Critical Reflection

A Critical Reflection (also called a reflective essay) is a process of identifying, questioning, and assessing our deeply-held assumptions – about our knowledge, the way we perceive events and issues, our beliefs, feelings, and actions. When you reflect critically, you use course material (lectures, readings, discussions, etc.) to examine our biases, compare theories with current actions, search for causes and triggers, and identify problems at their core. Critical reflection is not a reading assignment, a summary of an activity, or an emotional outlet. Rather, the goal is to change your thinking about a subject, and thus change your behaviour.

Critical reflections are common in coursework across all disciplines, but they can take very different forms. Your instructor may ask you to develop a formal essay, produce weekly blog entries, or provide short paragraph answers to a set of questions. Read the assignment guidelines before you begin.

How to Critically Reflect

Writing a critical reflection happens in two phases.

1. **Analyze:** In the first phase, analyze the issue and your role by asking critical questions. Use free writing as a way to develop good ideas. Don't worry about organized paragraphs or good grammar at this stage.

2. **Articulate:** In the second phase, use your analysis to develop a clear argument about what you learned. Organize your ideas so they are clear for your reader.

First phase: Analyze

A popular method for analyzing is the three stage model, What? So What? Now what?

**What?**

In the What? stage, describe the issue, including your role, observations, and reactions. The what? stage helps you make initial observations about what you feel and think. At this point, there's no need to look at your course notes or readings.

Use the questions below to guide your writing during this stage.

- What happened?
- What did you do?
- What did you expect?
- What was different?
- What was your reaction?
- What did you learn?
Since you’ll be using more course resources in this step, review your readings and course notes before you begin writing.

Below are three perspectives you can consider:

- **Academic perspective:** How did the experience enhance your understanding of a concept/theory/skill? Did the experience confirm your understanding or challenge it? Did you identify strengths or gaps in your knowledge?
- **Personal perspective:** Why does the experience matter? What are the consequences? Were your previous expectations/assumptions confirmed or refuted? What surprised you and why?
- **Systems perspective:** What were the sources of power and who benefited/who was harmed? What changes would you suggest? How does this experience help you understand the organization or system?

**So What?**

In the second *So What?* stage, try to understand on a deeper level why the issue is significant or relevant. Use information from your first stage, your course materials (readings, lectures, discussions) -- as well as previous experience and knowledge to help you think through the issue from a variety of perspectives.

**Now What?**

In the third *Now What?* stage, explore how the experience will shape your future thinking and behaviour.

Use the following questions to guide your thinking and writing:

- What are you going to do as a result of your experiences?
- What will you do differently?
- How will you apply what you learned?

**Second phase: Articulate**

After completing the analysis stage, you probably have a lot of writing, but it is not yet organized into a coherent story. You need to build an organized and clear argument about what you learned and how you changed. To do so, develop a thesis statement, make an outline, write, and revise.

**Develop a thesis statement**

For more help on developing thesis statements, see our *Thesis statements* resource.

Develop a clear argument to help your reader understand what you learned. This argument should pull together different themes from your analysis into a main idea. You can see an example of a thesis statement in the sample reflection essay at the end of this resource.
Make an outline

Once you have a clear thesis statement for your essay, build an outline. Below is a straightforward method to organize your essay.

**Introduction:**
- Background/Context of Reflection
- Thesis statement

**Body:**

Paragraph/Section A
- Introduce theme A
  + Writer’s past position/thinking
  + Moment of learning/change
- Writer’s current/new position

Paragraph/Section B
- Introduce theme B
  + Writer’s past position/thinking
  + Moment of learning/change
- Writer’s current/new position

Paragraph/Section C
- Introduce theme C
  + Writer’s past position/thinking
  + Moment of learning/change
- Writer’s current/new position

**Conclusion:**

- Summarize learning
  + Discuss significance of learning for self and others
  + Discuss future actions/behaviour

**Write and revise**

Even though you are writing about your personal experience and learning, your audience may still be an academic one. Consult the assignment guidelines or ask your instructor to find out whether your writing should be formal or informal.

Time to get writing! Work from your outline and give yourself enough time for a first draft and revisions.
Sample Critical Reflection

Below are sample annotated paragraphs from one student's critical reflection for a course on society

**Introduction:**

**Background/Context of Reflection:** I became aware of privileged positions in society only in recent years. I was lucky enough, privileged enough, to be ignorant of such phenomena, but for some, privilege is a daily lesson of how they do not fit into mainstream culture. In the past, I defined oppression as only that which is obvious and intentional. I never realized the part I played. However, during a class field study to investigate privileged positions in everyday environments, I learned otherwise. **Thesis:** Without meaning to, I caused harm by participating in a system where I gained from others’ subtle oppression. In one of these spaces, the local mall, everything from advertisements to food to products, to the locations of doorways, bathrooms and other public necessities, made clear my privilege as a white, heterosexual male.

**Body paragraph:**

**Topic sentence:** Peggy McIntosh describes privilege as an invisible knapsack of tools and advantages. This description crystalized for me when I shopped for a greeting card at the stationary store. There, as a white, heterosexual male, I felt comfortable and empowered to roam about the store as I pleased. I freely asked the clerk about a mother’s day card. **Writer's past position:** Previously, I never considered that a store did anything but sell products. However, when I asked the sales clerk for same sex greeting cards, she paused for a few seconds and gave me a look that made me feel instantly uncomfortable. Some customers stopped to look at me. I felt a heat move over my face. I felt, for a moment, wrong for being in that store. I quickly clarified that I was only doing a report for school, implying that I was not in fact homosexual. **Writer's current position:** The clerk's demeanor changed. I was free to check, she said. It was the only time during the field study that I had felt the need to explain what I was doing to anyone. I could get out of the situation with a simple clarification. But what if I really was a member of the homosexual community? The looks and the silence taught me that I should be feared. I realized that, along with its products, the store was selling an image of normal. But my “normality” was another person’s “abnormality.” After I walked out of the store I felt guilty for having denied being homosexual.

**Conclusion:**

**Summary of learning:** At the mall I realized how much we indirectly shame nonprivileged groups, even in seemingly welcoming spaces. That shame is supported every time I or any other privileged individual fails to question our advantage. And it leads to a different kind of shame carried by privileged individuals, too. **Value for self and others:** All of this, as Brown (2003) documents, is exacerbated by silence. Thus, the next step for me is to not only question privilege internally, but to publicly question covert bias and oppression. If I do, I may very well be shamed for speaking out. But my actions might just encourage other people to speak up as well.

Sample paragraphs adapted from https://blogs.commons.georgetown.edu/jco34/sample-assignments/sample-student-reflection-paper/and privilege.