



# Faculty of Public Health

of the Royal Colleges of Physicians of the United Kingdom

Working to improve the public's health

## Faculty of Public Health Tips on Writing Effective Reflective Notes

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Naveed Syed  
Anne Scoular  
Liz Reaney

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## 1 Introduction

*'In school, we think about math, and we think about spelling, and we think about grammar. But who ever heard of thinking about thinking? ... If we think about electricity, we can understand it better, but when we think about thinking, we seem to understand ourselves better.'*

Harry Stottlemeier (Lipman, 1982, p. 17).

At all stages of Public Health Professionalism and related education, people are now being asked to keep a learning portfolio, which usually includes some reflective writing. This will be more important with Revalidation. This learning tool is very familiar to those newly graduated from universities or medical school but it somewhat more unfamiliar and difficult for others who are not trained to think in this fashion.

Reflective writing is said to encourage a writer to learn from an event, as it necessitates focused and analytical thinking. The lessons learnt can be identified and recorded, as can learning needs for future attention.

### 1.1 The Faculty Expectations

The Faculty of Public Health latest CPD Guidance states that the FPH Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Co-ordinators Committee has adopted the view that, in verifying the CPD of any given public health professional, the use of reflective notes written by the public health professional about their learning is the most discriminating form of evidence of effective CPD. Evidence suggests that it is important to take time systematically to reflect on learning as this is more likely to embed the learning within subsequent practice.

A reflective note for each CPD learning activity claimed should contain the following four elements:

- Title and description of activity
- What was the learning need or objective that was addressed?
- What was the outcome of the activity?
- Further learning needs

Subjectively the CPD auditor may be able to ascertain from the content of responses to each element of the reflective note whether there is an indication that the practitioner found the activity of benefit to their public health practice (see Section 1.3 below).

### 1.2 The Purpose of this document

The quality of Reflective Notes varies hugely and the FPH CPD Co-ordinators Committee wants to improve the quality of these – not just for audit purposes but to support its members in being more effective learners and more effective Public Health Practitioners.

This document will set out what Reflective Writing is and how this generates a Reflective Note. It will briefly mention the educational theory behind this learning tool before giving practical tips on how to construct a useful Reflective Note.

Finally, it will give some examples of the language that can be used in a Reflective Note – which is not meant to be prescriptive but to demonstrate how members can easily write and reflect on their learning. A copy of this document should be in the portfolio of Members.

### 1.3 How to use this document

This document is not intended to support a 'tick-box exercise' but to establish thinking patterns that genuinely promote professional growth and good practice. Members should find **Sections 4 and 5** particularly useful in the practical aspects of creating their personal Reflective Notes.

- Section 4 gives '*Tips on Writing Reflective Notes*' and includes a section on what the CPD auditors will be looking for in assessing the quality of Reflective Notes submitted.
- Section 5 breaks this down further by giving practical examples of the language that could be used when documenting individual Reflective Notes. Some members may find it useful to print off Section 5 for ease of access when they are completing their Reflective Notes on a contemporaneous basis.

## 2 What is Reflection (Reflective Thinking)?

A simple definition of reflection can be '*consciously thinking about and analysing what you are doing and what you have done; thinking about what and how you have learnt*'. There is a lot of theory behind reflection that can be very complex and some of this is touched upon in Section 3. Reflection is a developmental thinking process that is contextualised into past experiences, thus it is unique to each individual and not merely a description of the events themselves.

Reflection is a form of personal response to experiences, situations, events or new information. It is a 'processing' phase where interpretation, 'sense-checking', creation of meaning and planning for future takes place. This all amounts to a change that takes place in the individual, which can be summarised as a development or learning process. There is neither a right nor a wrong way of reflective thinking, there are just questions to explore.

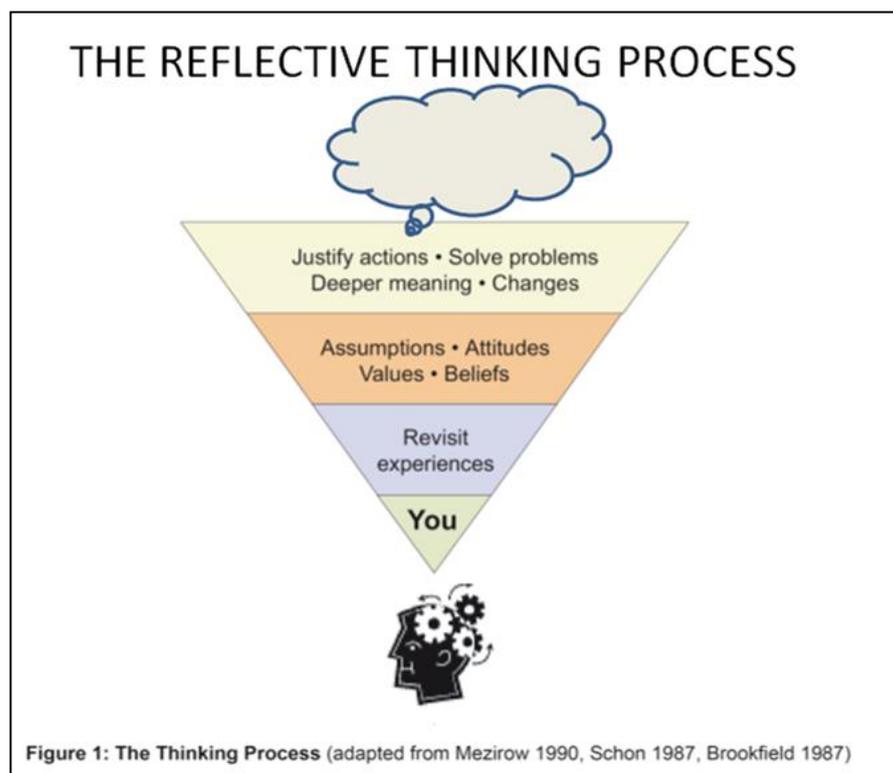


Figure 1 shows that the reflective thinking process starts with you. Before you can begin to assess the words and ideas of others, you need to pause and identify and examine your own 'baseline' position. This involves revisiting your prior experience and knowledge of the topic you are exploring. It also involves considering how and why you think the way you do. The examination of your beliefs, values, attitudes and assumptions forms the foundation of your interpretation of a new events and ultimately building a richer understanding and new learning.

Reflective thinking demands that you recognise and define the valuable knowledge you bring to every new experience. The learning process fundamentally relies on the important connections between what you already know and how you place that in the context of new events. In this way, you become an active, aware and critical learner.

## 2.1 What is reflective writing?

Reflective writing provides evidence of reflective thinking and can also be a valuable tool for helping you to formulate and clarify your evolving thinking as it develops. In an academic context, reflective writing usually involves:

- Looking back at something (often an event, i.e. something that happened, but it could also be an idea or object).
- Documenting your personal analysis of the event or idea (thinking in depth and from different perspectives,).
- Writing carefully about what the event or idea means for you and your ongoing progress as a learner and/or practising professional.

Reflective writing is thus more personal than other kinds of academic writing. We all think reflectively in everyday life, of course, but perhaps not to the same depth as that expected in good reflective writing at CPD level. Genuinely reflective writing often involves 'revealing' anxieties, errors and weaknesses, as well as strengths and successes. This is fine as long as you show some understanding of possible causes, and explain how you plan to improve or manage a change in behaviour.

It is normally necessary to select just the most significant parts of the event or idea on which you're reflecting. It is often useful to '**reflect forward**' to the future as well as '**reflecting back**' on the past.

### **Box 1: What Reflective Writing is**

#### **Reflective writing is:**

- your response to experiences, opinions, events or new information
- your response to thoughts and feelings
- a way of thinking to explore your learning
- a way of making meaning out of what you study
- a way to achieve clarity and better understanding of what you are learning
- an opportunity to gain self-knowledge
- a chance to develop and reinforce writing skills

#### **Reflective writing is not:**

- just conveying information, instruction or argument
- pure description, though there may be descriptive elements
- a straightforward decision or judgement (e.g. about whether something is right or wrong, good or bad)
- simple problem-solving
- a summary of course/conference notes
- a standard essay

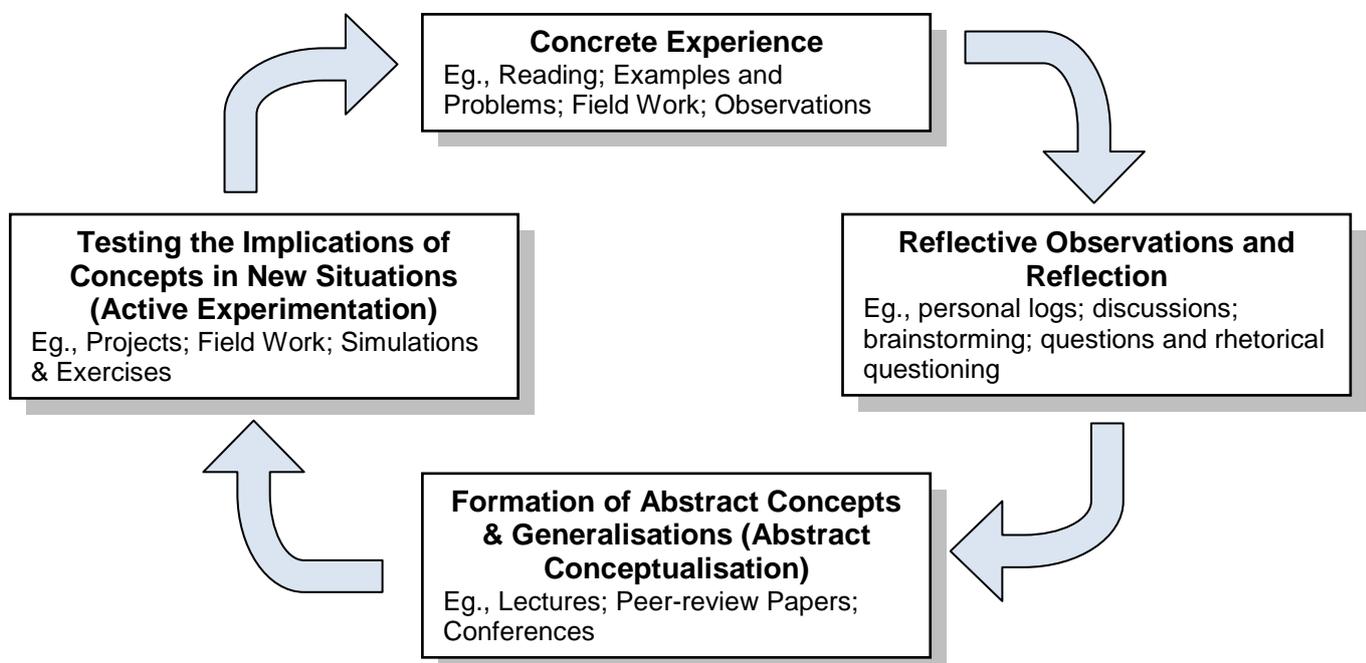
## 2.2 Why reflect - what are the benefits to the Practitioner?

Learning is both an active and a reflective process. If you look at the learning cycle in Figure 2 you can see that reflection or thinking about what you have done and how and why you did it, form an integral part of learning. Because learning is often subconscious, we don't realise that we have gained new knowledge or understanding until we stop to contemplate a particular activity.

Reflection then, is a way for critical analysis, problem solving, synthesis of opposing ideas, evaluation, identifying patterns and creating meaning. Reflection will help you reach the higher levels of learning as well as identifying their own learning needs and improving your practice.

## 3 The Theory behind Reflection

Figure 2. Learning cycle and examples of each phase



The theory on learning and reflection comes from a number of different sources. It begins with Kolb's work on the learning cycles in 1984 and Schön's ideas about reflection, with Gibbs outlining the stages in reflection and reflective writing. David Kolb presented reflective learning as a diagram that is known as 'the Kolb cycle' – a modified version is outlined above in Figure 2.

Reflection is said to help to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and between off-job learning and on-job application. Reflecting on the real work problems can help to identify how best to apply what we know in practice. Reflection leads to critical awareness and enables us to look critically at our own behaviour, the behaviour of other people, and at the organisational and social context within which we operate. Reflection is used to combine the six levels of learning (See Table 1) with a bias towards the synthesis and evaluation.

Table 1. Six levels of learning

Increasing Difficulty 	<b>Process</b>	Explanation
	<b>Knowledge</b>	Recognition and recall of information and facts - describing events
	<b>Comprehension</b>	Interprets, translates or summarises given information - demonstrating understanding of events
	<b>Application</b>	Uses information in a situation different from original learning context -
	<b>Analysis</b>	Separates wholes into parts until relationships are clear – breaks down experiences
	<b>Synthesis</b>	Combines elements to form new entity from the original one - draws on experience and other evidence to suggest new insights
	<b>Evaluation</b>	Involves acts of decision making, or judging based on criteria or rationale - makes judgements about

All this means that reflection is not a bland or innocuous process – it is central to becoming a powerful, critical professional who is prepared to challenge the way things are done (See Box 2).

**Box 2: Why are we asked to write Reflective Notes?**

- To make connections
- To examine your learning processes
- To clarify what you are learning
- To reflect on mistakes and successes
- To become an active and aware learner
- To become a reflective practitioner in your professional life

Remember reflection and reflective writing is like any other skill, it will take time and practice to master it and you will only benefit from it if you approach it seriously.

**4 Tips on Writing Reflective Notes**

As previously mentioned, a reflective note for each CPD learning activity claimed should contain the following four elements:

- 4.1 Title and description of activity
- 4.2 What was the learning need or objective that was addressed?
- 4.3 What was the outcome of the activity?
- 4.4 Further learning needs

Good quality Reflective Notes are usually personal and individualised to each learning event. A standard template would negate the value of reflection. Box 1 outlines the basic rules in writing Reflective Notes. As it concerns your thoughts, reflective writing is mostly subjective. Therefore, in addition to being reflective and logical, you can be personal, hypothetical, critical and creative. You can comment based on your experience, rather than limiting yourself to academic or course evidence.

Table 2 expands on the general approach to writing good Reflective Notes, and these are used to make the bulleted list in Section 4.5.

Hence, it is essential to consider which parts went well or badly regarding the learning event and why this is your assessment. Furthermore, explain what exactly you have learnt – which is new learning. Based upon this new learning what will you do differently next time? Ideally, this will lead you to identify further learning needs which can be part of your next PDP or can be flagged up at future appraisals.

Table 2. Guidelines for reflection

<b>Learning</b>	<b>CPD Question</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Description:</b>	4.1	What are you going to reflect on? Describe what happened (the learning event)
<b>Feelings:</b>	4.2, 4.3	What were your reactions and feelings? What did you think and feel?
<b>Evaluation:</b>	4.3	What was good and bad about the learning event? Make value judgements.
<b>Analysis:</b>	4.3, 4.4	What sense can you make of the learning event? Bring in ideas from outside the learning event to help you (such as work experience)
<b>Conclusions (general):</b>	4.3, 4.4	What can be concluded, in a general sense, from these learning events and the analyses you have undertaken?
<b>Conclusions (specific):</b>	4.3, 4.4	What can be concluded about your own specific, unique, personal situation or ways of working?
<b>Personal Action plans:</b>	4.4	What are you going to do differently at work next time based on this learning event? What steps are you going to take on the basis of what you have learnt?

#### 4.5 What makes a Good Quality Reflective Note

A good quality Reflective Note has many elements that relate to the actual learning activity, how the individual interacts with the new learning, how this learning is useful to the individual (often related to the PDP or job plan) and how this may cause a change in an individual's practice. Reflective writing is an activity that includes description (what, when, who) and analysis (how, why, what if). It is an explorative tool often resulting in more questions than answers.

##### 4.5.1 Style

- Use full sentences and complete paragraphs
- You can usually use personal pronouns like 'I', 'my' or 'we'
- Keep colloquial language to a minimum (eg, kid, bloke, stuff)
- Keep the length appropriate or concise (quality not quantity)
- Presentation and legibility (especially if hand-written submissions)

- A reflective task may allow you to use different modes of writing and language:
  - descriptive (outlining what something is or how something was done)
  - explanatory (explaining why or how it is like that)
  - expressive (I think, I feel, I believe)

#### **4.5.2 Content**

- Clarity and good observation in presentation of learning event or issues;
- Depth and detail of reflective accounts;
- Honesty and self-assessment;
- Thoroughness of reflection and self-awareness;
- Evidence of a willingness to revise ideas;
- Evidence of creative thinking;
- Evidence of critical thinking;
- Evidence of a deep approach to the subject matter of the journal article, or online learning
- Representation of different cognitive skills (synthesis, analysis, evaluation etc);

#### **4.5.3 Supportive Practice**

- Submit the right number of Reflective Notes for each learning event (see CPD guidance)
- Clear statement of the learning need and link to PDP, e.g., why was the Member there in the first place (Relationship of the entries in CPD Form to any relevant day to day activities)
- Match of the CPD Form, or learning events to the PDP
- A clear proposed action(s) in response to the reflection
- Questions that arise from the reflective processes and on which to reflect further

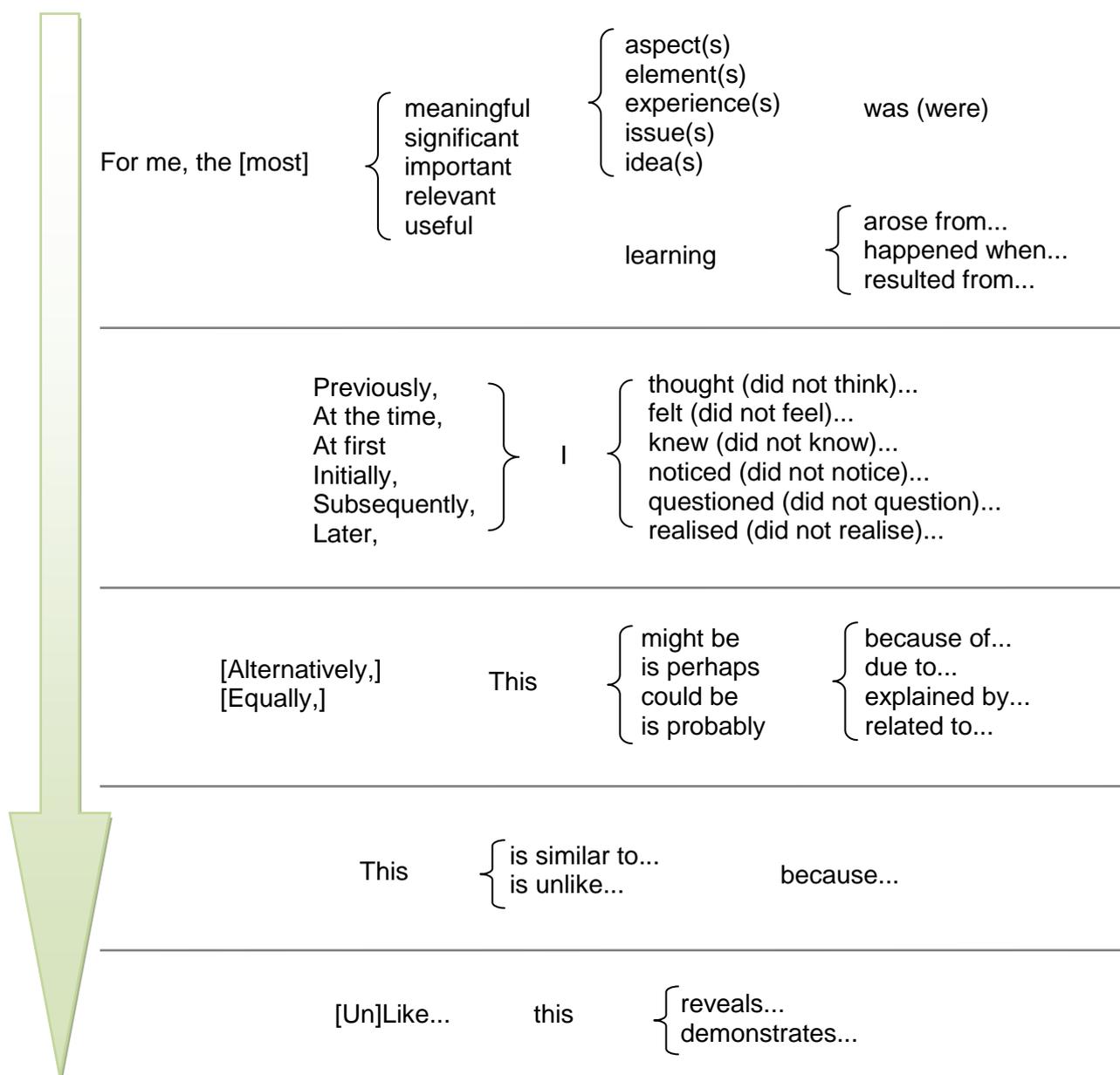
## 5 Useful Vocabulary

The following are just a few suggestions for words and phrases that might be useful in reflective writing. Using any of these words and phrases will not in itself make you a good reflective writer, of course!

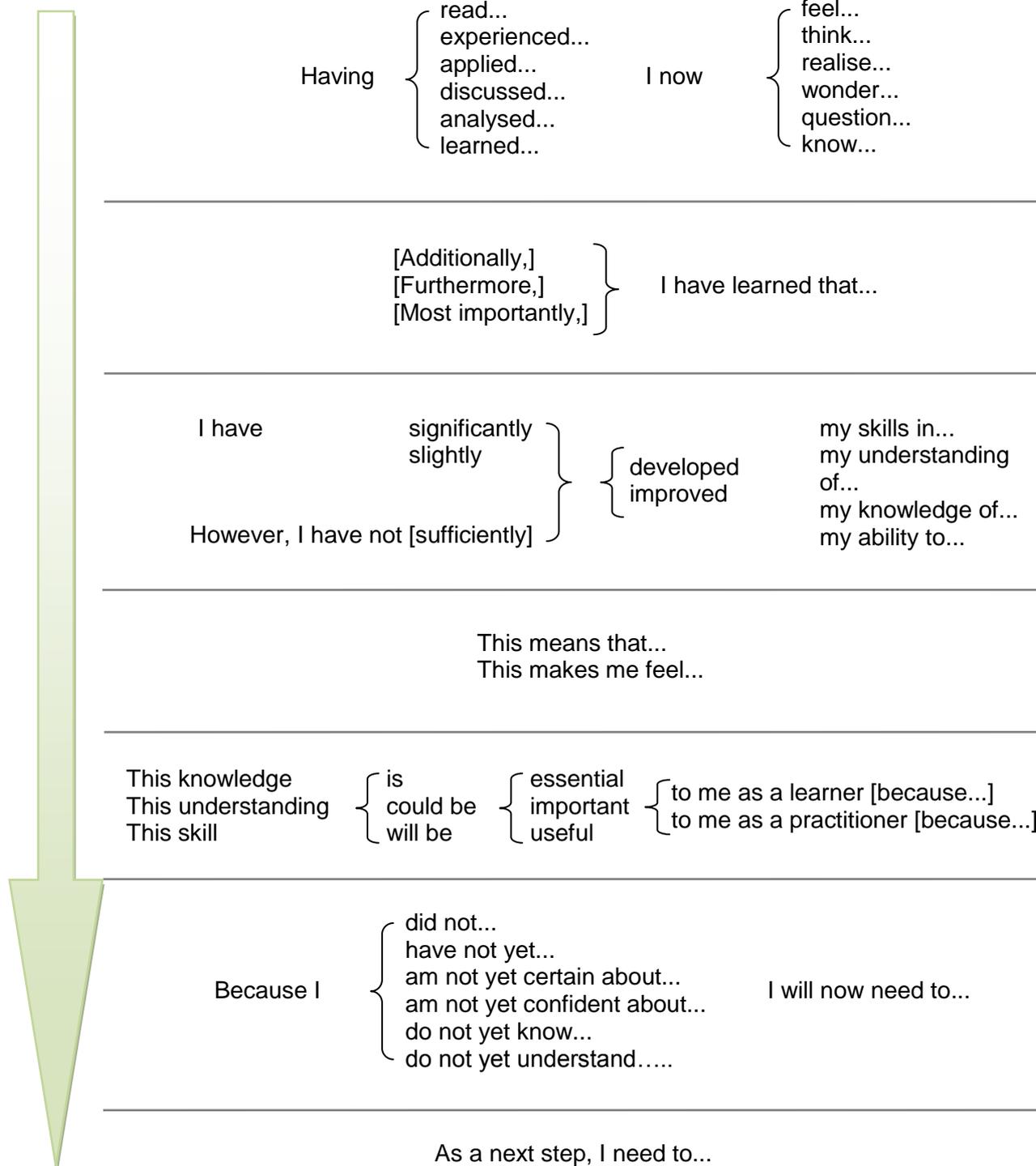
### 5.1 Description (the short bit!)

We are not suggesting specific vocabulary for any descriptive elements of your reflective writing, because the range of possible events, ideas or objects on which you might be required to reflect is so great.

### 5.2 Interpretation & Analysis (probably the most important bit)



### 5.3 Outcome & Synthesis



## 6 Conclusion

We hope that this brief introduction to learning theory and its accompanying practical guidance will assist members with planning and reflecting on their CPD activities, ensuring that they maximise the many learning opportunities that present in daily public health practice, as well as optimising the value of more formal educational events. Ultimately, time invested in reflective thinking and writing will greatly enrich the quality of professional development, which ultimately translates into effective public health performance.

Comments on this guidance are welcomed. They should be directed to: [cpd@fph.org.uk](mailto:cpd@fph.org.uk)

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