



Reflective writing

using writing as a tool to think constructively and insightfully about events, experiences, and issues

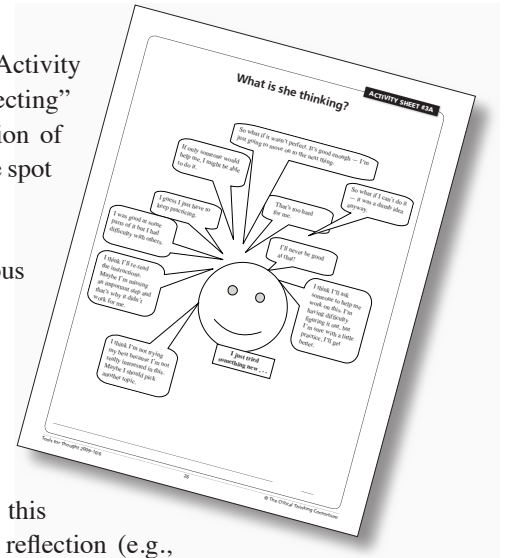
- Objectives:**
- Appreciate the value of thinking back, particularly in writing, about what has happened
 - Understand what is required to skillfully reflect on matters in writing
 - Learn to use a variety of techniques to write reflectively

Use the following activities to systematically introduce this writing strategy

- Invite students to consider the following scenario.

Bindi is a student trying to learn . . . (insert a specific skill appropriate to students' grade level and interests, for example, learning to skateboard, writing her first essay, learning to take digital photographs). She was given instructions to read. She tried to read them a few times but she had difficulty. Many different thoughts went through her head when she found she couldn't do this very well.

- Provide students with a copy of *What is she thinking?* (Activity Sheet #3A). Suggest that what Bindi is doing is “reflecting” on her performance. Provide students with a definition of reflecting: directing or returning an image back to some spot or thinking back about an experience or issue.



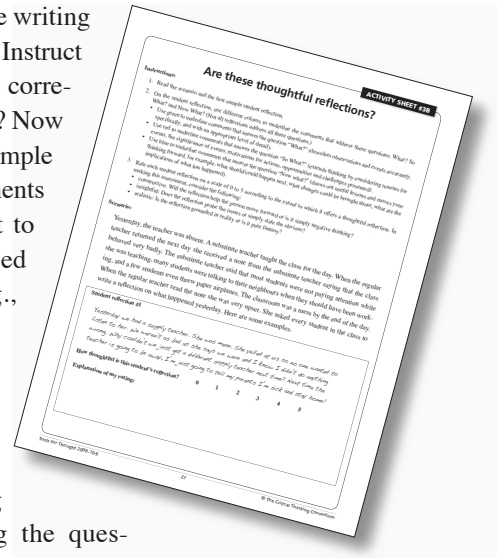
- Invite students to work in pairs to sort (or label) the various thought bubbles into three categories:
 - not helpful/useful reflections;
 - somewhat helpful/useful reflections; and
 - very helpful/useful reflections.

Ask students to report on how they categorized the thought bubbles and to explain their reasoning. From this discussion, draw out criteria characteristic of useful reflection (e.g., constructive, insightful, realistic).

- Suggest to students that the following are some of the many reasons why people take time to reflect on events, experiences, and issues in their lives:
 - understand or explain why something happened;
 - decide whether a process is going well or needs improvement;
 - come up with a plan or make a decision about what to do next;
 - solve a problem;
 - sort through and understand personal feelings.
- Suggest that thoughtful reflective writing addresses the following questions:
 - **What?** Describes observations and events accurately, specifically, and with an appropriate level of detail.
 - **So What?** Extends thinking by considering the reasons for and significance of events, motivations for actions, and opportunities and challenges presented.
 - **Now What?** Draws out useful lessons and moves your thinking forward (e.g., what should/could happen next, what changes could be brought about, what are the implications of what has happened).

Practise the strategy

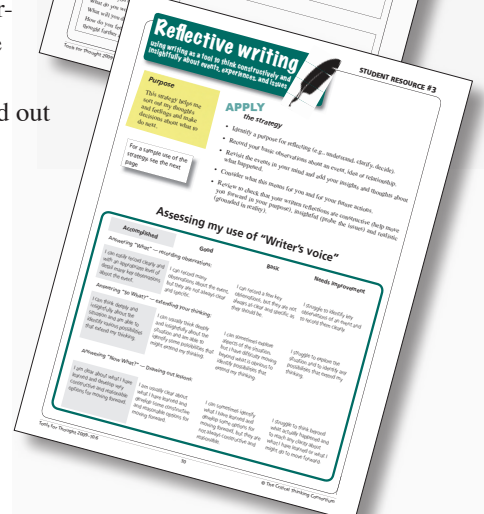
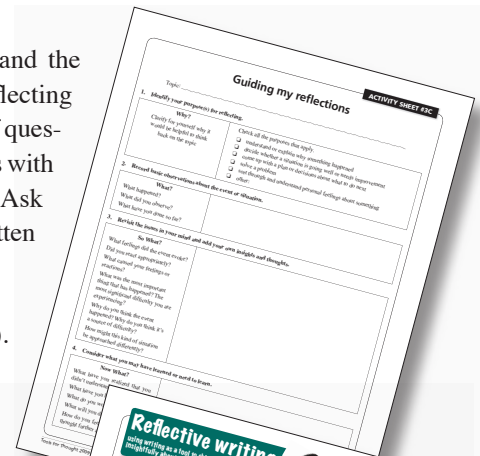
- Invite students to examine the examples of reflective writing on *Is this thoughtful reflection?* (Activity Sheet #3B). Instruct students to identify lines in each writing piece that correspond to the three questions above (What? So What? Now What?). For elementary students, complete one example as a class. Once students have identified the components of each reflection, invite them to judge the extent to which the writing piece is a thoughtful reflection based on the criteria for identifying a useful reflection (e.g., constructive, specific, realistic, purposeful).
- Invite students to try their hand at reflecting orally before writing a reflection. Choose a project or skill they are currently working on in class (e.g. presenting orally, writing a paragraph, listening attentively, executing a volleyball serve). Using the questions as a guide, invite students to “think aloud” to a partner about how their skill or project is developing:



- **What?** Describe observations and events accurately, specifically, and with an appropriate level of detail.
- **So What?** Extend thinking by considering reasons for events, significance of events, motivations for actions, opportunities and challenges presented.
- **Now What?** Draw out useful lessons and move your thinking forward (e.g., what should/could happen next, what changes could be brought about, what are the implications of what has happened).

Reinforce the strategy

- As a class, discuss the usefulness of the questions and the quality of the oral reflection. Invite students to try reflecting in writing. Suggest that following a more detailed set of questions may help them with their writing. Provide students with a copy of *Guiding my reflections* (Activity Sheet #3C). Ask them to use the activity sheet to help them prepare a written reflection on the experience they practised orally.
- Introduce *Reflective writing* (Student Resource #3). Review each of the elements: the purpose, strategies, practice sample, and self-assessment rubric. Encourage students to refer to this resource when using the strategy in the future. Discuss with students when the strategy of reflection might be useful both in and out of school.

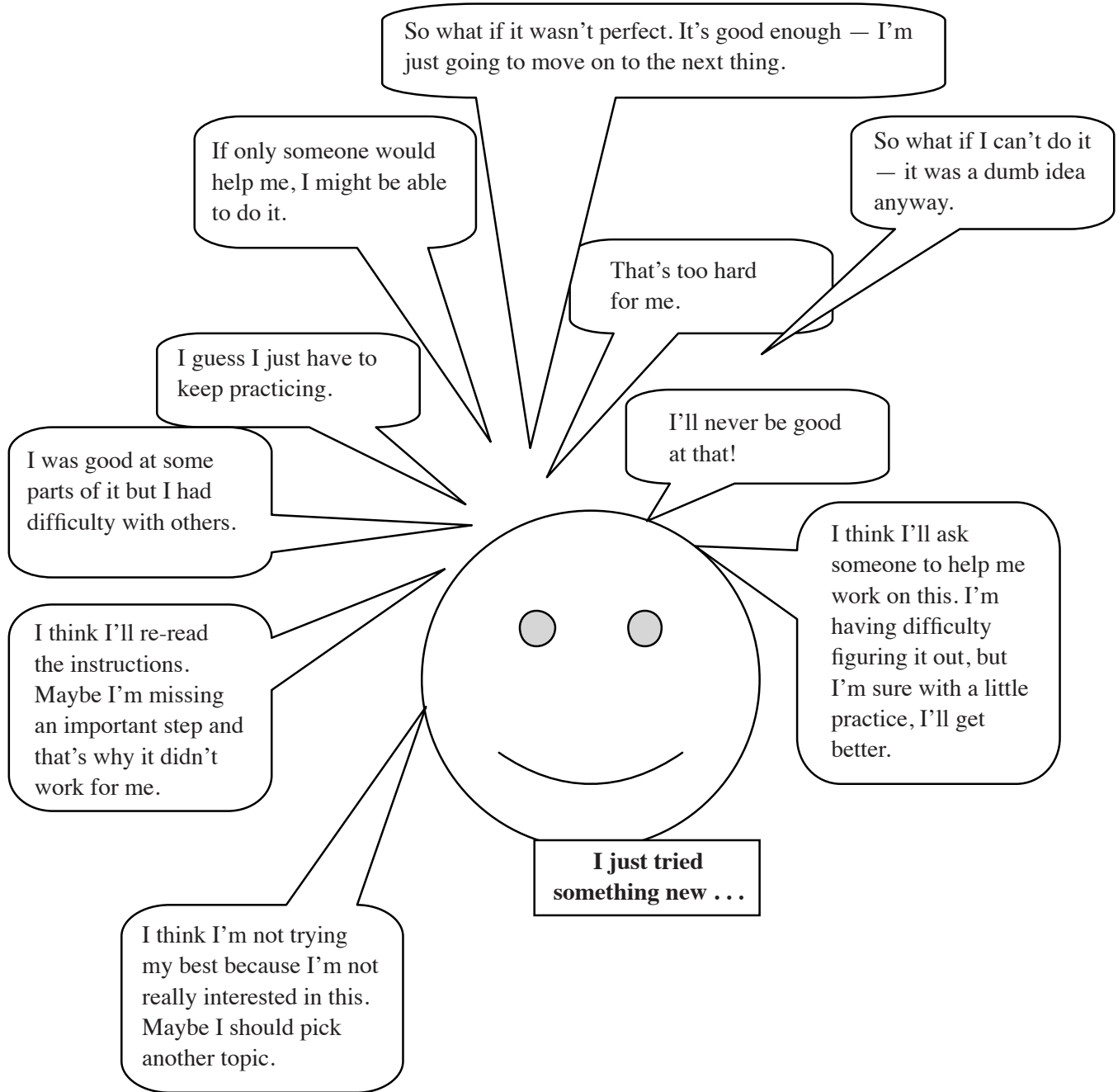


Apply the strategy to everyday teaching

- To further reinforce the strategy, choose a character in a story or a historical figure students are currently studying. Ask students to write a reflection from the perspective of that character at a pivotal moment in their lives. Encourage students to use *Guiding my reflections* (Activity Sheet #3C) to support their writing. Invite students to exchange their reflective writing pieces with a partner. Invite partners to use the rubric to provide feedback to the “character” about the quality of his or her reflection.
- If lifestyle choices is a topic you wish to investigate with your students, use the material on lifestyle choices found in this resource and ask students to write a letter to themselves encouraging healthy lifestyle choices. (Critical challenge #1)
- At appropriate times over the ensuing several weeks, encourage students to use this strategy in regular classroom situations, including the following:
 - examining their behaviour and considering alternative choices;
 - gauging their progress in an ongoing project or task;
 - thinking about what they have learned at the end of a lesson;
 - examining their own work habits after or in the midst of an activity;
 - considering how they felt during a discussion of a controversial topic;
 - revisiting an assignment after it has been marked and handed back by the teacher;
 - making decisions about activities and work habits.
- Encourage students to refer to the rubric found in *Reflective writing* (Student Resource #3) when self-assessing their use of this literacy strategy.
 - Allow students opportunities to apply the strategy two or three times without evaluation.
 - Guide students in interpreting and using the rubric to assess their own responses.
 - Encourage students to use the rubric whenever they use this strategy.
- To use the rubric for teacher evaluation of student work, remove the first person (student) reference from each descriptor.

Assess the use of the strategy

What is she thinking?



Are these thoughtful reflections?

Instructions:

1. Read the scenario and the first sample student reflection.
2. On the student reflection, use different colours to underline the comments that address these questions: **What?** **So What?** and **Now What?** (Not all reflections address all three questions.)
 - Use **green** to underline comments that answer the question “What?” (describes observations and events accurately, specifically, and with an appropriate level of detail).
 - Use **red** to underline comments that answer the question “So What?” (extends thinking by considering reasons for events, the significance of events, motivations for actions, opportunities and challenges presented).
 - Use **blue** to underline comments that answer the question “Now what?” (draws out useful lessons and moves your thinking forward, for example, what should/could happen next, what changes could be brought about, what are the implications of what has happened).
3. Rate each student reflection on a scale of 0 to 5 according to the extent to which it offers a thoughtful reflection. In making this assessment, consider the following:
 - *constructive*: Will the reflection help the person move forward or is it simply negative thinking?
 - *insightful*: Does the reflection probe the issues or simply state the obvious?
 - *realistic*: Is the reflection grounded in reality or is it pure fantasy?

Scenario:

Yesterday, the teacher was absent. A substitute teacher taught the class for the day. When the regular teacher returned the next day she received a note from the substitute teacher saying that the class behaved very badly. The substitute teacher said that most students were not paying attention while she was teaching, many students were talking to their neighbours when they should have been working, and a few students even threw paper airplanes. The classroom was a mess by the end of the day. When the regular teacher read the note she was very upset. She asked every student in the class to write a reflection on what happened yesterday. Here are some examples.

Student reflection #1

Yesterday we had a supply teacher. She was mean. She yelled at us so no one wanted to listen to her. We weren't as bad as she says we were and I know I didn't do anything wrong. Why couldn't we just get a different supply teacher next time? Next time the teacher is going to be away, I'm just going to tell my parents I'm sick and stay home!

How thoughtful is this student's reflection? 0 1 2 3 4 5

Explanation of my rating:

Student reflection #2

Yesterday we had a supply teacher. Some kids were really bad. They were talking and making faces at her and not paying attention. They were throwing stuff around the classroom and the classroom was a real mess afterwards. It was awful. I think all those kids should get suspended.

How thoughtful is this student's reflection? 0 1 2 3 4 5

Explanation of my rating:

Student reflection #3

I'm really upset. It's totally unfair that we all have to write this dumb reflection. What a waste of time. Only the kids who misbehaved should be punished by having to do extra writing. I'm so frustrated by the other kids in this class! Why can't people just behave!

How thoughtful is this student's reflection? 0 1 2 3 4 5

Explanation of my rating:

Student reflection #4

The class behaved really badly yesterday. I don't think I was the worst one but I definitely did some things I shouldn't have done. I was talking with Jenny when the supply teacher was giving instructions and I didn't get much work done. In fact, I had to take the work home to finish it which was silly since I could have just finished it in class and then I would have not had homework last night! I'm not sure why the class behaved so badly. I guess we thought we could get away with it but now it's made our regular teacher upset and I feel bad about that. I'm not sure anyone will listen to me next time if I say that we should calm down but at least I can make sure I don't behave badly.

How thoughtful is this student's reflection? 0 1 2 3 4 5

Explanation of my rating:

Guiding my reflections

Topic: _____

1. Identify your purpose(s) for reflecting.

<p style="text-align: center;">Why?</p> <p>Clarify for yourself why it would be helpful to think back on the topic</p>	<p>Check all the purposes that apply.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> understand or explain why something happened <input type="checkbox"/> decide whether a situation is going well or needs improvement <input type="checkbox"/> come up with a plan or decisions about what to do next <input type="checkbox"/> solve a problem <input type="checkbox"/> sort through and understand personal feelings about something <input type="checkbox"/> other:
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2. Record basic observations about the event or situation.

<p style="text-align: center;">What?</p> <p>What happened? What did you observe? What have you done so far?</p>	
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3. Revisit the issues in your mind and add your own insights and thoughts.

<p style="text-align: center;">So What?</p> <p>What feelings did the event evoke? Did you react appropriately? What caused your feelings or reactions? What was the most important thing that has happened? The most significant difficulty you are experiencing? Why do you think the event happened? Why do you think it's a source of difficulty? How might this kind of situation be approached differently?</p>	
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4. Consider what you may have learned or need to learn.

<p style="text-align: center;">Now What?</p> <p>What have you realized that you didn't understand before? What have you learned? What do you wonder about now? What will you do next? How do you feel now that you've thought further about this?</p>	
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Purpose

This strategy helps me sort out my thoughts and feelings and make decisions about what to do next.

For a sample use of the strategy, see the next page

APPLY the strategy

- Identify a purpose for reflecting (e.g., understand, clarify, decide).
- Record your basic observations about an event, idea or relationship.
- Revisit the events in your mind and add your insights and thoughts about what happened.
- Consider what this means for you and for your future actions.
- Review to check that your written reflections are constructive (help move you forward in your purpose), insightful (probe the issues) and realistic (grounded in reality).

Assessing my use of “writer’s voice”

Accomplished

Good

Basic

Needs improvement

Answering “What” — recording observations:

I can easily record clearly and with an appropriate level of detail many key observations about the event.

I can record many observations about the event, but they are not always clear and specific.

I can record a few key observations, but they are not always as clear and specific as they should be.

I struggle to identify key observations of an event and to record them clearly.

Answering “So What?” — extending your thinking:

I can think deeply and insightfully about the situation and am able to identify various possibilities that extend my thinking.

I can usually think deeply and insightfully about the situation and am able to identify some possibilities that might extend my thinking.

I can sometimes explore aspects of the situation, but I have difficulty moving beyond what is obvious to identify possibilities that extend my thinking.

I struggle to explore the situation and to identify any possibilities that extend my thinking.

Answering “Now What?” — Drawing out lessons:

I am clear about what I have learned and develop very constructive and reasonable options for moving forward.

I am usually clear about what I have learned and develop some constructive and reasonable options for moving forward.

I can sometimes identify what I have learned and develop some options for moving forward, but they are not always constructive and reasonable.

I struggle to think beyond what actually happened and to reach any clarity about what I have learned or what I might do to move forward.

SAMPLE

use of the strategy

Guiding my reflections

Topic: Working with my group to complete our project

1. Identify your purpose(s) for reflecting.

<p style="text-align: center;">Why?</p> <p>Clarify for yourself why it would be helpful to think back on the topic</p>	<p>Check all the purposes that apply.</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> understand or explain why something happened</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> decide whether a situation is going well or needs improvement</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> come up with a plan or decisions about what to do next</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> solve a problem</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> sort through and understand personal feelings about something</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> other:</p>
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2. Record basic observations about the event or situation.

<p style="text-align: center;">What?</p> <p>What happened? What did you observe? What have you done so far?</p>	<p><i>So far our group has chosen a topic and started the research. Each of us looked at a different source of information. It was a bit difficult to decide who would do which source since some seemed shorter and easier than others but we worked it out so it's fair.</i></p> <p><i>When we got into groups yesterday in class to share our research so far, things didn't go very well. After everyone else shared their research, I felt like what I had to share wasn't very good. I shared it anyway, but I don't think my group members were very happy with me.</i></p>
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3. Revisit the issues in your mind and add your own insights and thoughts.

<p style="text-align: center;">So What?</p> <p>What feelings did the event evoke? Did you react appropriately? What caused your feelings or reactions? What was the most important thing that has happened? The most significant difficulty you are experiencing? Why do you think the event happened? Why do you think it's a source of difficulty? How might this kind of situation be approached differently?</p>	<p><i>I felt pretty bad about not having very much information to share. I felt like I let my group down. I also felt angry, though, since my source ended up being more difficult to understand than I thought. But I don't think they gave me a hard one on purpose. I think it just turned out that way.</i></p>
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SAMPLE
use of the strategy

Guiding my reflections

Topic: Working with my group to complete our project

4. Consider what you may have learned or need to learn.

Now What?	
What have you realized that you didn't understand before?	<p><i>I think I probably should have had a quick look at my book when we first divided the work so I could see if I could handle it. Instead, I ended up leaving the work until the last minute so I didn't have time to ask for help. I've also learned that my group members are pretty nice and helpful. I think I should let them know when I'm having difficulty and see if they have suggestions.</i></p> <p><i>Our group has decided to meet tomorrow again to share more information and decide on our next steps. I'm feeling better about the whole thing, and this time, I'll make sure I'm ready for sharing tomorrow!</i></p>
What have you learned?	
What do you wonder about now?	
What will you do next?	
How do you feel now that you've thought further about this?	
How might this kind of situation be approached differently?	