Reflective Writing Tips

What is reflective writing?
In an academic context, reflecting writing usually includes:

• Evidence of reflective thinking – being able to review what you have done and why you have done it in a clear and succinct way
• Analysing the experience – looking at the experience from all angles and being aware of your strengths as well as any weaknesses
• Making reference to theory or research – linking what you may have noticed to the overall theory. This includes critical evaluation as well; looking at situations in which the theory seemed to be supported and other times when it did not
• Using critical thinking, reading and writing – keeping an open mind when reading, writing or experiencing and not being afraid to question or critique the “experts”
• Reflecting forward - thinking about what your experience means for you and your process as a learner and a professional going forward

Why is reflective writing useful?
Reflective writing is very important in understanding who you are, where you have come from, and how your experiences shape your learning. It helps with:

• Understanding your strengths and weaknesses; allowing yourself to learn and grow as a result of an experience
• Identifying and questioning your underlying values and beliefs
• Acknowledging and challenging possible assumptions on which you base your ideas, feelings and actions
• Recognising areas of potential bias or discrimination in yourself, in others and in research
• Acknowledging your fears – in reflective writing, it is okay to admit that you struggled in places or made some mistakes. It is all part of the learning process
• Identifying possible inadequacies or areas for improvement – being honest with yourself as to what your next steps might be – i.e. you may need to gain further understanding about the theory before moving on to another experience

The structure of a reflective essay
Reflective writing can typically be broken down into three parts. This is just one way of structuring a reflective writing essay, however, so please check with your lecturer to ensure that you are covering all of the points and areas that you need to be covering:

1. Description – What happened/is being examined? What did you do/say? Who else was involved?
• This should be the briefest section as it is simply setting the scene for the discussion and analysis to come. Do not get into too much detail here or you could waste your word count on being overly-descriptive and may lose marks in the process
• Try writing a sentence explaining the main point you want to make before your description. This will help you make sure that you are clear about the purpose of including an example. You can switch this around afterwards if you wish.

2. Interpretation – What is important about this experience? How did it make you feel? How is it similar/different to theory?

• This is the most important section as it illustrates what you learned from your experience. It is usually encouraged to use vignettes as examples to give an insight to the reader about how what occurred that made you think differently, upheld/went against the theory, or provided you with an important learning experience

3. Outcome – What have I learned? What might I have done differently? What does this mean for my future?

• This is the area in which you begin to “reflect forward” on your experiences. Based on everything that you tried, learned or discovered, it is important to discuss how all of this impacts you as a student (i.e. how it aids in your understanding about yourself and the method/ theory). It is also useful to ascertain how your learning will impact you one day as a professional in your field.

Top tips on writing the most effective reflective essay

• Try not to confine your writing to the event and your feelings – use big picture type of thinking to see from a greater perspective how what happened has a larger impact
• Use examples to raise new questions or to speculate about causes/reasons
• When writing reflectively, it is important to not just write about experience (what happened) but to also link the experience to theory
• Be aware of what tense you are writing in as reflective writing often requires movement between past, present and future tenses

Common Mistakes

Reflective writing can be interesting as well as challenging. Be aware that even though you are able to use the first person in reflective writing, this is by no means a sign that you can depart from the normal academic writing conventions. Therefore, you must reference where appropriate and keep to a structure to avoid going off on a tangent and confusing the reader. Please see below for some additional common mistakes made by students:

• Use of colloquialisms or cliches: i.e. “The supervisor was out of order”; “I was over the moon”
• Starting sentences with conjunctions: or, and, but, yet
• Using abbreviations without spelling the words out first: i.e. NHS, dept
• Using contractions outside of dialogue: can’t, won’t, I’ll, he’ll
• Not using enough transitional words: however, therefore, furthermore. These keep the flow of your writing moving
• Writing with too much certainty: “This is this way because....”
**Interpretation Phase**

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

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

This might be because of....
could be due to....
is probably explained by...
is perhaps related to...

[Un]like... this reveals....
demonstrates....
Reflective Writing: Suggestions for useful words/phrases

**Outcome Phase**

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

_____________________________________________________________________________

I have significantly/slightly developed my skills in...

improved my understanding of...

However, I have not [sufficiently]...

my knowledge of....

_____________________________________________________________________________

This knowledge is essential to me as a learner because....

This understanding could be important to me as a practitioner because....

This skill will be useful

_____________________________________________________________________________

did not...

have not yet...

Because I am not certain about...

which means as a next step...

am not yet confident about...

I will now need to...

do not yet know...

do not understand...