Writing Reflective Journals

Overview
Reflective ‘writing’ is a series of ‘writings’ in response to life experiences & events that may also contain reflections on what took place, express emotions, understandings & conclusions, lessons learned or action plans. Often called a “Journal Entry”

You don’t have to be a great writer, perfect speller, or creative thinker to keep a personal journal. Just regularly write down your experiences and thoughts.

Why do we write Reflective Journals?
Lots of people keep journals as part of their hobbies! How many of the following journals have you kept? Bird watching, Train spotting, Gardening, Diet or training, Idea files, Trip diary, Dream journal, Book journal, Wine journal, Blogs

When we refer to reflective journals we are exploring our learning.

Is there a Structure to a Reflective Journal Entry?
A reflective journal entry is a conversation with yourself (and possibly your faculty) and follows the four components of the Focused Conversation Method. Often you hear the method called by its acronym ORID.

Objective Data
Describe a situation: what did you see, hear, taste, smell, and touch?

Reflective Data
Describe your reaction; often an emotion or a feeling. This is what tells you the situation is important and worth writing about.

Interpretive Data
Try to explain what you have observed. Use some concept from the course here!

Decisional Data
Make a plan about what you will do differently (or the same) the next time you are in a similar situation or what you need to learn to do differently to manage the situation better the next time! This part of your journal entry should be stated in terms of a SMART Goal.

For more information about SMART Goals, see pages 73 and 74 in Team Launch! In this reference, the terms goal and objective are used interchangeably.

• Specific
• Measurable
• Agreed upon
• Realistic
• Time framed
**What is the Format?**
Journals are generally prose, but not necessarily so! In fact, the less you make your journal look like an essay, the more likely you will be able to reflect. Reflection happens when you get outside of your academic head and into your heart, soul, and gut. We DON’T evaluate what you reflect on, what you observe, how you interpret the situation, or what action plans you make. Often we CONVERSE with you about what you write, but we DON’T evaluate it. We DO evaluate the process of reflection.

Your journal entry can be:
- Visual by capturing or including a mind map, pictures, photos, lists, doodles, sketches, ticket stubs, programmes
- Audio by recording a poem, song, interview, soliloquy, narration
- Moving video by recording an interview, soliloquy, travelogue

Have a look at the sample reflective journal entries and take note of the different topics people have written about and the formats they have used to explore their experiences.

**What gets graded?**
We grade the process of reflection. We look to see if you are collecting enough objective and reflective data to be able to make sense of the experience AND recognize it if you see it again. The interpretive data needs to be a logical outcome of the observations and based in some concept you learned in class. The decisional data needs to logically follow the interpretation and present an reasonable action plan in the SMART goal format.

A good rule of thumb: your journal sound have approximately the same amount of data in each section. Some people find certain data easier to capture than others do. So, this rule of thumb is a good way to ensure you spend enough time in the places you are not proficient and not too much time capturing data that is easy to find.

The attached rubric outlines the requirements for a single reflective journal entry.

**What doesn’t get graded?**
Although your faculty may make comment on the substance of your reflective journal entry, that part isn’t graded. Think of those questions and comments as the conversation your faculty is having with you about your experience, interpretation, or decisions. To make the distinction obvious, some faculty change to a different colour when they switch from grading to conversing. If you are not sure, feel free to seek clarification!

**What should I write about?**
Some reflective journal entry topics are assigned. In that case, you need to follow the instructions about describing the experience, what interpretive framework to use (or both!).

Other reflective journal entry topics are left up to you. Usually the only restriction in that case is the requirement to reflect on SOME experience in the course OR use some framework from the course to interpret and take action on any experience.

In the past, students have written about a class or lab activity, readings, group exercises or meetings, film or videos, an interaction with their faculty. They have examined their experiences using what they have learned about collaboration, patient centred care, conflict, active listening. The possibilities are endless!

If you find yourself reacting to something, take that as a cue to write a reflective journal entry. Your body is telling you “pay attention, you just experienced something very important”.

Be clear about:
- If you are prepared to share
- What you are prepared to share
- Who you will share your journal with