



# Writing in a reflective style

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## Introduction

Reflection is something that comes naturally to most of us in our daily lives. We often reflect on incidents, exchanges or experiences wondering what happened and what we might have done differently.

At university, you are frequently asked to reflect on your learning, particularly if you are doing a degree or diploma that is practice-based i.e. Teaching, Nursing or Social Work. You may also be asked to write reflectively on your practice and learning experiences whilst on placement. This resource explains the process of reflection and reflective writing.

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## Why is reflection important?

Reflection helps you understand and learn more. It is concerned with thinking about our actions, experience, feelings and responses, standing back from them, analysing them in order to learn from them, and perhaps do things differently next time.

Reflecting on your learning experiences lets you discover your strengths and weaknesses and develop strategies to improve in the areas needed. Becoming reflective requires you to actively adopt strategies to help in the process of becoming reflective.

## Different types of reflection

It is helpful to distinguish between **reflection in action** and **reflection on action** (Schon, 1991).

- **Reflection in action** applies to practice. You reflect on what you are doing and how it is going, and whether you need to change your approach as you are doing it: taking a patient's medical history, teaching a new concept to a class, for example.
- **Reflection on action**, on the other hand, applies to thinking about the event/experience after it has occurred and making judgements about how it went, what might you have done differently, for example.

**Typically, assignments will require reflection on action.**

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## Models of reflection

Different models of reflection on action exist. These are helpful because they can introduce structure into your reflection. The following outlines some commonly used models. You will note that all of these are based on a cycle and involve considering different aspects of your experience:

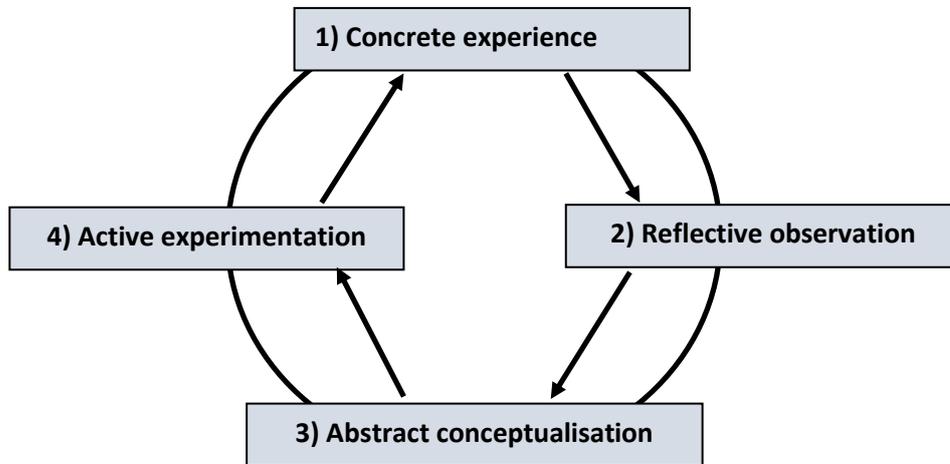
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## Using a reflective cycle

You will notice that the reflective models discussed in this guide are quite similar. Considering the three collectively is helpful in terms of identifying what should be considered when reflecting. It is not possible to say that one is 'best' because model suitability will always depend upon the nature of your assignment. You might also find that your tutor requests that you use a specific reflective model in an assessment.

## Kolb's (1984) learning cycle

Kolb's cycle is based upon four stages:

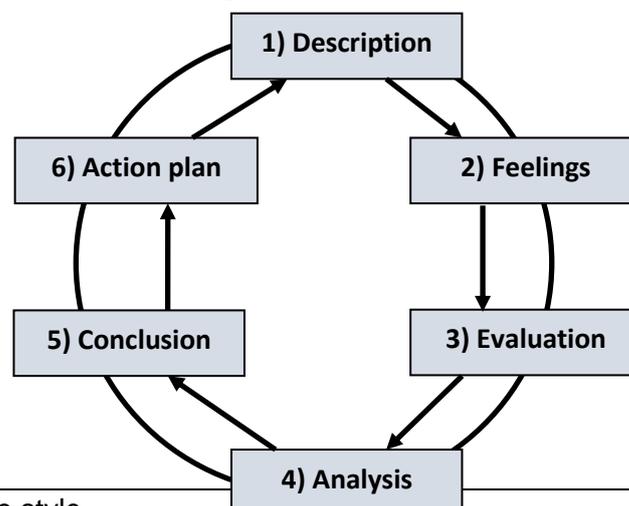


The following outlines how each stage of this model encourages you to reflect on your experience:

|                                     |   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| <b>1 Concrete experience</b>        | What happened?  |
| <b>2 Reflective observation</b>     | What was good/bad about this experience?<br>What evidence is there to support this? |
| <b>3 Abstract conceptualisation</b> | What can be concluded about / learned from the experience?                          |
| <b>4 Active experimentation</b>     | How will your experiential learning influence your future actions?                  |

## Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle

Gibbs' cycle is based upon six stages:

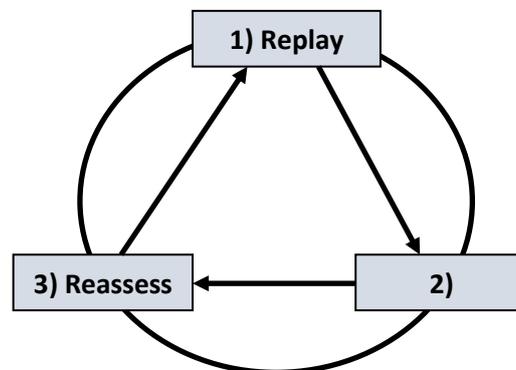


The following outlines how each stage of this model encourages you to reflect on your experience:

|                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| <b>1 Description</b> | What happened?                                   |
| <b>2 Feelings</b>    | How did you feel about this experience?          |
| <b>3 Evaluation</b>  | What was positive/negative about the experience? |
| <b>4 Analysis</b>    | What sense can be made of the experience?        |
| <b>5 Conclusion</b>  | What else could have also been done?             |
| <b>6 Action plan</b> | What would you do differently in the future?     |

### Price and Maier's (2007) 3R

The 3R approach to reflection is based upon three stages:



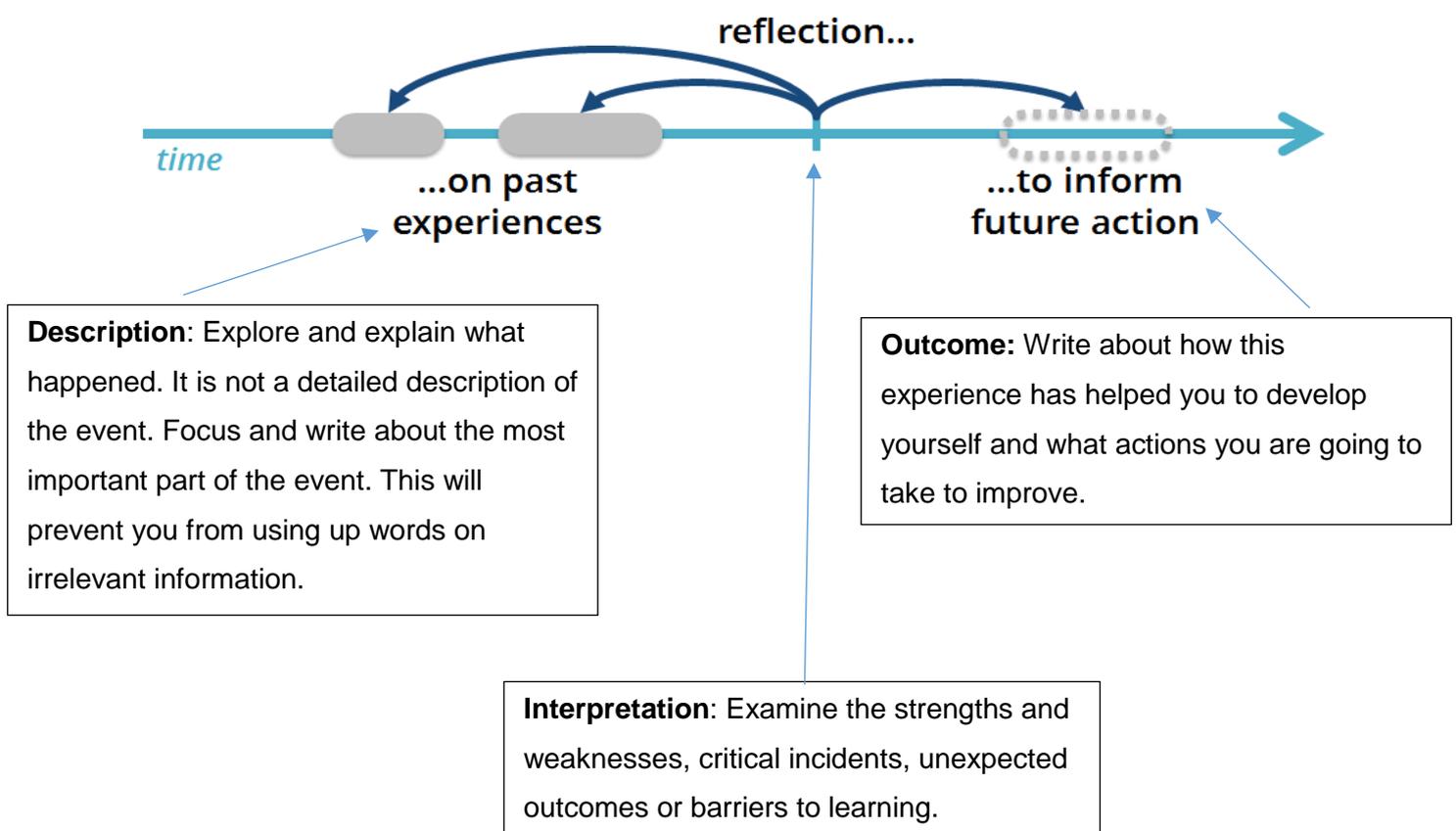
The following outlines how each stage of this model encourages you to reflect on your experience:

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| <b>1 Replay</b>   | Recap what you said/did/read etc. (Replaying the situation)  |
| <b>2 Reframe</b>  | Take an objective look at the implications of what you said/did/read etc. What was positive? What was negative? (Reframing your actions) |
| <b>3 Reassess</b> | Learn from it. What would you do differently in the future? (Reassessing your actions and future action)                                 |

## Writing reflectively

A common mistake students make when writing reflectively is writing too descriptively about what happened, instead of thinking about what you learned from it and what you might do differently in the future (as indicated in all of the reflective models discussed).

If you are not required to use a reflective model to structure your reflection, you can use the timeline and the table below to help you understand what you are required to do when you write reflectively.



Adapted from Washington University (2015)

| <b>Phase</b>                                      | <b>Questions to ask</b>   |
|---|---|
| Description<br><i>(Keep this part short)</i>      | What happened?<br>What is being examined?   |
| Interpretation<br><i>(Elaborate in this part)</i> | What is most significant/useful interesting/ relevant about the event?<br>What worked well/badly?<br>Why did I do that?<br>What theory can I link to this experience?<br>How do I know this worked well / badly?<br>Does it support or reject other theories or studies? If so, how?<br>What patterns emerged in my experiences?<br>What if a different strategy had been applied?<br>So what are the implications of this in relation to my work?<br>How has it changed me as a person? Draw parallels between your experience and the literature. |
| Outcome   | What have I learned from this event?<br>How will this reflection enhance my skills and knowledge for the future?<br>What would we / I do differently in the future?   |

(Hampton, 2015)

### **Reflective writing vocabulary and phrases**

Below are examples of phrases and vocabulary you can use as you write your reflective essay. There is also an example of how these phrases can be used to write reflective paragraphs.

| Phase                 | Possible vocabulary and phrases to use  |   |  |   |   |               |  |  |  |  |          |  |   |  |  |      |  |  |  |  |  |      |  |  |  |  |      |  |            |  |  |  |             |      |   |  |  |
|-----------------------|---|---|--|---|---|---------------|--|--|--|--|----------|--|---|--|--|------|--|--|--|--|--|------|--|--|--|--|------|--|------------|--|--|--|-------------|------|---|--|--|
| <b>Description</b>    | <p>In this section, vocabulary and phrases will not be recommended due to the range of possible events, ideas or objects on which you may be required to reflect on.</p> <p>Typically, you can use 'I' and 'we' in your reflective writing. However, as the reflection is about you, it is better to limit the use of 'we' and focus more on what you did.</p>  |   |  |   |   |               |  |  |  |  |          |  |   |  |  |      |  |  |  |  |  |      |  |  |  |  |      |  |            |  |  |  |             |      |   |  |  |
| <b>Interpretation</b> | <table border="0" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20%;"></td> <td style="width: 15%; text-align: center;">           For me, the [most]         </td> <td style="width: 15%; text-align: center;">           {           <br/>meaningful           <br/>Significant           <br/>important           <br/>relevant           <br/>useful           }         </td> <td style="width: 15%; text-align: center;">           {           <br/>aspect(s)           <br/>element(s)           <br/>experience           <br/>issue(s)           <br/>idea(s)           }         </td> <td style="width: 15%; text-align: center;">           was / were...         </td> <td style="width: 20%;"></td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">learning</td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">           {           <br/>arose...           <br/>happened when...           <br/>resulted from...           }         </td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">           [Alternatively,]           <br/>[Equally,]           }         </td> <td style="text-align: center;">this</td> <td style="text-align: center;">           {           <br/>is perhaps           <br/>could be           <br/>might be           <br/>is probably           }         </td> <td style="text-align: center;">           {           <br/>because of...           <br/>due to...           <br/>explained by...           <br/>related to           }         </td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">           Previously,           <br/>At the time,           <br/>At first, I           <br/>Initially,           <br/>Subsequently           <br/>Later,           }         </td> <td style="text-align: center;">knew</td> <td style="text-align: center;">           {           <br/>thought (did not think)...           <br/>felt (did not feel) ...           <br/>(did not know)...           <br/>noticed (did not notice)...           <br/>questioned (did not question)...           }         </td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">This</td> <td style="text-align: center;">           {           <br/>is similar to...           <br/>is unlike           }         </td> <td style="text-align: center;">because...</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">[Un]like...</td> <td style="text-align: center;">this</td> <td style="text-align: center;">           {           <br/>reveals...           <br/>demonstrates           }         </td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </table> |   | For me, the [most]   | {<br>meaningful<br>Significant<br>important<br>relevant<br>useful           } | {<br>aspect(s)<br>element(s)<br>experience<br>issue(s)<br>idea(s)           } | was / were... |  |  |  |  | learning |  | {<br>arose...<br>happened when...<br>resulted from...           } |  | [Alternatively,]<br>[Equally,]           } | this | {<br>is perhaps<br>could be<br>might be<br>is probably           } | {<br>because of...<br>due to...<br>explained by...<br>related to           } |  |  | Previously,<br>At the time,<br>At first, I<br>Initially,<br>Subsequently<br>Later,           } | knew | {<br>thought (did not think)...<br>felt (did not feel) ...<br>(did not know)...<br>noticed (did not notice)...<br>questioned (did not question)...           } |  |  |  | This | {<br>is similar to...<br>is unlike           } | because... |  |  |  | [Un]like... | this | {<br>reveals...<br>demonstrates           } |  |  |
|                       | For me, the [most]  | {<br>meaningful<br>Significant<br>important<br>relevant<br>useful           } | {<br>aspect(s)<br>element(s)<br>experience<br>issue(s)<br>idea(s)           }  | was / were...   |   |               |  |  |  |  |          |  |   |  |  |      |  |  |  |  |  |      |  |  |  |  |      |  |            |  |  |  |             |      |   |  |  |
|                       |   |   | learning   |   | {<br>arose...<br>happened when...<br>resulted from...           }             |               |  |  |  |  |          |  |   |  |  |      |  |  |  |  |  |      |  |  |  |  |      |  |            |  |  |  |             |      |   |  |  |
|                       | [Alternatively,]<br>[Equally,]           }  | this  | {<br>is perhaps<br>could be<br>might be<br>is probably           }   | {<br>because of...<br>due to...<br>explained by...<br>related to           }  |   |               |  |  |  |  |          |  |   |  |  |      |  |  |  |  |  |      |  |  |  |  |      |  |            |  |  |  |             |      |   |  |  |
|                       | Previously,<br>At the time,<br>At first, I<br>Initially,<br>Subsequently<br>Later,           }  | knew  | {<br>thought (did not think)...<br>felt (did not feel) ...<br>(did not know)...<br>noticed (did not notice)...<br>questioned (did not question)...           } |   |   |               |  |  |  |  |          |  |   |  |  |      |  |  |  |  |  |      |  |  |  |  |      |  |            |  |  |  |             |      |   |  |  |
|                       | This  | {<br>is similar to...<br>is unlike           }                                | because...   |   |   |               |  |  |  |  |          |  |   |  |  |      |  |  |  |  |  |      |  |  |  |  |      |  |            |  |  |  |             |      |   |  |  |
|                       | [Un]like...   | this  | {<br>reveals...<br>demonstrates           }  |   |   |               |  |  |  |  |          |  |   |  |  |      |  |  |  |  |  |      |  |  |  |  |      |  |            |  |  |  |             |      |   |  |  |

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
| <b>Outcome</b> | Having <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>read...</li> <li>experienced...</li> <li>applied...</li> <li>discussed...</li> <li>analysed...</li> <li>learned...</li> </ul> I now <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>feel</li> <li>think</li> <li>realise</li> <li>wonder...</li> <li>question</li> <li>know</li> </ul>                                     |
|                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>[Additionally,]</li> <li>[Furthermore,]</li> <li>[For most importantly,]</li> </ul> I have learned that...   |
|                | I have <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>significantly</li> <li>slightly</li> </ul> However, I have not [suffiecntly] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>developed</li> <li>improve</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>my skills in...</li> <li>my understanding of...</li> <li>my knowledge of...</li> <li>my ability to...</li> </ul> |
|                | This means that...<br>This makes me feel that...  |
|                | This knowledge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>is</li> <li>could be</li> <li>will be</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>essential</li> <li>important</li> <li>useful</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to me as a learner [because...]</li> <li>to me as a practitioner [because...]</li> </ul>                           |
|                | Because I <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Did not...</li> <li>Have not yet...</li> <li>Am not yet certain about...</li> <li>Am not yet confident about...</li> </ul> I will now need to...   |

(Hampton, 2015)

| Phase          | Questions to ask  |
|----------------|---|
| Description    | <p>This essay reflects on the process of the group work activity, which involved designing a poster presentation in support of our campaign on promoting hand hygiene in neonatal clinics. The group included five students including myself. The group members were expected to identify relevant literature and research that supports our campaign and designing an electronic poster which will then be presented to our peers.</p>   |
| Interpretation | <p>My role was of a Chair. <b>For me, the most important element of this experience was</b> exploring in more detail the strengths and weaknesses of group members and allocating tasks accordingly. However, there were challenges that I faced as a chairperson. This is <b>because not all team members had</b> a good working relationship with each other. Some believed that my decisions were biased. <b>This made it difficult to</b> reach a conclusion during our group meetings in terms of progressing with the project. This can be supported by Tuckman's (1965) model on group development. It seems that we were still in the first stage of 'forming' the group, where I was trying to understand the members and how we can work effectively. According to Tuckman, the forming stage does not involve any 'real' work but it is a significant stage as it determines how successful the project will be. This clearly shows that the forming stage is necessary for there to be a good working relationship between all parties in order to reach a positive conclusion.</p> |
| Outcome        | <p><b>Having learned from my challenges, I now think</b> I could have avoided this situation by outlining all the essential tasks and asking group members if they have any strong preferences for any particular tasks than allocating tasks based on what I perceive as their strengths and weaknesses. <b>As a next step, I will now need to</b> identify strategies that will help me to develop my working relationship with the group members. In our upcoming meeting, I will be more attentive to how they feel about the tasks they are currently working on. <b>This knowledge is essential to me as a learner because</b> I believe that it formed a key moment in my learning in terms of my awareness of how dynamic a group could possibly be.</p>  |

## Example of a Reflective Event

This essay reflects on the process of the group work activity, which involved designing a poster presentation in support of our campaign on promoting hand hygiene in neonatal clinics. The group included five students including myself. The group members were expected to identify relevant literature and research that supports our campaign and designing an electronic poster which will then be presented to our peers.

My role in the group work was of a chair. For me, the most important element of this experience was exploring in more detail the strengths and weaknesses of group members and allocating tasks accordingly. However, there were challenges that I faced as a chairperson. This is because not all team members had a good working relationship with each other. Some believed that my decisions were biased. This made it difficult to reach a conclusion during our group meetings in terms of progressing with the project. This can be supported by Tuckman's (1965) model on group development. It seems that we were still in the first stage of 'forming' the group, where I was trying to understand the members and how we can work effectively. According to Tuckman, the forming stage does not involve any 'real' work but it is a significant stage as it determines how successful the project will be. This clearly shows that the forming stage is necessary for there to be a good working relationship between all parties in order to reach a positive conclusion.

Having learned from my challenges, I now think I could have avoided this situation by outlining all the essential tasks and asking group members if they have any strong preferences for any particular tasks than allocating tasks based on what I perceive as their strengths and weaknesses. As a next step, I will now need to identify strategies that will help me to develop my working relationship with the group members. In our upcoming meeting, I will be more attentive to how they feel about the tasks they are currently working on. This knowledge is essential to me as a learner because I believe that it formed a key moment in my learning in terms of my awareness of how dynamic a group could possibly be.

## Things to consider when writing reflectively

- **Confidentiality** – this could be of a client or an organisation. If you do this make sure that you have clearly indicated this in your assignment. You may wish to include a reference to support why it is important not to name individuals.
- **Record critical events** – commonly reflective assignments will be based on experiences that happen over a period of time. It is therefore sensible to keep a record of 'critical events' that you have experienced and intend to reflect upon. If you do not do this, you might forget to include some important information.

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## References

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