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Types of Reflective Writing

By the end of this chapter you should:

- Recognise the different types of reflective writing you may be asked to do
- Know what a reflective assignment question looks like and what to include

So what types of reflective writing might you be asked to do at university? You may have already written a reflective piece of coursework and you may realise that reflective writing comes in many forms. The following are some of the most common types of reflective assignment in nursing, health or social work programmes:

Reflective journal

This is probably the first type of reflective writing you will do and indeed you may already be used to writing a reflective journal. You may or may not need to hand in your reflective journal, but the key is to make regular entries and remember to be honest. Your journal is best written in the first person (this means using *I* or *we*), and even if you do hand in extracts of your journal as part of your reflective assignment, these extracts should not read like academic writing.

Some questions to get you started writing journal entries:

What happened? How did I feel at the time? How do I feel now, looking back at the event? What would I do differently next time?

You can prepare for writing a journal by practising writing about your daily experiences and getting used to being honest when you write. Though it may feel uncomfortable at first, the more you do this, the more naturally it will come, and the more easily you will be able to write your journal entries. With journals, it is best to write little and often, as it can be difficult to remember how you felt if you leave it too long after the event.

Reflective essay

A number of different assignments may come under the broad heading of 'essay' and sometimes the word essay is used to describe any extended piece of writing you may be asked to do. Often you will be given a particular topic or *theme* to write about, around which you base your reflection. For example, you may be asked to discuss the theme of dignity through reflecting on different elements of your own practice. In this case, you will need to ensure that the examples that you think of can be easily connected to the theme that you are being asked to discuss.

An example of a reflective essay question might be:

With reference to your own experience in practice, reflect on your understanding of the importance of maintaining dignity as a mental health nurse.

To answer this question, you might like to think of three sub themes under the heading of dignity (for example, privacy, communication and autonomy) and relate each of these themes to examples from your own experiences.

To prepare for writing this type of assignment, make sure you keep notes while on placement. You may like to leave a margin to jot down themes that occur to you at the time or when you read back over your notes; or, if you already know possible themes you will be writing about, you can 'collect' your thoughts under different themed headings and start to read more about these themes.

Patchwork assignment or patchwork essay

A patchwork assignment requires you to reflect on a number of different artefacts that you choose or produce yourself, including, for example, journal entries, pictures or poems. This is a relatively new type of assignment, developed, among other reasons, in order to combat the problem of students leaving assignments to the last minute. The idea is that while a patchwork essay is an integrated piece of work, you complete short segments of writing over the course of a module to avoid the panic of having to finish a whole essay. (Of course, we know the reality is often different and you may still be faced with having to finish the assignment in one go!) Even if a patchwork assignment is an unfamiliar format for you, if you remember the different elements of reflection that need to be included and devise a clear structure for your assignment, it isn't any more difficult than other types of reflective assignment.

An example question for a patchwork assignment might be:

Use three patches to illustrate and analyse your professional and personal development during the second year of your degree.

In this example, possible patches might be a journal entry where you reflect on how you have developed your ability to communicate with clients. You might include a picture of a snowy mountain which you link to some aspect of practice which you thought was insurmountable or particularly daunting but that you managed to conquer. Another patch could be based around a map in which you write about how you tried to navigate your way through a tricky situation and the resources you drew on.

To help prepare for patchwork assignments, try recording your journal entries in different formats; for example, through writing a short poem about your experiences or drawing pictures. Also look out for interesting artefacts you might see when you are out and about that you could reflect on. For example, a picture on a café wall or some text on a postcard could provide some inspiration.

Reflection on an incident

You may be asked to choose a particular incident that happened while on placement and to reflect on it while not being given any broad theme. In this case you will need to decide on a theme or themes emerging from the experience that you want to explore further and any related sub-themes (for example, advocacy in nursing might be your overall theme and your subthemes may be decision-making, communication, and autonomy). You would need to ensure that the incident that you choose has enough examples of situations for each of these subthemes.

An example essay question for reflecting on an incident might be:

Reflect on an encounter with a service user.

To prepare for writing this type of assignment, make sure you keep notes while on practice of any potential or noteworthy 'incidents'. You may like to leave a margin to jot down themes that occur to you at the time or when you read back over your notes.

Reflection on a placement

This is similar to the assignment of reflecting on an incident, in that it is up to you to decide which themes to discuss. In this case, however, you might include examples from a number of different incidents rather than

from one incident. Again, make sure the incidents you choose from the placement tie in to the overall themes you have chosen. If you do reflect on a number of incidents you should ensure your reflection does not become too superficial. It is far better to focus on a small number of events and reflect in detail on these.

An example essay question for reflecting on a placement might be:

Reflect on your experience working as a paramedic.

Again, to prepare for writing this type of assignment, make sure you keep notes while on placement of any potential or noteworthy 'incidents'. You may like to leave a margin to jot down themes that occur to you at the time or when you read back over your notes.

Other types of reflective assignment

While we have given you some indication of possible reflective assignments, there may be other forms of reflective writing that you need to submit. Reflection may be part or all of an assignment.

Types of reflection for higher degrees, research degrees and for CPD

While we start with the very basics of reflection in this book, the types, structure and basic components of reflective writing will be similar at different levels. What will differ is the level of critical analysis you will need to include. The increasing level of criticality you will need as you progress through your studies and career is addressed in Chapters 14 and 16.

Summary

- Different types of assignment come under the bracket of reflective writing
- Find out the type of assignment you are expected to write and what format it will take
- Capture your thoughts in a reflective journal, and link key themes together. This will give you a firm foundation for your assignments

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