Portfolio Keeping
A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS
Third Edition

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding Portfolios

You've been asked to prepare a portfolio to share your writing, represent your learning, or showcase your accomplishments. *Portfolio Keeping: A Guide for Students* will help you feel more confident with the portfolio process, whether you are enrolled in a course, working as an intern, or earning a degree or certification. This booklet introduces you to a variety of strategies for making sound decisions, for learning something meaningful, and for presenting a successful final product, whatever your goals may be.

You may recognize the term *portfolio* from art or finance: Artists keep samples of their best works in a portable case or folder, pieces that represent their interests, their potential, or their development. They show their portfolios to instructors, gallery owners, their peers (a jury of other artists, for example), or potential employers. In finance, a portfolio is a record of stocks, bonds, mutual funds, and other investments that is reviewed periodically and updated as needed. Professionals in many other fields also compile portfolios, records of their accomplishments, that they can use to apply for a promotion or a new job. In all of these examples, the work is not static: it changes with the portfolio keeper's new achievements, new ideas, and new interests.

A *portfolio*, in other words, is a meaningful collection of selected artifacts or documents, collected over time and across interests. Portfolios have become a common method of evaluating and assessing student work in writing classes because they provide a more thorough and authentic picture of a writer's developing skills. Therefore, in this booklet, we will often talk about strategies and methods for compiling a writing portfolio. Even though you may be creating a portfolio for a course other than writing, for a degree or certification program, for an internship, or for some other purpose, the attention we pay to writing in this book will still be useful for you. All portfolios, no matter the purpose or focus, require writing to describe, explain, and analyze their contents. Carefully attending to the way the written elements of your portfolio are composed and presented is important for any portfolio keeper. A portfolio is meant to be shared with others, so taking care to communicate clearly and effectively with your intended audience is crucial.

If you are creating a portfolio in a writing course or program, you are creating something that is designed to be assessed or appreciated. It may
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make up a large percentage of the course grade, or in an internship setting, it may be required for a review or renewal. Keep a list of the artifacts you will collect or create artifacts—essays, photographs, journal entries, blog posts, Facebook comments, charts, letters, video clips, MP3 files, and so on. Portfolio designs. The first step is to determine what type of portfolio you are being asked to produce. Is your portfolio going to demonstrate your learning process? Will it showcase your best works? Will it combine both process and products? How will it be evaluated, or who will be reviewing it and for what purpose? Should you connect the entries using a central theme? a metaphor? a story? Will you be able to use your portfolio in other contexts or later in your career? These are questions you should ask your instructor, team leader, or supervisor. You may be asked or required to include drafts and the final version of several projects; or you may be required to submit a collection of finished work only. In either case, your portfolio is likely to be a "high-stakes" document or product. In a class taken for credit, it may make up a large percentage of the course grade, or in an internship setting, it may be required for a review or renewal. Keep a list of the artifacts you've been asked to include, as well as specific notes from your instructor or supervisor.

A focus on portfolios usually also means an emphasis on the working process, especially revision, and portfolios provide good reasons to revise and a context for revision. The demands of presenting your best work, for example, can help you begin to understand the number of drafts that may be required for a project to become focused, organized, and developed. The portfolio process, which might take several months or more, provides opportunities for you to practice revising and refining your work before being judged. In a portfolio-based writing course, grades on individual projects and assignments may be postponed, for instance, giving students time to develop their work.

Portfolio Keeping will help you through the steps of collecting, selecting, and presenting your work, all while emphasizing reflection. You will examine the situation for each project and make many complex and subtle decisions. Throughout this guide, you will find advice and strategies to help you keep track of your learning and to make reasoned choices about the content and appearance of your portfolio. Your tasks as a portfolio keeper will include tending to your developing ideas, keeping watch over your own learning patterns, helping your peers or collaborators, and being responsible for the final product.

In the following sections, we describe the two main types of portfolios and the forms contemporary portfolios take. We also discuss the characteristics of portfolios, the elements that provide the foundation of every portfolio, whatever its type or form. While the discussion will often focus on writing portfolios, many of the goals and issues apply to other types of portfolio-keeping situations as well. Understanding these principles and the importance of reflective learning will give you a good start toward building your portfolio.

**TYPES OF PORTFOLIOS**

Although they share many characteristics, portfolios can vary considerably. Our focus in Portfolio Keeping is on writing portfolios for any number of situations, but there are two broad types: learning and presentation. The former focuses on the learning experience; the latter, on the product of that experience.

**Portfolios for Learning**

A process portfolio asks you to demonstrate your learning. It should reflect the journey more so than the destination. For a learning portfolio, you will collect or create artifacts—essays, photographs, journal entries, blog posts, Facebook comments, charts, letters, video clips, MP3 files, and so on. Depending on what you are being asked to do, you may need to keep a process portfolio for several weeks and then reshape it into a presentation portfolio.
You may have a choice of creating a paper portfolio or an electronic one, or stage. Presentation portfolios are also sometimes called evaluation portfolios: from a number of pieces or projects, students choose the best for inclusion in their portfolio. These portfolios usually do not include the notes, outlines, informal pieces, drafts, or other materials that helped you create your final drafts, but they will always involve reflection at nearly every stage. Presentation portfolios are also sometimes called evaluation portfolios because they are required for assessment or grading for a course or for certification, although process portfolios are often evaluated as well.

**Forms of Portfolios**

You may have a choice of creating a paper portfolio or an electronic one, or some combination of the two. The primary advantage of a paper document is that anyone can read it: it requires no special understanding of or access to technology. On the other hand, paper portfolios take up space, and they can get lost or stained or tattered. More often than not, writers and readers are now choosing to forgo paper. Assuming that both writers and readers have access to technology, the e-portfolio offers much more flexibility than a paper portfolio does.

Electronic technologies have increased exponentially the possibilities for collecting, designing, and presenting the artifacts, materials, and projects produced in a class, degree program, workplace, or organizational setting. An electronic portfolio is a meaningful tool that can be used in academic settings, job searches, and performance reviews. E-portfolios give writers exciting opportunities to demonstrate their visual design skills, or how they synthesize ideas through hyperlinks or other navigational pathways. The electronic environment also allows writers different ways to present themselves and their work. Rather than text on a page, e-portfolio keepers might choose to upload a short video or an audio clip not only to demonstrate their writing samples to an editor or to some other prospective employer. Similarly, students often keep portfolios to show their instructor and classmates, at the end of the term, what they have learned from the course.

Presentation portfolios are sometimes called best-works or showcase portfolios: from a number of pieces or projects, students choose the best for inclusion in their portfolio. These portfolios usually do not include the notes, outlines, informal pieces, drafts, or other materials that helped you create your final drafts, but they will always involve reflection at nearly every stage. Presentation portfolios are also sometimes called evaluation portfolios because they are required for assessment or grading for a course or for certification, although process portfolios are often evaluated as well.

**Principles of Portfolio Keeping**

Are you planning to compose a process or a presentation portfolio? A paper portfolio or an electronic portfolio? Whatever the type or form, you must consider three important principles: choice, variety, and reflection.

**Choice**

Portfolio keepers need to choose what to include and how to arrange and present each artifact. It’s very likely that an instructor or program leader will assign some elements or provide guidelines, so a first step is to make sure you know what choices are yours to make. Will you be making big decisions like the type of portfolio you’ll keep or the technologies you’ll
INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING PORTFOLIOS

use? Or will your decisions be on a smaller scale, like length or number of entries? Perhaps you will get to choose which artifacts or pieces of evidence to include — and how to arrange those entries. In any case, you will make many choices, selections, and decisions at every stage of the composing process. The reflective learning inherent in the portfolio method will make you more aware of your decision-making process. Most importantly, you will need to choose your artifacts carefully and wisely depending on the rhetorical situation. The guide you are reading now will help you make these important choices.

Variety

Portfolio keepers have different strengths and interests, and their portfolios should reflect and celebrate these differences. No two portfolios will ever be exactly alike, even those created for the same course or instructor. A writing portfolio invites you to show off your writing ability and the ways you approached different topics or audiences. If you can make a number of choices, you might stress variety in your portfolio by including samples of informal writing (Tweets or Facebook status updates, e-mails or notes to collaborators), as well as samples of projects you've spent a great deal of time revising, editing, and polishing. You might demonstrate, for example, how different amounts of time spent on each entry impact the diversity of your work. Variety is one of the reasons that portfolios are considered a more valid measure of writing ability, especially when compared with one-time assessments that focus on measuring things like grammar, style and usage, punctuation, and mechanics. When people review your portfolio, they see numerous examples of your work, pieces created at different times and for different audiences. Portfolios are an opportunity to show that you can produce more than essays for a teacher — that you are flexible as a writer and know how to adjust to different situations and speak to different audiences. They also give readers insight into the specific issues, subjects, and problems that interest you and that you have chosen to spend time researching and working on in your academic or professional career.

Reflection

Keeping a portfolio helps you look at your work differently, as a whole rather than as a series of separate assignments or projects. The choices you make in building your portfolio and in displaying variety will demand that you practice reflective learning and self-assessment. With this booklet to guide you, you will take a careful look at your work to identify your patterns, strengths, and preferences for negotiating writing tasks, for learning new skills, and for putting those skills into practice. You must go beyond simply stringing the pieces of your portfolio together; you need to be able to articulate why you made certain choices and what you meant to convey through those choices. Educational theorists use the word metacognition to describe people's ability to think about their own thinking. Meta- means "after," "behind," or "beyond"; cognition means "the act or process of knowing." Metacognition, then, is the ability to "know beyond one's knowing," or to think about your own thinking. Reflection is so integrated into the process of portfolio keeping that it is sometimes difficult to separate choice and variety from reflection; many educators believe that reflection is the heart and soul of portfolio keeping.

The Time to Reflect exercises provided in each chapter ask you to practice reflection, or the important skill of thinking about your own thinking. As you complete each exercise, save what you have written. Your responses to the Time to Reflect prompts will give you material that you may want to use in your portfolio. It might help to think of reflection as the sum of many different parts of your thinking process, which might include bits of the following "acts":

- Watching
- Remembering
- Reviewing
- Asking
- Explaining
- Clarifying
- Wondering
- Imagining
- Evaluating
- Rehearsing
- Generating
- Initiating
- Pretending
- Preparing
- Presenting
- Arranging
- Searching
- Planning
- Rereading
- Checking
- Editing
- Revising
- Questioning
- Predicting
- Forecasting
- Memorizing
- Sharing
- Delivering
- Summarizing
- Analyzing
- Synthesizing
- Defining
- Mapping
- Exploring

Time to Reflect activities throughout this guide ask you to focus on a few of these acts as a way of exercising your reflection muscles. Some of these will take only a few minutes to complete, but the idea is to write and keep writing, and then save what you produce. Some or all of these exercises may be assigned to you, or you can choose the ones that seem most promising for your goals. Don't feel obligated to answer every question embedded in these activities, as they are designed simply to prompt your ideas.
TIME TO REFLECT

What has your instructor, team leader, or supervisor asked you to create? Are you working on a process or a presentation portfolio? Are you expected to submit your portfolio as a paper document or electronically? What choices do you need to make about tools or variety or time frame? Now that you have a better understanding of how portfolios can differ and how they often are used among writers, you're ready to begin portfolio keeping. But before you read on, take time to reflect on where you are right now.

TIME TO REFLECT: PREDICTING WHAT'S AHEAD IN YOUR PORTFOLIO JOURNEY

Now that you have had an overview of writing portfolios, write one or two paragraphs about any questions you have about the portfolio you'll be expected to produce. If you already know something about portfolios — you have prepared one before or have heard about them — you might address how what you've read so far fits — or doesn't — with your earlier experience or with your assumptions. If they are new to you, what interests you about portfolios? From what you know so far, what parts of the portfolio process do you expect to do well on or succeed with? What parts of your reading and writing history make you confident about creating either a process or a presentation portfolio? What makes you hesitant? Once you are finished with this brief, informal piece, give it a title and/or file name and store it where you can find it again; it may come in handy later.

PART ONE

The Process of Portfolio Keeping