

Blogs, journals et al.

Academic Tip Sheet



This academic tip sheet:

- looks at how writing changes over time;
- describes how to write a blog;
- looks at the learning portfolio; and
- discusses the use of reflective journals.

Written reflective records

While at university you will be encouraged to read and think analytically and critically and to communicate your ideas in writing. One way to achieve this is to engage in critical or reflective writing over a period of time. Some examples of these forms of writing include:

- blogs;
- learning portfolios; and
- journals.

Blogs

The word blog is a contraction of the word weblog (or web log). A blog is an online journal or diary. As with journals and diaries in general, in blogs the opinions and personal perspectives of the writer are expressed. Commonly, blogs investigate social, political and/or philosophical issues. They invite commentary from their readers and enable groups of people with similar interests to engage in online debate and discussion.

In some of your units you will be assessed on your entries into a unit blog over the semester.

You will be guided in the topics you must write about by a series of set questions. Information about how to set up the blog will be provided by your lecturer or tutor.

In your blog entries, you will present your perspectives and critical reflections on the content of the unit (the ideas expressed in lectures and in weekly readings, for example). That is, you will share your thoughts and opinions on the issues you have been studying and discussing.

You may also be required to comment on the blog entries of your fellow students in that unit. In this way the blog creates an online community of scholars (you and your classmates) discussing and debating issues of importance in your field of study.

As with all academic writing, opinions and reflections must be substantiated (or 'backed up') with reference to your reading, thinking, observation, and experience, in the form of a coherent argument. This applies both to your own blogs and to your comments on other people's blogs. Although your personal opinion should be presented, you must share with your readers the process of reading, thinking, discussion, observation and analysis that led you to reach that opinion. You must also support your opinions with evidence, either in the form of references from your reading, or with examples from the wider world that strongly support your case.

Learning portfolios

A learning portfolio is a collection of weekly assessment tasks that you will be asked to submit once or twice a semester. The format the learning portfolio will vary according to your lecturer's requirements. You may be required to undertake a variety of weekly activities such as:

- providing written summaries of and reflections on the week's lecture, tutorial, and set readings;
- answering set weekly questions;
- applying the central principles/themes of the unit to texts of your own choice; and
- finding examples from media texts).

The learning portfolio is designed to encourage you to engage deeply and regularly with the course content. The weekly tasks guide your learning journey. If you keep up to date with your learning portfolio, applying yourself to the weekly tasks as they arrive, your understanding of the course content will be enriched. You will be engaging with new ideas while they are fresh in your mind, and you will have time to reflect critically on them. You will also be providing yourself with very useful and highly condensed material for your exam revision.

In the learning portfolio you are invited to:

- reflect critically on the unit's content area;
- present your perspectives and opinions; and
- substantiate your reflections, perspectives and opinions with reference to your reading/reflection and class discussions.

The learning portfolio also asks you to:

- think about your own learning processes and your own learning journey;
- reflect on how your understanding of certain concepts has changed/broadened/narrowed over the semester; and
- indicate areas of particular difficulty or interest, learning preferences, breakthroughs and set-backs.

Traps to avoid

Leaving work on your learning portfolio until just before it is due to be submitted is foolhardy. Learning portfolios written under these conditions are usually superficial, incomplete, poorly presented, and too brief. Your tutor is certain to detect if you've handed in a 'rushed job' and your marks will reflect this. Writing less, more frequently, is the best approach to take.

Reflective journals

The essential reason for writing a reflective journal is to recall experience and to try to understand it. Reflective writing can do things that 'just thinking' or 'thinking through talking' rarely achieves. Journal writing forces you to select particular elements from the vast range of possible things you could write about, to organise those elements into a narrative and to reflect on them. An important element of journal writing is the acknowledgement that the process of writing makes conscious the unconscious within us.

A reflective journal plays down the role of memory and enhances the search for patterns and complexes of meaning. As a reflective journal develops, stories appear which develop similar themes and issues even if the content of the story appears dissimilar. In addition, as many journal writers have discovered, it is not simply the record, but the act of writing itself that can provide a rich source of learning.

Recalling and recording

A reflective journal can be a rich resource for learning both through the act of writing itself and through your re-reading of the records of your experiences. A journal may be other things, but it is always a record. Entries are typically dated and link in some way to intellectual and emotional experiences of that time. Keeping a journal involves some commitment to maintaining the record over a period of time – you will need to write

regularly and at sufficient length in order to capture experiences in sufficient depth, so they will have meaning when reviewed at a later date.

Writing a reflective journal

Why keep a journal?

- The act of writing things down helps you clarify your thoughts and emotions, to work out strategies, and to focus on your development and progress.
- A written record will help you see how you are progressing from week to week and from semester to semester, year to year.

Who is it for?

- Mainly for yourself. The reflective journal will help you focus on your own learning development.

What is it for?

Anything which helps you to reflect on:

- your feelings about the course, the lecturers, other students, your progress;
- things you find difficult or challenging;
- changes in your attitude or motivation;
- how you tackle tasks – your strategies.;
- things you find out about yourself;
- thoughts about how you learn best;
- ideas that arise from your studies;
- how different areas of study link up; and
- how your studies relate to real life.

These points will help you get started, particularly if you have writers block.

Checklist

- **Have you determined which type of writing is being asked for?**
- **Have you kept up to date with your writing?**
- **Where necessary, have you backed up your personal opinions with evidence?**
- **Has your writing progressed over time?**

References

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