

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Reflective essays require students to think critically by reflecting on their own worldview or performance. This type of essay challenges students to reflect on what they do, how they do it, their values and beliefs, and the potential implications of these beliefs and values on others (critical reflection and self-awareness). Importantly, a reflective essay needs to create links from personal experience to course concepts, theories, and information from sources.

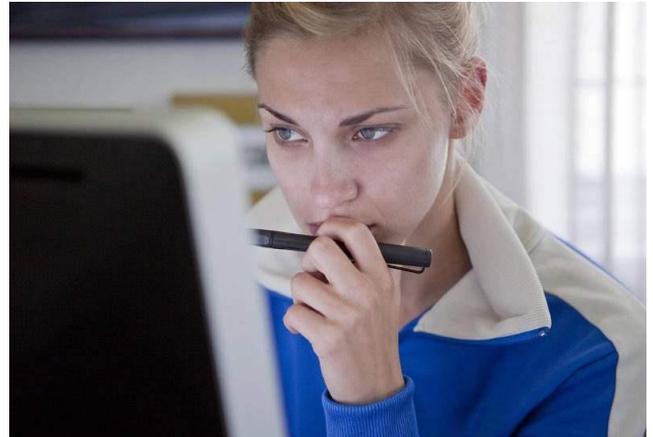
Note: A reflective essay is different to a reflective learning journal. A reflective learning journal usually asks you to consider what you've learned as well as how you learned in class or while on placement. More information about this type of writing can be found on the *Reflective or Learning Journals* section on the Student Learning Support website.

Content

The content of a reflective essay is based on creating links from personal experience to course concepts, theories, and information from sources. Just like an academic essay, a reflective essay contains an overall argument or point of view, known as the thesis statement, as well as support, evidence and examples. Information from scholarly writers in the field should be incorporated to either support your views or provide a contrast to your point of view.

Structure

In the same way as an academic essay, a reflective essay has a well-organised structure



with an introduction, a series of body paragraphs, a conclusion, and a reference list. Stages of the argument are indicated through paragraphs with a logical flow, not through the use of headings. More details about what is required in each of these components can be found in the *Academic Essay* writing guide.

Tip

A major element of reflective essays involves linking research with your ideas and experience. One way to do this is to create a table with two columns: one column is for notes about your experience and your ideas (in relation to each of the focus areas of the task) and the other column is for information from the literature that supports or helps you to interpret or analyse those ideas. This strategy also ensures you have a good balance of information about your ideas/experience and information from sources.

Style

Because reflective essays draw on personal experience, first person pronouns such as *I*, *me*, *my* and *our* can be used. Thinking and feeling verbs can also be used, such as *feel*, *believe*, *consider*, *discover*, *learn* and so on.

Although reflective essays require a more personal form of writing, it is important to maintain a formal and academic style by avoiding conversational language, slang and contractions (short forms of words). Third person should be used when referring to theory and sources, and sources should be referenced according to APA Style.

Just like academic essays, reflective essays should incorporate plenty of linking words and phrases so that your essay is easy for the reader to follow. These words and phrases help by making the connections between sentences and paragraphs clear and indicate the flow of your ideas.

Tip

A common weakness with students' reflective essays is that they are too descriptive and there is not enough critical reflection. Although reflective essays include some description of personal experience, thoughts, feelings or actions, the essay then needs to examine and interpret these experiences/thoughts through the lens of theories and research. Put simply, the essay needs to move beyond just description and show a deeper level of analysis that highlights your new 'level' of thinking based on your reading.



Sample reflective essay paragraph

The paragraph below is a good example of reflective writing. Notice how the student has:

- ✓ provided a topic sentence which addresses the focus of the paragraph
- ✓ provided details and specific examples from their experience including feelings, thoughts and observations
- ✓ created links from their experience to course concepts and theories

Maintaining a bond with my children can be affected by how I approach our conflicts. Kriesberg and Dayton (2012) explain that to sustain relationships it is important to see conflicts as a way to achieve outcomes that are beneficial to all. Positive results can be achieved by how we approach disagreements. I thought that I had a collaborative approach to conflict as I had experienced that the best results for change were achieved by involving all parties in a disagreement. However, on reflection, my initial approach was actually competitive. This was evidenced by my insistence that we “sort this out now!” when I confronted my husband. I insisted on a family meeting to discuss the situation. I now understand how this can be seen as aggressive behaviour and is not conducive to building healthy relationships.