

## GUIDED REFLECTION / Effective Guided Reflection

Some people describe reflection as looking at your face in the mirror. The mirror allows you to see yourself as others see you. Without that mirror you would never see your own face. This is a good initial description, but too shallow to describe true reflection, or reflective practice, as it is sometimes called. *True* reflection would require a mirror like the one in the fairy tale *Snow White*. But instead of allowing you to see 'the fairest of them all', as the fairy tale goes, this mirror reflects not just your face but allows you to see into your own psyche, soul, thoughts, and motivations. In doing so, such reflection allows you (as defined in *Becoming a Critical Thinker*) to undertake a conscious examination of your thoughts, actions, experiences, choices, or ways of doing things. The purpose of such reflection is not to have done it, but in the process of doing it to achieve a level of understanding of yourself, to contribute to your learning about the event or topic you are reflecting on, and ultimately to contribute to your own transformation.

Some students think reflection is just 'nice to have' or that they 'don't have time'. By avoiding the opportunity to think to reflect, such students significantly diminish the impact this book (and reflection more generally) can have on them, and on their chances of becoming a critical thinker. The decision to undertake the Guided Reflection exercises, which are carefully constructed and strategically placed in this book, is really the first test of whether you are serious about becoming a critical thinker at university.

However, as with many things, being told to 'reflect on xyz' is somewhat abstract. It doesn't provide much guidance on how to actually approach the task in order to achieve the best outcome – that is, the best insight. This document has been written to help guide you in undertaking reflection exercises. While this applies directly to the Guided Reflections offered in each chapter of I, the guidance applies equally to other reflection tasks you are likely to undertake throughout your university studies. Note that there are also some overlaps with the advice provided in Chapter 7, Writing, in the section titled Writing to Reflect.

### CHECKLIST / SUMMARY OF INSTRUCTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE GUIDED REFLECTION

- Allow at least 20 minutes
- Be alone, turn off all distractions (e.g. electronic devices)
- Handwrite if possible, in a dedicated journal you have bought
- Be honest, look at the wider context
- Find some distance but also get uncomfortable'
- Focus on the reflection: the quality of writing is irrelevant

## **HOW TO APPROACH REFLECTION – PRACTICALITIES**

All you really need to undertake reflection is yourself and your mind, and you have these with you always. However, there are some additional steps which can contribute to more profound insight and transformation. That said, in an independent learning environment – including your engagement with this book and undertaking reflection more generally – you need to make your own decisions, based on the extent to which you agree with and choose to follow the suggested instructions. Ultimately all that really matters is that you achieve useful insight.

### **TIME AND FOCUS**

The issue of dedicated time and focus and the removal of potential distractions is key. Depth of thought and reflection comes not from snapshots taken of surface feelings, but from deeper, slower, explorations which uncover potentially surprising thoughts and reasons. Our brain needs to be assured that, for the next dedicated time period (even if that is only 20 minutes), nothing else will demand its attention. By turning phones off (not just on silent), and (if using a computer) closing all websites and wifi, our brains will stop surface processing, or monitoring. Research has shown that the mere presence of a smart phone can lead to underperformance in tasks requiring thinking (Ward et al., 2017). Finally, in relation to time, you need to give your brain and yourself time to adjust to this space. A short meditation at the start can help to achieve focus. Also important, however, is just being patient and allowing insight to come in its own time.

### **SPACE**

The question of where to undertake reflection can be deeply personal, but can also link to the issue of focus. To stop surface processing, it is important that we look within. This is often achieved in isolation. A quiet place with no distractions might be sitting in your bedroom, or in a corner of the library. These are preferable. On a sunny day, a quiet seat outside can be a very fruitful location for reflection. Of course, there are some people who might be able to 'tune out' the distractions of a busy café. You need to make your own decisions. But these should be made not on what you 'prefer' but on what best achieves the ultimate aim of focused reflection. For many, a busy café does not achieve this.

### **SYSTEM OF RECORDING OUR REFLECTIONS (A JOURNAL)**

It is important both for the progression of this book and for the effectiveness of reflection more generally that we write our reflections down. By writing, rather than simply 'thinking' our reflections, we slow our mind down. This time, and the delay between thinking and writing, provides our brain with opportunities to explore deeper reasons, uncover unexpected links, and grapple with complex ideas which may manifest as both conscious and subconscious thoughts. Many people believe that we achieve greater insight by *hand* writing, rather than typing. While still subject to debate, research (Mueller and Oppenheimer, 2014) suggests that when handwriting, instead of typing, we are able to better process ideas, be more creative, and understand the ideas we are exploring. In particular, given reflection is often loosely structured, a blank piece of paper can provide a more open canvas on which to express ourselves, including with sketches, mind maps, or doodling, in addition to words.

Moreover, it is incredibly useful to be able to refer back to our reflections at a later time. Indeed, at the end of this book you will be asked to. To achieve this, but also to show your commitment to reflection as a vital tool to becoming a critical thinker, you should buy yourself a blank notebook to use as your Reflection Journal. You can choose the type, size, and colour of notebook, and whether it is lined. These might seem like small things. But each choice you make, however small, makes that notebook more *yours*, to suit yourself and your life. To signal to yourself and to the world your acceptance of reflection as part of the journey to critical thinking.

## HOW TO APPROACH REFLECTION: PERSPECTIVE

- *Be honest:* Reflection is not the place to note the widely accepted societal norms or views. If you aren't honest with yourself as you reflect, you aren't gaining what you can from the exercise.
- *Look at the wider context:* While you may be looking at one specific issue or event, try to consider it in the wider context of yourself or the environment in which it happened. This allows more perspective on how and why things happen.
- *Find some distance:* While reflection can often look at quite emotional or powerful moments, beliefs, or aspects of yourself (both in a positive and negative sense), try to look at this from a distance. To the extent possible (you don't have to take this to extremes!) look at them rationally and dispassionately. Think of it like looking at a loved one who you are attempting to help – you are obviously invested in a positive outcome, but you don't become overwhelmed. However, see the point below on getting uncomfortable.
- *Get uncomfortable:* While this is not necessarily true of all reflections, often there may be issues or topics you are exploring about yourself or your response to an event that make you uncomfortable. Perhaps you uncover beliefs you hold that, on the surface, you don't really agree with, or that you think society, your parents, or your friends would disapprove of. It is also possible that a reflection may link to significant or serious events in your past that you have hidden. If this becomes too overwhelming, do seek out support by talking to a trusted friend or colleague, or to your university's counselling or student wellbeing department.
- *Don't try to do 'good' reflective writing:* Much reflection (and all in this book) is written. Effective reflection achieves what it set out to do. Often, reflection sets out to provide insight or reveal understanding. Such outcomes aren't achieved by trying to do 'good' reflective writing. The writing is the note-taking part of the reflection exercise. Focus on what you are understanding about yourself, not on whether the writing is good.

## WHY QUESTIONING

One of the key methods we use in this book, and in reflection more generally, to achieve insight is invoking the power of the question 'why?' This simple question helps us to look beyond surface interpretations, status quo assumptions, or unconsidered decisions, to identify their deeper meaning. We call this 'why' questioning. Many of the Guided Reflections in this book use this to help us to really interrogate our views, opinions, beliefs, biases, and approaches in more depth.

There is often a point, however, where the question 'why?' no longer makes sense, or a different question is more important. This is the point at which we change to the question to 'how do I know this?' The example below will explain this.

Imagine I want to understand why I decided to go for a run. I could first list all the reasons, big and small, certain and possible. I could then choose the most important ones and undertake 'why' questioning to understand the real reasons, drivers, or factors which led me to list this reason. There may be a point at which I realize it is more appropriate to ask "how do I know this?"

Why did I decide to go for a run?

Because it's good for me	Because I'm tired of sitting at my desk.	Because I feel guilty if I don't go for a run.
Why?	Why?	Why?
Because it exercises my heart and helps me lose weight.	Because I've been redrafting this chapter all day and my back is now sore.	Because I feel pressure from society to be healthy.
How do I know this?	Why?	Why?
I'm not really sure.	Because I haven't been using correct posture.	And continue...
	How do I know this?	
	Because I once did a workplace training session on good posture.	

In summary, the Guided Reflections in this book offer a key opportunity to understand yourself. Given the point of this book is to transform you into being a better, more critical thinker, understanding yourself is an essential step on this path.

## REFERENCES

- Mueller, P. A., & Oppenheimer, D. M. (2014). The Pen Is Mightier Than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand Over Laptop Note Taking. *Psychological Science, 25*(6), 1159–1168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614524581>
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