Writing about Writing

Cover Letters and Portfolios
To think well, one must write well.
To think *about writing* well, one must write *about writing*.
Reflective Writing

Definition:
• Writing that makes unconscious or preconscious cognition visible for students. Process-oriented, not content-based.

Goals:
• Define and discuss their process.
• Effective self-evaluation.
• Students can teach themselves.
Reflective Writing: process-oriented

Cover Letters
- Self-reflection and evaluation for a particular assignment.
  - Effective self-teaching (for students).
  - Improved assessment (for me).

Portfolios
- Cumulative self-reflection and evaluation of how skills changed over time.
  - “Arc” of the class.
  - Synthesis of skills achieved.
Prompts/Instructions

• Minimum word count.
• Questions to address.
  – “What question would you like me to answer in my grading?”
  – Identify and discuss one weakness in this paper.
• Quote from their work.
Sample Portfolio Instructions

In your portfolio, include a cover letter that:

1. Introduces your portfolio and describes its contents, explaining how each assignment fits together
2. Discusses *at least four formal assignments*, describing how each challenged or helped you, or demonstrates your skills as a writer
3. Comments on specific strengths, weaknesses, and improvements in your writing
4. Uses and discusses direct quotes and examples from your work as concrete evidence for all of your assertions.
Sample student work

“I did something I’ve never done before while writing an essay; I scrapped everything I had originally written and started over from scratch. . . . I think it was probably the best thing I could’ve done for the paper.”
that the Cyclops may or may not act upon, this display is a physical obstacle that traps the men, with no possibility of escape. It’s this realization that Odysseus makes that changes and shapes the way he decides to go about defeating the Cyclops. As the Cyclops is sleeping and Odysseus is contemplating an escape, he claims,

I thought at first
to steal up to him, draw the sharp sword at my hip and stab his chest where the midriff packs the liver—
I groped for a fatal spot but a fresh thought held me back.
There at a stroke we’d finish off ourselves as well.
How could we with our bare hands leave back.
That slab he set to block his cavern’s gaping maw? {9.336-342}

Because of the magnitude of the Cyclops’s strength, Odysseus is forced to change tactics. While Odysseus’s Greek hero archetype would typically call upon his own masculine power to defeat an opponent, Odysseus realizes he can’t use strength alone against a being that is solely brute strength. Instead he uses a tool that the Cyclops seems to be lacking in: intelligence. By using the stake, Odysseus takes an object only as strong as its weakest point [approach to defeating the monster. The Cyclops’s eye proves to be his weakest point because not only does losing it render him blind, it also renders his strength less effective. Without the ability to see, he is no longer able to effectively
Results

Articulate specific skills.

“Though it is important to choose words that are powerful and alive, in this essay, I tend to overdo it a bit. In later essays, as I gain more to say, I do a better job of clearly stating my point.”
Results

Understand how skills interrelate.

“By pointing out the places in someone else’s writing that used incorrect logic, I saw this was a problem in my own writing that I had not yet identified. I also became aware of the need for each paragraph to make a rhetorical or argumentative move.”
Results

Gain a global understanding of the field.

Outlines not only help organize ideas, they also put those ideas into a story.
Results

Gain ownership of the Process

“I have a better idea of what writing really is . . . true and good writing comes from the portraying of a backed up idea as clear, simple, and organized as possible.”

Writing isn’t about compiling something that seems “finished” to me, its about communicating my ideas to someone else.
Cross-Disciplinary Applicability

Any process-related skill, where the concrete object produced is assessed while student understanding of the process is implicit or non-linguistic.

• Reading a piece of literature critically.
• Solving an equation?
• Designing an experiment?
• Developing a business model?
• Compiling a bibliography?