

Reflective Writing

Work-based reflection in Education & Nursing

Reflective writing tasks are designed to get you to think deeply about what happened in a particular situation in which you were involved, and why. Your experience of placements in schools or health care settings, when set alongside key theories in your field and the course materials, provides you with a lens through which to observe, describe, and improve your professional practice now and into the future.

You may feel conflicted about the different approaches needed for reflecting on your personal experience vs. referring to theories in academic research. However, like any skill, the process of thinking and writing reflectively will become easier with practice.

Why reflect?

Our performance at work matters, regardless of our field. Reflection allows us to learn more about ourselves, and our practice as professionals. It is likely that you will need to work with others in your future career, whether that is in education, nursing or health care, or something else.

Reflecting on our skills, capabilities and personal challenges is important, particularly when we work in high-risk situations where our behaviour has consequences for others, such as in the health professions. Being able to critically reflect on our performance allows us to be the best we can.

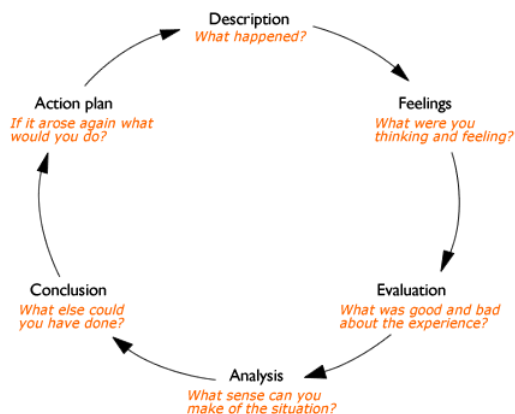
Similarly, reflecting on your encounters with others, be they patients/clients, peers, educators and other professionals, will improve the way you interact.

How do I reflect?

Drawing from your placement or work experiences, written reflections encourage you to reflect on your actions and take responsibility for them, and to make improvements. Most of us reflect on events that happen to us, but often we stop at articulating **feeling**: “I am so good at communicating, clever me!” or “What a total fool I am! How could I have done such a bad job? I’m so embarrassed!” These are examples of **limited reflections**: we stop at describing the **feelings**. If we don’t reflect further, we will not learn from our experiences.

Gibbs’ Cycle of Reflection

A **structured reflection process** helps us to discover more about ourselves so that we can improve. Gibbs’ Cycle is designed for workplace reflection, and its guided questions give us a structure to follow. Through it, we analyse our actions so that we can identify strengths and weaknesses, and seek to improve performance. Writing about our experience, analysing it, and committing ourselves to actions for improvement provides a clear set of goals to follow a contract with ourselves and our supervisors.



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Description

- Describe what happened during your critical incident or chosen episode for reflection.
- Set the context and **describe**:
 - what you initially observed, including sensory details: seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting
 - the interactions between yourself and others, including interpersonal and intercultural dimensions
 - your role in the episode.

Feelings

- Describe what you were thinking and feeling at the time.
- Name your personal reactions, e.g. shocked, alarmed, frustrated, afraid.
- Consider these questions:
 - What was the range of your feelings? For example: **totally to not at all**
 - What beliefs may be responsible for those feelings? Personal, cultural, ideological, community?

Evaluation

- Explain what worked well/what was good, and what could have been better/what wasn't good.
- Use your description and feelings sections to explain why and how the situation was troublesome, challenging or difficult.
- Give details about 'sticking points' for you or for others, relating to actions, beliefs, knowledge, or power dynamics, for example.

Analysis

- Extend your thinking. Relate the incident or situation to your studies:
 - course readings
 - assignments
 - placements
 - cross-cultural contexts
 - interpersonal growth
- *What other* perspectives can you use to analyse your scenario or incident?

Conclusion

- What could you have done differently?
- What could you and others have NOT done, now that you look back on the situation?
- What have you learned in writing this reflection?
- What new knowledge do you have that will influence future choices and actions?

Action plan

- What actions do you intend to take now, with others you mentioned in your reflection?
- Will you try these actions in similar or different situations?
- What steps will you take to improve your technique and prove that you have improved?
- In the light of your new understandings, how will you adapt your practice - your actions and interactions - with others?
- Set a time limit for the completion of these steps before you reflect again on your development.

This material is adapted from:

Gibbs, G. (1988). *Learning by doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*. Further Education Unit. Oxford Polytechnic: Oxford.

Other helpsheets available

- Reflective Writing: Phrases
- Writing in an Academic Style
- Sentence Structure