

# Guidelines for Writing Experiential Learning Essays

## The Kolb Model: The relationship between learning and experience

David Kolb presents a model of experiential learning containing four components: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. They are described more fully below.

### Section 1: Concrete Experience

The first stage of Kolb's Model starts with the individual's *concrete experience*: an event that triggers the learning cycle. While this is usually a specific experience, it can also include reading, consulting with others or personal research.

When writing about concrete experiences that led to learning, it is helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- What did I do? Where? When? For how long? Why?
- What was my role (as opposed to the others involved)?
- How deeply was I involved?
- What techniques, methods, procedures did I employ? Why did I choose the ones I used?
- What were my goals and objectives? How did they influence my choices?
- What resources did I use?
- Can I get documentation to verify my experience?
- *Summarise* what occurred rather than giving a narrative account of what happened.

### Section 2: Reflective Observation

In the second stage of writing about experiential learning, you step back from the experience to observe and reflect upon it. This might involve noticing similarities or differences, patterns or results of certain actions.

Ask yourself:

- What were the reasons behind my behaviour? What was I thinking at the time?
- What trends and patterns are evident?
- What were the significant and unique components of the experience?

### Section 3: Abstract Conceptualisation

Based on your observations and reflections about your experience, begin to generalize and form abstract concepts about it.



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Ask yourself:

- What are the underlying principles of my experience?
- What *existing* theories, and/or concepts from other sources support my understanding?
- Can I articulate depth and breadth of understanding of these theories or concepts?
- What examples from my concrete experience demonstrate this understanding?

#### **Section 4: Active Experimentation**

In the fourth stage of the model, you will apply your newly discovered principles, testing the implications of the concepts in new situations.

Ask yourself:

- How does my knowledge apply to other situations?
- How will I implement (have I implemented) my new knowledge?
- Have I tested my ideas or those of others? If not, what might I predict will happen? Why?
- Can I give specific examples of how I am using or would use the learnings I have gained in a new setting?

The testing or experimentation in the fourth stage can lead to another concrete experience. You then make new observations and reflections and, based on them, formulate or refine the principle and apply it to see if it holds true. Therefore, Kolb's Model might be better pictured as a spiral: the cycle repeats itself, becoming more refined and sophisticated with each turn.

#### **Experiential Essay Outline**

##### **TITLE**

##### **INTRODUCTION**

In one paragraph, introduce the reader to your topic and integrate your three key concepts into this opening narrative. This is a short paragraph that clearly tells the reader what you will be discussing and sets the stage for you to continue on to your Section I experience. It should be between 3-6 sentences long.

##### **I. CONCRETE EXPERIENCE**

Discuss your experience here.

##### **II. REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION**

Discuss your learning in terms of reflective statements; show the reader how you came to understand the concepts relevant to your experience. Don't continue talking about new experiences.



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### III. ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION

Discuss your learning in terms of defining relevant concepts and showing the underlying principles and relationships between the principles. This is the section in which you must use academic references and in-text citations to support your stated learning outcomes. The ideal Experiential Learning Essay should provide a balance between breadth of theory (general concepts) and depth of practical application, as practical applications of general concepts are crucial in demonstrating a thorough understanding of how concepts apply to new situations.

### IV. ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION

Discuss your learning in terms of how you have used it, or may use it, in a new situation. Give specific examples that show how you have/will transfer the learning.

#### 1. Concrete Experience. Tell the story of what you did (what behaviours and actions you took) using terms such as:

I met	I said	I tried
I attended	I taught	I traced
I saw	I listed	I recorded
I drafted	I reacted to	I calculated
I designed	I coordinated	I promoted
I purchased	I modified	I programmed
I forecasted	I convinced	I reviewed
I collected	I avoided	I studied

When that happened, I saw – sensed - reacted

Five weeks ago, I developed – started – mistook a problem with...

I created – investigated – experienced – encountered – confronted... After that I travelled – studied – criticized...

#### 2. Observations Reflections/ What you learned from what you did

I learned that	I discerned	I distinguished
I detected	I perceived	I wondered about
I noticed	I viewed	I spotted
I found that	I discovered	I grasped



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I imagined                      I heeded                      I neglected to see  
I observed                      I acknowledge              I recognized  
I came to believe

Looking back, I realize – now remember watching/detecting...

In retrospect, I observe that I...

Reflecting on this experience I acknowledge that I... I now see  
that my reaction was based on....

I have come to believe that....

### **3. Generalizations and Principles. What you understand from what you learned including theories, principles, general concepts, models, systems, insights.**

Research indicates...

It is apparent that...

The concept of...

The principle of...

It is similar to...

An analysis explains that...

Experts agree that...

This idea means that...

A synthesis of this data...

It is understood that... (give theories)

A logical explanation of this was written about in the book... (give principles)

This is similar to... (give models ---explain the model and compare/contrast)

This analysis contradicts others who claim that... (give insights)

### **4. Testing Application. How you can use, transfer and apply what you learned?**

New approaches would be... Applying this concept is....

A different plan would be...

Practicing this includes... A better way of doing this is... This could be applied in....

Next time I will....

When I now encounter/meet people, I use the method of ...

When other people I know go through this experience I will apply the principle of I now use the concept  
of \_\_\_\_ in my personal life whenever I am faced with ...

I have educated my peers/patients about the importance of....

Because I understand the importance of \_\_\_\_ I now react differently with...

**Reference:** [www.engstrominstitute.com/uc/coursehelps/files/guidelines\\_for\\_learning\\_essay.pdf](http://www.engstrominstitute.com/uc/coursehelps/files/guidelines_for_learning_essay.pdf)

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