

A note to faculty: Asking students to attach reflective cover letters to their writing assignments can encourage them to feel more ownership of their development as writers and to grow into more perceptive, self-aware critics of their own writing process and products. For faculty, cover letters can help target feedback and enliven otherwise tedious, potentially half-informed engagements with student work, ultimately resulting in a more efficient and effective pedagogical relationship.

Consider borrowing or adapting the language below, which I use with my students, and asking your Cadets to write such statements, especially for major written events. You won't necessarily get the information you'd prefer from everyone, but you'll probably be surprised how seriously most students-writers treat such opportunities to give you a better sense of what they think about what they've written and how they got there.

Writing Reflective Cover Letters to College Writing Assignments

A cover letter sets some of the terms of your reader's experience; think of this letter as an opportunity for you to specify the kind of feedback you want. Your letter initiates a dialogue between us and provides me with a more educated starting point for evaluating your work. By reflecting on your finished essay—describing how it came to be written and assessing what you see as its strengths and weaknesses—you help me get a better sense of where you're at as a writer and, just as importantly, how you're progressing as a *perceptive reader* of your own writing.

Without this sort of statement, it's hard for me to know what *you* think about your essay, which problems you already know about and which you may not be able to see unless I point them out. In short, it's hard to judge which of your paper's shortcomings are the result of a rushed compositional process (for instance, a lack of time to plan or proofread) and which are actually the result of genuine struggle or lack of know-how (in which cases I'll be able to suggest new strategies to help). Similarly, it's useful for me to know which of the paper's successes came easy to you and which gave you more difficulty; if you let me know where you spent the most time or worked the hardest, I can tell you whether I think that labor paid off.

Ideally, as a result of your letter, I'll be able to address more than the individual paper in and of itself; I'll be able to speak also to your larger concerns, issues that carry across papers (and potentially not only for this course but your college writing generally). The bottom-line, clichéd as it sounds, is that this letter is an opportunity for you to help me help you—for you to take a lead role in your own development as a writer.

One last thing: don't be afraid to point out flaws or to render an honest account of exactly how successful (or not) you find your finished essay to be. What you write in this letter doesn't affect my grading; it just helps me to tailor my comments and analysis to your concerns.

Your letter should address your **writing process** and your **writing product**. Here are some questions you could touch on:

- **Process:** What was your compositional process like for this essay? How did the essay come together? How much time did you spend on it? Where did you write it, and over how many sessions? Were any class textbooks or resources particularly helpful?
- **Process:** Did anything change in your preparation of this essay from your normal process? Any experiments here that you'd like feedback on?
- **Product:** What do you see as your main idea or point? What idea or point do you feel you've made most successfully? least successfully? why? (Point to specific parts in the essay if you can.)
- **Product:** What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of your work here? Which parts did you spend the most time on? What gave you the most difficulty? (Again, be specific.)
- **Product:** What's the number one question about your paper that you'd like me to address?
- **Process/Product:** If you were allowed just a couple more days to revise, where would you focus?

Your letter should be single-spaced, around half a page or so. It should also be the last thing you write (write it after you've finished your paper). I have reprinted two sample letters on the following page.

Dear Professor:

I spent about eight hours on this paper over three sessions. The first involved outlining my thesis and supporting points; the second was a brief period when I simply got all documentation and formatting done. The third was when I actually composed the paper from the outline I had made earlier. I have found that when I do this stage in one sitting, it allows my train of thought to be uninterrupted.

The main idea of this paper is to show why the character of Horatio was needed in the play and how Hamlet made use of him. The speech I've chosen to examine implies a special relationship between the two characters, one that I've also tried to explore. It seems to me that Hamlet uses Horatio to fill in the gaps that were created by his madness and political intrigues at court, though I'm not sure this idea comes across clearly enough.

The point I think that I've made most successfully has to do with Horatio's overall loyalty and stability, a point that I reinforce throughout the paper. Perhaps that comes off as a bit repetitive. But I probably could have more fully explored Hamlet's personal doubts and complaints as reflected in his speech, especially concerning his potential insanity. It just seems to me that my thesis could be stronger, maybe I'm lacking a key term. I also think I need to work on my structure. I think the overall organization works—intro, background on Horatio, discussion of the speech, discussion of Horatio's importance to Hamlet, conclusion—but within each section, I'm having trouble linking my ideas to my thesis. Each paragraph needs to have a purpose that's unique, yet not so different that it doesn't fit into the essay. That's the trouble I'm having.

Aside from the questions I have about thesis and structure, I'd like to know how could I have made the 'speech' portion of my paper stronger. I feel like it needs to be more carefully planned and end with a bang, not a whimper. Any help you can give me about how to make that point more forcefully would be much appreciated.

Sincerely,
[Name]¹

Dear Sir:

I developed my essay in two general stages. First, I created a relatively detailed outline, a thesis statement (which I ended up revising multiple times), and found rough evidence for my body paragraphs. Second, I sat down and actually wrote the essay. Strangely, I actually wrote a great deal of my body paragraphs before fully developing my introductory paragraph. This is a departure from my normal essay-writing method, in which I go at it in one straight shot in order. I spent about 5-7 hours total time working on the essay I would estimate. I did not consult TS/IS or any other Norton resources for my essay. I did briefly look over the HWE1 tips document that you gave us and the close reading sample. They were somewhat helpful, but I generally found them overwhelming, as I did not attempt to utilize them until too late into my own creative process for them to be very constructive. I had some trouble coming up with my topic for this essay because I have never had to analyze poetry in this manner before. I did end up enjoying it, but it was an uphill battle in the early stages of development.

I am generally pleased with my final product; I think it follows all of the guidelines established in the assignment. The strengths of the essay are its style and syntax; I feel that I do have my own "voice" so to speak, so I feel comfortable writing papers that have a specific tone to them. The weakest aspects of my essay are some of the evidence and developments for the allusion and modernism paragraphs. In retrospect, I should have taken more time to prepare these portions of my essay so that they were more encompassing and better supported my argument. This is not to say that they don't support it, but they could be improved upon. I had the most difficulty writing the introduction because I was unsure how to start the essay without sounding boring or stereotypical. I ended up opening with a short explanation of my poet's style as a modernist and how that impacted the poem. I ended up reconnecting with this concept in my last body paragraph, so I feel that it was a nice introduction to some of the larger themes of the poem and my essay. I was also pleased with my analysis of tone and enjambment.

Sincerely,
[Name]

¹ This example is adapted from Kerry Walk, *Teaching with Writing* (Princeton University, 2008), p. 14. Walk's reflections on the cover letter also inform my own account. The second example is adapted from Cadet work at the U.S. Military Academy.