

Chapter 7: Questions and Answers about the Portfolio

How do you physically put together the portfolio?

Keep in mind that the most important aspect of your portfolio is the writing! We are very interested in what you have to say and hope you will be fired up and enthusiastic about writing. However, the portfolio process also gives you an opportunity to show that you can follow simple format rules. We don't want you to make a bad first impression over something that might be quite minor. So be sure to read the following tidbits:

- Use a plain paper pocket folder for presenting your portfolio (not plastic!). Put your instructor code and student ID number on the top left. Do **not** put your name or the instructor's name anywhere on the folder.
- Do not mention your instructor by name, anywhere – on the folder, in or on the cover letter, in or on the essays.
- Do not mention yourself by name, anywhere -- on the folder, in or on the cover letter, in or on the essays.
- Do not write "English 95" or "English 96" or "ALP" anywhere on the folder.
- Put the cover letter and two essays in one of the pockets, with the letter on top and the essays in the order you want them read. Make sure your cover letter and essays are stapled if need be and in the correct order. We have to go through 300-400 of the portfolios in one day and doing anything that slows us down makes us more impatient, not impressed, with your writing.
- Double space your essays. Use the default 1 inch or 1¼ inch margins that come with most word processing software. Use a normal font like Times New Roman, Calibri, or Ariel-- size 12.

What you should you think about while writing the cover letter or reflective essay?

The cover letter is just as important as the essays, so be sure to work equally hard on it. The letter is like a job application letter. Think about how it makes you sound. You should not only discuss your writing this semester, but also do your best writing to convince the committee of the quality of your writing.

Remember that this is your first impression on the people grading your papers. This is **your opportunity** to present yourself in a positive way, so consider your ethos as a writer and adopt a tone that will make a good impression on the portfolio readers. If you sound resentful, lazy, or combative in your letter, it won't help you get your readers on your side.

Show that you care about your writing and that you've thought about it critically.

You should be honest but polite, and use the letter to prove that you really have learned something specific (something you can explain to us) about writing. Most impressive are cover letters that are especially reflective, for example, those that really address the question "how exactly have I grown as a writer this semester?"

Speaking honestly in your own terms is also of great importance. It looks bad when you try to impress the graders with terms you don't understand. It's great to use the terms of the course when you understand them--brainstorming, pre-writing, free-writing, invention, revision, and so on--but not if you don't completely understand them.

Perhaps the cover letter will go better if you write about it all semester, for yourself. What is your own definition of good writing? Of good writing habits? What is, in your own words, the meaning of the terms your instructor might use, words like brainstorming, pre-writing, free-writing, focus, theme, and so on? Do this "writing to think", not just because this book or your instructor tells you to, but to discover your own ideas about writing. Do it to understand yourself as a writer better, then share your understanding with the graders when you write your letter. Thinking about these things all semester will not only help you write a better cover letter, they will be a positive influence on your writing habits.

The cover letter should go well onto page two, at least. It should have a good introductory paragraph and a strong closing. It's not a good idea to use a whole paragraph to sum up each essay. Instead, sum each essay up in a sentence, then use the rest of the paragraph to justify why the essay is worthwhile reading and to explain **what you learned in the process of writing it**. This is also your opportunity to spell out what you did to revise (improve) the essay. Go into detail. Consider quoting from your drafts to show us what you changed over time.

Which essays should you choose to put in the portfolio?

Quality should be your first priority, variety your second. Almost always, the essays you were most interested in writing and were ultimately the most satisfied with are going to be the ones the portfolio graders rate the highest. If you have three essays that are tied in your mind, it would be best to pick the two that show the most variety. Two very different essays would be great (for example one about your own experience and another about a political issue). But if the two you pick are the same kind of essay but are easily the best you have done, you are best going with those two.

Instructors generally like reading about your experiences, but they are interested in other things, and even when you do write about your experience, they encourage you to go beyond writing about something just because it happened to you and to arrive at a greater meaning, whether directly stated or implied.

Your instructor will push you sometimes to find the greater meaning, and you might resist by asking, "Why can't I just write what I feel like?" But when you reach that higher level, it's a great bonus in the reader's mind instead of that sinking feeling that it's "just another graduation essay" or "one more essay about a vacation." Things that happen to you are important, but you also have to think about what makes these events important to the readers. What is your insight?

How long should the essays be?

To get a clear picture of what you are writing about usually takes more than two pages. Teachers assign minimum length requirements because it takes a while to develop ideas sufficiently. In an essay, it's pretty difficult to do that in a page and a half.

To be quite honest, to get into 96, you might not make it with two essays that are 700-1000 words. Typically something near 1000 words is the least each essay has to be for you to be considered for English 101. That doesn't mean instructors go by hard and fast rules and think, "Oh, it isn't exactly the right number of words, so it fails." There are no automatic check off points. Every once in a great while, an 95/96 student can get enough accomplished in a shorter essay to really impress the graders. This is rare. Usually, you really need to get past the bottom of page three without rambling or padding to make an impression. If we were to honestly describe what has generally happened in previous portfolio grading sessions, we would have to say that it has been fairly consistent that the higher scores go to the students who can write essays that sustain a certain level of quality for a greater number of words.

One idea to keep in mind: We are also not saying that an essay is great just because it is long. The length in the essay should show you've accomplished the skills we introduced way back on page 6.



What do instructors say about quality and grading?

Now ... Wouldn't it be great to find out more of what your audience will be looking for when reading your portfolio? We asked our writing instructors to complete a survey asking them what they thought should be stressed to students about the portfolio process. We have collected these responses and organized the questions and answers in the sections below. At the end of this chapter, we have also reproduced several handouts from the Success Center. These include guidance about several web applications that you teacher may use with your class so that your essays can be posted and reviewed online.

What are you looking forward to reading in a cover letter?

Keep in mind that the cover letter is usually the first thing that a teacher will read -- you want to make a great first impression! Here are some responses from the surveyed instructors:

- What I like to hear about in the cover letter is how and why, not what. How did you go about tackling the assignments? Why did you make the choices you did? I am about to read the what (what the essays are about), so please stick to the how and the why when writing about your essays.
- When reading a cover letter, I most look forward to hearing how the student has improved the development and organization of the essays they are submitting as the semester progressed.
- Agency -- I want to be informed by [the student's] past but also what became of them (these students) as they grew in the writing classroom.
- Specific reflection/thinking about composing processes and specific choices made in particular papers.
- I want to see what students have learned and are able to practice in their writing. If students write that they understand the rhetorical process, I should see that demonstrated in the portfolio. I also want to read about the steps students use to revise their writing and I want to see evidence that the student uses these strategies in the portfolio.
- Explain what you did with your writing to make your papers "good." I want to know why you think these pieces of writing are your best. Tell me what you did to connect to your readers and capture our attention. Tell me what you added or changed... and why. How did you decide to start and end your papers? What did you zoom in on? What background information was needed? Did you decide to tell a story, argue a point, provide information,... What was your purpose for this approach to the assignment? Basically, what decisions did you make to guarantee that your papers were meaningful contributions to your portfolio?
- I would love to know who you are as a person and as a writer -- perhaps you could help us see your strengths and weaknesses or perhaps even how you engaged with the class and the assignments.

- I look for an honest assessment of the student's ability. How did a personal experience essay (for example) help you with seeing yourself as a writer? How is that different from writing an argumentative essay? Don't just give me buzz words. I like "realness." Yes, I know that sound corny, but I am more drawn to effort and a genuine analysis on how you feel as a writer than just dropping the cute phrases.
- I look for three pieces of information: (1) Introduce the papers being submitted in the portfolio. Why did the student choose them? What makes them good? (2) The writing process the student went through for the papers. How did the student prepare to write the paper? How did the student organize his/her thoughts for the paper? (3) The revision process for the papers. What did the student revise? Why? Specific examples of the revisions.

What one piece of advice would you give to a student submitting a portfolio?

Make sure to read the following comments -- these instructors want to see you pass the portfolio and they have advice to give you including how to spend your time during the semester and what to do just before you submit your portfolio.

- Make your portfolio stand out as uniquely yours. You have experiences and stories and beliefs and dreams that make you special and very interesting. Find a way to connect to your writing and to show us why we should be interested in what you have to say as well.
- When selecting essays for the portfolio, if you are not sure which to submit, try to choose papers that show different skills of yours. If you told a narrative in one, try not to choose another narrative for the second essay. Or pick papers with different tones or vastly different topics. That helps us to know that you can succeed with different assignments.
- The portfolio is the end product of a semester's hard work. To do it well, you need to be working diligently on your writing from day one.
- Give yourself time to enjoy playing with words and phrases to decide how to best express your ideas. Listen to what you have typed on the page and ask yourself if your readers will understand what you meant to say to them. Reading your paper aloud will help you.
- Think about what makes a good paper. What strategies did you use to connect the topic to yourself and to the reader? What strategies did you use to make the paper interesting? What did you do to hook the reader in at the start? What strategy did you use to bring your paper to a close? What did you do in your paper to get your reader to think about something you wrote? What did the reader learn from your paper? If you can't answer these questions, then maybe you need to look at your paper closer and actually think about what you did to be a good writer.
- Be willing to revise. Slow down! Writing is a labor-intensive process and even the best writers cannot rush through it. We might begin with fast freewriting, but at the end, we

need to pour over the text slowly and carefully, making sure our message is clear for our readers. Reading instructor comments and carefully considering that feedback is part of that process, as well as conferencing with the teacher.

- This portfolio should represent all the hard work that you have done over the course of the semester. Be proud of what you are submitting.
- Check everything and then check again. It gets boring I know. However, even the small details (double-space, spelling, etc) will be noticed by someone. If you cannot do the small things, how can you accomplish the bigger things?

How do you know if a submitted essay is strong enough for ENG 101?

Hopefully, by the time you reach the end of the semester, you will have a solid idea of what comprises an effective college-level essay. Here are some comments from SWIC writing instructors as to how they know if a portfolio is ready for the next level of writing instruction:

- The basics--focus, development, organization, critical thinking, and language. See the grading criteria.
- It stands out. I feel your passion and commitment to making me see, feel, or understand something. I enjoy reading it and see purposeful development in what was written.
- I enjoyed reading the essay. It included examples, explanations, descriptions, stories, humor ... It captured my interest and made me think or entertained me. It went beyond just stating the obvious in mundane language. I recognized at least an attempt to use strategies of a good writer. The cover letter actually discussed the writing process and gave examples of what the writer did to produce good papers.
- An essay that makes me think the author is going to be successful in 101 is one where the writer has made an attempt to engage the audience, has a distinctive voice and has made sure that the writing in the portfolio reflects the amount of work and effort the author has put into the task.
- The submitted essay displays creativity, voice, and significant purpose.
- It has a clear sense of purpose - a thesis that will be evident to the reader throughout the essay, but is not "announced" to the reader. In fact, even though it may not have a "thesis statement," it will still have a thesis, which will be a central idea that the writer wants to get across to your readers: a point to prove to them. And there will be plenty of support for that point: examples, narratives, descriptions, cause/effects, etc. I also look for added insight. An English 101 essay will teach me something or make me think in a new way - and that almost always involves analysis.
- Your writing teacher has experience in teaching Eng. 101. Follow his or her advice and ask for more reviews from the teacher with that point in mind. Also ask for challenging topics reflected in Eng. 101.
- The essays included have a specific purpose/point/ thesis (whatever you want to call it) and the writer can support and discuss that purpose. Grammar issues can be "fixed" later -- but I know that you can survive ENG 101 if you are thinking and writing.

- This is a difficult question because each reader is drawn to something different. I look at the basic questions we use to make a determination and I match that with the essay I just read. If the writer is mostly successful with development, rhetorical content, and order, then I believe the writer is strong enough for ENG 101.

What is the most common “mistake” that you have noticed with students who do not pass the portfolio assessment?

We asked our writing instructors to think about “mistakes” that could be rectified to help ensure that our students writers not only pass the portfolio process, but excel at this important opportunity to share their writing. Here are a few comments from the surveyed instructors:

- Not enough time spent writing and rewriting the reflection/ letter--time management in locating themselves within the work as it pertains to them in the actual process of writing--it's a chore at times getting students to put down the mirror. Many instructors (writing and reading) have opined what should be the deciding factor in the portfolio--the essays or the reflection or vice versa? Again--the rubric comes into play--tough questions are born out of this what should be an obvious assessment and judgement. This is still a work in progress for me, though!
- They are too easily satisfied! Students who do well are never fully "done." They are constantly looking for stronger word choices, more vivid descriptions, interesting examples. They are adding dialog or reordering paragraphs for a better flow. They look for what is too wordy or repetitive, and they search for areas in their papers where more information is needed. They mull over suggestions and work hard to make meaningful changes to their papers. Successful students who do well work consistently in and out of class to improve their papers. They do not just do the bare minimum in class to fulfill the assignment nor do they make only minimal changes to their drafts.
- Lack of development!!! Don't tell me what you are writing about in the introduction. Instead show me what you are writing about in the body of the paper. And don't end with "in conclusion" and state what you already told me. It should be clear what you told me.
- The biggest "mistake" I see students making is when they choose not to spend more time on the portfolio in the final week of the class. This is the one thing that determines whether you pass or fail the course. Unless your instructor has personally told you that the portfolio is ready to be submitted, assume that there is room for improvement.
- I think they underestimate the power of real revision. When we put our writing away for a while and then come back to it, we often see it with fresh eyes, and can then work wonders with it - especially since by the end of the semester, we have gained more insights and skills with which to rethink and revise. But students might not allow enough time at the end. They get in a hurry at the last minute and the essay is not all that it could be.

- Sometimes the writing is too "general" meaning that I have a fuzzy idea in my head about what you are writing about. Instead, I would love to see the specifics and the details that will make your writing "yours" and unique from other essays and portfolios.
- The biggest mistake is an underdeveloped essay. Don't just tell me you love your grandma and she is the greatest person ever. Tell me why. Give me some background information, some little stories about your grandmother that prove why she is so loveable. Describe her in detail. What does she look like? How does she talk? Use her language. Maybe I, as the reader, will love her as well! Of course, this is just an example but avoid the mistake of not doing enough. You can overdo it and then work with your instructor to edit your writing.

What do you wish students knew about you as a reader?

It is important that you understand the concept of audience as you work on your writing. We writing teachers are not robots. We are human beings who want you to succeed in all of your endeavors. In the comments below, a few of our surveyed writing instructors shared their ideas of who they want you to think about in terms of your portfolio's audience:

- That it all started with super hero comic magazines and newspaper comic strips as a young kid looking forward to riding his bike on a Saturday morning to buy whatever the corner liquor store had to offer, cheap back then--to today where I am everywhere with the reading/ genres--which helped me back when as a lowly student to even now the present day as a professional writing teacher--so yes, you can read without writing, but you can't write without reading or some paradox like that. Hope this all helps?
- That I'm intelligent and generally knowledgeable, but not a mind reader. You, the writer, need to explain your thoughts fully.
- I'm on your side. I'm rooting for you. I want you to pass. I also want you to do well in college, so I'm not going to let you slide if I think your writing skills still need some work. I'm not looking for perfection. But I am looking for purposeful development of your papers and the ability to make a connection to your topic.
- I am looking for something uniquely yours, something that shows real effort on your part. I'm not mean, and I really do want you to succeed. But I want you to succeed in college as a whole, not just pass through this class. I am not expecting you to write a perfect paper at the level of someone with a B.A. degree in English. But your papers should reflect a semester's worth of sincere effort and evidence of the writing strategies you learned.
- If you have chosen a topic because you think "it will make a good English paper topic," I am less likely to be interested in it, probably because I've read over a dozen papers on that same topic. If you choose something a little offbeat, you immediately have more of my attention and interest. Over ten years ago, I read a paper about trying to fill a pool with Jell-O. Do you know how many papers I have read in between?...yet I still remember reading a paper about the attempt to fill a pool with Jell-O.

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- I want to be surprised and awed by how interesting an essay is. I love it when someone takes me in a new direction or teaches me something new.
- I am genuinely interested in what you have to say, and I want to learn something from you, so I hope you will write about something that will really matter not just to you, but also to me - and to their other readers. I hope that you will offer us readers some kind of insight to carry away from your work, and I hope that it will be clear to us so that we can truly appreciate it.
- I want to know you and I want to know your thoughts via language and words.
- I really love reading different ideas and opinions even if I disagree. So, give me something that will make me think. James Baldwin once said, "Write like it matters, and it will." If I know that the essays you submit matters to you, it will matter to me as well. And, I will know that it matters to you because you put in the work.