Formative evaluation is an important part of portfolio courses — that is, it is an ongoing assessment of students' performance in a variety of forms. After consistent and routine formative evaluation, however, summative evaluation becomes necessary. For most of us, that means assigning letter grades at the end of the course. In my classes, the portfolio is worth between 40 percent or 50 percent of the final course grade. (The other 50 to 60 percent is assigned to graded postwrites; peer response forms; journals, reading-response papers, or other short, informal writings; writing folder checkups; participation or "good citizenship"; or a final exam.) Grades on final portfolios are determined the old-fashioned way: by reading what's included and deciding on each portfolio's ranking.

Although each writing instructor needs to develop his or her own routine, mechanism, or rubrics for grading student work — a process aided by years of experience and conversations with other teachers, as well as by the literature on grading — the portfolio should receive a single grade even if there are several entries included. The term for this from the assessment literature is holistic evaluation — judging the portfolio as a whole, with the full weight of first impressions. When it's time to grade the portfolio, commenting or responding is not your job. The opportunity to intervene has passed by. Summative evaluation remains an important part of instruction. I will circle or otherwise mark errors and mistakes and record such familiar symbols as stars, question marks, or exclamation marks, but I don't write comments any longer than brief phrases: Catchy title; This is powerful; Great example; any evidence? I'm confused; Super sentences here. Responding is optional because you have already done the difficult and time-consuming work of guiding students' revisions. Since that stage has been completed, and the portfolio marks the end of the practice period, grading the portfolio with nothing more than a letter grade — no marks, notes, or questions — is perfectly appropriate, as long as students understand this or know what to expect. Putting only a grade and no comments is not only pedagogically sound in this situation but is also a straightforward time-management issue. As I discuss later about managing the paper load, portfolios needn't be a burden at the end of a semester.

Students can develop a keen understanding of the grading situation if they are invited to develop the rubric or "grading criteria" for the assessment. In an English methods course, for example, C. Beth Burch worked with her students to agree on certain criteria for the portfolio, including "organization, originality and creativity, variety, pedagogical soundness, practicality, and evidence of effort" (1997, 264). When the group could not reach consensus on weighting the criteria, "I left that task up to each student. The result was a rubric allowing adjustments for individual strengths and weaknesses" (264). In developing any scoring guide, the trick is to match what the assignment asks for with what the criteria require. For a portfolio in a first-year composition course, we want to see evidence that students understand the rhetorical situation of assessment, that can articulate reasons for their choices and the revision processes that went into the portfolio, and so forth. A scoring guide should describe features of, roughly, a superior response to the assignment, a strong response, a competent response, a weak response, an inadequate response, and an incompetent response. These terms, of course, can vary, and there can be more than six levels, but this model has evolved from large-scale writing assessments such as those designed by the Educational Testing Service.

In developing a rubric, some of the following questions may come up, and each is worth considering in some detail:

- **How much revision is enough?** This should be determined in consultation with the student or through general expectations distributed to students or discussed in class — well before the portfolio is submitted. In other words, grading the final portfolio is not the time to determine if "enough" revision has occurred; grading the final portfolio means that the question has already been answered. The act of submitting the final portfolio indicates that the writing process, including adequate revision, has been completed, given the time limits and other constraints of a composition course. The precise amount or type of revision is not "visible" in the final portfolio although it may be discussed explicitly in the reflective introduction. Because the portfolios I collect contain only clean, final copies, without drafts, the introduction or a preface to each entry clarifies the most important changes made to the entries. Otherwise, the proof of revising and editing is in the pudding; they cannot be treated as isolated variables in the assessment of the whole package.

- **How much should "the process" count?** Because every person's writing process differs for each and every writing task, grading a writer's process is a very tricky and problematic practice — especially in the age of word processing. Should those students with careful outlines, messy drafts, pages of clustering, or dozens of note cards receive more points than students without? Are we sure that a careful outline or a messy draft is really leading toward a better piece of writing? It's tempting to grade evidence of students' processes because we want students to become familiar enough with the steps and stages to apply the writing process to other writing situations. We also need to discourage plagiarism as well as last-minute writing. Writers make so many changes onscreen, however, that it's impossible to track or record most of the changes made in an evolving draft. In the temptation to grade the notes or the number of
drafts, we may forget that it's the product that really counts. For classroom portfolios graded at the end of a term, the product contains the writing process or embodies the process; therefore, teachers can and should grade the portfolio as a final product with a single grade. The time to "grade the process" occurs throughout the course: Each time I grade postwrites I am assessing students' sense of the writing process and their strategies or repertoire for negotiating particular assignments. Instructors can also grade working folders not only for how complete or organized they are, but also for how well they demonstrate the steps a writer has taken in working her way through a rhetorical task.

- **How much should improvement count?** After students have been with us for several weeks, it's difficult not to have an instinctive sense of their improvement, but can we really measure improvement? It is tempting to compare the portfolio version of a paper to an earlier one and look for improvements or actual evidence of revision. Because the portfolio includes only clean, final copies and not the entire working folder, however, that temptation has to be replaced by fresh readings, by a sense of the whole package. Not having the earlier versions increases the chances that we will evaluate the portfolio for what it is — for the actual product and for how it meets or doesn't meet the goals and expectations of the course. I do, of course, find myself comparing, sometimes, the portfolio version of a paper with an earlier draft. I have a good memory for students' papers and cannot block out what I know about the evolution of an essay. But the test of the portfolio is not how an individual paper has changed or improved (or hasn't). I am careful to review with students the fact that I will not have the drafts or earlier versions to serve as comparisons. Because my reading will be fresh and uninfluenced by earlier versions in the same folder, students may be less likely to make only those changes I suggested. Of course, I may recognize changes or realize that a student hasn't made any, but I do not intentionally set out to compare versions. And as we know, revising is not an automatic improvement — revising does not guarantee a "better" essay, just a different one. In addition, reading to determine a grade is about more than "Is this version better than the last one I saw?" You have to consider the status or quality of the package of writings as a whole.

- **How do we account for the choices or the variety?** How can evaluators call one portfolio markedly better than another when they may contain different types of writing? If all of the portfolios in a given class contain a different combination of final entries, how can they be compared with or ranked against one another? This is yet another argument for a class-developed rubric, with students having both input and insight into the evaluation process. In addition, it helps to have a broader notion of variety than just "different genres." Variety also means pieces written at different "moments" and for different audiences, or composed with different aims or purposes. In the context of most first-year composition courses, variety does not mean a wide variety of genres or types of writing; it results from other factors.

- **Then what are we looking for, exactly?** What factors should be taken into account? The preceding paragraphs above warn evaluators against comparing portfolio entries to earlier versions and against looking only for evidence of revision or improvement. In grading the final portfolio, however, we need to assess how well students negotiate the complexity of this rhetorical situation and assess the overall quality of their writing. What evidence do you find of students' understanding of the rhetorical situation the portfolio presents? What choices have they made about content and arrangement, and how effective is their sense of audience? What choices have they made about self-presentation, and how do they represent themselves as readers, writers, and learners? Where do you see good habits paying off? Where do you find proof of effort, responsibility, or revision? As I will try to illustrate, what students say about their work in a reflective introduction or essay constitutes much of what evaluators need to determine a grade or ranking.

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GETTING THE GRADING DONE

Here's my own grading process: I try to set aside a big chunk of uninterrupted time to complete the reading and grading for one class. (Interrupted time — for example, grading half of the papers one day and the other half three days later — means that I lose my sense of the class as a whole.) I get comfortable as I would for reading a novel or doing something I expect to enjoy. (I don't sit at a table or desk as I do for responding extensively to papers.) I sit on the couch with pillows and with my feet up. I have a pencil in my hand for marking errors, and for recording notes that communicate my reading response — for recording question or exclamation marks, smiley faces, or one- or two-word responses like "Good details" and "Very convincing" and "Why?"

From my comfortable spot, I read through the whole set quickly but completely — making all of the markings or comments that I am likely to make — giving each portfolio a tentative grade in pencil and placing each portfolio into one of three stacks: high range, medium range, and low range. Then I go through each stack separately, sorting more specifically the high-range, medium-range, and low-range portfolios. Once that is done, I confirm or change my pencil grade accordingly. Each portfolio grade is determined within the context of the whole set, and each grade reflects the class standard. That doesn't mean that the "best" portfolio necessarily gets an A (often it's an A- or occasionally even a B+), but sorting and ranking them helps me distinguish the B- from the C+.

What I can't account for or explain are the actual cognitive processes that lead me to say, "This is a B, and this isn't." What do we know from some
research on evaluating portfolios is that the cover letter, reflective introduction, or first few pages make the most significant impression of any other portfolio entry (Conway 1994; Hamp-Lyons and Condon 1993; Black 1994). My own experiences or intuitions fit with this research. The reflective introductions do seem to figure largely in my evaluation of a portfolio—mostly because of what students say about their work. In fact, I believe that what students say about their own work gives me plenty to go on in determining a fair grade.

In this next section, I want to quote passages from some of my students' reflective introductions, written for two sections of Writing 101 and one section of Writing 301 in the fall of 1998. My purpose in sharing these is not necessarily to provide "models" but to illustrate the kinds of passages that particularly struck me in my reading and grading process—passages that I really needed to pay attention to or think about. Although my categories for interpreting these "acts of reflection" in portfolio introductions may be representative, the actual samples or passages will differ in every portfolio writing class. Students' claims, examples, and approaches to this assignment will grow out of the context of the course (as they should). Teachers preparing to read and grade their own students' portfolios, however, might benefit from seeing how one instructor responded. In general, I am trying to be reflective about how I read and grade these portfolios.

Because this assignment was quite specific about demonstrating reflection, I share samples of student writing that accomplish this. I've also quoted passages that show other types of understanding about the class or about writing; another set of passages illustrates typical patterns I see in these reflective introductions (sometimes, despite my best efforts). Following several passages of student writing is a discussion of "glow and schmooze," an effect that many portfolio readers have noticed.

Evidence of the Ability to Be Reflective

When we say we want students to reflect on their learning, on their writing processes, or on their choices, what exactly do we mean? The following passages demonstrate lessons learned, discoveries made, or realizations achieved.

I have learned how to organize myself for a writing task by jotting down ideas, making lists of important points, writing rough half-thoughts when they come to mind and how to incorporate all of this into a piece of writing. Learning to write then put it away and come back to it later has become a very useful tool in my writing process. This course has shown me that it's O.K. to scrap ideas, even good ones, if they are not relevant to the subject at hand. — Amy

It has taken me a while, but I'm more capable of fixing the problems in my writing. I am getting better at recognizing when I wander off from the focus of the paper. Also, I am learning how much information to give, what's too little and what's too much. I know that I have to seriously consider my audience before I start writing. I have to figure out how much they might know and how much they might not know. I also have to figure out how to make a certain kind of audience interested in a specific topic; I need to know what would make them angry, upset, or pleased. — Carol

The second entry weaves together quotations from all five postwrites. I analyzed what I had written in each one and what I had learned and I discovered that through the postwrites I had grown tremendously over the course of the semester. In the first three postwrites I didn't know where my paper was headed. About halfway through the semester I realized that by not freewriting or brainstorming or making an outline, I was having a difficult time focusing. That slowly began to change as I began to understand how to focus my papers. By writing the postwrites after writing each paper, I learned to analyze my work so that I could revise. — Sharon

As a writer, I feel that I have learned how to take criticism and work with it to improve my opinion of my papers. I have also learned more efficient and up-to-date options for research. In addition, I was able to encounter new ways of brainstorming ideas and new techniques for organizing my pieces. — Rebecca

On Revision

It's important to note here that reflection means revision, too. A writer cannot make many changes in a paper or make decisions about its purpose or organization or tone without being reflective. So when reflective introductions discuss the writer's revision processes explicitly, the reader/evaluator gets a double dose of reflection.
In revising [the review of The Neverending Story], I took a couple of lines from the original introduction, copied them down onto another piece of paper, added a few more sentences, and rewrote the rest of the original piece. . . . I kept most of the description, and a couple of the opinions, but my final copy took on a whole new face. Instead of bashing the movies, like I did in the first review, I tried to concentrate on recommending the book. I wanted to give my review a more positive light. The original review was too negative. I had created the impression that the movies were to be avoided at all costs, which was not what I intended to do. Instead, I simply wanted to praise the book, make readers aware that there is a book, and still keep the movies in good standing. — Carol

My writing has been transformed through the past fourteen weeks. Not only have I made improvements and learned valuable techniques, but I am also able to identify the strong and weak aspects of my writing. This allows me to expand upon the strong points and fix the weak ones, thus making my writing better. Through the many workshops and revisions that we have done for this class, I now see the importance of revision and its effects. I am able to read my own work critically and revise areas of weakness myself. Revision would probably be one of the most important lessons I have learned about writing in this class. — Kristin

Overall, my weakness was organization. It is a flaw I have endeavored to correct, and I feel that I have finally done so. Through revision I have changed paragraphs, moved, chopped, dropped, added, and altered whole sections to make the paper “fit” together right. I believe that I have accomplished my goal. — Nathalie

Our project was originally directed toward a fictitious publishing company. However, I always had my father in mind. He became my audience when I began revising this piece for the portfolio because he is the one who I hope can really take this trip someday. With that in mind, the project became much more gratifying and enjoyable to complete. I felt as if the piece was fulfilling more than one purpose. It became a portfolio piece and my father’s dream. When the audience changed, the criteria changed. . . . [My father] would not be interested in reading about the customs of the food because he was born and bred there. He would want to know where he is going, how to get there, and what to expect when he arrived at each destination. Taking in these considerations, the piece worked out very well, presenting everything my father was looking for in his traveling package. In the end, this project ended up being my favorite assignment. — Karina

**Choices and Why**

My assignment sheet for the reflective introduction specifically asks students to identify some of the choices they made and why. It sounds simple enough, but some students have more success with this than do others, and I think some students believe it’s too obvious to spend much time on, or they can’t say much beyond “I liked these the best” or “I spent the most time on these.”

I elected these three papers because they each possess traits of a style of writing that I enjoy publishing. I feel that all required a good deal of ingenuity, descriptiveness, and persuasiveness to appeal to the reader. These are namely the qualities that have captivated me to thoroughly enjoy writing. — Jesse

My first paper illustrates my opinion on the portrayal of cities on TV. I tried to match the style of the piece with the thesis. For example, the paragraphs are cut off abruptly. It is meant to deliver a hammering and relentless feel, analogous to the quick button pushing of the remote control, and that’s how I end the paper, too. I feel that this was creative. — Nathalie
What I have chosen to do with this portfolio is a bit different than the suggestions given, but it is also the best way for me to show the process that I have gone through. The thing that is different is that I have chosen to include not only my best work, but also my work that is definitely my poorest. I feel that college is about the student's growth and development. For this reason I have included my best projects as well as my worst. — Bryan

Evidence of Rhetorical Savvy

These passages tell me that these writers really understand the reader/writer relationship and know something about how to cultivate it.

When I write a paper, I write it in hopes that it will have an effect on the reader in some way. It doesn't matter if the reader only thinks about my paper for five minutes after they read it, or remembers it five years down the road. As long as it had some kind of impact on the reader, then I have met my goal. I specifically chose these three papers, to include in my portfolio, because I feel they have the qualities to meet my writing goal. — Jennifer

The first paper deviates from the other three in that its focus is on me, the author. It's not so much an "issues" paper as it is a personal anecdote, and though this genre is not my particular favorite, I included it to give the reader a more intimate look at the author. Readers tend to respond more warmly to papers if they trust the author, and trust comes with familiarity. — Tom

Acknowledging Peer Respondents

Students did use some good rhetorical strategies in appealing to what they knew I would find valuable; for example, some credited their peer respondents for a lot of help.

In closing, I would like to note that the work contained in this portfolio would not have been improved without the help of you, Dr. Reynolds, and two special students, Jenn and Abigail. Jenn, Abby, and I worked together in every writing workshop and also helped each other outside of class. The three of you served as my critics, supporters, and creative thinkers. You are all true "wordsmiths" and I hope to carry the lessons you taught me into every piece I write in the future. — Julie

The Five-Paragraph Theme

A number of introductions found students falling back on the tried-and-true five-paragraph theme, even though, of course, that was never a focus of our course.

This is an introduction to my final portfolio. My final portfolio will include project three, a commentary titled "Tattoos Are Not That Bad"; project one, a literacy narrative titled "Keep In Touch"; and project five, a review titled "A Review of Misery." — Newton

This portfolio is a representation of the progress I have made this semester. I have chosen to include three pieces of my work. The first piece will be a combination of the two self-assessments we wrote in class, now titled "Learning to Write." The second one will be the paper on malls. My fifth project about confidence is the third selection. Through these pieces, I will show how my writing has improved. — Amanda

Frustrated by the dominance of this predictable structure when I tell students it's only appropriate for one- or two-hour timed writings, I should have seen earlier that it's a result of students feeling insecure or frustrated. Not knowing what the teacher wants, they fall back on the safety of a predictable package, on what has worked for them in the past.
"Creative" Approaches

Portfolio reader/evaluators will need to be prepared, if they invite creativity, to receive it. It may be worth thinking ahead about what it is you mean by “be creative,” or what types of writing might “go too far.” I have received passages that resist the assignment as they also attempt to do something different, like the following:

It’s driving a straight road late into the night, the windows down and the heater up, the radio loud, but not too loud and it feels like you could just go on forever.

It’s walking on a beach after sundown, late in the summer when you need a sweatshirt but can still walk barefoot along the shore, shoulder to shoulder and smile to smile with somebody you know you could stay with forever.

And it’s standing in a crowded bar, drink in hand and friends in tow and a hundred people you’ve never seen and will never see again all lost, because you’re lost in that someone you just met, and you wish the night would never end.

Only it does end. It doesn’t go on forever. Soon enough we get busy with our lives. We have priorities and obligations and responsibilities. And fears. So we wait for the next moment, telling ourselves that this one won’t get away.

This is, more than anything else, what I want to capture. . . . And maybe, if I can get it just right, maybe I can wrap my words around these times, around forever, and hold on tight.

For me, the words themselves always came easily. That was never the problem. The problem was the idea. I got lost in the words, sitting alone in front of a blank screen, a blank page. I babble on. I delete everything. So I try to be simpler. As simple as a walk on the beach. And as simple as a long romantic look.

Still it seems that we can be so afraid to take a chance. Those moments sit right in front of us, yet instead of reaching out to grab hold we too often push away. I want us to stop pushing. . . . I decided some time back that I could handle anything — except regret.

I hope that my writing will reflect this. — Craig

Dear Reader,

Have you ever walked along a quiet beach, your bare feet making impressions as you go? Often you become so engrossed in your thoughts that when you look back you are astounded at how far you have traveled. Your footprints create a wobbly pattern across the shoreline. You can stand and watch the tide erase parts of this trail, its metronomic arm unceasing in its devotion to the straightening of the sand. Looking back is a satisfying ritual. Today, dear reader, I invite you to join me in a metaphoric walk along my beach.

I have put together a cross-section of my work for you to sample. Each piece reflects my ability to write in a different style. After a brief self-assessment to introduce me as a writer, I have chosen four pieces I think exhibit my best work. The first two selections are reading response papers. One is about a book I enjoyed and the other I did not enjoy but I did appreciate. I wanted to show how I can be critical without being derogatory. Hopefully you will easily recognize which way my feelings leaned.

Next, I will sweep you off to paradise, but don’t be too surprised if Eden has a few serpents. I am possessed of a satirical wit and have allowed it free rein in my tale, “Picture Perfect Travel.” Let you burn under the blazing sun, I promise to cool you down in a rainstorm. This piece, “Storm Warnings,” has not one bit of humor in it. I purposely avoided by preferred style to exhibit my flexibility in writing. It is quite riveting, from my biased perspective.

While you are wringing out your bookmark, you can peruse my final analysis in which I briefly touch on how I have grown and changed as an author through this class. (I know it’s a bit Freudian to be so analytical but I was a psychology major for many years and old habits die hard.)

I guess you are ready to proceed. Thank you for giving me a truly beneficial experience as a student. I know when you walk alone on the beach . . . you look back too. — Alison

While neither of these introductions explains choices very thoroughly, or introduces the contents or even reflects on the writer’s learning, can I call such introductions unsuccessful? I found myself impressed, even if I did also find myself wishing for “more,” perhaps, of what I expected or suggested or asked for. Instructors should let students know how much “room” they have in the introductions to play with conventions, be creative, or “have a voice.”
Some of the entries I've just shared, I'm well aware, will be read or interpreted very differently by teachers or readers who don't "know" the students. I did draw these examples from the portfolios of students in my own classes, and context means everything. In fact, the question of context and interpretation leads into a messy area of portfolio evaluation that Irwin Weiser calls "glow and schmooze." "Glow" refers to the portfolio that starts out with a terrific introduction, meeting all of our expectations for a reflective preface, but then diminishes in quality. The writer succeeds at self-reflection and at explaining choices, but has not succeeded in putting together a strong package overall. "Schmooze" refers to those portfolio introductions that attempt to charm us or flatter us. While both features are subject to interpretation and "misreadings," I think Weiser has identified two difficult areas of assessing classroom portfolios. How should we grade portfolios that "fall apart" after the introduction? How do we (or should we) respond to passages in which students are thanking us for such a great class, marveling at how much they've learned, or claiming profound improvements in their writing? Some teachers worry about distinguishing between reflection and either appreciation or self-promotion. How do we know students are "sincere" in their introductory pieces when they make claims of appreciation—or how much should our doubts concern us?

RESPONDING TO "GLOW" AND "SCHMOOZE"

When students have a less-than-sophisticated sense of the rhetorical situation, or a limited understanding of self-assessment, they may rely on "schmoozing," and instructors need to prepare themselves for the "schmooze factor" when grading portfolios. Weiser calls it "psyching out the port. prof.," sometimes in the form of "writing to warm the heart of a composition teacher" (1997, 300). This may be in the form of praising our teaching—"You're the best teacher I've ever had"—or making grand claims for their improvement in writing—"My writing has improved more in one semester than it did in four years of high school." Students know what we want to hear and can sometimes put together a portfolio that "glows" in the beginning but isn't particularly strong or consistent after the glowing introduction. Evaluators of classroom portfolios need to be aware of these phenomena and to pay attention to their own readings of students' reflective pieces and what they find themselves responding to or valuing.

First, it may be difficult to distinguish schmooze from sincerity, but I want to suggest that students who express gratitude or who praise our abilities as teachers may not be intentionally schmoozing but may be trying to show that they are targeting a particular audience and understand what that audience values. They also may be sincere. We are often in a position of judging someone's sincerity (politicians come to mind, or deans and provosts), and we have to make the call based on past experience, intuition, evidence, or whatever data we can collect. The same goes for judging our students' sincerity or credibility in their portfolio's reflective introductions or cover letters: We have to rely on our own judgment.

One way to resist the schmooze factor is not to give students models of reflective introductions that contain any passages that could be interpreted as schmoozing. If students think you value praise of your teaching or appeals to how much they've learned, they will, naturally, use that as one of their own appeals. Another (rather authoritarian) way to prevent schmoozing is simply to outlaw it.

It is also an option to ask for the portfolios with names and identifiable features removed; to judge and record grades using social security numbers, for example. While this anonymity might reduce the feeling of pride and ownership that portfolios help to build in students, it should reduce any anxiety teachers have about judging degrees of schmooze.

Judging Degrees of Schmooze

Are the following excerpts from reflective introductions examples of schmoozing? How can we tell? Aren't we more likely to call it schmoozing if it comes from a student who has done mediocre work, with only a modicum of effort? Or from a student whose skills are not that strong, someone who may be facing an average grade? Or a student who just didn't like very much, with whom we've had a personality conflict?

One fuzzy category, within the area of schmoozing, is what I call transformation narratives. These are fairly common moves in reflective introductions, when students claim that the course somehow changed them or truly affected them. (See in particular Kristin's opening line on page 52.)

When I walked into this class for the first time in September, I had no idea what I was capable of in writing. I had no idea what I could or could not do. I had never written to an audience before. I had only written to one specific person, the teacher. This class showed me what it was like to write to an audience, both specific and general, and to change my writing accordingly. Also, all I had ever done were reports and critiques, no open letters, commentaries, or proposals. I wasn't fully aware of the different types of writing I had to choose from. This class made me realize that there are many different styles and genres of writing. — Carol
I had never expressed myself artistically or intellectually as a writer and came to this course relatively new to writing. I say that now, for it wasn't until I attempted to write that I realized how little I knew. Writing requires a great deal of contemplation, clarity of mind, perseverance and time. I have gained a new respect for those who choose this medium. It has been interesting for me to join their world and enter this realm. — Karen

When students rely on stock narratives provided by the culture — "This experience has changed me in profound ways" — it's difficult to fault them. They have found and used, after all, a culturally sanctioned form in which to express their experience.

If passages like the following appear in portfolio introductions of the best students, are we as likely to consider it schmoozing? Consider the following:

I liked this class. It allowed me to write about what I was thinking — unlike previous classes in which I was forced to write about a boring topic not even of my choice. This class has given me the chance to express my ideas and opinions, and I liked that. — Joel

In my personal life there is a letter that I need to write that I have been putting off. Through your class I have learned how to think it out, write it, and rework it so that I can present the best final product possible. I think the valuable skills that I've learned this semester will improve my writing as I continue my education and will enhance my personal writing as well. Thank you for removing the sinking feeling of dread that once came over me when the idea of writing was proposed. — Amy

In conclusion, I would like to say that I enjoyed this class because I was able to improve my writing through the course, and I think that this portfolio demonstrates that well. Happy reading! — Kristin

In a less predictable way, some students will touch on the standard narrative, and then give it a refreshing twist:

I must admit, upon hearing this course description, my heart sank a little. I had never dedicated any time to travel writing. In fact, the thought of spending an entire semester focused on it made me contemplate dropping the course. After looking over the syllabus and sitting through the first class, I decided to try it. I thought maybe I was being a tad close-minded about the topic and perhaps I would end up falling in love with the whole thing. I am still not too crazy about travel writing. I can honestly say that I will not be making an appearance on the New York Times best sellers' list within the genre of travel writing. However, I did learn quite a bit this semester and am anxious to share some work with you. — Karina

Whether we "trust" the writer or the writer's claims is a valid way of responding to a text. Schmoozing can fall, after all, within the category of the ethical appeal, or the appeal from character. What kind of character comes through in the prose? I tend to trust writers more who thank their peer group members rather than thanking me, or those who refer to specific activities or goals of the class, rather than to the course more generally. "I learned a lot in this class" isn't persuasive, but this might be: "I learned a lot from choosing my own topics, doing the postwrites, and reading your comments on my drafts." If this sentence were followed by an illustrative "For example," I would be very convinced by that writer's claim. "My writing really improved" is not as convincing as "I have learned to distinguish facts from claims, anecdotes from arguments, and support from repetition." So, as I tell my students, specificity is almost always better than vagueness in these situations. As with any strong piece of writing, reflective essays should contain details, evidence, support, or examples from the student's writing.
The Culmination of the Course

Portfolios that glow in the beginning and then grow dim should be evaluated as a package. Tempting as it is to reward writers who are comfortable with self-reflection or with the identity of "writer" (see Black, et al. 1994), if the portfolio does not meet the expectations set by the successful introduction, then the assessment will have to account for the lapse in quality.

Anticipating elements of glow and schmooze does not mean that we become suspicious of students who claim in their reflective introductions to have learned a great deal, grown as writers, or enjoyed our class. It does mean recognizing that writers call on a number of strategies for being reflective learners, and some will be more effective than others with us as readers.