

Reflective writing: applying Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle

This is the second of our guides on reflective writing; in this one, we will be looking at Graham Gibbs' reflective cycle. The process represented by this cycle provides a very useful way of structuring reflective writing, since it gives you an opportunity to analyse an experience in detail.

In this guide, we will briefly set out the main characteristics and purposes of reflective writing before looking in more detail at Gibbs' cycle. While reading through this guide, think carefully about how you might apply it to your own work.

What is reflective writing?

Reflective writing differs from academic writing because it is about *you*. More specifically, it is about your self-development and the importance of learning from the experiences you have, whether as a student or as a graduate in the workplace. It is key to something called *lifelong learning*, the notion that your learning continues well beyond your time at university.

As we've just mentioned, reflective writing is about *you*. As such, it needs to be written from your perspective. In academic writing, you are encouraged to write in the third person ('it has been argued'; 'the research has shown that'), but in reflective writing, you need to write in the first person ('I completed the task').

Since reflective writing is focused on self-development, it needs to be written from your perspective, in the first person.

In addition to the use of the first person, reflective writing is characterised by two things:

- i. it is about your experiences;
- ii. it looks forward.

Reflective writing is focused on an experience you've had or an aspect of it. It is this experience that forms the focus of the discussion. Since its purpose is to help you learn from your experiences, reflective writing looks forward; in other words, it requires you to think about how you can apply what you have learnt to the way you might go about doing something in the future in order to do it more effectively or efficiently.

Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle

Gibbs' reflective cycle allows you to structure a piece of reflective writing around six distinct stages, which may be labelled as: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion and action plan.



Description

In the first stage of the cycle, you would provide a brief overview of what happened.

Feelings

How did you feel before, during and after the experience?

Evaluation

What went right and what went wrong?

Analysis

Why did certain things go well and others not so well? How effective was your contribution?

Conclusion

Reflecting on the analysis, what might you have done differently? Is there a particular skill you need to develop?

Action plan

Considering the analysis and conclusion, how can you enhance your contribution in a similar situation? What *exactly* will you be doing differently in the future?

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

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