

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

Yes! I sat in on the reading workshop one 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, and they are not archived on Moodle, 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're happy to talk to students about the actual experience of completing a portfolio. They may be able to download assignments from the course Moodle page for you if your access has expired.

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 (available online), 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 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 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 a paragraph with the gist of the assignment, save as a document, and upload that to the Moodle portfolio site, and that will suffice. If you have a printed assignment, though, be sure to include it—scan it, if necessary.

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. 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 during the next term you are on campus.

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. Do NOT use two papers from your favorite course; readers want to see breadth.

- Revise all your papers, even if they are already very good. I heard several readers observe 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. 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?

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.

For more information, follow links on this page:
go.carleton.edu/portfolio

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 often leave 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 a backup copy of your assignment sheets and all papers on Google Drive. Computers crash; you don't want to lose your work. Believe me, this is the single best way to eliminate later hassles, even if you have to scan a paper into Moodle to submit it.
- Save everything. Are you seeing a pattern here?
- 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. Also, involving another reader—a Writing Center tutor would be a good choice—in your revision process will help catch what 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 done 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?

Three departments or programs—Make sure that your papers come from classes in at least three departments or official academic programs, e.g., Asian Studies or Cross-Cultural Studies. Papers should show your ability to write well in several rhetorical contexts. Look for papers that meet the other criteria (below) and also move beyond a pattern you probably used a lot in high school. Don't use more than one paper from a single course.

Observation—This requirement may include more than you expect. Papers in this category generally incorporate direct observation of real-world events. The official list 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.

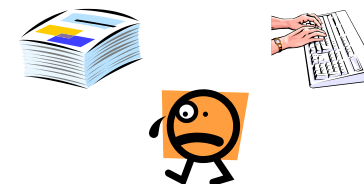
Documented sources—The idea is that you use sources besides the primary text for the assignment. If you are writing an essay about Aristotle's *Politics*, quotations from outside commentary would count, but just citing the *Politics* isn't enough. This requirement can be satisfied by any paper written 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. It's common to see a thesis-driven paper with documented sources and analysis, and maybe interpretation. This is a good deal.

An Insider's Guide to Carleton's Sophomore Writing Portfolio

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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 a few 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*. Save a backup copy of each paper you write *and the assignment sheets* on Google Drive (drive.google.com); log in using your Carleton login credentials. You never know what papers you will want a year from now.

Second, recognize that you have already done almost all of the work. You select papers from those you have already written, right? Look them over to make sure you have a combination that fulfills the criteria, upload your work on the Moodle portfolio site, upload assignment sheets and 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.