# Promoting Metacognitive Thought through Response to Low-Stakes Reflective Writing

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Metacognition is a typical learning outcome in composition courses, but providing feedback on low-stakes reflective writing and assessing high-stakes reflective writing are complex tasks that warrant more attention in the literature. Consequently, this article explores how the assignment of and response to low-stakes reflective writing can provide effective scaffolding to higher-stakes reflective writing tasks. We present an example of our strategy for response through one instructor's experience with responding to her first-year composition student's low-stakes reflective writing. Ultimately, we call for more research on responding to reflective writing that will ensure the valid and reliable assessment of metacognition in composition courses.

*Keywords:* reflective writing, portfolio, metacognition, validity, response

# Introduction

Metacognition, most literally defined as "thinking about thinking," or, as Flavell (1979) phrases it, "cognition about cognitive phenomena" (p. 906), is a typical learning outcome in first-year composition. However, it is not one we often explicitly discuss. More frequently, writing instructors describe the importance of reflection in the writing process and ask their students to engage in a variety of reflective writing tasks, such as freewriting (Elbow, 2000), journaling (Fulwiler, 1987), and composing memos to introduce essay drafts (Giles, 2010; Shvidko, 2015). The goal of these reflections is to increase students' awareness of their strategies and intentions—to get students thinking about their own thinking—but these tasks are often assigned without much instruction on how or why reflection is an important part of the writing process, and without instructor response indicating whether or not the student achieved the desired goals of reflective writing. Without these important teacher interventions, reflection can become a quick task that students complete because they are asked, rather than an avenue for practicing metacognition. As education researchers Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) put it, because "metacognition often takes the form of an internal dialogue, many students may be unaware of its importance unless the processes are explicitly emphasized by teachers" (p. 21). Several writing studies scholars echo this point. Randazzo (2012) argues, "reflection and reflexivity require guidance from a mentor" (p. 378), and Kimball (2005) cautions that, without instructor guidance, students may view reflective writing as "an extra hoop" through which they must jump (p. 451). We thus propose that instructors more deliberately evaluate their assignment and assessment of reflective writing, and we argue that a key element in ensuring that metacognition is a valid learning outcome in first-year composition is to respond to students' low-stakes reflective writing.

When we say that metacognition is a learning outcome, we mean that a primary goal of first-year composition is for students to develop their abilities to self-reflect and self-assess, to understand and articulate the reasons for the decisions they made during the writing process. This learning outcome is important in any educational context because it helps

"students learn to take control of their own learning" and it can "increase the degree to which students transfer [learning] to new settings and events" (Bransford et al., 18–19). Specific to writing studies, metacognition helps students generate "a better understanding [of] . . . cognitive and linguistic processes" that both enhances reasoning skills and improves writing ability (Bower, 2003, p. 49), and supports composition studies' increasing focus on transfer (Downs & Wardle, 2007). As a course learning outcome in first-year composition, metacognition is developed in a variety of ways, including both high-stakes and low-stakes reflective writing.

Reflective writing is high stakes when students feel social or academic pressure to perform well, which is typically accomplished by publicly presenting the writing or receiving a substantial grade for it. In the first-year composition courses we teach, our students compose cover letters that accompany their final portfolios, which are worth 50% of their course grade. The reflective writing is high stakes because the cover letters introduce the portfolio and are read by not only the students' instructor but also by another composition instructor at our institution (following a community model of portfolio assessment) (Broad, 1994; Hout 2002). The portfolio cover letters are also the final opportunity for students to demonstrate the metacognitive skills they have been developing throughout the course.

Low-stakes reflective writing has less pressure, providing students with opportunities for honestly and authentically reflecting on their thinking and writing processes. In the courses we teach, we ask students to compose reflective cover letters, which introduce and reflect upon completed writing assignments, similar to Giles' (2010) "process notes" and Shvidko's (2015) "letters to the reviewer." The cover letters are an interesting middle-point between low-stakes and high-stakes writing because they are graded, but only worth a cumulative 10% of the student's grade, and they are in the same genre as the final portfolio cover letter. As such, these lower-stakes cover letters are meant to prepare students for the high-stakes portfolio cover letters, and can create an opportunity for scaffolding students' development of metacognition.

While we suspect that our institutional context is not unique, there is not much attention in the literature to the ways low-stakes assignments prepare students for high-stakes assignments that measure metacognition

as a learning outcome. Consequently, our concern in this article is the extent to which instructors can prepare students for high-stakes reflective writing tasks by responding to low-stakes reflective writing. What does it look like for a student to demonstrate metacognition in a cover letter? What kinds of responses to low-stakes reflective writing will encourage students to practice and develop metacognitive skills?

This article answers those questions by first discussing different strategies for responding to low-stakes reflective writing, then offering an example of Cohn's practice of responding to a first-year composition student's reflective writing, and concluding with a discussion of how responding to low-stakes reflective writing increases the validity and reliability of measuring metacognition as a learning outcome in first-year composition courses.

## Strategies for Responding to Low-Stakes Reflective Writing

Elbow (1997) describes a "continuum" of response strategies from zero response to critical and diagnostic response. While he does not suggest that "we can just mechanically match low stakes responses with low stakes assignments," he observes that "the lowest stake response goes most naturally with low stakes assignments: when the writing doesn't much matter to the final grade, we can afford to withhold our response or criticism" (p. 10). In practice, these low-stakes responses are often full-credit or no-credit point allocation, and, if there is written commentary, it is noncritical and supportive. The primary advantage of providing zero or minimal response is that it maintains the "low-stakes" status of reflective writing, which enables students to take risks.

While Elbow (1997) certainly has a point, his perspective assumes that students have an inherent ability to engage in metacognition, which other scholarship tells us is unlikely, especially when reflective writing takes the form of a cover letter or process memo. As Sommers (2011) asserts, reflective memos must "intersect with [students'] own experiences as writers/readers in multiple ways" (p. 108), but students may not be able to recognize the intersections without feedback from the instructor. Ash and Clayton (2004) further explain that students "need help with connecting

their experiences to course material, with challenging their beliefs and assumptions, and with deepening their learning" (p. 138). Without challenging students to articulate the relationships between their work in class and their independent attempts outside of class, reflective writing can become a redundant exercise, one where students replicate a formula for describing their process between drafts without moving beyond description. Further, encouraging students to challenge their beliefs and assumptions necessarily involves response; without seeing a response to their writing, students may not know that someone may disagree with them or think differently than they do.

An alternative strategy, then, is to provide a more rigorous response to reflective writing. Bain, Mills, Ballantyne, and Packer (2002) describe such a strategy for responding to student-teacher journals, arguing that the more detailed feedback reflective writers received, the deeper their reflections became. In their study, some writers received feedback primarily on the content while others received feedback on the form of their journals and the nature of their reflection. The strong reflective writers did not necessarily benefit from receiving detailed feedback, but the weaker reflective writers began to shift from mere description to the analysis characteristic of metacognition (p. 186). Therefore, Bain et al. conclude that, "feedback focusing on the reflective writing process" can encourage students to use reflective writing as "a learning tool," not just a method of describing events (p. 193).

The need for response to low-stakes reflective writing increases dramatically when those low-stakes tasks are meant to prepare students for a high-stakes demonstration of metacognition. Bower (2003) illustrates this in her rhetorical analyses of 88 cover letters from a basic writing class. She found that the students were more focused on convincing the teacher that they were good students than they were on demonstrating authentic metacognition. Students frequently asserted that they had changed as writers and as learners, but they did not support those claims with evidence, nor did they demonstrate any critical reflection or analysis that led to this conclusion. Bower thus reasons that most students were "merely paying lip service to the classroom's values" (p. 60), and were not "actually exhibit[ing] metacognition" (p. 62). In other words, simply asking students to engage in

reflective writing does not necessarily lead to authentic metacognition—we need to teach students how to do this.

An effective teaching strategy is responding to student writing, such that students' multiple attempts at low-stakes reflective writing throughout the quarter are guided by instructor feedback that prepares them for high-stakes reflective writing at the end of the quarter. To describe this strategy, Cohn offers a narrative example of giving a student feedback on reflective writing.

## An Example of Responding to Student Reflective Writing

When I began to teach first-year composition, my composition pedagogy courses had convinced me that metacognition was valuable. However, I wasn't entirely sure how to communicate that value to my students. The reflective cover letter prompt I used was built to promote flexibility, as it pointed students not only to a description of their writing process, but also to a number of different ways in which they might analyze that process (see Appendix for Reflective Cover Letter prompt). However, because the reflective cover letters were meant to be low-stakes activities, I kept explicit instructions to a minimum. I also refrained from responding to the cover letters because I assumed that writing without the looming pressure of feedback would make students feel more comfortable detailing their feelings and learning experiences.

I soon found myself disappointed. The reflective writing my students produced could best be described as progress reports, where students detailed what they did to complete the assignment, typically in the way that a prescribed "writing process" gets described: brainstorming, outlining, drafting, and revising. Because I had not given students any real vocabulary for writing about their processes, most turned to the linear, formulaic writing process narratives with which they were familiar. Finally, most cover letters ended with a salutation expressing their hopes for their performance on the assignment and a brief, anxious inquiry about whether I thought they deserved an A. It was clear that they were writing this reflective cover letter for me alone, and I didn't see any evidence that a lack of feedback was encouraging them to use this assignment as an opportunity to examine their ways of thinking about the assignments. In spite of efforts

to encourage students to see reflective writing as an opportunity to examine their own processes and practices, it was still a graded assignment where the real audience was the instructor.

Given my experiences, I made two decisions: (1) I needed to make my own expectations for the assignment clearer, and (2) I needed to start giving students some feedback on their reflective writing, even if it was minimal.

As I thought about my expectations for the task, I realized that I wanted to see students analyzing both their writing process and their products to a greater extent. I hoped that this assignment would be a way for students to develop the autonomy and self-confidence essential for making informed writing choices. Upon reflecting about the value of reflective writing for my students, I knew that I needed to model this reflection in turn by making the assignment goals more explicit and aligned with the metacognitive work I had done myself. My hope was that by making metacognition's transferable quality clearer, I would also make clearer the concrete value of reflective writing to students.

In addition to explaining the assignment instructions with greater clarity, I started to respond to every reflective cover letter submitted in order to give students an understanding of how they could deepen analysis of their progress. I knew that part of developing metacognition is also developing new ways of thinking about writing; these possibilities might not be immediately obvious to students without some guidance. Below, I offer an example from one student to whom I gave feedback, tracing the ways she responded to this feedback and how the feedback was applied in both her lower-stakes cover letters and her final portfolio cover letter. "Courtney" (a pseudonym) offered consent for use of her written work in publication.

Writing in response to completing a digital literacy narrative for the class, Courtney wrote many paragraphs like this one where she describes what she did and how she felt about what she did:

> *The hardest part for me is always the topic and formulating it into a thesis, probably because I believe it is the most important step. I often spend a couple hours over the course of several days before I even begin typing thoughts into a Word Document and this time was no different. For this paper I was*

> *trying to narrow down my laundry list of ideas to pick a topic specific enough to elaborate on but also one I really felt comfortable discussing . . . I finally decided I wanted to branch out and challenge myself with not only a negative viewpoint, but a very personal topic.*

While I appreciated that Courtney went beyond simply describing her process by reflecting on the challenging feelings she experienced while developing her topic for the assignment, it also seemed that Courtney could have done more to explain why she found it so challenging to pick a topic. Further, it didn't seem that Courtney did very much work to analyze why she thought these steps worked for her. In response to this first cover letter, then, I gave Courtney the following feedback:

> *Great work describing your writing process, Courtney! You do a nice job in your cover letter of describing what your thought process was behind each of your decisions for this essay. I agree that coming up with the thesis statement and the topic can certainly be some of the hardest parts. Future cover letters might do more to consider what you think could be revised and what things you still have questions about it. If you feel like you don't have much to revise, you might reflect instead on what you learned from what you wrote. Did you learn anything new in the process or did any of your knowledge about writing get reinforced?*

My feedback to Courtney began on a positive note, offering my honest assessment of what I thought worked well in her cover letter. I also gave her some guiding questions to consider during her next cover letter attempt, encouraging her to focus on not just the work she did, but also on what she learned from that work and how she could apply it to future scenarios. I hedged my response, however, using words like "might" to show that my suggestions were simply some among other options she could choose. I didn't want my feedback to be too prescriptive, but I also wanted her to be aware of options for deepening her reflection.

Although she continued to organize her writing based on her chronological process, Courtney ended her next reflective cover letter with some thoughts on what she learned from the experience, responding directly to my feedback on her last cover letter.

*Composing this paper forced me to become very aware of my audience and purpose. I found myself constantly checking back to who specifically I was writing to and what I was trying to persuade them of. This assignment has taught me that a great paper is obviously written and designed in the interests of one specific audience and it is obvious at all points who that audience is. I truly discovered the importance of having a clear purpose and clear audience. In every other paper, presentation or video I write/make from here on out, at every step I will remind myself who my audience is and what I am writing to achieve. I have learned that that clear focus in a paper is what differentiates the good papers from the great papers.*

I found Courtney's thoughts insightful; she addressed what she learned from her writing process in clear and specific terms (e.g., "the importance of having a clear purpose"). Further, by addressing how her understanding of audience and purpose allowed her to distinguish "the good papers from the great papers," Courtney shows an awareness of how she could apply concepts she learned in class to future writing assignments, both within and beyond this class. In response, I gave Courtney the following, entirely positive feedback:

*Excellent cover letter, Courtney! It sounds like you put a lot of good and careful thought into your genre and audience choices for this piece. I'm glad you learned some new things from this assignment, too!*

While Courtney's growth may not necessarily be dramatic, the minimal feedback offered to her gave her something to work with for her next attempt at a reflective writing assignment.

When it came to her high-stakes final portfolio cover letter, Courtney maintained the structural patterns of her previous cover letters, telling the story of her revisions in the order in which she completed them. Like her second reflective cover letter, she also maintained a focus on transferable skills and what she learned from the experience of revising her work:

*Overall, this portfolio represents me as an adaptive writer. I came into this class with a limited skill set for a specific genre and came out learning how to adapt to new genres and tailor each piece to a specific audience. The design of*

*my portfolio is very straightforward. I am a very logical thinker and presenter so even the few pictures on my audience and purpose essay are a symbol of me branching out and letting myself add personal touches. My hope is that this portfolio showcases my abilities as a writer to adapt to various genres and execute in a manner that is organized, persuasive and focused. I have not only broadened by scope of writing to include more genres, but I have built confidence in my ability to write.*

As this final paragraph of Courtney's letter moves between discussing what she learned and what the design of her portfolio reflects about her work, it reiterates many of the lessons learned from the most recent cover letter. While we cannot say for certain—without getting into a conversation about the influence of classroom interactions on her work—whether she is responding this way because she received the positive feedback or because she truly considered these skills the most important thing she learned over the course of the quarter, she demonstrates more metacognition than she did earlier.

Without interviewing the student, we cannot be completely sure that her demonstration of reflective skills are a direct result of my feedback, but we can see that her cover letters do more metacognitive work over the course of the quarter. As the instructor, I observed many other students progressing in similar ways, an observation I did not make in earlier quarters when I did not respond to my students' low-stakes reflective writing.

## Measuring Metacognition

While more systematic research is needed, we believe Courtney's experiences indicate the potential for students to develop as metacognitive thinkers throughout a writing course. However, this potential must be nurtured by careful instructional design. Courtney's development was facilitated by several factors, including the fact that the low-stakes reflective writing assignments were clearly explained and Cohn's feedback offered personal and specific guidance on how Courtney could improve her reflective writing. In addition to helping students write more successful final cover letters, this combination can increase the validity

and reliability of measuring metacognition as a learning outcome in a writing course.

When the content that students are taught and the work that students do aligns with the criteria on which they are assessed, the assessment is considered valid (Legg, 1998). If we are going to validly assess students on their metacognitive abilities at the end of a course, students need to be taught the differences between descriptive and reflective writing, and they need to be asked to practice writing in ways that exposes their metacognition. Of course, the nature of reflective writing complicates this seemingly straightforward recommendation. As Yancey (1998) articulates, evaluating reflective writing requires navigating the "sticky territory" of "outlin[ing] our expectations at the same time we want students to articulate their own sense of accomplishment" (p. 14). Nevertheless, we need to develop clear guidelines for students to traverse this "sticky territory" in order to guarantee that high-stakes reflective writing like portfolio cover letters are, indeed, a valid assessment of their metacognitive ability.

Reliability, or consistency, is historically problematic for writing assessment. Huot (2002) explains, "the importance of reflection or point of view in writing is contradictory to an objective approach, because to assume a particular position is to be subjective" (p. 92). If objectivity is not possible, then it becomes difficult to say that a given portfolio will receive the same score regardless of reader, hence the difficulty of establishing reliability in writing assessment. Moss (1994) offers a useful strategy for responding to this challenge in her "hermeneutic approach," which blurs the distinctions between validity and reliability in favor of:

> holistic, integrative interpretations of collected performances that seek to understand the whole in light of its parts, that privilege readers who are most knowledgeable about the context in which the assessment occurs, and that ground those interpretations not only in the textual and contextual evidence available, but also in a rational debate among the community of interpreters. (p. 86)

By offering a first-person example in this article, we privilege the instructor as most knowledgeable about the context of her classroom,

and, by publishing this article, we welcome debate about the strategies for responding to reflective writing and measuring metacognition. The broader community of writing scholars and the narrower communities of writing programs can increase the reliability of metacognition as a learning outcome in writing courses by engaging in more conversations about what we mean by "metacognition" and how we identify demonstrations of metacognitive ability in our students' reflective writing.

As illustrated in Cohn's experience with responding to her students' low-stakes reflective cover letters, an important first step toward establishing valid and reliable measurements of metacognition in writing courses is for instructors to respond to students' reflective writing. Writing is difficult to assess in any situation, and reflective writing is particularly challenging, but this only makes it more important to employ careful course design and thoughtful feedback.

## Conclusion

Few will contest the complicated nature of responding to and assessing reflective writing or the value of metacognition as a learning outcome in writing courses. It is for these reasons that we need to engage in more conversations about how to assign and assess reflective writing. From our experiences, direct instructor response to low-stakes reflection is a good strategy for helping students successfully develop and demonstrate metacognition in high-stakes reflective writing.

An important next step for this line of inquiry is to conduct interview research to learn more about students' approaches to reflective writing, as well as systematic comparisons of response strategies and assignment instructions. This research is critical for the field of writing studies because so much of what we hope to instill in our students requires metacognition, yet many instructors shy away from direct response to or measurement of this complex skill. In Ferris's (2015) call to return to scholarship on response, she acknowledges all of the ways in which scholarship on response to writing has been limited in the past decade. Among her list of suggested ideas to explore is how response interacts with writing assessment. We agree that this relationship is valuable and, particularly in the context of developing

metacognitive writing, we think students could use significantly more guidance and support. Failure to do so risks reinforcing students' beliefs that metacognitive work is an "extra hoop," and may prevent students from experiencing the full benefits of reflective writing.

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# Appendix: Reflective Cover Letter Prompt

## Digital Literacy Narrative
## Reflective Cover Letter

### Task:
Now that you have finished your Digital Literacy Narrative, reflect on the process you went through to produce it. You will want to consider the following:

- How did you decide how to respond to the assignment prompt?
- What steps did you take in approaching your response to the prompt?
- Why did you decide to take these particular steps?
- How did you organize your essay and why did you decide to organize it in that way?
- What do you want your reader to learn from reading your essay?
- As you look at your paper, what do you think are the best parts of it? Why do you like these parts?
- Which parts are you unsure or less happy about? Why are you less happy with these parts?
- What did you learn from the process that you could transfer to future assignments in this class or other classes?

You do not need to answer all of the questions—just the ones that are most interesting and relevant to you.

### Format/Specifications:
Write this as a cover letter with several well-developed paragraphs. I will read your cover letter before I read your essay, so consider what you think I should know about your essay before I read it.
The cover letter should be 300-400 words (longer is OK), double-spaced. It should also be spell-checked, proofread, and edited.

### Grading:
This cover letter is worth 25 points. You will receive full credit (see the rubric) for a thoughtful, thorough, well-written response.