

# PORTFOLIOS IN FYC

FORMS, FUNCTIONS, AND CONSIDERATIONS

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## WHAT DOES COMPOSITION RESEARCH SAY?

A good deal of scholarship speaks to the value of reflection, multimodal composing, process-oriented writing, directed feedback, and peer/audience engagement. For many years, the first-year composition classroom has used the the portfolio, which gives students the opportunity to survey their work over a period of time and pursue some or all of these goals. As a result of (typically) being an end-of-term project, portfolios also provide more time for continual revision and many opportunities for feedback.

Several scholars (see Lunsford and Ede, Yancey, and Clark) discuss in particular the pedagogical value of portfolios that take advantage of digital resources, as a way to utilize what many students are already familiar with, access greater flexibility in organization, and teach skills that might not be engaged in traditional print portfolios.

Some practical investigations of the use of portfolios (see Corbett, et al., and Tosh, et al.) reveal additional benefits to ePortfolios, as well as drawbacks. ePortfolios allow students to reach a greater audience and have more control over the appearance of their portfolio, but this does risk encouraging students to focus more on appearance than content. When students reflect on ePortfolio experiences, they are more likely to recall using the software—the benefits and complications—than the actual portfolio skills, although the work they produce tends to be more sophisticated than that of similar students using paper portfolios.

## FIVE KEY POINTS

1. Portfolios can provide students with greater opportunities for reflection, metacognition, and synthesis both within and between courses, than they would have simply working on a number of separate essay assignments.
2. Digital media play an increasingly active part in students' lives and the world as a whole, and to consider composition without considering modern technology is to do ourselves and out students a great disservice.
3. Traditional print portfolios have a necessarily linear structure and allow for the use of images as well as text. They give students a place to organize their work with a sense of finality, a clear beginning and end. They also make it easy to show the process of development behind the ultimate product.
4. Electronic portfolios can be non-linear to varying degrees and provide students with greater flexibility in terms of the presentation of their work. They are readily updated, revised, expanded, and redesigned and allow for a wide range of multimodal composition.
5. Which portfolio medium is ideal—and if a portfolio would even be valuable—has more to do with the way the project is presented and the expectations, goals, and implementation strategies of both instructors and students than any inherent qualities.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR INSTRUCTORS

- **Make the choice** to use (or not use) a portfolio a deliberate one, and ensure that your curriculum is laid out with that in mind.
- **Be clear** with students about the goals of the project, as well as what lifelong value it has to them.
- **Provide examples** for students, many of whom will be unfamiliar with the portfolio form.
- **Set clear targets** along the way, associating each with specific goals (e.g., a draft for peer review, and outline to discuss in conference) so that students don't feel directionless.
- **Familiarize yourself with the platform**, if you choose to use an ePortfolio, so that you can instruct students on the basic functions, and decide ahead of time how much flexibility you want to allow beyond that.
- **Use whatever portfolio medium you select** as a way to frame other discussions—for example, content ownership in the digital age, different ways to set up and organize a collection, or the idea of multiple audiences.

## REFERENCES/SUGGESTED READING

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