

Reflective writing

Difference between essay writing and reflective writing¹

The table on the following pages outlines the main differences between essay writing and reflective writing.

¹ Adapted from Moon, J.A., (2006) 'A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning, Theory and Practice' London: Routledge



Type of writing	What it expects	For example
Essay Writing	You are given an essay question to respond to.	Discuss with reference to.... Describe and critically evaluate....
	There is a set of expectations about what content this should include. You are guided towards this content by your lecture notes and seminar reading.	You realise you have included too much background information or strayed from the point when your essay feedback says that you have ' <i>not answered the question!</i> '
	Follows academic conventions e.g. referencing.	Use referencing techniques (e.g. Harvard) to acknowledge the thoughts and opinions of others, especially quotations. 'there is an underlying assumption that cognitive styles are not particularly amenable to change' (Coffield 2008, p 45) An essay includes a bibliography and reference list so readers are clear what is your own idea and what has been taken from other people's work, and how they can search for that work if they would like to know more.
	Follows a logical structure.	It is simplistic to say every essay should have an introduction, main body and conclusion, but the reader will expect to see an outline of what the essay is about, how you have interpreted the question, how you are going to address it and what conclusions you have drawn.
	Follows a traditional format	X,000 words formatted and presented according to module handbook requirements
	Written in an objective, usually passive style	Research suggests that patients respond negatively to such treatment (Jardine 2003, Hume 2006).
	Written in the third person	Data was collected and analysed.
Reflective Writing	<p>If you are writing a learning log, you control the learning and have 'ownership' of the writing. You can decide your own personal learning points.</p> <p>In addition to setting your own personal learning</p>	<p>You may be asked to create an action plan which identifies personal learning points, indicating what you personally hope to get out of your experience.</p> <p>e.g. I need to improve my interpersonal communication and to develop my ability to make patients feel more comfortable and relaxed.</p> <p>If this is one of your action points, your writing should identify examples of where and how you improved your interpersonal communication.</p> <p>If your module learning objectives says you will :-</p>

	<p>points, you will be expected to frame your writing in relation to your module learning outcome</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognise anxiety and its effects on patients then <i>you</i> can decide which situations or scenarios to write about, but you should use situations that demonstrate how you have ‘recognised the effects of anxiety on patients’.
	<p>It takes place over a period of time, tracing the experience of personal development and the different ideas and emotions that form part of that experience.</p>	<p>Most reflective writing is based on entries in a diary or learning log. You can use these entries to show how your thoughts and opinions or perspectives have developed over a period of time. For example :-</p> <p>‘When I started at university I was amazed by the quality and quantity of information available at the library. I couldn’t have imagined that I would need to use better sources. But over the last few months I have found my visits to the Thoresby Society have definitely improved my confidence in independent research. When you start doing independent research you realise you need really specific, detailed information and because the Thoresby Society is an organisation separate to the University it has taught me that when researching I should look beyond the resources in the Edward Boyle Library, extensive as they are’.</p>
	<p>Is written in the first person</p>	<p>Reflective writing concerns the self (Moon 2004) and uses ‘I’ because you are the first person!</p> <p>“I was concerned when...”</p> <p>“I noticed...”</p>
	<p>Allows for more emotive forms of writing</p>	<p>An extract from a learning log might say:-</p> <p>“I personally feel responsible for this failed output as I was the group member who was leading this part of the project”.</p>
	<p>Is less prescriptive about form and structure</p>	<p>To help you get started writing reflectively you can use free-flow writing, just ‘write, write, write’, recording experiences as soon as they happen and as fully as possible. Make a note of what you thought or felt about these experiences.</p> <p>But, reflective writing is NOT a jumble of ideas and thoughts. Most assessed reflective writing assignments expect you to summarise your learning log or diaries and this is when you need to think about how you are going to collect and organise your thoughts and plan your summary based on the learning outcomes.</p>
	<p>Learning logs and reflective diaries rely less on academic referencing conventions e.g. referencing and bibliographies</p>	<p>Reflective writing in a learning log is often used to demonstrate your understanding of theoretical principles and how (or if) they work in practice, but you are less likely to use direct quotes or need page references.</p> <p>For example : -</p> <p>Jadine suggests that patients respond negatively to such treatment, but when I watched the practice nurse administer the treatment I noticed that if proper attention is paid to after-care, the patient is less likely to become disorientated and frustrated.</p>

	<p>BUT a reflective essay will use academic convention if you are reflecting on published work and theoretical principles.</p>	<p>For example this is an extract from an assignment about learning styles that asks the student to reflect on their personal experience of learning style inventories.</p> <p>Criticisms of learning styles theory and models are becoming increasingly common and educational theorists continue to speculate, research, accept or challenge the theories of others (Coffield et al 2004). I often find it difficult to 'classify' myself. Using Honey and Mumford Learning inventories (Honey and Mumford 1982) I usually come out with a reasonably equal spread across reflector/activist with evidence of strong pragmatic tendencies...'</p>
	<p>Electronic blogs and learning journals may use more informal language.</p>	
	<p>Reflective essays and summaries of learning journals need to be grammatically correct, and evidence clear, concise well structured sentences.</p>	
<p>Common to both</p>	<p>Need to meet the assessment criteria</p>	
	<p>Need to evidence learning and demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes</p>	