

Writing Proficiency Portfolios
for
Secondary English Education Majors
and
English Certification-Only Students

Some questions and answers

Penn State –Harrisburg

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Writing Proficiency Process:

This brochure contains answers to some likely questions about the writing proficiency portfolio: its contents, submission deadlines, and available assistance for preparing the portfolio. Please read this brochure carefully; there have been some changes made in the process. If you have additional questions, please feel free to contact Dr. Patricia Johnson, English Program Coordinator, at pej1@psu.edu.

Who needs to prepare and submit a writing proficiency portfolio?

- Secondary English Education majors
- English Certification-Only students (for students beginning in the Fall 2000 semester, and later)

Basically, anyone who will be seeking a secondary English certificate with his/her English coursework from Penn State – Harrisburg will be required to participate in this portfolio process.

Why do I need to prepare a writing proficiency portfolio?

This portfolio process has two purposes: to demonstrate your writing proficiency and to prepare documents similar to those needed early in your teaching career.

For prospective teachers of English, competent writing skills are essential. First of all, teachers are required to write a variety of documents for students, parents, fellow teachers, administrators, and other professionals, so the ability to write clear, cohesive, and correct prose is vital. Furthermore, being a competent writer oneself is critical to being able to teach writing. Certainly, a writing teacher need not be a masterful writer; however, a certain level of writing proficiency is necessary before one can begin to teach students to write. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania agrees that writing ability is important, and so requires degree-granting institutions to certify prospective teachers' writing proficiency. Consequently, here at Penn State Harrisburg you are required to demonstrate that proficiency through the preparation/submission of a writing portfolio.

In addition to allowing you to demonstrate your writing proficiency, preparing this portfolio will give you the opportunity to write pieces that you will likely use during your application process and early in your teaching career.

What types of writing should be included in my portfolio?

You will be required to submit three pieces of writing, as well as a letter that introduces the portfolio by contextualizing the pieces and situating the portfolio process in your preparation to become an English teacher. So that this portfolio be as authentic an assessment as possible, each of the three pieces in the body of the portfolio will be from among those that you will likely be asked to produce as a pre-service or new in-service secondary English teacher:

- **EDUCATIONAL ESSAY:** This brief essay (1-2 pages, double-spaced) will be like that required by the standard Pennsylvania Department of Education teaching application. (These are the topics for the current application, but please check online to see if the topics have been changed. Application link available online at <http://www.personal.psu.edu/bjj6/WPP.html>.)
 - “The Most Important Qualities of an Outstanding Educator”
 - “My Philosophy of Student Discipline”

- “The Importance of Continuing Professional Development and how I Plan to Incorporate it Throughout My Career”
 - “Essential Elements of Instruction, Administration or Area of Certification”
 - “How Information Technology (i.e. computers, Internet) can be Integrated into the Instructional Process and Curriculum”
- **POSITION STATEMENT:** This essay requires you to respond to a scenario that will ask you to construct and sustain a clear, concise argument about some controversial aspect of the teaching of English and to use sources appropriately to support your argument. Completed essays should be around 5-6 pages in length, double-spaced, with a minimum of 3 outside sources. Choose one scenario from the following:

- **Scenario One:** Your first teaching position is at a high school with about 1000 students. You are the newest of the eight English teachers there, so you have plenty of experienced teachers to mentor you. To your surprise, however, a few of the teachers turn to you at times to ask what's currently being taught about various aspects of English Language Arts education.

In the most recent English faculty meeting, a lively debate arose about the teaching of grammar in the school's English classes. Several teachers, including a 28-year veteran and third-year teacher, spoke most passionately for the inclusion of grammar workbooks into each grade's curriculum. Several other teachers were vehemently opposed to the idea, but the others, including you and your English Department chair, listened to the debate without adding to it.

Now, a week later, the English Department Chair, Chris Hopkins, has come to ask for your help. Because you are the most recently graduated member of the English faculty, Chris has asked you to write a documented essay that explains (and supports) your position on the inclusion of grammar into your high school's curriculum. Your essay will be shared with the English faculty and if they support doing so, it may be used to express the faculty's position to the school administration.

- **Scenario Two:** Some of the English faculty members allow students to write about topics of their own choosing, which has resulted in some personal revelations by their students. Hearing about one of these essays prompted the principal to question the wisdom of allowing adolescents to write about such personal, and potentially traumatic subjects. As a result, you've been asked by your department chair to write a documented position paper on the wisdom (or lack thereof) and pedagogical soundness of allowing students freedom to choose their writing topics. Your essay will be shared first with the other English faculty and then with the school administration.
- **STUDENT'S CHOICE:** You may submit a piece of any genre that you believe demonstrates your writing proficiency. This could be any previously unsubmitted

expository/ persuasive essay (i.e. personal statement* ; book or movie review; explication of, or response to, a written text) or a creative piece.

How will my portfolio be evaluated?

Once you have submitted your portfolio to the School of Humanities, with your name noted **only** on a separate title page, it will be given an identifying number, known only by the program coordinator. Your portfolio will then be read, and holistically evaluated, by at least two Penn State Harrisburg full-time English faculty members in a blind process.

If your first two readers pass the portfolio, you will be certified as a proficient writer for secondary English education. If, however, one of the readers believes that the portfolio does not demonstrate sufficient proficiency, it will be sent to a third reader to ascertain the final evaluation. Once the English Program Coordinator has received word of two, like evaluations of your portfolio, you will receive written notification of the results and these will also be sent to the School of Behavioral Sciences and Education.

What criteria will be used to evaluate my portfolio?

Readers will be using the following criteria as a common benchmark of proficient writing; however, please remember this is not a checklist; your portfolio will be evaluated holistically, deemed either passing or not.

A Passing Portfolio—

- Contains all of the required materials, arranged in an effective and visually appealing way.
- Demonstrates a conscious consideration of audience by including prose that fits the assignments.
- On the whole, its papers have:
 - clear purpose (usually an argument) that drives the entire piece.
 - clear and appropriate organizing principle.
 - logically ordered and well developed supporting points.
 - sufficiently varied sentence structure.
 - adequately smooth transitions.
 - almost no grammatical and mechanical errors.
 - almost flawless documentation using MLA system, where needed.
- The writing in a passing portfolio is organized, clear, coherent, and correct.

How/Where will I submit my portfolio?

Submit your portfolio to Cindy Leach, in the School of Humanities office W356, with your name typed **ONLY** on a detachable title page.

* Part of the responsibility for keeping these evaluations “blind” falls on you, the writer. Remember that personal references in your work may reveal your identity, and should be avoided, when possible.

When will I submit my portfolio?

Your portfolio will need to be submitted by a specific and firm deadline. This is necessary so that the evaluation process can run smoothly, but ultimately your timely submission is necessary to insure that you will be eligible for a student teaching placement during the semester you desire.

The deadline for submitting portfolios will be the second Friday of classes in the semester **prior** to the semester in which you plan to student teach. This submission deadline is firm; no portfolios will be accepted after that date. A portfolio workshop will take place on the first Friday of every semester to address questions students may have about the process. Be sure, however, that you do not wait until the start of the semester to write your portfolio essays. You need to allow yourself at least a month to draft the essays and revise them in order to produce a successful portfolio.

If you intend to student teach during this semester:

Your writing proficiency portfolio will be due:

Fall 2005

January 21, 2005

Spring 2006

September 9, 2005

Fall 2006

January 20, 2006

Spring 2007

September 15, 2006

What kinds of help will be available during this process?

EVERYONE will be encouraged to attend portfolio construction workshops offered each semester. (Although these sessions will probably be most useful to you during the semester just prior to you submitting your portfolio, you are free to attend earlier workshops, as well.) At these sessions (approximately two per semester, depending on student interest), a volunteer faculty member will speak on one aspect of the portfolio's construction and be available to give advice about specific questions. Probably the greatest benefit from these sessions will be the opportunity to workshop with one another on your portfolios, giving one another feedback. One note—although you are certainly encouraged to attend these workshops, you are asked NOT to work with an individual faculty member during your portfolio's preparation.

What happens if my portfolio does not pass?

If your portfolio does not pass, there will be a four-week revision period, in which you can work with an individual faculty member of your choice (presuming his/her consent) before resubmitting the portfolio for its final evaluation.

If you have any other questions or concerns about this process, please contact Dr. Patricia Johnson, pej1@psu.edu.