

# Seeing the Results for Yourself: A Portfolio Primer

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**P**ortfolios are powerful because they help students learn about their learning. They provide an opportunity for students to share the responsibility for collecting proof or evidence of learning. Portfolios are worth doing well because they are a rich resource for reporting – they help students and parents see the results of student learning for themselves.

Portfolios become simple for classroom use when teachers design them for their students, their parents, and their school communities by answering the following questions:

### **What is my purpose for using portfolios?**

All portfolios are a collection of evidence of student learning. They become powerful when they have a purpose. There are three major purposes for portfolios: to display student work around a theme (e.g. best work, celebration, showcase, representative, chronological), show the process of learning, or show growth or progress. As you plan your portfolio, consider what your purpose will be.

### **Who is the primary audience for your portfolio?**

There are many possible audiences for your portfolios, such as students, parents, next year's teacher, or the school district. Each audience has different needs and requires different information. An effective portfolio has clear purpose and communicates clearly to the audience; having more than one primary audience muddles the message.

### **What does your audience want to know?**

The contents of your portfolio will be determined by your purpose and audience. For example, a portfolio that shows progress will include “snapshots” of student work over time in the various subject areas or units the students are studying. When the audience looks at the progress portfolio, the progress or growth will speak for itself. These portfolios are similar to the height charts I used as my kids were growing up. They would stand against the door frame and we'd mark their height, date it, and then look to see how much they had grown since the last measurement.

If the portfolio is designed to show the student's best

learning then it will consist of all those things that showcase what has been learned. This is much like getting ready for a job interview. You gather all your evidence and present yourself in the best possible light. You are expected to talk not only about your strengths and achievement but also about some things you need to work on and what your goals are.

Process portfolios require learners to collect and organize evidence that illustrates their process of learning. When I keep a process portfolio as a teacher, I acknowledge that I am a learner and that the learning process never ends. I will include things I am proud of, some things that I learned from, and some questions I am now exploring. This kind of portfolio acknowledges that learning is a process and not a destination.

A portfolio communicates more for an audience when the audience knows why the evidence has been included. The portfolio might contain writing samples, pictures, videotapes or audio tapes, work samples – anything that helps the audience understand the student's accomplishments as a learner. When students are selecting pieces, they use categories that you have developed with them, such as “best work,” “hardest work I now know how to do,” and “most improved.” We find that when we set criteria with students, they begin to understand what they are to learn and how to talk about it. They begin to use a shared language of assessment.

### **What will it look like? Where will we keep it?**

If you've decided to show growth or progress and are using a progress folio as part of the reporting process then you will probably want to do some initial entries and some entries at each reporting period – a total of three to four entries per year. If you've selected to do a best work or process portfolio, then you may decide to select entries weekly, monthly or term by term. Once you've made that decision, you will need to think about what kind of access students and parents will need and where best to store them.

Organization within the portfolio tends to be by

time (when was it done), by progress (how have they improved as a learner), or by accomplishment or best work. A progress folio is usually organized with work samples within a subject area displayed side by side so viewers see progress over time. A showcase portfolio is organized so the audience sees best work as determined by students in consultation with teachers. The key to organizing is to ensure the portfolio represents the learners and their learning rather than who they could be with huge amounts of support from others. Students need to have a major role in selecting work, putting work in the portfolio, and preparing self-assessments that explain the significance of each piece of work.

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### What are some ways to get started?

My advice is that you explore your answers to the previous questions, start small, and begin quietly. When I begin with students, I've learned to give them a chance to set criteria, and provide many opportunities for them to self-assess, collect and organize their evidence of learning, and choose work according to categories. I ask students to explain why they chose a piece of evidence for that category and what they want the viewer to notice. The earlier we can involve the students in the process, the more successful students and their portfolio will be.

### Powerful, practical, possible and painless portfolios result from:

- Keeping the portfolio process simple
- Understanding that there is no one best method
- Including more than written work
- Asking students to explain and record why they chose each work sample
- Maintaining a clear purpose
- Ensuring students have involvement and ownership

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