

Learning Journals and Reflective Writing

What is a learning journal?

A learning journal requires you to write critical and reflective entries on what you have done at regular intervals; usually daily, weekly, or monthly.

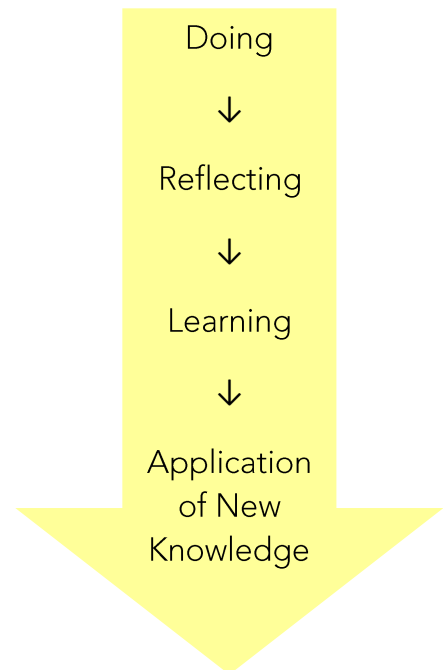
They are used to assess *and* facilitate learning. By focussing on ongoing events over time, the journals will give both you and your tutor insight into what you are learning; your experiences and emotions; how you are tackling any issues; and how you are developing. In compiling the journals, it will give you time to reflect on your progress and attempt self-improvement.

It is a personal *and* academic document. It should be directly relevant to you and your learning, and also include relevant academic theory.

What should a learning journal include?

It is vital that you **ask your tutor** what exactly he/she wants to see included in your learning journal. They may give you headings or questions to directly respond to.

Essentially, it should be a piece of **reflective writing**. Therefore, **as outlined below**, it should include a brief description of events but should be predominately focussed on reflection, analysis and evaluation of your role/learning.



What is Reflective Writing?

Reflective writing is:

- an exploration and explanation of events
- your response to experiences, opinions, events or new information
- your response to your thoughts and feelings
- a way of thinking to explore your learning
- an opportunity to gain self-knowledge
- a way to achieve clarity and better understanding of what you are learning
- a chance to develop and reinforce writing skills
- a way of making meaning out of what you study

Reflective writing involves some description of events, but to avoid being 'too descriptive' it is usually necessary to **select only the most significant parts** to describe and reflect upon.

You want to alert the reader to your **reflection-in action** (the decisions you took and why), your later **reflections on that action** and how this will **impact on your future actions**.

It **combines the academic and personal**: it requires you to adopt an objective, academic tone and reference academic theory/models, and also employ the personal pronoun 'I' to comment on your experiences.

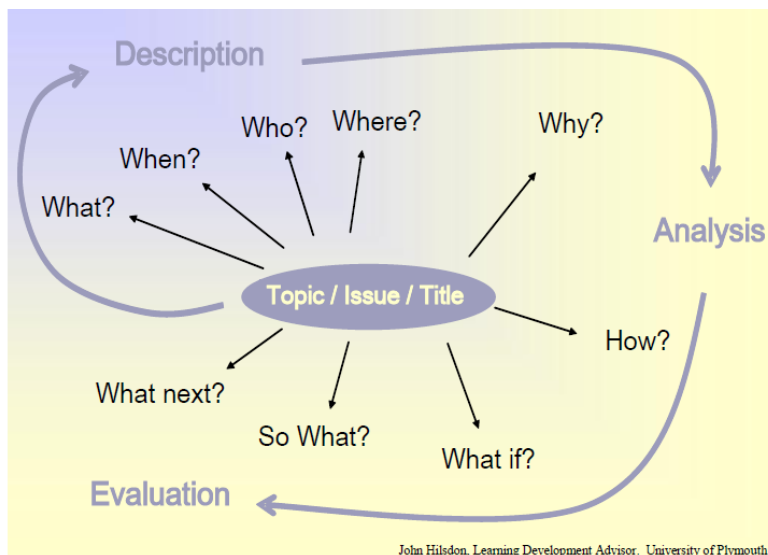
It includes **alerting the reader** to anxieties, fears, errors and weaknesses, as well as strengths and successes. You want to show the reader the causes of these issues, how you tackled them and how you plan to improve.

Getting the language right is one of the key skills in reflective writing: you need to balance the personal with the objective; employ first person ('I felt...') and third person ('Gibbs proposes...'); and use past tense to describe past experiences and present tense to describe current academic theory.

Questions to ask yourself: What? - So What? - What Next?

It is, of course, necessary to **briefly describe** the situation but your writing then needs to show evidence of **reflection, analysis and evaluation** on what happened.

It should move quickly from descriptive questions like What happened? When? Who? Where? into **reflection and analysis** (Why? How?) and **evaluation** (What if? So what? What next? What have I learnt?) For these steps, see the flow chart on 'critical thinking' below.



NOTE

You may have been advised to use a specific model to help develop your reflection, such as the **Gibbs model** or **Borton's Framework** etc.

It makes you ask many of the same questions of your experience as outlined on this guide, but it is vital to stick closely to and refer directly to any prescribed model.

Reflective questions to ask yourself include (but are not limited to):

Why did I respond this way?

How did I feel as a result? During and after?

How can this be explained with theory?

How is this similar/different to other theories on the topic?

What if I had responded in a different way: if I had said/done something else?

What if I apply a different theory?

So what? Would a different theory have made any difference to the outcome? Would I have done things differently? What have I achieved? What I have learned from this? How can I ensure this happens/does not happen again?

What next in terms of my learning/interactions/professional practice? Do I need additional training? Do I need to consult my tutor? How will I ensure that I can cope better with a similar situation?