

Reflective writing: applying Kolb's (1984) learning cycle

This is the first of two guides on reflective writing in which we will be looking at David Kolb's learning cycle. The process represented by this cycle provides one of the more popular ways of structuring reflective writing.

In this guide, we will briefly set out the main characteristics and purposes of reflective writing before looking in more detail at the each of the four stages in Kolb's 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.

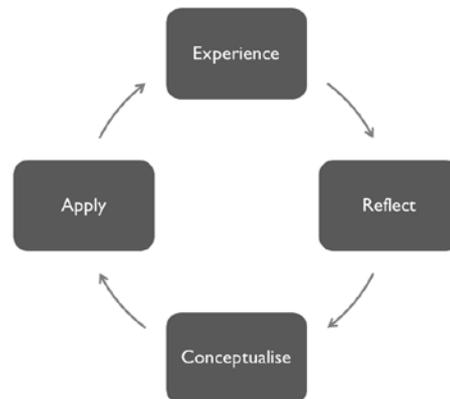
In addition to the use of the first person, reflective writing is characterised by two things:

- 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.

Kolb's (1984) learning cycle

David Kolb's learning cycle allows you to structure a piece of reflective writing around four distinct stages. Here, we've labelled them as: experience, reflect, conceptualise and apply.



Experience

In the first stage of this cycle, think about – and then write down – the situation you are reflecting on, your feelings at the time, and what you think about it. This will provide a solid platform on which you can build your reflection.

Reflect

Having described the situation, ask yourself: what worked well? What didn't work? How do you account for the successes or failures of this experience? What shaped your activities or contribution to the experience?

Conceptualise

In this stage, you will take the reflection to a deeper level by trying to understand why the experience went as it did. It is at this stage that you might use some theoretical ideas to gain some insight into the experience.

Apply

Having analysed the experience, at this stage, you will come up with a plan as to how you might do things differently. You might also have a chance to test your new approach in a relevant context.

(Kolb, D. A. (1984) *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.)

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