

# 18 Portfolio Assessment as an Alternative to Grading Student Writing

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In the wake of cutbacks and government intervention, the natural tendency may be to do less, not more, in our classrooms. I believe that the writing portfolio is a structure that will help simplify assessment and grading and at the same time help make learning meaningful in our classrooms. The National Council of Teachers of English has recently passed a resolution encouraging teachers to “refrain as much as possible from using grades to evaluate and respond to student writing.” Using a portfolio approach can help us in this kind of assessment.

A portfolio can be many things, but for my purposes, ever mindful of the need to keep things simple, a writing portfolio is a collection of completed writing assignments. I want students to follow through on any writing they undertake, so every piece of writing, including the various drafts, self-assessments, peer responses, and teacher response is included in the portfolio. Revisions, rewrites, and false starts are also evident. This collection becomes a living, almost breathing, record of a student’s thinking as well as his or her growth, through self-assessment, as a writer and learner.

For me, the issue of choice of writing topics is the first crucial component for meaningful writing to take place in the classroom. If the assignment is determined by the teacher, the students’ stake in it will be guided by the external outcome of the teacher’s approval, in

many cases a grade. On the other hand, if students are given the opportunity and responsibility of finding their own topics and tasks, the outcome will be linked with what they have set out to accomplish and what they have achieved. I want the topics for writing to develop naturally from the reading and the discussion of ideas. I also want the form the writing takes to develop in authentic ways. The content or idea should suggest the form.

I believe this is true of the traditional, or literary, essay as well. I don't teach the five-paragraph essay; when students are writing about ideas in a genuine fashion, formula writing has no place. When we discuss an idea from a piece of literature that has affected us strongly, we may discuss how that idea was developed and the nature of its impact on us as a reader. This may mean we will deal directly with the literature, or it may mean we will use it as a springboard to something else, perhaps related to ourselves. It may even mean that we take the idea and develop our own story, our own literature—to explore the idea fully in a way that has meaning for us.

It is important, then, to encourage students to think in terms of the reader-writer connection. I think that when they begin to read as writers and write with potential readers in mind, they become their own best readers and learn to write for themselves. I have learned that I have to stay out of it. When I determine what it is that students write, the writing quickly becomes stilted. If the student has to jump through my hoops with regard to form, the writing deteriorates. When students are committed to writing—"This is my idea; now how can I best get it across?"—everything opens up, and the stage is set for portfolio assessment.

What does all of this have to do with the writing classroom and the grading or nongrading of papers? Every time we, or our students, sit down to write, we have myriad decisions to make. All of these decisions are part of the writing and the learning process. All of this leads to the quality of the end product. And it is the quality of the end product that we are concerned with. A single piece of writing is only a step along the way in that process toward a body of work which is the end product. If all of this ends in incomplete pieces of work, or numerous attempts that never get anywhere, then we are spinning our wheels. Quality counts. Getting finished and meeting some kind of deadline counts too.

In my classroom, the writing portfolio is placed within the context of a response-based program. Students do a great deal of writing in their journals in response to what they read. This writing varies, but

can become the basis for a piece of writing that will be developed and polished for the writing portfolio. Writing is assigned at regular intervals. Depending on the class, my deadlines can be very definite, with built-in penalties for lateness, or fairly flexible, with target deadlines and a certain grace period. A student recently suggested that after the deadline has passed, I should speak to the student and together we should set a final deadline. The following description is given to students at the beginning of the term:

### **Writing Portfolio (30%)**

You will be required to take ownership and responsibility for the writing you do in this classroom. You will come up with your own topics and formats from ideas found in your reading, your journals, and class discussion. From the basic topic through to the final polished draft, you will be responsible for revisions, peer editing, and responses, as well as a thorough self-evaluation of your work. Teachers will not edit work, but will be available for conferences to help with specific writing problems identified by the student or the teacher. It is expected that you will use the computer technology available to you, including spell checkers. Writing assignments handed in must include rough notes, drafts, peer comments, a writer's memo, and a cover page with the title, name, date, and class. Your final draft should demonstrate that you take pride in producing quality work.

Your portfolio should include a variety of formats each reporting period. Examples might include a short story/narrative writing, plays, TV scripts, poetic/descriptive writing, essays of all kinds—reflective, persuasive, opinion/viewpoint, position, letters. Completed work will be stored in a file folder in the room.

Individual writing assignments will *not* receive a grade. All work will require a self-assessment as well as comments from peers and teachers. All work will be shared, sometimes with the group and sometimes with the whole class.

The portfolio will be evaluated as a whole each reporting term in a conference between the student and teacher and according to the criteria provided. A grade will be assigned at that time.

Please note: *All assignments must be handed in to receive a passing grade on the portfolio. The portfolio grade is cumulative—each report-card period the portfolio is looked at as a whole.*

The issue of teacher editing comes up a great deal with regard to a portfolio approach. I used to do too much editing of student papers, and I may still do more than I believe we should. I have found that students get too dependent on teacher editors. Students need to be made responsible for revising their own papers. I agree that students need feedback during the process of writing, but the peer-response or writing group is the ideal place to train students to respond to each other's

writing. We have to be careful that peers deal with more than surface errors. They have to learn to read each other's writing just as they would any author—with the intention of trying to understand—not just reacting, not just judging, but making an honest attempt at getting to the meaning intended or otherwise revealed by the author and the particular text. It becomes a transaction or dialogue between writer and reader just as with any literary text.

Depending on the experience and level of the class, I may structure the group process very carefully or just let them go at it and then make adjustments as I go. Students will already be familiar with their group and have some experience discussing literature in it. Looking at each other's writing is an easy transition. I have taken various approaches, especially when the class is starting up. Later they can decide which approach works best for their group. They may read their work aloud or pass it to the left. The expectation is that they will read the draft with the intention of understanding it. Sometimes I give them prepared questions; other times I ask them to respond to the writing just as they would to a piece of literature. This response is usually written, but later I allow students to do this orally if that approach works best for them. Sometimes I ask them to focus on a specific problem area such as great introductions; most often, I ask the student writer to determine the area of concern to be addressed. I discourage the actual correcting of a student's work, although students may bring errors to the attention of the writer.

Which brings me to a crucial point—students have to become their own best readers. And ultimately, they have to learn whether or not what they have written achieves the goal they have set for themselves. The assessment process begins with peer comments and continues with a self-assessment or a writer's memo that serves to open up a dialogue between the student and the teacher.

When the portfolio writing is ready for a response from me, it is always accompanied by evidence of the process. I want whatever there is: the concept maps, the outlines, the scribbles, the doodles, the drafts that were rejected, and the drafts that were responded to and sometimes corrected by peers. I want the written peer comments, as well as a brief summary of any discussion about the writing, with peers or with me, that has taken place. I also want a writer's memo (self-assessment) that chats with me about the writing, that tells me what the writer tried to do and whether or not the writer thinks his or her intention has been accomplished. I want writers to articulate their

ideas very clearly. I want them to begin to recognize their strengths and weaknesses. This is crucial to the assessment process.

My response to this portfolio writing will be to this memo. I will agree or disagree with students' perceptions of their writing. I might make a suggestion or two. I might share my interest in their idea or I might share my pleasure in reading their work. I will read what they have written, certainly, and I may choose to make corrections in the first paragraph or even the first page of a longer piece. I may choose to zero in on one type of writing problem and ask the student to conference with me about it. Students always have the option of coming back to a piece of writing to revise or rework it. I might encourage a student to try another draft or just let it be. All writing doesn't have to be beaten to death or be perfect.

I don't put a grade on any of this writing. At first, students will ask for a mark, but I resist the urge to give them one. A grade is a final judgment, and any single piece of writing in the portfolio is only part of a process that should encourage risk taking and experimentation.

The assessment process continues with the first portfolio conference and is a learning experience for student and teacher. At this conference, the student and the teacher evaluate the portfolio and assign a grade. The grade reflects the work as a whole. Because you want to encourage risk taking, one poor showing shouldn't affect what is otherwise exceptional work. But you need criteria (mine are shown in Figure 1) that provide the basis for the discussion of the student's work. The set of criteria or the rubric should include completion, process, and quality of final product, and it should incorporate what you value. This should be spelled out quite clearly or conflicts will arise during the conference. Students need to be prepared to make a case (I like to receive this in writing at the time of the conference) for the grade they propose, and it must be supported by the criteria. It is important to listen; I have to guard against doing all the talking. Depending on the length between reporting periods, we may only have a couple of pieces of writing to look at the first time. The portfolio mark is cumulative, so that each time there is a larger body of work to look at. I use the time to talk about students' writing. I ask them which piece they are most proud of and which piece demanded the most work. During these conferences I get to know the student and the writing problems he or she may be having.

I hold these conferences at the end of each term to coincide with report cards. We offer a full-year humanities program, and report cards are issued four times each year. I have worked in a system where

### Writing Portfolio Assessment and Evaluation Guidelines

#### A

The writer *extends and explores ideas and concepts* from the readings and discussion.

The writer takes ownership and responsibility for coming up with his or her own topics, establishing a personal focus, developing the idea, and seeing it through to the final finished *quality* product.

The writer deals with *complex ideas and issues*. Ideas are thoughtfully developed with carefully chosen support and detail. This expression of ideas is *fluent, thoughtful, and effective*. The writer takes *risks*, experimenting with a variety of formats.

The writer demonstrates a sophistication of language usage. Vocabulary is appropriate to the tone and topic of discussion. Terminology is discussed in a meaningful context.

The *writer's voice* comes through. The writer is *confident, insightful, and perceptive*. The writing demonstrates *confidence in control* of correct sentence construction, usage, grammar, and mechanics. The writing is *error free*.

The writer's memo (self-assessment) demonstrates a *growing self-awareness* and ownership in improving writing. The writer sets high standards and strives to meet them.

#### B

Topics are *related to the ideas and issues* that arise from the readings and discussions. *Understanding is evident*. The writer chooses a format that develops his or her idea. The writer considers his or her impact on the reader.

The writer has *met all deadlines*. Class time has been used well. Peer input is valued during the process of the writing. The writer uses feedback from peers to revise. The writer is committed to producing a polished final product.

A *clear focus is established* and thoughtful ideas are supported with appropriate evidence. The writing is *organized so that it has impact* on the reader. The conclusion is effective.

Vocabulary is clear and appropriate. Language used is *straightforward, clear, and fluent*. The writing demonstrates *competence in control* of sentence construction, usage, and mechanics. *Minor and minimal errors*.

The writer's memo carefully considers what has been accomplished in the writing as well as dealing with specifics of the writing.

#### C

Most deadlines have been met. *All writing assignments have been completed* (including revisions when asked to do so).

Topics are *related to the ideas and issues* that arise from the readings and discussions. *Ideas are dealt with simply but clearly and supported by/with some kind of evidence*.

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**Figure 1.** Portfolio assessment criteria.

Figure 1 continued

The writer is focused and the introduction provides a general direction for the reader, but discussion of idea may be general or predictable. It may lack the specific detail needed to support ideas. The conclusion is functional.

Vocabulary is imprecise and/or inappropriate. The writing may be straightforward but limited to simple structures. The writer *demonstrates control of the basics* of sentence construction, usage, grammar, and mechanics. There may be *occasional errors*, but the communication of ideas is clear. The writer is aware of his or her purpose and audience.

The writer's memo is beginning to deal with specifics of the writing.

#### D

Deadlines have been missed/portfolio is incomplete.

Topics are *not related to ideas and issues* from readings and discussions in the classroom. The writer may be *confused or lack the background to deal with the subject chosen*.

The writer lacks a focus and/or is unable to develop an idea.

The writer may be unable to use paragraphing to organize ideas. The conclusion is not functional.

The writer *lacks control of conventions and language usage*.

The writer is *unable to write clearly* and/or effectively.

#### F

The writer has not completed any assignments or has made no effort in the assignments completed.

report cards were required two or three times in a semester. In order to prepare for the portfolio conference, I ask students to take a close look at the work they have completed, and they study the criteria and the comments they have received to see where their work fits. I ask them to make a case for a grade in writing and add notes during the conference. This then becomes part of their portfolio. Early in the year or semester, and depending on the level of the students, my emphasis is on process. As the course progresses, my emphasis shifts to product, with the final portfolio grade reflecting the overall quality of the product while acknowledging the process that went into it.

The discussion must relate to the criteria (see Figure 1). If the criteria state that all assignments must be done to get 50 percent, and the student hasn't done that, then the conference can focus on getting the student to realize that his or her goal is to get all the assignments in. If the criteria state that if any of these assignments are late, the maximum mark is 60 percent, that too is fairly nonnegotiable. If the criteria state

that a B can only be achieved if there are minimal proofreading errors, then that too is quite straightforward. Yet, I have been known to fudge on my own criteria; flexibility is the key. Every conference is unique. A student may be an excellent writer in every sense of the word, but a terrible speller. Depending on what is most important to you and to the student, the mark assigned may be on the high side for the criteria. High standards are important, but the point of the conference is not just to assign a grade, but to help a student improve his or her writing. Most of the time students can determine their grade easily; sometimes they need your help. The goal is quality, and to the student whose effort is phenomenal, but whose work is still poor, I will often say I believe that in the long run the hard work will pay off.

This may sound like a lot of work when I could have just given them the mark in the first place and saved myself all this time and trouble. But more is at stake here. Ten minutes per student is about all the time I need. During this time, I also discuss the student's contribution to class discussion and briefly discuss any concerns I might have about the student's journal. You also need to post a schedule and make sure the students have everything they need for the conference: their portfolio and their report-card conference sheet (where they've made their case). In my experience, students feel better about their grades when they have had some kind of say in determining what they will be. But these are not grades that come out of thin air. The student understands the grades and the criteria because the student has been part of the process of assessing and improving the writing all along. This is time well spent because it puts assessment and evaluation in the context of the actual work of the writer.

The portfolio conference shifts the evaluation and assigning of grades from something done *by* the teacher *to* the student to the perspective of a *shared responsibility* in assessing what has been accomplished. It's one thing to fail a piece of writing because you couldn't figure out what the teacher wanted; it's quite another to not quite reach the goal you have set for yourself. This kind of approach to writing allows an entry point for every student at whatever level of ability. Weak writers can still make gains when they choose to write a diary entry, while the stronger writer can try an interior monologue. And after a few diary entries, it is not amiss to suggest other approaches. Variety is written into my assessment criteria. It is also appropriate to be honest about a student's ability; we shouldn't need to hide behind numbers. It is okay to look at what a student has tried to do and see that it is simplistic in language, style, or idea, even if it is error free.



Conference time can be used to be honest and set individual goals with students. Each individual student should be challenged; and no one is in a better position than the students themselves to know whether they've been challenged and whether they've achieved their goals. This is possible in a classroom where students learn to write for themselves first, rather than for a teacher marker.

From a teacher's perspective, I look forward to what my students will write next. I enjoy watching them develop as writers and thinkers. And believe it or not, I even enjoy "marking" (or, more accurately, "responding") to their papers. A great deal of pressure is lifted when one can respond to genuine concerns of the writer and not worry about justifying a number at the top of the page. In the past, all the writing that students did in the classroom was an end in itself, and the teacher was the judge and jury. Portfolio assessment moves writing into a more open arena, a collaborative approach that allows for learning at all stages of the writing process.

In my effort toward simplicity, I have one portfolio grade that reflects their ability in writing, one journal mark that reflects their ability in reading, one oral participation mark that reflects their willingness to participate in discussion and presentation, and one category for tests and leftover stuff that doesn't fit into any other category. My report card clearly communicates to parents where there are strengths and where there are weaknesses. It also represents a commitment to working with students to determine where we go next. I leave you with a last word from one of my twelfth-grade students:

The quality of the writing has improved....I worked harder on my assignments and tried to put more of my personality into the work....Self-assessment is very important. I didn't realize this before but I soon began to realize its importance. Looking at what you have just written and asking yourself questions about it really opens your eyes as to what you have done. It helps to develop your awareness of the writing process and shows you what you have really attempted and where you have succeeded....I became more interested in probing my ideas and developing them beyond just a simple exploration.

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## **Interlude**

A great way to send portfolios to the next grade level is by having each child build his or her own Hyperstudio portfolio. The students add their own pictures, colors, text style, voice, sound, animation, etc. It is much more interesting than looking at a folder.

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