Preventing to Write the Introduction and Other Reflective Components

**TAKING STOCK 10: Revisiting Your Expectations**

Review your answers to Taking Stock 1, where you practiced reflection. Reread what you wrote about your expectations for this course and about the areas in which you thought your strengths would help you. Do you still agree with what you wrote? How did your expectations match up with the reality of the course? What parts of this exercise can you use in writing your reflective introduction or cover letter?

Reflection can and should take place throughout your portfolio keeping experience, but at some point it’s important to make the reflection more formal, to present and discuss evidence of your learning in a formal piece of writing. Before you begin, be sure you understand how the reflective elements in your portfolio should function.

Clarify with your instructor if you are expected to write a reflective opening statement—a cover letter, an introduction, a preface, an essay.* If you are not being asked to preface the portfolio with a reflective introduction, are you expected to describe your entries or introduce your choices in some other way? In other words, there can be two types of reflection: (1) an introduction to the portfolio, and (2) short pieces that introduce each artifact. If your instructor has not assigned a reflective opening statement, he or she may be expecting accounts of your choices or descriptions of your process to appear throughout the portfolio. Ask your instructor if each entry should have a preface. Although the reflective essay does not have to be the first entry in a paper portfolio, it often is, owing to its role in establishing a relationship with your readers and evaluator. If its placement is not specified in your syllabus or the portfolio assignment sheet, check with your instructor.

*Your instructor may also refer to this reflective statement as the introductory slide, the jump-off point, or the first node.
Preparing to Write the Introduction

In deciding where to place reflective elements in the portfolio, an e-Portfolio offers you additional options. For example, you can insert links that let readers move through the portfolio in different sequences or that they follow a particular sequence in certain places. It makes sense to have them read the reflective introduction first, for example. So, on your portfolio's home page, you might insert just one link, to the introduction. Then, on that page, you can give readers the option to go to any artifact next. Of course readers can skip around in a paper-based portfolio too; but traditionally they read one page at a time in sequence. (By limiting the links you insert in each section, you can achieve the same effect in an electronic portfolio.) If you have posted a reflective essay, but it can be read at any time, provide links to it from each of your other pages.

A good rule of thumb with e-Portfolios is that the reader should be able to get to anyplace in your work from anyplace in your work. Keep your navigational tool set the same by copying and pasting it on each artifact or on each page of your portfolio Web site. Many e-Portfolios are designed so that readers have to click on the reflective elements before reading the artifacts themselves. This ensures that readers will at least have the opportunity to understand the context of each entry, how and why the artifact was created.*

Whatever form your reflective elements take—a letter to your reader, an essay, a set of paragraphs introducing each artifact, or all of the above—the reflective writing you do could well be your most important writing in the course. Reflective components show your ability to be a reflective learner and to analyze a rhetorical situation effectively. They explain your choices in compiling the portfolio and demonstrate your thinking about your learning. One demonstration of reflective thinking is being able to identify important features or patterns in your writing process. Think of it this way: Readers of your portfolio—even your instructor—cannot see your entire writing process. If you’ve done most of your composing alone at the keyboard, your readers have not watched you write or watched you do online research; they haven’t participated in your peer response groups; they haven’t seen all of your notes, drafts, and other evidence of your evolving ideas. They won’t know what your friend suggested about the anecdote that opens your argument essay, and they won’t know how hard you’ve worked on adding transitions between paragraphs. Readers will be aware only of what you share with them in the reflective elements. In fact, it is for this reason that many students like to use digital video in their e-Portfolios: to show themselves writing. You can find a few examples of these kinds of clips through the companion Web site.

If your portfolio is a best-works portfolio, the reflective introduction or other elements function as a type of final exam—the ultimate test of what you’ve learned about the qualities of good writing, about anticipating

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readers’ needs, and about the importance of details. If you think of those elements as a final examination, you begin to see the importance you should place on them. Sometimes students work throughout the course very diligently on their assignments and projects, and then spend twenty minutes on a reflective piece. That’s simply not enough time for what is a critical component of your portfolio.

You have many options in writing an effective introduction or other reflective element, but you will need to demonstrate reflective learning or self-assessment. In other words, you must show that you can evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your writing, that you understand what you do well and what you still need to work on. Instructors are not looking for perfection; they are looking for writers who are insightful, conscientious, and engaged in learning.

If you have maintained a working folder and have managed to save, label, and file all of your work for this course in print, in electronic form, or in some combination of the two, here comes the payoff. Retrieve all of the notes, postwrites, and journal or blog entries in which you’ve recorded something about your writing process, your struggles and triumphs, the adjustments you’ve made. With these materials, you should be ready to begin drafting your reflective introduction. Have you ever written an essay and then written your introduction or title for the essay? This is a similar process.

As you reflect on your learning, think of a vivid or memorable way to represent that learning to your readers. Most portfolio evaluators are looking specifically for an indication that you can name your learning and identify its significance. Ultimately, this course is about teaching you how to make good writing decisions in the future, not simply about writing individual essays right now. To demonstrate their learning, many portfolio keepers find it valuable to use a powerful theme or rich metaphor to tie the contents of their portfolio together. We’ve talked a bit about metaphor above; but you may actually find it easier to develop a unifying metaphor after you’ve chosen your artifacts and articulate how each piece contributes to the whole.

• Tam, for example, describes her portfolio as the Boston T, with each artifact a stop along the way between where she boards the subway and her destination. Looking out the window as a passenger, you see a flurry of objects whizzing by you; but when you stop, you understand where you’ve been.

• Diego chooses a baseball theme. There are nine innings in the game, and different events happen in each of them. A run in the third inning may or may not be significant; it’s impossible to know until later, when an analysis of the entire game clarifies its importance.

• Frank, a student who grew up helping on his family farm, uses cropping corn as a metaphor. You have to have the right tools and equipment; you
have to apply your experience to choosing the right week to plant and
the right week to harvest; and you have to have luck with the weather.
In much the same way, to write well you need to have good tools and the
ability to reason based on experience; and, of course, you need a situa-
tion that encourages quality writing.

What you see in these examples is a deep connection between the stu-
dents' personal experiences and their new writing experiences. These stu-
dents have a better understanding of writing because they are able to see
how it works as a whole. The sum can be worth far more than its individu-
al parts. That, in effect, is a primary value of portfolio keeping. The navi-
gational scheme you develop may or may not include a unifying metaphor.
Regardless, the scheme should both inform your reflection in the introd-
tion and provide context for each artifact. The navigational scheme helps
your reader move through your work, but it also helps you understand the
connections you've been making between your world and the writing you've
produced in this course.

In the reflective element(s) of your portfolio, especially if yours is a
best-works portfolio, you might try some of the following:

• Discuss your best entry and why it is your best.
• Detail the revisions you've made and the improvements and changes
  that you want readers to notice.
• Demonstrate what this portfolio illustrates about you as a writer, stu-
dent, researcher, or critical thinker.
• Acknowledge the readers-respondents who have influenced your portfo-
  lio pieces and describe how.
• Reflect on what you've learned about writing, reading, or other topics of
  the course.
• Include specific examples or passages from your working folder.

If you are working on a process portfolio, in addition to some of the
points above, you may want to consider these ideas for developing the
reflective portion(s) of your portfolio:

• Outline the process you went through to produce one or more of your
  entries.
• Acknowledge your weaknesses, but show how you've worked to over-
  come them.
• Discuss each piece of writing you've included, touching on its strengths.

And here are several points to consider in planning and writing your
reflective introduction or essay:

• Who will be reading this piece? Is the evaluator reading to suggest
  changes? to assess your work and make a decision about your effort and
talent?
• What is the situation surrounding this reading?
• What will the outcome of the reading be? Can you influence it? If so, how and how much?
• What qualities of writing does your reader value?

Your instructor no doubt will add other points to consider that you need to examine carefully. Be sure to look back over the comments on and responses to your returned projects, and review the course syllabus and assignments. What patterns do you see in your instructor’s concerns or directions? Use what you’ve learned about your instructor’s values as a reader to compose a convincing, well-developed reflective introduction or essay. It’s doubtful that your instructor is looking to be flattered, and asking for an A is probably not the best strategy, but humor, liveliness, or anecdote might be very effective.

If your evaluators are unknown—that is, if a team of instructors will be reviewing your portfolio—ask your instructor to give you some information about them so that you can decide which logical, ethical, or emotional appeals might be most effective. In this scenario, you won’t know your readers personally (and they won’t know you at all). Still, it’s safe to assume that your evaluators will be trained in portfolio assessment and will share many of your instructor’s ideas about good writing. If your college writing program has a set of guidelines or policies and grading criteria, consult it for information as you begin composing.

If your classmates also will be reading your portfolio and perhaps contributing to its assessment in some way, gather as much feedback as you can and make use of it, immediately, in the work itself. It makes sense that your portfolio would be shared with the people who have read and responded to your writing for the entire term, and you may be asked to make your classmates or peer response group your audience. In some classes, the sharing is just that; but in others, your peers may be asked to evaluate the portfolio. Because your instinct would probably be to write more informally for your peers than for an instructor, find out what level of formality is expected, and what uses of language would be most appropriate.

How long should the reflective introduction or reflective essay be? Again, check with your instructor for these types of details. Remember, however, that you need to develop your ideas or support your claims as you would in any effective piece of writing. In this situation, you are trying to convince your reader that you have learned the course’s subject matter and also that you have chosen wisely, revised judiciously, and edited carefully. If you are asked to write a letter, follow the format for a business letter (check your style and usage handbook), and include the date and inside address, as well as an appropriate salutation and closing. Above all, remember how important first impressions are: It is critical that you take this piece through the same stages of the writing process that each of your entries has undergone.