Writing a Journal or Learning Log

See also: Super Tips – Differences between Essays, Reports and Journals

At some time in your program you may be asked to reflect on your learning by writing a reflective journal (sometimes called a learning log). Reflecting on your learning and work helps you improve your understanding. Writing a journal or learning log helps you to reflect on what you’ve learnt and what you’re trying to achieve. It encourages you to think about topics covered in class, take a position on issues and think critically.

What sort of information should I include in a reflective journal or learning log?

You often have some flexibility in the topics or issues you write about in your journal, but be sure to include any specific elements requested by your teacher or lecturer. In general, your teacher will be looking for evidence of critical thinking about issues covered in class and your interpretation and point of view of these issues.

Your journal might cover these elements:

- **Information**: your journal should show that you’ve attended the classes, done the readings, understood the issues and theories involved and it should include personal interpretations of the course work.
- **Observations**: descriptions of what you’ve read or activities you’ve participated in.
- **Speculations**: your ‘wonderings’ about the meaning and implications of course related events, readings, discussions and issues.
- **Understanding**: making personal sense of issues or concepts.
- **Questions**: these can include academic queries, your own doubts, things you would like to find out about.
- **Synthesis**: pulling together ideas to find connections and relationships. Also, if work experience is part of your course, you need to bring together these experiences with concepts and ideas covered in class and in the readings.
- **Critique**: identification of the strengths and weaknesses of theories, readings, and activities in the course.
- **Revision**: you might look back at earlier entries and realise your ideas have changed or expanded in some way. This shows the developmental nature of journal writing.
To get started, think about recent readings for your program, what you’ve been discussing in class, work placements, etc, and identify:

- an issue or problem
- an argument or debate
- a topic

that interests you. Think critically about it and review your learning in the light of the issues.

**How is the language style of reflective writing different from other types of academic writing?**

Reflective writing doesn’t require the formal objective style necessary for most other forms of academic writing, such as essays and reports. Since reflective writing is an exploration of the development of your own understanding of the content and issues of a topic area, the style is more relaxed, incorporating subjective opinion.

The language features of a journal are more conversational than other written forms. You can use the rhythms and patterns of everyday speech. Because you’re reflecting on your own understandings, you can use ‘I’ to show your position on a topic. The word choice tends to include simple, short words, contractions (didn’t rather than did not), and abbreviations and informal expressions that allow you to show how you feel as well as how you think.

Similarly, the punctuation is informal; dashes and brackets are used to add additional comments rather than the colons and semi-colons of more formal writing. Journals also have scope for more experimental expressions of your ideas. Drawings, poems and other literary styles can be included where appropriate.

**Learning Activity**

Read the sample excerpts from a reflective journal and identify the type of information and language features in them. Each of the sections in *italics* represents a particular feature of reflective writing. When you’ve finished, check the answers on the last page.

**Choose from these elements:**

- Information
- Observations
- Speculation
- Understanding
- Questions
- Synthesis
- Critique
- Revision
- Use of informal language

Note: Many of the sections include more than one particular feature of reflective writing. Choose the one that you think is *most* represented in the section. The aim is not to be ‘correct’, but for you to think about the features and to see how they’ve been used.
Here are some selected excerpts from a reflective journal written by a first year nursing student:

**Excerpt from Week 1**

(1) Defining nursing is a tough one. I am not sure about the ins and outs of it yet. But I will write what I think of it now. This should make for some good laughs when I read back at the end of semester! It is about caring for people. I guess I see it as a job where you have to give of yourself physically, and by physically I mean doing things like making beds. But you also have to give a lot of yourself emotionally. Dealing with people a lot of the time, this is not really surprising. I see nurses as being privileged in a way. I mean you are allowed to share some intimate moments with people. Births. Deaths. All this is not to say I have romanticised the whole occupation. I do realise you have to wipe people’s bums too! Now I’ll try to incorporate some of what we have learnt this week into this definition.

All of this is underlined with the premise that the role of the nurse is to guide people on the path to wellness. Not simply cure their illness. (2) I really enjoyed the reading on wellness and I am pleased to see that this course is so….how do I put this? – new age? My mother has been a believer in the wellness idea for a long time. She is a physio. She will probably be mentioned quite a bit in this journal as she is a very influential person in my life. (Incidentally, I see nursing as a craft, an art and a vocation).

**Excerpt from Week 5**

The issue of caring is a really tricky one. (3) My family almost came to blows over it when I brought it up at the dinner table! LITERALLY. It is obviously an emotive issue amongst professionals.

(4) I must say that I did not agree with the views expressed at the tutorial. For I believe that caring can be learnt – and so does my Mum! It was my father who didn’t agree, and thereby caused the rowdy discussion! I believe that caring is an umbrella term that is used to describe a number of qualities that some people show. Although it is not an emotion, it is similar in that it is not tangible. It is not like a chair or a table; You cannot touch it. You only know caring exists if you experience it. I guess caring means different things to different people. So this is what it is all about to me, on a personal level.

\[ \text{Caring} = \text{understanding} \]
\[ \text{Caring} = \text{support} \]
\[ \text{Caring} = \text{time} \]
\[ \text{Caring} = \text{empathy} \]
\[ \text{Caring} = \text{acceptance} \]
\[ \text{Caring} = \text{want to care} \]

(5) And the last one is surely the most important. For caring must be something you choose to do. Everyone can learn to care, but not everyone makes the choice to learn. Some are perhaps innately more caring initially, but we can all learn something. We are not all born equal.

**Excerpt from Day 2 of Clinical Experience at a nursing home.**

(6) Whilst it is a lovely place in many respects, I felt frustrated because there are some questions I will never have answers to. The people Rachael and I were assigned to are pretty incapacitated, especially Mrs J. She actually has to be fed. She never goes into the day-room, at her daughter’s request, and so she sits in a chair all day. She has lost either the will, or the actual ability to communicate. Every time I had contact with her I kept wondering…(7) Can she hear me?…Does she know what we are talking about? Does she know if we are talking about her?…And does she get bored in her room by herself, with all the days so much the same that they must blend into each other? If she is a thinking, feeling and still intelligent being, what is it like to be a prisoner in her body as she must be? They say that
she cries all the time. Just cries, and I wondered what it was that made her cry. Was it out of frustration? Or was it that only the horrible moments of others life are relaying through her head like some kind of endless repeating video tape? I guess I’ll never know. But I really did think about it today.

Excerpt from Day 5
Well, today was my last day at the nursing home. I have mixed feelings about that. Part of me feels happy to be not going back. For I felt that in some ways it was a place full of sadness and monotony. But another part of me feels unhappy to be leaving. I have already grown fond of some of the residents, and gotten used to caring for them. I was even getting used to the ‘character building early starts’ (direct quote from my Dad). (8)The time at the nursing home brought me much. I got used to all the skills (yes, all of them!) I had learnt this semester at University. I also learnt a lot of things. Some funny little things (like how to place the spoon on the back of the tongue so that the food goes down better) and some bigger things (like how to operate the hydraulic bath).

Being at the nursing home made me think about a lot that I wouldn’t usually be thinking. How I felt and my revelations are written up in the preceding paragraphs and I see no point in repeating them here. (9)But my most important thoughts were about the value of a human life. When you are born, life is a miracle. We see little babies and coo and look in awe at them and marvel that they are alive. When you reach the other end of the spectrum (specifically the elderly that I saw in the nursing home), where is the miracle of life? Is there one? Life for them seems to be simply an existence. Days the same stretching on forever with little or no change.

To exist, I believe, is not to live. (10)What I learnt at the nursing home was how to make a life that is in existence more bearable. Not an easy lesson. But there are none of those are there?

**Answers**

1. **Informal language.** …*a tough one* and *the ins and outs of it* are both informal, conversational style of language. The student could also have contracted *I am… to I’m…*

2. **Information.** Most importantly, this shows that the student has done the readings and understood the issues involved. The student has also related the issue to his/her personal feelings. It also shows informal, conversational use of language, with rhetorical questions (questions not meant to be answered) and pauses (…)

3. **Informal language.** The language used in …*came to blows…*is very informal, as is showing intensity by using an exclamation mark and capital letters. Being able to use this kind of language and punctuation allows the student to show how she/he *really feels* about this issue without having to think too hard about using ‘academic’ language.

4. **Critique.** The student is reacting to a class discussion and carrying this further into his/her personal life. It shows that the issue hasn’t been left to be dealt with at university, but has now become part of the student’s whole way of thinking. (It also shows understanding, with the student making personal sense of this issue).

5. **Understanding.** The student, having thought deeply about this concept, is making personal sense of it.

6. **Understanding.** The student understands that there will be some things that won’t have answers. It’s important when you write a reflective journal to be honest. Don’t invent answers or understandings because you think your lecturer or teacher expects them.

7. **Speculation.** The student is wondering what it’s like to be a patient with dementia. As with the answer to the last section, the student is becoming aware that there will always be some unanswered questions.

8. **Synthesis and understanding.** This shows that the student has made personal sense of the work placement, but also that she/he has successfully synthesised theory and practice by bringing the skills learned in class to the workplace environment.

9. **Questions and speculation.** The student is asking some ‘big questions’ that are relevant to her/his nursing career. These are the types of questions that you often develop possible answers to which are revised throughout your studies (and often beyond study). The nature of these types of questions is often one of speculation – ‘wonderings’ about the meanings of issues, beliefs and concepts.

10. **Understanding.** This is an excellent summing up of the students’ experience in a nursing home, and what it all means to her.

These materials were produced by the RMIT University Study and Learning Centre.