

# Reflective Writing Toolkit: For Health Care Residents and Learners



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# 1. Reflective Writing: The Basics

## What is reflective writing?

Reflective writing is a tool of Narrative Medicine, which is a method for physicians and other health care workers to connect with their patients and their patients' experience of the illness, medical care, and journey to recovery through telling and listening to stories (Charon, 2008).

Writing can take many different forms and each has a slightly different objective. For example, descriptive writing paints a picture of circumstances and situations such that it is understood by a general audience. Technical writing aims to explain procedures and skills in a clear, transmissible manner. Meanwhile, creative writing stimulates imagination through poems, stories, or other methods and is generally used to entertain or share a particular message.

Reflective writing is a method of evaluating the writer's perspectives and past experiences to increase insight, integrate knowledge and experience, improve wellbeing, and promote connection with the patient experience.

This happens when providers become reflective of their practice and learn to process the experiences they share with their patients.

Reflective writing serves as a learning tool in health care education and practice.

Reflective writing purposefully looks at the influence of past experiences on current experiences, behaviors, emotions, and reactions. Through reflection and contemplation, it is possible to process what happened, your role in the situation, and how to change things in the future.

**In other words reflective writing is a form of personal and professional learning from your own experiences and insights. Reflective writing can improve patient care and empathy among physicians and health care providers who take the time to engage in this activity.** (Chen & Forbes, 2014; DasGupta & Charon, 2004)

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**THOUGHTFUL QUESTION:** What is the difference between a doctor who regularly and thoughtfully reflects on their performance, emotions, and lessons learned...and one who does not?

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“You cannot respect others' stories unless you respect your own stories.”  
-Dr. Arthur W. Frank (2010)

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## What are the different types of reflective writing?

There are two types of reflective writing that we'll discuss here: individual reflective writing (IRW) and professional reflective writing (PRW).



**Individual reflective writing** can be used to explore personal experiences and reactions to those experiences to find important lessons and principles which could be useful in the future. IRW can be beneficial to help sort out struggles in our personal life such as strengths and weaknesses, relationships, communication patterns, past negative experiences, and emotional reactions.

**Professional reflective writing** can be used to explore the relationship between theory, evidence-based interventions, past experience, and present performance, as well as our individual response to the event. There are few tools as useful to learning as identifying the experience, exploring individual reactions, what the professional literature says on the topic, and looking for future courses of action.

## When and where can reflective writing be used?

Reflective writing is a flexible learning technique which can be used in a group setting or in private. Working in the medical field involves relationships, emotions, and spiritual beliefs along with science, thus providing ample opportunities for reflective writing.

It can be used in moments of heightened distress, such as grief, regret, shame, embarrassment, anxiety, frustration, helplessness, and anger.

Examples of situations which may cause these emotions include:

- ✓ Losing a patient, particularly one who is young, who reminds you of a loved one, or who you have been treating for a long time
- ✓ When you missed diagnostic clues and a patient's health suffered as a result
- ✓ Inadequate staffing in the hospital or other administrative challenges impacting the quality of care you are able to provide to a patient
- ✓ Discord among colleagues, patient non-compliance, or disagreement over treatment plans

Engaging in reflective writing during these times can facilitate personal growth, emotional processing, and professional development. These events can be life and practice changing so being able to think about them, learn key lessons, and identify things to change in the future is a critical aspect of becoming a better medical provider.

## What are some barriers to reflective writing?

Reflective writing is generally a new activity for medical professionals. You spend so many years reading, memorizing, studying, and writing professional and technical materials that reflection is often squeezed out. Four major barriers prevent people from engaging in reflective writing, but each can be overcome.

### **I don't have time**

It's no secret that you are pressed for time at work and for self-care. However, reflective writing can be accomplished in minutes and can be beneficial with only a poem or few written words. One particularly helpful aspect of writing is your ability to stop and start at will. Unlike a conversation with a friend or colleague you can pick up writing exactly where you left off and don't even need to apologize. You can write a lot in 5 minutes.

### **I don't know how to start**

As with any form of writing, the hardest part is beginning. You are in good company if you are struggling with this—most people do at first. One particularly helpful tool to start with is writing prompts (see page 7). As you use writing prompts and the other exercises in this toolkit, you will find your own writing style and method that works for you. Reflective writing is about the journey, not the product, so don't worry about it being right or a great product—that's not the point! Just get started and enjoy the experience of putting your thoughts on paper.



### **I don't have a journal**

Your reflective writing can be in any notebook, on your phone, a word document, excel spreadsheet, or a collection of sticky notes. You can do this however you want. There is no algorithm to this, you just need a place to write about your experiences. You may find over time you prefer writing by hand or electronic means. Don't let the means of writing be a barrier. Pick a reasonable method, start, and readjust as necessary.

### **I don't know what emotions will come up**

Compartmentalization is a powerful tool which allows us to focus on tasks without being flooded by fears and memories. Yet, compartmentalizing too much inhibits learning how to process painful or negative emotions. Reflective writing helps us sharpen the saw of productively processing emotions and experiences. Writing can bring up unpleasant emotions, but generally the result is insight, relief, self-compassion, and hope.

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**KEY POINT:** Reflective writing is a method of creating a link from the past to the present so learning can take place for your future benefit.

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## 2. Reflective Writing Exercises

There are many methods and models of reflection and reflective writing. You are encouraged to explore and find different ideas that may help you. In this section we will cover a basic model and a variety of tools which offer a scope of options to begin your approach to reflective writing. Other models and tools can be found in the Resource Section of this Toolkit.



### The “What” Model

The “What” Model is a simple pattern which is useful for anyone, especially beginners to reflective writing and was intended to support nurses and other medical professionals. (Rolfe et al., 2001). The model has three steps:



The following list of questions can get you started with the reflective writing process:

#### **What?**

- What were the circumstances leading up to this event?
- Where did this happen and how did the setting play into the event?
- What were the influences which were a part of this experience?
- What else was going on at the time and who was involved?
- What was your reaction at the time?
- How did you feel when the event was happening?
- What did you notice at the time but didn't think about until later on?
- What thoughts did you have about the event, those involved, and the outcome?
- What was the major problem going on?
- What was your role in the event and associated outcomes?

#### **So What?**

- What strengths and weaknesses were exposed because of this situation?
- Was your reaction similar to other situations in the past?
- What was different about your thinking then than now?
- How does your reaction and response relate to what you've done in the past?
- Did you know everything you needed to know? If not, why not?
- How did the conditions at the time play into your decisions and reactions?

- What do you wish you would have managed better?
- What knowledge is out there that would have helped you in the moment?
- How extensive was your preparation to handle a situation like this?
- What does this experience say about you?

### Now What?

- Given what you know now, how would you rate your response?
- What do you still need to learn, practice, or develop?
- How will you go about making these improvements?
- What lessons did you learn that can be applied to future situations?
- How did this change how you think about yourself, your practice, and your skills?
- What would you expect from yourself in the future under similar circumstances?
- If you didn't change anything, what would happen over time?
- How do you need to change individually? Professionally?
- Do you have a mentor who can help you perform better?
- Is there anyone you need to talk to in order to make things right?

<https://www.bda.uk.com/static/eda1787e-3616-44ea-906b5e5a9f9ee7b9/CPD-Reflect-tool.pdf>

<https://www.hood.edu/sites/default/files/Career%20Center/What%20So%20What%20Now%20What%20Critical%20Reflection%20Model.docx.pdf>

<https://online.op.ac.nz/assets/LearningAdvice/d0a1fac268/Reflective-writing.pdf>



## Poetry

This is a great way to write in a style and manner which is completely different than our typical day-to-day writing. It is unique, interesting, and powerful as a literary device to convey messages across time and conditions. For so many people, poetry is an unfamiliar form of writing, but is absolutely a fun and creative medium of expression. Yes, it can rhyme but it certainly does not have to for effect.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5873566/>

<https://www.aamc.org/news/healing-power-poetry>

<https://www.grammarly.com/blog/how-to-write-a-poem/>




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**THOUGHTFUL QUESTION:** What personal or professional experiences have you had that you still think about regularly but have never written about?

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## Gratitude Journals

The use of gratitude journals has become increasingly popular as a method of capturing the full spectrum of experiences each day. By writing and capturing events which foster gratitude or positive emotions, the writer is preparing a list of positive events to reflect and build upon. Additionally, expressing gratitude improves motivation (Armenta, Fritz, & Lyubomirsky, 2016) and life satisfaction (Robustelli & Whisman, 2018).

<https://positivepsychology.com/gratitude-journal-pdf/>

<https://www.rd.com/article/gratitude-journaling/>

<https://accelerate.uofuhealth.utah.edu/explore/how-to-practice-three-good-things>

[https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/tips\\_for\\_keeping\\_a\\_gratitude\\_journal](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/tips_for_keeping_a_gratitude_journal)

<https://www.happierhuman.com/gratitude-journal-prompts/>



## Writing Prompts

Journaling is a tremendously useful method to help record events, process information, and begin a reflective process. One of the risks with journaling is that it can become stale for people, if they are only recording daily events, and thus they are less likely to continue in the pursuit over long periods of time. One way to combat this tendency and become more engaged in journal writing is to use prompts. Writing prompts give you a topic to write about and explore. They cover a variety of topics, themes, and interests. There are numerous sources of writing prompts on-line, a few of which are shared here.

<https://psychcentral.com/blog/ready-set-journal-64-journaling-prompts-for-self-discovery#getting-unstuck>

<https://reflectionsfromaredhead.com/writing-prompts-for-self-reflection/>

<https://dayoneapp.com/blog/journal-prompts/>



## 55-Word Stories

This particular activity requires the writer to carefully select their words to convey the meaning and summarize the impact of their experience or message. A 55-word story can have tremendous impact and requires careful thought, reflection, and consideration.

<https://jenniferlycette.medium.com/reflective-writing-for-physicians-the-55-word-story-51c0f4e98dbe>

[https://journals.lww.com/mjdy/Fulltext/2023/16010/Fifty\\_Five\\_Word\\_Stories\\_A\\_Unique\\_Form\\_for.2.aspx](https://journals.lww.com/mjdy/Fulltext/2023/16010/Fifty_Five_Word_Stories_A_Unique_Form_for.2.aspx)

<https://faculty.uwmedicine.org/55-word-stories/>

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**THOUGHTFUL QUESTION:** In what ways do you think reflective writing could be helpful to you in your practice and learning? .

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## Letter Writing

This technique is often used in therapy to address relationships when conversations may be difficult, damaging, or impossible. The goal is not to send the letter to the individual but to express emotions and thoughts in a direct and personal manner. By writing a letter, the writer is able to express their emotions and thoughts in a constructive and ordered method at their own pace (Prasko et al., 2009). Getting the thoughts on paper can be a relief to have simply expressed those thoughts.

Letter writing can also be creative in that you can write a letter to a hero or mentor expressing gratitude, to yourself in the past or future expressing some of your thoughts now, or to an editor expressing some of your thoughts of current events or social topics. Some people find it beneficial to write a letter multiple times, as each iteration helps to clarify thoughts, feelings, and lessons by digging a little deeper into the experience or relationship.

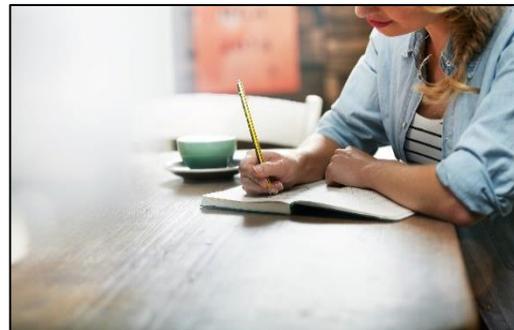
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/write-yourself-well/201403/transactional-writing-letters-heal>

<https://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-worksheet/letter-to-my-past-self>



## Lessons Learned

Another useful reflective writing exercise is really part of the “Now What?” phase of reflective writing. At the end of each day, important event, unique patient encounter, or other special circumstance take time to think and write about a lesson learned. This should be something that is transferable to other situations and circumstances. Ideally it would be written in one or two sentences. This



exercise forces the writer to regularly look for helpful principles to carry forward in their practice or personal life. The activity requires reflection and can involve additional writing but really is an attempt to get the lesson learned quickly. This is easier to do if the writer is familiar with reflective activities and has done some additional writing to get practice with making connections and learning to see the nuances of the context.

<https://www.kevinmd.com/2020/01/what-doctors-can-and-should-learn-from-patients.html>

<https://closler.org/lifelong-learning-in-clinical-excellence/whats-one-life-lesson-you-learned-from-a-patient>

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**KEY POINT:** Reflective writing can help you learn about and process your barriers to critical reflection and deeper learning.

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### 3. FAQ

#### Q: How in depth should my reflections be?

A: When starting in reflective writing, it can be tempting to write superficially and not delve deeply enough into the events, associated feelings and responses, or relevant factors impacting the circumstances. On the other hand, reflecting on challenging situations can be draining, emotionally and mentally, and it can take time to develop some of the intended insight. Thus, it is not expected nor even realistic to attain Critical Reflection (see table) each and every time we engage in reflective writing.

Aim for the Reflection or Critical Reflection categories in the Reflection Continuum below, but don't be concerned if you are not there yet. Over time writing can improve reflection because it engages so many different parts of your brain and makes you process information differently than you have before.

The Reflection Continuum				
	<u>Non-Reflection</u>	<u>Understanding</u>	<u>Reflection</u>	<u>Critical Reflection</u>
<b>Deliberateness</b>	Little-to-none	Minor	Moderate	Deep
<b>Context</b>	Unaware	Immediate	Broad	Complex
<b>Connection</b>	Superficial	Some	Moderate	Underlying
<b>Self-Insight</b>	None	Limited	Moderate	Transformative
<b>Points-of-view</b>	None	Few	Some	Numerous
<b>Complexity</b>	Black-White	Some Nuance	Mostly Nuanced	Nuanced

Note: Adapted from Kember et al., 2008

#### Q: What kind of language should I use?

In general, reflection is about your experience of certain events or circumstances so the preferred language is first person. Words such as *I*, *me*, *my*, and *mine* are perfect when speaking about your experience and *we*, *us*, *our*, and *ours* is helpful when speaking about group or team actions or shared experiences. Obviously, there are times when others points-of-view such as *he*, *she*, *they*, or *you* may also be appropriate. Balint Groups use similar perspective taking processes as reflective writing.



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**KEY POINT:** The real issue is not the medium of writing or becoming a great writer, but the reflective process which takes place through the writing.

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## 4. Resources

The University of Edinburgh Reflection Toolkit

<https://www.ed.ac.uk/reflection>

University of Cambridge—Reflective Practice Toolkit

<https://libguides.cam.ac.uk/reflectivepracticetoolkit/introduction>

Carthage College Reflective Writing Info Page

<https://www.carthage.edu/faculty-staff/teaching-commons/supporting-excellence-in-teaching/reflection-toolkit/>

University of Northern Colorado PSI Project

<https://www.unco.edu/psiproject/si-website/5r-framework.aspx>

University College Dublin

[https://www.ucd.ie/teaching/t4media/reflective\\_practice\\_models.pdf](https://www.ucd.ie/teaching/t4media/reflective_practice_models.pdf)

Project Based Learning: Reflection Toolkit

<https://project-based-learning-toolkit.com/reflection-toolkit/>

Academy of Medical Royal Colleges

[https://www.aomrc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Reflective\\_Practice\\_Toolkit\\_AoMRC\\_CoPMED\\_0818.pdf](https://www.aomrc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Reflective_Practice_Toolkit_AoMRC_CoPMED_0818.pdf)

University of Southern California Reflective Paper Guide

<https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/assignments/reflectionpaper>

Technical University of the Shannon Library Guide

<https://lit.libguides.com/reflective-practice-tips/writing>

UNSW Sydney Reflective Writing Guide

<https://www.student.unsw.edu.au/reflective-writing>

Brain Parts Involved in Writing:

<https://uwaterloo.ca/writing-and-communication-centre/blog/psychologically-speaking-your-brain-writing>

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“Get it down. Take chances. It may be bad, but it’s the only way you can do anything really good.” ~ William Faulkner ~

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