Focus on reflective thinking

You engage in reflective thinking all the time. You experience something, think about what happened including maybe how you feel, and what you learned from the experience. In sum, you considered what you could take away from the experience and applied your knowledge. Reflective writing is your written personal account of your observation and your meditation or thoughts about the meaning of that experience. The Table below highlights the difference between reflective writing and academic writing. You will be engaging in both types of writing. The research paper will involve academic writing whereas your research journal will develop your reflective thinking. Both types of writings will develop critical thinking skills. Because your reflective writing will focus on your research experiences, there will be a constant interplay between your reflective thinking and your research papers. Each will inform the other. The Table below illustrated the differences between the two types of writing.

Table 1. Reflective vs. Academic Writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflective writing</th>
<th>Academic writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal account of your experience (s)</td>
<td>Impersonal account of process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on your personal views</td>
<td>Based on a review of the literature stressing the views of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written in the first person (I found the experience…..)</td>
<td>Written in the Third person (the authors argue that the experience ….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemplates</td>
<td>Finds evidence, argues and justifies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finds solutions to problems</td>
<td>Compares and contrasts findings to those of others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why keep a research journal?

In the journal, you will keep a detailed history of your research process. The journal will give you a context to think about the problems that arise in your research. Often times we forget the steps, the events, what we found interesting, how we made particular decisions. The journal will serve as a reference point that you can go back to.

Reflections are more than a description of what has happened but needs to include your perspective. Reflections include
(1) the WHAT (what happened, descriptions of the event, experience, situation or new knowledge);
(2) REACTIONS (how you felt, how you reacted);
(3) EVALUATION (what was good, bad, useful, not useful);
(4) ANALYSIS (what can be done with this information, what should I keep, what should I get rid of);
(5) if applicable CONCLUSION (is there anything I could have done differently, did I miss anything);
and (6) ACTION (what would I do, what will I do, practical steps).

Adapted from web.anglia.ac.uk/anet/rdcs/research/training/Keeping_a_Research_Diary.doc
The following are examples of what you can include:

- What you’ve done on a day-to-day basis, described in practical terms;
- Factual accounts of things that you did, people you met and what they said, books or papers that you read, lectures or conferences you went to;
- Notes from discussions or useful conversations;
- Ideas that you might want to remember or follow up;
- Questions that you might want to explore, discuss or find out more about;
- Suggestions about reading, contacts, ways forward on problems;
- Reports of observations, experiments, events;
- ‘Think pieces’ – discursive notes about ideas or directions;
- Brainstorming notes or diagrams;
- Strategic plans for developing ideas;
- Personal views and opinions;
- Problem analysis;
- ‘To do’ lists or action plans;
- Reports of observations, experiments, events;
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From web.anglia.ac.uk/anet/rdcs/research/training/Keeping_a_Research_Diary.doc...

The nuts and bolts

- Choose a format for your diary that is practical and manageable for you. This may be on computer, in a notebook, or in loose-leaf format;
- Keep your diary to hand – this is where the format you’ve chosen is important;
- Aim to make an entry every day you work on your project, or whenever something useful that you want to remember comes up;
- Consider writing ‘end-of-week’ and ‘end-of-month’ reviews. Over time, this helps with maintaining momentum and motivation;
- Remember to lay your diary pages out clearly as you go along and leave space for comments and additions;
- Sometimes there will be a lot you want to record; other times there will be less. You do not have to standardise your diary entries.

From web.anglia.ac.uk/anet/rdcs/research/training/Keeping_a_Research_Diary.doc

Ethical considerations

In some projects, you will be assessing individuals who you know. In your diary, because these friends or family members are considered research participants, their identity must be kept confidential. Thus, if you want to write about a research participant you need to use an alias name.

Conclusion:

One of the advantages of maintaining a journal is that you get more experience writing. Writing forces you to attend to your experiences and helps clarify your ideas. You will be the only one who will be seeing your writings. Ultimately your reflective writings will help you with your research papers. As suggested previously, you can use your record of what you have done, including reasons and decisions in your research paper(s).