



Reflective writing

What's reflective writing?

The purpose of reflective writing is to show what you have learnt from theory or an experience and apply it to things you might do in the future. It's a type of **critical thinking** that helps you find connections between topics or theories and make sense of your own thoughts and feelings about your learning.

Why is reflective writing important?

In most professional contexts you'll need to be able to learn from your experiences, including mistakes and what went well. Reflective writing helps you do that, and reflective writing at uni is an opportunity to practice this professional skill.

Tip: For more detailed information about reflective writing purpose, see the [Reflective writing purpose guide](#).

What's in reflective writing?

The structure of a piece of reflective writing varies a lot. If you have a reflective writing task, read the instructions carefully to see if a structure is provided. You may need to write regular **reflective journal** entries, a reflective **essay** (see [Essays](#)), or **short reflective task** as part of a portfolio.

The key elements of reflective writing are:

- describing, analysing or evaluating the concepts, theories or practices you've been learning
- reflecting on your own experience, attitudes, or practice
- relating what you've learnt to your own experience, attitudes, or practice

Tip: For more detailed information about essay structure, see the [Reflective writing structure guide](#).

Example

Reflective writing task

Reflect on two psychological concepts you have learnt in this unit, referring to your own experience.

Brainstorming experiences:

- Getting my scarf stuck in the train door
- **Falling on stage before a performance**
- Leaving the lecture to go to the bathroom

Choosing concepts:

The spotlight effect (Myers and Haslam, 2016, pp. 75-77)

The illusion of transparency (Myers and Haslam, 2016, pp. 75-77)

Reflective writing example

The spotlight effect and the illusion of transparency (Myers and Haslam, 2016) is common in every individual's daily lives. An example of these concepts is a situation where I fell between the platforms on stage as I was getting prepped to perform a piece. It was dark and another act was on so the audience's attention was focused elsewhere, but I was embarrassed and ended up feeling nervous. When I asked others afterwards, nobody had noticed my nervousness at all. From learning about these two concepts I have come to realise that being overly focused and self-conscious of yourself is simply a waste of time. Those around you rarely pay attention to the minor things that are overwhelmingly obvious to yourself. Next time I feel self-conscious or embarrassed about a similar situation, I'll remind myself not to worry because the transparency of my feelings is just an illusion.

Reflective writing structure

There are different ways of structuring reflective writing, but Gibbs Reflective Cycle and the 4 Rs Model are two common ones. This table shows the structure of the reflective writing example from above using two different models.

Gibbs Reflective Cycle	Example text	4 Rs Model
Describe: Describe what happened	<i>The spotlight effect and the illusion of transparency (Myers and Haslam, 2016) is common in every individual's daily lives. An example of these concepts is a situation where I fell between the platforms on stage as I was getting prepped to perform a piece.</i>	Reporting and responding
Feelings: How did it make you feel?	<i>It was dark and another act was on so the audience's attention was focused elsewhere, but I was embarrassed and ended up feeling nervous.</i>	
Evaluate: What was good or bad?	<i>When I asked others afterwards, nobody had noticed my nervousness at all.</i>	Relating
Analyse: What sense can you make of the situation?	<i>From learning about these two concepts I have come to realise that being overly focused and self-conscious of yourself is simply a waste of time.</i>	
Conclude: What general and specific conclusions can you draw?	<i>Those around you rarely pay attention to the minor things that are overwhelmingly obvious to yourself.</i>	Reasoning
Action: What next, or what will you do next time?	<i>Next time I feel self-conscious or embarrassed about a similar situation, I'll remind myself not to worry because the transparency of my feelings is just an illusion.</i>	Reconstructing

Tip: For a step by step break-down of the reflective writing process and deadlines for each step, use the [Assignment Calculator](#).

Common problems

- Only describing the concepts or experiences, not analysing or evaluating them.
- Too impersonal (not referring to own experience or attitudes) – read the [Reflective writing tone](#) guide
- Focussing on your own experience without relating it to the concepts, theories or practices you've been learning. The example above should have connected more clearly with the scholarly source in the 'Analysing/Relating' part.
- Not enough scholarly support for your analysis or evaluation - go to the Library's [Referencing and Citation Guide](#) for help with correctly formatting your citations and references

Activity

1. Look at your reflective writing task/question and rewrite it in your own words. Do you understand what it is asking you to do?
2. Write down the concepts, theories or practices you have to reflect on and brainstorm some experiences you have had that relate to them.