

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

consist of artifacts, pieces, or entries that demonstrate your thinking and learning processes or that showcase your range and/or the quality of your work. Your portfolio may be evaluated by an instructor, reviewed by prospective employers, or displayed on an organization's Web site. Keeping a writing portfolio will help you pay attention to both the processes and products of writing. It also will help you track the evolution of each writing project and your development as a writer. In starting your own writing portfolio, you join many other writers and learners who are using this method to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

Portfolios provide a structure to guide and practice reflective learning. *Reflective learning* means to think consciously or deliberately about how you learn best or what is most meaningful to you about what you've learned. Reflection involves self-assessment and being thoughtful and attentive to your own learning as well as about content and presentation. When you practice reflective learning, you focus on your own patterns, habits, and preferences as a learner. As we discuss in other parts of this text, reflection is a key ingredient for portfolio keeping. The goals of your reflective learning are to identify what doesn't work well for you, repeat what does, and develop strategies for addressing difficult tasks or overcoming obstacles. By following this booklet, you will have a record of your working process for each of your projects, a meaningful collection of your work, and a better understanding of both useful strategies and ways you learn best. All of this should help you become a better writer, reader, and thinker. And by learning how to present your knowledge and skills to others, you are practicing your communication skills by thinking about the larger rhetorical context for your portfolio, including its purpose, its audience, its focus, and its credibility.

Rhetorical situations and requirements vary and therefore, so do 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 the 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.¹ 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

¹Depending 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.

on — that best represent your learning experience and your engagement with the learning process.

One of the most challenging components of creating a process portfolio is selecting the artifacts to include. You need to figure out early in the process how much freedom you have and then make reasoned choices from all the possible materials. While you may have 3,742 photographs and 1,290 songs stored in your phone or other device, very few people actually want to see or listen to all of them. A portfolio is not like other means of recording your life experiences: it is not a scrapbook. A process portfolio focuses sharply on your learning, usually over a limited amount of time or within a specific context.

Although you can expect your process portfolio to be evaluated, you should understand that you have been invited to create and keep the portfolio *for your own benefit*, not necessarily to prove to your instructor or supervisor that you should pass this course or receive an award or get a promotion. Your thoughts on and understanding of the learning process, and the degree to which your portfolio reflects them, in large part form the basis for assessing your work.

Portfolios for Presentation

A *presentation portfolio*, like a learning portfolio, promotes and sustains learning. But it shifts attention at a certain point from the learning process to the *product* of that process. This type of portfolio has many variations, but in all of them, the primary goal is to show the reader/viewer what you have learned and to showcase your achievements, abilities, and talents. For instance, an artist puts together a portfolio to show her work to a gallery owner or to a potential client; or a writing major creates a portfolio to show his 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.

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 media skills but also to establish their ability to anticipate what viewers want or expect. No matter what kind of technical platform or application is being used to construct and support an e-portfolio, awareness of the audience and the rhetorical situation are paramount.

Even portfolio keepers who feel unprepared to create an e-portfolio will find that it takes much more than technical know-how. Good portfolios, whatever the medium, depend on choice, variety, and reflection. It's likely that someone — an instructor or supervisor — will tell you which form to use, but it's also possible that you will need to incorporate some paper artifacts into your e-portfolio that you prepare for digital presentation through scanning or digital imaging, or you may use paper to sketch out your design plans for your digital portfolio. The two mediums are not mutually exclusive, so to some extent, you can use the tools you are comfortable with.

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

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

1—*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