

Written Reflection: Creating Better Thinkers, Better Writers

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It is Wednesday, the day I collect students' notebooks to check their weekly work. Since the beginning of writing time, students have been noisily completing pages of prewriting, drafting, or revising. The laser printer has been spewing paper continuously for the past fifteen minutes. Several boys are fighting over the sole working hole puncher. They must ready their printed pages for their working portfolios. Two of my chatty girls have been "conferencing" at a third girl's computer. One sits on the table behind the writer, reading the screen over her shoulder, and the other sits on the floor. They have been giggling hysterically

for the past ten minutes. I glance at the clock—ten minutes left in the hour. "Take out your writer's log," I direct over the hub-bub of the room. The chatty girls reluctantly return to their own computers and seats. Several students groan. "I know, I know. I don't *want* to think. Thinking is *hard*. Thinking is *work*," I tease in my best whiny teenager voice while students turn to the section of their notebooks labeled "Writer's Log." "What's been going on in your writing this past week?" I ask.

The quiet in the room is even more overwhelming than the noise of a minute ago. Several students scribble furiously. Obviously they have much to say. One boy sits perplexed. I walk toward him and read over his shoulder, and he asks what "that thing is called where we checked to see if our topic sentences fit our thesis." "Unity and coherence?" I ask. "Yeah," he says and begins to write. Several students finish in minutes and shut their notebooks. Others are still writing thirty seconds before the bell rings, when I tell them they may put their notebooks in the crate to be graded and pack up. The noise resumes and, prompted by the bell, it drifts out into the hallway. What was that calm spell in the normal carnival atmosphere? It is

a time routinely set aside in our writer's workshop for reflection.

Reflection is a form of metacognition—thinking about thinking. It means looking back with new eyes in order to discover—in this case, looking back on writing. As Pianko states, "The ability to reflect on what is being written seems to be the essence of the difference between able and not so able writers from their initial writing experience onward" (qtd. in Yancey 4). Able writers can think critically about their writing.

Not only do I want all of my students to be able writers, I also want them to be active in their learning process. As Luanne Kowalke writes in *Methods That Matter*, "To make sure that children become intelligent, insightful, educated human beings, we educators must help them become conscious of their own learning and thought process. Instead of teaching students *what* to think, we need to teach them *how* to think, and how to think for themselves" (234). I do not want to direct my students' every action and decision about their writing. My goal is to teach them to think critically and communicate clearly about their writing in order to gain understanding and become better writers.

Before explaining the three types of assignments I use in my writing classes, drawing distinctions among them, and discussing the methods I use to promote quality written reflections, it is important to note that these assignments alone are not the only key to creating better writers who are actively involved in their own learning. (See Figure 1.) I could have saved myself frustration and time had I known from the beginning that a necessary element in teaching students to be independent, critical thinkers and writers is to make sure they care about what they are writing. As Bryan, one of my sophomore students, pointed out to me, writing and reflection are both “just an assignment to do; just something to get done so you don’t have to do it” if the writing does not matter to the student.

“So when does the writing matter?” I asked Bryan. “Is there ever a time when it isn’t just an assignment?”

If writing had a purpose beyond just a grade, Bryan told me, students would spend more time really thinking about their work, “because there is something to do . . . more of something to do *better* than just . . . to do it.”

I realized something that maybe should have been obvious to me from the beginning: Reflection is only one piece of the puzzle. Alone, it doesn’t look like much. But add authentic writing experiences—having students write for real audiences, giving students choice in topic and/or genre, allowing students to choose the writing they take to final draft—and the picture of able writers actively involved in their own learning begins to take shape. I revised my writing class, adapting a writer’s workshop approach from Atwell and Reif, and it became the perfect place to use reflective writing and actually see results.

FIGURE 1.
THREE TYPES OF REFLECTIVE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Writer’s Log: a quick write that focuses on one week of writing

Draft Letter: longer writing that focuses on a single piece of work

Portfolio Letter: polished writing that discusses a body of work

The Writer’s Log

The Writer’s Log, part of our weekly routine in workshop, is the first reflective assignment I introduce. Once a week, students turn in a notebook of their work to me for credit. It is a simple way of holding the students accountable for workshop time. The section of their notebook labeled “Writer’s Log” is a weekly opportunity for students to step back, think, and write a paragraph about how their writing is progressing and what they are learning. At first, I naively thought this abstract explanation of the Writer’s Log was enough for my students to produce quality reflections. However, as with any genre, I learned it takes time to teach characteristics and expectations before students can write thoughtful, helpful logs.

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Now when I introduce the Writer’s Log, I explain this is not a time to summarize what was done during the week. It is a time to *think* about what was done. I show models of logs that simply summarize and logs that use higher order thinking skills. We discuss the differences. I encourage students to focus on one aspect of their writing, many times reminding them of mini-lesson topics such as leads or using specific nouns and verbs. Listing mini-lesson topics also reminds students of the writing terminology they may use in their logs when they discuss

their work. We brainstorm questions good writers may ask when thinking about their work.

After understanding my expectations, many students write thoughtful entries that not only help me monitor their progress and meet their individual needs as writers, but also help them think, understand, and make decisions about their writing. For example, Shannon writes:

I plan on in the future working harder on my conclusion. I found that it was the most difficult part in my editorial because I didn't want to recopy my introduction but it seems like I did. From this I have concluded that in the future when I work hard on my conclusions I will do two things: incorporate not only the introduction but what I talked about in the paper into the conclusion, not get frustrated about the length of the conclusion like I have been to just be proud of what I accomplished in the piece.

Shannon's log demonstrates her problem solving skills. Looking back on her conclusion, she is able to identify that it is simply a copy of her introduction. Besides identifying a problem, she determines a plan of action: "to incorporate what I talked about in the paper into the conclusion." Her plans show me she understands that a good conclusion recaps the main ideas of the piece. Not only can I see that Shannon understands how to write conclusions, but I can also see that she is able to analyze her writing and determine a course of action. Thinking through her writing in this way has helped Shannon to become a more able writer, one who relies less on me to tell her what to think and do about her writing.

The same week, Jeff writes:

I have worked really hard on my editorial. I have tried a new method for prewriting—I have a bunch of different things in [Microsoft] Word for different parts such as opposing arguments, topic sentences, and others. It is kind of confusing to me because I have all this good information but I can't put it into a good piece. I have been prewriting for 2 weeks and I still don't have a rough draft.

Jeff's log shows he has analyzed his progress and is making decisions about where he should be. He is taking risks as a writer by using a "new method for prewriting" and has identified difficulties with his new method. He is confused about how to move from his neat, organized categories and lists to a draft. His log allows me to give Jeff suggestions, while giving him control of his process and writing.

The logs are a necessary learning tool for my students as well as for me. When students first begin writing logs, I read them each week. I make comments, asking questions to help a student clarify an idea or to prompt deeper thinking. When a student has simply summarized activities for the week, I might ask, "Did any of the strategies you used this week work better than ones used last week?" As time passes and students have had more practice with reflective writing, they begin to write more thorough logs, and I begin to skim the logs, looking for misunderstandings I need to clarify for an individual student or questions and problems that may become mini-lessons. Weekly, I learn what my students need, and students practice the thinking necessary to become thoughtful, able writers.

The Draft Letter

The Draft Letter, though similar to the Writer's Log, is routinely written at the end of each unit rather than at the end of each week. At the end of each unit, students must turn in their best piece to me for my feedback. Before I will accept this draft, it must be accompanied by a reflective letter. Unlike the logs,

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the letter should reflect on *several* aspects of the student's writing. The students may write about favorite parts of the piece, any weaknesses they see in this particular piece, what new techniques they tried that differed from their regular process, or any number of other aspects that we brainstorm together. The letters, I explain, are to be more polished and thoughtful than the logs. "This is your chance to tell me anything I should know before I give you comments on your writing," I tell my students. "Nothing feels worse than to be criticized for something you already know isn't working well, or to not be commended for something you really thought was great. Let me know what you think, and I can help you."

Most students take this offer seriously as they write their letters. For example, in the first of the

following examples, Mike writes a comparison that explains why his latest piece is better than his previous piece. His letter is clear, relatively polished, and explores in depth the aspects of his writing that make his feature article better than his profile. However, some letters, such as Nate's, do not contain the depth of thought I expect to see in able writers. I use these two examples to demonstrate the difference between thoughtful and superficial letters. Mike writes:

Dear Ms. S,

I have worked hard on my two pieces to make them better. But I think that my feature article is much better than my profile.

My introduction is the first big difference between the two pieces. The attention getter in my profile just wasn't as good as in my feature article. In my feature article the story is a little bit more detailed than in my profile. In my feature article I say, "As he grows closer, you start to panic. Your hands start shaking." This is showing that it gets into better detail. The attention getter goes even further than what is shown. And in my profile I said, "Imagine walking into a house that is totally engulfed in flames." This doesn't get into much detail and is short.

The thesis is also better in my feature article than in my profile because it fits better. I think it may fit better because we did that thing where we looked at all our topic sentences and saw if they fit our thesis. In my profile I wrote, "There are many reasons why being a firefighter is exciting for Tom Osborne and many reasons why it is not." This really only fits one or two paragraphs. But in my feature article I wrote, "There are hundreds of different fears that people have which makes them very common. And people have these fears at different levels." This thesis allowed me to write about all the things I had to and still fit.

The second big difference is the development in the two pieces. In my feature article I used a lot of stories. For example, the one about somebody being bit by a red widow or me scaring my mom. In my profile I didn't get much out of the person I interviewed. I used facts well in my feature article. I had a whole paragraph about how many people had phobias in the U.S. and in our class. I also used facts in the profile though. I used them when talking about the person's wages. In my feature article I also used a lot of examples. I had a whole paragraph about weird phobias. The whole paragraph was examples of different phobias. In my profile I didn't really use examples.

This is why I think I have written my feature article better than my profile.

In contrast, Nate writes:

Dear Ms. Swartzendruber,

I really enjoyed doing this last paper. The fact I got to interview someone and write about one certain aspect of him or her made me feel like I was a writer or journalist for a newspaper.

I really like the order that I placed the events in. This time, unlike most of my other papers, I did not really do it in perfect timeline form. I think that it makes it a little more interesting to read.

At first my topic sentences really did not go along with the rest of my paragraphs. They were not specific enough. They were too general. Over all I think I did a really good job on my paper.

Although Nate discusses several aspects of his writing, his letter is very similar to the early Writers' Logs many students write. He evaluates when he points out he likes "the order that [he] placed the events in," but he does not explain this idea in depth. A more thoughtful letter would analyze how he ordered his events and why this method of organization seemed to work better. Many students have the same problem of being unable to explain their thoughts in depth when they first attempt to write longer, more polished reflective pieces.

Modeling letters such as Mike's and Nate's is one way I've helped students to better understand the thoughtfulness that good writers exhibit. We read the models and discuss the differences we notice. Although both pieces discuss specific aspects of the author's writing, Mike's letter covers specific methods of development as well as specific parts of his introductions, whereas Nate discusses only topic sentences and organization. Mike also supports his evaluations with quotations and examples from his writing. For example, he explains, "The attention getter in my profile just wasn't as good as in my feature article. In my feature article the story is a little bit more detailed than in my profile. In my feature article I say, 'As he grows closer, you start to panic. Your hands start shaking.' This is showing that it gets into better detail." Although Nate makes judgments about his writing, such as saying he likes his method of organization, he does not really explain this idea. His letter lacks the analysis that Mike's contains. After looking at the two letters, the students understand more clearly the thoughtfulness that better writers should work toward demonstrating.

While discussing models helps students to write more thoughtful letters, just as important are the connections made between our regular mini-lessons and reflective writing. By the time students write their first draft letter in my expository writing

class, we have learned about using examples to develop ideas. I remind them of this, and we discuss how they can use this same technique in reflective writing as well. Similarly, after we learn about how to use quotes or how to compare and contrast, I ask students to try these techniques in their Draft Letters. As the semester progresses, these qualities begin to appear in students' Writers' Logs as well as their Draft Letters. Not only do students begin to write more thoughtful reflections when connections between mini-lessons and reflective writing are drawn, but logs and letters become an opportunity to practice the writing techniques the students are learning.

Both Writers' Logs and Draft Letters offer students an opportunity to practice writing techniques, as well as an opportunity to practice reflection. Because they are still working to become more able writers, I simply give credit for having completed the assignments rather than grading the quality of either. However, I do read every Draft Letter as thoroughly as I read the beginning logs because, like the logs, the letters not only help me to monitor students' understanding and progress, but they also give me an opportunity to address individual needs. In the margins of the letters, I write answers to questions students may ask; I give suggestions for solving problems students point out; I ask questions to push students to think more clearly and deeply about their writing. For example, on Nate's letter, I may write in the margin, "Why is your profile more interesting if it isn't in chronological order? What order did you use? How did you decide to arrange your ideas this way? Did you try anything else first?" While the logs promote a habit of reflective thinking, the letters promote clarity and depth of thought.

The Portfolio Letter

The last reflective assignment is the culmination of both the Writer's Log and the Draft Letter: the Portfolio Letter. Like the Draft Letter, the Portfolio Letter addresses multiple aspects of the students' writing. Also, as in their Draft Letters, students analyze their writing much further than what was first required in their Writers' Logs. They must support judgments with quotations and/or examples from their writing. However, where the Draft Letter focuses on one particular piece of writing, the Portfolio Letter looks at an entire collection of work. Most students take the Portfolio Letter seriously because, along with the rest of their portfolio, it should

demonstrate their writing knowledge and abilities. Unlike the Writer's Log and the Draft Letter, the *quality* of the Portfolio Letter will affect their grade.

Shannon and Tara wrote Portfolio Letters that demonstrate they have been active in their learning process. Though the letters are too long to include here, it's apparent that Shannon and Tara do not rely on my judgment of their work, but instead develop their own ideas of their writing. For example, Tara decides that the lead in her profile, which states, "20% of all women in the U.S. are affected by Bulimia," is her best "because most people don't know that fact and it gets the attention of the reader." Shannon determines that her strength is prewriting because it "makes development much easier because [she] can see ahead of time what [she is] going to say in each paragraph." Both students demonstrate they can clearly evaluate their own work and process.

Because of their clear, insightful evaluation, the letters also demonstrate Shannon's and Tara's understandings of writing beyond what the portfolio pieces alone are able to do. For example, Shannon demonstrates her understanding of unity and coherence when she describes how she tends to "squeeze" stories or quotes she likes into her writing, even if she is "way off base." She uses the example of her feature article to show how she dealt with this problem by moving a story that did not support a particular topic sentence to "an entirely new paragraph where the topic sentence read, 'Many kids, teenagers especially, feel the need to lie in order to protect themselves from their parents' which the story better supported.'" Her description of this process demonstrates she is able to evaluate how well details fit into her paragraphs and how to correct details that do not seem to make her point. Her work shows she can write in a unified, coherent manner, but her Portfolio Letter shows me she understands the concept.

Tara's letter also demonstrates her understanding of unity and coherence. Unlike Shannon, Tara explains she knows "it means to have all your ideas connect and to make the paper flow well together" but does not yet understand how to analyze her work and evaluate whether she has accomplished this. Simply reading Tara's work, which is usually quite unified, does not indicate the depth of her understanding of this concept. Her Portfolio Letter indicates that, though she understands the theory, she is still having difficulty applying it.

Both girls' letters contain the language of thoughtful, able writers. They accurately use writing

terminology from our mini-lessons in class when discussing their work. They use terms such as *prewriting*, *revision*, *development*, *thesis*, and *unity and coherence*. Using writing terminology to refer to their work distinguishes them as knowledgeable writers.

Another sign in their Portfolio Letters distinguishing the girls as able writers is their use of writing techniques we've learned in class. For example, Shannon uses specific examples and explanations to support her ideas. She writes:

There was no way I could have written my editorial and not gone insane if I hadn't done as much prewriting as I had. There are so many reasons why young people should not get married; I couldn't organize them all in my head alone. There are so many "sub-reasons" for each reason also. I took the idea of perhaps you may not really be in love, and inside that paragraph included how people change so much in their twenties and how they have only been exposed to a small number of people. That is very hard to organize those three ideas into one paragraph without writing it down. I wrote them all down, and wrote my supporting facts and details underneath. I ended up having tons of arrows all over my paper, moving details around under the different reasons I had.

Her detailed explanation shows her clear understanding of her writing process.

The Portfolio Letters are invaluable to both the students and me. They allow students to speak about their writing, using all of the terminology and thoughtfulness of a real writer. I am amazed not only at the quality of work that is included in their portfolios, but with the letters that show me students who understand their learning and are able to discuss their work thoughtfully. This type of reflection, however, does not just happen. Without cultivating a habit of reflective thought, developing writer's language, and promoting clarity and depth of thought during the semester, Portfolio Letters would not be

an accurate picture of a student's writing knowledge and ability.

Conclusion

Reflective assignments and the instruction needed to produce quality written reflections are imbedded into our writer's workshop. They have helped me teach my students to become better writers and thinkers. I found, as did Luanne Kowalke, that "Facilitating thoughtful, metacognitive learning in the classroom is not especially difficult, but it does take time, understanding, and a vision that goes beyond the traditional classroom values. The end result, however, is an increased awareness for students; not only of what they learn, but how they learn it and what they can do with that knowledge" (220). My students may groan when I mention the word reflection. They know as well as I that it takes a great deal of brain power, but as with anything that takes effort, the rewards are great.

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