

## How do I . . . Write a Reflection?

### Why reflective writing?

Reflection offers you the opportunity to consider how your personal experiences and observations shape your thinking and your acceptance of new ideas. Professors often ask students to write reading reflections. They do this to encourage you to explore your own ideas about a text, to express your opinion rather than summarise the opinions of others. Reflective writing can help you to improve your analytical skills because it requires you to express what you think, and more significantly, how and why you think that way. In addition, reflective analysis asks you to acknowledge that your thoughts are shaped by your assumptions and preconceived ideas; in doing so, you can appreciate the ideas of others, notice how their assumptions and preconceived ideas may have shaped their thoughts, and perhaps recognize how your ideas support or oppose what you read.

### Types of Reflection

**Experiential Reflection:** Popular in professional programs, like business, nursing, forensics and education, reflection is an important part of making connections between theory and practice. When you are asked to reflect upon experience in a placement, you do not only describe your experience, but you evaluate it based on ideas from class. **You can assess a theory or approach based on your observations and practice and evaluate your own knowledge and skills within your professional field.** This opportunity to take the time to think about your choices, your actions, your successes and your failures is best done within a specific framework, like course themes or work placement objectives. Abstract concepts can

become concrete and real to you when considered within your own experiences, and reflection on your experiences allows you to make plans for improvement.

**Reading Reflection:** To encourage thoughtful and balanced assessment of readings, many interdisciplinary courses may ask you to submit a reading reflection. Often instructors will indicate to students what they expect of a reflection, but the **general purpose is to elicit your informed opinions about ideas presented in the text and to consider how they affect your interpretation.** Reading reflections offer an opportunity to recognize – and perhaps break down – your assumptions which may be challenged by the text(s).

### Approaches: Reflective Inquiry

You may wonder how your professors assess your reflective writing. What are they looking for? How can my experiences or ideas be right or wrong? **Your instructors expect you to critically engage with concepts from your course by making connections between your observations, experiences, and opinions.** They expect you to explain and analyse these concepts from your own point of view, eliciting original ideas and encouraging active interest in the course material.

It can be difficult to know where to begin when writing a critical reflection. First, know that – like any other academic piece of writing – a reflection requires a narrow focus and strong analysis. The best approach for identifying a focus and for reflective analysis is interrogation. The following offers suggestions for your line of inquiry when developing a reflective response.

### Experiential Reflection

It is best to discuss your experiences in a work placement or practicum within the context of personal or organizational goals; doing so provides important insights and perspective for your own growth in the profession. For reflective writing, it is important to balance reporting or descriptive writing with critical reflection and analysis.

#### CONSIDER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. Contextualize your reflection: What are your learning goals? What are the objectives of the organization? How do these goals fit with the themes or concepts from the course?
2. Provide important information: What is the name of the host organization? What is their mission? Who do they serve? What was your role? What did you do?
3. Analytical Reflection: What did you learn from this experience? About yourself? About working in the field? About society?
4. Lessons from reflection: Did your experience fit with the goals or concepts of the course or organization? Why or why not? What are your lessons for the future? What was successful? Why? What would you do differently? Why? How will you prepare for a future experience in the field?

### Reading Reflection

Critical reflection requires thoughtful and persistent inquiry. Although basic questions like “what is the thesis?” and “what is the evidence?” are important to demonstrate your understanding, you need to interrogate your own assumptions and knowledge to deepen your analysis and focus your assessment of the text.

#### ASSESS THE TEXT(S):

- What is the main point? How is it developed? Identify the purpose, impact and/or theoretical framework of the text.
- What ideas stood out to me? Why? Were they new or in opposition to existing scholarship?

#### DEVELOP YOUR IDEAS:

- What do I know about this topic? Where does my existing knowledge come from? What are the observations or experiences that shape my understanding?
- Do I agree or disagree with this argument? Why?

#### MAKE CONNECTIONS:

- How does this text reinforce my existing ideas or assumptions? How does this text challenge my existing ideas or assumptions?
- How does this text help me to better understand this topic or explore this field of study/discipline?

### For example . . .

Consider the purpose of reflection: to demonstrate your learning in the course. It is important to actively and directly connect concepts from class to your personal or experiential reflection. The following example shows how a student's observations from a classroom can be analysed using a theoretical concept and how the experience can help a student to evaluate this concept.

My observations from the classroom demonstrate that the hierarchical structure of Bloom's Taxonomy is problematic, a concept also explored by Paul (1993). The students often combined activities like application and synthesis or analysis and evaluation to build their knowledge and comprehension of unfamiliar concepts. This challenges my understanding of traditional teaching methods where knowledge is the basis for inquiry. Perhaps higher-order learning strategies like inquiry and evaluation can also be the basis for knowledge and comprehension, which are classified as lower-order skills in Bloom's Taxonomy.

### A note on mechanics

As with all written assignments or reports, it is important to have a clear focus for your writing. You do not need to discuss every experience or element of your placement. Pick a few that you can explore within the context of your learning. For reflective responses, identify the main arguments or important elements of the text to develop a stronger analysis which integrates relevant ideas from course materials.

Furthermore, your writing must be organized. Introduce your topic and the point you plan to make about your experience and learning. Develop your point through body paragraph(s), and conclude your paper by exploring the meaning you derive from your reflection. You may find the questions listed above can help you to develop an outline before you write your paper.

You should maintain a formal tone, but it is acceptable to write in the first person and to use personal pronouns. Note, however, that it is important that you maintain confidentiality and anonymity of clients, patients or students from work or volunteer placements by using pseudonyms and masking identifying factors.

**The value of reflection: Critical reflection is a meaningful exercise which can require as much time and work as traditional essays and reports because it asks students to be purposeful and engaged participants, readers, and thinkers**

The Academic Skills Centre



[www.trentu.ca/academicskills](http://www.trentu.ca/academicskills)  
[acdskills@trentu.ca](mailto:acdskills@trentu.ca)  
705-748-1720