

Joel Barlow High School
WRITING CENTER

Junior Writing Portfolio: Reflective Letter Assignment

As part of your junior writing portfolio, you will write a reflective letter that focuses on your growth and development as a writer. Use the letter as an opportunity to discuss the role of writing in your life, your development as a writer, and the strengths and weaknesses of your writing. In addition, the reflective letter might introduce the other pieces in your portfolio and relate them to your overall writing development. Three examples from previous classes follow, and you can read more letters in *Standouts*.



Your Reflective Letter to the Portfolio Assessors

Your portfolio letter is a *personal* letter from you to the assessors who will read your portfolio. The purpose of the letter is **INTRODUCTION** and **REFLECTION**.

Introduce YOURSELF - especially as you relate to writing.

This might include what you like to write about, an early memory of writing, a good or bad writing experience, your preferred writing environment, or how you prepare or go about writing.

Introduce YOUR WRITING - especially the pieces in your portfolio.

You might discuss why you selected the pieces, what your choices say about you as a writer, or how you feel about the finished product.

Introduce CREATIVITY and INDIVIDUALITY into your letter.

Use humor — include a personal anecdote. Consider the use of an original simile or metaphor that compares writing to something else.

Some ways to creatively *introduce* yourself and your writing are to:

Reflect on your writing strengths and weaknesses.

Reflect on how you learned to write and how you have grown as a writer.

Reflect on what you like and dislike about writing and writing assignments.

Reflect on how you feel about the process of writing and writing in general.

Reflect on your goals for your writing in high school and beyond.

Be honest, be yourself, be sure to set a positive tone.
Remember your audience. Your letter is the first piece to be read.
It truly is the assessors' *introduction* to you !

Dear Assessors,

The voice and style created in the first paragraph continue in later paragraphs.

I was never one for being the center of attention. My sister, Cassidy, was the actress; the stage was her home away from home. During each of Cassidy's shows, I loved to watch her captivate the audience as she hit her notes perfectly and danced like a professional. At one point I was jealous, yes—but I knew that the second I stepped on stage, my knees would grow weak and my voice would drift into a cacophony of stuttering and confusion.

Now, however, I cannot avoid being the center of attention; I'm in a light that I've never been in before, one that illuminates every drop of sweat that outlines my face. I'm on stage, a place I avoided for so many years, revealing myself in a way that no one has seen before. Clenched in my perspiring palm is my Junior Writing Portfolio. It's my act, my chance to express myself not only as a writer or student, but also as an individual.

It's clear that Brenna took the time to craft her syntax and diction.

In order to prepare myself for this scene of vulnerability, I had to be sure that every aspect of my performance was perfect. Each piece required its own idea or characteristic that made me feel a special attachment to the work; otherwise it was exiled from the mammoth pool of potential papers. Immediately, I chose five or six pieces that outshone the rest. The process presented obstacles. Each piece exemplified different attributes of my writing skills; certain ones emphasized my abilities with description, while others displayed my best attempts at analysis. Once the final banishments were made, I chose four pieces that were far from perfect. This is just what I wanted. I found myself excited to revise the three works that I could and format them into the best pieces of my writing career. I was uniquely interested in each piece of writing, whether it was the style or the position of the paper. With the proper corrections, each piece began to reflect different characteristics of who I have developed into over the past seventeen years.

She connects her formal analysis to the metaphor about performing.

My stage fright is obvious through the worry in my eyes, even before the introduction of my first piece, my formal analysis paper. Surprisingly enough, this paper, entitled "Second Time Around: The Wisdom and Selflessness of the Founding Brothers," is the one in which I have the most confidence. As one of the few "A" grades I achieved in my AP U.S. History course, it is an essay that I believe embodies a wide variety of details that are effectively organized and support my thesis well. I felt passionate about the arguments I make in this paper, which examines how the Founding Brothers were great men with maybe not perfect, but inspiring motives. The research and fervor behind this paper enabled it to become one of the most effective analysis papers I have written. With this piece as my first, the others were expected to live up to many expectations. In my moment of stardom I couldn't let the performance die, so each piece had to provide its own dramatic character.

The light shining on me seems to be getting hotter as my breath becomes heavy. I do not work well when I am unsure of the response I will get—and the next two papers are much riskier than the first. These pieces show the inventive side of my writing abilities. My writer's choice, "Gatsby . . . The Great?" was based upon the novel *The Great Gatsby*. This was the book I most enjoyed reading and analyzing during the first semester of

this junior year. The tales and gossip of the wealthy in this novel intrigued me, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's ability to saturate the book with meaning and symbolism astounded me. Being able to analyze the novel's protagonist was a great opportunity, and I was very satisfied with the result.

The other risky paper was my creative piece, "Whispers," which I felt most accomplished after writing. I had never written a short story similar to this and having to start from scratch made things difficult. But once the paper joggled its way out of the printer, it was much more satisfying. The risks I took with writing these two papers correspond with the anxiety I have as I stand presenting them in front of the audience.

At last, the piece of which I am most fearful: the timed writing. This produces the most amount of sweat and the heaviest pattering of the heart. Though I feel confident with the statements and connections I made in writing the timed piece about my summer reading materials, an activity under pressure creates more agony for me than adrenaline. I am doubtful about certain areas of this piece; but considering the pressure under which I was working, I present it with confidence and fulfillment alongside the rest of my works.

Overall, this Junior Writing Portfolio has put me in a place where I have never been before. Each of the proceeding pieces expresses who I've become throughout my life in its unique way. Hopefully, once the light fades and I can exit the stage, you, the audience, will feel as fulfilled as I did after accomplishing this task. Thank you for your time.

Even though it's not required, Brenna introduces her timed write.

She clearly and concisely brings her metaphor to a close.

Sincerely,

Brenna Regan

Dear Assessors,

A lively introduction with some personal insight engages the reader.

Here's a brief glimpse of who I am today: A young girl, with hippy hair that flows in waves to her waist. It takes me less than ten minutes to get ready, and I quickly throw on my flannel button down, leaving it unbuttoned over a Grateful Dead shirt. I grab my tie-dye bag, covered in pins I've spent years collecting. I spend most of my days with my friends, listening to music, taking pictures, enjoying nature, and procrastinating. I've always felt like I was born in the wrong era, an "old soul" if you will, whose friendly nature and caring heart are overshadowed by people's assumptions. However, I don't worry much about people's opinions of me anymore.

Rewind to three years ago: I'm a freshman, I'm fourteen, scared, and self-conscious. It takes me about an hour to get ready, my hair straightened and makeup done perfectly. My outfit took me an hour to put together the night before, and is similar to something you'd see on the pages of *Seventeen Magazine*. Even with the perfect outfit, hair, and makeup, I'm still second-guessing myself. I'm trying to be part of a crowd I simply don't belong in. I'm insecure, an outsider. Those were some of the most miserable times of my life.

During those desperate attempts to be something I was not, as I tried to fit the mold of a normal teenage girl, I also tried to adhere to the guidelines instilled in me on how to write a good paper. You know, the introduction, three-body paragraphs, and conclusion deal? The one taught to you in middle school and driven into your young, malleable mind, until you're programmed to write simple, robotic, boring pieces?

Adie connects her writing to the theme she developed in the first paragraphs.

Luckily, mid-sophomore year I had an epiphany. I no longer cared about being accepted by my peers. I knew I had to put effort into things that made me happy. From that point on, I no longer cared if my writing pleased others. Writing was supposed to be cathartic, something I could relate to. I had to be dedicated to the piece and proud of it. It couldn't be something written with no soul or substance—solely created in the hopes of getting a "good" grade.

Her theme provides a smooth and interesting transition into each portfolio piece.

Truthfully, it all began with my Sophomore Speakout, which I've included as my writer's choice, called "What's Love Got To Do With It?" When given the assignment, I decided I wasn't going to take the easy way out as I had done with previous essays. I wasn't going to pick a simple topic, one that everyone in my class could readily agree with. No, I was going to choose something that had meaning to me. I won't spoil the piece for you, but I got my inspiration from a problem I was dealing with at the time, and writing the paper helped me discover what I truly needed in my life. This was the start of a new me, one who wrote not to please, but to gain consciousness about myself.

From that point on, I wrote freely, without constraints. I let writing be a form of discovery, a form of relaxation, a form of therapy, rather than being rigid and structured, as it had previously been. I no longer focused on the paper being what others would deem "good" writing, and turned my attention to writing pieces I wanted to write. I let go of my inhibitions and

insecurities, freeing my mind and my writing, focusing on subjects that mattered to me.

She continues to connect her writing to personal development.

Since my epiphany, I've experienced many ups and downs in life and my writing improves with each success and failure. I think this theme is prominent in my personal essay, "A Bump in the Road." I learned a lot from the ordeal, which you will read about as you venture on into my portfolio, and it's put a lot into perspective. While the experience I wrote about was a difficult and painful time, the essay itself is one of my best, as well as one of my favorites because I was able to express a lot of emotions bottled up inside.

Remember that you can revise and improve the papers you choose to submit.

I still haven't reached my peak though, and there is always room for improvement. Perhaps the weakest piece in my portfolio is my analytical paper. Analytical papers have never been my strong suit, yet I chose "A Father's Love," about *Fences* by August Wilson, because I can relate to it the best out of all my analytical pieces. I could really identify with Cory and his relationship with his father. Even though it might not be the best analytical paper, I am proud that I stuck with what I wanted to write about, rather than picking a simple thesis.

As I said before, people's opinions don't matter much to me anymore but, as you read my pieces, I hope you enjoy them. This being said, I leave you, hopefully free of assumptions, to read my writings, taking them where they came from: the heart.

Sincerely,

Adelaide Egan

Dear Assessors,

Ben begins with an important insight about the writing process.

There. I just achieved getting the first words of my reflective letter down on paper! One of the biggest challenges I face when writing a paper is getting those first words written. I can't help but strive for perfection in each of my assignments, making it difficult to "just get something down." However, I've finally learned that it's okay to get a rough draft started instead of trying to make the first draft perfect. This portfolio development process has reinforced that great writing results from great revising.

He develops his thoughts about revision and works the subject into the discussion of his pieces below.

With that in mind, I chose some of my best pieces of work, yet I still found opportunities to make them more concise and effective. As I selected my pieces for each category, I found that my strongest works were on topics that I truly feel passionate about, whether it's my connection to Judaism, my political views, or even my love for sports. Additionally, I had no issue choosing my analytical piece, as this has always been my main area of strength in writing. I've had the ability to integrate research and information into a cohesive argument, and then apply my skills from the Debate Team to persuade the reader of the thesis or argument. In spite of the persuasiveness of my papers, I still found many opportunities during both the first and second revising processes to enhance the effectiveness of my communication of ideas.

Here, Ben shows that he understands his strengths and weaknesses, and that he has worked to improve his writing.

Aside from my past inability to get the first words down on paper, I have always struggled with creative assignments that have minimal instructions or guidelines. It is not coming up with an idea as much as creating a non-traditional style that would jump off the page and interest the reader. Creating meaning from a vague prompt is a skill that I've been forced to develop over the past few years. Another previous weakness of my writing was an inability to be succinct in expressing an idea, using extra descriptive words such as "extremely." This is where the revision process has helped me cut down on the use of unnecessary words. I've developed as a writer by identifying these challenges and honing in on them through revisions, while also exploring my creativity, recognizing that I am no Robert Frost.

To give some context to each of the pieces of writing in my portfolio, I'll start by giving some insight into my formal analysis. This essay, entitled "A Resurgence of Anti-Semitism," is the summer assignment for all juniors and seniors enrolled in the Honors section of the "Madman as Hero" course. This past summer, I read *The Burden of Guilt* by Hannah Vogt, and synthesized my understanding of the anti-Semitism that existed in Nazi Germany with research about the modern dilemma of the global rise of anti-Semitism in 2014. I integrated the two different areas of research to draw parallels between the two situations and make a conclusion of why this recent issue is so significant in the world. This essay reflects my overall analytical abilities and my passion in writing, since the topic directly connected to my life as a Jew living in a dangerous world in 2014. I am personally very pleased with the outcome, especially since I was able to refrain from my personal bias and write an objective paper based on modern and historical research.

Ben could have used his ideas about revision and editing as transitions, instead of a list format to introduce his pieces.

For my creative piece, I chose an interesting assignment from my sophomore year titled “One Man’s Defense.” The creative writing aspect of our *Frankenstein* unit in English class was to write a story from an atypical point of view. In order to challenge myself to defend a point of view completely different from my own, I decided to write from the perspective of a made-up Nazi official giving his testimony at the Nuremberg trials. Inspired by the 2000 film *Nuremberg*, I thought about how a Nazi leader may go about defending himself in justifying his actions. I was able to take on the voice and tone of this character to create both sympathy and empathy for a generally evil figure. The editing process for this creative piece was essential, as I added more descriptive language and details to further bring this invented character to life.

As my writer’s choice, I chose to submit my Sophomore Speakout, “Taking Away Our Freedom,” which is my favorite piece of writing from all my years at Barlow. I was passionate in writing this speech because of my interest in public policy and for often being one of the lone liberal voices among my peers. This was finally my opportunity to publicly voice my strong opinions by speaking out against socially conservative policies. This required synthesizing evidence into my arguments in order to enhance the reliability of my public statement. I also incorporated multiple literary devices, such as anaphora and polysyndeton, to make specific parts of speech even more powerful. Having grown as a writer since last year, I further revised the speech to more effectively communicate my arguments. Going through the paper and taking out many “I”s and “I believe”s was an essential aspect of the revision process, enhancing the credibility of the speech.

For my timed writing, I chose the in-class essay from the *Fences* unit. Of all the timed writes, this product is the most reflective of myself as a writer, as it demonstrates my ability to quickly develop a thesis and support it with substantial evidence. It also shows in-depth character analysis of Troy and his sons, which is essential for justifying Troy’s actions. Additionally, in my conclusion, I manage to teach an important life lesson about parenting and watching out for your children, developing a real-life application for my thesis. Lastly, my integration of quotes is essential for providing concrete evidence to support my thesis.

The best writers are the ones who can have an impact on the reader, which is the main goal in all my pieces of writing. I hope you find meaning in my writing and develop a clearer understanding of who I am, both as a writer and as a person.

Sincerely,

Benjamin Ball