

## Reflective Writing in the Social Sciences

As part of your degree studies you will sometimes be asked to write a reflective paper. Check the instructions in your course book and your marking schedule to find what sort of writing you are being asked to do. Sometimes it will be a whole reflective paper but sometimes you might be asked to incorporate your reflections into other writing. You might be asked to reflect on your practice. You could also be given a case study, asked to explain what you would do in this particular situation, and then reflect on the possible consequences of your actions. Often a reflective paper will also ask you to integrate theory into your reflection. Reflective writing should help you to better understand what it is you are learning.

A reflective paper is not just expressing your opinion; it will require you to evaluate practice (Watson, Burrows, & Player, 2002). This means not just describing a situation, but going deeper and analysing your practice and then considering the value of what you did or did not do. In particular you will need to explain how and/or why you did certain things. It will be useful to consider reflective writing as being on three levels:

**Description** - to begin with, you usually need to describe a situation or experience. This might be real, or if you are given a case study, hypothetical. What was it you noticed about the situation? Why did you notice this? What were your thoughts and feelings? How did you respond? You then need to move into the second level, analysis/synthesis (“Freshman Showcase 2012,” n.d.).

**Analysis** - is to split something into its separate parts. To synthesise is to put parts together to make a whole. In the process of analysing practice, you need to consider all your “assumptions, attitudes, values [and] beliefs” (“Reflective Writing,” n.d., para. 1). These could depend on your age, gender, ethnicity, level of education, religious beliefs, real or perceived power, and so on. How did these influence what you did? Why did you do what you did? This will be where theory can be linked to practice.

**Evaluation** – is carefully considering the strengths and weaknesses of what you did, what problems were encountered and what worked or did not work. How might you improve things in the future? Of the things that did work well, how might these be transferred to other situations (Ministry of Social Development, 2010)?

As with every assignment, remember that you will need to write an introduction and a conclusion to this work.

## References

- Freshman showcase 2012 preparing for the reflective essay. (n.d.). Retrieved from [teacherweb.com/CA/.../Reflective-Essay-w--student-organizer.doc](http://teacherweb.com/CA/.../Reflective-Essay-w--student-organizer.doc)
- Ministry of Social Development. (2010). Supporting teen fathers: A resource for service providers. Wellington, New Zealand: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/planning-strategy/teen fathers/index.html](http://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/planning-strategy/teen-fathers/index.html)
- Reflective writing. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/pdf/reflective.pdf>
- Watson, F., Burrows, H., & Player, C. (2002). Integrating theory and practice in social work education. London, England: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. [Note: on pages 178-180 this book has a very good example of a weak descriptive essay, followed by a good analytical essay, on the subject of two chairs]