PART ONE

BACKGROUND AND BASICS

Defining Writing Portfolios

The National Council of Teachers of English supports the use of writing portfolios. The following statements appeared in The Council Chronicle (June 1997). While some particulars of this list may be more suited to elementary or secondary classrooms, the principles hold true for college-level classes.

Our Beliefs about Portfolios

• Improving learning and teaching is at the heart of the portfolio process.
• Contents and format are negotiated between student and teacher. The portfolio can take a variety of forms; there is no one right way.
• Student choice is essential. The students must select and reflect upon the contents within the negotiated parameters.
• Purpose and audience determine what goes in the portfolio and how the portfolio is organized and shared.
• Reflection is an essential element; without reflection, the portfolio is merely a collection.
• The creator of the portfolio talks about it with a variety of audiences. The portfolio is never handed to someone without its creator present.
• The portfolio process is woven into daily classroom life; it is not saved for the end of the month or trimester.
• The portfolio process is most successful when teachers first create their own portfolios and share their own process and portfolio with students and other audiences.
• The portfolio process celebrates student accomplishments by thoughtfully describing the learner.
Background and Basics

Like most good ideas, portfolios aren't really "new." As Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff relate, once portfolios had become very popular several years ago, veteran teachers, especially at the elementary level, began to speak up about their own "portfolio" methods (1997, 22). Long before 1986, when the Belanoff and Elbow program at the State University of New York at Stony Brook attracted so much national attention, portfolios had been familiar in art and investing. Artists keep some of their best works in a portable case or folder, ready to display the pieces that represent their interests, potential, or changes over time and to show to teachers, gallery owners, employers, or a jury of other artists. Financial managers keep records of stocks, bonds, mutual funds, or other investments to review periodically and to update as needed. Similarly, teachers or faculty members compile "portfolios" in the form of tenure packets or promotion files or annual review reports. In these versions and many others, the portfolio is not static but changes according to recent achievements, expanded ideas, or new interests.

A writing portfolio, then, is a collection that represents the writer's best work. Collected over time and across projects or interests, a portfolio showcases a writer's talent and hard work and demonstrates the ability to make thoughtful choices about content and presentation. It is a final product meant to be shared with others—perhaps to be evaluated or just to be enjoyed by friends or family. A teaching portfolio collects a variety of documents related to a teaching life: assignments and reflections on how they worked, course designs or curricular units, pages from a teaching journal, samples of responses to student writing, materials for an in-service day, thank-you notes from former students. Teachers keep portfolios to track their way through a new course, new school, or new curriculum; or to show evidence of teaching excellence to supervisors or future employers; or, perhaps most important, to practice reflective teaching, to model portfolio keeping for students, or to understand portfolios from a different perspective.

**DIFFERENT TYPES OF PORTFOLIOS**

Portfolios for educational purposes are usually of two broad types—learning portfolios and assessment portfolios—and they share the principles of choice, reflection, and variety. What follows is a review of the two types of portfolios and the key principles that inform portfolio keeping.

**Portfolios for Learning**

Some approaches to portfolios are specifically for the benefit of students, with or without some evaluation of their work. If learners are asked to keep a learning portfolio, they are invited to keep, collect, and create a portfolio for their own benefit, not to prove to teachers, or coaches, or supervisors that they should pass a course, receive an award, or get a promotion. Learning portfolios invite students to collect or create a variety of artifacts—essays, photographs, charts, letters, and so on—that best represent their experiences and engagement with the learning process in a particular subject area. Sometimes learning portfolios are revised to become a presentation or evaluation portfolio.

**Portfolios for Presentation or Evaluation**

A presentation or evaluation portfolio also promotes and sustains learning, but it shifts the attention, at a certain point, from the learning process to a final product. These types of portfolios vary widely, but they share a similar goal: to show someone else what the portfolio keeper has learned, or to convince an audience of the portfolio keeper's achievements, abilities, or talents. An artist puts together a portfolio to show to gallery owners or employers, or a writing major designs a portfolio to show to editors or graduate program directors. Similarly, students in a variety of courses keep portfolios to show the instructor, at semester's end, what they have learned from the course and applied to their portfolio's contents.

Whether a learning or assessment portfolio, the following three major principles define writing portfolios for most situations: choice, reflection, and variety.

- **Choice** Portfolios are designed, ideally, to give writers room to choose what to include and how to arrange and present the entries. If portfolio keepers are "told" what to include, where to include it, and in what form, there will not be nearly as much learning in the process. Keepers of learning portfolios make dozens of choices. Keepers of assessment portfolios also make many choices, often different ones. While writers make choices, selections, or decisions at every stage of the writing process—some of them unconscious or hardly recognized—the portfolio method allows some of those choices to be more conscious. No matter what type of portfolio is involved, good decisions are important to the reflective process and the final product. Helping students to manage and inform those choices is one of the jobs of portfolio teachers.

- **Reflection** Portfolios let writers look at their writing in a different way, taking into account several years, months, or weeks of work rather than just one assignment or task. Sometimes called reflective learning or self-assessment, this part of the portfolio method asks writers to look at their own patterns, strengths, and preferences for negotiating writing tasks, for learning a new skill, or for practicing a complex set of skills like those required for reading and writing. Almost every form of the portfolio method of assessment asks portfolio keepers to go a step beyond putting the portfolio together. They need to be able to articulate why certain choices were made or what those choices are meant to convey. Educational theorists use the word meta-cognition to describe the ability of people to think about their own thinking. Meta means "after," "beyond," or "outside," and cognition means the act or process of knowing. Thus, meta-cognition is the ability to "know beyond one's knowing," or
to think about one’s own thinking, usually after an assignment or task has been completed.

- **Variety** Because writers have different strengths and different interests, portfolios try to celebrate and cultivate these differences. A writing portfolio invites students to show off their writing abilities across different kinds of assignments, for different audiences, or with a different amount of time spent on each entry. Variety means more than different genres or types of writing; it also includes pieces of different lengths, written for different purposes, at different points in a writer’s life — even if just at Weeks 2 and 12 in a college semester. A portfolio’s variety is one of the reasons that it is considered a more “valid” measurement of a person’s writing ability, especially when compared with a timed, multiple-choice test on grammar, usage, punctuation, and mechanics. Portfolios for school assessment include more than one sample and pieces written at different times, giving teachers or evaluators a fuller picture of someone’s writing abilities.

Within these principles of choice, reflection, and variety, writing portfolios can have several differences. What follows are some common variations on the portfolio method for writing classes; you’ll want to consider which of these variations fits best with your course goals or your writing program.

- **A writing folder** Students are asked to submit all drafts, notes, outlines, scribbles, doodles, and messy pages, representing all of their writing, finished or unfinished. Everything is saved, if only for simple record keeping, but students may also be asked to select from the folder two or three of their most promising pieces to revise for a “presentation” portfolio (see p. 8). For example, John asks his students in a first-year composition class to bring their writing folders to each class. To check that students are keeping their papers organized and labeled, John often asks students to refer to specific documents in the folder in order to write a journal entry or to complete a class activity. In another case, a technical writing instructor asks that students submit, along with each final product, a complete record of the writing process that led to that product. Students are expected to keep — within reason — hard copies of all of their notes, drafts, outlines, peer reviews, and photocopy articles to show the instructor evidence of their discovery, drafting, and research processes. The key feature of a writing folder is that it includes everything related to a project or course, and the contents demonstrate how much collecting, drafting, and revising the writer has done.

- **A learning or open portfolio** Not necessarily submitted for assessment purposes, this type of portfolio gives writers considerable guidance in what to submit. Students may have fewer choices or options but still need to make decisions, to show as much variety as possible within the guidelines, and to demonstrate their ability to look critically on their work. For example, for an introductory American literature course, the instructor asks each student to submit these items: (1) a revision of the comparison/contrast essay on two short stories; (2) an explanation of an unassigned contemporary poem in the anthology; and (3) one of the two essay exams written in class (the actual blue book), along with an explanation of how the student would rewrite the exam or change his or her responses. As a preface to their three portfolio entries, students are asked to explain their choices and to make a case for what they have learned about American literature. From the portfolios, submitted in the last week of classes, the instructor will create the final exam questions.

- **A midterm portfolio** Students are able to give the portfolio method a trial run, or one or two papers are submitted for evaluation, perhaps accompanied by a brief self-assessment, to determine the midterm grade. For example, in a research writing course designed around collaborative projects, the instructor requests a midterm portfolio instead of a midterm exam. Each group is asked to write a collaborative proposal to the instructor via e-mail about which assignment they will be entering and why. After receiving their instructor’s approval to submit their informative paper about changes in libraries in the last five years, Group 1 revises and edits in response to comments received from the instructor and the other groups. Group 1 then writes a brief statement to the class about
what their submission demonstrates about their increasing understanding of research. Finally, Group 1 submits the midterm portfolio electronically to the course Web page, where all of the students in the course will be able to read the group's submission and make comments.

- **A final or presentation portfolio**. At the end of the course, each student submits a portfolio — revised, edited, and polished to presentation quality — and it is evaluated to determine a significant portion of their final grade. (This type of portfolio may overlap with the closed portfolio or other types, but the difference is the emphasis on polish.) For instance, with three weeks remaining in the term, Jeff asks students to review their working folders carefully, charting the contents and choosing those pieces that they are most interested in revising. Then Jeff asks students to write a revision plan for one of those pieces. Next, in a group conference, students discuss some of their choices and revision plans, hear the ideas of others, and begin putting together their final portfolios. In one of the last class meetings before the portfolio is due, students meet in workshop groups to read and respond to one another's reflective introductions.

- **A modified or combination portfolio**. Many portfolio designs fall under this category, as this type offers some choices but also outlines requirements to fulfill. The portfolio keeper makes some choices within certain boundaries. In my first-year composition courses, for example, a typical portfolio requirement is that students keep a writing folder throughout the term; then they choose which three writing projects (out of five or six) they wish to revise and edit for portfolio presentation. Along with the three projects, students choose from the writing folder any three to five pages that best represent their learning or their writing strengths, improvement, or interests. These three to five pages may be brief in-class writings, journal entries, postwrites, or reading response pieces, and the selections will vary for each student, giving the portfolio variety and individuality. This portfolio assignment is "open" in that students choose what pieces to include, but it is also "closed" in that I ask for a specific number of entries. For my upper-division courses in writing, I allow students more freedom to design their final portfolio. Instead of asking for three projects, revised and polished, I let students propose what they want to include, and we discuss, as a class, what is enough and what is too much. The choices students make about what to include are informed by what they have learned about audience, purpose, voice, and other elements of the rhetorical situation.

Before exploring further all of the opportunities or options portfolios offer for writing courses, and certainly before making firm decisions about the features, emphases, and pace of your own portfolio courses, you might want to think about portfolios from a very personal perspective and to try to practice the same kind of portfolio keeping that you're going to ask of students. In the next chapter, then, I encourage teachers to become more reflective about their own practices, beginning with the idea of a teacher portfolio.