Reflective writing: a basic introduction

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An increasing number of courses require students to write reflectively.

Reflective writing may be an occasional requirement or it may be a core feature of most or all assignments.

There are many different models of reflection and it is vital that you follow any guidelines offered on your course.
what is reflective writing?

Reflective writing is evidence of reflective thinking.

In an academic context, reflective thinking usually involves

• Looking back at something (often an event, such as something that happened, but it could also be an idea or object).
• Analysing the event or idea (thinking in depth and from different perspectives, and trying to explain, often with reference to a model or theory from your subject).
• Thinking carefully about what the event or idea means for you and your ongoing progress as a learner and/or practising professional.
Reflective writing is thus more personal than other kinds of academic writing.

We all think reflectively in everyday life, of course, but perhaps not to the same depth as that expected in good reflective writing at university level.
Specific tasks were shared out amongst members of my team. Initially, however, the tasks were not seen as equally difficult by all team members. Cooperation between group members was at risk because of this perception of unfairness. Social interdependence theory recognises a type of group interaction called ‘positive interdependence’, meaning cooperation (Johnson & Johnson, 1993, cited by Maughan & Webb, 2001), and many studies have demonstrated that “cooperative learning experiences encourage higher achievement” (Maughan & Webb, 2001). Ultimately, our group achieved a successful outcome, but to improve the process, we perhaps needed a chairperson to help encourage cooperation when tasks were being shared out. In future group work, on the course and at work, I would probably suggest this.

A possible structure for reflective writing

Reflective thinking – especially if done in discussion with others – can be very ‘free’ and unstructured and still be very useful.

Even reflective writing can be unstructured, for example when it is done in a personal diary. In assignments that require reflective writing, however, tutors normally expect to see carefully-structured writing, but you need to check this with your tutor.
The example of basic reflective writing on the previous slide can be broken down into three parts:

1. Description
2. Interpretation
3. Outcome
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4 key points (all of which were made by course tutors who set and mark reflective work):

1. Reflection is an exploration and an explanation of events – not just a description of them.
2. Genuinely reflective writing often involves ‘revealing’ anxieties, errors and weaknesses, as well as strengths and successes. This is fine (in fact it’s often essential!), as long as you show some understanding of possible causes, and explain how you plan to improve.
3. It is normally necessary to select just the most significant parts of the event or idea on which you’re reflecting. If you try to ‘tell the whole story’ you’re likely to use up your wordcount on description rather than interpretation.
4. It is often useful to ‘reflect forward’ to the future as well as ‘reflecting back’ on the past.
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Adapted from material produced for the University of Portsmouth by Martin Hampton