

Getting the language right

As a large proportion of your reflective account is based on your own experience, it is normally appropriate to **use the first person** ('I'). However, most assignments containing reflective writing will also include academic writing. You are therefore likely to need to write both in the first person ("I felt...") and in the third person ("Smith (2009) proposes that ..."). Identify which parts of your experience you are being asked to reflect on and use this as a guide to when to use the first person. Always check your guidelines if you are not sure. If guidelines are not available then, in your introduction, explain when and why you are going to use "I" in your writing.

Produce a balance by weaving together sections of 'I thought... 'I felt,...' and the relevant academic theories. This is more effective than having a section which deals with the theory and a separate section dealing with your experiences. Try to avoid emotive or subjective terms.

When writing about your reflections use the past tense as you are referring to a particular moment (I felt...). **When referring to theory** use the present tense as the ideas are still current (Smith proposes that...).

Examples of writing style

One objective of the session was to help the client to understand the connection between her thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This is an important aim of HSD (Bloggs, 2009). To achieve this objective the following HSD method was used (Smith, 2006). At times during the session I was too directive and could have used more open questions to allow the client more opportunity to verbalise her understanding.

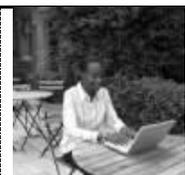
During the session the client stated... I wish I had explored this further.

For more information...

See: Practice-based learning 1: Reflective thinking

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Reflective Writing

Practice-based learning 2



This guide is part of a series looking at particular areas of learning that are relevant to practice-based study modules. It explores how to write an assignment which is based upon, or includes, reflective thinking, and has advice on:

- The challenges of reflective writing
- Using academic evidence in reflective writing
- Selecting the content
- The writing process
- Getting the language right

The challenges of reflective writing

Reflective writing involves an exploration and explanation of an event. It may feel particularly difficult and more challenging than other forms of academic writing as it involves thinking and writing about anxieties and errors as well as successes in your interactions with an individual or when carrying out a practical task. Try to stand back from the situation and be as objective as possible. Although you are writing about your own experiences and feelings, you need to be as rigorous and thorough as you would be for any other assignment.

Follow the guidelines for your course. There is likely to be a word limit: you cannot write about everything, so select what will illustrate your discussion best. Most of the marks awarded for your work are likely to be for the reflective insights and not for the description of events, so keep your descriptions brief and to the point.

Key features of reflective writing

Reflective writing is a way of processing your practice-based experience to produce learning. It has two key features:

- 1) **It integrates theory and practice.** Identify important aspects of your reflections and write these using the appropriate theories and academic context to explain and interpret your reflections. Use your experiences to evaluate the theories – can the theories be adapted or modified to be more helpful for your situation?
- 2) **It identifies the learning outcomes of your experience.** So you might include a plan for next time identifying what you would do differently, your new understandings or values and unexpected things you have learnt about yourself.

Using academic evidence in reflective writing

You are aiming to draw out the links between theory and practice. So you will need to keep comparing the two and exploring the relationship between them.

Analyze the event and think about it with reference to a particular theory or academic evidence. Are your observations consistent with the theory, models or published academic evidence? How can the theories help you to interpret your experience? Also consider how your experience in practice helps you to understand the theories. Does it seem to bear out what the theories have predicted? Or is it quite different? If so, can you identify why it's different? (Perhaps you were operating in different circumstances from the original research, for instance.)

- **Be selective:** Identify challenging or successful parts of the encounter. Reflect deeply on a few significant aspects and learning points.

- **Discuss** your reflections with others to deepen your insight, improve your ability to express your ideas and help to explore a range of perspectives.

- **Collect evidence** There are two sources of evidence which need to be used in reflective writing assignments:

- 1) **Your reflections** form essential evidence of your experiences. Keep notes on your reflections and the developments that have occurred during the process.
- 2) **Academic evidence** from published case studies and theories to show how your ideas and practices have developed in the context of the relevant academic literature.

Selecting the content

- 1) **Write a log of the event.** Describe what happened as briefly and objectively as possible. You might be asked to include the log as an appendix to your assignment but it is mostly for your own benefit so that you can recall what occurred accurately.

Top tip: Avoid writing a long narrative describing what happened, as you will then run out of space to analyse why it happened.

- 2) **Reflect.** You should reflect upon the experience before you start to write, although additional insights are likely to emerge throughout the writing process. Discuss with a friend or colleague and develop your insight. Keep notes on your thinking.

- 3) **Select** Identify relevant examples which illustrate the reflective process; choose a few of the most challenging or puzzling incidents and explore why they are interesting and what you have learnt from them.

Top tip: Start with the points you want to make, then select examples to back up your points, from your two sources of evidence -

- i) your experiences and ii) theories, published case studies, or academic articles.

Use **the reflective learning cycle** to structure your writing: plan; act; observe; reflect; plan again etc. This will make sure you cover the whole process and explain not just what happened, but why it happened and what improvements can be made based on your new understanding. For more on this, see our guide on **Reflective thinking (Practice Based Learning 1)**.