



Structure of reflective writing

The structure of a piece of reflective writing varies greatly. If you have a reflective writing task, read the instructions carefully to see if a structure is provided.

A **reflective essay** should follow the classic essay format of introduction, body, and conclusion. Some other common formats include journaling or using a reflective model for only part of an essay or assignment.

A **journal** is a collection of entries made on a regular basis (e.g. daily or weekly). For example, you might be asked to keep a reflective journal during a practicum or placement in which you write each day about the tasks you performed, things you observed, and questions that you had. Even if a reflective task is not set, it's a good idea to keep a personal journal during a placement so you can keep track of what you've learnt and note any questions or observations you want to talk to fellow students or teachers about later.

Other types of reflection might be performed as the need arises, or in response to particular events. You might reflect on the weekly tutorial readings, or after experiencing a difficult assignment. Reflective models can be especially helpful when something has gone wrong and you know you need to think about it, but you're not sure how.

Regardless of the structure used, reflective writing is more than a descriptive activity. You might start by describing what happened or how you feel, but true reflection goes beyond this step and might include things like why you think something happened, why you feel the way you do, how your feelings or thoughts have changed, and what you might do differently in a similar situation in the future.

Models for reflective writing

One common model is the **Gibbs Reflective Cycle**, which has 6 parts:

Describe	Describe what happened
Feelings	How did it make you feel?
Evaluate	What was good or bad?
Analyse	What sense can you make of the situation? (Include external issues)
Conclude	What general and specific conclusions can you draw?
Action	What next, or what will you do next time?

Adapted from Western Sydney University School of Nursing and Midwifery (2016, pp. 70-72).

Another model is the 4Rs model of reflective thinking:

Level	Stage	Questions to get you started
1	Reporting and Responding	Report what happened or what the issue or incident involved. Why is it relevant? Respond to the incident or issue by making observations, expressing your opinion, or asking questions.
2	Relating	Relate or make a connection between the incident or issue and your own skills, professional experience, or discipline knowledge. Have I seen this before? Were the conditions the same or different? Do I have the skills and knowledge to deal with this? Explain.
3	Reasoning	Highlight in detail significant factors underlying the incident or issue. Explain and show why they are important to an understanding of the incident or issue. Refer to relevant theory and literature to support your reasoning. Consider different perspectives. How would a knowledgeable person perceive/handle this? What are the ethics involved?
4	Reconstructing	Reframe or reconstruct future practice or professional understanding. How would I deal with this next time? What might work and why? Are there different options? What might happen if...? Are my ideas supported by theory? Can I make changes to benefit others?

Figure 1: The 4 Rs of reflective thinking, from Ryan & Ryan (2012, p. 18, Appendix A).

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Still not sure where to start? You might like to review some [activities to aid reflection](#) (PDF, 97 kB).

References

- Ryan, M., & Ryan, M. (2012). *ALTC Project: Developing a systematic, cross-faculty approach to teaching and assessing reflection in higher education: Final report*. Retrieved from <http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-developing-systematic-cross-disciplinary-approach-teaching-and-assessing-reflective-writing>
- Western Sydney University School of Nursing and Midwifery. (2016). *Professional communication academic literacy (PCAL) skills resource book for nursing and midwifery*. Retrieved from http://www.westernsydney.edu.au/nursingandmidwifery/home/current-student-info/professional_communication_and_academic_literacy