

# *Writing Spaces* Assignments & Activities Archive

## Reflective Cover Letter

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# Reflective Cover Letter

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## Overview

Prior to a first-year writing course, students often see writing as static and rule-based, and have not been challenged to reflect on how they make choices about writing and the impact those choices have on readers. I have found in teaching my first-year writing course that introducing the idea of metacognition—awareness of one’s own thought process and ability (Tinberg)—empowers writers by helping them conceptualize the role of reflection in their growth as writers. Metacognition undergirds a strong process pedagogy by helping writers reflect on their own choices and processes and revise accordingly, rather than relying on instructor or peer feedback for direction. Metacognition also is central to the process of soliciting feedback: as professional writers, we know that being able to articulate what feedback we want and need is central to a successful social writing process. Thus, class activities that push students to enact metacognition reinforce the habits of mind that will help them not only be successful in the course, but also recognize how they might productively transfer lessons learned from the course to future writing situations.

This activity helps students engage in metacognitive reflection about their drafting and writing process for major assignments. I ask students to produce a reflective cover letter articulating their process and rhetorical choices for each draft of every major assignment they complete. My students have consistently told me that they find regularly completing this assignment to be one of the most valuable experiences in the class because it pushes them to think critically about their writing and decision-making and helps ensure they receive feedback from me and their peers that responds to their own concerns about their writing.

## Time Commitment

The assignment, which is completed outside of class and takes most students less than half an hour, should be due on the same day as the draft to which it is appended.

## Materials

Students should be provided with a copy of the assignment guidelines (see Appendix) and (optionally) a sample student reflection.

## Assignment Process

- Before the assignment, students practice freewriting metacognitively in class. At the start of the class, use general prompts like “Identify something you’ve learned about writing that changed the way you approach it. Why was it impactful? How did it change the way you write?” As students begin working on writing assignments, ask them to metacognitively identify moments of rhetorical choice-making with prompts like “Describe a point in drafting when you changed your approach because you thought about the audience’s needs or expectations.” Students may also benefit from reading pieces about metacognition and reflection like Tinberg and Taczak.
- Next, the assignment is provided to students on the same day the first major paper in the course is assigned. Assigning this activity at the same time as the paper highlights the role metacognition will play throughout the writing process in a first-year writing course.
- Students complete a reflective cover letter with their first draft of the paper. The instructor should respond to specific concerns articulated by students in their cover letters in providing feedback on the assignment to affirm the relevance of students’ concerns. The assignment can also be integrated into the peer review process; students should identify

questions from their cover letters on which they hope to receive feedback from their peers and share them with peer reviewers.

- Students complete additional reflective cover letters with any subsequent drafts of their papers. Again, instructors should respond to specific concerns articulated in cover letters in feedback and take students' goals for writing into account in grading.

## Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Practice articulating and reflecting on their goals and rhetorical choices in writing
- Reflect on their writing and thinking processes for the assignment, allowing them to refine their approach to future writing assignments/situations

## Learning Accommodations

- Instructors should introduce the activity in class and provide students with written directions to create redundancy and maximize the accessibility of the directions.
- Students could be offered the option of completing the reflection in multiple modes, for example by creating an audio recording or including visual elements.

## Works Cited

- Taczak, Kara. "Reflection is Critical for Writers' Development." *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, Utah State University Press, 2015, pp. 78-81.
- Tinberg, Howard. "Metacognition is Not Cognition." *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, Utah

State University Press, 2015, pp. 75-76.

## Appendix: Reflective Cover Letters Assignment Sheet

### Reflective Cover Letters

#### *Deliverables*

For each draft of the major assignments you complete this semester, you will write a reflective cover letter. These provide you the opportunity to reflect on and demonstrate to me the effort and rhetorical consideration you put into your work. It is also an opportunity for you to tell me about your purpose in writing so that I can assess your work in terms of your effectiveness in achieving your own goals rather than viewing it solely through the lens of my expectations.

Cover letters should be at least **250 words in length** (about one double-spaced page). Your writing can be informal. Don't worry about organization, grammar, etc. or about completing multiple drafts; I want you to focus on your ideas and reflection.

For cover letters for first submissions, please be sure to **tell me what feedback would be most helpful to you as you revise your paper**. For cover letters for second submissions, you must **describe your revision process and how you responded to any feedback you were given** (even if you did not take suggestions). In addition, you might consider answering the following questions (though you do not need to answer any one in particular, and almost certainly cannot answer all of them):

- What were you trying to accomplish in your writing? Did your purpose change as you wrote? In what ways did you accomplish your goals? In what ways did you struggle?
- What was your writing process for this assignment? How was it similar or different to your past writing process? What will you do similarly or differently in future writing?

- What rhetorical considerations did you prioritize for this assignment? What did you not think about, or struggle to accommodate, given the priorities you set? Did your thoughts about this change as you worked on your draft?
- If a reader were giving you constructive feedback on your paper now, what would they say? What would you continue to work on if you had more time?

### *Grading & Feedback*

Collectively, your cover letters are worth 5% of your final grade. Grades for cover letters will be based on the completion of the letter and the quality of reflection therein. In addition, the way I grade your paper submissions will be influenced by what you say in your cover letter, since they will inform me about your purpose, process, etc.

### *Learning & Assessment Objectives (Why Are We Doing This?)*

Completing cover letters will help you:

- Articulate your goals and rhetorical choices in writing
- Reflect on your writing and thinking process, which helps you refine your approach for future writing

Reading your cover letters will help me to:

- Assess your understanding and application of course content
- Provide better individualized feedback and support
- Grade more fairly by assessing your effectiveness in accomplishing your own goals rather than ones I prescribed