**TIME TO REFLECT 11—*Mapping Connections between Artifacts***

Draw a wireframe and label the lines between things with descriptive writing about the relationship represented by that line. In what ways (as many as you can think of) does that artifact connect to the one you've linked it to on the diagram?

If all of your sorting and review still leaves you uncertain, talk to an instructor or mentor about other options. Maybe you want to try one of the projects or assignments again, which would mean an entirely new draft, an alternative approach, or a new target audience. While that might be acceptable, be sure to check first because it may be that you need to provide evidence that you have taken the entry through all of the stages of the development process or that you are only showing work produced in the context of a particular course or program.

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# Preparing to Write the Introduction and Other Reflective Components

Along with choice and variety, reflection — also referred to as self-assessment or analysis — is the third major characteristic of a portfolio, and as you prepare for assessment, reflection moves to the top of your list. You'll need to find out whether you are expected to write a reflective or analytical essay to introduce your portfolio or if you have other options for the reflective elements necessary to your portfolio. We know that first impressions are very important and sometimes lasting, so the introduction to your portfolio is crucial to establishing your credibility as a strong, careful writer. Research, in fact, has found that portfolio readers in large-scale assessments make their judgments quite early in the process of reading a portfolio, and that entries in the middle or at the end do not much alter their evaluation.[3] This finding emphasizes the importance of a well-crafted introduction and suggests that your best entry should follow the introduction. Remember, however, that the study was conducted in large-scale assessments, which means that hundreds of portfolios were being evaluated in one session.

If your situation differs, so might the outcome. You need to decide, of course, on the best order, and you may want to address the reasons for the order in the introductory piece, particularly if you have grouped artifacts into categories rather than presenting them chronologically. You need to ensure that your reader understands the reasons for that categorization and this, in turn, emphasizes your ability to see and articulate the connections and relationships in your work. Whatever your decisions, your job in the

[3]This reader-response study was conducted at the University of Michigan. See Liz Hamp-Lyons and William Condon, "Questioning Assumptions about Portfolio-Based Assessment," *College Composition and Communication* 44.2 (May 1993): 176–190.

introduction is to give some of the reasons behind them. If the introduction does not establish a clear purpose for the portfolio and provide a context for the artifacts contained within it, your reader may not see the learning, growth, or accomplishments you intend the portfolio to demonstrate.

Because of the importance of reflection and/or analysis in portfolio keeping, you should spend a significant portion of the portfolio composition process considering and analyzing what your choices and changes *mean*. Can you address the "so what?" question about the work you are presenting in your portfolio? Reflection can and should take place throughout your portfolio-keeping experience, but at some point it's important to make the analysis more formal, to present and discuss evidence of your learning. Before you begin, be sure you understand how the reflective elements in your portfolio should function and what role this type of analysis should play in terms of the purpose and audience for your portfolio. Here are several points to consider in planning and writing your introductory analysis or what some evaluators will call a reflective introduction or essay:

- Who will be reading this self-assessment? Is the evaluator reading to suggest changes?
- What is the situation surrounding this reading? Is it to assess your work and make a decision about your effort or demonstrated abilities?
- What will the outcome of the reading be? Can you influence it? If so, how much and in what ways?
- What qualities of writing does your reader value?

Clarify with your instructor or supervisor what the reflective or analytical elements of your portfolio should be or include. Some audiences may expect an opening statement — a cover letter, introduction, preface, or essay. A longer reflective element does not have to be the first entry in a paper portfolio, but it often is, owing to its role in establishing a relationship with your readers and evaluators. Even if you are not required to present an opening statement or cover letter directed to your audience, you may be expected to provide accounts of your choices or descriptions of your process throughout the portfolio. In an e-portfolio, of course, you may have more options for the placement of the reflective elements, so you might have introductions to each artifact with some analysis or other commentary. Others may prefer to see a preface to each artifact in order to assess how and why the entry was developed or what contribution it makes to your portfolio's purpose. That way, no matter how they navigate through your digital portfolio, users will encounter each artifact within a context that you provide. Ask your instructor or program director if each entry should have a preface.

Whatever form your reflective elements or self-analysis take — an informal letter to your reader, a formal thesis-driven essay, paragraphs presenting each artifact, a video, an audio podcast, or all of the above — the



reflective writing you do could well be your most important writing in the course. Reflective components demonstrate your ability to be a thoughtful, conscientious learner and to effectively analyze a rhetorical situation. Evaluators want to see you engaging in analysis of your own choices in compiling the portfolio and demonstrating your ability to judge your own learning. One demonstration of reflective thinking is being able to identify important features or patterns in your work. Think of it this way: readers of your portfolio — even your instructor — do not have access to your entire working process, academic coursework, or the experiences you've had in classroom or digital environments. Your readers have not watched you do online research; they haven't participated in your collaborative groups; they haven't seen all your projects evolve from brainstorming to finished product. They won't know how a paper you wrote in one of your courses connected to an experience you had in a study abroad program. Readers will be aware only of what you share with them as you break down the parts and present the essential features in the reflective elements. In fact, it is for this reason that many students like to use video in their e-portfolios: to show themselves working and talking about their work.

To provide this insight into your working and thinking process, especially if you are working on a process portfolio, 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 overcome them.
- Discuss each project you've included, touching on its strengths.

If yours is a presentation portfolio, you might try some of the following for the analysis or reflection components:

- Discuss the strongest artifact 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, student, researcher, or critical thinker.
- Acknowledge the readers-respondents who have influenced your portfolio pieces and describe how.
- Analyze what you've learned about writing, reading, or other topics of the course or program.
- Include specific examples or passages from your working folder.

For many portfolios, the reflective introduction or other analytical elements function as a type of final exam — the ultimate test of what you've learned in your course, internship, or degree program. If you think of those

**TIME TO REFLECT 12—Synthesizing Your Expectations Then and Now**

Review your answers to Time to Reflect 1 (p. 8), 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 self-assessment or reflective elements?

elements as a final examination, you begin to see the importance you should place on them. Sometimes students work throughout a course or program 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. The good thing about thinking of reflection as your final exam is that is gives you the opportunity to be part of the assessment of your work: with reflection, you have to assess yourself and then show that you can evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your own work, that you understand what you do well and what you still need to work on. Portfolio evaluators are not always looking for perfection but, for the most part, they are always looking for learners who are insightful, conscientious, and engaged in the development of their own skills and knowledge.

If you have maintained a working folder and have managed to save, label, and file all of your work in print, in electronic form, or in some combination of the two, here comes the payoff. Retrieve all of the notes, reviewer memos, and journal or blog entries in which you've recorded something about your working process, your struggles and triumphs, the adjustments you've made. With these materials, you should be ready to begin drafting your analysis about what it all means. Have you ever written the body paragraphs of an essay before writing your introduction or title? This is a similar process.

As you reflect on your learning and analyze your own choices, habits, or tendencies, 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, the portfolio process is coaching you to make good decisions in the future, not simply to produce final projects right now. This is where the metaphor you select can come in handy.

## METAPHORICAL THINKING

What word or phrase best describes your work in your course or program? If, for instance, *growth* is the term that comes to your mind most frequently,



then the metaphor of a garden might be appropriate. Or suppose *new understanding* captures your progress well. You might explore how the metaphor of a person climbing a mountain symbolizes your work. It's a long path and a difficult struggle through "course" terrain; but as you climb, what's below becomes clear.

If you think metaphorically and holistically, your ability to make connections between ideas and artifacts in your portfolio will increase. Metaphorical thinking can be a very good place to start when developing the reflective components of your portfolio. (Metaphors can also help provide you with design themes for electronic portfolios.) Selecting a metaphor for your portfolio can be an effective way to jump-start your thinking as you prepare to compose your reflection. Metaphorically speaking, the reflective elements of the portfolio are the connective tissue that binds the muscles and bones and organs of the portfolio together and allow it to function as a working whole rather than a random assortment of parts.

You may 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 be lucky 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 situation that encourages quality writing.

What you see in these examples is a deep connection between the students' personal experiences and their new learning experiences. These students have a better understanding of their skills because they are able to see them through a unifying idea. The sum can be worth far more than its individual parts. That, in effect, is a primary value of portfolio keeping.

The navigational scheme you develop may or may not include a unifying metaphor. Regardless, the scheme should both inform your reflection in the introduction 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 work you've produced in this course.

Your course or program will no doubt provide 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, review the course syllabus and assignments. What patterns do you see in the feedback you received on projects? Use what you've learned about your evaluators' values as readers to compose a convincing, well-developed reflective introduction or essay. It's doubtful that readers of your portfolio are 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 or administrators will be reviewing your portfolio — ask for 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. If your course or program has a set of guidelines or policies and grading criteria, consult it for information as you begin composing, and try to find out as much as you can about who will be reading and/or evaluating your portfolio.

For a portfolio being evaluated at the end of an introductory course, you might determine that your readers want to get to know you as a person as well as a writer. Readers might want to know how you feel about the pieces you've written, what you're proud of, and what techniques or activities were most helpful to you. In this case, the genres of narration and description are appropriate, where you "tell a story" of your journey, for example. In this situation, your style might be characterized by dialogue or an extended metaphor or humor. Such an approach might not be your best bet, however, in a more formal assessment context.

For a portfolio being evaluated at the end of an advanced course, a capstone or one required for graduation, or as the culmination of an internship, the expectations may be more formal and more rigorous. The more "professional" your portfolio is supposed to be, the more urgent it is to clarify and understand the expectations regarding reflection. In some assessment situations, it will not be appropriate for you to share personal anecdotes about your writing habits or to discuss your struggle with editing. For a career-oriented portfolio, narrative and description are not the genres that should characterize your reflective elements. Instead, to develop your reflective introduction, depend on evidence-based assertions about your learning or your achievements. Each assertion you make, of course, will need to be supported with examples, illustrations, or "facts" — like quotations from your own writing. Your style should probably be direct and precise, without digressions.



How long should the reflective introduction or essay be? Again, check with your mentor, supervisor, or instructor for such 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 subject matter and developed the appropriate skill set. If you are asked to write a reflective 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 all of the reflective elements through stages of drafting, getting feedback, revising, editing, and proofreading.