PORTFOLIO KEEPING

A Guide for Students

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ASSESSMENT FROM AN INSTRUCTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Most writing instructors know, from their experiences as writers if not as teachers, how complex portfolio assessments are. When I enter the keywords "writing" *and* "assessment," for example, in a quick check of the ERIC database (for education), I get 6,836 entries. Testing specialists, composition researchers, and instructors at all levels of the curriculum find writing assessment to be one of the most challenging areas of our profession. Most writers, however, value assessment of their work — in the form of feedback, response, readers' reports, or criticism — if it is offered in the right spirit and if it helps them to improve a piece or to recognize patterns in their writing of which they had been unaware.

As a writer, I certainly find assessment invaluable — I couldn't write without readers who respond to my writing through a supportive but evaluative lens. I depend on readers to tell me where they find strong or memorable parts, where they get confused, and where they want more examples. As a member of my profession, I assess or evaluate the writing of my colleagues when journal editors ask me to review manuscripts. And as a teacher, I value and often enjoy assessing the writing of my students — helping them to sharpen the focus, solve an organizational problem, or see the most vivid passage. In none of these situations do I find grades helpful for assessment. When I submit my own writing for review, no one puts a grade on it, and when I review the essays of my colleagues, I don't use grades to express my thoughts about the text. When I respond to student drafts, I don't use grades either, but at some point in college classes, grades become inevitable. While grades are very "unnatural" to writers' processes, they are a very real part of some writing situations — like earning college credit. Grades are a necessary evil, and portfolios must be graded, too, when the time comes. For most writers, however, other forms of assessment are a natural and built-in feature of the writing process.

I make this distinction between assessment and grading because many students associate writing classes with being graded on every paper. After collecting a number of red-inked papers, students begin to believe that instructors just love grading their written work, that they relish circling or correcting errors, and that their sole mission is to show students where they are wrong. This may be true in rare cases, but most of the writing instructors I know don't fit this stereotype; in fact, they often struggle with grading and assessment because it's such a challenging and complex part of writing classes.

In the following section, I offer several typical myths about grading or assessment that you can check against your beliefs and experiences. How many of these statements have you believed? What are your instructor's views about these myths?

Myths about Writing Assessment

Myth No. 1. Instructors love giving grades on written work; they find it easy to decide what the letter grade should be on any particular essay, story, or exam.

Actually, many instructors hate giving grades for writing assignments and often find it difficult to decide whether an essay should receive, say, a B- or a C+. Teaching students to write better is not like teaching them human anatomy, where all the body parts have a name and where test answers are either right or wrong. Writing has many shades of gray, and there are many right ways to succeed with a writing task. Every reader experiences a written text differently; even the same reader, on a different day, may have a response to something she didn't notice before. It's very difficult, in fact, to get instructors to agree on a single score for a paper; that's why a divergence of one point or one score is acceptable in large-scale assessments conducted by the Educational Testing Service (ETS).

Myth No. 2. Instructors value only error-free prose. When they read, they look mostly at commas and spelling.

Readers, no matter who they are, are first interested in the ideas and look to be pulled in by the language and the train of thought. This is what instructors want, too: to be engaged in the ideas, the voice, the anecdotes, the examples, the pace. Instructors are readers, first and foremost. They love to read and want to read something good. If the writing is strong in other ways, readers probably won't notice lapses or problems. If the writing is predictable, undeveloped, or unpersuasive, however, then reading becomes stalled by grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors. An intelligent, lively text can afford a few errors before it irritates instructors, but errors show up more if the text is unfocused or poorly organized.

Myth No. 3. Instructors spend most of their free time correcting student papers.

It's useful to remember, as you analyze your portfolio assessment, that instructors reading your work are people, too, with a wide variety of interests and a lot of responsibilities. Besides leading full personal lives, college or university instructors also teach other courses, conduct research or write for publication, serve on department committees or national boards, and do other professional work. When your instructor sits down to read and evaluate a stack of portfolios at the end of a term, many other tasks are waiting. This doesn't mean that you and your portfolio aren't important but that you need to make an impression within a very small window of opportunity.

Myth No. 4. A letter grade is the only way or the best way to assess student performance in writing.

In your experience with school writing, you might have received letter grades more than any other kind of response, but there are other ways to assess writing. Most common are comments written in the margins or at the end of the piece. Other means of assessment include having a conversation about the writing, or what some instructors call a conference, that can take place in the classroom, hallway, or office. Instructors may tape-record their responses on a cassette that students can listen to at their leisure, or they may type comments on a separate sheet, without marking the text at all. For working writers, conversations about a written text also take place online, over the phone, or via e-mail, fax or voicemail. Whatever the method, effective response needs to be a conversation or dialogue, not a one-way street. The important thing is that ideas about a work-in-progress are exchanged and advice is shared and either accepted, rejected, or adjusted. Letter grades really don't accomplish this for a work-in-progress, although they may be appropriate for finished work.

Myth No. 5. Instructors are autonomous, independent, and can do whatever they want.

Instructors are not autonomous, even if they pretend to be. In obvious and subtle ways, their efforts are shaped or controlled by a number of institutional codes, rules, or guidelines. Instructors are not free to inflict any kind of torture upon you that they dream up, and they have to satisfy certain requirements, cover specified material, or undergo annual reviews. If they were autonomous, most would not give letter grades, knowing that the instructional value of grades is so questionable, but 95 percent of colleges and universities require that instructors give a single letter grade at the end of a term. That alone means that the instructor's assessment procedures are limited.

Myth No. 6. The evaluation of writing is purely subjective, and everyone is entitled to his or her opinion.

Because writing is such a complex act and language can elicit very different responses from people, it would be easy to think that evaluators are only being subjective when they decide that an essay is excellent, average, or poorly written. Readers do not develop their criteria for good writing in a private, personal way, however. Opinions come from somewhere: from one's experiences, from mentors, from the media. In a college or academic setting, most judgments are determined by the use of evidence or support; therefore writing is not judged from personal opinion but from a shared understanding of the characteristics of strong, effective prose. Teachers and evaluators of writing thus have developed a sense of good writing from years of reading (in their field and in the mainstream press), from listening to and working with colleagues, and from writing their own texts. While the criteria for good writing

vary across fields and in different situations, such criteria are shaped over many years, through negotiations and social contracts that are usually subtle, implicit, or difficult to measure. Readers from *any* background rely on judgments that are neither purely objective nor purely subjective, but a little of both.

There are probably more than these six myths about instructors and assessment, but keep them in mind as you prepare your portfolio. They address a tough contradiction that teachers struggle with: how to encourage their students and help them to have a positive attitude about writing while also correcting and critiquing their work. It's a tricky line to walk, but what seems to help for me is a distinction between **reading** and **grading**, or between response and evaluation.

When I first sit down with student papers, *I am a reader.* Where does the text engage me, lose me, entertain me, bore me, or satisfy me? As a reader/respondent, my main focus is to give students the feedback and advice of an experienced reader, one who's done more reading and writing than they have. This kind of reading response requires **evaluation** — what works in the text so far and what doesn't. Not all forms of evaluation, however, include response. I could, for example, slap a big red C on the paper and be done with it. The letter grade would serve as evaluation but not as response, and most writing instructors agree that oral or written commentary is more instructive than a letter grade. Distinguishing between response and evaluation is tricky because some theorists claim that every encounter with a text or artwork is evaluative — that we are constantly evaluating something as we read it, listen to it, or look at it. Still, I think that acknowledging the differences between these two might help you to assess the stakes involved in different situations: *The situation will be different depending on the agenda of your reader.* Is your reader going to respond or evaluate or both?

For your own portfolio assessment — the reading and grading of your final portfolio — your reader is probably just going to evaluate and won't take the time to respond; that is, your portfolio will receive a grade and perhaps some brief marginal notations but not extensive commentary. This is largely due to time constraints, but it is also a result of emphasizing the importance of a product after the process has been completed. In other words, response should take place for a draft or a work-in-progress, but for a finished piece, it's appropriate to evaluate without necessarily responding.

Understanding the elements of assessment should help you to make enlightened, reasonable choices based on what you know and on what can be safely assumed. Rhetoric can inform those choices by giving communicators a set of tools with which to analyze the context or situation and to respond appropriately, reasonably, or judiciously. You will demonstrate your rhetorical understanding with each set of decisions you make about your portfolio, beginning with your choice of which pieces of writing should comprise your portfolio.