

Writing Tips for Portfolio Entries

All writing is mostly editing.

I. GEARING UP

If you've followed the *Getting Started* recommendations, then you've begun gathering the raw material for each portfolio entry: the portfolio entry prompt, the assessed standards, and your evidence. Now you're ready to write, but how do you start?

✓ THE HABIT OF WRITING:

- There are many ways to write. Some people stick to the outline. Other people free-write. There's no right or wrong, there's only you. Use what works for you.
- Don't spend too much time on word choice and grammar while you're getting out your ideas.
- The important thing is to start putting your ideas on paper. If it helps, keep a journal and write several times a week to get in the habit of writing.
- Keep a small notepad with you at all times, so you can jot down events, observations, and ideas when they occur.

✓ OUTLINING:

- Create a framework for each entry, including the requirements, the assessed standards, and the commentary questions from each portfolio entry.
- Use the framework and your evidence to create an outline, first with broad themes, then fleshing out the themes with evidence and ideas. A good outline gets you started and saves you hours of off-topic writing. The outline is also a valuable editing aid.

II. CONSTRUCTING A PORTFOLIO ENTRY

This four-level schema may help you think about constructing and editing your entry:

- *structure* – check that your entry as a whole clearly meets the requirements
- *argument* – check that your arguments have all their parts
- *style* – check your usage and consistency
- *grammar and spelling* – check your clarity of expression

✓ STRUCTURE:

Your first goal is to have a portfolio entry that meets all the requirements and is easy for the assessor to score.

- The overall structure of each classroom-based portfolio entry is to *describe* your classroom and instructional context, *analyze* your instruction and student interaction, and *reflect* on your instructional practices.
- **Did you answer the questions that were asked?** Compare your written entry to the entry requirements. You can change your writing or your outline, but you can't change the requirements.
- Each entry is read by a different assessor. Therefore, each entry must stand on its own. You cannot assume the assessor knows anything about you or your instructional context except what you write in that entry.
- You're given a scoring guide in each portfolio entry, in the section titled "How will my response be scored?": *use it!*

✓ ARGUMENT:

Your second goal is for each sub-argument to be complete. As with the overall structure of the portfolio entry, sub-arguments can also be structured with *description*, *analysis*, and *reflection* (though every sub-argument does not require all three parts).

Analysis

- The most common problem of portfolio entries is that they are mostly descriptive.
- Teachers make hundreds of decisions a day. Teachers' everyday expertise is implicit knowledge, which never gets expressed. The analysis requirement of the portfolios forces candidates to put their silent knowledge into words.
- Analysis answers the *why?* question by giving explanations, rationales, reasonings, and decision-making processes. Explain *why* you did *what* you did.
- Analysis is often found in statements with *because* or *therefore* or *in order to*.
- The borders between description, analysis, and reflection are fuzzy. What is descriptive in one context can be analytical in another. Note the saga of Keisha and Bob in the examples.

Writing arguments

There are two basic forms of argument: *pyramid* arguments begin with evidence and build up to conclusions; *inverted pyramid* arguments begin with conclusions and work down to evidence. Each form has its own uses.

Brief example of a pyramid argument:

<Description> In this video segment, the students have chosen to divide themselves by gender. The boys are all seated together, as are the girls. In this case, the conflict being resolved was a "boys versus girls" playground battle arising from my students' strong self-identity as *boy* or *girl*. This class has been particularly prone to... <Analysis> Therefore, I allowed students to self-segregate, to prevent an in-class flare-up of gender conflict. Keisha and Bob, the respective ring-leaders of the girls and the boys, have no target for their... <Reflection> Although this was a successful policing strategy and the students learned *about* getting along, I wondered whether they learned *to* get along. I decided that I would change the small group activity I had planned for the afternoon by...

- The pyramid argument's strength is its unfolding of the situation by telling a story. However, because it is an unfolding story, it's easy for a reader to read the description, then jump to their own analysis and impose their own instructional choices onto the situation before you have had a chance to give your analysis. Therefore, the pyramid form is best used for arguments that end in reflections that address other possible instructional choices.

Brief example of an inverted pyramid argument:

<Analysis> The segregation of the class by gender was purposeful, in order to lessen the underlying conflict of boys vs. girls, as evidenced in the playground battles that spurred this class discussion. By so dividing the class, individual conflicts between neighboring boys and girls were avoided and instead, students spent the discussion time... <Description> In this video segment, the boys and girls discuss the situation without the animosity displayed in their playground battles. Keisha and Bob, the two main antagonists, sit safely out of reach of one another and have joined in the...

- The inverted pyramid prevents readers from jumping to the conclusion by putting the conclusion first. Since the reader doesn't have the context, he or she can't reach his or her own conclusion, and, therefore, is more likely to accept your interpretation. The inverted pyramid is best used for reporting or justifying some act of practice.

Checking arguments

- Do you make assumptions that need to be laid out?
- Are there gaps in your reasoning that need to be filled with description or analysis?
- Do you provide the assessor with **specific** reasons for your important instructional choices?
- Do your peers agree that the instructional choices you highlight are important? Have you missed any choices? Do you overemphasize trivial choices?

✓ STYLE:

In writing, "style" is about consistency and clarity, not flair or extravagance. For portfolio entries, this level of editing is less important than it is for works intended for publication. However, style must not be ignored.

- Write simply and choose good words. There's no need to scribe elaborately or utilize inappropriate verbiage.
- **Heavily** cut unnecessary words ~~that serve no purpose in your writing.~~
- Don't stretch for synonyms. For example, you can *believe* more than one thing; you don't have to *think, hold, opine, consider, judge, sense, trust, or deem*.
- Avoid slang, jargon, and dialect. Your assessor may be in rural Idaho, uptown Manhattan, or Miami Beach. Ask yourself the theater question: *Will it play in Peoria?*
- Always explain abbreviations and acronyms.
- Avoid clichés. They're boring.
- When people are first introduced in an entry, describe their relevant identity. "John Block, district superintendent, first announced..." "Phat, whose family emigrated from Vietnam just last year, tried to explain..."
- Transitions between sub-arguments can help the reader follow your thoughts, but they aren't valued in scoring the entries. It's okay for your writing to be somewhat choppy if it satisfies all entry requirements.

✓ GRAMMAR AND SPELLING:

Proper grammar and spelling clearly transmit your ideas and appropriately present your professional work.

- Good grammar and spelling score no points, but poor grammar or spelling can make it difficult for your assessors to understand (or focus on) your meaning.
- *Use* your word processor's grammar checker, but don't *trust* it.
- Ask someone to read your entry for grammar and spelling.

III. EDITING PORTFOLIO ENTRIES

✓ EDITING YOUR OWN WRITING:

- Some people recommend that you put away what you've written, for a few days or weeks. When you come back to it, all the assumptions you made about what the reader knows will jump out at you because you'll have forgotten most of those assumptions yourself.
- Some people recommend reading (or having someone read) your writing aloud. The ears may catch what the eyes missed.
- Make multiple, focused edits. Choose a single level from the schema – don't try to fix everything in one pass!

✓ EDITING SOMEONE ELSE'S WRITING:

- Read through it once, without editing. It's checking the map before you start backseat driving: you may want them to go right, but their left turn may be just as good.
- Remember, you're not the writer:
 - i. Point out a weak argument;
 - ii. ask whether they provide evidence for a given standard;
 - iii. ask yourself if they answered the questions posed in the requirements;
 - iv. indicate ambiguities;
 - v. don't write for them.
- Point out the good as well as the bad.

IV. COMPUTER TIPS

- Keep old versions of your files. When you open a portfolio entry's word processing file, choose menu FILE, option SAVE AS, and save it with that day's date in the file name (e.g., "Entry 1 Nov 1"). That way, if you make a bad mistake and then save the file, you can go back to an earlier version.
- Keep backups of your portfolio entry files. Most people back up files on floppy disk. Others E-mail files to family outside of earthquake country for safekeeping.
- Beware of saving your files *only* on floppy disk. Foey! Floppies frequently fail. Hard drives are much less likely to fail.
- Use antivirus software and update the virus detection files frequently. This is especially important if your family shares a home computer and (1) gets a lot of E-mail attachments or (2) carries floppies between home and school computers. Most school computers have antivirus software but rarely update the virus detection files. This means that they are vulnerable to about 200 new viruses each month.