

Why Use Portfolios in First-Year Composition?

- Emphasize **process** over product, **practice** over performance
- Provide time and space for **revision** and **reflection**
- **Decentralize grades** as primary source of feedback for students
- Make it possible to grant opportunities for **risk-taking without the high stakes** of an impact on final grade.
- Aligns with **growth mindset** - early failures are opportunities for learning and growth that can be demonstrated in the final portfolio

Options for Portfolio-Based Grading:

1. **“Pure” Portfolio-Based Grading:** These are systems that use “Holistic” grading, where the entire course grade determined by quality of Final Portfolio.

Pros:

- Completely de-emphasizes grading as primary source of feedback
- Gives students a great deal of flexibility to guide their own learning

Cons:

- Harder for students to know how they’re doing in the class
- Students (and instructors!) can find the “holistic” approach to grading vague and overwhelming
- “Requirements” are trickier to implement with these approaches

Logistical Considerations:

- What goes in the Final Portfolio?
 - Probably **MORE** in “pure” systems than in other Portfolio-Based systems
 - This is the **ONLY** place where you can implement “requirements” in “pure” systems
- How do students know how well they’re doing throughout the semester?
 - Mid-point Portfolio as “check-in”? Can implement “requirements” there, too.

2. **“Mixed” Portfolio and Conventional Grading:** These are systems that use a portfolio to determine PART of the final grade, and conventional points-based grading to determine the rest.

Pros:

- Makes it easier to require students to do particular work that may or may not end up in Final Portfolio
- Students understand conventional grading

Cons:

- It can be hard for students to “outweigh” bad early performances with growth demonstrated in Portfolio
- Less flexibility for students to guide their own learning

Logistical Considerations (in addition to those in (1)):

- What weights to assign to different elements of the course:
 - Portfolio as 25%? 40%? 65%? Homework as 5%? 10%? etc.

3. **Weighted Contract + Portfolio Grading:** These are systems that give students choices about how to meet the requirements of the course; their choices determine a grade that is then combined with Portfolio quality for a final grade.

Pros:

- Allows instructor to give flexibility within requirements
- Gives students choices and flexibility to guide their own learning

Cons:

- Students can misunderstand the nature of “choice activities” (view them as “extra credit” rather than as options for meeting course requirements)

Logistical Considerations (in addition to those in (1)):

- What weights to assign to Contract vs. Portfolio?
- What are the contract requirements, and what are the options (“choice activities”) for meeting them? What constitute “breaches” of contract?

4. “Baseline Contract” + Portfolio Grading: These are systems that create a contract with set of course requirements and options for meeting those requirements, and set a baseline grade that is guaranteed for meeting them. Higher grades are gained by high quality writing in the final portfolio. For example, meeting the contract earns the student a “B”; an A would require “A”-level writing in the Portfolio; an A- would require “A-”-level, etc.

Pros:

- Allows instructor to give flexibility within requirements
- Gives students choices and flexibility to guide their own learning
- Creates opportunity to reward students for efforts even when improvements to writing are slower to materialize

Cons:

- Students can find the “baseline” idea confusing or even unfair
- Students can misunderstand the nature of “choice activities” (as in 3)

Logistical Considerations (in addition to those in (1)):

- What IS the baseline? (Is it a “C”? “B”? “A-”?)
 - It should be high enough to incentivize meeting the contract requirements, and reflect the amount of work required to meet them, but not so high that writing quality (reflected in Portfolio) doesn’t matter
- What are the contract requirements, and what are the options (“choice activities”) for meeting them? What constitute breaches of contract?
 - Major vs. Minor breaches - what is the impact on final grade?
- What is “A”-level writing? How can you make expectations clear to students?

Additional Resources:

1. Carol Dweck. Mindset: The New Psychology of Success. (2007)
2. Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow. “A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching.” CCC 61:2 (December 2009); 244-268.

Promoting a Growth-Mindset through Feedback: Dweck’s research indicates that the kind of feedback, especially praise, that learners receive can profoundly impact their mindset. Here are some general principles:

1. Focus on (productive) effort instead of outcome

- “Great paper!” doesn’t give the student any sense of HOW they achieved a great paper. Try instead: “Your work on [this introduction] really paid off in this draft.”
- It’s not JUST about praising hard work, though - learning only happens through **productive** effort. Not all effort is productive.

2. Be SPECIFIC in both praise and criticism.

- “Great paper!” feels good to a student for a second, but doesn’t give them anything to take forward. “Your introduction did a really effective job of setting up your argument; the examples you chose to illustrate the problem were very effective!” is much more specific.
- “This intro doesn’t work” shows student where work needs to be done, but doesn’t give them any sense of why or how to approach it. “I don’t get a clear sense of your question in the intro - work on making it clear why you’re arguing this!” is much more specific.

3. Remember the power of “not yet”

- “This introduction isn’t working yet”: this gives the student the knowledge both that their introduction isn’t working AND that there is possibility that it could be made to work.
- Your feedback isn’t a final judgement (until it is). Make sure your students know that you see potential for their writing to keep improving.

4. Encourage Reflection (on successes AND failures)

- We learn from failure and mistakes, but only when we both **acknowledge** them, and then **reflect** on them.
 - If a student doesn’t realize that something isn’t working in their paper, there’s no way they can actually improve it!
- We can learn from **successes**, too, if we reflect on HOW and WHY.

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