WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS	Reflective writing: a basic introduction
No. WA13a	

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**.

> **The aim of this handout is to model some basic ideas about reflective writing. We are not suggesting that this is the only way to approach it!**

What is reflective writing?

Reflective *writing* is evidence of reflective *thinking*. In an academic context, reflective thinking usually involves:

1. looking back at something (often an event i.e. something that happened, but could also be an idea or object)

2. 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)

3. 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 maybe not to the same depth as that expected in good reflective writing at university level.

Example of basic reflective writing

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.

Reference
Maughan, C., & Webb, J. (2001). *Small group learning and assessment*. Retrieved August 01, 2007, from the Higher Education Academy Web site: http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/resources/temp/assessment.html

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.**

The example of basic reflective writing on the previous page can be broken down into three parts: description, interpretation and outcome:

1. Description (keep this bit short!) What happened? What is being examined?	Specific tasks were shared out amongst members of my team. Initially, however, the tasks were not seen as equally difficult by all team members. ↓
2. Interpretation What is most important / interesting / useful / relevant about the object, event or idea? How can it be explained e.g. with theory? How is it similar to and different from others?	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). ↓
3. Outcome What have I learned from this? What does this mean for my future?	Ultimately, our group achieved a successful outcome, but to improve our achievement, 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.

This is just one way of structuring reflective writing. **There are others** and you may be required to follow a particular model. Whichever approach to reflection you use, however, try to bear in mind these four key points (all of which were made by course tutors who set and mark reflective work):

- Reflection is an **exploration and an explanation** of events – not just a description of them.

- 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.

- It is normally necessary to **select just the most significant parts** of the event or idea on which you're reflecting. (The next page has some suggestions on how to do this in your writing.) If you try to 'tell the whole story' you're likely to use up your words on description rather than interpretation.

- It is often useful to **'reflect forward'** to the future as well as 'reflecting back' on the past.

Vocabulary aid

The following are **just a few** suggestions for words and phrases that might be useful in reflective writing. Using any of these words and phrases will not in itself make you a good reflective writer, of course!

The vocabulary aid is structured according to the three-part analysis that is modelled on the previous page of this handout.

1. Description (the short bit!)

We are not suggesting specific vocabulary for any descriptive elements of your reflective writing, because the range of possible events, ideas or objects on which you might be required to reflect is so great.

Do remember, though, that if describing an *idea*, for example a theory or model, it is usually best to use the *present* tense e.g. 'Social interdependence theory recognis**es**…' (not 'recognis**ed**').
Events, of course, are nearly always described using the *past* tense.

2. Interpretation (probably the most important bit)

For me, the [most]

significant	aspect(s)	was…
important	element(s)	were…
relevant	experience(s)	
useful	issue(s)	
	idea(s)	

learning

- arose from…
- happened when…
- resulted from…

Previously,
At the time,
At first ,
Initially,
Subsequently,
Later,

I

- thought [did not think]
- felt [did not feel]
- knew [did not know]
- noticed [did not notice]
- questioned [did not question]
- realised [did not realise]

[Alternatively,]
[Equally,]

[This]

might be	because of…
is perhaps	due to…
could be	explained by…
is probably	related to…

[This]

- is similar to [x]
- is unlike [x]

because…

[Un]Like [x],   [This]   { reveals…
                                                       { demonstrates…

3. Outcome

Having   { read   [x],   I now   { feel…
              { experienced   { think…
              { applied   { realise…
              { discussed   { wonder…
              { analysed   { question…
              { learned   { know…

Additionally,   }   **I have learned that**…
Furthermore,   }
Most importantly,   }

I have   significantly   { developed   { my skills in…
              slightly   { improved   { my understanding of…
                                                  { my knowledge of…
                                                  { my ability to…
However, I have not [sufficiently]

This means that…
This makes me feel…

This knowledge   { is   { essential   { to me as a learner [because…]
This understanding { could be   { important   { to me as a practitioner [because…]
This skill   { will be   { useful

Because I   { did not [x],   I will now need to…
             { have not yet [x],
             { am not yet certain about [x],
             { am not yet confident about [x],
             { do not yet know [x],
             { do not yet understand [x],

As a next step, I need to…

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