Writing a reflective marker or tute paper

In a reflective marker or reflective tutorial paper, you are expected to critically reflect on the course overall and how you have responded to issues raised in the course. You are also expected to reflect on the course readings, without simply repeating or summarising what you have read.

Before starting, check expectations with your course tutor/lecturer, as there are often two significant differences between a reflective marker and an academic essay:

- It’s generally acceptable to use the pronoun ‘I’ as in, ‘I think.’ You are expected to write about your thoughts and reflections.
- Although you need to draw on your course readings, lectures and tutorials, you are not normally not expected to undertake extensive other research.

How to start

- Prepare yourself by re-reading the course ‘blurb’ in the course guide and think about how the course was described: its aims, objectives, its ‘big questions.’ Develop a broad overview of the course -- its themes and ideas. Ask yourself: what was the course designed to teach me and, on reflection, what do I think were the most important issues and why?
- Review the tutorial questions and the discussions you had in tutes. Which issues were highlighted as being important? Which issues were most controversial?
- Review the key course readings: what were the key issues they covered?
- Choose one or more of the major/most important issues.
- Cross-check your choice of issues against the length of the paper, and with your tutor/lecturer. How many issues can you reasonably and effectively cover within the set word limit?
- Justify your choice of issues: why do you think they are the most important in relation to others?
- Critically reflect on how the course and readings changed the way you thought about the issues and explain why they did so.

Reflective pieces are designed to be broad and to cover a course or idea. You can think of this as ‘writing across’ the course material. This is different from a research essay where you are expected to ‘write down’ the course material, ie, to delve deeply into a single topic. See Figure 1.

The actual writing

- The features of an academic essay are all present: an introduction, the body, and a conclusion, plus a references list.
- In your introduction, acknowledge the disciplinary context in which you’re writing. If it’s Gender Studies, for example, you need to acknowledge how your issue affects gender and society (patriarchy, women, men, oppression etc). If it’s Political Science, you need to reflect on how your issue relates to power relations (eg, who has power, who doesn’t).
- Remember that there are (at least) two sides to every issue; in other words, there is a debate, and you need to
persuade your reader to accept your point of view. Don’t ignore one side of the debate at the expense of the other.

- You need to include your own reflection (‘I think,’ ‘I believe’ ...) and the reasons for that reflection. One way of thinking about this task is imagine you’re having an intellectual chat with your lecturer and you need to demonstrate to them that you understood the course and have thought about it.
- Include evidence (references/citations) and examples to support your claims. Check the assignment requirements as to what referencing system you should use.

Figure 1. Differences between reflective markers and essays.

Marking criteria

Marking criteria vary between courses and between assignments, so check with your tutor/lecturers. But, as with all essays, markers expect:

- focus on the set question
- critical reading
- reasoned argument (eg, use of evidence)
- competent style and presentation.

With a reflective marker, however, examiners may include criteria relating to whether or not you have:

- reflected upon and justified your personal thoughts, as opposed to having simply summarised the readings
- critically evaluated the issues against the ‘big picture’
- synthesised and integrated your readings into your reflection
- demonstrated your understanding of the course.

Check with your tutor/lecturer as to what criteria they will use.

Additional information*

Rogers (2001: 41) identifies four criteria for reflective learning:

- “it requires active engagement on the part of the individual;
Reflective papers call on the student to critically engage with the course material, including lectures, readings and tutorials. This critical engagement with the material is a skill that some education theorists posit as being among the "most important assets that individuals need to succeed" in the contemporary environment (Pillay and Elliott 2001: 12).

Reflective papers challenge students to complement their essay writing skills with brief, more direct, arguments on material that they have recently confronted. This corresponds with Rogers’ second point, that is, that reflective learning is enhanced through confrontation with new and thought-provoking situations. It encourages students to broaden their writing talents beyond the large essay format by learning the skills involved in writing concise, brief summaries of material. It also meets Rogers’ third criteria: reflecting on one’s own responses to new information. Reflective papers encourage students to think about their views on the subject matter and to respond in written form. They also provide the opportunity for students to fulfill Rogers’ fourth criteria by integrating the new-found and considered knowledge into their own experience.


REFERENCES