

Reflective Writing

Much of a student's time at a post-secondary institution involves thinking; thinking about what people have said, what you have read, what you yourself are thinking and how your thinking has changed. It is widely believed that there are two main elements that are involved in the thinking process: reflective thinking and critical thinking. These are not thought to exist as separate processes; rather, they are closely connected (Brookfield, 1987).

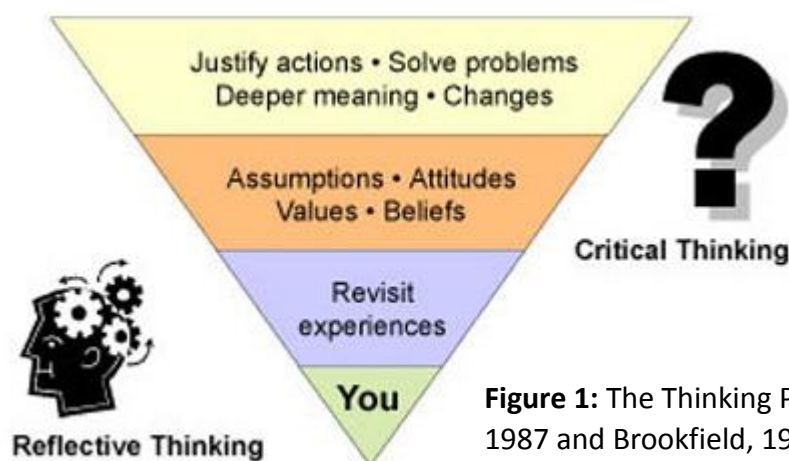


Figure 1: The Thinking Process (adapted from Mezirow, 1990, Schon, 1987 and Brookfield, 1987).

What is Reflective Writing?

Reflective writing is writing which involves '... consideration of the larger context, the meaning, and the implications of an experience or action' (Branch & Paranjape, 2002). For example, in medical and health science courses, students are required to produce reflective writing in order to learn from educational and practical experiences, and to develop the habit of critical reflection as a future health professional.

Reflective writing may be based on:

- a description and analysis of a learning experience within the course: a community placement, a clinical placement, a rural placement
- a description and analysis of a past experience
- a review of your learning or course to that point
- a description and analysis of a critical incident.

What is a 'critical incident'?

A critical incident is an event which has significance **for you**. It is often an event which made you stop and think, or one that raised questions for you. It may make you question an aspect of your beliefs or values and it is an incident which has had a significant impact on your personal and professional learning.

In the college setting, a critical incident might include:

- an aspect of your project or group work that went particularly well
- an aspect of your project or group work that proved difficult
- a piece of work that you found particularly demanding
- a piece of work which increased your awareness, or challenged your understanding, of social justice issues; or an incident involving conflict, hostility, aggression or criticism (Fook & Cooper, 2003).

Cited from <http://www.monash.edu.au/lis/lionline/writing/medicine/reflective/2.xml> - What is a critical incident?

Reflective writing is:

- your response to experiences, opinions, events or new information
- your response to thoughts and feelings
- a way of thinking to explore your learning
- an opportunity to gain self-knowledge
- a way to achieve clarity and better understanding of what you are learning
- a chance to develop and reinforce writing skills
- a way of making meaning out of what you study

Reflective writing is not:

- just conveying information, instruction or argument
- pure description, though there may be descriptive elements
- straightforward decision or judgment (e.x. about whether something is right or wrong, good or bad)
- simple problem-solving
- a summary of course notes
- a standard university essay

What can I discuss in reflection writing?

- Your perceptions of the course and the content.
- Experiences, ideas and observations you have had, and how they relate to the course or topic.
- What you found confusing, inspiring, difficult, interesting and why.
- Questions you may have
- How you solved a problem; reached a conclusion; found an answer; reached a point of understanding.
- Possibilities, speculations, hypotheses or solutions.
- Alternative interpretations or different perspectives on what you have read or done in your course.
- Comparisons and connections between what you are learning and:
 - your prior knowledge and experience;
 - your prior assumptions and preconceptions;
 - what you know from other courses or disciplines.
- How new ideas challenge what you already know.
- What you need to explore next in terms of thoughts and actions.

Clarify your task

- Reflective writing assignments can take many forms, so check the guidelines in your course outline before you begin. Clarify any questions or uncertainties with your lecturer or tutor.

Clarify the practical aspects

- Find out what form your task should take. You may need to submit a book or folder or complete an online component. In addition to writing, you may be able to include pictures, diagrams, media clippings etc.

Gather your ideas

- Before you write, you need to think and reflect. Start by drawing up a Mind-map.
- **Mind-mapping** is a technique that can help you expand your thinking, structure your ideas and make connections. You can use a Mind-map to plan your assignment and arrange items to create the structure of your writing.

How to Mind-map

- **Write** your topic in the centre of a blank page.
- **Draw** related ideas on 'branches' that radiate from the central topic. When you get a new idea, start a new branch from the centre. Include any ideas, topics, authors, theories, experiences associated with your topic.
- **Map** quickly, without pausing, to maintain a flow of ideas. Associate freely and do not self-edit; at this stage anything and everything is OK.
- **Circle** the key points or ideas. Look at each item and consider how it relates to others, and to the topic as a whole.
- **Map** the relationships between the ideas or key points using lines, arrows, colours. Use words or phrases to link them.

Link to a useful Mind-mapping site: <http://www.studygs.net/mapping/>

- As it concerns your thoughts, reflective writing is mostly **subjective**.
- Therefore in addition to being **reflective** and **logical**, you can be **personal, hypothetical, critical** and **creative**. You can comment based on your experience, rather than limiting yourself to academic evidence.
- Reflective writing is an activity that includes **description** (what, when, who) and **analysis** (how, why, what if). It is an explorative tool often resulting in more questions than answers.
- A reflective task may allow you to use different modes of writing and language:
 - descriptive** (outlining what something is or how something was done)
 - explanatory** (explaining why or how it is like that)
 - expressive** (I think, I feel, I believe)
- Use full sentences and complete paragraphs
- You can usually use personal pronouns like 'I', 'my' or 'we'
- Keep colloquial language to a minimum (for example: kid, okay, stuff)

Examples of Reflective Writing

Journal: requires you to write weekly entries throughout a semester. May require you to base your reflection on course content.

Learning diary: similar to a journal, but may require group participation. The diary then becomes a place for you to communicate in writing with other group members.

Log book: often used in disciplines based on experimental work, such as science. You note down or 'log' what you have done. A log gives you an accurate record of a process and helps you reflect on past actions and make better decisions for future actions.

Reflective note: often used in law. A reflective note encourages you to think about your personal reaction to a legal issue raised in a course.

Essay diary: can take the form of an annotated bibliography (where you examine sources of evidence you might include in your essay) and a critique (where you reflect on your own writing and research processes).

Peer review: usually involves students showing their work to their peers for feedback.

Self-assessment: requires you to comment on your own work.