

CHAPTER 6

Developing a reflective approach to learning

So, you have made it to chapter 6! Well done! You must have your procrastination under control. You might be wondering how we have made it all the way to chapter 6 hardly mentioning essay writing. Sure, we have looked at notes, but not how you turn those into an essay, that's what you're here for, isn't it? Well maybe you are, but a Masters degree is about a lot more than writing. And before we can get good at writing at this level we have to master (get it?) a few other things along the way. Over the next few chapters I'm going to show you the mantra of 'think – read – think – write'. But first, a few words on reflection.

The idea of reflection exercises often makes people worried, and you have probably already thought about skipping this chapter (I knew I shouldn't have told you, you don't need to read a whole academic book). But, actually, reflection is a natural human activity and we tend to reflect on our daily lives, our successes and failures, relationships and careers whether we like it or not. Often these things occur at 3am and keep us awake, but some structured reflection can help us with our studies and keep away the night-time worries – who would have thought a book on studying would also help you to sleep! Reflection is important as it enables us to learn from our experiences – both our failures and successes. It is often done alone, but can also be undertaken in a group, which can really help with the empathy parts of group work (see chapter 5). Reflective learning is a way of allowing yourself to step back from your learning experience to develop critical thinking skills and to improve on future performance by analyzing experiences. This helps us to improve our skills and practice, and it isn't as hard as it sounds. Now that we are about halfway through the book, it is time for us to take stock and consider ways of reflecting on what you have already read, but also how integrating reflection into your studies and essays

How to cite this book chapter:

Specht, D. 2019. *The Media And Communications Study Skills Student Guide*. Pp. 61–67. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book42.f>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

will help you be a better student (and sleep better) It is worth keeping in mind the words of English historian Edward Gibbon:

Every person has two educations, one which he receives from others, and one, more important, which he gives to himself




EDWARD GIBBON

There isn't really a clear and single definition of reflection, but it is about more than just thinking about your studies; the lack of definition, though, makes this chapter tricky, both to read, and to write. We can though talk about some of the benefits of reflection, and give you some pointers about how you might develop your own reflective practice, one that suits you. At its simplest, reflection is thinking for a purpose, in many ways it is like our active listening, but we are listening to ourselves, which most of us are not very good at. Reflection is also about wanting to, or at least being willing to, become a better learner through understanding, and maybe changing, the way we learn. All sounds a bit abstract and difficult at the moment, but we will try some activities to help with this.

This can all be quite a difficult process, as reflection requires us to be critical – although much like when we are engaging with critical reading, we aren't trying to be negative or to think about things in a destructive way, but instead we are engaging in deep questioning and probing about how we learn. And just as with critical reading, it is a really important skill to learn but as we have already seen, most people can't tell you what that means. Luckily this book can – they mean actively challenging both themselves and others... at least they probably do.

We spend most of our lives learning how to learn, although this isn't always something we do consciously. We instead spend a lot of our time thinking about what we have learned, rather than how we learned it. It is important though for us to reflect on the learning process, and think about how we learn individually.

Start by thinking back to an example of studies you have done in the past. For this activity you should think about something where you really felt like you were learning something, or that you were really engaged with. Write down what the subject or theme of the class was, and then make some notes about the way in which you were learning and why you found that class so engaging. This will help you to think about the way in which you learn.

	Topic/Subject/Task: _____
	How was I learning?:


Suggesting that you think carefully and reflectively about how you learn, as well as about what you learn, is actually proven through research to help improve your performance (Loo and Thorpe, 2002) – Look at that, research that helps you do your research (cool!). Before we start exploring the process, there are two important things to remember; first there are no guarantees of success here, no one way of learning that will make everything easy, or guarantee high grades, but knowing how you learn is important, and it is likely to be different to those around you, even those on the same course as you. The rest of this book offers a number of templates and cheat sheets, but in this chapter, you will need to develop your own templates. Much like you did in the *planning your time* exercise in chapter 2 – you did do that didn't you? Go on, go and do it now – I can wait.

It is a good idea to start by trying out a few different ways of reflecting on your work and learning, this will help you to find out what works best for you, of course you might want to share ideas, techniques, tips and hints with other students and also try some that seem to work well for them. If they do not work for you though, don't worry, it just means you need something a little different, something just for you!

Now let's think about the whole you (looking back to why you are studying might be helpful here too), two main things will probably affect your approach to learning:

- Your motivation (why did you decide to take this degree?)
- Your previous learning; either at school or on another course, or life experiences.

Ok, now we are going to reflect on some past experiences.

	<p>Write one good learning experience, something that you found enjoyable...</p>	<p>Write one poor learning experience, something you didn't like so much...</p>
	<p>Was this learning formal/informal?</p>	<p>Was this learning formal/informal?</p>

Whatever your answers above, it is likely that you have some emotional relationship to those moments, and about why you wrote them down. We all have a range of positive and negative experiences when it comes to learning, and these are connected to emotion and feelings. When we combine these feelings (or the affective component – to use the clever phrase) with our thinking (the cognitive component) we can become reflective learners, as this enables us to resolve problems and worries about our learning or studies. So, part of the process here is thinking about what parts of your studies make you angry, sad, or happy, and then to think about why that might be the case. Are you angry at your professor because of something they have done, or is it actually a frustration about not understanding the work, or even just the temperature in the room?

When you reflect, you can ask the right questions of your professor about how to improve things – or the caretaker in the case of the temperature. Likewise, don't take for granted the bits you enjoy. Thinking about why you are enjoying them can help you find ways of working independently by creating the same scenarios or environments outside the classroom – although this might be tricky if your favourite thing is a huge room filled with 200 other students, you might upset your housemates in you try to recreate that at home.



TOP TIPS

Reflection as an assessment

Sometimes you will be asked to undertake a reflective exercise as part of an assessment. This might be keeping a diary or a blog that is then seen by your tutor and graded. These kinds of assessments are very useful, but they can leave you feeling exposed as they are asking you to be very personal in your thoughts. While you should be as open and as honest as you can in these tasks, consider also keeping a second notebook to write down those reflections that you feel you don't want to include – often times these are the most important ones for our own development. You can decide later if you want to mention those to your tutor, but the crucial thing is, you have undertaken the personal reflection to help *you*. Don't forget to submit something though!

Other ways to become a reflective learner

We talked about habits and time management in chapter two, and reflective learning has a great deal in common with those points. You're going to do it on some level anyway, so you might as well get used to reflection as part of your everyday learning, and then make it a more active and useful exercise. That way you can use your reflection to help you become a better learner, a better thinker, and maybe even a better person... that last one might be a stretch too far for this book though.

You could record your reflections in a notebook, online in a blog or as an audio file on your phone. You might just jot down a few things at the end of your notes from class (a chance to use another coloured pen). You should though, try and use the reflection process to support your studies, rather than as a separate thing – or something to be avoided. Having already done some reflection is also useful when you go to meetings with your professor, it means you arrive ready to discuss issues or problems you might be facing. But it isn't all negative, thinking about positive experiences you have had can help you to think of strategies that might help you deal with difficult tasks or assignments. This can

then all (gradually, it takes time) help you excel as a learning and researcher. Fantastic! We are only halfway through the book and you already excelling!

Before we launch back into writing and research, let's take a moment to recap some key tips. These are the first things we forget when stress hits, so I don't mind repeating myself a little here, because they will help to destress you and help you reflect.

Planning and prioritizing

If you started reading this book at the start of semester one, then you were no doubt wide-eyed and excited about doing your degree perfectly. Like when you start a new notebook, you promise yourself you will do this perfectly, with the best possible handwriting. By now (week 2), you probably feel like you are putting out fires and all your plans have fallen apart. This is quite normal. Your Masters is much more intense than other studies and you may find that you feel a little overwhelmed by your workload and the vast range of different types of activities and skills required by the course.



Figure 6.1: Fine?⁴

But, this is okay! Now you know what is happening and what is expected of you, you can replan and reprioritize your tasks, family, work and hobbies – and luckily you can download as many timetables as you need from our online portal. Draw a new one, that works for the rest of this semester. And don't be

⁴ This meme from K. C. Green's webcomic *Gumshow* became incredibly popular globally; many academics (probably including some of your tutors) know this feeling and have shared. See <https://knowyourmeme.com> (2016).

afraid to update it again. Planning is key. One of the ways to keep your motivation up, is to think about why you are here to study, what is it that made you want to start this painful process in the first place? We examined some of that in chapter 2, but you should keep it to the fore of your mind, and you should use it to help you define some more short-term goals. If thinking about your original motivations isn't helping too much, then speak to someone – talk through your motivations and concerns with them, it will help you to find the focus you will need to get through this year.

This will also help with procrastination. We can never fully kill the procrastination monster, but we can tie it down. Reflecting on how, when, where and why you procrastinate can help you to recognize and challenge your routines and habits. So, don't be afraid of making reflection an active part of your day or your week. Doing so helps our brains to file away information and deal with difficult or stressful situations and can also help motivate us and stem procrastination. Reflection can also help us know when things are getting too much before it is too late. And remember your university will have lots of support networks if you are feeling overwhelmed by your studies – don't wait to ask for help in dealing with issues as they arise.



A study-buddy or peer group can be helpful for working with deadlines. Don't pair up with the perfect student or the waster in the class but someone in the middle like yourself who has good weeks and bad weeks and sometimes needs a reality check or reminder to organise work ahead.

Juan-Pablo – MA student

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