
Preparing Your Writing Portfolio

BY WILLIAM P. BANKS

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding"*

What Is a Portfolio?

It's safe to assume that you've been writing for a while now – and not just in college. In fact, as a writer, you're likely to have had some experience in elementary school with writing stories, both fictional and not, and you're just as likely to have had some time in middle or high school to write a few poems, either for class assignments or for fun – or even more likely, as part of that typical teenage angst that movies like *Clueless*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, and *The Breakfast Club* have suggested are the norms of adolescent life. Or perhaps you're one of the many who have gotten into "blogging" on the Internet, posting thoughts and pictures from your life or critiques of social and political happenings. But it's probably safest to say that you've been actively writing emails to friends, family, and new acquaintances for quite a while.

So what if you were asked to think back through all these writings you've done for so many years and to come up with your "favorite" pieces so far? What pieces of writing would you include? A blog posting about your trip to see Tori Amos in concert, an email you wrote to your mother telling her how much you miss her now that you're at college, a poem you wrote in your high school creative writing class?

What if the question were not about your "favorite" pieces of writing so far, but about your "best" pieces? How would that change your selections, or would it?

Your answers to these questions would constitute your creation of a reflective portfolio of your written work thus far. Like stock portfolios contain various business-related choices and art portfolios contain various pieces of an artist's work, writing portfolios are usually (though not

always) a collection of a writer's best pieces, a showcase of what the writer believes are her strengths as a writer. If you're reading this chapter, then you've probably been asked by your teacher to work in what we might call a "portfolio-based writing course." That means that as a writer, you're going to be collecting your writings (early drafts, drafts with teacher and peer comments, revisions, final drafts, as well as freewriting activities, journal entries, or whatever else the teacher has assigned) all semester as you work on them. You will not be throwing *anything* away, at least not until after you've compiled your portfolio and turned it in at the end of the semester for an assessment by your teacher.

In this chapter, we will explore what portfolios are and how they might work in a writing classroom as we discuss how a student-writer might put one together and how a writing instructor might evaluate a portfolio. Before we get to all that, however, it might be useful to think for just a minute about why your teacher has chosen to use a portfolio approach instead of the more traditional written-graded-finished type of approach you may be more familiar with, and what you as a writer might be getting out of such an approach.

Why Portfolios?

Believe it or not, your writing teacher is very concerned with helping you to be the best expository writer you can become. While no one course will make you an expert writer, able to address all writing situations, purposes, and audiences, your first-year composition course can give you valuable strategies and ways of thinking about writing that will help you to start along that path. Writing teachers, of course, know that they cannot do it all in one or two semesters, but the fact that they're willing to keep trying every semester, reading hundreds and hundreds of pages of writing from students, suggests that they are very much invested in your success as writers, especially while you're in college.

Given that fact, many teachers around the country continually conduct research and investigate how students actually write, how non-student writers write and revise, and how writers learn to assess their own work and determine when it's ready for an audience. Because real-world writers do not have teachers to hover over them as they write, such writers have to move beyond the teacher, learn how not to depend on the teacher alone for help with writing. When these teacher-researchers began to think about this problem of how to help writers learn to write without becoming a crutch for them, they began to formulate a way of teaching and assessing writing that has come to be known as the "portfolio approach." This approach focuses on the

development of a text from an early idea to a finished, carefully-edited document, one that usually goes through constructive peer reviews and "expert" reviews (where the teacher serves as an experienced writer and reader), substantial student-writer revisions of his or her texts, and the presentation of the best work in a portfolio, along with a reflective analysis of that work which explains how the texts came to be and how they "work" to meet the needs of their chosen audiences.

How is this more like "real-world" writing than traditional composition assessment practices? Well, for one, in most writing situations – newspapers, group-reports in businesses, academic research essays that get published in scholarly journals, dissertations that get revised into books and published – the writer doesn't sit down and write a finished draft immediately. Usually, that writing takes place over a significant amount of time, and the writing itself is read and re-read by many different people. The columnist for the local newspaper may write the 500-word story on pollution in a local river, but by the time someone reads it in the newspaper, an editor has read it several times (and made or suggested revisions) and fact-checkers have made sure there are no inaccuracies in the evidence and source materials in the text. By the time your biology professor has an article published in a top research journal in her field, she has written and revised several times, had peers who are experts in her field review her methods and her data and make revision suggestions or ask for clarification on parts of the study, and has determined for herself that her research and writing are of a high enough quality to stake her reputation as a professional on. These writers produce their work over time and stay open to feedback from critics (friends, bosses, colleagues, themselves); ultimately, they make the choice to "go public" with their writing but rarely until *they as writers* have decided that their work is ready.

The portfolio approach, as you'll discover all semester, asks the student-writer to work in similar fashion. Your portfolio of writing develops from day one of the semester as each piece of writing begins, goes through peer response, teacher response, revision, etc. Likewise, if your teacher uses a Showcase Portfolio (all writing is included, but only certain texts are evaluated for quality), you'll be asked to *choose* your best writing pieces and forward them for evaluation, a process that requires careful self-assessment. But why? How does merely collecting your essays in one binder or folder improve your abilities to write and to assess your work? Those are good questions, and the answers to them point to why so many writing teachers have moved to a portfolio approach.

For one, writers need to achieve some distance from their work; most short story writers do not just sit down and churn out a story in a few hours and call themselves finished. Even if they write the story

itself in a few hours, they very likely spend the next several months returning to the story, refining it based on the suggestions of friends or based on their own increasing "closeness" to the text, their own deeper understanding of their motivations and desires for the characters, plot, and what they want the reader to get from the story. In a portfolio classroom, as the semester draws to a close, you will probably return to the writing you did at the beginning of the course, and you'll be surprised by how much revision you can now see to do with that essay you initially wrote several months before. Likewise, with even this little bit of distance from the text, you'll be much more capable of accepting the suggestions that your peers and your teacher offered you. Often, when we get a teacher's comments back, our feelings are hurt; we know we worked hard and we're shocked that this teacher didn't see that, or if he did, that he didn't acknowledge that hard work. A portfolio approach lets writers achieve a little bit of that critical distance. Many of your professors, in fact, when they get back "revise and resubmit" letters from journals, will put those letters and the accompanying suggestions in a drawer somewhere to let it cool down a bit; they find that after a few weeks, they can handle those suggestions better; they find themselves less defensive about their work. This doesn't always happen – after all, writing is very personal work and any criticism can seem to be directed at the writer instead of the writing – but often it does, and it's just that little bit of time that helps us to see our work better than when we were first writing it.

Writers also need to see their individual pieces in context. It might surprise students to know that most writing teachers absolutely *hate* grading writing; we would much rather write comments and make suggestions, ask questions and encourage other ways for the writer to think, than to put a grade on the writing itself. Why? There are lots of reasons, but one reason is that we know – from research and personal experience – that one piece of writing never tells the whole story of a writer. Even Shakespeare hit a few rough patches: his play *Titus Andronicus*, while loved by many, is rarely seen as his best work; his reputation as a writer is made by many of his more sharply written and complex plays (*Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, etc.). If we only looked at *Titus*, we might have a very different picture of one Mr. Bill Shakespeare! The same is true for the student-writer in a composition course. No matter how interesting a topic for a paper may be to the teacher who assigns it, it may never really resonate with the student-writer; in this situation, even though the writer tries her hardest, she's just not going to write as well as she might in a different situation. While the writer needs this experience –

after all, writers don't always get to choose their topics; just ask the news journalist! – the writer also needs a chance to understand how this “weaker” text fits in with other texts, those that the writer may have become more invested in or which the writer may have found “easier.” More important, since no writing assignment is really “easy,” when a writer looks at her work in context she can begin to discover why one project *seemed* easier than another; that's an important element of self-assessment and one which will help the writer to know how to respond to future writing situations. However, in order for a writer to know how to work best in a given situation, that writer needs to have some experiences with various writing situations, which brings us to the next point about portfolios: reflection.

Writers need to reflect on their performances as writers and to analyze how their writings began, changed, grew, fell apart, came back together (or didn't), etc. because only in doing so do writers really become aware of their strengths and weaknesses as writers, become aware of how their writing actually *works* or doesn't. Because portfolio assessment requires the student-writer to think about how documents developed – where there were struggles and where the writing was “easy,” how topics changed or became more precise as the writing went along, and how the writing was adjusted to meet the needs of a specific audience and purpose – the portfolio approach gives the writer *active practice in self-development*. The writer who can assess his own skills is much more likely *not* to embarrass himself by showing off weaker writing in a situation where the reader's evaluation matters. Think job application letter! When you reflect on your writing and its development, you begin to develop a “theory” of yourself as a writer. The Greek word for theory, in fact, suggested that the person with a theory was the one who was sitting in the highest seat of the amphitheater, the one who had the most distance from the stage and could see both what was happening on stage and how the audience reacted. This person had a more distant point of view. For the early Greeks, this person could develop a “theory” because he had the chance to see from more than one perspective; rather than getting lost in the play itself, the writer could see the play and how those in front and around him were reacting. Likewise, when writers reflect on their work and write about their work *as writing* in their Portfolio Cover Letter, they are sitting back from their work, no longer thinking of it as a person who is trying to persuade a particular audience about a particular subject; now, the writer is thinking about *how* and *why* she wrote what she did. Developing this sort of perspective is crucial for a writer because without it, she

will always be dependent on someone like a teacher to tell her whether her work is effective or not.

All of these points should be persuasive to the student-writer as much as to the teacher. Really learning how to write and why and in what situations and being aware of these as choices and not just blind luck – these are the outcomes a student should expect from a writing class at college. In the early 1980s, one writing teacher, Mike Rose, who has since published two *New York Times* best sellers, did research to find out what causes “writer's block.” That's a term we're all familiar with, of course, and too many of us have suffered from its crippling effects. What did Rose discover? Well, in his essay “Rigid Rules and Inflexible Plans,” Rose argues that the main reason student writers experienced this “block” was that they, like his essay title suggests, had created *hard and fast* rules about how to write. Some of the rules they'd taken from previous teachers, often out of context, but now that these were “rules,” they had the force of law for the students. One that Rose found rather pervasive was the rule that a writer has to have the first paragraph just right before going further with the essay. Most of the students Rose interviewed noted how long they spent on the first paragraph, often days, and that they often had trouble turning work in on time because they were fretting over that first paragraph so much. Rose found that when writers have *flexible plans*, or when writers can see these plans as *options* rather than *rules*, they were less likely to experience writer's block. Sometimes, these “rigid rules” can take on the character of *myth*. Like the softball player who always wears her lucky socks for big games, writers create their own senses of luck and chance in writing. When writing “flows,” student-writers find some explanation, like sugar wafers and Mountain Dew. One student will claim that he needs the TV on in the background – which makes writing in the classroom impossible; how convenient for the writer who wants to procrastinate! – another will claim that she needs to use a particular computer or that she needs M&M's, Peanut M&M's, only Peanut M&M's, and without them, she just cannot write.

These explanations, of course, are silly, although they do give the writers some comfort; they let the writer believe that, if conditions were different, the writing would be easier, would come more quickly, would “flow.” These are easy solutions, but not very realistic. Students can choose to continue to believe these myths that they create, or they can take a more productive path, namely looking at their writing over time and discovering which pieces are more effective than others and, more important, *why* they are more effective. The writer who can look at her work this way has begun to discover exactly what her “writing

process" is and how topic selection, research, drafting, revision, and the other elements of writing processes will help her to be more or less effective in different writing situations. That alone is a good reason for a student writer to want to use a portfolio. There are, of course, other reasons worth considering.

For one, students, particularly those in first-year composition courses, need to learn how to be the best students they can be, not just the best writers. General education courses, of which first-year composition is traditionally one, seek to give students not just subject-area knowledge in rhetoric, but also the sort of general college learning skills that students will need throughout their time at the university. Because students in a portfolio classroom are required to keep all their work, these students learn important habits that college students need. Teachers should not be required to keep up with students' work; students should. Students, after all, are the only ones who are going to be in a position to suggest to a teacher that he recorded a grade incorrectly. You've probably heard several friends already complain about a teacher allegedly recording a grade wrong and now these friends have had to put up with lower grades because they didn't keep their graded papers and had no way to argue for a better grade. Teachers are human; they make mistakes with recording grades, especially when they have 100+ essays to keep up with. Because the portfolio approach requires students to maintain copies of all their work, the responsibility for the work shifts to the students.

Likewise, aside from being just a repository of student work, portfolios also let student writers see their work develop over time. As noted above, student writers in portfolio classrooms collect all their writing and can begin to look at it from a "theoretical" point of view. Why does that matter? Well, think about it. If *you*, the writer, can look at your first paper and your fourth paper and see for yourself why the fourth is better than the first, then you don't really need a teacher to put a grade on those pieces; you can determine for yourself whether you have grown and, more important, you can *see the changes*. For a writer (and a student), this is an empowering moment. No longer are you a slave to the whims of someone else, at least on some level. You can see for yourself what has changed in your writing and why and how, and with that knowledge, you can have an honest, specific, intelligent conversation with your teacher about your work. It may well be that *you* see some important changes in your work that your teacher has missed; after all, your teacher has to concern herself with the writing of fifty to one hundred students each semester – you need concern yourself only with your own writing. While this gives your teacher some broader

perspective (remember that person sitting back in the auditorium?) in which to assess your work, it also means she's very busy and may miss something. This doesn't mean your teacher is a bad teacher; it means she's human. But because this teacher is requiring you to play a more active role in your development as a writer, you now have a responsibility to work *with* this teacher and make sure that you're both performing your best and being recognized for that performance.

We should also note that one of the primary goals of first-year composition courses is for students to learn about various research methods. As we noted above, a portfolio asks a writer to look at textual evidence of his development over time. This sort of "research" gives the writer two very different but complementary skills. For one, the writer is working closely with written texts, with words, and that level of close reading and analysis will be important in just about any course you take in college, especially those courses in the humanities where careful attention to history, language, or literary texts will be the norm, not the exception. Second, the writer is looking at development and change over time; sociologists and others who conduct "qualitative research" find themselves doing similar projects, looking at places, people, or issues over time and looking for what evidence there is that ideas/concepts change over time. Because your teacher has chosen a portfolio approach, you as a writer and a student will have the chance to develop some very important analytical and research skills. That alone is worth the price of admission, yes?

What Is this "Cover Letter" You Keep Talking About?

Good question and, in fact, the crux of the portfolio. In fact, without an Analytical Cover Letter, a portfolio is not a portfolio; it's just a bunch of essay stuck together in the same place. A shoe box doesn't seem much different. The Analytical Cover Letter, while not as "personal" or "reflective" as you might normally think a letter would be, is a letter of sorts. It is addressed to the teacher of the course and offers the teacher *your* analysis of your writing this semester. Most professional portfolios are preceded by a letter that lets the reader know what to expect. Think, for example, of how you might write a letter of introduction to your resume. A good letter will *not* just repeat the jobs or skills that are so clearly listed on the resume; a good letter will go beyond what can be listed, putting those skills and abilities and jobs and experiences in a context that will make prospective employers think of the applicant as more than just "computer skills including Microsoft Word, Power Point, and Macromedia Dreamweaver." While those might be useful computer programs, they tell an employer *nothing* about who the appli-

cant is or what the applicant might actually do with those technologies. A good letter that accompanies your resume does just that.

For these reasons, a portfolio cover letter can often suggest to your teacher just how much you've grown as a writer during the semester, showcasing, in fact, that you have learned the major concepts of the course and that you can demonstrate your learning by making specific references to your revised, finished drafts. Your teacher can supply you with sample cover letters from actual first-year composition students so that you can see what such a letter might look like; therefore, we won't go into too much detail here. Instead, we just wanted to mention the letter and give you a little context for it as we'll talk more about it throughout this chapter.

We should also note that some teachers, in order to prepare you for the cover letter, will ask you to write cover "memos" for your individual essays as you write them all semester (these are sometimes called "Post-Writes" or "Progress Memos" or "Mini-Reflections"). If your teacher asks you to write these, do not think of it as "extra" work that other classes may not be doing; instead, think of these memos as "first drafts" of your Portfolio Cover Letter, drafts that will make your cover letter infinitely easier to write at the end of the semester. These teachers recognize that analytical writing is *hard work*, and that students need long-term practice with it. Therefore, they have asked you to reflect on each of your projects as you write them. Ultimately, this means that, at the end of the semester, when you've been given the big cover letter assignment, you'll already have three, four, or even five memos that have done the same work in a much shorter space. In the last weeks of the semester, you will be able to reference these memos and remember who helped you with revisions early in the semester, what comments the teacher may have made, what topics you considered before settling on the topic you actually spent weeks writing, etc. It's easy to forget this information after a few months, but with these memos, you'll be able to remember your process more fully *and* you'll be more specific in your cover letter. Any teacher will tell you that specificity is a key component to successful analytical writing! For that reason, we've also provided some sample Cover Memos assignments at the end of this chapter. Even if your teacher does not *assign* these to you, you would be well advised to do this work on your own and just keep it at home; you'll be amazed at how much easier it will be for you at the end of the semester as your peers in class are struggling to remember what happened during the drafting and revision process for Essay #1. Whether your teacher requires the assignment or not, your teacher can offer you samples of the sort of Cover Memos that students have actually written for first-year composition courses; you only need to ask.

What Does a Portfolio Look Like?

In the "real world," a person's portfolio is usually as individual and distinctive as the person who put it together. In fact, many graphic designers and animation artists these days are creating digital portfolios of their work as that medium is both easier to duplicate and send out to prospective employers and more appropriate for their particular art form. One of the primary changes that the portfolio goes through when it becomes part of a college classroom is that some of this individuality disappears. Because teachers are using portfolios as part of a large-scale assessment procedure, these teachers have to make some adjustments so that they can accurately assess students (as opposed to visual artists or stock brokers). To that end, we should note that your teacher may have some very specific guidelines about portfolios for his or her particular writing class. The suggestions we make here are meant to serve only as broad guidelines or suggestions for *possible* organizational strategies for portfolios. You should definitely consult your teacher's handouts or assignment sheets to be certain that you're following the specifics that she has set out for you and the rest of your class.

That said, there are some components of portfolios that will be part of any writing class that claims to be using a "portfolio approach." These include

- a reflective/analytical cover letter,
- finished drafts of multiple pieces of writing generated in response to course assignments,
- and rough drafts (the number of which is usually determined by each teacher) that coincide to the finished drafts that the writer is "showcasing" for evaluation.

Individual teachers, depending on their course objectives and learning goals (and perhaps their negotiations with students in the course), may ask students to include even more in their portfolios, or may have a more itemized list of what should count as "finished" and "rough" drafts. Here are some possible texts that students may be asked to place in their portfolios:

- journal writings and other types of free-writing exercises from class, including invention and revision activities,
- peer responses and teacher responses to various writing projects,
- a student's written responses to his/her peers (as evidence that he writer participated in in-class peer response sessions),
- copies of source materials used in researched papers,
- a CD/floppy disk containing all the students' writing projects for class,

- a Check Sheet / Table of Contents for indicating what's in the portfolio,
- or an Informed Consent document to allow the teacher to use your work as examples to future students.

Teachers may have any number of course-specific activities and writing or thinking assignment that they expect you to turn in as part of your portfolio; be sure to double-check with your teacher before, during, and at the end of the process of compiling the portfolio to make certain you've not left anything out. Teachers may also have a specific order in which they want these items; while this order may seem a bit "obsessive" to you, you should be happy to have it because if your teacher can't find something in your portfolio that's a required component, you'll be the one whose grade goes down! Remember, your teacher may be reading 50 – 100 of these portfolios in the last week of the semester; they shouldn't be expected to go on a scavenger hunt for required content.

In fact, given that a writing portfolio can contain so many different items, many teachers are quite specific about what should go in the final portfolio and how it should be organized. Essentially, there are two basic types of writing portfolios, and these types affect organization: we'll call them the *complete* portfolio and the *showcase* portfolio. These names may be misleading, but basically, the **complete portfolio** is a collection of everything the writer has done during the semester – all the major essays and their drafts – and *all the pieces are used for evaluation purposes*; the **showcase portfolio** may include all the writing the student has done, but the student is allowed to *choose which projects will count for evaluation purposes*. For example, if a teacher has assigned five (5) writing projects during a semester, a showcase portfolio might allow the student to choose three of those five projects to "put forward" as representative of the student's best work; all five projects will have to be completed and part of the portfolio (to be certain the student has completed all assigned work), but the student gets to have some say in how she will ultimately be evaluated.

Here are two samples to show you how your teacher might ask you to organize your portfolio to be certain that she can find everything she needs for evaluation:

Table 1: Complete Portfolio Sample Organization

| | |
|-----------|--|
| Section 1 | Analytical Cover Letter |
| Section 2 | Final Drafts of 4 Projects |
| Section 3 | Essay 1 Archive (rough drafts, peer review, instructor comments, etc.) |
| Section 4 | Essay 2 Archive (rough drafts, peer review, instructor comments, etc.) |
| Section 5 | Essay 3 Archive (rough drafts, peer review, instructor comments, etc.) |
| Section 6 | Essay 4 Archive (rough drafts, peer review, instructor comments, etc.) |
| Section 7 | Free-Writing Exercises, Journal Activities, etc. |
| Section 8 | Other (anything else you've written for class and want credit for) |

In this course, the teacher made four (4) total essay assignments and is requiring the students to put all of them forward for evaluation at the end of the semester.

Table 2: Showcase Portfolio Sample Organization

| | |
|-----------|--|
| Section 1 | Analytical Cover Letter |
| Section 2 | Final Drafts of 3 Projects |
| Section 3 | Essay 1 Archive (rough drafts, peer review, instructor comments, etc.) |
| Section 4 | Essay 2 Archive (rough drafts, peer review, instructor comments, etc.) |
| Section 5 | Essay 3 Archive (rough drafts, peer review, instructor comments, etc.) |
| Section 6 | Essay 4 Archive (rough drafts, peer review, instructor comments, etc.) |
| Section 7 | Essay 5 Archive (rough drafts, peer review, instructor comments, etc.) |
| Section 8 | Free-Writing Exercises, Journal Activities, etc. |
| Section 9 | Other (anything else you've written for class and want credit for) |

In this course, the teacher made five (5) total essay assignments but is requiring the students to put only three (3) of them forward for evaluation at the end of the semester. Why? And which class is doing more work? That's hard to say. Writing four essays or five essays? Revising four or revising three? These students are probably doing the same amount of "work"; it just appears different. The hard work of genuine, substantial revision might be the emphasis in the second teacher's class, so while the students might work on five essays, they work hardest on revisions of the three projects they most invested in during the semester. The teacher has chosen this approach because she believes that the students may not like one of the project and not do well on it or the student may choose a topic that, ultimately, left him spinning his wheels because it was too broad or too difficult a project to take on in a short semester. The teacher in the first class may believe that an important outcome for a writing course is the students' ability to compose different kinds of essays in different genres; he will need to see more kinds of essays to make such an evaluation. While students in the first teacher's class may have less choice about what to invest in, they may do just as much revision as those in the second teacher's class; the only difference is that they 1) didn't get to choose what to be evaluated on and 2) didn't do a fifth essay. Both classes are pedagogically sound; both are appropriate for a college writing course.

There are, of course, good reasons for teachers to choose these different strategies – and there are other possibilities that we've not even brought up here – but ultimately, you as the student need to understand what you're doing and why. Don't be afraid to ask the teacher what his motivations are and what his learning outcomes are; knowing these things will help you write a better cover letter because you'll be more aware of what the course goals are (if they're not already stated on the course syllabus) and how your work does or doesn't meet those goals. (Do, however, be savvy enough to *ask* your teacher politely, and perhaps during his office hours, rather than to *confront* your teacher in attack mode.) Regardless, the fact that you can have this conversation with your teacher suggests already that a portfolio approach has helped you to be more in charge of your learning while at college. That's good news!

How Will My Teacher Evaluate All this Writing?

This may be the best question yet, especially since grading/assessment/evaluation was one of the key reasons that teachers began to move toward a portfolio approach for writing classes. We could offer you a lot of research reports on what we know about "grading" – data

about holistic scoring of writing, theoretical discussions about the differences among assessment, evaluation, and grading, and what happens to students who participate in portfolio-based classrooms – but since you're writers (and not researchers or teachers of writing), that information may not be as important to you as the nuts and bolts of how your portfolio will be evaluated and *why* it will be evaluated in that way. And like other parts of the portfolio, evaluation is not set in stone; teachers, based upon their own experiences and knowledge of evaluation, will make some different decision, ranging from how much the portfolio itself will count in your course grade (for some, it's 100% of your grade; for others, it might be 80% with 20% being something called "studentship" or "class participation") to whether or not individual projects will count differently in the portfolio.

Briefly, however, let's clarify these three terms. *Grading* is what we're most familiar with; it usually involves putting a letter or number on a written paper. That's it. Grades are important because they are used to determine scholarships and GPAs, and they're used, as well, to let the university (and perhaps your parents or future employers or graduate schools) know where you stand among your peers, whether you're mastering concepts, and whether you should be asked not to return to campus for a future term. But grade ultimately mean very little. After all, if your teacher put the number 442.987 on your paper, what would that "grade" tell you? And even if you got a more recognizable grade, like a B (85), what would that mean? How would you improve your writing? The fact is you wouldn't, not without the comments that a teacher-reader gives you. Those comments constitute an *assessment*. *Assessments* can come with or without numerical or letter grades attached, and in truth, it's those written comments that help you revise and develop as a writer. Some teachers in portfolio-based classrooms do not put "grades" on papers at all; others give them something they call "tentative grades," "interim grades," or the "grade for now." These grades are meant to help students to see how the assessments (comments) work in a larger context or to compare comments with a kind of grading students are more familiar with from school. Teachers who assign "tentative grades" on each project are usual very clear about what these grades mean. For some, these grades mean something only on the day they're given; because writers will be required to revise their essays, failure to do so might make the "grade" lower at the end of the semester because the student hadn't done additional work. This kind of grade-work can be confusing to students who are not used to it, so be sure to ask your teacher about how he grades work (if at all) and what these grades mean. Will the grade be permanent, or will the

teacher expect you to be a better writer at the end of the semester and thus need your work to be re-evaluated?

And there's that word: *evaluation*. *Evaluation* is relatively the same thing as "grading," but we tend to think of grading as the act of putting a single grade on a single piece of work, whereas evaluation tends to be rubric-driven and take into account multiple pieces of work. Think of it this way: in second grade, your teacher may have given you a check mark on one math sheet, a check-minus on another, an S on a reading quiz, and an N on a spelling test; at the end of the year, the teacher had to look at all these grades (as well as other indicators like your maturity, general reading competence, grade-level equivalency exams, etc.) and make a holistic evaluation of whether you should move on to third grade. In a portfolio-based class, your teacher will most likely provide you with a rubric (evaluation criteria) for what she will be looking for in your portfolio at the end of the semester. These criteria may be put in terms of goals or objectives for the course, or they may be put in terms of specific writing abilities, or some combination of these. You may notice that while an individual paper early in the semester was "graded" heavily on how little revision took place, *revision* may be a key component in the Portfolio Evaluation Rubric. What does this mean? Well, for one, it means that while your paper might have been a B in week three, based on the skills you had developed in three weeks, that same paper would not look very B-like in the context of the portfolio if it hadn't been significantly revised. Again, different teachers will grade, assess, and evaluate differently, so be certain to ask your teacher for clarification on these matters. How awful to find out at the end of the semester that what matters most in your first-year composition course is your ability to revise and all along you've just been making sure you have plenty of commas in your paper!

Since individual teachers will need to adjust their evaluations in various ways in order to account for different classroom practices or learning objectives, we will not be explaining *the right way* to do portfolio evaluation (assuming there is one), but rather, we'd like to give you a series of questions about evaluation that you should make sure your teacher has answered for you so that you know where to expend your energies in the writing process and how best to showcase your work. These might not be questions you've been encouraged to ask before, but you have a right as a student to make decisions about your evaluation and you have a right *and a responsibility* to be informed enough to make sure that you're working at your best whenever possible. Most teachers will supply you with a very carefully articulated evaluation rubric for your portfolio, but whether you have such a rubric or not,

you should know the answers to the following questions so that you can do your best on your writing portfolio:

- Is this a "complete" or "showcase" portfolio? Am I being evaluated on all my essays or do I get to select a certain number for evaluation? How many?
- In a showcase portfolio classroom, you might ask, "Are there certain 'outcomes' the teacher expects my portfolio to demonstrate?" For example, if one outcome on the Portfolio Evaluation Rubric is "demonstrates strong research skills," and you don't include an essay with any research in it as part of your selected showcase essays, you're not going to do very well no matter how good those essays are – they won't be meeting the evaluation criteria! (Take a look at the Outcomes Statement of the Council of Writing Program Administrators for a good example of how you might be evaluated based on your abilities at the end of a first-year writing course: <http://wpacouncil.org/positions/outcomes.html>.)
- Are the essays being evaluated individually or as a collective unit? That means, will each essay count a certain percentage or will they altogether, along with the other contents of the portfolio, count for one large percentage of my course grade?
- If evaluated separately, what criteria will each essay be evaluated on? As the writer, do you have any indication what each essay is supposed to accomplish? For example, does the teacher value "substantive revision" over "surface correctness"? If so, you need to make sure that you've done more than just corrected missing commas or fixed sentence fragments (both "surface correctness" issues), and be certain that your first, middle, and last drafts all look very very different, a demonstration that you've done all the parts of *revision* (addition, deletion, substitution, transposition). Likewise, one essay might be evaluated based on the quality of the research that went into it, while another might be evaluated based on your ability to narrate a sequence of events with appropriate levels of detail and description.
- What role does "drafting" play in evaluation? Does the teacher expect a certain number of drafts for each essay, including the cover letter, or not? How many?
- What role does "peer review" play in your evaluation? Are you evaluated on how well you write your peer reviews to your classmates or just your essays? Are you being evaluated on whether or not you have a minimum number of peer reviews

from your class peers on your essays? How do you “showcase” this sort of writing in the portfolio?

- What role will your “cover letter” play in your evaluation? Some teachers allow their students to evaluate their own work (based on a course outcomes rubric) and to explain their self-assessment at the end of their cover letters; others do not. Some teachers have students write their cover letters in class as a “final exam”; others give students a couple of weeks to work on it outside of class. Teachers who use the cover letter this differently will have different expectations for it and will evaluate it (and the portfolio) differently, so be sure to ask!

These are just some of the questions that we would ask if we were being expected to produce a portfolio. The energy that the student writer puts into each of these parts and how the writer completes each of these parts has much to do with how the parts will be evaluated (if, indeed, they will be evaluated individually or differently). Be sure to ask these important questions to make sure that you can do your best on these different types of writing your teacher asks you to do.

Good Luck!

We hope you will enjoy working on your writing portfolio all semester. Yes, it is a lot of work, but hard work is not a bad thing. One of the best parts of portfolio-based courses involves the sense of pride and accomplishment that the student-writers in these courses often experience. Putting together that portfolio really gives you a chance to see how much work you’ve done all semester, a chance to reflect on that work, and, we hope, to be proud of what you’ve accomplished.

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENTS

Project Cover Memo Assignment Sheet

This sample assignment comes from an English 1100 class in the fall of 2003. The same assignment was given for each essay written, so after the first time, students began to expect it and began to think about these questions *while they were writing* their second, third, and fourth essays. We include it here to help you to begin to think *as writers* who are conscious of their processes. As you can tell from the paragraph prompts, the writers in this course were allowed to choose their own topics, and they went through various peer-response activities in class and even had a first draft of their projects read and responded to by the teacher. Likewise, this teacher focuses on real-world audiences (i.e., not the teacher-as-audience), so the third paragraph asks the writers to write about how their audiences, how they chose them and why. Your teacher may have different outcomes and may, then, ask you different questions or ask you to reflect in different ways; these questions are only one of many different options.

English 1100 The Writer’s Memo

All writers “luck up” once in a while, do a little something special in their writing that’s unexpected or that has unexpected results with readers. But for the most part, writers work hard at drafting and revision, and each change seems part of a slow and arduous process of figuring out where to go, what to do, what to say. “Good” writers can also, then, talk about what they’ve done, taking responsibility for the choices they have made, articulating the reasons for those choices, recognizing the effects those choices may have on certain readers.

For the Writer’s Memo, I want you to demonstrate your abilities as that second type of writer. If we spend two weeks (or more, sometimes) inventing information, drafting possible versions of a text, responding to each other, revising our texts, etc., then you should be able to talk about the processes you went

through to get to this finished draft. To that end, please draft a memo to me, as teacher–evaluator, to help me see your particular processes and what vision you have for this text (that I might have a context in which to read). Below is a template you can use for your memo:

Student Name
Course # & Section
Teacher Name
Date

Writer's Memo

Paragraph #1: Trace the evolution of this project. When did you decide on this topic? What topics did you reject in favor of this one? How did your topic evolve from what you knew at first to what you know now? (Other comment relevant to topic evolution)

Paragraph #2: Discuss the specific revisions you've made to the project. What revision suggestions did you get? from whom? Which did you choose to use? Why? Which did you reject? Why? Where in the project did you make these changes? What effects do these choices have on your project/your readers? Why?

Paragraph #3: Purpose/Audience/Publication. Explain in one sentence what the purpose of your project is: are you trying to argue something? persuade a reader about something? tell a story to illustrate a point about the world? explore pertinent issues? etc . . . Then, tell me who your primary audience is (those you most want to write to) and why you chose them. Be sure to include what sort of publication site your piece would be appropriate for (or toward which you're working even if you're not really ready yet for that space).

You should be able to produce this memo in one single-spaced page. If you can't say it in one page, cut cut cut. Sometimes, to write reflective/analytical pieces like these, we start by rambling, trying to figure out what we have to say. Fine, but go back and get rid of the "fluff." **I won't accept them if they're not typed and single-spaced in Times New Roman 12 pt. font.**

Portfolio Cover Letter Assignment Sheet

This Analytical Cover Letter assignment comes from the same English 1100 as the previous Cover Memo assignment. You can tell that this teacher has some very specific expectations about the formatting of these documents, and it's good that he put those out there for his students rather than hope they'll guess what's on his mind or what he wants. However, this Analytical Cover Letter assignment also asks some rather large questions of the students in the course, questions that they will have had some practice with in their Cover Memos but which now need to come together and trace a project from its earliest incarnations to the version the student–writers have put forward in their portfolios. Again, there are any number of ways to construct this assignment; this example is but one of many. Be sure to check with your teacher to make sure that you're following the assignment she has given you.

English 1100 Analytical Cover Letter

Just as a cover letter would accompany a business portfolio or proposal, just as a cover letter would accompany a resume and letters of recommendation, just as a cover letter accompanies professional writing sent to publishers, so too will your portfolio contain a cover letter. I consider you all writers, and since you're requesting something from me (evaluation of how your work has progressed), you must ask for it in your cover letter.

So far, you have written analytical cover memos for each of your three major projects; likewise, you've analyzed the proper forums for your three projects and have ideas about how to revise. Therefore, you should have had extensive practice at analysis (if you've done your work as I asked you to), *and* you should also have much of the material you will need to write this analysis of your work. Your goal here is to answer the following questions in excessive detail:

- How have your writing projects been revised this semester? Who made what suggestions during peer review? How did you use those suggestions? Why? Which suggestions did you refuse? Why? How did you use class activities (like forum analysis) to revise your projects? Why? What effect did using

published models of your choosing have on your projects?
Why?

- How do your current projects address their respective audiences? Who are those audiences and what do you think their needs/desires/interests are? How do your revisions acknowledge those audiences' concerns? Why?

Your first paragraph should introduce YOU to ME and explain what I'll be finding in this portfolio. Your last paragraph should explain what GRADE your work has *earned* as demonstrated by the artifacts in this portfolio (not for how hard you work or how much you've shown up to class; although that's part of the assessment rubric, it is not all). After you have carefully addressed the questions above, you should be in a place for "self-evaluation." You should assess your own work based on those common outcomes for the course. You should measure your portfolio against the evaluation rubric; your ability to do this effectively demonstrates, yet again, your analytical skills.

When you're reading over your cover letter, ask yourself the following three big questions: Does this letter convince the evaluator that he should keep reading and actually get to the essays? Have my discussions of the revisions to my essays whetted his appetite for reading my final drafts? Have I adequately explained how my essays changed from their initial rough drafts to their final "presentation" form?

Your cover letter must be a minimum of three (3) typed, single-spaced pages, and it must be in a formal letter style (date, inside address, salutation, close, signature), Times New Roman 12-pt. font.