

Using Portfolios in English 100

This short overview describes how portfolios work in English 100 and offers some suggestions to help instructors make the most of our portfolio system of evaluation. If you're interested in reading more about portfolios, please see the list of resources at the end of this document.

Evaluation in English 100

Instructors do not grade individual writing assignments in English 100. Instead, our portfolio system aims to broaden the focus of evaluation to include both finished products (revised papers) and the development of writers (people). In addition, using portfolios for evaluation encourages students and instructors alike to be reflective about the writing process, the progress of the course, and the ways in which writing can be valued.

How Portfolios Work in English 100

Students collect their work twice during the semester and present it as a portfolio for grading. In the process, they review and discuss the varied kinds of writing they have done and make choices to represent their best work. They also reflect on their strategies, sidetracks, stumbling blocks, and successes in doing the work of the course.

Instructors use portfolios in English 100 as a way to help students develop a body of writing over time. When we encourage students to develop their work over time, we are also encouraging them to develop *as writers*, giving them opportunities to build on their experiences in the new context of a college writing class and to try out strategies different from the ones they used in high school. Through portfolios and other practices – like peer review – we try to shift the focus off “writing for a grade” toward writing with other purposes in mind, such as communicating with readers, creating new understandings, exploring possibilities, or making a persuasive argument.

Although students do not receive grades on drafts or individual assignments, they receive other kinds of useful feedback from you and their peers in a range of forms. Your conferences and written comments, along with classroom conversations during small group (peer review) and whole-class workshops can all help students revise their thinking and their writing. Thus, when portfolios are used to present work for evaluation, grades are not disregarded, they are simply deferred. During this time of deferment, your own ideas might develop through classroom give and take, even as you communicate and reinforce your high expectations for the kinds of thought and research you expect from students. Granted, grades can convey such expectations, too. What graded papers don't often allow for is change over time. In the case of English 100, this can be a period of weeks during which meanings can continue to be negotiated, ideas honed and tried out, revisions made – and revised again – until the time when the portfolio is due. Meanwhile, students collect their ongoing work in a Writing Folder.

Writing Folders

In English 100, students keep a folder where they collect all the writing they do for the class. (Expandable, accordion folders work well.) Among other things, Writing Folders

can include notes, bibliographies, drafts, freewrites, peer review comments, and in-class writing. They can also include copies of writing done on-line, for example, blogs, emails, and contributions to wikis. All of these have the potential to make it into the Mid-term and Final Portfolios. And all have the potential, too, to be used as evidence or referred to when the student considers his or her development as a writer during the course.

Although the essays and texts in a Writing Folder are not graded, you can help your students by encouraging them to keep their folders organized and up to date. When it comes time to assemble a portfolio, write a cover letter, or begin the Reflections project, they will then have resources to help them reflect and make choices. You can also ask students to bring their folders to conferences, where you can collaboratively review their work and help them make choices about what to revise for inclusion in one of their portfolios.

The Mid-term and Final Portfolios

Portfolios of polished work are put together twice during the semester according to requirements listed in the model syllabus. Each portfolio consists of five texts that the writer considers to be finished, polished products. The Mid-term Portfolio includes Essay One and a Summary or Analysis. The Final Portfolio includes the Research Paper and the Reflections project. Students choose two additional texts for each portfolio.

The fifth text for each portfolios is a required Cover Letter. Cover Letters are drafted and receive feedback, as are other important assignments. In their Cover Letters, students reflect on their work and assess their own development. They also demonstrate how well they understand their own writing processes, discuss the collaborative process of peer review in relation to their work, and show their familiarity with the expectations of a university community with regard to effective writing. All of these elements will build off of the work you and your students do throughout the course – the conversations you have, the writing they produce, the readings you assign, the responses they receive to their writing.

In addition to polished work, each of the portfolios will include the drafts and other preparatory work for a major assignment. This is one way to include process as an element in evaluation and to get a better sense of the writer's development over time. Students are asked to submit the drafts and other work related to creating Essay One (for the Mid-Term Portfolio) and the Research Paper (for the Final Portfolio). Ask your students to be sure to include the drafts that have your written comments as well as any written feedback received from peers. As an additional benefit, the inclusion of drafts discourages plagiarism.

Mid-term and Final Portfolios receive letter grades, which are then figured into the final course grade, along with class participation. (See the model syllabus for details.) When you grade a portfolio, you will *still* not be giving individual grades to each paper but will need to assess the whole. The Cover Letter plays an especially important role in helping you read the portfolio. In *Portfolio Teaching: A Guide for Instructors*, Nedra Reynolds

advocates for a rhetorical view of the portfolio. Among the questions she suggests instructors consider, when grading:

What evidence do you find of students' understanding of the rhetorical situation the portfolio presents? What choices have they made about content and arrangement, and how effective is their sense of audience? What choices have they made about self-presentation, and how do they represent themselves as readers, writers, and learners? Where do you see good habits paying off? Where do you find proof of effort, responsibility, or revision? (49)

The development and use of a rubric of goals and values can help you in the grading process. These goals and values can be developed with your students during class discussions. When you allow time in your class for such discussions and build your rubric around agreed-upon values, the grading process becomes more transparent. Students get a clearer sense of what they are working for and what they are working on.

What You Can Do to Help Students Build Strong Portfolios

Practices that help students build strong portfolios include the following:

- Introduce portfolios early in the course, preferably on the first day. Let students know their papers will not receive grades. At the same time, describe the other varied kinds of feedback that they will receive on their writing – and that they will participate in giving to each other. (Don't be discouraged if students are not immediately happy that they won't receive grades on their papers. It can take a while for them to get used to the idea and open up to the possibilities!)
- Have conversations about grading and assessment in relation to writing. Listen to students' ideas and experiences. Help them recognize what they value. Provide clear guidelines about your own values. If you choose, these can be developed collaboratively as class values.
- Incorporate these agreed-upon class values in grading rubrics that are shared with students as they prepare their portfolios.
- Provide specific, timely, and meaningful feedback that engages with students' ideas.
- Encourage students to take advantage of the deferred grading in the portfolio system. Give them chances to experiment and take risks, for example, through in-class or revision exercises that complicate the idea of linear improvement and progress in a draft.
- Allow time for reflection in class throughout the semester.
- Schedule conference time to help students review their work well in advance of the portfolio due date. (This is built into the calendar of the model syllabus.)
- Stress the importance of the Cover Letter and its role in helping you read the portfolio. (The model syllabus schedules class time for peer review of a draft of the Cover Letter.)

Some Resources to Help You Think More about Portfolios and Evaluation

Allison, Libby, Lizbeth Bryant, and Maureen M. Hourigan. Grading in the Post-Process Classroom : From Theory to Practice. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook-Heinemann, 1997.

Belanoff, Pat, and Marcia Dickson. Portfolios : Process and Product. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1991.

Berhard-Donals, Michael. "Peter Elbow and the Cynical Subject." The Theory and Practice of Grading Writing: Problems and Possibilities. Ed. Frances Zak and Christopher C. Weaver. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998. 53-65.

Gale, Xin Liu. "Judgment Deferred: Reconsidering Institutional Authority in the Portfolio Writing Classroom." Grading in the Post-Process Classroom: From Theory to Practice. Ed. Libby Allison, Lizbeth Bryant, and Maureen M. Hourigan.

Neal, Maureen. "The Politics and Perils of Portfolio Grading." The Theory and Practice of Grading Writing. Ed. Frances Zak and Christopher C. Weaver. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998. 123-140.

Reynolds, Nedra, and Richard Aaron Rice. Portfolio Teaching : A Guide for Instructors. 2nd ed. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2006.

Reynolds, Nedra. Portfolio Keeping : A Guide for Students. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake, and Irwin Weiser. Situating Portfolios : Four Perspectives. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1997.

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