

Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition



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Portfolio Standards for English 101

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The following portfolio grading guide was prepared for use by English 101 faculty. It was approved by the department Writing Committee and is being shared with English 101 students to help them understand levels of performance in the course.

Unlike individual paper grading, portfolio evaluation involves judging a collection of texts written by a writer. The grade reflects an overall assessment of the writer's ability to produce varied kinds of texts, not an average of grades on individual papers. Raters will choose the description that best fits the portfolio. In other words, not all of the criteria in a selected grade range may apply to a given set of papers, but that cluster of criteria more accurately describes the portfolio than any other. Feedback to student portfolios will usually consist of some indication to the students of how their work measures against these various criteria, plus a few sentences of written response to the portfolio as a whole. Individual papers are not marked.

The "A" Portfolio

"A" portfolios demonstrate the writer's skillful ability to perform in a variety of rhetorical situations. "A" portfolios suggest that the writer will be able to adroitly handle nearly any task an undergraduate student writer might encounter, in both academic and public forums. The papers, the drafting materials, and, most important, the reflective introduction demonstrate the writer's sense of his or her development through the semester, his or her ability to reflect analytically and critically on his or her writing, and the relations among works submitted in the portfolio.

Individual works in "A" portfolios tend consistently to be appropriate to their intended audiences, audiences who

are characterized as well read or knowledgeable on the topics and ideas addressed. These readers would often be struck by the freshness of ideas, strategies, perspective, or expression in the work. Writers are usually able to bridge knowledge or opinion gaps between themselves and their readers and effectively create a context for the writing.

The quality of thought in "A" portfolios is generally ambitious and mature. Not only is the writer able to state claims or ideas clearly and effectively, but also he or she is generally able to provide support and discuss warrants for those claims in a manner that reflects the complexity of issues and yet still takes a plausible position. Not only is the writer able to describe phenomena or events clearly and effectively, but also he or she is able to analyze and interpret their possible meanings, going beyond the obvious. "A" writers usually have a keen eye for detail. Individual works are most often characterized by an effective texture of general and specific ideas or by such compelling specific ideas or accounts that generalizations are implicit.

Through allusions, interpretive strategies, and stylistic sophistication, "A" portfolios often suggest that their authors read or have read widely, not only materials assigned for courses but also a variety of public texts: newspapers, magazines, and books. These writers are able to incorporate ideas and insights gained from reading into their texts, sometimes critically, sometimes generatively, sometimes as support or illustration of ideas. This is not to suggest, however, that all works in portfolios must be documented. Indeed, reference to outside sources in many papers would be contrived, inappropriate, and undesirable.

"A" portfolios frequently show how their writers are able to draw on personal experience and direct observations of the world around them. They are able to connect these experiences and observations to readings or to new situations. Their writing often displays analogical or metaphorical thinking.

"A" portfolios may show frequent evidence of the writer's ability to make conceptual or global revisions—wide-ranging changes at the idea level—as well as local revisions—changes that affect meaning primarily in sentences and paragraphs. The writer is often able to use the entire range of revision operations: addition, subtraction, transposition. The writer is frequently able to

use teacher and peer response generatively, moving beyond a single, narrow comment to revise other aspects of the paper—or to initiate revisions on her or his own.

“A” portfolios are generally marked by a range of sophisticated stylistic features appropriate to a given writing situation, perhaps including sentences of various types and lengths (especially cumulative and other subordinated structures), striking word choices that are appropriate to the situation of the paper, and the effective use of metaphor and analogy, often extended. Papers often reflect a distinctive voice. The opening strategies of “A” papers are generally creative and engaging, the conclusions more than simple restatements of preceding ideas.

“A” portfolios, although not necessarily perfect, are virtually free of the kinds of errors that compromise the effectiveness of the piece, and have virtually no stigmatized errors.

“A” portfolios are neatly printed and organized as described in “Guidelines for Turning in Portfolios.”

Incomplete portfolios may not be graded “A.”

The “B” Portfolio

“B” portfolios generally suggest the writer’s skillful ability to perform in a variety of rhetorical situations, though a few areas may not be as strong as others. “B” portfolios suggest that the writer will be able successfully to handle nearly any task an undergraduate student writer might encounter, in both academic and public forums. The papers, the drafting materials, and, most important, the reflective introduction suggest progress toward the writer’s becoming conversant with his or her development, toward an ability to reflect analytically and critically on his or her writing, and toward understanding the relations among works submitted in the portfolio.

Individual works in “B” portfolios are usually appropriate to their intended audiences, audiences who are characterized as well read or knowledgeable on the topics and ideas addressed. “B” portfolios may be less ambitious in their choice of intended topics or audience, or may be less sophisticated in the way they address their readers than “A” portfolios. “B” writers are often

able to bridge knowledge or opinion gaps between themselves and their readers and to create a plausible context for the writing.

The quality of thought in “B” portfolios is often ambitious and mature. Not only is the writer able to state claims or ideas clearly and effectively, but also he or she is frequently able to provide support and discuss warrants for those claims in a manner that frequently reflects the complexity of issues. Not only is the writer able to describe phenomena or events clearly and effectively, but also he or she is generally able to analyze and interpret their meaning. Individual works are often characterized by an effective texture of general and specific ideas.

Through allusions, interpretive strategies, and stylistic sophistication, “B” portfolios suggest that their authors read widely, not only materials assigned for courses but also a variety of public texts: newspapers, magazines, and books. These writers are able to incorporate ideas and insights from reading into their texts, sometimes critically, sometimes generatively, sometimes as support or illustration of ideas, although this is often done less fluently or more readily than in “A” portfolios. This is not to suggest, however, that all works must be documented. Indeed, reference to outside sources in many papers would be contrived, inappropriate, and undesirable.

“B” portfolios occasionally show how their writers are able to draw on personal experience and observations of the world around them. They suggest that their writers are able to connect experience and direct observations to readings or to new situations. Occasionally, their writing may display analogical or metaphorical thinking.

“B” portfolios show occasional evidence of the writer’s ability to make conceptual or global revision (or frequent evidence of such revisions that are not always fully successful). They show the writer’s ability to make effective local revisions and to use a variety of revision strategies. The writer is sometimes able to use teacher and peer response generatively, moving beyond a single, narrow comment to revise other aspects of the paper.

“B” portfolios display a variety of sophisticated stylistic features, including sentences of various types and lengths (perhaps including cumulative and other subordinated structures), word choices that are appropriate to the rhetorical situation of the paper,

and the occasional use of metaphor and analogy, though sometimes these features may not be fully controlled or appropriate. There is frequently a distinctive voice to the papers, although this may be uneven. The opening strategies of "B" papers are creative and engaging, the conclusions more than simple restatements of preceding ideas.

"B" portfolios, although not necessarily perfect, are virtually free of the kinds of errors that compromise the rhetorical effectiveness of the piece, and have virtually no stigmatized errors.

"B" portfolios are neatly printed and organized as described in "Guidelines for Turning in Portfolios."

Incomplete portfolios may not be graded "B."

The C Portfolio

"C" portfolios demonstrate the writer's ability to perform competently in a variety of rhetorical situations, perhaps even showing skills in some writings. The set of papers, the drafting materials, and, most important, the writer's reflective introduction suggest progress toward the writer's becoming conversant with his or her development, toward an ability to reflect analytically and critically on his or her writing, and toward understanding the relations among works submitted in the portfolio. "C" writers, however, may not be nearly as perceptive as "B" writers in making connections between projects, in discussing and illustrating general tendencies in their writing, or in critically analyzing their drafting processes. These portfolios may seem to be more compilations of isolated works than at least partially connected wholes. Again, the reflective introduction will be most useful in making this judgment.

Writing in "C" portfolios adequately addresses knowledge and attitudes of peers. While this writing may often successfully address a well-read and knowledgeable outside audience, the context and occasion for the writing tend to be confined more to the classroom situation itself.

The quality of thought in "C" portfolios is competent and sometimes compelling, though often standard or familiar. Not only is the writer able to state claims or ideas clearly and effec-

tively, but also he or she is able to provide support and discuss warrants for those claims, although the complexities of the issues involved may be suggested rather than fully treated—or perhaps dealt with very little. Not only is the writer able to describe phenomena or events clearly and effectively, but also he or she is able to analyze and interpret their meanings, although the interpretations may be obvious or sometimes perfunctory. Individual works are often characterized by a texture of general and specific elements, but paraphrase and repetition may often take the place of development. Papers may be developed more by partition or addition, in the mode of the five-paragraph theme, rather than by logical or organic development of a central idea.

"C" portfolios demonstrate the writer's ability to read course materials critically and analytically and to incorporate ideas from reading into his or her texts. There may be some suggestions of the writer's facility with outside readings, but they may not be well integrated into papers, used rather in a more cut-and-paste fashion than a more organic one.

"C" writers may be able to draw on personal experience and observations of the world around them and connect these to readings or to new situations. The connections, however, may not be as fully integrated, explored, or subtle as in "B" portfolios.

"C" portfolios demonstrate the writer's ability to make local revisions, perhaps with one dominant strategy (addition, for example). While these portfolios may suggest the writer's ability to make global revisions, this ability is not clearly demonstrated. Revisions are frequently tied narrowly to specific comments made by the teacher or peers; the writer is less clearly a self-starter when it comes to revision than the "A" or "B" student.

"C" portfolios display a reasonable range of stylistic features, although sentences tend to be of a fairly uniform type (usually subject-verb-complement) and sentence length is mostly a function of coordination rather than subordination. There is infrequent use of metaphor and analogy. The voice of these papers is perhaps generic, competent but largely indistinct from other student prose. The opening strategies of writings in "C" portfolios may rely fairly directly on the assignment sheets or use some version of a funnel strategy. Conclusions tend to summarize the preceding ideas.

"C" portfolios are virtually free of the kinds of errors that compromise the rhetorical effectiveness of the piece, and they have few stigmatized errors and no consistent patterns of stigmatized errors.

"C" portfolios are neatly printed and organized as described in "Guidelines for Turning in Portfolios."

Incomplete portfolios may not be graded "C."

The "D" Portfolio

"D" portfolios suggest the writer's inability to write competently in several rhetorical situations. Writers of "D" portfolio work will likely have difficulty in other college or public writing situations. The set of papers, the drafting materials, and, most important, the writer's reflective introduction suggest that the writer is not fairly conversant with his or her development as a writer and is fairly unable to reflect analytically and critically on his or her writing. These portfolios generally seem to be more compilations of isolated works than partially connected wholes.

While the writing is sometimes appropriate to an audience that is knowledgeable on the topics and ideas addressed, frequently the writer assumes less—or more—of his or her readers than is appropriate. There are considerable knowledge or opinion gaps between the writer and his or her reader, and the context for the writing is usually limited to the classroom assignments themselves.

The quality of thought in "D" portfolios is frequently stock or perfunctory. The writer may be able to state claims or ideas clearly but is able to provide only minimal support and discuss virtually no warrants for that support. The writer may be able to describe phenomena or events clearly, but his or her interpretations may be obvious or perfunctory. While works may sometimes display a texture of general and specific elements, paraphrase and repetition may often take the place of development. "D" portfolios may contain papers that are consistently shorter than is needed to successfully engage the tasks.

"D" portfolios suggest their authors' difficulties in reading course materials critically and analytically. These writers may

have some difficulty summarizing complex ideas. Or they may be able to summarize but unable to respond critically or interpretively. They incorporate ideas from reading into their texts in ways that are frequently not well integrated, in more of a cut-and-paste fashion than an organic one.

"D" portfolios suggest the writer's ability to make local revisions, but these are often infrequent or do not substantially improve the paper from draft to draft. Revisions may take the form primarily of proofreading or direct responses only to the teacher's or peers' comments.

"D" portfolios may display a narrow range of stylistic features, with most sentences of a fairly uniform type. The result may be an overly predictable text, at levels all the way from the sentence, to paragraphs, to openings and closings.

"D" portfolios may display some of the kinds of errors that compromise the rhetorical effectiveness of individual works and may have some stigmatized errors, even a pattern of one such error.

"D" portfolios may not be neatly printed, or they may not be neatly organized as described in "Guidelines for Turning in Portfolios."

"D" portfolios may be incomplete.

The "F" Portfolio

"F" portfolios demonstrate the writer's inability to write competently in various aims (persuasive, explanatory, and narrative), although the writer may be better in some than in others; writers of "F" portfolio work will have difficulty in most writing situations. The set of papers, the drafting materials, and, most important, the writer's reflective introduction generally indicate that the writer is not conversant with his or her development as a writer and that he or she is unable to reflect analytically and critically on his or her writing. These portfolios generally seem to be more compilations of isolated works than at least partially connected wholes.

The writing is almost never appropriate to an audience that is knowledgeable on the topics and ideas addressed; the writer

assumes less—or more—of his or her readers than is appropriate, expecting readers to fill in all the gaps, to make all the connections, and automatically agree with the writer's perspective.

The quality of thought in "F" portfolios is perfunctory, obvious, or unclear. The writer may offer claims or ideas but be unable to provide much support. The writer may be able to describe phenomena or events but be unable to analyze or interpret them. Paraphrase and repetition often take the place of development. "F" portfolios may contain papers that are consistently shorter than is needed to successfully engage the tasks.

"F" portfolios demonstrate their authors' difficulties in reading course materials critically and analytically. These writers may have considerable difficulty summarizing complex ideas. They are unable to respond critically or interpretively. They incorporate ideas from reading into their texts in a cut-and-paste fashion rather than a more organic one.

"F" portfolios show relatively little evidence of revision, and what is there is frequently done at the sentence level or narrowly in response to a teacher's comment.

"F" portfolios may display the kinds of errors that compromise the rhetorical effectiveness of individual works; they may have patterns of stigmatized errors.

"F" portfolios may not be neatly printed, or they may not be neatly organized as described in "Guidelines for Turning in Portfolios."

"F" portfolios may be incomplete.

English 101 Final Portfolio Cover Sheet and Checklist, Spring 1999

Please provide the following information, which will help make sure you submit all the appropriate materials with your final portfolio. Turn this sheet in with your final portfolio. Thank you.

Name _____ Social Security Number _____
Instructor and Section Number _____

Local Address and Phone: _____

Permanent Address: _____

- I. A check on the right numbers and kinds of works
 ___ This portfolio contains a total of 20–30 pages.
 ___ This portfolio contains a reflective introduction (Part I, Course Guide, p. 8).

___ This portfolio contains at least 17 pages of revised writing from the course, appx. 5000–7500 words (Part II, p. 8).
 ___ The writings in Part II consist of at least 4 but not more than 8 papers.

Note: It's acceptable to list a paper in more than one category below:

One persuasive paper in the portfolio is titled:

One paper that has analysis or critique as its primary aim is titled:

One paper that makes substantial use of readings is titled:

___ This portfolio contains an analysis of writing done for another course and a copy of that paper (Part III, p. 8).

II. A check of format for the portfolio

___ I have included drafts for each paper. These are arranged exactly as described in step 3 on page 11 of the English 101 Course Guide. I understand that the Writing Program strongly urges me to keep a photocopy.

___ I have provided an electronic second copy of the portfolio exactly as described step 7 on page 11.

___ I have turned in all materials in a two-pocket folder. On the outside of the folder is the information requested in step 9 on page 11 of the Course Guide. I understand that I can pick up my portfolio from my teacher at the beginning of next semester.

III. Permission: Choosing to give or withhold permission will not affect your grade in any way. Report any concerns or irregularities to the director of Writing Programs or the program ombudsperson.

I give my permission to the English Department to reproduce writings from this portfolio in future editions of Language and Composition I Course Guide: _____yes _____no

I give permission to my instructor or to the English department to reproduce or otherwise use my writings for teacher training or research purposes. This includes permission to quote from my work in published articles or books. I understand that I will not be identified in any way, that my participation is completely voluntary, and that I may withdraw my permission, in writing, at any time. ___yes ___no

IV. Certification

The works submitted in this portfolio do not violate the plagiarism policy stated in the Course Guide. I understand that plagiarism will result in an F for the course.

(signed)

(date)

Handling the Confrontative Conference

RUTH OVERMAN FISCHER
George Mason University

Ruth Fischer provides guidelines for making the most of individual conferences with confrontational writing students.

Conferencing with students on their writing in process is the hallmark of a process-oriented pedagogy, regardless of genre. Providing formative feedback presents teachers with the opportunity not only to help students in shaping their writing along the lines of the assignment, but also to get a sense of how a student learns and what kind of support a student needs in order to do well. These formative conferences can be pleasant, if not downright enjoyable.

But there comes the day when we have to provide a summative evaluation of a piece of writing. We have to assign The Grade. Students who tell us they “always got A’s” on their writing in high school—and even those who don’t—can respond with a range of emotions when they see that first C or whatever grade lower than expected. After all, they did the assignment, so they should get an A.

And perhaps in the midst of their various manifestations of angst, plagued by your own concerns that you have been too easy or too hard, you are feeling nervous about having to give grades at all. Students are asking to meet with you about their grades. And you find yourself faced with what might be called the Confrontative Conference. What follows is a way to set up a productive interaction with your students.

1. Set up an appointment for sometime after class in your office. Students upset about a grade usually cannot listen effectively. And when they appear on the attack, it’s difficult for the teacher to respond appropriately without sounding defensive. So don’t try to deal with these students in the moment in class. Schedule an appointment and ask them to read over their paper, your comments, and the assignment before they meet with you. You might even ask them to write a note to you explaining how they think they have met the requirements of the assignment and why they should have received a better grade. The time between getting the paper with its unacceptable grade and sitting down to discuss the paper allows students to calm down and gives you a chance to gather your thoughts.

2. Construct a good assignment in which the expectations are clearly stated and you have clear expectations in mind. Actually, in terms of the overall assignment, this step precedes the first one. Constructing an assignment with clearly articulated expectations is one of the best ways to ensure a solid understanding of the assignment on all sides of the desk. Not only do you need to be clear about what you want students to try to do, but also you need to provide students with a frame for their writing. In addition, in-class discussion of the assignment provides a context for