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Becoming a Reflective Learner

Consider a lighthouse keeper, a groundskeeper, a timekeeper. What do they have in common? Keepers keep watch. The reflective portfolio method asks you to keep watch over your own work and your own learning, and to pay close attention to your strengths and weaknesses, including your preferences and practices when working on projects. Understanding more about yourself as a writer, reader, and thinker helps you make sound choices for your portfolio.

With practice, you'll notice patterns or preferences in your learning. Reflective learners develop the ability to identify and discuss their choices, strengths, and learning processes. For either a process or presentation portfolio, you may be expected to include an introductory reflective essay or other reflective elements. For a process portfolio, you will want to identify what you have learned both from working on the individual projects and from the process of collecting, selecting, and arranging the entries. For a presentation portfolio, your reflective elements might outline the skills and strengths demonstrated by the artifacts and why you chose them for inclusion in your portfolio. Is this something you need to do? It's better to begin developing your reflective-thinking skills now than right before your portfolio is due.

PRACTICING REFLECTIVE LEARNING

Step back and evaluate your performance: What do you do well when faced with a new project? What do you need to do better to improve your working process? Maybe you have great ideas but find it difficult to organize them. Maybe you come up with provocative solutions but have trouble organizing and presenting sufficient and relevant evidence to support them. Maybe

you have trouble incorporating feedback during the drafting and revision process. If you can identify your working attitudes and habits, you've made a great start toward practicing reflective learning.

You've made a start, too, if you wrote in response to Time to Reflect 1 (p. 8). Try to cultivate the habit of recording, at least once a week or so, some thoughts about your learning in your course, internship, or other portfolio context. Ask yourself: What am I learning? How am I learning it? What is or isn't making sense? coming together? clicking? Remember: You can do this with a pen in a notebook or journal, or on your laptop or tablet, or on your phone in some quick notes to yourself. Write and reflect on your writing, and then store your reflection in your working folder. If you get into the habit of recording details about your learning experiences, you will have considerable materials to draw upon later in compiling your portfolio.

Write informally about the material you've covered recently in your course or internship:

- What do you understand, or what could you explain to others?
- Record your observations about the pace and quality of the course and your role in it.
- Have you made a contribution that made others think?
- Did someone else contribute something that made you think?
- What are your goals for next week?

It may seem like busywork, but this kind of record keeping and self-analysis will help you compose a first-rate portfolio. For instance, you can use this reflective writing as a springboard to the more formal self-assessment that your instructor might ask for later. It's difficult to go back when the class is nearly over and trace what you were thinking in the second week of class. Keeping watch now of your working process may lead you to an idea for a navigational scheme in your portfolio, to a design framework, or to a holistic and unifying metaphor for your learning in the course.

To make sure you are practicing reflective learning throughout the course, to help you keep watch, your instructor may assign one or more of the following reflective-writing tasks:

- Making regular entries in a writing journal or blog
- Composing reviewer memos
- Carrying out a midterm self-assessment

If you're not assigned one of these writing tasks, do at least one anyway on your own. Keeping watch can help you in the long run, and writing informally is a good way to learn material, rehearse main ideas, reinforce classroom discussion, and respond to assigned reading material. *Writing to learn* is the popular name for this kind of activity, and reflective learners depend on it.

JOURNALS AND BLOGS

Journals or blogs can take many forms — a personal diary, a travel narrative, a professional record. Generally, a journal can contain anything its keeper chooses to record; but for the purpose of becoming a more critically reflective learner, keep a writing journal in which you work through the decisions you're making for your portfolio. Track ideas, questions, problems, and triumphs; jot down possible titles, your work schedule, outlines, and lists. Note the ways your projects are developing or changing, too. Record your learning evolution using a method that is comfortable for you, whether that is a paper notebook, a document on your computer, or an online blog.

If you're not familiar with blogs, review some blogging applications like WordPress, Google's Blogger, and Tumblr to see what possibilities and features they offer. Using a blogging tool for reflective journal keeping is convenient because you can access your blog from any computer that is connected to the Internet. If you are in a class or internship that requires you to keep a blog, or to use another social media tool for your class (Twitter or a Facebook group, for example) there may be specific questions you need to answer; however, what makes blog writing effective is the immediacy of the

TIME TO REFLECT 5—*Analyzing Keys to Reflective Learning*

Here's an entry from Yvette's writing journal:

> I think I'm trying to do way too much in this version. By the time I get to the conclusion, I'm having to summarize too much and cover the same territory again, which may be a sign that I've been over-ambitious. Shane [a peer reviewer] hinted that my thesis was too broad, but I didn't want to hear it because I was still very excited about the ideas and still finding plenty to say. Now that I've found more examples and developed most of the major points, I see that I need to go back and sharpen the thesis by dropping the historical stuff, where I cover some of the earliest uses of social media. I think the paper will work better without that overview, and I'll just concentrate on the uses of social media as activism. It seems as though I've done a lot of writing on the history part for nothing, but maybe I can use it for another essay later if I stay interested in it.

What evidence do you find here that Yvette is a reflective learner? How does this entry move her writing process forward? Compare Yvette's journal entry about her writing process to one of your own. Have you found yourself making decisions about a project through your reflective writing? To what extent are you able to identify patterns or habits in your own work?

ideas. When you think of something, blog it. Don't wait until next week. Later you can spend time reviewing your blog. You also can copy and paste links to Web pages you want to review later into your blog. You can use it as a research log, too. Some students, in fact, use their blog as their working folder or even as an electronic portfolio tool itself. You can link all of your artifacts through your blog. (Because blogs are an online space, there are privacy issues. If you wish for your blog to remain private, use the privacy settings that most blogging tools provide to limit access to your blog. If your instructor wants to be able to review your reflective blogging, you can set your blog up so that only those you invite have access to it.)

Read Time to Reflect 5, and answer the questions in your journal or blog.

REVIEWER MEMOS

Since writing is a way of working out ideas, we often are able to write our way to a solution or to a valuable insight. Various forms of reflective writing ask you to write about the work you're currently doing. In other words, you might write to a potential reader about how a project is going or what you've accomplished so far or what's not going so well. In the act of writing, for a real or imagined audience, you might solve the problem you're having. You can write reflectively at any point in the writing or working process. Some people use reflective writing between drafts to help sharpen the focus of their writing or to help figure out the most effective organizational structure. Others find it helpful to write a cover note when preparing to share a draft with reviewers. That is, when you are about to share your writing with peer reviewers, a valued colleague, or your instructor, you would write a note or memo that gives them some insight into your goals for the piece or asks them to pay attention to a certain part.

Before asking other people to review your work and offer feedback, reflect on these questions about your project: How do you feel about it, or how is the process going? What shape do you think it's in? What questions do you have for readers about the piece? Do some work judging your own work before you ask others to judge, and do it in writing. It's not enough to think about your answers to these questions: The act of writing your answers gives you more insight.

The questions in Figures 4.1 and 4.2, on pages 30 and 31, were designed by an instructor for students to answer about their own essays, the processes they went through to write the papers, and their thoughts on the feedback or advice they received from readers. (Reflection shared between readers and writers helps both get more out of the response process, as we discuss below.) You might use the sample questions as prompts for your own reflection.

FIGURE 4.1 *Reviewer Memo for Your Informational Brochure*

To:
From:
Re:

1. My target audience for this brochure is:
2. My key purpose in designing this brochure is to:
3. My most important decisions or choices included the following:
4. The most useful and credible source I am using is:
5. The design element I like best right now is:
6. The design element I'm frustrated with or don't like is:
7. Reviewers can help me most by helping me answer the following questions I have about this version:

Using Reviewer Memos to Get More Out of Peer Review

Because they give your readers direction and focus, reviewer memos help move the peer response process along in ways that you need them to move. Composing a reflective memo for a reviewer or reader helps you identify areas in a draft with which you feel dissatisfied, even if you cannot quite name, let alone fix, the problems. Alerting readers to these areas will help them help you — if your cover memo can focus readers on what you feel your writing needs. It also leads to more thoughtful responses. Without a cover memo, reviewers often give generic, unfocused commentary. How many times has a classmate read a paper of yours and said, "I like it; it's good," and nothing more? When you reply, "Are you sure?" your reader finds a spelling mistake, but that's about it. Reading a memo first helps readers know where to look and encourages them to give considered and thorough feedback.

When you compose a memo, usually you describe your working process, identifying the steps you took or a strategy that proved fruitful. These descriptions — one account for each project — provide a record of how you felt about each work before readers saw it. This is an excellent form of directed reflection. Reviewer memos concentrate the reader's attention on your focus, support, or organization so that they have more to say to you about what works and what needs work in your draft.

FIGURE 4.2 *Reviewer Memo for Your Proposal Argument*

Name:
Title:

1. What problem or issue are you addressing in your proposal, and how did you come up with this topic? If you changed topics along the way, when did you switch and why?
2. What exactly are you proposing — a solution or change in policy, procedure, or attitude? Who will be interested in this proposal?
3. What is the most important piece of research that informs your proposal? Summarize the author's argument in two or three sentences.
4. Name three specific ways that your paper has changed since our last workshop. If you wish, identify someone who was very helpful in guiding those changes.
5. How can I [the instructor] help you most in my response to this draft? Be specific about parts or passages that you think still need work or that you want me to look at carefully. What questions do you have for me as a reader?

Reviewer memos can vary in form or function, but they help writers keep track of the process they went through to plan, research, and draft each paper, as well as where they got stuck and where things clicked. These notes help jog your memory and provide you with phrases to use when you are asked to explain your writing process in your portfolio or are expected to reflect on choices you made. Keep these memos in your working folder, and review them frequently to move in directed ways on your revisions. The

TIME TO REFLECT *6—Generating Reviewer Memo Questions*

Review the sample memos in Figures 4.1 and 4.2, and then draft three or more questions for the project you're working on right now. Your questions should ask what you have done so far and what you still need to do. Answer your own questions in your journal or blog. You might also do an Internet search for blogs that reflect on writing in progress to get some ideas for your reflective questions.

memo examples in Figures 4.1 and 4.2 illustrate how the questions should change according to the assignment and what you've already done in the course.

MIDTERM SELF-ASSESSMENTS

It is very important to keep watch over your work as your course or internship program approaches its midway point. By this time, certain concepts or routines should be familiar to you. If you've missed a class that covered something important, or if you don't quite understand a term, concept, or assignment, there's still time to catch up, clarify, or ask for extra help. If you don't get help in a timely way, you may not have a chance to learn from the task you were assigned and apply your learning to what comes next in the course.

Plan to take stock, then, of how you're doing at midterm or at the halfway mark in your portfolio process. Examine which strategies are or aren't working for you, and what you need to concentrate on for the remainder of the course. Your instructor may ask you to take stock by conducting an inventory of your working folder for your portfolio. You should try to look both forward and backward at your progress in the course and write some sort of self-assessment or reflective piece. This is good practice for the reflective elements that will be included in your portfolio. Even if your instructor doesn't require this type of reflection, it's an excellent idea to review your working folder at midterm and spend at least thirty minutes writing your own self-assessment. Answer questions you have about your process, about your strengths, and about your preferences and working habits. Try to evaluate your habits and see where your record keeping, organizational skills, or reflective learning practice could use some work.

In writing self-assessments, students often discover something about their working patterns that they had not noticed before, and sometimes they find areas where they need to work harder. Aisha, for example, describes her typical writing process: "I tend to write one draft, bring it to the workshop, then edit that one draft a little and hand it in as a final draft. I never spend a lot of time writing things over or revising my papers. This is a habit I still have from high school classes." Kabir sees a lack of development: "I find that in my writing I have good ideas, but I don't develop them enough. I feel all my papers are good, but they need more." And Jamie admits that she isn't giving readers enough help: "I tend to leave things unclear. I assume because I know what I'm talking about that my readers should also." Each of these students identifies areas where his or her writing could use work, and recognizing problem areas is a great place to start. Because these students took stock of their work at midterm, they can benefit from their self-assessment over the rest of the course.

Journals, reviewer memos, and self-assessments are just three ways of keeping watch over your own learning. Your instructor or team leader will likely have other ideas as well. Practicing reflection throughout your portfolio process, using any method that works for you, makes your learning more meaningful and increases your chances of pulling together a first-rate portfolio.