

## **This seems like a lot of paperwork. Do I really need assignments for every paper?**

Yes! I sat in on the reading workshop this year, and I saw several portfolios that didn't pass because the reader couldn't tell how well the papers addressed the assignments. Including assignments should be a piece of cake...you've already been saving them all, right? If you haven't saved them, asking your prof for a copy provides you with a good reason to go and actually talk to your professor. Believe it or not, professors genuinely enjoy talking to students—not just about their writing. Carleton faculty are very involved in and supportive of the portfolio project. They would love to talk to students about the actual experience of completing a portfolio.

## **What in the world is this “reflective essay?” What should I write about in my essay?**

It's a paper that you write specifically for the portfolio to introduce it to your readers. Ideally, your essay provides some insight into yourself as a writer. I know this sounds trite, but think of it as explaining to your audience how you relate to the task of writing—for school or on your own.

Start with the scoring guide (blue) included in your folder, which faculty will use to rate your portfolio. Comment on your own assessment of your writing according to those categories. If you have solved a particular writing problem, say so. If you know you have some things to work on, feel free to ask for feedback on one or two specific features of your writing. This essay is your chance to contextualize your portfolio for readers who probably don't know you and will appreciate your help as they sort through a collection of papers they did not assign. Think of it as a means of reaching an audience with your best efforts at description, persuasion, and other rhetorical tactics. Demonstrate your ability to write this essay with confidence and maturity, and your readers will be well disposed toward you and your work.

## **My other papers can speak for themselves. Why do I have to write a reflective essay?**

The essay can be extremely important, especially if you want an “exemplary” score. The reflective essay probably gets read more carefully than any other paper in your portfolio, and many of the faculty readers commented that the essay can make or break the portfolio. The impression left by the introductory essay significantly informs the reading of the rest of the portfolio. If you want an exemplary rating, you will be best served by investing in the essay. Taking the time to write a good reflective piece has intrinsic

benefits, too. By thinking about your own writing, you may become a more self-aware, and eventually, a better writer.

## **What if there's no written assignment? Some professors only give oral assignments.**

If all you have is an oral assignment (or if the assignment was given via e-mail, or if you lost the printed assignment), just write the gist of the assignment on the summary sheet and that will suffice. If you have a printed assignment, though, be sure to include it.

## **How do these portfolios get graded? What are the readers looking for?**

More goes into the scoring than you might think. The faculty readers are careful and conscientious and give every portfolio a good deal of attention. As to what they look for, it's the same as you would look for in any good writing. Structure and organization. Critical thought and support for your arguments. Theses and evidence. PROOFREADING. Sentence structure and word choice. Control of language. Engagement with your topic. Portfolios missed “exemplary” simply because the writer seemed detached from the topic. If readers feel that you're writing only to complete an assignment, they're not going to be very impressed.

Of course, each reader emphasizes different things; assessing writing is subjective. You should be in good shape, if you pay attention to the advice above.

## **What if I end up with a portfolio that “needs work?”**

Faculty want to make sure that students have the writing skills they need to succeed in their major and in their last two years at Carleton. If your portfolio “needs work,” you'll get some pretty specific suggestions about what to do. The Writing Program will work with you to pinpoint the problems and come up with an appropriate plan. In some cases adding one more paper may be enough; others may require extensive work on future assignments, a tutoring arrangement, or some other specific writing help. Use the help offered and get your portfolio re-submitted!

## **I write pretty well. What do I need to do if I want an exemplary rating?**

• Write a thoughtful, polished reflective essay. Readers start here: the essay gives them their first look at your writing. It is definitely in your interest to make this first impression a good one.

• Choose papers from a variety of courses that show off your range as a writer. Two or three papers from one course will dilute your case for exemplary writing across disciplines.

• Revise all your papers, even if they are already very good. This summer, several of the readers commented that seeing that papers were revised another time showed that the student was conscientious and cared about his or her work. This probably seems like a little thing, but the borderline decisions are made by little things.

• Make sure you satisfy all the requirements clearly and completely. If your reader is questioning if a paper fulfills what you say it does, your writing probably won't get her full attention. If you are missing a requirement, an otherwise exemplary portfolio might be scored “needs work” or “incomplete.”

• Finally, when writing and selecting your papers, make sure you are engaged with your subject. Develop a strong authorial voice that comes through for your readers. Many good portfolios missed exemplary because the writing felt mechanical and lacked inspiration. One of the most frequent comments was that the writing was very competent, but lacked a personal touch.

## **I'm really not happy with many of my papers. How can I make sure I still pass the portfolio and don't have to resubmit it?**

You should focus on the very same things as the students seeking exemplary ratings. You're talking about marginal decisions, again, and even at the lower end, the borderline cases are decided in much the same way. Here, it becomes even more important to meet all the requirements, including getting assignments for all the papers. If your writing is marginal *and* your portfolio is incomplete, it will probably be scored “needs work.”

Proofreading is also critically important. Again, borderline writing that is filled with surface errors will almost certainly be scored “needs work,” while error-free writing that is otherwise the same is more likely to pass. Again, the mere fact that you took the time to revise may swing the decision in your favor.

### **I wouldn't still be at Carleton if couldn't write. Why does the college need further proof that I'm ready to continue?**

You may not see the merits of the portfolio as a tool for assessment, but that doesn't change the fact that you have to complete one. You have two choices: You can grumble through two years and complete it frantically at the last minute—a course of action that pretty much guarantees the experience *will* be worthless. Or, you can invest in your work, reflect meaningfully on your writing and potentially see some benefit from your efforts. Taking stock of yourself as a writer half-way through your time at Carleton can be pretty interesting.

In addition to serving individual students, the portfolio serves broader curricular goals. Faculty appreciate the opportunity to see the writing that goes on in other disciplines, which can inform their own thinking about writing. For example, faculty left this year's session with a number of ideas for improving their own future assignments.

### **What are the most important things to remember to make my life easier and my portfolio better?**

- Keep your assignment sheets and all papers *in hard copy*. Computers crash; you don't want to lose your work. Believe me, this is the single best way to eliminate later hassles.
- Save everything. If you put everything you think you *might* later want in your portfolio folder, it will be no problem if you decide that you do, in fact, want it.
- Proofread. A portfolio might be scored "needs work" just because the surface errors were too prevalent, and you can forget about "exemplary." It doesn't take that much time to get rid of typos, and the effect on the readers can be significant. Also, involving another reader in your revision process will help to catch the things that you might otherwise miss.
- Pay attention to your reflective essay. The quality of your essay will definitely influence the reading of the rest of your portfolio. You should be making an argument about yourself as a writer, using the scoring sheet as a guide. Do that well, and readers will be engaged with your work.
- Stay on top of things and get it out of the way early. I realize that the tendency will be to put it off, but believe me, it will feel good to finish it and not have to worry about it anymore.

### **I'm confused by some of the requirements. Can you explain how to satisfy all the criteria?**

*Two curricular divisions*—Make sure that your papers come from classes in at least two—or better, three—of the distro groups at Carleton: Humanities, Social Science, Math & Natural Science, or Arts & Literature. Don't use more than one paper from a single course.

*Writing Requirement*—Unless you scored a 5 on the AP Literature or Language test (or 7 on IB), you need to take a course marked WR during your first two years, and include one paper from this class. If you took more than one WR class, may use a paper from any of them. If you did score a 5 on the AP test, you may ignore this requirement.

*Observation*—This requirement is just like you might think, but may include more than you expect. Papers in this category generally incorporate direct observation of real-world events. The official sheet suggests field notes, a lab report, or a description of art or drama. Things like interviews or ethnographies count, too. In reality, any time you use your senses to interact with the world you are observing. Any sort of personal experience probably involves observation.

*Analysis*—Analysis is best thought of as breaking down data (of any sort) into constituent parts and then examining those discrete bits to understand a problem or argument or to provide evidence.

*Interpretation*—It is likely that whenever you interpret, you have already analyzed what you are interpreting. When you interpret, you build up your own meaning from the individual bits you have pulled out of a text, an author, or other data. The classic example is close reading of a single source.

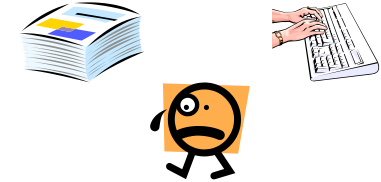
*Documented sources*—The idea is that you use sources besides the primary text for the assignment. If you are writing an essay about Aristotle's *Politics*, quotations from outside commentary would count, but just citing the *Politics* isn't enough. This requirement can be satisfied by any paper written using a bunch of primary and secondary sources.

*Thesis-driven argument*—This requirement is fairly self-explanatory. The key here is to make sure your thesis is strong, clear, and that the rest of your paper is focused around it. Avoid theses that are weak, vague, or unsupported by the rest of the paper.

## **An Insider's Guide to the Sophomore Writing Portfolio**

Keith Purrington '05

Revised Summer 2009



### **There's no way around it? I'm definitely going to have to submit a portfolio in two years?**

I'm afraid you are, but it isn't that bad. In the process of choosing papers to include and writing a reflective essay, you may gain insight into your own writing. Eventually, thoughtful reflection can help to make you a better writer.

Furthermore, the college is committed to the idea of a writing portfolio for a number of very good reasons. It provides a consistent way of assessing students' ability to write in a number of different disciplines and to get help to students who haven't quite mastered all the necessary skills. I know it can seem like a pain, but having been through the process myself, I can tell you that it really isn't. It shouldn't take you more than 5 or 6 hours to complete the portfolio. In fact, some students probably spent more time complaining about the portfolio than actually completing it.

### **What can I do to make things easier for myself?**

First, save *everything*. (One student lost his computer and the electronic copies of most of his work.) Save a hard copy of each paper you turn in. You never know what papers you will want a year from now. Save all your assignment sheets; it will be your responsibility to provide one for each paper you turn in. Even save the portfolio folder. It provides a great place to store everything, and a good reference to all the requirements.

Second, recognize that you have already done almost all of the work. You select papers from those you have already written, right? Looking them over to make sure you have a combination that fulfills the criteria, filling out the summary sheet (pink), attaching assignment sheets, and writing your reflective essay—you're done! Of course, it's a good idea to revise your papers as well, especially if you have helpful comments from your professors to guide you.