What Are Portfolios?

Throughout the years, there have been varying definitions of a "student portfolio," but authors Leon Paulson, Pearl Paulson, and Carol Meyer (1991) provide us with a succinct definition:

> A portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas. The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student reflection (p. 60).

So, although portfolios may differ in their appearance, style, or presentation, a true student portfolio must contain three essential characteristics:

1. It must be a collection of work produced by an individual student.

2. The collections must be chosen with a purpose in mind, not simply selected at random.

3. Each piece of work must be accompanied by a reflection sheet on which the student describes the reason for including that piece in his or her portfolio.

The Purpose of Portfolios

There are many reasons for using portfolios in the classroom. Sometimes, an external source, such as state, provincial, or district guidelines, may influence the decision to include portfolios in the curriculum. Other times, personal philosophies or goals will motivate their use.

Portfolios can also be used in the classroom in a variety of ways:

- One teacher might want to use them as a tool for showing students' academic growth over time.

- Another teacher may want to use them during parent-teacher conferences to provide parents with concrete evidence of their child's achievements.

- A school district may want to use portfolios as a means for judging the achievement of district-wide goals.

Whatever the reason for using portfolios, Carol Rolheiser, Barbara Bower, and Laurie Stevahn (2000), the authors of the book *The Portfolio Organizer*, emphasize that "identifying the purpose of the portfolio is an essential decision that will influence many facets of organizing the portfolio" (p. 2). In other words, without a clear purpose or goals for the portfolio, all other aspects of the portfolio—such as type, audience, and time frame—cannot be established.

To establish a purpose for the portfolio assessment, focus on your broader educational goals, write Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevahn. Start by asking yourself the following questions:

- Why am I implementing portfolio assessment? Is it mandated by an external body or is it a personal choice?

- Why do I want to involve students in collecting and evaluating their own work?

- How will portfolios help me achieve my personal goals with my students?

- Is my purpose to show the process and product of work or just the product itself?

- Is my purpose to have students accumulate a sampling of 'best work' for admission to a particular program or for employment?

- Is my purpose to carry out large-scale assessment or to report progress and inform instruction at the classroom level?

- Is my purpose to evaluate overall student performance or to target specific areas? (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000, p. 2)

Types of Portfolios

Once you've determined your goals for using portfolios in the classroom, the next step is to find the type of portfolio that will best suit your needs. Depending on the goals, reasons, and the audience, different authors classify portfolios into several types.

Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevahn (2000), for example, write about best work portfolio and growth portfolio. While the best work portfolio is used to showcase a student's best work and achievement, the growth portfolio focuses on the student's development and growth over time, and "will contain evidence of struggle, failure, success, and change" (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000, p. 4).

Danielson and Abrutyn, the authors of the book *An Introduction to Using Portfolios in the Classroom* (1997), describe three types of portfolios: working portfolios, display portfolios, and assessment portfolios.

Working portfolios serve as a holding bank for students' work in progress before it moves into a display or an assessment portfolio or is sent home with the student. This type of portfolio can help the students reflect on their work, can help teachers assess students' needs, and can be presented to parents during parent-teacher conferences to demonstrate students' growth over time or present the evidence of the children's strengths and weaknesses.

Display, showcase, or best work portfolios contain samples of the student's best work. Selected by the student, the pieces that have made the students proud and that demonstrate their highest level of achievement can be presented to the students' parents, siblings, or the teacher. Best work portfolios can be collected over

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several academic years so that the student may also display the work to the next year's teacher. High school students can also use portfolios during interviews with prospective colleges or employers.

Best work portfolios can include work produced by the student in different academic disciplines, as well as some examples of extracurricular activities that help showcase the student's skills. For example, write Danielson and Abrutyn (1997), while portfolios can contain students' written assignments, videos, projects, resumes, and testimonials, they may also include "a project from scouts or a poem written at home" (p. 4).

The assessment portfolio primarily documents what students have learned, showing their ability to master the curriculum objectives. It's important to match the selection of items for the portfolio with the outcomes. "For example," write Danielson and Abrutyn (1997, pp. 3-4), "if the curriculum specifies persuasive, narrative, and descriptive writing, an assessment portfolio should include examples of each type of writing. Similarly, if the curriculum calls for mathematical problem solving and mathematical communication, then the portfolio will include entries documenting both problem solving and communication, possibly in the same entry."

Because the assessment portfolios are evidence of student achievement—and, in some situations, serve as criteria for important decisions, such as high school graduation, "it is essential that the procedures used to evaluate student work in the portfolio meet standards of validity and reliability," write Danielson and Abrutyn (1997, p. 6). That means that it's important to develop "rubrics with clear criteria and descriptions of different levels of performance" (Danielson & Abrutyn, 1997, p. 6) that portfolios will be evaluated on.

Benefits of Using Portfolios

According to North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (n.d.), many teachers initially hesitate to introduce portfolio assessment in the classroom for fear that planning, collecting, storing, and interpreting students' portfolios will add exponentially to their workload. However, those who have used portfolio assessment suggest that collecting and assessing portfolios typically blends assessment and instruction—without necessarily increasing teachers' time and effort.

But why go through all of the trouble of implementing student portfolios in your classroom when traditional tests have been around for so long to help us assess what students are learning?

Robert Tierney, Mark Carter, and Laura Desai (1991) studied the use of portfolios in the local school system for three years before outlining the benefits of portfolios over traditional tests in *Portfolio Assessment in the Reading-Writing Classroom*. The differences between these two types of assessment can be summarized in the following table.

Portfolios	Tests
Represent a wide range of student work in a subject area.	Usually cover a limited content area and may not be a true representation of the student's knowledge.
Allow students to be actively involved in assessment.	Are scored mechanically or by teachers, with little or no student input.
Allow for student differences.	Examine all students on the same dimensions.
Encourage partnerships among students and teachers.	Are controlled by the teacher.
Are designed with student self-assessment as a goal.	Do not include student self-assessment.
Focus on improvement, effort, and achievement.	Usually focus on achievement only.
Integrate assessment with the learning process.	Separate assessment from the learning process.

Unlike tests, portfolios offer opportunities for collaboration among students, teachers, and parents. To involve students in the portfolio development process, teachers can have students reflect on their work and then ask them to choose their best work for a portfolio. Teachers can also use portfolios to help students understand and appreciate the learning process or to move from pencil-and-paper tests to more holistic assessments.