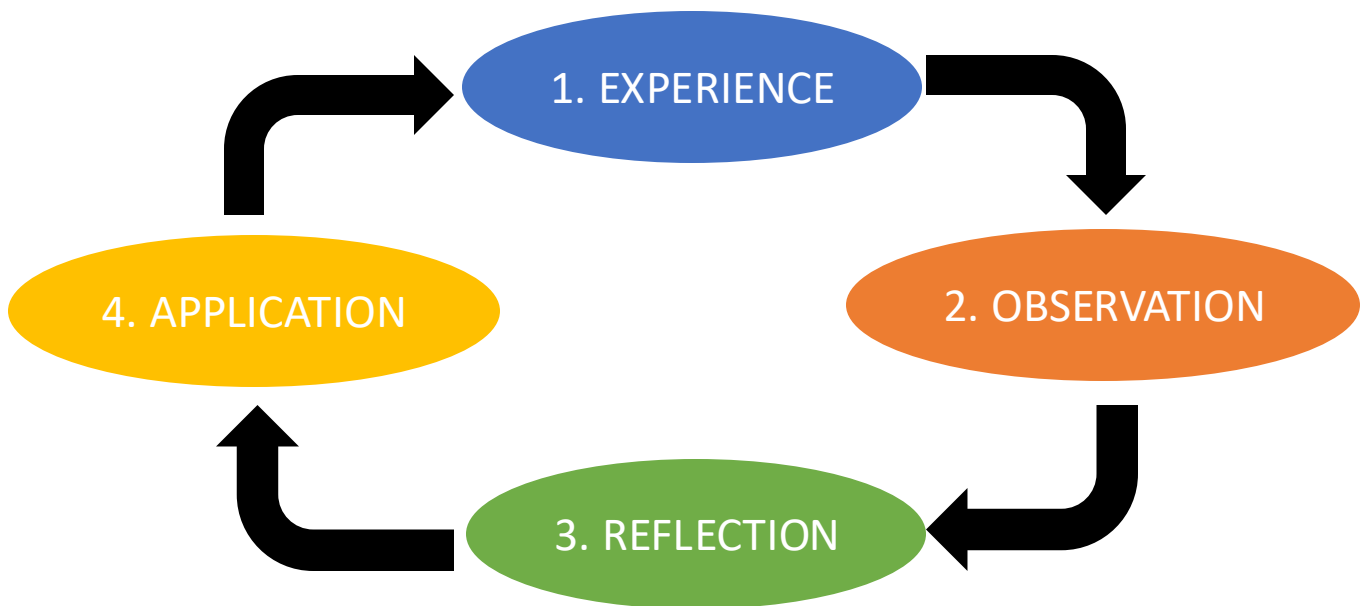## What is Reflective Writing?

Reflective writing provides a critical analysis of individual experiences, responses, assumptions, values, beliefs, and perspectives. For example, you may be asked to reflect upon a personal circumstance, a workplace incident, a learning process, a challenge that you have overcome, a newly acquired skill, a professional event, an assigned reading or text, etc. The purpose of reflective writing is to analyse the new insights that you have gained into a topic or experience, and to demonstrate how you will use/ apply this new knowledge to achieve optimal outcomes in the future.

How to Conduct a Critical Reflection

1. EXPERIENCE	A description of a past experience, event, incident, challenge, topic, text, etc. This requires providing details about what happened, or what the topic/text is about.
2. OBSERVATION	A description of how it made you feel at the time. This requires an evaluation of your past thoughts/ feelings, and an evaluation of what was good/bad about the experience, event, incident, challenge, topic, or text.
3. REFLECTION	An analysis of why you responded in the way that you did and what you learned from the experience. This requires interpreting the meaning behind your response and connecting it to/ elaborating on the new insights or knowledge that you have gained as a result. Scholarship and theory can be very useful for this part of the reflection; for example, does any existing research help to explain your initial response? Does your initial response fit into any trends recorded in research?
4. APPLICATION	An action plan explaining how the experience has impacted you and your future decisions. This requires applying the new insights/ knowledge that you have gained from the experience, event, incident, challenge, topic, or text. Again, scholarship and theory can be useful for this section; for example, does any existing research help you to make sense of this new knowledge? Can you pair your new insights with theories about this topic?

Stylistic Features of Reflective Writing

	Reflective Writing	Other Forms of Academic Writing
Description & Information	**Individual**: Describes/ provides information about individual experiences, e.g. *This policy within the department made me feel like my voice was being heard.*	**Collective**: Describes/ provides information about observable patterns/trends of significance, e.g. *This policy within the department demonstrates proactive and inclusive collegiality.*
Register	**Personal**: Often written in the first person (uses the personal pronoun "I"), e.g. *I think that the module could be more engaging for students.*	**Impartial**: Rarely written in the first person (does not use the personal pronoun "I"), e.g. *Student engagement in the module was poor.*
Tense	**Past, Present, Future**: Uses the past tense to reflect on previous experiences, the present tense to evaluate current feelings/ to explain previous feelings, and the future tense to explain how new insights will be used, e.g. *I initially felt like this was a personal attack, but now that I am thinking about it from a distance, I feel like it was intended as constructive criticism. In future, I will endeavour to accept such criticism more generously.*	**Predominantly Present**: While many academic assignments may require the past, present, or future tense, the consistent use of the present tense often provides the most clarity, e.g. *René Descartes' famous claim of 1637 suggests that subjectivity is better mapped through the human mind, rather than through the sometimes deceptive perceptions of the human body and its senses.*
Evidence	**Anecdotal**: Observations are often based on personal thoughts, experiences, emotions, reflections, and memories, e.g. *I was worried about my ability to perform throughout my first year in placement.*	**Objective**: Observations are mostly based on objective evidence such as recorded data, surveys, case studies, statistics, and existing/peer-reviewed scholarship, e.g. *Research indicates that a majority of students experience performance anxiety in their first year of placement.*
Interpretation	**Evaluative**: You are judging something and coming to your own conclusions based on that judgement, e.g. *I think this is an excellent book, and its key themes resonated with me on a personal level.*	**Analytical**: You are assessing the meaning of the evidence without making a judgement about the content/ results, e.g. *The book's key themes speak to broader literary trends and social issues during this period.*
Secondary Support	**Explains Personal Responses**: Develops a relationship between individual experience and existing research, e.g. *My response in this moment started to make more sense when I read John Smith's 1999 analysis.*	**Explains Broader Trends**: Develops a relationship between an observed pattern/trend and existing research, e.g. *John Smith accounts for this cultural zeitgeist in his 1999 analysis.*

Reflective Writing: Essay Structure

Introduction

1. Introduce your topic: what is your assignment about?

2. Background: overview of the past experiences, events, incidents, challenges, topics, or texts that you are analysing.

3. Key findings: what new insights/ knowledge have you gained and how can these be applied in future?

REMEMBER: This structure is merely a foundational recommendation, and you should always consult the rubrics provided by your lecturer.

Body Paragraphs

1. Experience: Describe a past experience, event, incident, challenge, topic, text, etc. What happened?

2. Observation: Describe your response to that experience, event, incident, challenge, topic, or text. How did it make you feel?

3. Reflection: Analyse why you felt that way at the time, and what new insights/ knowledge you have gained as a result. Why did you respond in this way and what have you learned?

4. Application: Explain how you can apply what you learned in the future. Would you do anything differently? Connect your Reflection and Application back to your Key Findings.

Conclusion

1. Re-state your key findings/ new insights you gained (not verbatim).

2. Summarise the main points of your assignment/ experiences.

3. Suggest the broader implications of what you learned/ future impact.

REMEMBER: Although secondary scholarship is not always required in Reflective Writing, you can use existing research to help explain your Reflection and Application.

Example: Short Reflection OR Body Paragraph

One of the key moments that impacted my learning on this module was when I decided to ask for help with my assignments. This was my first semester at UCD, and so I had not yet learned how the library system worked, how to conduct effective research, or how to write academic essays. When the midterm essay questions were released on Brightspace, I felt incredibly overwhelmed. The topics were very broad and I was unsure about how essays would be graded. Based on tutorial discussions, my classmates appeared very confident, outspoken, and very well informed about the logistics of the module and what we needed to do for the midterm assignment. In contrast, I was confused about the requirements and bewildered about some of the module content. Moreover, I had fallen behind on some of the weekly reading, so I often remained quiet during tutorial discussions because I felt ignorant compared to my peers and also a little ashamed. At this point, I started asking for help. I emailed my lecturer for guidance, and she directed me to the UCD grading rubrics, which gave me so much more clarity about the assignment. She also recommended that I attend the UCD Writing Centre, so I booked an appointment immediately. At that meeting, the Writing Centre tutor carefully explained a recommended essay structure. He also helped me to interpret the essay questions and showed me how to conduct and use research from the *UCD OneSearch* engine. It felt like somebody had suddenly given me a map and, although I was still learning, I now had solid steps I could take to complete the work. More importantly, talking to these professionals eased my anxiety about my academic performance to date; they all unanimously reassured me that everyone faces these kinds of struggles in university. When I researched this topic in the library, it turned out that they were right. As research demonstrates, "first-year university students in particular are plagued by what is known as 'imposter syndrome', insofar as they wrongly believe that they are undeserving of their position, and they express anxiety about their supposed 'deception' being discovered" (Smith, 2009, p.31). This resonated with me hugely and convinced me that my instructors were right when they said that this is all part of the learning process at university, which is designed to teach us a new skillset. This experience taught me that asking for help can transform a negative perspective into a much more hopeful one. Not only did my initial request for help provide clarity about the assignment and reassurance about my academic performance, but it led to a chain-effect of good outcomes; by approaching my lecturer, I was then brought to the UCD Writing Centre and, there, I was additionally directed to their suite of resources online, which I can now use throughout the rest of my degree. I was also able to put what I had learned into action. The whole experience gave me the confidence to speak to my peers more openly; I shared my concerns with some of my more vocal classmates and they said that they had also fallen behind on the reading, as well as the fact that they too were feeling very lost. I was astounded that I had not seen that they were going through the same experience. I immediately gave them the same recommendations that had been given to me. In future, I will rely less on ill-informed assumptions regarding the experience of others and, more practically, I will aim to be more proactive in my learning by asking for help when it is needed and deserved.

1. **Experience**

2. **Observation**

3. **Reflection** (with optional research to support)

4. **Application** (key findings)

Critical Reflection Example in Academic Writing

2. Observation

1. Experience

3. Reflection (with research to support)

4. Application

Key Finding

I came to governance because I thought an effect that Anne Keegan and I had observed was a transaction cost issue. I had been introduced to transaction cost analysis by Susan Foreman (1996). I read the books of Oliver Williamson (1995, 1996), and the papers by me and Anne Keegan (1999, 2001), resulted. I also researched transactions costs on projects (Turner and Müller, 2004a). I realized later that the work I did with Reza Peymai (1995) was touching on governance. Anne Keegan and I noticed that whereas for routine supply for external transactions (markets), the governance structure is aligned with the transaction yet for internal transactions the governance structure is aligned with the hierarchy perpendicular to the transaction (hierarchies) (Williamson, 1975), on projects the governance structure is always aligned with the project, which is the transaction, for both internal and external supply. Reza Peymai and I (1995) had effectively observed the same thing. (For that paper I won my first award, from the Association for Project Management.) Roland Gareis has said that he does not believe in project governance. He says you can only have the governance of a permanent organization. In my most recent writing on project governance (Turner and Müller, 2017), I have gone to the other extreme. I got heavily involved in the idea of organizational project management. There are three primary organizations involved in the management of projects: the investor, the project and the contractor. All three require governance, as do the three interfaces between them. In fact it was the governance of the interface between the investor and the contractor that Anne Keegan and I considered (2001). The project can be involved in several more organizations: the annual investment portfolio at the investor; a program at the investor; the portfolio of work at the contractor; and a project network. All require governance.

J. Rodney Turner, "The Management of the Project-Based Organization: A Personal Reflection", *International Journal of Project Management*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2018, pp. 231-240.