

Spring 2017

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Recommended Citation

Smagacz, Julia, "Creating Confident Writers: Implementing Writing Portfolios in a Secondary-Level Language Arts Classroom" (2017). *Honors Research Projects*. 451.

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Creating Confident Writers: Implementing Writing Portfolios in a Secondary-Level Language
Arts Classroom

University of Akron Williams Honors College Research Project

Julia Smagacz

Abstract

This paper explores the implementation of a writing portfolio project in secondary-level English Language Arts classrooms. In addition to defining the project and describing its potential parameters, this paper describes goals and strategies that educators may use to implement this project, using research from multiple school district curricula and reputable state education resources. The paper includes testimonies from four current high school English teachers, in which each teacher details his or her experience with the writing portfolio. The teachers also provided feedback on the importance of writing and the writing process in general. Also included in this paper is a personal testimony of my own experiences with the writing portfolio, and how it has benefitted me academically as a student, and professionally as a teacher and journalist. Lastly, I have provided artifacts from my own student teaching experience, in which I was able to teach a unit on argumentative writing. In summary, writing portfolio is a highly effective and versatile project that reinforces the importance of the writing process, and instills in students a sense of pride and confidence in their own writing.

In today's educational and professional world, strong and effective writing skills are becoming increasingly beneficial and appealing. Honing one's ability to express oneself through various forms of writing is something that can propel an individual, especially a student, deeper into his or her academic and career-related endeavors. This foundation of the development of strong writing skills starts, and is nourished and fostered, in the classroom. The importance of incorporating a variety of writing assignments into a secondary-level English curriculum cannot be emphasized enough. One of the most beneficial methods of ensuring that students are exposed to a wide enough variety of writing exercises is the writing portfolio. These kinds of cumulative, comprehensive assignments are versatile, flexible, and can meet the needs of classrooms ranging from rudimentary (or even remedial) composition courses to advanced placement and college-prep level curricula. Portfolio assignments, as will be explored and covered in depth, include a collection of various types of writing assignments developed throughout the entire unit, semester, or even year, if time permits. The purpose of this research is to explore the various methodologies and strategies for implementing the writing portfolio in a high school English classroom, and to determine the uses and benefits of these types of assignments to a student's writing proficiency, and to their confidence in their own writing ability. The versatility of the writing portfolio makes it an invaluable, useful asset to secondary-level English and composition classrooms, as is supported by research, testimonies from current licensed high school English teachers and current high school students, and through personal experience.

Defining The Writing Portfolio

There are numerous ways in which one can define and describe a writing portfolio, but in simple terms, this comprehensive assignment is a compilation or collection of a student's written work, usually including samples of a wide variety of types and genres of writing. A publication

sponsored by the George Lucas Educational Foundation differentiates between two kinds of portfolios. The positivist approach is a shorter-term, typically summative project that collectively displays a student's best work from the year or semester (Davis, 2015). The constructivist approach, on the other hand, covers a longer period of time and is a more formative in nature, reflecting a student's entire writing process and including reflection and ownership of learning (Davis, 2015). Because of the versatility of this kind of assignment, teachers and educators are at liberty to determine the goal of the assignment, how many pieces are included in the final portfolio, what kinds of pieces will be included, and over how lengthy a time period the assignment will last. Keeping the focus on a secondary-level English classroom can help to narrow the parameters in terms of the specific genres of writing that will most benefit the high school student. The Ohio Department of Education has determined in their updated Common Core English/Language Arts Standards that the high school student (across grades 9-12) must practice and master the argumentative essay, the explanatory or informative essay, and the narrative essay (Ohio Department of Education, 2016, 53-54). These three styles of writing are widely accepted as the most important and useful styles of academic writing for students at the high school level.

The argumentative essay is perhaps the most widely-used genre in English/Language Arts classrooms and therefore most certainly deserves a place in a student writing portfolio. This type of essay requires students to explore a topic and establish an argument or stance concerning the chosen topic, using collected evidence and analysis to support their claims (The OWL at Purdue, 2013). This assignment would fulfill the ODE Common Core Standard (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-12.1.A-E) requiring students to "write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient

evidence” (Ohio Department of Education, 2016). Argumentative writing is commonly employed in concurrence with or immediately after the completion of a major text or novel read in class, in which students must develop a thesis about an issue in the novel and support their thesis with support, namely quotes from the novel itself.

Another valuable piece of writing often included in writing portfolios is the expository essay, in which the student attempts to increase and expand upon the knowledge of their reader concerning a certain topic or process, through the conveyance of accurate information and summary and instruction, when needed (The OWL at Purdue, 2013). This type of writing, which lines up with Ohio standard CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-12.2.A-F, allows the student to focus on clarity in their writing, so to ensure that their topic is completely explained and that their audience is well-informed by the end of the essay (Ohio Department of Education, 2016). Another goal of the expository essay is mastery of the ability to choose relevant information and present that information in an appropriate and clear manner for an audience.

A final effective addition to a strong high school writing portfolio fulfills the third Ohio Department of Education writing standard for the 9th- to 12th-grade student: the narrative essay. The narrative essay allows the student to explore a more personal style of writing, which can serve as a type of “break” from the rudimentary argumentative style. Narrative essays are anecdotal pieces that often reflect or tell the story of a personal event in the student’s life, and include traditional elements of a story, such as characters, dialogue, and setting (The OWL at Purdue, 2013). Including a narrative element to a writing portfolio not only exposes the student to another type of writing but also allows them to switch their formal tone of argumentation to one which fits their chosen narrative. This type of writing also fulfills a required Common Core Standard for the state of Ohio that dictates a high school student must “write narratives to

develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences” (Ohio Department of Education, 2016).

These three genres of writing make up a solid foundation for a student writer to hone and perfect their essential writing skills. Because of the flexibility of this assignment and the diversity of writing genres in existence, the teacher or administration can add to or alter the types of writing included in the portfolio to fit the needs of the student, curriculum, or class. Career-driven language arts classes (such as journalism or editing) or more focused, specific English classes (such as poetry, or AP-level classes), can choose to build off of the core genres and add to the portfolio such assignments as news writing pieces, poems, business letters, and pieces resembling those that will appear on English Advanced Placement exams. This way, the portfolio not only covers the requirements detailed in the state’s learning standards, but also serves to prepare a student for writing that they will encounter on exams or in future careers.

The Writing Portfolio: Goals and Strategies

Aside from fulfilling the academic requirements a high school student must master in terms of writing, the objective of the writing portfolio is to create a confident and seasoned writer in the student. Over the duration of the assignment, the student and the teacher will be able to reflect upon student work and address any visible strengths and/or weaknesses in the writing (Baltimore County Public Schools, 2012). Students can capitalize on recognized strengths, and aim to improve upon targeted weaknesses, which promotes overall development. Including and saving all edits and drafts of a given piece can be helpful with this aspect of the portfolio.

Teachers can use this assignment as a key tool to track a student’s demonstration of growth over the course of a period of time as it relates to their skills and confidence in writing. Going hand in hand with this idea is the concept of using the portfolio as a summative assessment of student

proficiency in mastering desired academic outcomes detailed in the given learning standards (Plainfield Public Schools, 2016). This is another common objective of the assignment as a whole, used widely across the nation's schools. Teachers take full advantage of the versatility of the writing portfolio when they utilize it to expose their students to a wide variety of writing genres, as well as to gauge their students' level of mastery of said writing styles over time. In addition, the Utah-based Weber High School English Department, in their published student writing portfolio assignment guidelines, recognizes the writing portfolio as a way to encourage accountability in students, which will prepare them for later years in high school, college, and beyond (Weber High School English Department, 2016). This assignment is not meant to be taken as a string of tasks to simply complete and forget about. This assignment promotes beneficial skills and confidence in students that they can apply and incorporate into their future academic and professional lives.

As has been touched on already, the writing portfolio concept is widely versatile. There are many ways in which an educator can approach the assignment, based on the grade level, time frame, learning standards, and desired outcomes. One such strategy comes from the Kentucky Department of Education, in which the student has a degree of freedom in choosing which pieces will be included in a final portfolio (Ruhana, 2001, 17-18). The students would be responsible for completing the portfolio based upon the requirements that the educator would provide to them at the beginning of the assignment period. The students would then choose their best pieces of completed writing to include in their final compilation, ensuring that all listed requirements and outcomes were met (for example one such requirement might be, "write an essay using a novel we read in class that establishes an argument about the theme of equality"). This model

might work better for an upper-level class with refined time management skills and the knowledge of what effective writing entails.

Another sample strategy comes from a model used by the Baltimore County Public Schools, in which umbrella requirements are established, leaving more freedom to the educator in refining artifact selection. This model (see Figure 1) suggests a number of total pieces to be included in the portfolio (for grades 9-12, the recommended number is six or seven pieces) along with a recommended number of pieces in each of the three genres of writing (argumentative, explanatory, and narrative) described earlier (Baltimore County Public Schools, 2012). This model also encourages educators to expose their student to the complete writing process, such as prewriting, revising, and drafting, as well as to research and response-based writing. The educator has more leeway to decide what his or her students can write about, therefore allotting them the ability to tailor the portfolio to their specific classroom learning needs and outcomes.

	Total number of artifacts (minimum)	Minimum which include evidence of the complete writing process	Number of artifacts of each writing type			Minimum number of writing in response to source artifacts	Minimum number of research writing artifacts	Common Core State Standards to be addressed in skills chart and student reflection
			Narrative	Informative / Explanatory	Opinion / Argument			
K-2	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	
3-5	5	3	1	2	2	3	2	
6	6	4	1	3	2	3	3	
7	5	3	1	3	1	3	3	
8	6	3	2	2	2	4	1	
9	6	4	1	3	2	4	1	
10	7	4	2	3	2	5	1	
11	7	3	1	4	2	5	2	
12	7	3	0	4	3	4	2	

Figure 1 (Baltimore County Public Schools, <https://www.bcps.org/offices/lis/writing/secondary/portfolios.html>)

A final sample strategy (see Figure 2 below) published in *The English Journal* by the National Council of Teachers of English aims to strengthen and empower the student writer by

involving them deeply in their own writing. It is proposed that the students write an introduction to their portfolio that summarizes their writing process and the pieces included therein, including personal sentiments and reactions to their writing (Cooper and Brown, 2010, 40). This strategy encourages a kind of metacognition in which the student is required to think about and respond to their own completed writing. In effect, the student can express a sentiment of pride in their work as well as recognize their strengths as a writer. An intriguing aspect of the NCTE's model is that it includes an element of timed writing, which makes this model even more dynamic. This aspect of this model also covers another Common Core standard that requires students to "write routinely over extended time frames...and shorter time frames...for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences" (Ohio Department of Education, 2016). This kind of writing has multiple benefits aside from being a required state standard; it could also prepare students for exams that include timed writing periods (such as the ACT or an Advanced Placement exam).

This model also emphasizes what is referred to as "writing to learn," in which the student uses writing not only as a mandatory assignment, but as a way to learn about classroom content, writing styles, author styles, and about their own writing (Cooper and Brown, 2010, 42). The educator might lead a prewriting activity for an assignment about a novel, for example, and students who complete the activity might learn a bit about what they know about the subject, thus shaping the topic of their writing.

Portfolio Table of Contents	
✓1. Introduction	
✓2. Sample of timed writing	
✓3. Different types of writing, one with evidence of process	
4. Sample(s) of writing to learn	Possibilities include but are not limited to copy change, dialogue, word-weaving, creating a persona, imitation of author's style, transition from author to student voice, dialectical journal, reading log, quickwrite, drawing inferences, note-taking, learning log.
5. Creative writing sample	
6. Student-selected best writing with rationale	
7. Two pieces selected by student and/or teacher	Possibilities include but are not limited to creative writing, special projects, evidence of collaboration, evaluation of oral presentations, evidence of listening, selections from other curricular areas, annotated reading list.

Figure 2 (Cooper and Brown, NCTE, <https://faculty.unlv.edu/nagelhout/ENG714f10/CooperandBrownUsingPortfolios.pdf>)

The NCTE's method appeals to a student's authority and ownership over their writing by having them choose a favorite piece they've written, explaining why said piece is their favorite. This again supports a metacognitive approach to writing, requiring the student to evaluate their own pieces, while the "rationale" section requires them to pinpoint and analyze their own standards to back up their choice (43). Another attractive aspect of this model is the collaborative element described in point seven of the table of contents pictured above in Figure 2, in which the teacher either lays out guidelines for the final two pieces included in the portfolio or meets with the student to choose the final pieces together (44). The teacher therefore involves him- or herself in the student's writing process while still giving the student a considerable amount of authority over the decision. This model is collaborative, all-encompassing, and quite versatile, while still allowing the student to grow as a writer and recognize their growth.

Adding to the versatility of the portfolio is the option of including a technology component, which is appropriate in our increasingly modern, 21st-century world. The Ohio Department of Education requires high school students to “use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products” (54). Including an online component to the writing portfolio assignment would therefore be beneficial to student learning. There are several useful tools for educators and students alike that can involve the student and teacher in the writing process. Google Documents is a simple way for students to submit assignments, and to give their teachers access to their work, while allowing the teacher to see evidence of their writing process. Microsoft’s OneNote has a similar concept that allows teachers to create a class “notebook” and send students handouts, notes, and feedback on their writing, while students can send drafts and revisions (Davis, 2015). Educators of upper-level students or technology-driven classes might even consider having their students create a free website via Weebly or Wix to showcase their final writing products. This also exposes students to various forms of technology that they may have not yet encountered, while still ensuring that the writing standards are met. Teachers must allot time to create the website, however, so this concept might fit with a more short-term, summative portfolio.

Aside from meeting numerous established Common Core writing standards, exposing the student to a wide variety of writing genres, and encouraging metacognition, the writing portfolio allows for many other academic and professional benefits. This assignment is an effective preparation for college writing. Several colleges even now include writing portfolios or final writing pieces as graduation requirements (Rutz, 2017). Colleges look for their students, especially those in majors that require a lot of writing, to be able to write in several disciplines and manners, from formal report-style writing to creative and artistic forms (Rutz, 2017).

Including a version of this kind of assignment in high school puts students ahead and prepares them for success later in their academic careers. In addition, the writing portfolio is a tangible piece of evidence of a student's individual growth (Weber High School English Department, 2016). Adding a reflective component allows the student to recognize and take pride in this improvement, which acts as a sort of positive reinforcement for success in writing. It is also valuable to the teacher, who, when looking at student writing, can tailor their instruction and feedback to each individual student based on their specific needs.

A final and equally important justification for the writing portfolio assignment is that writing is simply necessary and crucial for any student. Writing is the basis upon which student work is judged, in high school, in college, and beyond (The Marquette University Writing Center, 2011). It encourages interaction with the educator, with the audience, with other editors, through feedback, and with the writing itself, in a metacognitive manner. Writing hones the student's ability to form a complex argument, and reflect upon said argument to ensure its clarity. It also plays a large role in shaping who the writer is as a person, through style, voice, and strengths in writing. The Marquette University Writing Center encourages the fostering of a student's writing ability for this reason, among others, because a student's writing helps them to stand out from others during the application process. Mastery of plenty of different styles of writing allows the student to develop their own signature voice and showcase their strengths. Writing is more than just a skill or a talent; it is a complex form of learning that allows for expression and growth that is applicable to many areas or disciplines of a student's life (The National Writing Project and Nagin, 2006). The writing portfolio is one very effective strategy to expose students to the necessity that is writing, allow them to write many different pieces covering a variety of genres and disciplines, and fulfill their academic requirements.

Teachers Describe Their Uses of the Writing Portfolio

Current English teachers can also attest to the effectiveness of the writing portfolio and of exposing students to a plethora of styles. The following testimonies are from licensed high school and upper-level middle school teachers of English and language arts in the state of Illinois. Illinois's state high school academic writing standards are nearly identical to Ohio's, requiring students to master the three main academic styles of writing detailed previously (argumentative, explanatory, and narrative), show evidence of the complete writing process, use technology in the writing process, and vary the time frames for writing assignments (Illinois State Board of Education, 2014, 45-47). Heather Weeks is currently teaching 10th grade high school English at Barberton High School in Barberton, Ohio. Michael Gluskin, Kristen Hawver, and Greg Pedersen all currently teach various English courses at Libertyville High School in Libertyville, Illinois. Each of these current educators has experience with incorporating either a writing portfolio assignment or at least various types of writing into their specific curricula. These educators were posed a series of questions about the subject of writing portfolios and about writing in general. The interviews were conducted online, via email.

The interviewees were first asked to share how they incorporate a variety of different writing assignments into their curriculum. Michael Gluskin, who teaches Advanced Placement English Language and Composition, replied that his students write a narrative essay, two research-based essays, one of which is a causal analysis assignment, the other a problem and solution paper, and a college application essay (Gluskin). Mr. Gluskin also targets the kind of writing that his students will see on their Advanced Placement exams, having them write several timed in-class essays to mimic the test environment, including synthesis, rhetorical analysis, and argumentative essays (Gluskin). Greg Pedersen, in his freshman literature and composition class,

incorporates various writing assignments into his literature curriculum, planning a writing task that appropriately corresponds to a piece of literature or reading. For example, an argumentative essay would be given as an assignment in accordance with a novel, such as Lord of The Flies (Pedersen). His students are therefore exposed to a variety of writing assignments over the course of a semester.

Kristen Hawver's honors-level world literature classes are required to complete multiple writing assignments, both formal and more informal, over the course of her instructional units. Hawver's students always complete a larger argumentative or synthesis essay at the end of larger units (Hawver). In this manner, Hawver exposes her students to "most types of writing" by the end of the semester, creating confident and well-rounded writers out of her students. Many teachers already expose their students to an array of writing styles and methods that align with their specific learning materials; this practice is very easily adaptable to the writing portfolio concept. Compiling these works at the end of a quarter, semester, or year, would be a useful tool for educators to assess not only student growth, but their own instruction. Heather Weeks' tenth-grade English students are often reminded that writing is a skill, and a valuable one at that. In her classroom, Mrs. Weeks implements styles such as argumentative writing, narrative writing, and poetry writing, among others, to continually expose her students to the different kinds of writing over the course of the year (Weeks). This helps students become well-rounded and to recognize the importance of developing their skill.

The teachers were then asked to explain how the incorporation of various writing assignments helped develop student writers and strengthen their skills. Mr. Gluskin replied that students who are asked to write in only one type of style no longer have to think critically about the various aspects of their work, instead perceiving writing as a "formula that they've figured

out” (Gluskin). He added that writing in many different styles and genres helps students to understand the prominence of certain important writing elements, such as theses, organization, and voice, “regardless of the overall task” of the given assignment (Gluskin). Mr. Gluskin also commented that students who were not succeeding at just one style of writing might begin to perceive themselves as poor writers. Exposing them to many assignments can help them to identify their individual strengths. Mr. Pedersen added that with his freshmen students, he aims to build a strong foundation in argumentative and expository writing in order “to set the groundwork for students to write successfully in all academic essays” (Pedersen). This foundation will then allow them to develop important rudimentary writing skills that can carry over into other disciplines as well as later into their high school academic careers.

Kristen Hawver added that the benefits of exposing students to a wide variety of writing styles are fourfold. This practice teaches students how to incorporate style into their writing, to correspond with the given writing assignment. Students also learn how to address different audiences, increase their writing fluency, and experiment with different writing structures (Hawver). All of these benefits translate directly into providing students with skills crucial to becoming more effective writers. Mrs. Weeks added that varying the style of writing assignments “helps students by meeting their individual needs and emphasizing their individual interests” (Weeks). This way, she can effectively teach the writing process while also tailoring her content to meet her students’ interests and needs. The writing portfolio is effective in this way in that it can allow students to explore the various kinds of writing, discover strengths and weaknesses they may have, and, very importantly, understand the writing process.

Next, the educators shared their thoughts on how collaborative peer and teacher feedback fits into the writing process, and how this concept benefits student writing. Michael Gluskin

replied that his students have one day of peer editing for each of the four out-of-class essays assigned in the class. The peer editing is done anonymously so that writers attain the most honest and unbiased feedback possible (Gluskin). This prevents a student from commending a friend's piece of writing that might actually need some work, simply because of the relationship existing between the two students. Peer editing allows the students to obtain an outside perspective, requiring them to think about certain aspects of their writing that they themselves might not have recognized. Mr. Gluskin commented that students who take the feedback seriously benefit the most and learn the most about their writing, making worthwhile edits. Mr. Pedersen commented that "peer editing is a favorite" activity that he does with his students, for it gives students an outside perspective into their own writing. This way, the students see their work from multiple angles, which can help them to develop and improve it further. Kristen Hawver allows her students "a generous amount of time" to work on essays in class, which in turn allows students to conference with her, conduct peer reviews, and break the writing process into steps that can be monitored (Hawver).

Expanding on the feedback concept, the teachers were asked if they require their students to complete a self-reflection assignment of any kind, and how this helps their writing. Mr. Pedersen's students complete a self-reflection at the end of the year in which they "write about their writing" (Pedersen). His students look over their past essay rubrics and identify any strengths and weaknesses that they notice. This not only requires them to write even more, but it also requires metacognitive thinking, which encourages awareness of one's own successes and areas where improvement may be needed. Mrs. Hawver makes use of a "writing folder" for each student; after each writing assignment, the students must file their assignment into said folder and "track their performance on certain skills, set goals for the next assignment, and complete an

online written reflection” (Hawver). Her students also compose a letter home midway through the year, requiring them to reflect upon their strengths and weaknesses as a writer (Hawver). Hawver’s practice of compiling all writing assignments and using each assignment as a goal-setting building block for the next resembles a true portfolio and deeply involves the students in their own writing. Weeks’ students complete reflections for most large writing assignments, in order to gauge what her students think their own strengths and weaknesses are, using the information to create revision and editing lessons (Weeks). The portfolio can be as metacognitive as the teacher decides to make it, involving the student deeply in their own writing, making them more aware of their growth and identity as writers.

The teachers were then asked if they recommend including a formal writing portfolio assignment in English curricula. Mr. Gluskin replied that he believes some form of a well-crafted writing portfolio is a “great idea” given that it forces students to “carefully examine their work” (Gluskin). He believes that the students who take the assignment seriously would “likely benefit from spotting improvements they’ve made” in their writing over the course of the assignment. Mr. Pedersen has his students keep a physical portfolio folder in which all graded essays, including all drafts and revisions of these essays, are kept for the duration of the course (Pedersen). This practice allows students to analyze and understand their own writing process as well as promote awareness of writing improvement over time. His freshmen students can also pinpoint areas that they may still need to improve, which can turn into a target goal for the coming academic years. Mrs. Hawver enthusiastically recommended this kind of practice, commenting that “it makes the writing process more transparent, more personal, and more metacognitive” for students (Hawver). She added that a portfolio allows students to see writing as a “process that builds on itself,” in turn bettering their writing through analysis of feedback

and of their own growth. In a similar manner, Weeks added that her inclusion of a cumulative writing portfolio allowed her students to “see how their writing improved throughout the year” (Weeks). Writing portfolios are therefore effective in facilitating reflective thinking in the writing process, and in creating tangible evidence of progress and skill development in which a student can take pride.

As a final question, the teachers were asked how the mastery of a wide variety of different writing styles could help to prepare a student for college and for careers. Mr. Gluskin shared his thought that learning to write in many different styles helps a student prepare for the real world, in which writing also takes on a variety of styles. Even just within their academic careers, students will have to be able to write for not only their English classes, but likely for their humanities and social studies courses as well (Gluskin). Businesspeople and sales representatives will benefit from argumentative writing when attempting to sell or persuade, and occupations like nurses or police officers will need clear informative writing skills to report checkups or incidences (Gluskin). Mr. Pedersen’s focus is on preparing his freshmen students for the kind of writing that they will encounter later on in high school, in other classes, and in college, by building a strong foundation in argumentative and expository/explanatory writing (Pedersen). He commented that his freshmen students get more creative writing exposure in their sophomore year, which further reinforces the importance of building the basic yet important argumentative and explanatory writing skills (Pedersen). Mrs. Hawver asserted that exposing students to writing (and to a variety of writing and writing skills) is crucial for students to better be prepared for the area of work they wish to pursue. A major benefit of the portfolio is that it does not confine a student to a single style. Additionally, Mrs. Weeks added that building a

strong foundation and eventual mastery of basic writing skills (which the portfolio certainly does) that can be applied to all writing styles prepares students for any path they choose.

My Experiences in Using a Writing Portfolio

As a committed and seasoned writer, I agree with several of the above teacher perspectives regarding the usefulness of incorporating a wide variety of writing styles as well as a portfolio concept into an integrated language arts classroom. I can attest to the effectiveness of these strategies, pulling from my own past experiences as a successful language arts student, from high school up to the present, as I write professionally as an online journalist. As an eighth grade student, I took a language arts course dedicated entirely to honing and developing writing skills through various assignments compiled into a portfolio. I was required to write several pieces over the course of the year, including an argument, an explanatory piece, several descriptive pieces, an informative essay, a narrative, and poems, among others. Each piece had to be peer-reviewed before submission to the teacher, who would either return the piece with requested edits or accept it as complete. I believe that this emphasis on the writing process and on completing an impressive variety of pieces not only fostered a sense of understanding of the importance of variety and process in writing, but also prepared me for high school writing. This portfolio was a crucial step in developing who I am today as a writer.

In high school, though none of my teachers required a formal portfolio assignment, I gained more insight into my own writing proficiency as well as a further understanding of the writing process. As a freshman and sophomore, writing assignments were largely text- and standard-based, and critical, argumentative, or analytical in nature. My teachers incorporated narrative writing into the necessary curriculum in very creative ways. For example, in a World Literature class, a teacher included an assignment that required us to take on and write a

narrative from the perspective of a person from another country. I was introduced to timed writing as well as several short-term pieces that made my writing even more dynamic. As an upperclassman writing at the Advanced Placement level, writing assignments became more complicated and involved, including causal analyses, in-depth personal narratives, research-based theses, poetry analyses, and thematic analyses. I am confident that the extensive exposure to the writing process, a range of styles, and the portfolio concept that I had received earlier in my schooling allowed me to excel in these upper-level, rigorous courses. I felt amply prepared for a language arts-driven college education as I studied to become an English teacher.

The aforementioned teacher testimonies touched on the importance of writing in terms of preparing students for careers, college, and the future, in which they would undoubtedly need to have a solid grasp on the writing process. As a result of the writing skills I had obtained from being exposed to a portfolio assignment, learning the importance of the writing process, and through sheer practice, I was more than prepared for college-level critical analysis and for adapting my writing style to various needs, professors, and assignments. During my college career, I was fortunate to be hired as a college student online journalist for FlockU, LLC., working as a full-time staff writer and freelance worker. I would argue that having even more opportunities to complete traditional portfolio assignments earlier in my education would have only benefitted me more in the long run. It is understood that not all students will pursue a degree in English, English teaching, journalism, or some other writing-heavy profession. The portfolio concept is perfect in that it targets the necessary writing skills required for several professions. Exposure to the writing portfolio concept gave me the confidence to turn an academic requirement and passion into a tangible profession.

The benefits of the writing portfolio concept are clearly numerous and invaluable. This kind of assignment is so flexible by nature that it can be adapted to most classrooms, curricular needs, and content areas. Though I was unable to implement a full writing portfolio assignment during my experience student-teaching in a ninth grade English classroom, I was able to teach an argumentative writing unit that I believe could have easily been incorporated into a portfolio style project. At the beginning of the unit, after I introduced the basics of the essay, the students were given freedom to choose their own topic, which allowed them to write about a topic in which they took great interest. Student choice of topic and a certain degree of freedom with the writing portfolio gives the student the chance to take ownership of their writing. This assignment was heavily process-focused, broken down into lesson plans that focused on particular sections of the paper (introductions and theses, body paragraphs, rebuttals, etc.), which again emphasized a process-driven approach. The students were given an organizational research packet (attached at the end of this research thesis) that also broke down each section of the paper. As the unit and lessons progressed, the students completed the sections of the packet that corresponded with section of the paper covered that day. When the research packet was complete, the students had compiled a skeleton outline of the paper that they would bring to life and coherence.

After a first draft was completed, the students participated in a peer review activity (this activity is also attached at the end of this thesis) to facilitate reflection and revision, both crucial steps in the writing process. To maximize the effectiveness of these steps, I took on the role of guide during this activity and purposely planned the peer review to be student-centered. Each student was assigned a partner's paper to read while completing a checklist to ensure that their partner had included all the necessary components that we had gone over as a class. The students took time to read their classmates' feedback and revise their drafts before submission. This

added a metacognitive step to the process in requiring the student to think about his or her own writing. This assignment fulfilled the Ohio state standard requiring students to “write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence” (Ohio Department of Education, 2016). Given that these were ninth grade students without a large writing repertoire, it also gave them relatively in-depth exposure to the writing process and its various components. In addition, this assignment prepared my students for a standardized state test that included a written, argumentative component. They took this exam only a few short weeks after completing the argumentative essay. I had several students approach me after their test to tell me that they had organized their responses just as I had taught them during the argumentative writing unit. This illustrates the usefulness and application of process-driven writing that can fit easily into the portfolio concept.

Had I received the opportunity to implement a full portfolio assignment in my time as a student teacher, I would have included a personal narrative component, a feature-style article assignment to expose the students to informational writing, and a character or thematic analysis assignment to go hand-in-hand with John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice And Men*, which we read as a class. The personal narrative assignment would allow the student to explore their own experiences, bring them to life, and employ descriptive and narrative writing techniques while fulfilling another core style of writing specified in the Ohio state learning standards (Ohio Department of Education, 2016). The feature article would require the students to take on an objective tone and informative style as they report and inform their audience of a certain topic of their choosing. Finally, the piece centered on *Of Mice And Men* would pull from the argumentative style and require students to take a stance on an idea or theme in the novel, using the novel itself as support instead of outside research. I would have also added a step to the

writing process after the peer review, in which I reviewed the students' submissions and provided my own feedback to ensure that the piece was ready for final submission and inclusion in the portfolio. I would assert that this project as a whole would develop student writing skills, expose them to a diverse array of useful writing styles, instill in them a sense of the importance of the writing process, encourage metacognition, and strengthen confidence in their own writing skills.

Summary

As has been made clear, the students of today's high school English classrooms would benefit greatly from completing a portfolio-style writing project. The project itself is so inherently flexible, effective, and useful that it can be adapted to fit many curricula, goals, student learning objectives, and classrooms in general. It can also function as the perfect assessment tool, in both a formative (assessing each individual piece as the project progresses) and summative manner (assessing the final product). Students would be able to discover new strengths, learn more about writing, and about their *own* writing, while completing a project that aligns with several state English Language Arts standards. Conversely, teachers would be able to gauge student progress, deliver meaningful, useful, effective lessons and content to students, and effectively and continually assess student progress throughout the duration of the portfolio. An additional and vital benefit of the portfolio is the lasting confidence that it fosters in students with regards to their writing skill and proficiency. While the academic and curricular benefits of this project are manifold, the portfolio has the ability to impact students beyond the classroom, making it a truly invaluable addition to any English Language Arts curriculum. The portfolio obviously requires the student to write. This project goes beyond simply fulfilling a requirement,

however. It is capable of building and transforming a student's writing ability, accomplishing the greater goal of creating a confident writer.

Artifacts From Personal Student Teaching Experience: The Argumentative Essay

NAME: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

English 9 and Advanced 9
Argumentative Essay Planning and Research Packet

TOPIC (one word):

CLAIM:

SUPPORT 1:

SUPPORT 2:

SUPPORT 3:

REBUTTAL (opposing argument AND why your idea is better):

Topic:

INTRODUCTION

Hook:

Background information:

1.

2.

3.

Claim:

BODY PARAGRAPH 1

First Support for Claim:

Research (in your own words):

Citation:

BODY PARAGRAPH 2

Second Support for Claim:

Research (in your own words):

Citation:

BODY PARAGRAPH 3

Third Support for Claim:

Research (in your own words):

Citation:

REBUTTAL

Summary of opposing argument (in your own words):

Citation: _____

WHY your claim is better (without using "I"):

CONCLUSION

Restate claim (in a different way):

Summary of main points:

Support 1:

Support 2:

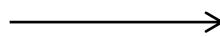
Support 3:

Concluding sentence ("drop the mic"):

PEER EDITING CHECKLIST - Editor: _____ Author: _____

INTRODUCTION

- ✓ Hook grabs the reader’s attention
- ✓ Background information is relevant/explains the topic
- ✓ Thesis:
 - Establishes writer’s POV
 - Includes 3 supports



Did the author do all 5 of these things?

SCORE out of 5:

BODY PARAGRAPH #1

- ✓ Topic sentence clearly supports thesis
- ✓ Enough evidence is given to support thesis
- ✓ At least one correctly cited quote/piece of evidence is included
- ✓ Did the author use PEELS?
- ✓ Closing sentence to wrap up the paragraph

BODY PARAGRAPH #2

- ✓ Topic sentence clearly supports thesis
- ✓ Enough evidence is given to support thesis
- ✓ At least one correctly cited quote/piece of evidence is included
- ✓ Did the author use PEELS?
- ✓ Closing sentence to wrap up the paragraph

BODY PARAGRAPH #3

- ✓ Topic sentence clearly supports thesis
- ✓ Enough evidence is given to support thesis
- ✓ At least one correctly cited quote/piece of evidence is included
- ✓ Did the author use PEELS?
- ✓ Closing sentence to wrap up the paragraph



Did the author do all of these things for ALL 3 PARAGRAPHS?

Paragraph 1 Score out of 5:

Paragraph 2 score out of 5:

Paragraph 3 score out of 5:

REBUTTAL

- ✓ Statement of opposing argument
 - With evidence?
- ✓ Statement of why MY argument is better

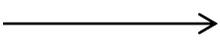


Did the author do all 3 of these things?

SCORE out of 3:

CONCLUSION

- ✓ Thesis is re-stated
- ✓ Summary of...
 - Point 1
 - Point 2
 - Point 3
- ✓ DROP THE MIC



Did the author do all 5 of these things?

SCORE out of 5:

Good sentence starters for your feedback:

“I liked....”

“I noticed....”

“I wondered...”

“I suggest...”

TWO POSITIVE COMMENTS (what did the author do well?):

1. _____

2. _____

TWO CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISMS (what can the author do better?):

1. _____

2. _____

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