

# Writing in a Reflective Style

## 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 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**, 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.**

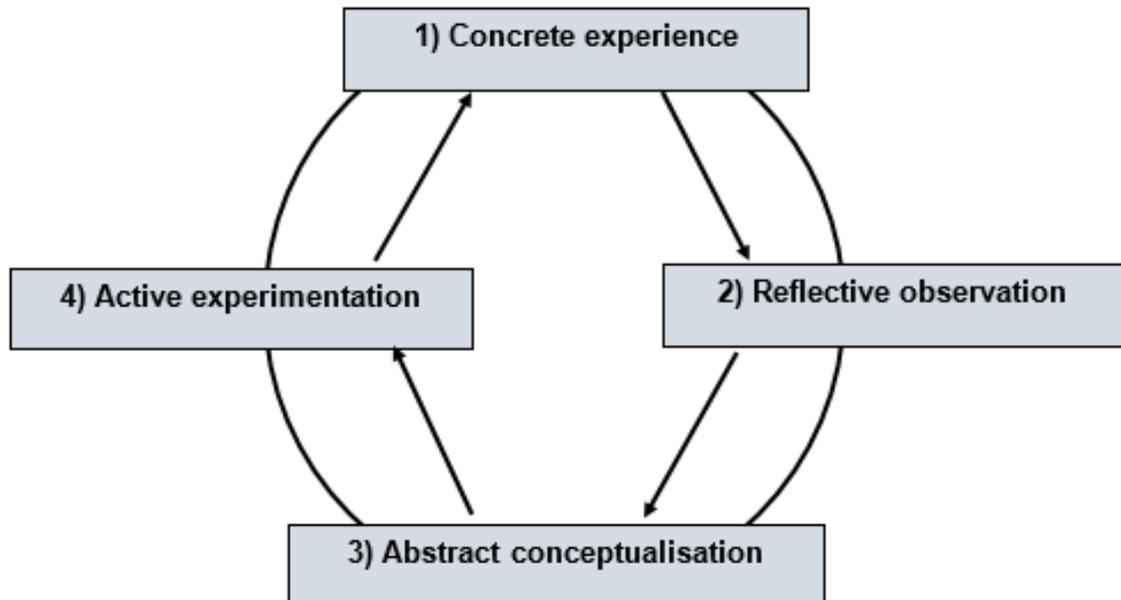
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## Models of reflection

Models of reflection are a good way of structuring your reflective writing and thinking about different aspects of your experience. When working with a reflective model, it is important to check if your assignment requires a specific model. If you are given the flexibility to choose a model, ensure that it is compatible with the nature of your assignment. The following are three commonly used 'cycle' models:

## Kolb's (1984) learning cycle

Kolb's cycle involves four stages:

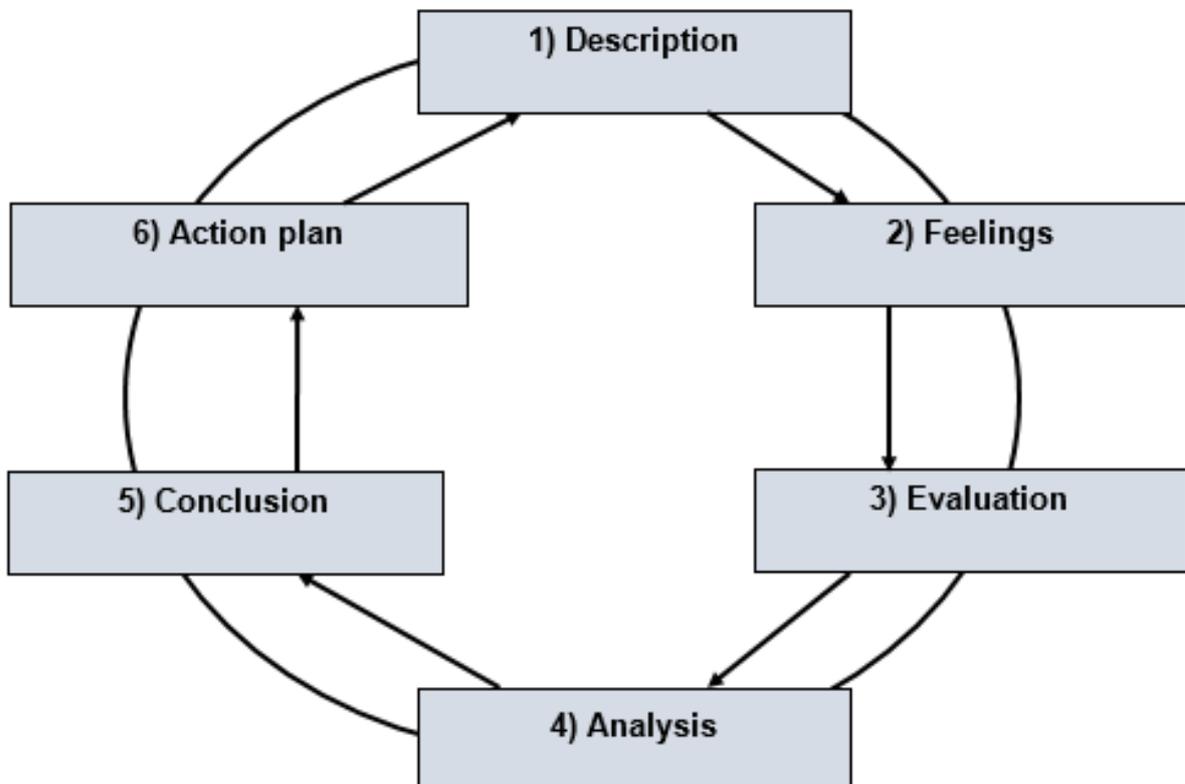


The following are questions that you would ask at each stage of this model to undertake progressive reflection:

- 1) **Concrete experience** (what happened?)
- 2) **Reflective observation** (what was good/bad about this experience? What evidence is there to support this?)
- 3) **Abstract conceptualisation** (what can be concluded about / learned from the experience?)
- 4) **Active experimentation** (how will your experiential learning influence your future actions?)

## Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle

Gibbs' cycle involves six stages:

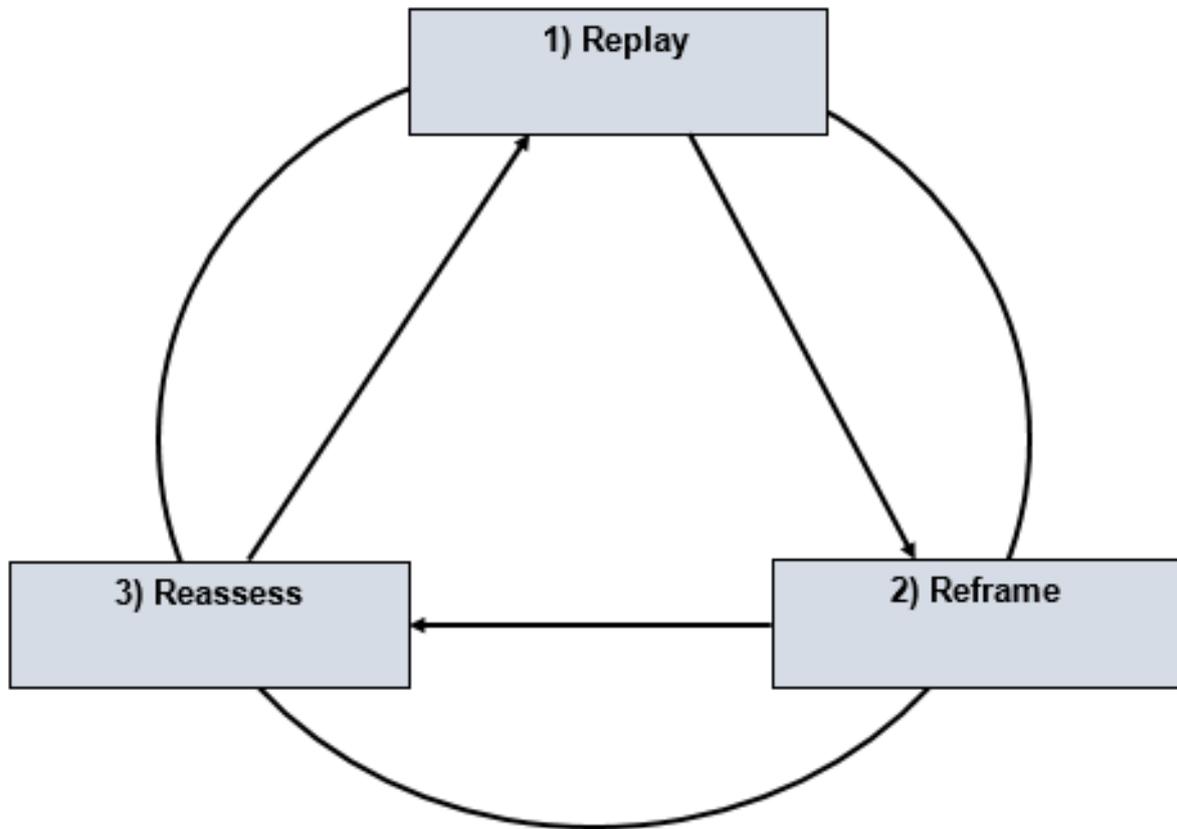


The following are questions that you would ask at each stage of this model to undertake progressive reflection:

- 1) **Description** (what happened?)
- 2) **Feelings** (how did you feel about this experience?)
- 3) **Evaluation** (what was positive/negative about the experience?)
- 4) **Analysis** (what sense can be made of the experience?)
- 5) **Conclusion** (what else could have also been done?)
- 6) **Action plan** (what would you do differently in the future?)

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

The 3R approach involves three stages:



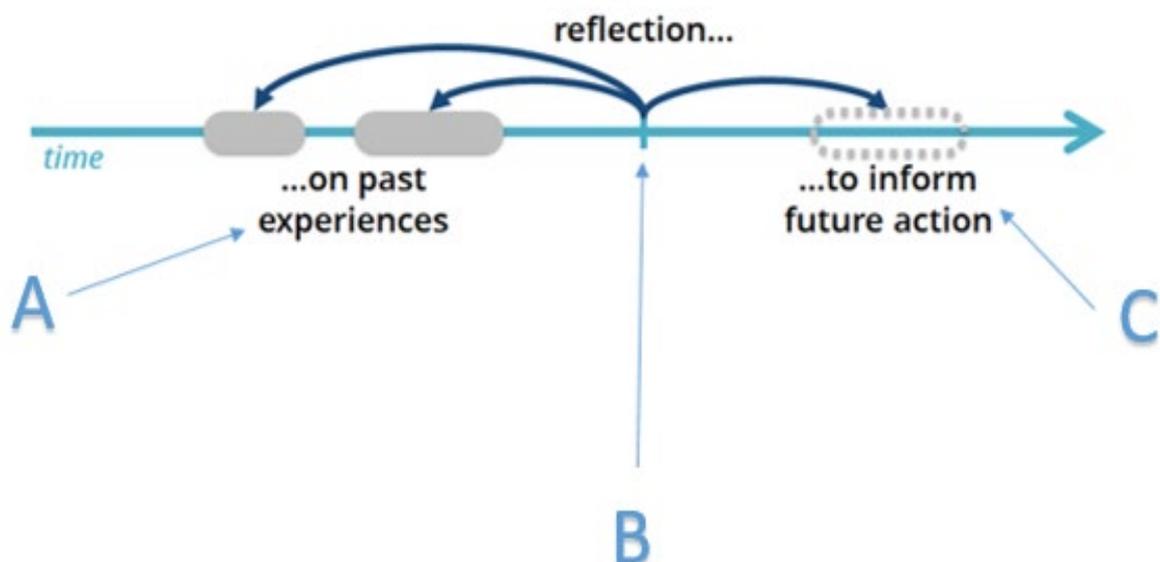
The following are questions that you would ask at each stage of this model to undertake progressive reflection:

- 1) **Replay** (Recap what you said/did/read etc. (Replaying the situation))
- 2) **Reframe** (Take an objective look at the implications of what you said/did/read etc. What was positive? What was negative? (Reframing your actions))
- 3) **Reassess** (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, you can use the timeline and the table below (adapted from Washington University, 2015)) to help you understand what you are required to do when you write reflectively.



- A) **Description:** Explore and explain what happened. It is not a detailed description. Focus and write about the most important parts. This will prevent you from wasting words on irrelevant information.
- B) **Interpretation:** Examine the strengths and weaknesses, critical incidents, unexpected outcomes or barriers to learning.
- C) **Outcome:** Write about how this experience has helped you to develop yourself and what actions you are going to take to improve.

### 3 Phase Reflective Writing

Hampton (2015) suggests that reflective writing can be structured using a 3 phases - Description, Interpretation & Outcome. The lists questions associated with each phase and how each phase might be demonstrated in writing:

#### Phase 1: Description (keep this short and simple)

Reflective questions to ask:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What happened?</li><li>• What is being examined?</li></ul>
Possible vocabulary and phrases to demonstrate description:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 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.</li><li>• 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 on what you did.</li></ul>

#### Phase 2: Interpretation (elaboration is key in this part)

Reflective questions to ask:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is most significant/useful interesting/ relevant about the event?</li><li>• What worked well/badly?</li><li>• Why did I do that</li><li>• What theory can I link to this experience?</li><li>• How do I know this worked well / badly?</li><li>• Does it support or reject other theories or studies? If so, how?</li><li>• What patterns emerged in my experiences?</li><li>• What if a different strategy had been applied?</li></ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• So what are the implications of this in relation to my work?</li> <li>• How has it changed me as a person? Draw parallels between your experience and the literature</li> </ul>
Possible vocabulary and phrases to demonstrate interpretation:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For me, the most meaningful aspects was...</li> <li>• For me, the most useful element was...</li> <li>• For me, the most significant issues were...</li> <li>• For the, the least important idea was....</li> <li>• Learning arose from...</li> <li>• Learning happened because of</li> <li>• Learning resulted from...</li> <li>• Alternatively, this might be due to....</li> <li>• Equally, this is perhaps because of....</li> <li>• Equally, this could be explained by....</li> <li>• At the time, I thought...</li> <li>• Previously I felt....</li> <li>• At first, I questioned....</li> <li>• Subsequently I noticed...</li> <li>• Later I did not feel...</li> <li>• This is similar to X because...</li> <li>• This is unlike X because...</li> <li>• Like X, this reveals...</li> <li>• Unlike Y, this demonstrates....</li> </ul>

### Phase 3: Outcome

Reflective questions to ask:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What have I learned from this event?</li> <li>• How will this reflection enhance my skills and knowledge for the future?</li> <li>• What would we / I do differently in the future?</li> </ul>
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Possible vocabulary and phrases to demonstrate an outcome:

- Having read X, I now know...
- Having experienced X, I now realise....
- Having applied X, I now feel...
- Having discussed X, I now question....
- Additionally, I have learned that....
- For the most part, I have learned that....
- Furthermore, I have learned that....
- I have slightly improved my understanding of....
- I have significant developed my skills in....
- I have enhanced my knowledge of....
- I have developed my ability to....
- This means that...
- This makes me feel that...
- This understanding is essential to me as a learner because...
- This skill could be important to me as a practitioner because...
- This knowlegde will be useful to me as a practitioner because...
- Because I did not do X, I will now need to...
- Because I have not yet learned about X, I will now need to...
- Because I am not yet confident in X, I will now need to...

### Example: Reflective writing vocabulary and phrases

The following piece of reflective writing was provided by a previous UoB student (2016). It has been divided into the three phases of reflection. As you read each phase you will see corresponding vocabulary and phrases.

<b>Description phase</b>	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.
<b>Interpretation phase</b>	My role 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 is 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

	<p>there to be a good working relationship between all parties in order to reach a positive conclusion.</p>
<p><b>Outcome phase</b></p>	<p>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.</p>

### 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 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.

## References

Gibbs, G. (1988) *Learning by doing: a guide to teaching and learning methods*. London: FEU.

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Kolb, D.A. (1984) *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*. London: Prentice- Hall.

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UoB students (2016) 'Assignment 1 - Reflective essay' *NUR022-2 Leadership, management and team working for professional practice*. Unpublished [Provided by academic 26 April 2017]

University of Washington (2015) *Muddiest point: Reflecting back to move forward* Available at <http://www.washington.edu/teaching/2015/02/02/reflecting> (Accessed: 18 October 2016)

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## Further information

Study Hub@Library provides a range of opportunities for you to enhance your academic skills. For more information, visit the [Study Hub Website](#).

**The Healthcare Academic Skills BREQ community** (HAS) provides a range of online resources on the topic of reflection.