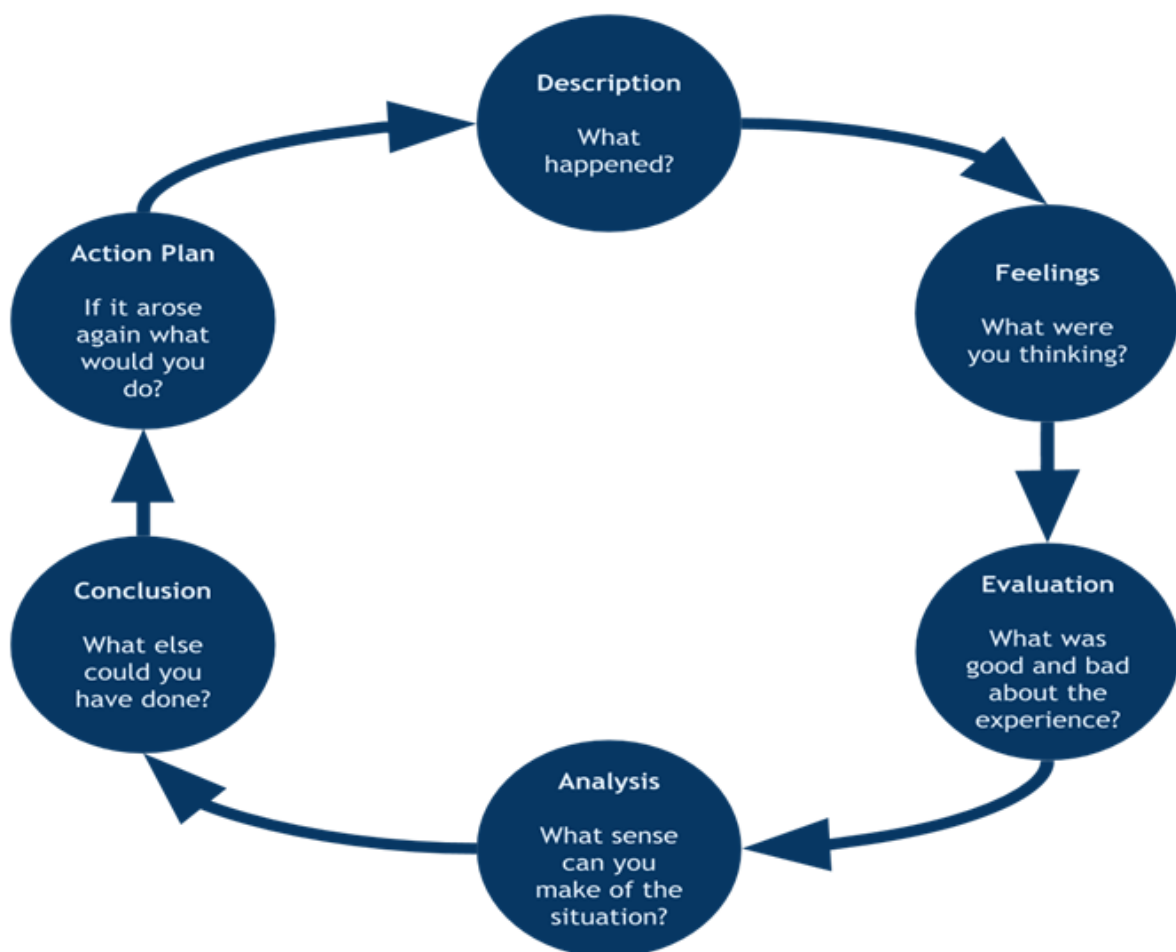
Kolb's reflective cycle, looks at reflection holistically, starting from having the experience up to trying out what you have learnt. This is the cycle of reflective practice. So, **this is a key model to illustrate the continuous process as a whole.**



Gibb's Reflective Model (1988)

Gibb's reflective cycle helps **to break down each reflective experience you have into manageable chunks and can help you to structure your writing**. It is divided into 6 steps:

1. **Description**
2. **Feelings**
3. **Evaluation**
4. **Analysis**
5. **Conclusion**
6. **Action Plan**



TOP TIP

One of the main issues with students' reflective writing is that it focuses on the first three steps and is only describing, but does not critically reflect. The last three steps (Analysis, Conclusion and Action Plan) are useful and important as they force you to critically think and critically reflect.

It is only when you get to **Step 4 (Analysis)**, where you start to truly analyse and **start questioning 'why'** and to **make sense of what happened and linking it to theory that you really begin to critically reflect. You may at this stage have to think back to the theory of your discipline, and how it links to what you have learnt.**

Step 5 (Conclusion) is looking retrospectively at what you could have done differently, again this could link back to theory.

Finally, **Step 6 (Action Plan)** is what you have learnt for the future.

TOP TIP

Gibb's Reflective model can also be a guide to how you could structure your reflective writing. There are various ways you could implement this.

- If you are new to reflective writing, you could follow it step by step.
- It could be that each step is a paragraph or half a paragraph.
- it could be that you move through the steps per sentence.

The key though is to make sure that the descriptive part is minor and that the majority of your reflection focuses on the critical reflective stages.

Language for Critical Reflection

Students reflective writing **tends to be too descriptive and lacks critical reflection.** That is why **the language we use can change the way we think about reflective writing.**

Useful Phrases to Critically Reflect

These phrases are taken from Southampton University. They can help you to start critically reflecting after you have described the situation. **These generators will help you create the beginning of reflective writing sentences and in turn create interpretation sentences.**

Combine each column and finish the sentence to create the reflective writing flow.

		aspect(s)	
		element(s)	
	meaningful	experience(s)	was (were)
For me, the [most]	significant	issues(s)	
	important	idea(s)	
	relevant		arose from . . .
	useful	learning	happened when . .
			resulted from . . .

Previously,		thought (did not think)
At the time,		felt (did not feel)
At first,	I	knew (did not know)
Initially,		noticed (did not notice)
Subsequently,		questioned (did not question)
Later		realised (did not realise)

These generators will help you to create outcome sentences.

I have	significantly		my skills in . . .
	slightly	developed	my understanding of . ..
		improved	my knowledge of . .
However, I have not [sufficiently]			my ability to . . .

[Additionally,]	
[Furthermore,]	I have learned that . . .
[Most importantly,]	

	read . . .		feel . . .
	experienced . . .		think . . .
Having	applied . . .	I now	realise . . .
	discussed . . .		wonder . . .
	analysed . . .		question . . .
	learned . . .		know . . .

Reflective Practice in a Professional Context

You can see how complex some questions are but there is an overlap of the question, in terms of university life and work life. **For you, the question that asks you to compare your experience with theory, which is essential.**

How do professionals reflect?

- What happened?
- Why?
- What was my role?
- What was the role of others?
- What was the role of the context?
- What was the role of the system?
- What was the outcome?
- How was this similar or different to what I expected/ to my past experience/ to my theoretical understanding?
- What have I learned and how can I use this learning in the future?

Actions of the reflective professional/ academic:

- Think about what you do and the meaning of your practice experience regularly.
- Examine the assumptions behind your practice.
- Compare the theory of your practice to what you actually do.

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Useful Links

- Learning Development with Plymouth University, 'Reflection: Becoming reflective; How is reflective practice applied in academic life?; Reflective writing; Reflective writing for assessment', Available at: <http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/Reflection1.pdf>
- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Louise Marbina et al (2010), 'Practice Principle 8: Reflective Practice', Available at: <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/providers/edcare/evirefprac.pdf>
- Peter Elbow, 'Writing Without Teachers', Open Learn Create, 'Frameworks for reflective practice Part 2', Available at: <https://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/mod/page/view.php?id=76089>.
- The University of Edinburgh, (2019), 'Reflection Toolkit: Gibbs' reflective cycle', Available at: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/reflection/reflectors-toolkit/reflecting-on-experience/gibbs-reflective-cycle>.
- Library and Learning Services Study Guide, 'Analytical, Critical, Evaluation, Reflective Writing Compared', Available at: http://www2.eit.ac.nz/library/lis_guides_descriptivewriting.html.
- Sam Young, 'Time to Reflect', Available at: <http://www.samyoung.co.nz/2015/11/time-to-reflect.html>
- Solent Online Learning, 'Archived Material (Reflection): Reflective thinking and writing', Available at: <https://learn.solent.ac.uk/mod/book/view.php?id=2732&chapterid=1110>

Other Relevant PDFs

- Sentence Structure
- Grammar
- Editing
- Proofreading
- Paragraph Structure