

WRITING A REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

Why is critical reflection important for learning?

Reflection is essential to help us develop our understanding about ourselves, our learning experiences, our responses to what we're learning, and to develop and continue as effective practitioners throughout our professional life. The reflective practitioner will take the time to think about what they're doing, and why they're doing it, to recognise where they need to develop and improve their skills.

As we encounter new concepts, principles and theories, it's important that we understand how they arose, what they're based on, and how they relate to practical application. This understanding equips us with the ability to question others' ideas and conclusions, identify unfounded generalisations, and challenge assumptions.

"Knowledge" frequently changes; theories come and go; accepted "fact" one day becomes discounted myth the next (consider, for example, the constantly changing advice in the field of nutrition).

What does "critical" reflection mean?

How does reflecting "critically" differ from just thinking about something? Imagine a social occasion you've recently experienced. Think about where it was held, who was there, what everyone was wearing, and whether you enjoyed it. Now, take a more analytic or "critical" approach. First, you'll need to mentally re-live the experience more than once, and you'll probably need to isolate out particular incidents and think about their significance. You will think more deeply about how the events unfolded, who said what, and how you reacted. Ask yourself questions:

- Did I feel comfortable or uncomfortable at any point? If so, why?
- Did I have a good time? Why or why not?
- Did anything happen that was confusing or unsettling?
- What sort of dynamics did I notice between individuals or groups?
- Were my existing attitudes and opinions either confirmed or changed?
- What new ideas did I come away with?

Now, reflect even more "critically". Re-examine the conclusions you just reached about any or all of the above and consider:

- How else could I interpret the events/my reactions?
- What might I have done differently?
- Why are such occasions useful or enjoyable (or not)?

- How might other people have a different point of view (e.g., what might the new arrivals from
- South Africa have thought; what about John's elderly aunt; were the children so noisy because they were bored)?
- If I were to host such an occasion, what have I learnt from this one?

The process of attempting to understand, apply, analyse, synthesise and evaluate your experience is the key to critical reflection

How do I "critically reflect" on a topic for my assignment?

Notice that the above pointers are based on questions: questions act as prompts to get you thinking. Therefore, you might find it useful to reflect on your topic by formulating some relevant questions, such as:

- What ideas stood out for me in this tutorial/reading?
- What aspects did I like and why?
- What aspects did I not like, and why?
- Do I agree or disagree with these theories?
- How can I link the theories/ideas to my experience?
- How might someone of another culture, age, or socio-economic group relate to these theories/ideas?
- How can these theories/ideas help me to develop my learning and practice?
- What questions do these theories/ideas raise for me?
- Are there any ideas or assumptions that I'd like to challenge?
- How can I link the ideas discussed in the tutorial with reading I have completed for this topic?

Why write a reflective journal?

The process of writing forces us to deal with our ideas in a concrete form, and undoubtedly leads us to a deeper examination of what we're thinking. It helps us to clarify our thoughts and identify gaps in our understanding. Written accounts allow us to see our progress as our learning expands. A written record is also useful in our continued reflection and revision of what we've learnt and experienced.

What form should a reflective journal take?

No particular structure or format is required. However, it's a good idea to work out a series of headings, maybe along the lines of the questions listed above. This will remind you of important points and give an overall structure and flow to your writing. Your journal will need to be typed up before it's handed in so you may prefer to type your ideas as you form them. On the other hand, you may feel ideas flow better with pen and paper.