

LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

How to write reflectively

A Writing Centre workshop

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Introduction

Welcome to this workshop, in which we will explore what reflective writing is and examine ways in which we can become successful reflective writers. Within this handout you will find several exercises, which you may complete and return to the Writing Centre for feedback if you wish.

We hope you find this workshop useful. It is one of a range of services provided for you by the Writing Centre. Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you would like to know more about what the Writing Centre offers.

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Exercise 1 – What is reflective writing?

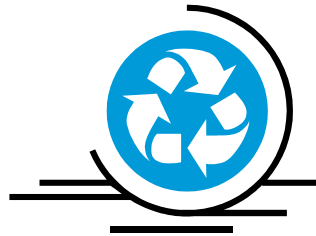
This exercise is intended to help you think about what you are trying to achieve by writing reflectively.

Firstly, write a sentence explaining what you think reflective writing is.

Now write another sentence explaining *why* you think we have to write reflectively at University level.

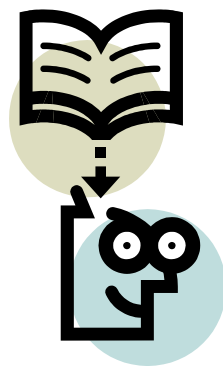
So what *is* reflective writing?

The word 'reflect' comes from the Latin word 'reflectere', which means 'to bend back'.
(Collins English Dictionary, 3rd edn, 2001)



The adjective 'reflective' is defined as:

1. Characterised by quiet thought or contemplation.
 2. Capable of reflecting: a *reflective surface*.
 3. Produced by reflection.
- (ibid)

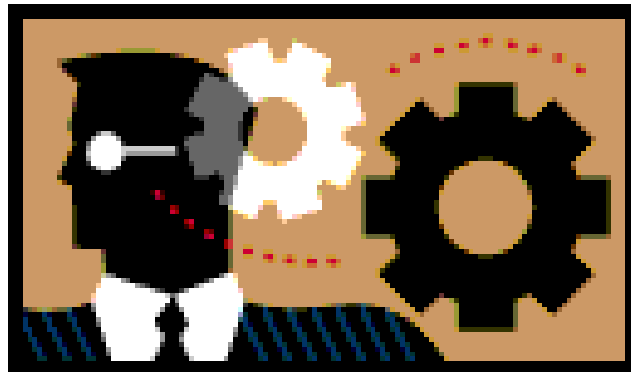


Why do we have to write reflectively at University level?

- Becoming aware of your own learning processes
- Knowing how you learn makes you a more effective learner
- Enables active participation in own development
- Helps you evaluate your own performance as a learner and practitioner
- Focuses thoughts on how your practice is defined, constructed and experienced
- Develops critical and independent thought
- Effective way of demonstrating your learning to assessors
- Reflective practice is a life skill, not just a university requirement

Thinking and writing

- Thinking and writing are closely connected processes.
- In order to write reflectively, you need to think carefully about yourself as a learner.
- This processes is sometimes referred to as 'metacognition', in other words, thinking about your own thought processes.



How is reflective writing different from other sorts of academic writing?

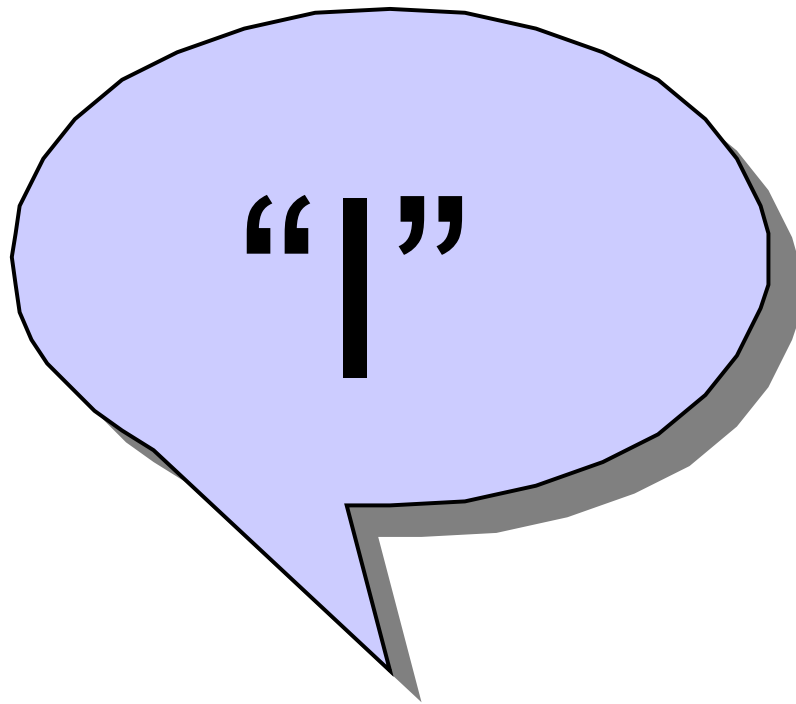
In keeping with all academic writing, reflective writing has certain basic features:

- It uses Standard English
- It does not use slang or colloquialism
- It contains a claim or argument
- It is logical
- It evaluates and analyses critically
- It uses appropriate and relevant information
- It supports an argument with evidence
- It does not use contractions
- It uses correct grammar, spelling and punctuation
- It uses words precisely
- It uses the right word for the job
- It cites references accurately at all times

Unlike most other forms of academic writing, it *is* all about you, so you can say 'I'.

Often, the evidence you cite will be your own experience and observation rather than quotations from academic texts.

However, that is not to say that you cannot quote academic texts where this would help the reflective process e.g. relating theory to practice.



Common problems

As with all other forms of academic writing, there are certain common problems to be aware of.

- **Long sentences, often trying to cover several points**

Solution: Use shorter sentences, each dealing with one main point. Make each sentence serve a precise purpose.

- **Verbiage (unnecessary padding-out of sentences)**

Solution: use the fewest number of words necessary to express the meaning precisely. (Unnecessary words can be interpreted in a way the writer had not intended – be careful!)

- **Confusion (where is this sentence going?)**

Solution: Get your ideas clear in your mind before you start to write. Ask yourself ‘what am I trying to say?’ and then ‘have I said it as clearly as possible?’

- **Over formality**

Solution: use the simplest word that expresses the meaning precisely. For example, why say ‘seating apparatus’ when ‘chair’ would do just as well? However, sometimes a complex or unfamiliar word will be the best word for the job.

Cited by the Plain English Campaign, available online at <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/law.html> accessed 20.01.04

Above all, reflective writing is not just a description of what you did.

A narrative of events is the starting point for reflective writing, not the end point.

For example:

“I developed a computer resource designed to assist a child who speaks English as a second language.”

You could turn this into a more reflective description by asking yourself the following questions:

- Why have you chosen to write reflectively about this event?**
- Why did you decide to develop a computer resource?**
- Why was it aimed specifically at children who speak English as a second language?**

The above example may then become:

“In order to enhance my understanding of the decisions and experiences that influence my practice as a learning support assistant in an early years setting, I am seeking to write reflectively about an IT resource that I developed and implemented.

I decided to develop an IT resource because I have particular skills in this area and I would like to make more use of them within the classroom as I feel this would benefit the children and my own personal development.

I wanted to develop a resource for children who speak English as a second language because my own experience of being a bilingual child in a single-language setting has been a big influence on my career. Memories of feeling marginalized because of my different linguistic status have been a strong motivating force in my determination to prevent other children experiencing what I did.”

The above example is starting to become reflective, but really it is still only scratching the surface. The question to ask yourself after every statement is “why?”. This should bring you to deeper levels of reflection.

For example:

How did you feel about the success of your IT resource?

“I thought it was quite successful.”

Why?

“I thought it was quite successful because the child engaged enthusiastically with the material.”

Why?

“The child engaged enthusiastically with the material because the software I used to create it allowed the inclusion of appealing visual elements.”

Why?

“I selected this particular computer programme because it is recommended by several leading practitioners, including Jones and Smith. In addition, I have used it before in this setting with consistently successful outcomes.”

This process could go on for ever, but hopefully you get the idea!

In addition to writing a detailed description of what you did and why, and reflecting upon your success or otherwise, you could also consider the following factors:

Evaluate

- **How did you react to events?**
- **What were your feelings at the time?**
- **How do you feel now?**
- **What went particularly well?**
- **What, if anything, went wrong?**
- **What could have been better?**

Analyse

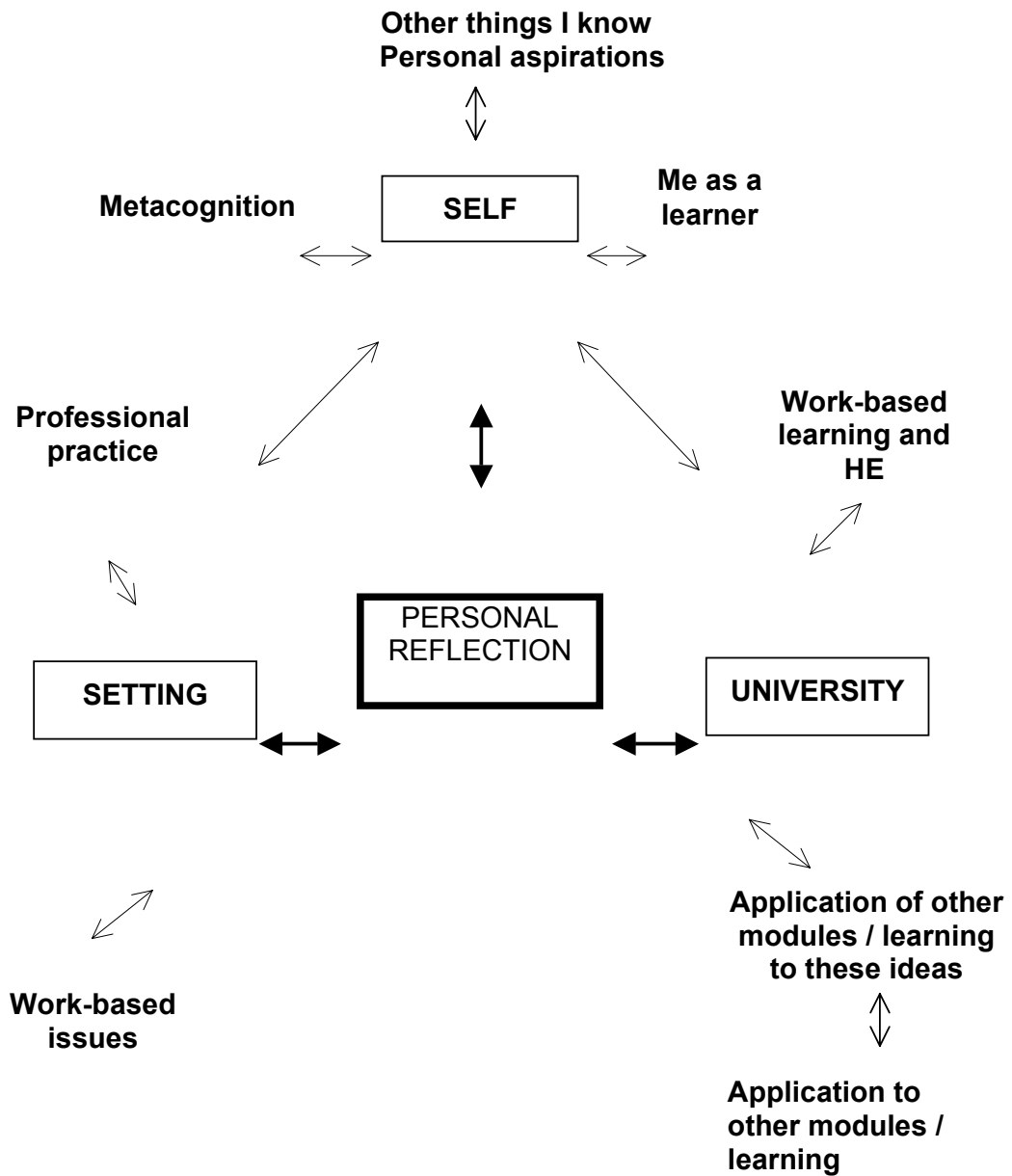
- **Looking beneath the surface, can you identify any trends, patterns or deeper motivations?**
- **What was really going on?**
- **Can you apply theory to your practice?**
- **What might an objective observer have thought?**
- **Are there any academic or other sources you can use to help make sense of your experience?**
- **Can you look at events from different perspectives or points of view?**

Conclude

- **From a personal point of view, have you learned any lessons that you will apply in future situations?**
- **From a general point of view, are there any principles that could help to inform your practice and those of others?**
- **What would you do differently next time?**
- **What insights have you gained about your own practice?**
- **What actions/steps will you take as a result of the reflective process?**

Possible sources of evidence for reflective writing

(adapted from Watton, Collings & Moon, 2001)



Appendix 1 – examples of reflective writing

The following three accounts are of a presentation at a team meeting in the workplace. The accounts of the same event are written at three different levels of reflection. (Examples reproduced from Watton, Collings and Moon, 2001).

The Presentation

A) I had to take an agenda item to the weekly team meeting in my third week of working at PIGG PLC. I had to talk about the project that I am on (creating a new database for the management information system). I had done a presentation before and then I relied on my acting skills. Despite the acting, I spent quite a bit of time preparing it in the way that I have seen others make similar presentations.

The presentation at the last team meeting, given by my colleague, went well – she used Power Point and I decided to use it. I decided that a good presentation comes from good planning and having all the figures that anyone might request so I spent a long time in the preparation and I went in feeling confident.

However, I became nervous when I realised they were all waiting for me to speak and my nerves made my voice wobble. I did not know how to stop it. Early on, I noticed that people seemed not to understand what I was saying despite the Power Point. Using Power Point meant that people received my presentation both through what I was saying and what I had prepared on the slides. In a way that meant they got it twice but I noticed that Mrs Shaw (my boss) repeated bits of what I had said several times and once or twice answered questions for me. This made me feel uncomfortable. I felt it was quite patronising and I was upset. Later my colleagues said that she always does it. I was disappointed that my presentation did not seem to have gone well.

I thought about the presentation for several days and then talked with Mrs Shaw about the presentation (there was no-one else). She gave me a list of points for improvement next time. They included:

- putting less on Power Point;
- talking more slowly;
- calming myself down in some way.

I also have to write down the figures in a different way so that they can be understood better. She suggested that I should do a presentation to several of the team sometime next week so that I can improve my performance.

B) I had to take an agenda item to the weekly team meeting in my third week of working at PIGG PLC. I had to talk about the project that I am on. I am creating a new database for the management information system. I had given a presentation before and that time I relied on my acting skills. I did realise that there were considerable differences between then and now, particularly in the situation (it was only fellow students and my tutor before). I was confident but I did spend quite a bit of time preparing. Because everyone else here uses Power Point, I felt I had better use it – though I realised that it was not for the best reasons. I also prepared lots of figures so that I could answer questions. I thought, at that stage, that any questions would involve requests for data. When I think back on the preparation that I did, I realise that I was desperately trying to prove that I could make a presentation as well as my colleague, who did the last one. I wanted to impress everyone. I had not realised there was so much to learn about presenting, and how much I needed to know about Power Point to use it properly.

When I set up the presentation in the meeting I tried to be calm but it did not work out. Early on the Power Point went wrong and I began to panic. Trying to pretend that I was cool and confident made the situation worse because I did not admit my difficulties and ask for help. The more I spoke, the more my voice went wobbly. I realised, from the kinds of questions that the others asked, that they did not understand what I was saying. They were asking for clarification – not the figures. I felt worse when Mrs Shaw, my boss, started to answer questions for me. I felt flustered and even less able to cope.

As a result of this poor presentation, my self esteem is low at work now. I had thought I was doing all right in the company. After a few days, I went to see Mrs Shaw and we talked it over. I still feel that her interventions did not help me. Interestingly several of my colleagues commented that she always does that. It was probably her behaviour, more than anything else, that damaged my poise. Partly through talking over the presentation and the things that went wrong (but not, of course, her interventions), I can see several areas that I could get better. I need to know more about using Power Point – and to practice with it. I recognise, also, that my old acting skills might have given me initial confidence, but I needed more than a clear voice, especially when I lost my way with Power Point. Relying on a mass of figures was not right either. It was not figures they wanted. In retrospect, I could have put the figures on a handout. I am hoping to have a chance to try with a presentation, practicing with some of the team.

C) I am writing this back in my office. It all happened 2 days ago. Three weeks after I started at PIGG PLC had to take an agenda item to the team meeting. I was required to report on my progress in the project on which I am working. I am developing a new database for the management information system of the company. I was immediately worried. I was scared about not saying the right things and not being able to answer questions properly. I did a presentation in my course at university and felt the same about it initially. I was thinking then, like this time, I could use my acting skills. Both times that was helpful in maintaining my confidence at first, at least. Though the fact that I was all right last time through the whole presentation may not have helped me this time!

I decided to use Power Point. I was not very easy about its use because I have seen it go wrong so often. However, I have not seen anyone else give a presentation here without using it - and learning to use Power Point would be valuable. I was not sure, when it came to the session, whether I really knew enough about running Power Point. (How do you know when you know enough about something? – dummy runs, I suppose, but I couldn't get the laptop when I wanted it).

When it came to the presentation, I really wanted to do it well – as well as the presentations were done the week before. Maybe I wanted too much to do well. Previous presentations have been interesting, informative and clear and I thought the handouts from them were good (I noticed that the best gave enough but not too much information).

In the event, the session was a disaster and has left me feeling uncomfortable in my work and I even worry about it at home. I need to think about why a simple presentation could have such an effect on me. The Power Point went wrong (I think I clicked on the wrong thing). My efforts to be calm and 'cool' failed and my voice went wobbly – that was, anyway, how it felt to me. My colleague actually said afterwards that I looked quite calm despite what I was feeling (I am not sure whether she meant it or was trying to help me). When I think back to that moment, if I had thought that I still looked calm (despite what I felt), I could have regained the situation. As it was, it went from bad to worse and I know that my state became obvious because Mrs Shaw, my boss, began to answer the questions that people were asking for me.

I am thinking about the awful presentation again – it was this time last week. I am reading what I wrote earlier about it. Now I return to it, I do have a slightly different perspective. I think that it was not as bad as it felt at the time.

Several of my colleagues told me afterwards that Mrs Shaw always steps in to answer questions like that and they commented that I handled her intrusion well. That is interesting. I need to do some thinking about how to act next time to prevent this interruption from happening or to deal with the situation when she starts*. I might look in the library for that book on assertiveness.

I have talked to Mrs Shaw now too. I notice that my confidence in her is not all that great while I am still feeling a bit cross. However, I am feeling more positive generally and I can begin to analyse what I could do better in the presentation. It is interesting to see the change in my attitude after a week. I need to think from the beginning about the process of giving a good presentation.. I am not sure how helpful was my reliance on my acting skills*. Acting helped my voice to be stronger and better paced, but I was not just

trying to put over someone else's lines but my own and I needed to be able to discuss matters in greater depth rather than just give the line*.

I probably will use Power Point again. I have had a look in the manual and it suggests that you treat it as a tool – not let it dominate and not use it as a means of presenting myself. That is what I think I was doing. I need not only to know how to use it, but I need to feel sufficiently confident in its use so I can retrieve the situation when things go wrong. That means understanding more than just the sequence of actions*.

As I am writing this, I am noticing how useful it is to go back over things I have written about before. I seem to be able to see the situation differently. The first time I wrote this, I felt that the presentation was dreadful and that I could not have done it differently. Then later I realised that there were things I did not know at the time (eg about Mrs Shaw and her habit of interrupting). I also recognise some of the areas in which I went wrong. At the time I could not see that. It was as if my low self esteem got in the way. Knowing where I went wrong, and admitting the errors to myself gives me a chance to improve next time – and perhaps to help Mrs Shaw to improve in her behaviour towards us!

*I have asterisked the points that I need to address in order to improve.

Features of the accounts that are indicative of different levels of reflection

A) This account is descriptive and it contains little reflection.

1. The account describes what happened, sometimes mentioning past experiences, sometimes anticipating the future – but all in the context of an account of the event.
2. There are some references to Marianne's emotional reactions, but she has not explored how the reactions relate to her behaviour.
3. Ideas are taken on without questioning them or considering them in depth.
4. The account is written only from Marianne's point of view.
5. External information is mentioned but its impact on behaviour is not subject to consideration.
6. Generally one point is made at a time and ideas are not linked.

B) An account showing evidence of some reflection.

1. There is description of the event, but where there are external ideas or information, the material is subjected to consideration and deliberation.
2. The account shows some analysis.
3. There is recognition of the worth of exploring motives for behaviour
4. There is willingness to be critical of action.
5. Relevant and helpful detail is explored where it has value.
6. There is recognition of the overall effect of the event on self – in other words, there is some 'standing back' from the event.
7. The account is written at one point in time. It does not, therefore, demonstrate the recognition that views can change with time and more reflection. In other words the account does not indicate a recognition that frames of reference affect the manner in which we reflect at a given time

C) This account shows quite deep reflection, and it does incorporate a recognition that the frame of reference with which an event is viewed can change

1. Self questioning is evident (an 'internal dialogue' is set up at times) deliberating between different views of her own behaviour (different views of her own and others).
2. Marianne takes into account the views and motives of others and considers these against her own.
3. She recognises how prior experience, thoughts (own and other's) interact with the production of her own behaviour.
4. There is clear evidence of standing back from an event.
5. She helps herself to learn from the experience by splitting off the reflective processes from the points she wants to learn (by asterisk system).
6. There is recognition that the personal frame of reference can change according to the emotional state in which it is written, the acquisition of new information, the review of ideas and the effect of time passing.

Last word

We hope you have found this session on reflective writing useful. There is a lot of information to take in, but as with everything, the more you write, and the more you practice the techniques we have discussed here today, the easier it will get.

If you would like to discuss your writing further, you are welcome to make an appointment with the Writing Centre Co-ordinator. Appointments last for 30 minutes, and you can book them by contacting the Writing Centre via the details given below.

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