To emphasize choices and responsibility, I will not tell or advise students what to include in their portfolios. The preceding questions are my way of intervening, but I try to encourage students to make their own decisions, based on their "gut feeling" about a paper, the responses they've received from me and from their peers, and the ideas they have about revising. If they just don't want to revisit a particular assignment or project, then they shouldn't.

Assigning the Reflective Introduction

Students who have maintained a working folder and have managed to save, label, and file all of their paperwork for this class can now be grateful and can reap the benefit of their organizational skills. If they have kept track of their writing processes for each assignment and their struggles and successes, they can use much of this collected information to write their portfolio's reflective introduction, cover letter, self-assessment piece, or the description that prefaces each of the entries. This piece, if it does come first, could be the most important text students will write all semester because it will show their ability to be a reflective learner and to analyze and respond to the rhetorical situation effectively. In many ways, students' reflective introductions (or conclusions, if you'd rather the reflective piece be at the end) are the "final exam" for the course. This piece, wherever it's placed, brings together students' understanding of both of the situations involved with a portfolio writing course—the keeping part and the assessment part. The keeping in which students have been engaged now evolves into rhetorically informed choices.

CONSIDERATIONS IN ASSIGNING THE REFLECTIVE ELEMENT

The reflective portion of the portfolio will be more developed or more thoughtful if instructors spend a considerable amount of time in class reviewing and discussing its role in the portfolio. If you have prepared for or anticipated all the possibilities, students will be clearer about the expectations.

- Should the reflective piece come first in the portfolio—often called a cover letter or an introduction—or can it appear elsewhere? Do I really want it to be a "letter," addressed to me, or might it be written in the more traditional essay form?
• Should I ask for reflection before or after each entry instead? Or should I have students include a piece at the end that serves as a conclusion or postscript?
• Should I ask for a reflective element to the portfolio but let individual students make the decisions about what that is, where it goes, and why it goes there?
• How much information should I give students about the reflective parts to their portfolio? How much coaching or how extensive the modeling?
• If the piece is to be an introductory letter, should I ask for business letter format, with, for example, inside addresses, block style, and a proper salutation?

After exploring the implications of each of these decisions, you'll be ready to present this assignment to students. In addition, if you have introduced the reflective piece through first-week orientation to the class, and if you have reminded students periodically throughout the semester that the postwrites and other "reflective" assignments are giving them practice, then they are prepared to write this assignment. With about two or three weeks left in the term, schedule thirty to forty-five minutes of a class period to preview this assignment with students, to discuss their options and to clarify its purpose and importance. Part of the handout I distribute to students to help them with this assignment appears on page 44.

As you present and explain this important assignment to your students, the following questions or discussion topics can highlight the rhetorical nature of this assignment:

• Who will be reading this piece? Is the reader reading to suggest changes or reading it to evaluate your work and make a decision about your effort and talent?
• What is the situation surrounding this reading?
• What will the outcome of the reading be, and how much can you influence the outcome?
• What qualities of writing will your reader value?

Even a simple question such as "How long should it be?" can trigger a good conversation about the relationship between length and quality, or the importance of development (examples and the like) without "padding" the writing. Students will also be interested in talking about their own experiences with first impressions, if the reflective portion comes first, and will be able to identify good and bad decisions that may affect the "first impression" factor.

For example, ask students to brainstorm what would be inappropriate claims to make in their reflective introductions to a portfolio worth a large percentage of the course grade. In other words, what would be just really dumb things to say? What kinds of statements or claims would be unwise, ill-considered, or at least risky? (My students often respond with "To say you haven't learned anything" or "To admit your writing isn't any better" or "If the paper is full of errors.") This discussion usually moves into whether they should "ask for an A" or whether flattering the reader is appropriate. Be prepared for the student who claims he will ask for an A because he can prove that he deserves one. You may want to consider ahead of time what your rhetorically informed response will be or how you will discuss this strategy with students, who have a right to know if you will react strongly to such an appeal. If you know from experience that you "hate it" when students do that, it's only fair to tell them what your own recognized idiosyncrasies are as an evaluator.

More important, though, is to get students to see the rhetorical layers behind such a bold request for a certain course grade and how such a request (or demand) might be presented in ways that fit with the expectation for reflection or self-assessment. If, for example, a student can support his request for an A by referring to the course policies and grading criteria, or by paraphrasing and quoting extensively from his working folder, I would be much more open to such a passage in the reflective introduction.

Similarly, portfolio teachers need to anticipate obvious attempts at flattery or teacher pleasing, which some students may choose as a rhetorical strategy. I discuss "schmoozing" later in this chapter, but if teachers know it will be a turn-off, they should announce that to students. I suggest to my students that flattery runs the risk of underestimating my sophistication as a reader or my years of experience with reading student texts. Having been reminded that you've "seen it all before," students might be hard-pressed to come up with more original forms of flattery, or they might have to make their case differently.

MODELING REFLECTIVE INTRODUCTIONS: PROS AND CONS

Because using imitation to teach rhetoric predates Plato, teachers' natural inclination is to give students models for effective reflective pieces. The instinct is a sound one: If we're emphasizing the importance of this piece of writing to students' success in the course, then shouldn't we show them good ones? If a variety of good ones are shared or made available, a case can be made for their use, but each teacher should weigh the benefits and disadvantages of sharing models. Because writing the reflective portion is often the equivalent of a final exam, or a test of what students have learned about qualities of good writing, anticipating readers' needs, and the importance of careful self-presentation, you might decide that students need to create their reflective essays without models or samples. On the other hand, if this piece is crucial to students' success with this assignment and the portfolio, and models could help them to succeed, then why not provide some? One concern is that students will sidestep their own decision-making or creative choices
In the reflective introduction, you might try some of the following (but you can’t choose all of these options):

- Discuss your best entry and why it is your best.
- Detail the revisions you’ve made and the improvements and changes that you want readers to notice.
- Discuss each piece of writing included, touching on the strengths of each.
- Outline the process that one or more of your entries went through.
- Demonstrate what this portfolio illustrates about you as a writer, student, researcher, or critical thinker.
- Acknowledge your weaknesses but show how you’ve worked to overcome them.
- Acknowledge the reader-respondents who have influenced your portfolio pieces and how.
- Reflect on what you’ve learned about writing, reading, or other topics of the course.
- Prepare your reader for a positive evaluation of your work.

You have many options in writing an effective introduction — there is no magic formula or model text — but you will need to demonstrate self-assessment; in other words, show that you can evaluate the strengths of your work, that you understand what you do well and what you still need to work on.

The reflective introduction is also the place where both process and product come together. Readers of your portfolio have not been able to see your process. They haven’t watched you write, haven’t participated in your peer response group, haven’t seen all of your notes, drafts, and other evidence of your evolving ideas. They won’t know what your friend suggested about the anecdote that opens your argument essay, and they won’t know how hard you’ve worked on adding transitions between paragraphs. Readers will be aware only of what you share with them in the reflective piece.

Assigning the Reflective Introduction

A good reflection assignment should ask students to read critically, analyze data, and see patterns. This list of assignments or activities, while not comprehensive, will help students practice reflection before the portfolio is due.

1. Have students analyze three different audiences for the reflective letter: (1) the classroom instructor, (2) instructors in the same program but unknown, and (3) classmates or peers. Students should decide which logical, ethical, or emotional appeals might be most effective for each audience, and what tone, language, or vocabulary would be appropriate for each. How do they know? What makes them think so?

2. If the college writing program has a set of guidelines or policies and grading criteria — in brochure form or on a Web page — ask students to consult it and to come to a consensus about what information they can use for their reflective introductions.

3. Ask students to look back through their working folders and to categorize or classify the instructor’s comments on their returned papers. At the same time, they should review the course syllabus and assignment sheets. What patterns do they see in their instructor’s concerns or directions?

4. Ask students to imagine that a friend has asked if she should enroll in their instructor’s section of writing or composition. What information would they give their friend about their instructor’s expectations — or pet peeves? Students should call upon what they’ve learned about their instructor’s values as a reader to compose a convincing, well-developed reflective letter.

5. Share several models of reflective introductions (from a previous class or colleagues’ classes), and ask students to analyze them for effectiveness, strategies, appropriateness, and areas for improvement.