

Reflective Activity

Cover Letter for Papers

Activity Description

I ask students to write a cover letter to turn in with essays/papers. I use this with both first and second drafts. The worksheet I will send includes all the details and rationale for the activity. Dr. Thomas Jehn (Harvard U Writing Program) presented on this topic during a writing workshop a while back, and I've found it a powerful tool. He shared his description and gave us permission to use it, which I have done numerous times. So this comes from him.

Preparation, Handouts, Resources

I have a handout that I pass out. Then I ask students to turn over the page and write their first letter on the back of the sheet. I'm sending you the sheet separately.

Learning Goals

I think this activity supports argumentation ("I wanted to argue X in my paper, but I struggled with Y") and revision ("I feel like Z doesn't work as well in my paper as it could"). But it also helps students think about process, and I often hear about things my students either have done differently in their process or things they would like to try differently. Having access to that reflection helps me discuss the writing process with students.

Challenges/Obstacles

Some students have a hard time taking that step back and reflecting on the work they have just completed. Some students have a hard time figuring out what they want to say in the letter. I point them to the questions at the bottom of the handout as a way to get going.

Recommendations

I really like how this exercise makes students take a step back and reflect on both their essay and their writing process. I feel like I learn a lot about my students and their writing from reading these letters, and I think my students enjoy the chance to think a bit more about the process they are still emerging from. Sometimes students are able to articulate what they want to say better in the letter than they do in the actual essay, so that can be a starting point for revision.

Another benefit I've found time and time again is that students are able to target exactly what is still weak in an essay draft. Then my job is simply to agree with them and to encourage them in their revisions in that area. That way, they take ownership of their own writing, rather than looking to me for what to do next.

Tool Contributor

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