

5 Assembling a Portfolio and Writing a Reflective Essay

- What passages show my independent thinking about the subject? My unresolved problems or mixed feelings about it?
 - What were the major content problems I had, and how successful was I in resolving them?
 - What did writing about this subject teach me?
- Rhetoric-related questions: How did the audience I imagined influence me in writing this paper?
- How did my awareness of genre influence my choices about subject matter and rhetorical features?
 - What do I want readers to take away from reading my work?
 - What rhetorical strategies please me most (my use of evidence, my examples, my delayed thesis, etc.)? What effect do I hope these strategies have on my audience?
 - How would I describe my voice in this work? Is this voice appropriate? Similar to my everyday voice or to the voices I have used in other kinds of writing?
 - Did I take any risks in writing this?
 - What do readers expect from this genre of writing, and did I fulfill those expectations?
- Self-assessment questions: What are the most significant strengths and weaknesses in this writing?
- Do I think others will also see these as important strengths or weaknesses? Why or why not?
 - What specific ideas and plans do I have for revision?

Comprehensive Reflection Assignments

You may also be asked to write a final, comprehensive reflection on your development as a writer over a whole term. Although end-of-the-term reflective essays differ in scope and audience from single reflections, similar qualities are valued in both: selectivity, specificity, dialectical thinking, and adequate detail.

In some cases, the comprehensive reflective essay will introduce the contents of a final portfolio; in other cases, this will be a stand-alone assignment. Either way, your goal is to help your readers understand more knowledgeably how you developed as a writer. Most important, in explaining what you have learned from this review of your work, you also make new self-discoveries.

Guidelines for Writing a Comprehensive Reflection

Instructors look for four kinds of knowledge in comprehensive reflections: self-knowledge, content knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, and critical knowledge or judgment. Here we suggest questions that you can use to generate ideas for your comprehensive reflective letter or essay. Choose only a few of the questions to respond to, questions that allow you to explain and demonstrate your most important learning in the course. Also, choose experiences to narrate and passages to cite that illustrate more than one kind of knowledge.

Self-Knowledge

By *self-knowledge*, we mean your understanding of how you are developing as a writer. Think about the writer you were, are, or hope to be. You can also contemplate how the subjects you have chosen to write about (or the way you have

approached your subjects) relate to you personally beyond the scope of your papers. Self-knowledge questions you might ask are the following:

- What knowledge of myself as a writer have I gained from the writing I did in this course?
- What changes, if any, have occurred in my writing practices or my sense of myself as a writer?
- What patterns or discontinuities can I identify between the way I approached one writing project versus the way I approached another?
- How can I best illustrate and explain through reference to specific writing projects the self-knowledge I have gained?

Content Knowledge

Content knowledge refers to what you have learned by writing about various subjects. It also includes the intellectual work that has gone into the writing and the insights you gained from considering multiple points of view and grappling with your own conflicting ideas. Perhaps you have grasped ideas about your subjects that you have not shown in your papers. These questions about content knowledge can prod your thinking:

- What kinds of content complexities did I grapple with this term?
- What *earned insights* did I arrive at through confronting clashing ideas?
- What new perspectives did I gain about particular subjects from my considerations of multiple or alternate viewpoints?
- What new ideas or perspectives did I gain that may not be evident in the writings themselves?
- What passages from various papers best illustrate the critical thinking I did in my writing projects for this course?

Rhetorical Knowledge

Our third category, *rhetorical knowledge*, focuses on your awareness of your rhetorical decisions—how your contemplation of purpose, audience, and genre affected your choices about content, structure, style, and document design. The following questions about rhetorical choices can help you assess this area of your knowledge:

- What important rhetorical choices did I make in various works to accomplish my purpose or to appeal to my audience? What parts of my various works best illustrate these choices? Which of these choices are particularly effective and why? About which choices am I uncertain and why?
- What have I learned about the rhetorical demands of audience, purpose, and genre, and how has that knowledge affected my writing and reading practices?
- How do I expect to use this learning in the future?

Thomas Newkirk, in *Critical Thinking and Writing: Reclaiming the Essay* (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1989), coined the phrase “earned insights,” a phrase that Donna Qualley also refers to in *Turns of Thought: Teaching Composition as Reflective Inquiry* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, Heinemann, 1997), pp. 35–37.

Our first reading is a single reflection by student Jaime Finger. She writes about what she sees as the strengths and weaknesses of an exploratory essay in which she was asked to pose a question raised but not clearly answered in a collection of essays on issues of race and class. (She posed the question, "What motivates people to behave as they do?") She was then asked to investigate various perspectives on the question that were offered by the readings, to consider other perspectives drawn from her own knowledge and experience, and to assess the strengths and weaknesses of differing points of view.

Jaime Finger (student)

A Single Reflection on an Exploratory Essay

Although this paper was harder than the first one, I believe I have a good opening question. I like how I divided her [the author of the essays] ideas about motivation into two parts—individual and social. I also like how I used examples from many different essays (this proves I really read the whole book). Another thing I like about this essay is how I include some examples of my own, like the Michael Jordan example of how he did not make the basketball team in his freshman year and that motivated him to practice every day for a year before making the team his sophomore year. I wonder if he ever would have been as good as he is if he had made the team his freshman year? I wish I could or would have added more of my own examples like this one.

What I'm not sure about is if I later ask too many other questions, like when I ask, "If someone is doing something because of society's pressures, is he responsible for that behavior?" and "How much are we responsible to other people like the homeless?" I felt that I piled up questions, and also felt I drifted from my original questions. The paper was confusing for me to write, and I feel that it jumps around. Maybe it doesn't, but I don't know.

Since *Alchemy* [the title of the essay collection] was such a hard book, I'm kind of happy with my paper (although after hearing some of the others in my peer group, I don't know if it's up to par!).

THINKING CRITICALLY

about "A Single Reflection on an Exploratory Essay"

1. To what extent does this reflection show that Jaime has deepened her thinking about the question, "What motivates people to behave as they do?"
2. Where does Jaime show an awareness of audience and purpose in her self-reflection on her essay?
3. To what extent does Jaime show us that she can identify strengths and weaknesses of her essay?
4. What are Jaime's most important insights about her essay?

Critical Knowledge or Judgment

A fourth area of knowledge, *critical knowledge* or *judgment*, concerns your awareness of significant strengths and weaknesses in your writing. This area also encompasses your ability to identify what you like or value in various pieces of writing and to explain why. You could ask yourself these questions about your critical knowledge:

- Of the works in my portfolio, which is the best and why? Which is the weakest and why?
- How has my ability to identify strengths and weaknesses changed during this course?
- What role has peer, instructor, or other reader feedback had on my assessments of my work?
- What improvements would I make in these works if I had more time?
- How has my writing changed over the term? What new abilities will I take away from this course?
- What are the most important things I still have to work on as a writer?
- What is the most important thing I have learned in this course?
- How do I expect to use what I've learned from this course in the future?

Guidelines for Writing a Comprehensive Reflective Letter

Because the letter (sometimes an essay) that you write to introduce your portfolio shows your insights not only about your writing abilities but also about your abilities as a reflective learner, it may be one of the most important pieces of writing you do for a writing course. Here we offer some additional suggestions geared specifically toward introducing your writing portfolio:

- Review the single reflections you have written about specific writing projects during the term. As you reread these process log entries, writer's memos, companion pieces, and so on, what do you discover about yourself as a writer?
- Consider key rhetorical concepts that you have learned in this course. Use the detailed table of contents of Chapters 1 through 4 to refresh your memory about these concepts (see pp. vii–ix). How can you show that you understand these concepts and have applied them in your writing?
- Take notes on your own writing as you review your work and reconstruct your writing processes for particular writing projects. What patterns do you see? What surprises you? How can you show the process behind the product? How can you show your growth as a writer through specific examples?
- Be honest. Identifying weaknesses is as important as identifying strengths. How can you use this opportunity to discover more about yourself as a writer or learner?