



DOUGLAS COLLEGE

Learning Centre

Writing a Reflection Paper

Writing a reflection assignment in an academic style can be difficult to master. Is a reflection paper the same as a journal? Should I talk about my feelings? How do I know what is appropriate to say? This handout explains how you can approach writing a reflection assignment.

I. What is a Reflection Assignment?

Reflection assignments are an opportunity for you to recall an experience you had and reflect on it in a critical, detailed way. This type of assignment is meant to help you integrate course concepts and theory into your thinking about your practice. Expectations will vary with different assignments, so follow the assignment instructions closely, but in general, reflection assignments will:

- describe the experience (the who, what, when, where, why, and how)
- describe your feelings, observations, and judgments about the experience
- consider how course concepts/theories/skills apply to this experience
- reflect on what you learned and what interfered with your learning
- explain how this learning will impact your future practice

II. How Do I Write a Reflection assignment?

As with other academic writing, most reflection papers will have these parts:

- 1) Introduction
 - a) Identify the paper's topic
 - b) Describe the major course concept/theory
 - c) State what your paper is going to prove (the "thesis" statement)
- 2) Body
 - a) Describe the situation, context, or item to be analyzed
 - b) Describe your reaction or experience
 - c) Connect the experience to theory
- 3) Conclusion
 - a) Summarize new learning
 - b) Explain the implications for future practice

Introduction

a) Identify the paper topic

This is where you briefly introduce the topic of the paper. What is the purpose of this assignment? What will you be reflecting about?

b) Explain the major course concept/theory

Your assignment will probably be directly related to something you are learning in the course. For instance, you may be asked to interpret your experience using the code of ethics for your profession, or you may be asked to discuss your application of a skill or technique (e.g., what is empathy and how did you practice empathy with a client). Your introduction is the place to briefly outline the course concept or theory being used.

c) State the “thesis”

The thesis statement will be one or two sentences (usually at the end of the introduction) that tell the reader, not just the topic of the paper, but also the primary purpose and focus of the paper as a whole. This statement clarifies for the reader what to expect. This type of thesis can be thought of as a scope thesis because it states what the paper will primarily cover. The most effective thesis statements also identify what the paper is primarily meant to demonstrate or show.

Here are two examples of reflection assignment thesis statements:

- *In this paper, I describe an interaction with a patient in clinical practice and explore the ethics of nursing in this experience.*
- *In this reflection, I discuss how a counselling experience highlighted for me the importance of developing self-awareness to improve counselling relationships with clients.*

Body

a) Describe the situation, context, or item to be analyzed

Similar to a “Methods” section of a research report, this description gives details about what was involved in the situation. This is where you describe the details of the situation you are reflecting on. The who, what, when, where, why, and how information (if it applies) is included in this description.

Some questions to consider are:

- What was the situation or event that you are reflecting about?
- Where and when did it happen? Who was involved?
- What was the purpose of the situation or event? Why were you there, or what was the reason you were doing this activity or task? What goals or intended outcomes were part of this assignment?
- How was the situation or task set up or organized? What were the instructions or steps that were part of the assigned activity?

b) Discuss/Analyze your reaction or experience

This section is much like the “Discussion” section of a research report because it evaluates what happened during the event. Keep in mind that your paper needs to go beyond a simple description of the facts—it’s also how you felt about it and your evaluation of yourself in the situation. Just as with a personal journal, you probably wouldn’t bother writing down something that happened to you unless you had some specific feelings, judgments, and observations about it, so be sure to include those, too. Questions to answer include:

- What struck you as important? What surprised you? What was new?
- What went wrong? What went right? Why?
- What did you do well? What do you need to improve?
- What interfered with or enhanced your learning/skill application?
- How did it make you feel (positive and/or negative emotions)?
- How was this experience the same or different from past experiences?
- What assumptions, expectations, or beliefs influenced the experience?

c) Connect the experience to theory

How does this experience or this information link to the theory or course concepts? How does the theory help you understand the observations stated in your discussion? How did the theory guide your behavior or thought processes during your experience, or how does the theory help you evaluate and analyze the experience now?

Conclusion

a) Summarize new learning

Your conclusion is the place for your final reflections on this topic. These reflections should be more general about the overall experience because the detailed reflection should be in the main body section of the paper.

Instead, focus on what you understand better now as a result of this experience and this assignment. Overall, what did you learn?

b) Explain the implications for future practice

You'll also want to include your final overall evaluation of the experience and what you plan to take away from it going forward. What would you do differently next time? What do you still need to learn or investigate? What is your strategy to improve your skills/competencies for similar situations? Has this experience changed your perspective or improved your understanding of the field/topic/theory/skill set?

III. Useful Tips

Below are some useful tips to keep in mind when writing reflection assignments.

- **It's ok to write in the first person.** Since you are talking about personal experiences, 'I' statements are expected (I observed, I encountered, I explained, etc.).
- **Remember that nobody is perfect.** Your experience will likely include things you did well and things you can improve on. The purpose of the reflection is to identify these areas and explain what you learned from them. Having areas to improve isn't a bad thing – it's a learning opportunity.
- **Keep in mind who your audience is (your instructor).** Just because this is a journal-style assignment, it doesn't mean you should reveal every intimate thought you have. If you are writing something that you would only share with your best friend, you might be crossing the boundaries of professional communication.
- **Keep it professional and keep it confidential.** Remember to protect the identity of clients/patients you are discussing by using alternate names or descriptors. Also, your essay is not the place to vent about colleagues or clients; keep the discussion on track by focusing on what you learned.
- **Spelling, punctuation, and grammar still matter.** Even though the paper is a personal reflection, it is still an academic assignment. This means keeping language professional and having properly structured sentences. Avoid slang and abbreviations (e.g., "This grandpa vetoed me changing the dressing" is not okay; instead, write "The 70-year-old patient asked for the supervising nurse to change the dressing").