

# Student Reflection and Critical Thinking: A Rhetorical Analysis of 88 Portfolio Cover Letters

*ABSTRACT: This research is an analysis of 88 first-year portfolio cover letters from the Spring 2000 English 102 Program Assessment at the University of Nevada, Reno. This analysis focuses on what these students viewed as the rhetorical purposes of cover letters. The goal of this study was to apply the theories of Aristotle, Toulmin, and Burke to these letters to analyze their appellate, argumentative, and performative nature. The results of the study suggest that, while a majority of the student writers reviewed what they had learned, offered support for portfolio choices, and supplied information about learning, they did not often reach a level that demonstrated metacognitive ability by examining assumptions about writing and thinking. It is possible that the genre of the portfolio cover letter and its role in reflection need to be reexamined and redefined.*

As a basic writing and first-year composition teacher, as well as a former basic writing program coordinator, I have found that students often use the term “critical thinking” as a sort of linguistic buzz word, having little idea how to accomplish this “critical” skill. Students often find critical thinking to be a foreign and difficult task, perhaps because it differs educationally from finding a single right answer. As one student puts it, “critical thinking doesn’t seem to get me anywhere.” Such students can find this kind of analysis time-consuming and confusing, especially when there are several options or avenues from which to choose.

Because our society encourages forward progress and quick fixes and because critical thinking requires stepping back self-critically from the task itself to determine the best course of action, students may struggle with thinking critically. Critical thinking requires students to stretch themselves intellectually and psychologically, possibly taking two steps back before taking one forward. It requires students to dig and take apart their decision-making and justify their actions. According to composition research, one of the ways to encourage this type of cognitive digging is to have students participate in reflective writing. Reflective thinking and writing, as Kathleen Blake Yancey has postulated, can contribute to a student’s understanding of accomplishment

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because he/she must articulate that accomplishment (*Reflection 6*). In addition to articulating accomplishment, critical reflective thinking also focuses on how the process itself has progressed, mechanically and intellectually. For the present, this dualistic definition of reflection will be appropriated, although, as a result of my study, I hope to further complicate it.

In my own classes, I have incorporated reflective exercises, but the results have not been satisfying. Often students seem able and willing to step back and review their work but have difficulty weighing alternatives or formulating multiple analytical interpretations. How can teachers encourage students to be independent decision-makers and deeper thinkers, especially with regard to their writing? What kinds of reflective strategies do students exhibit in supposedly reflective documents, such as portfolio cover letters and how can these strategies be expanded?

## RESEARCH ON REFLECTIVE WRITING

I sought answers to these questions through exploring research on reflective writing. Reflective writing seems to be an accepted disciplinary way of encouraging critical thinking in basic writers and indeed in all first-year composition students. If students look back on their work reflectively and attempt to see what they have learned from the writing process, this information can be vital to improving their skills as writers and thinkers. "Becoming aware of your thought processes," according to Swartz and Perkins, is the first step toward achieving metacognition or thinking about thinking (quoted in Barell 258). Reflective writing also encourages students to highlight the reasons behind their choices and to describe how those choices affected their writing.

As Donna Qualley asserts, the treating of self as other, or being reflexive, encourages learners to see themselves through new, self-critical eyes. In Qualley's view, one's self is the object of reflective consciousness in reflexivity, with an accompanying awareness of the self's role as agent in knowledge production (14). To develop this agency, according to Jerome Bruner, students create an "autobiography" in a reflective document that fosters a dialogue with a sense of self. According to Bruner, this dialogue has the potential for "discovery" with the following long-range benefits:

- 1) an increase in intellectual potency [exercising critical thinking],
- 2) the shift from extrinsic to intrinsic rewards [establishing self-determination],
- 3) the learning of the heuristics of discovery [developing a willingness to take risks], and

4) a way to conserve memory [building experience upon experience] (83).

This is how individual meaning is created. A true dialogue will ask hard questions that demand an answer, and by viewing one's self as other, the individual must reexamine previously held beliefs and decide if those beliefs are beneficial or inhibiting or something in-between. This is the same kind of critical thinking asked of many basic writers in first-year writing assignments when they are asked to reflect upon why they wrote about their topic. Thus, reflective activity that recalls information can foster metacognition, or the analysis of one's thinking, as a way to enhance reasoning skills. In turn, this new information can result in a more satisfying written product and a better understanding for the student of his/her cognitive and linguistic processes.

The next step after recalling information is to contemplate how that information affects why and how one has done what one has and to consider what effect this new analysis might have on future acts. In this way, one begins to achieve control of one's thinking, the second significant part of achieving metacognition. According to Hacker, Dunlosky, and Graesser, the success of this control is realized through knowledge of 1) the task itself, 2) the demands posed by the task, 3) people's knowledge of the task, and 4) the kinds of cognitive strategies people can bring to the task (10). The first two items in this list can be achieved through a heightened awareness of what one has done (a review), but the latter two items must be gained from assessing one's thinking.

When teachers choose to develop their students' reflective and reflexive abilities and help them change their individual cognitive orientations, Kenneth Dowst calls this an "epistemic" approach to teaching, seeing language as a mediator between a self and objective reality (68). In other words, we can not know the world directly; instead we compose our knowledge of the world when we compose with language. Dowst further submits that what we know will affect how we act, and that experimenting with language is analogous to experimenting with knowing, which can result in changed behavior (70). To the epistemic teacher, knowledge, behavior, and language are all inextricably linked, meaning that students are presented with a type of writing activity that they can manage reasonably well, followed by questions that explore the importance of what they, as writers, have just done. Dewey calls this kind of education "progressive," where experience is combined with a review of that experience that yields "capital" for future experiences (87). True learning, Dowst adds, is always a reconstruction of previous learning and experience (73), a reflective building of experience upon experience, and such reconstructions can foster mental adaptation. Berthoff further stipulates that reclaiming the imagina-

tion is a way of bringing creative mental processes out in the open (4). When students “re-create” what happened in a piece of writing, remembering what they did and why, they are tapping into those mental processes.

In understanding how written reflection influences epistemological development, part of James Britton’s theory of how language functions in the writing process is useful in connecting linguistic ability and experiential learning. Britton (“The Composing Process”) posits that the writing act can encourage students to assume different roles, because first, they become participants in their writing when they compose a draft of a writing assignment. Such an assignment creates an opportunity for them to experience a linguistic “transaction” between their ideas and an audience, a transaction that is expressive in nature, because, if the topic is self-selected and meaningful to students, it will have purpose for them (16). When students reflexively detach themselves from their writing selves and step back to reflect upon their pieces of writing and see them through a reader’s eyes, they become spectators of that writing experience, increasing their understanding of the symbolic and evaluative nature of their work, a cognitive function. Then students might go back and revise their writing, becoming participants again, to perhaps reflect upon the writing at the end, becoming spectators again. Britton adds that while students are participants in their writing evaluations as shapers of the work, they operate under the “constraints of self-interest, in the light of . . . [their] hopes and fears regarding the outcome” (17). But when students stand back and become spectators of their work, they will “not lose or gain by the outcome,” because they do not see the written product as a part of their sense of self, their ego, at that moment (17).

To further explain how this process works, Britton (“Language”) adds that all human behavior is experimental. The way we learn or grow from anything is to form a hypothesis from previous experience (reviewing what we have done) that will be applicable to the present situation. Then we test that hypothesis in light of what actually happens in the present (196-97). Next, we evaluate what this conjunction of past and present has taught and perhaps revise the hypothesis, an act that can reveal not only growth and experiential learning, but can also inform our future acts.

How does self-assessment through reflective thinking lead to changes in thinking and ultimately in behavior? According to Geoffrey Hewitt, it allows an individual to “discriminate between his or her current level of behavior and some significant social or individual standard” (5). Self-assessment, Hewitt adds, can disrupt stereotypical behavior and lead to an understanding of why some behaviors are rewarded in a culture and others punished (5). This is significant for basic writers, who often have developed detrimental behavioral patterns

in school writing or who may become blocked, feeling that they don't know what is expected. A monitoring of self through reflection helps a learner determine the value system of a particular community and integrate his/her own abilities into the existing system. In academia, Yancey asserts, self-knowledge through assessment can affect what one believes it takes to be a college writer ("Dialogue" 99).

Assessment through reflection or a "rhetoric of reason," as James Crosswhite adds, creates a "dialectic" that allows students to reconcile their previous experience in school and in life with what they are presently learning in college, creating a new learning identity for themselves (285). Some basic writers need to develop new positive writing identities in order to reconstruct or reconcile their present learning with previous beliefs about themselves as writers or about a writing class. David Bartholomae (1985) calls this reconciliation a "compromise" between a student's personal history and the requirements of a particular convention (135). If the student is to be successful in communication, this reconciliation often involves change, a change in how the student approaches and thinks about writing. If it appears that a previous experience or behavior does not fit into or work with the current learning schema, a conflict is created. To resolve this conflict, students must assess their previous beliefs in light of the new material that they have learned. So how do students assess their previous beliefs in reflective documents such as portfolio cover letters?

In reviewing research that contained actual portfolio cover letters as exemplars of reflective thinking, I was surprised to discover that little work had been done regarding what kinds of rhetorical strategies students enact in end-of-semester reflections. While a great deal of theory proposes what reflection is and how it is accomplished, there is little evidence of what students actually do in such purportedly reflective documents. An exception was a study by Edward Wolfe of high school portfolio cover letters; unfortunately, Wolfe's discussion was difficult to follow because of a lack of explanation regarding categorical decisions and conclusions.

Detailed information about the kinds of rhetoric in students' reflective writings might help teachers determine what students can accomplish reflectively and what is missing in their metacognition. What kinds of reflection do students accomplish in cover letters? Do portfolio cover letters appear to be a useful means for reflective activity? Answers to these kinds of questions may provide teachers with insight into students' reflective processes and the rhetoric of the portfolio cover letter.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

To provide insight into students' reflective rhetoric, I used 88 cover letters from 30 different sections of English 102 (second-semester composition) provided by the Spring 2000 Core Writing Program Assessment conducted at the University of Nevada, Reno, for which I obtained human subject approval. Of the 200 portfolios used for the assessment, 88 had both cover letters and student consent forms. I was privy only to the actual letters themselves, not the cover letter assignments, the teachers' philosophies, or the portfolios, so this study is limited to a rhetorical analysis of the letters only. Future research should delve deeper into the external context of these documents to better understand what can and can not be accomplished through reflection. Case-oriented and longitudinal studies should endeavor to describe what students and teachers actually accomplish through reflection and its long-term effects. Ideally, such studies would include more types of methodologies and would analyze more contextual factors of individual classes such as the reflective assignments themselves, the context of the classes and their curricula, and the personalities of students and teachers.

Portfolios in this assessment were comprised of one best essay, a series of essays, or a multi-genre presentation of written work offered at semester end. Thus, the cover letter, by extension, was the reflective culmination of a grading period, after the portfolio had been compiled and polished, giving students the opportunity to look back at what they had done. The primary reader and grader for these portfolios was the student's classroom teacher. Students knew that five portfolios from each class would be selected for an outside assessment, but they also knew that the outside reader would not influence the teacher's evaluation or grade in any way.

Since there was very little foundational research in cover letter analysis upon which to build, I sought a new methodological approach that addresses what I see as a tripartite set of rhetorical purposes and strategies for the portfolio cover letter.

**1. A portfolio cover letter seeks to appeal to a teacher and convince that teacher of epistemological growth in the areas of writing and learning.** As an epistemological tool, the portfolio cover letter suggests to an outside audience what students know and how they know it. Because one of the rhetorical purposes of the cover letter, according to McNeill and Bellamy (preface), is not only to give evidence of what was done, but also to convince the teacher that something valuable was learned, the cover letter is a persuasive document. Through the cover letter, students seek to convince teachers that portfolios have been valuable learning tools, and sometimes they justify their grades based upon class criteria. These kinds of appeals can be

defined by applying Aristotle's theory in which rhetoric seeks to find the "best" means for persuasion (quoted in Bizzell & Herzberg 153), possibly leading to an understanding of how certain persuasive rhetoric functions (Aristotle, Book II, Chapter 9). Thus, the use of Aristotle's theory of appeals, using ethos, nomos, pathos, and logos, is informative with regard to where students concentrate their persuasive strategies and how they seek to appeal to the teacher.

**2. A cover letter allows students to construct arguments to support their writing growth.** The cover letter is rhetoric that exhibits argumentative strategies. Students must be able to justify the choices of certain pieces of writing for their portfolios and argue for what and how they have learned. Stephen Toulmin's theory, therefore, about how arguments are structured and supported is helpful in understanding not only how students' arguments are designed and supported with data, but also how the warrants for these arguments work, revealing possible intentions and justifications for the assertions.

**3. A cover letter exhibits a public performance of a sense of self that demonstrates learning, shared classroom goals, and valuable classroom experiences.** Students can use the opportunity of writing a portfolio cover letter to analyze and critique themselves, participating in reflexive and metacognitive activity. Such an analysis is intended as a performative document that demonstrates individual writing development and describes the circumstances behind that development to the teacher and other readers. Thus, Kenneth Burke's theory about performative acts is useful in analyzing how a self is constructed and presented. This construction includes students' understanding of their writing, their portfolios, and the conditions under which that writing was constructed. Burke's explication of context is valuable in piecing together the rhetorical purposes of students, portfolios, and classrooms, using only the students' rhetoric and the values associated with each. Such a contextual analysis, open to other interpretations of course, will help the reader understand the reasons behind students' selections of assertions and appeals.

## THEORETICAL LENSES FOR ANALYZING COVER LETTERS

### Aristotle

Aristotle believed that argumentative appeals encompass three areas—ethos, pathos, and logos, with a possible fourth being nomos. Categorical definitions follow, with the understanding that sometimes appellate statements can be cross-listed. In most cases, I made a decision about the primary thrust of a statement.

**1. Ethos.** Appeals to ethos focus on how one establishes authority. This classification is used when a statement seeks primarily to

assert student or writer authority. An example of a representative student comment is: "I researched this topic extensively, finding everything I could about AIDS" (Letter #81). This student authenticates writer authority through the thoroughness of the research, establishing the level of effort put forth. In a second example, "I have improved as a writer and have become more aware of my diction, sentence structure and organizational techniques" (#86), the student shows another way to establish ethos, by stressing important values exhibited by the student's writing and learning.

**2. Nomos.** Appeals to nomos center on commonly held sets of values, established, in this case, by the students, the teacher, and the classroom culture. An appeal is classified as nomotic when it primarily focuses on the value system of that particular classroom, i.e., the assignments, teacher, or curricular priorities. Examples include "Revision is a very powerful key" (#6), and "I know I must convey my opinion in a very persuasive manner" (#2). The latter comment also contains an ethical appeal as the student is establishing authority through reiterating the classroom precept of effective persuasion in writing. An appeal was determined to be nomotic when the verbiage reflected terms often used in an English class.

**3. Pathos.** Appeals to pathos are designed to evoke or express an emotion, either positive or negative. Pathetic appeals in these letters focus on three areas—students' writing hardships in particular classrooms, pride in what they have accomplished, and the evocation of an emotional reaction from the teacher through the discussion of a particular emotional reaction to an assignment or the offer of a compliment. An example of a hardship comes from Letter #3: ". . . I tried to think how to change it [the essay]. I was so frustrated I cried for a few minutes and then I gave up." This student later expresses how she/he "hung in there" and went back to writing, having, all in all, a positive learning experience, a comment that accents the draining yet rewarding nature of writing.

Many students express pride in their portfolios and want the teacher to share their feelings. They also seek to evoke sympathy when their performance in the classroom is less than might be expected. An example is "As you know, I had a really bad semester, and some really tough stuff happened . . . and my writing suffered" (#61). Students often compliment their teachers, for example, "I love your down-to-earth attitude . . ." (#10), possibly to evoke a positive reaction from the teacher and to express appreciation for his/her efforts.

**4. Logos.** Logical appeals present a rationale or supportive reasoning for certain decisions, in this case, generally signaled by "because." While it can be argued that entire letters, in some cases, are logical appeals, spending their length justifying the choices made and the reasons behind those choices, I limited my analysis to sentences



and paragraphs. Statements are logical appeals if they primarily present evidence for particular choices or provide rationales. For example, “I chose the pieces for this portfolio, because I can more adequately assert my positions and then support those opinions with analysis . . . than in my other writings . . .” (#21).

Students in this group of 88 are least likely to see logical appeals as crucial to persuasion (see Figure 1), except with writerly decisions or reasons for a particular positive evaluation. Logical appeals are used to explain deductive or inductive reasoning for decisions made either in the writing itself, the portfolio as a whole, or a particular method of evaluation. Examples of logical appeals, the first of which also reveals classroom values, are “I chose Essay #3 and Essay #4 as my showcase papers because they are the two essay[s] that I applied (or tried to) better transitions, examples, and analysis” (#22), and “I decided to write my essay on the target audience of two different talk shows . . . because I wanted to demonstrate how a particular target audience influenced a show’s content” (#12). The relatively small number of logical appeals present can indicate students’ inability or lack of interest in constructing arguments, a lack of depth in cognitive operations, or an understanding of the cover letter as non-logically based.

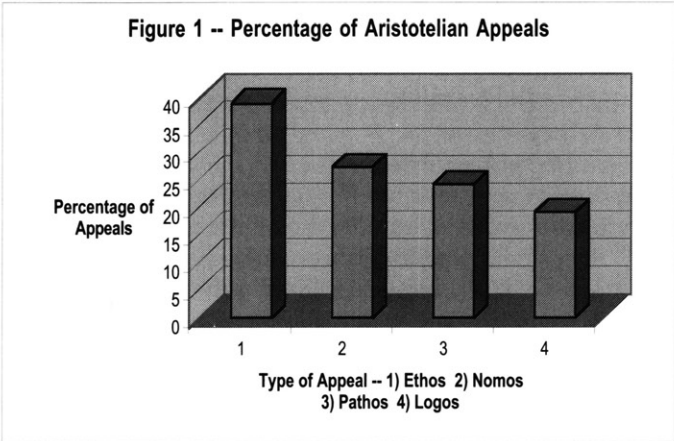


Figure 1 summarizes the frequency of appeals in the 88 cover letters I analyzed. The total is 108% as a result of cross-listed statements.

The use of Aristotle’s appellate theory illustrates how students address and convince teachers of the importance of what they have

learned as writers and students. Sometimes they connect their learning to the portfolios, although often not in specific ways. This rhetorical goal is followed by instances where students appeal to the teacher and/or reiterate classroom values. When discussing learning, students often do not cite particular passages or techniques in specific writings to illustrate their appellate statements; thus, as we will see in the next discussion about arguments, this lack of specificity results in arguments that are often not well supported.

## Stephen Toulmin

Stephen Toulmin posits that there are three parts to an argument. After the initial *assertion* is made, a claim or statement where something is put forth that is debatable, it is supported with foundational and evidential backing for the claim, the *data*. Simply presenting the data, however, without connecting the support to the claim, does not assure the reader of the validity of the argument. Underlying the pertinent data is an assumption, perhaps culturally based, that allows for the logical connection between the assertion and data, also known as a *warrant*. Warrants can be inferred from the stated assertion and data, and this process allows the reader to see how the conclusion is reached (97-98). In applying Toulmin's theory, ten areas emerge in which students concentrate their assertions.

**1. Assertions about how and why certain pieces were chosen for the portfolio.** An example is "With each paper I had a specific point I wanted carried out and I believe after the many revisions, my point was made" (#38). The student uses as data that he/she is proud of the ideas in these papers and that the writing flows. While the points made in each paper are not addressed in the student's letter, he/she does mention that revision involves adding more details and asking readers for input. The warrant, or underlying assumption, is that successful writing (writing that is worth working on) makes readers think or gets across a meaningful point with specific detail.

**2. Assertions about the skills, strategies, and knowledge that students gained.** While these assertions specify particular skills, they are usually not backed by actual assignments and students' experiences with those assignments. For example, one student asserts that the two essays he chose show examples of better transitions, examples, and analysis, techniques he states he learned from the teacher. The data do not support the claim as well as they might. This student does not provide examples from the portfolio or explain what better transitions might be or how examples and analysis are utilized in these essays. The warrant is that better transitions, examples, and analysis make for better writing or writing that is worthy of being evaluated, and a secondary warrant is that teachers have valuable knowledge to offer students in making them better writers.

The example above is not the only instance where data are lacking specificity. For example, in Letter #34 the student asserts that her writing has grown in many ways. As her data, she claims that writing in different genres helped that growth. There is no specific support, however, from the portfolio for exactly where or how her writing has grown. A specific warrant is difficult to determine since the reader is not privy to how writing in different genres helped this student. In most of the letters, asserting writing growth is more important than proving it.

**3. Assertions about the writing process on particular portfolio essays.** Students often mention something easy about the assignment and something difficult that they have overcome. For example, one student asserts that one of his papers was easy to write, because he freewrote and “barfed” onto the paper. He also asserts that he had a hard time organizing that same paper and hopes he has improved in that area. The warrant is that awareness of positive and negative aspects of the writing process is an important demonstration in a cover letter.

**4. Assertions of ability and writing strength.** The data provided by students illustrate the strong points of their writing and their abilities as students. The data, however, are often not tied directly to the students’ portfolios. One student iterates all the items that cause her to give herself a 90% in the class—class participation, good class discussion leading, and B+ on all writing assignments, with all requirements turned in on time. In this example and many others, there is no mention of how the portfolio essays justify a grade based upon the quality of writing or learning during the writing and compilation of the portfolio. The warrant is that other factors besides the writing quality should weigh heavily in a student’s evaluation. Perhaps the student wishes to draw the teacher’s attention away from the quality of the writing, or perhaps he/she does not understand the importance of or know how to talk about the quality of the writing and learning.

**5. Assertions about work that still needs improvement.** Students who make these claims state that, while they still recognize areas of weakness in the writing, they are certain these papers exhibit their learning in the class. One student claims that he is a better writer and researcher because he knows how to ask for help and how to interview people. He can sit for hours and hours at the computer now without becoming frustrated and can analyze his own writing weaknesses. However, there is no specificity about how he achieved this new ability or about actual changes in his writing process because of this analysis. The warrant is that asserting improvement in writing and claiming awareness of writing processes and weaknesses are the measures of assessment.

**6. Assertions about how the teacher should read and grade the portfolio.** Mostly, either all students in a particular class section explain how the portfolio should be graded, or none do. This suggests that students are responding to a specific prompt when they discuss how their work should be graded. When students offer a method of evaluation, they make assertions like the following:

I would like this portfolio to be graded by a fair yet critical eye. If I were to judge this portfolio I would make sure that it fulfills the requirements placed on it. I would look to see that essays have been revised and that time had been spent researching, writing, and revising. However, I would think about the time restraints placed on the person and I would realize that they are not even close to being a perfect writer. (#32)

In this typical example, while the student acknowledges the teacher's requirements, he/she also provides criteria for evaluation, desiring that the teacher assign a grade based on the level of effort, and not consider the papers only as finished products. The student wants to be graded as a "good student," not necessarily as a writer. One warrant is that the completion of class requirements is not a sufficient criterion for evaluating this portfolio, that the amount of time spent and the level of improvement should also be considered. Another warrant is that the quality of writing alone should not be the primary consideration for a good grade.

**7. Assertions regarding the student, teacher, and class.** These claims often center on positive aspects of the class and rarely focus on anything negative. Comments include "This was a thought-provoking class" (#64), or "Your feedback makes me a better writer" (#41). There are often no particular data given, although occasionally a student mentions a certain assignment or teaching technique as contributing to the assertion. These claims seem to be overall impressions, possibly designed to have a positive influence on the teacher's affective state while reading the letter. Because of a lack of specific data, such warrants are impossible to determine in most cases.

**8. Assertions about how "service learning" stimulates outside learning.** Many classes contain a service learning component, which requires students to participate in some kind of community service related to the class theme. Students typically emphasize that they took more away from this kind of class than how to write better. The data include understanding concepts like "ethics" and "community" and seeing the need for getting involved in a community. One person states, "Although I only learned the ethics (some) involved in one specific field, it made me realize (also while reading my colleagues essays) that everything we do has an ethical code that is applied and followed in a

community” (#16). This student’s data support what she learned about ethics and how that knowledge might affect her behavior in her future career, genetic engineering. The warrant is that, as a result of community service, one can understand the application of ethical principles.

**9. Assertions about how various curricular choices, other than service learning projects, influence learning.** A recurring discussion of marginalia (writing comments and questions in the margins of a reading assignment) is often present. Students claim that utilizing marginalia makes them more reflective, more engaged, and more aware of deeper meanings in their reading. Students support this claim by explaining how they approach reading differently and with a different attitude. Their warrant is that using marginalia improves reading and thinking about reading. For example, one student asserts that marginalia help her/him to be more reflective (#18). The data are that she/he can now analyze the concept and structure of a story, being able to depict what is being said and why, while reading. The warrant: anything that helps one read more thoroughly also helps writing as well.

**10. Assertions about outside factors that cause poor student performance.** Students often assert that their less-than-A work is due to circumstances beyond their control. Their data include heavy workloads and other high-level classes. The warrant here is that whenever work and other classes interfere with English homework, teachers should make allowances.

## **Kenneth Burke**

In *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke states that every act is motivated and performed in a variety of ways, including the act itself, the purpose, the agency, the agent, and the scene (xv). The *act* is what took place, in thought or deed (xv), and in this case, also includes the writing, the class, and the assignment of the portfolio cover letter. The *purpose* is why this particular thing was accomplished (xv), in other words, why this letter was produced. The *agency* is the means or instruments used to accomplish the act, how it was done (276). From what students mention in these letters, the agency also includes how the portfolio itself was accomplished. The *agent* is the person who performed the act (xv). In this study, the primary agent is the student, although the teacher may also exert secondary agency as the instigator of the assignment. Finally, the *scene* is the material situation in which the act took place (128). Because the reader of the cover letter (often the teacher) has inside information and cultural knowledge of the class and student, which an outside reader may not be privy to, the scene may be difficult for a researcher to determine and subject to multiple interpretations.

Using a Burkean analysis, the primary rhetorical purpose of a cover letter, for most of these students, was to exhibit growth or improvement and changes in their writing processes. The act of the cover letter was an opportunity for students to explain their reactions to writing, to the portfolio, and to particular curricular choices. For the most part, students situated themselves in such a way as to appeal to the teacher by iterating the value system of their particular environment, perhaps telling the teacher what she/he might want to hear. If agency with regard to a cover letter is viewed as the ability to assert oneself and one's ideals, then these cover letters encourage students to assert their learning. For the most part, however, students seem more concerned with pleasing the teacher and appealing to his/her set of values than analyzing their priorities and thinking. For example, while one student states that he/she views the portfolio as a celebration of learning, the entire letter is a discussion of positive aspects of the class such as research techniques, marginalia, and service learning without applying this information to the student's learning as demonstrated by the portfolio (#17).

When looking at letters from single class sections to analyze scene, if the curriculum appears to prioritize grammatical issues, then the cover letters from that section seek to mention how students have improved in that area. If the curriculum focuses on ethics and community, students center their letters on these areas. If students feel they can be effective in appealing to their teacher's compassion, then the letters contain emotional appeals that explain the circumstances behind a lack of performance.

It is also evident that students attempt to attach their new learning onto the old, saying, for example, "I used to think revision was a waste of time, but now I think it is valuable" (#33). This is a conjoining of the past with the present, but often students make such statements without reconstructing the basic assumptions under which their writing operates. Why did this student think revision was a waste of time? How and in what ways did the student's ideas of revision change, and why does he/she feel it is now a valuable tool? Without such reconstruction, little critical thinking can transpire. This may mean that most students have not gained control over their thinking but are merely paying lip service to the classroom's values, a move that does not alter thinking about writing on a long-term basis. According to John Barell, students who lack metacognitive knowledge are unable to "transfer knowledge or skills from one situation to another" (259).

### **Summary of Aristotelian, Toulminian, and Burkean Perspectives on Portfolio Cover Letters**

Many students' assertions and appeals are tied to evaluation, rather than to a depth of thinking about learning or writing. They

primarily seek to argue for a satisfactory grade. In addition, students often reject the finished portfolios as their primary means of evaluation. This assertion can indicate a lack of confidence on the student's part about the quality of the writing or her/his performance in the classroom. Students are aware of their audience (the teacher, in most cases) and argue and appeal in such a way as to validate their teacher's efforts and values.

The data in students' assertions are often scanty and unspecific, particularly in supporting assertions about writing decisions and choices. For example, one student claims to have done as much as possible for the portfolio. The data for this "outstanding" portfolio are that he/she made it look "as neat and proper as possible" (#2). Since the terms "neat and proper" are not explained, it is difficult to deduce the warrant. Rarely do students argue that their portfolio achieves personal writing goals, so the learning often seems not as personally meaningful as it might be.

The specificity exhibited by many students in discussing curricular elements points out that, when students understand how some aspect of the class influences their writing, they can support their assertions well with data, unlike their assertions about writing choices. For example, one student claims, "This entire class has really brought together the ideas of 'community' and 'ethics' for me." The data are "At first, I failed to see the connection. Through the Service Learning Project and the many in-class discussions I realize how I am a part of a community. I can choose to become involved and make a difference in my community or I can sit back and let things happen" (#17). One warrant is that service learning and class discussions connect ethics and community. Another warrant is that service learning helps one understand one's role as a citizen of a community.

Since students almost universally claim to have learned something in class, they argue for the pertinence of the teacher/class in achieving that learning. Comments about peer feedback and teacher input as contributing to the quality of writing are very common. Rarely do students analyze their own part in improving their writing skills and processes. In general, students are reluctant or unable to talk about writing processes in detail. Often writing growth is claimed but not supported, as in this example, ". . . I have grown as a writer and researcher throughout the semester" (#10). Warrants cannot be determined from such assertions.

In the evaluation of writing, warrants generally reveal elements that are privileged by the student and teacher. A lack of detailed discussion, however, often brings the value-changing adoption of those elements into question. An example is the student who states, "I now know how to effectively revise" (#33). The student does not explain his/her definition of effective revision or what has been specifically learned that contributes to this understanding.

All in all, instead of focusing on portfolios, students view the primary rhetorical purpose of these letters as reviewing their learning rather than providing a detailed analysis of goals and thinking. Students' arguments primarily assert changes in writing and learning, but they are often poorly supported with evidence from the portfolio. The majority of these cover letters are inadequate in providing insight about what the students learned and information about how they might apply that learning in the future.

In looking at these 88 letters using the three theoretical lenses, I surmise that while students often review their processes in these documents, they do not actually exhibit metacognition. When students state, "I've learned how to be a better writer," there should be sufficient support for this kind of assertion. But beyond that, the students should be able to articulate how their thinking about and approach to writing have changed to make them better writers. One student claims, "I feel I have made progress in my work from the beginning of the semester and my writing shows that. I know that I look at things in a different perspective and analyze the stuff I feel to be important and crucial. My introductory survey shows how I have progressed, because it shows my new knowledge about research. My service learning project shows my ability to use theory and praxis" (#18). This student attempts to articulate how he/she has changed when approaching writing and thinking. To demonstrate true metacognition, however, the student needs not only to indicate places where change has happened but also to specify how his/her perspectives have changed. How does the student decide what is important "stuff," and how does he/she analyze that stuff? Exactly how does this student's project conjoin theory and praxis, and what is the student's new knowledge about research?

## **PROBLEMS WITH THE GENRE OF THE COVER LETTER**

As a result of this study, I believe there may be previously unexplored reasons why portfolio cover letters sometimes lack an articulation of cognitive analysis. It is my contention that the expectations for a cover letter and the student's perceptions of those expectations may be at fault for not fostering a deeper assessment of writing and thinking. First of all, the cover letter is usually addressed to the teacher, as it was in 72% of these letters. This immediately prescribes an evaluative audience and influences the letter's rhetorical purpose. While students may attempt to articulate changes in their writing and thinking because of the assignment and the teacher's expectations, students may still perceive of the cover letter as another means of assessment or as a way of achieving a dialogue with the teacher. On the other hand, when the teacher is not the audience, as in several letters addressed "To whom," the rhetorical purpose of the cover letter may have nothing to



do with writing or thinking processes, as in the case of a student who spent the entire letter complaining about English or another case in which the student used the letter to comment on his/her college experience thus far. Perhaps a neutral yet familiar audience (the self?) would encourage self-examination.

Because of the students' impressions of the evaluative nature of the cover letter, they often justify or argue for a particular grade based upon the number of times that they assert growth and learning. Additionally, they comment upon their performance as students, compliment the teacher or the curriculum, complain about circumstances beyond their control, or describe and defend a particular topic. Ironically, students neglect what should be a primary purpose for a reflective document, to probe thinking and writing to integrate growth and change. Reflection becomes a lesser concern when the cover letter is viewed as an occasion to argue for a particular grade or to justify choices made in the portfolio. When evaluation takes precedence over reflection, students may also resort to description and explanation, techniques they are more comfortable with and more experienced at, rather than analysis, which is a more abstract and complex process.

Another problem with the genre of the cover letter may be its length. Most of the letters in this group of 88 letters were one page. A one-page cover letter is often a sweeping review of what has been done without a great deal of detail. Teachers, through conferencing with students about cover documents, can encourage students to include more specific examples of changes in their writing and thinking processes, perhaps encouraging a paper that is the length of an average reflective essay, say three to five pages, rather than a one-page, single-spaced letter.

Finally, a problem with the portfolio cover letter is its point in time. The end of the semester may not allow sufficient time for students to reflect as well or as deeply as they might if more time were allowed for thinking about how writing and thinking have changed. Usually there is a time crunch because students are studying for exams and finishing large projects for different classes. This can make a reflective letter a rushed or incomplete document without sufficient thought behind it. There can also be an advantage, however, in writing a cover document right after the portfolio is completed in that particulars about how papers were accomplished are still fresh in the student's mind. J. P. Powell contends that the reason why reflection works better at an end point in writing is because "it is extraordinarily difficult to identify what one is learning when engaged in a learning task . . ." (45). That's why "stepping back" or "turning back around" through reflection can help students better describe their feelings and thoughts about what happened when they aren't in the middle of learning (Verene 51-52). A plausible solution to overcoming the end-of-se-

mester crunch might be to include the portfolio cover essay as another writing assignment, cycled through with drafts, peer workshopping, and teacher conferencing.

## CONCLUSION

Like writing, reflective metacognition is a process with components such as review, reflexivity, and cognitive analysis, which require practice throughout the semester in order to maximize a learner's potential for growth and change. To be effective, reflective thinking should be bound up in the philosophy of writing as a whole, recognizing that the development of reflective ability is highly individualized and creatively cognitive. Students may progress through reflective stages at different rates, but all should be encouraged to attempt deeper reflection. Because metacognition is a complex skill, it is usually not intuitively understood, and students must be guided and be able to attain sufficient practice with it. Sources that can help teachers develop plans for increasing students' reflective abilities include Barell, Kay Burke, Calfee and Perfumo, Cranton, Foster, Hewitt, Johnston et al., Murphy and Smith, and Smyser.

While a great deal of research has proposed what students should do in portfolio cover letters, the reality may be different because of varying levels of cognitive maturity, lack of reflective practice, and/or the requirements of the assignments. While encouraging self-awareness, a cover letter alone may not give students sufficient practice to understand metacognition. By setting individual writing goals and progressing from simple to more complex reflective problem-solving questions that culminate in a deeply reflective essay at semester's end, basic writers and indeed all first-year college writers can become more reflective thinkers who are learning to be proficient at self-analysis and assessment. Along with writing, reflective analysis can become a life-long habit that leads to better decision-making, more skilled writing, and continued intellectual growth.

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