

# Chapter Nine

## The role of critical reflections and how to write them

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During the course of your creative writing degree, it's likely you'll be asked to submit some form of critical reflection to accompany a creative writing portfolio. This could be a logbook, journal, commentary, oral presentation or a critical reflective essay. This chapter aims to help you understand what a critical reflection is, to familiarise you with the different forms of critical reflection you're likely to encounter and to enable you to feel more confident in approaching them.

Students sometimes struggle to understand why they're asked to write critical reflections and view them as less important than the portfolio. As a result, they often spend less time and effort on these than on other parts of the assessment. However, as the critical reflection element of any one module could account for as much as 30–40 per cent of the final mark, then whether you see its relevance or not, you neglect it at your peril!

It may help you to engage more with critical reflections once you know a bit about the rationale for setting them.

## *Why critical reflection?*

### BACKGROUND

Over the past twenty-five years, many practice-based arts and humanities subjects, from photography to dance, have been incorporated into the university syllabus. As with all practice-based subjects, including creative writing, you develop your skills over time and largely by ‘doing’. The use of critical reflections as mode of assessment originates in the work of educationalists and researchers such as David Kolb, whose ‘Experiential learning cycle’ has been hugely influential (see Kolb, *Experiential learning*). Kolb sees the process of learning through ‘doing’ as an ongoing cycle, consisting of four stages:

1. concrete experience, where students gain hands-on experience of ‘doing’
2. reflective observation, where they reflect on what and how they’ve learned while engaged in the process of doing
3. abstract conceptualisation, where each student formulates his or her own ‘rules’ to explain what they have learned
4. active experimentation, where, having formulated their ‘rules’, they then test these out.

The whole process starts all over again when learners find themselves in the next situation where they have to learn something new.

### *Other useful things about critical reflections*

It’s helpful to bear in mind that the rationale for setting critical reflections is to make you more aware not just of *what* you learn but also of *how* you as an individual learn.

However, there are other reasons why critical reflections are useful and a range of ways in which they can help you develop your writing skills.

#### THEY LINK YOU TO A WIDER LITERARY TRADITION

There's a strong tradition of critical reflective writing in English literature, that is, of individuals reflecting on why they became writers, why they chose to write in a particular way or how they came to develop a new genre of writing. Famous examples include Wordsworth and Coleridge's 'Preface' to *Lyrical ballads* and George Orwell's essay 'Why I write'. So, in writing critical reflections, in whichever form your institution requires, you're allying yourself with a long-standing literary tradition.

#### ADDING ANOTHER STRING TO YOUR BOW

For many people, one of the main reasons for taking a degree in creative writing is to learn how to write in a range of styles and genres. Being open to learning how to write well across a variety of genres is important if you're serious about your craft as a writer, as the elements that determine what makes an effective piece of writing in one genre generally apply across the board. This also applies to critical reflections. More specifically, if you decide to specialise in non-fiction genres such as memoir or autobiography, learning how to reflect critically on your own motivations and approach to writing could prove invaluable. So try to view being asked to write critical reflections as the opportunity to add another string to your writing bow.

CREATIVE WRITING AS A REFLECTIVE/REFLEXIVE  
ACTIVITY

One final reason to embrace critical reflections, and perhaps the most important of all, is that the process of writing itself is fundamentally reflective. Writers are constantly reflecting: on the world around them, on their relationships and on their own inner thoughts. Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson repeatedly make this point in *Writing: self and reflexivity*, though they also argue, drawing on the work of writing theorist Donna Qualley, that there's a difference between 'reflection' and 'reflexivity'. Reflection, they argue, happens mainly at an individual level (Hunt and Sampson, *Writing*, p. 4). However, Qualley suggests that *reflexivity* also involves engaging with 'another', including our self as 'other', and in so doing being open to change (Qualley, *Turns of thought*, p. 11).

What does it mean to be our self as 'other'? Many people, including Sigmund Freud, have talked about the creative process in general as involving a kind of 'doubling' of self. To understand how this relates to writing, think of the way in which novelists' own views, opinions and fantasies get translated into art via the process of making up characters. To that extent, many (perhaps all) novels are both fiction *and* autobiography and involve the writer being both subjectively involved in what they're writing about and one step removed from it.

At another level, as Spencer Jordan's chapter makes clear, the ability to be objective about (i.e. to stand back from) our own writing is crucial to the editing process. It's also crucial if we want to write effective critical reflections though in fact the ability to stand back from our

writing is fundamental to what being a writer – any kind of writer – is all about. For that reason, it makes no sense to see critical reflections as something quite separate to your ‘creative’ writing.

Having examined the rationale for writing critical reflections, now let’s think about how to approach writing them.

### *The different types of critical reflection*

Students are often given very few guidelines as to how to go about writing critical reflections. In the case of critical reflective essays in particular (of which, more later), you’re unlikely even to be given a question or essay title to work to. And, if students tend to spend less time on writing critical reflections, lecturers often have little time on a busy course timetable to factor in a lesson dedicated to the critical reflection. As a result, it can be hard to know where to begin if you’re asked to write one.

A useful starting place can be to recognise that what you’re being asked to do in a critical reflection is give an account of what you have done, and in particular what you have learned, in the process of producing either a single piece or an entire portfolio of writing. However, there are specific points you need to consider, depending on which type of critical reflection you’re writing. The main types are:

- logbook
- journal
- oral presentation
- commentary
- critical reflective essay

Let’s look at each of these in more detail.

## LOGBOOK

Some creative writing courses ask students to submit a logbook to accompany a particular piece or an entire portfolio of writing. A logbook is usually a fairly straightforward record of the work you did towards completing this. Logbooks are typically both less analytical and less formal than other types of critical reflection. Indeed, it's common for lecturers to tell students specifically *not* to edit their logs so they can get a better sense of the ongoing process.

You'll usually be given a word count for the finished log, and this should give you an idea of how detailed or otherwise you're expected to be. If you're asked to keep a logbook throughout the entire duration of a ten- or twelve-week module, the early weeks will probably contain less information, and the details you *do* log will usually cover points such as finding a topic or story idea and your initial background research. Later on, once you've started the process of drafting and editing the work your logbook accompanies, you'll have more to say.

It's important that you keep any logbook up to date, so you'll need to set time aside on a regular basis to add any new entries. Make sure you record every activity and the date and time you undertook it. This includes any planning you did towards something in the future. Your entries could be as simple as 'Got Mr Brown's phone number. Rang up and arranged to interview them next week', but you'll also need to make clear as you go along how anything you log links to your final piece. In the example above, you should already have noted somewhere in the log why 'Mr Brown' was worth interviewing and how he's relevant to what you're writing about, e.g., 'As my main character Tom is a

fisherman, I hope to get more information from Mr Brown about the Whitby fishing fleet during the 1980s.’

## JOURNAL

Journals are much the same as logbooks in that you’re expected to update them on a regular basis (usually either daily or weekly). If you’re asked to submit one, it’s important that you follow any guidelines as to how often you’re expected to update it. Journals too are usually submitted as an accompaniment to a creative piece, and, as with the logbook, the purpose of a journal is to allow you to record details of your progress towards completing this and to provide some context to it.

One important difference between a journal and a logbook is that, generally speaking, journals are written in more continuous prose whereas logbooks can simply be a series of extended notes and usually don’t have to be written in proper sentences. Compare the two examples in the box below.

### **Sample logbook entry**

Rang David Martin today. Managed to set up an interview for my feature – 3.40 Tuesday 16th at the Dove. Result!

### **Sample journal entry**

Today I rang David Martin from the BBC to ask if I could do a background interview with him for my feature. He agreed, and we’ve arranged to meet up at the Dove on Tuesday 16th at 3.40 p.m. I am delighted as I’ve been trying to arrange this interview for the past two weeks.

On some creative writing degree courses, you may be asked to keep a more general daily journal or a diary that includes your thoughts on your writing and any ideas you have, especially in your first year. Many creative writing programmes also ask students (again especially in the first year) to keep a journal of free-writing, where you write the first thing that comes into your head. In both these cases, you wouldn't normally be asked to hand your journal in. If you were, either it wouldn't be marked, or any mark given would account for only a small percentage of your final mark. The main purpose would be to encourage you to get into the habit of writing regularly.

However, if you're asked to submit a journal of your progress towards completing a piece or portfolio of creative work as part of the assessment for a given module, this could account for a significant percentage of the overall grade.

#### ORAL PRESENTATION

Although the focus of this chapter is written critical reflections, you could be asked to give an oral presentation on what you've learned on a particular module. A key difference between this and written forms of critical reflection is that *how* you presented would also be important. Also, if asked to give an oral presentation, you'd normally only be expected to reflect on part of the course, and, in general, presentations are less detailed than written critical reflections.

#### COMMENTARY

Usually commentaries and critical reflective essays are both a bit more formal and more 'academic' than journals



or logbooks. This is especially true of critical reflective essays, which are discussed in more detail below. As with other written forms of critical reflection, you'll normally be given a word limit, so you should at least be able to work out how detailed you need to be. The length of commentaries varies from institution to institution (and from module to module within a given programme of study). It will also vary depending on which *year* of study you're in. For example, it's common for students in first and second year to be asked to write 500–1,000-word commentaries and for final-year students to be asked for commentaries that are anywhere between 1,000 and 2,000 words.

If you are asked to write a commentary, your assessment guidelines will probably say something like, 'Write a 500-word commentary to accompany your portfolio' then give little, if any, additional advice. Different institutions interpret the word 'commentary' in different ways, but usually you'll be expected to focus more on the creative work or 'end product' you submit than on the *process* of writing. As a result, you'll be expected to refer constantly to the finished creative piece in your commentary. Commentaries are generally also *retrospective*: in other words, they work backwards from the finished creative piece to discussing how it came to be written rather than the other way round (which would be more typical of the critical reflective essay).

## CRITICAL REFLECTIVE ESSAY

The critical reflective essay is one of the most popular forms of critical reflection, though often the one that causes the

most grief. For this reason, the remainder of this chapter will focus on trying to demystify this strange, hybrid creature. We'll look at why it sometimes causes confusion and at how to write one.

### *Demystifying the critical reflective essay*

Virtually everyone on a creative writing degree course will have written an academic essay at some point in their life, and critical reflective essays are like any other academic essay in so far as they have a beginning, middle and an end and the writer is expected to take a critically objective stance towards the topic (even if it is your own work). Also, as with other academic essays, you'll be expected to employ 'scholarly apparatus', in other words, to include footnotes and a bibliography and to follow the appropriate conventions for referencing and quotations.

However, there are some key differences between a critical reflective essay and what we might call a 'standard' academic essay. In order to be able to write effective critical reflective essays, it's useful to be aware of the ways in which they differ from the sort of academic essay you'll have written to date.

The main differences are as follows:

- Usually you're given no question.
- The focus is on your own work, not on someone else's.
- You are allowed to use the first person ('I', 'me', etc.).
- You are unlikely to have written, or even encountered, one until now.

Let's examine these four points in more detail.

### *No specific question*

Up until now, you will have been used to essay questions that were quite specific, such as ‘The origins of the Second World War may be found in the terms of the treaty of Versailles. Discuss’, or ‘How does Sylvia Plath use imagery in the poem “Daddy”?’ However, if you’re asked to write a critical reflective essay, the likelihood is you’ll simply be told to: ‘Write a critical reflective essay.’ That said, you will get *some* guidance in so far as you’ll be given a word limit, so, once again, as with the other forms of critical reflection discussed, you’ll have some idea of how detailed you’re expected to be. And, as noted above, you’ll also be aware that it has to be written in the form of an academic essay, with all that entails.

### THE FOCUS IS YOUR OWN WORK

The second big difference between critical reflective essays and ‘standard’ academic essays is that, unlike English literature essays, for example, the focus is not someone else’s work but your own – in other words, something you’ll have been intimately involved in creating. In some ways, that makes it easier as you’ll know your ‘topic’ inside out, but this can also make it more difficult to be objective. This really is a situation where you have to be a ‘doubled self’ in order to be able to write critically and analytically about your own work.

### USE OF THE FIRST PERSON

With most academic essays, you’re not allowed to use the first person (‘I’) or to include any reference to yourself. However, if you were writing about your own work, and what (and how) you’ve learned that you’ve been able to

apply in your writing, it would sound odd and rather disingenuous if you were to write about these things in the third person. That would be a bit like me saying here about myself, ‘Sharon Norris thinks that students don’t spend enough time on their critical reflections.’ However, in my experience, it’s the fact that they’re allowed to write in the first person in critical reflective essays that often confuses students the most and sometimes causes them to forget that they need to remain critically objective. Being allowed to use ‘I’ and being asked to focus on your own work shouldn’t be taken as an excuse to ‘splurge’ about your relationship, your new coat or your social life – unless, of course, any of that is somehow relevant to how you came to write your portfolio. Even then, you’d have to make the connection very clear! Some students also think that because they’re allowed to use the first person they can be more informal in the language they use. However, your writing style and vocabulary should be appropriately ‘academic’ throughout.

### *You’re unlikely to have written one before*

Most students, when asked to write their first critical reflective essay at university, won’t ever have read one before, let alone written one. This means that you and the majority of your fellow students will have no previous experience to draw on. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that lecturers are often unclear about the rationale for setting them. And, as they are a relatively new form of essay, your lecturers are even less likely than you are to have been asked to write a critical reflective essay at school, or even at university.

## DEALING WITH THESE DIFFICULTIES

Here are some tips to help you tackle the difficulties listed above. As I go along, I'll be illustrating the points I make with examples taken from a particularly good undergraduate critical reflective essay written by one of my former students, Emma Thompson, where Emma was reflecting on her experience of writing a feature on homelessness for a non-fiction course.

### *Set yourself a question*

In the absence of prompt questions from your tutor, an easy solution is to set your own. This could be something like 'What did I learn from this module?' or 'What would I do differently next time?' You should say in the introductory paragraphs what issue or question you're going to be addressing and then use this as a focal point around which to structure your thoughts in the remainder of your essay. Here's how Emma tackled this.

This essay explores the decisions I made with regard to the form, subject and tone of my work and how I came to make them. I also discuss the position of the writer and the importance of imagination when writing non-fiction.

### *Make the central focus your creative work, and back up what you say*

As the point of a critical reflective essay is to make you think about what and how you've learned in the process of planning, writing and editing a portfolio or single piece of writing, you really do need to focus on these things. As with any academic essay, you need to give

evidence to back up what you say. Quoting directly from your work, and especially if you compare/contrast earlier versions of a given piece with the final version, can be a useful way of demonstrating both how your work improved over time with careful editing and of backing up any claim you make about how you were able to apply what you learned on the course to your own writing practice. Here's another example from Emma's essay which illustrates the point:

After a lecture on the importance of linking one paragraph to the next I made several adjustments. For example, I changed 'Greg Hands MP is a member of the Communities and Local Government Committee which last month published a report called "Housing and the Credit Crunch" to 'A parliamentary select committee recently addressed the urgent need for government to go further in order to help these homeowners. Greg Hands MP is a member of the Communities and Local Government Committee which last month published a report called "Housing and the Credit Crunch".' The purpose of rewriting this link was to improve the transition from one paragraph to the next in order to present a more cohesive article, and I continued to edit other links between paragraphs.

If you want to quote at length from an earlier draft but are worried about going over the word limit, one way to get round this is to include the whole of the earlier draft(s) as an appendix at the back of your essay. As appendices aren't included in the final word count, you can simply refer the reader or marker to the appendix without having worry about using up your precious word allocation in long quotations.

*'I am writing an academic essay'*

As noted above, it's important not to see the critical reflective essay as a kind of 'confessional', where you tell everything about yourself. Yes, you *are* allowed to write in the first person and the focus *is* your own work, but you still need to be critically evaluative and objective in what you write; you need to be a 'doubled self'. Always remember, 'I am writing an academic essay.' You could even try repeating this to yourself as a kind of mantra while you're writing. That way you're already linking 'I' with 'academic essay' in the same sentence.

Remember too that as you *are* writing an academic essay, you'll need to use the usual scholarly apparatus, including a bibliography. The point of having a bibliography, even if you *are* writing about your own work, is that, as with any academic essay, you need to be able to put what you say within a wider context. Without wider reading and research, students often imagine that they're the only person who's ever written on a particular theme or the only writer ever to have used a particular technique. The following extract from Emma's essay underlines this.

It was the quantity of research that I accumulated, however, that proved to be the greatest difficulty I experienced during the planning stage. I had chosen the broad subject of charities and their struggle to survive the credit crunch as my subject. The impact of the economic downturn on fundraising for charities had already been widely reported so I looked for a new angle.

Although Emma had undertaken so much background research and reading that she wasn't sure initially where to take her feature idea, it was reading round the topic that

made her aware that (1) lots of other people had written on similar themes and (2) she needed to find a new angle. Here's a further extract from her essay which illustrates how reading (in this case one of the textbooks from the course reading list) also finally helped her to resolve the problem.

In *Telling true stories: a non-fiction writers' guide*, a chapter on how to find a good topic to write about suggests, 'When a story has been heavily covered, reposition the camera. Pull in from the wide, news-gathering angle. Look for a close-up angle on the story that hasn't been told.' Following this advice, I focused on two angles that I felt had not been fully explored within this well-documented subject. The first was the emotional cost that homelessness has on families and the second was the link between the financial difficulties that charities are experiencing and the rise in demand for their services.

A key part of writing an academic essay – any type of academic essay – is an awareness of how others have tackled the same sorts of issues, whether it be other historians who've analysed the Treaty of Versailles or other writers who've struggled to work out 'what's the story?'

*Find out what you need to know and ask  
to see sample essays*

If you're given little extra information or even a question when asked to write a critical reflective essay, it's all the more important that you follow the guidelines you *are* given. It's just possible that you'll receive some additional instructions beyond 'Write a critical reflective essay' such as 'focusing on your choice of topics in the portfolio'.



If so, follow these to the letter – and if you’re told to double-space or print on one side of the page only, that’s what you need to do. Also, be sure to read any course handouts or books that cover the critical reflective essay (including this one!). Finally, don’t be afraid to ask your lecturer if she or he can provide you with some sample critical reflective essays so you can see how it’s done.

#### WRITING A CRITICAL REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Having looked at how to deal with some of the difficulties posed by critical reflective essays, now let’s focus on how to go about writing them and what to include.

##### *Make a plan*

Once you’ve decided on the specific question or issues you intend to address, it’s a good idea here (and with any longer commentary) to write out a short plan. This needn’t be any longer than half a page of bullet points. It’s easier to add or change the order of material at this stage than after you’ve started writing.

##### *Choices*

An important element of your essay should be a discussion of the choices you’ve made such as how you decided on your subject matter or topic, or your chosen form.

##### *Putting theory into practice*

What you mustn’t do is simply regurgitate what you covered in class from week to week. The tutor knows this – and possibly even wrote the course. Concentrate on detailing how you’ve been able to put this into practice. Be explicit about this by citing examples from what you’ve written.

### *Dilemmas*

You'll also need to discuss any dilemmas or difficulties you encountered, how you dealt with these, and, if relevant, why you decided to take one particular course of action rather than another to resolve them.

### *Back up what you say and use quotations that are relevant*

Always give examples to back up any claim or assertion. Linked to this, make sure that any quotation from another source, such as a book or article you've read, is relevant to the specific point you're trying to make – and that you reference it properly.

### *Be critically evaluative*

Don't be afraid to discuss what *didn't* work as well as what did. Remember, we often learn as much (sometimes more) from our mistakes as we do from our successes. And, as you'll be writing after you've completed your portfolio, it's important to reflect on whether things turned out as you'd expected or not – for example, whether your decision to experiment with a particular form or technique was successful.

### *Situate your work in a wider context*

As noted above, you'll need to demonstrate that you are able to situate your work within a broader context. If you're submitting a portfolio of flash fiction on the topic of erotic obsession, for example, you'll want to refer to other flash-fiction writers who've covered similar themes (and to note how yours is different). You'll also want to refer to any relevant textbooks. In this way, you'll be

demonstrating your knowledge of the wider area and your awareness of how your work fits into it.

### *Focus on what you've learned*

Perhaps above all, the key thing is to focus on is what you've learned from the experience of planning, writing and editing creative work and the things you've learned that you'll be able to apply in the future. Here's one final extract from Emma's essay, taken from her conclusion, where she makes this explicit:

The process of writing this topical feature has been a useful experience. In particular, I am now aware of the dangers of doing too much research and the difficulties that that entails. Useful techniques such as bullet-pointing specific sections in order to structure the story and thoughtful interviewing have helped me in the planning and writing stages, and I intend to use the skills I have learnt in future freelance writing.

### *Avoid over-personalising*

Remember that any personal information has to be relevant to the topic.

### *Academic conventions*

Don't forget to include a bibliography and to apply the appropriate conventions for footnotes and referencing. Make sure you know which system your creative writing programme uses (MLA, Harvard, etc.) and follow it.

### *Apply the usual rules*

The rules of good writing apply to critical reflections too, so be sure to allow yourself time to redraft and edit. Be

clear, direct, concise and make sure you check your spelling, grammar, punctuation and layout.

### *Keep a log*

One final tip: as you'll be writing about the process via which you came to complete your portfolio or single piece of writing, it's useful to keep a log of all the things you do from week to week, whether you're asked to or not. It's difficult to keep track otherwise, especially as you won't be writing your critical reflective essay until the final weeks of term.

### *Conclusion*

Try not to see critical reflections as second-class citizens to your more 'creative' work. Aside from any other justification, the students I've taught have often talked about the sense of achievement they've gained from critical reflections and how, in the process of planning and writing them, they've realised just how much effort they've put into their work across the term.

If marks for the critical reflection are easy to lose because you don't know what's required or you don't allocate enough time for writing them, they're just as easy to gain once you *do* know and *do* take a bit more time over them.