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Using Portfolios in Writing-Enhanced or Writing Rich Courses

The portfolio is, essentially, a collection of writing by a student in a course. Following guidelines established by Stetson University, by the Writing Program and most importantly by the professor, the student assembles a portfolio to demonstrate mastery in written form of a particular course's material.

Portfolios are highly flexible. Because they provide multiple samples, too, they are in general a more accurate reflection of a student's progress than a final term paper or other single document.

The literature on writing portfolios is extensive. The highlights:

"Working" vs. "Performance" Portfolios

A writing portfolio can be designed as "working" or "performance."

- **Working Portfolios**
 - A working portfolio demonstrates progress and process, and it is evaluated accordingly.
- **Performance Portfolios**
 - A performance portfolio intends to demonstrate achievement primarily, and it is customarily evaluated by assessing the final drafts of assignments.

Portfolio Formats

For a professor in a writing enhanced course, a portfolio might take several shapes. For example:

- A **midterm working portfolio**, in which the student has included all the brief/out of class writing assignments up to that point, also including an informal assessment of the student's abilities and challenges met. A range of five to ten pages might be appropriate here, with the student's own assessment adding another one or two pages.
- A **performance portfolio, due at the end of the semester**, in which the student includes 15 to 20 pages of what he or she considers to be the "best writing" done in that class. A reflective essay might discuss what the student has learned from the portfolio process, or from the writing assigned, or from the course. It should discuss also why the student considers these 15 to 20 pages "the best," be it interest level, engagement required by the topic, amount of material learned or a specific skill achieved.
- A portfolio, **due at the end of each section of the course**, which includes all the writing done for that section and the student's assessment of what each assignment has contributed to his or her understanding of the material or the course goals.
- A **midterm portfolio, containing all writing done for the course** to that point, with a student reflection essay focused on which kinds of assignments they found most useful and which assignments they would want to revise further; follow it with a final portfolio in which at least one of the midterm pieces is included (after further revision).

Due Dates for Portfolios

A writing portfolio is a highly flexible medium through which student writing can be improved. Portfolios may be due at the end of the semester, to include only the final drafts of all major writing assignments during the semester. Or they may include the student's choice of three out of five major assignments. Or a writing portfolio may be due twice in a semester, once at midterm and once at final, the first perhaps designed to demonstrate progress and the final to demonstrate achievement. **A portfolio should, no matter how it is designed, represent the writer's best efforts, achieved after opportunities for revision.**

A Clearer and More Substantial Picture

A writing portfolio, because it contains multiple samples of a student's writing, provides a clearer and more substantial picture of a student's writing ability. A single sample of writing (for instance, a term paper) does not allow multi-leveled assessment. A portfolio does.

The Reflective Essay

A writing portfolio, because of the student's agency in choosing the assignments that go into it, should always include the **student's assessment of his or her own writing**. Known as "the reflective essay" or "the portfolio cover letter," this document can be framed for students in several ways: a "writer's introduction" to the portfolio, written for an astute reader; a critical reckoning of the skills demonstrated in the portfolio; an assessment of the writer's own growth and continued efforts, using problem areas in the included works as examples; and so forth. As long as the reflective essay performs some level of self-evaluation and reflection, the pedagogical purpose has been met.

Assessing a Writing Portfolio

Assessing a writing portfolio requires the professor to **avoid analytical grading in favor of holistic**. The portfolio represents the body of skills at large, and it must be graded that way as well. Rather than grading each essay included and then performing some math to average the grades, the professor has the opportunity to read quickly, draw overall conclusions about a student's relative abilities, and assess based on those conclusions.

For example: in a portfolio that includes four essays, final drafts plus revisions, a professor can see whether students can consistently handle:

- Clear thesis with support
- Adequate research skills and/or documentation
- Revision tasks involving organization, clarity of explanation, introduction and conclusion

If each of the essays demonstrates acceptable levels of mastery, and the included drafts show progress toward that level, the professor can reasonably say that the student has learned the skills of writing well in that course. If none of the essays demonstrate acceptable levels, the student has clearly not learned what he or she needed to. A portfolio whose essays are running at 50 percent of expected levels is an opportunity for the teacher to decide where his or her priorities are.

Students come to us very accustomed to the idea of averaging grades, or being able to "drop" the lowest grade, or other form of grade accommodation. A portfolio requires students to take all the work seriously. In a writing intensive course, where perhaps 60 to 75 percent of the grade is based on the learning demonstrated in writing, a student cannot ignore the reality.

Resources

- [Carleton College](#), instituted a writing-intensive curriculum in 2001; part of their program is the Writing Portfolio. Click [here](#) to read about Carleton's writing program.
- "[Writing Portfolios: What Teachers Learn from Student Self-Assessment](#)" by Kim Johnson-Bogart, Evergreen College.

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