

Reflective Writing for Students

Sarah Whitwell, Experiential Programming and Outreach Manager ([whitwese@mcmaster.ca](mailto:whitwese@mcmaster.ca))

Critical reflection is a process that allows learners to make connections between course content and their own experiences. Engaging in reflection encourages you to become more aware of your own learning as you think not only about the subject matter, but also how you acquire knowledge.

When you engage in reflection, you have the opportunity to:

* Examine your learningprocess
* Articulate what learning occurred
* Analyze how learning occurred
* Explain how newly acquired knowledge altered existing knowledge

Critical reflection can benefit you in a number of ways. Reflection encourages deeper learning and a more thorough engagement with topics; it promotes a growth mindset by providing you with the tools to challenge superficial conclusions, evaluate your biases, and understand your experience. Reflection also allows you to think critically on what you’ve learned in the classroom and how that knowledge transfers to your professional development.

This guide will outline basic guidance for engaging in reflective writing, but always make sure to follow any guidelines provided by your instructor in order to meet course requirements.

# Thinking Reflectively

Before you start writing, it’s important to think reflectively about what happened during a given experience. Consider what you’ve learned about a topic in class or what pre-existing knowledge you bring to an experience. Aim to analyze an event from different perspectives. Next, think about what worked or didn’t work during the experience. What is the significance of the experience? Finally, consider what you would do differently in the future as a result of the experience and explain why.

# Writing Reflectively

Often non-academic reflective writing is unstructured. Reflective writing is often compared to writing in a journal or diary. But when you’re writing reflectively in an academic context, you must structure your writing to critically examine your learning experience (University of Portsmouth, 2019). Your writing should also reflect *you* and how your thoughts and experiences fit into this academic context.

How you structure your reflective writing will likely vary based on the instructions provided for the assignment. Your instructor may ask you to use a specific framework or respond to specific prompts. In the absence of specific guidelines, here are four different frameworks you can use to critically examine your learning experience. Think of these frameworks as a step-by-step guide to writing reflections.

## The 4R Framework: Reporting and Responding, Relating, Reasoning, Reconstructing

* **Reporting and Responding** – Articulate what you noticed and describe aspects of the learning experience
* **Relating** –Connect what you learned to your own prior experiences or a related issue
* **Reasoning** – Critically analyze the context, the issue, and related impacts of the learning experience
* **Reconstructing** – Demonstrate new ideas and ways of thinking about an issue

## What? So What? Now What?

* **What** – Articulate what you learned, what happened during the experience, and what you noticed
* **So What** – Consider why the experience mattered, what questions it raised, and what conclusions you can draw
* **Now What** – Explain how you will use what you learned, how you will apply your learning, and what you may do differently going forward

## DEAL: Describe, Examine, and Articulate Learning

* **Describe** – Describe the experience objectively
* **Examine** – Examine the learning experience from a personal, academic, and/or civic perspective
* **Articulate** – Articulate what you learned and why it matters based on your previous responses in the describe and examine phases

## ICE: Ideas, Connections, Extensions

* **Ideas** – Identify the fundamental elements of a learning experience
* **Connections** – Make connections between the learning experience, course concepts, and prior knowledge
* **Extensions** – Extrapolate what you learned and apply it to other situations

# Reflective Writing Conventions

When writing reflectively, there are certain words and phrases that can prove helpful. There are also some writing conventions that you should adhere to, some of which may feel at odds with you already know about academic writing. Remember that reflective writing is a unique type of writing that asks you to bring more of yourself to the work.

* **Use first-person pronouns** – You are describing your personal learning experience, so you will need to use first-person pronouns (e.g., I, we, my)
* **Use the appropriate tense** – You will likely need to switch between tenses when writing reflectively. Use the past tense when describing the learning experience but use the present tense to describe how you currently feel or think about an issue. You may even use the future tense when describing things that you will do or change going forward.
* **Use vocabulary that shows development over time** – Reflective writing asks you to think about personal growth and change, so you will need to use vocabulary to show how you developed over time. Phrases like ‘initially’ can help indicate your thinking at the start of a learning experience, while ‘consequently’ or ‘later’ can be used to indicate change over time.
* **Express your personal viewpoint** – An important part of reflection is describing your personal experience. You might describe your thoughts, your feelings, personal knowledge, or individual questions. Reflections is inherently subjective, so don’t hesitate to bring yourself into the discussion.

# References

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