PORTFOLIO (e-PORTFOLIO)

A PORTFOLIO is a collection of student writing on various topics. Papers are revised and polished throughout the semester, and the portfolio is collected at the end of the semester. (A portfolio is not simply a collection of papers amassed during a semester or year.)

One major benefit of portfolios is that they are real writing—the way most people write in the “real world”—with multiple revisions. More than any other method of writing, they clearly demonstrate that writing is a process.

Using a writing portfolio in a class may require a shift in focus in the teacher’s methods. The teacher must see his/her role as someone who is assisting students in directing their own learning and not as someone with all of the answers. Error or correctness in papers must be de-emphasized. (It can be fixed later, as it is in the real world: writers write, get out ideas, experiment with ideas, and the last step of the writing process is editing or proofreading.) Marking error on an early draft often discourages a student, and it is incredibly time-consuming for the teacher. If a teacher ignores error on early drafts, he/she can read the papers much more quickly and can focus on the ideas in the paper.

Another major benefit to portfolios is that they shift the authority in the classroom to the students. Students become more responsible for their own grades since they can revise each paper as many times as they wish. Many people are wary of portfolios for this very reason: they think this will mean more reading of papers and involve more time. However, the portfolio system usually lessens the amount of reading a teacher will do. If a teacher creates a clear grading system (evaluating the paper based on (1) the POINT/PURPOSE of the paper, (2) the SUPPORT or DETAILS, and (3) the CLARITY and ORGANIZATION perhaps), he/she can read a set of papers rather quickly. Most students will not revise papers several times, but the few who do will benefit greatly, and even the students who revise only once create better papers as well. The crucial point is that it is the student’s choice about whether to revise his/her papers or not. The ones who do revise usually get better drafts, not as a reward for revising, but simply because the papers get better as the students revise.

Most teachers assign no grades on the papers until the final portfolio is due, but write extensive comments on each draft turned in. (The portfolio is graded holistically: the grade is not an average of what each individual paper would receive.) One major reason not to assign grades to individual papers is that the papers are not final drafts until the portfolios are due. Also, if a teacher assigns a grade, rarely will students read the comments: they see the grade and glance at the comments. If there is no grade, they have to read the comments to determine what they need to do to make the paper better. Many classes that use portfolios require conferences at mid-term and at the end of term between students and teacher so that the teacher can provide direct feedback about the students’ writing and give them an indication of their progress. Some teachers use these conferences to offer suggestions about what the grade would be on individual papers.
Portfolios can count as much as 60% of the final grade, though this will vary depending on the teacher. In the final portfolio some people require the following:

- Drafts of all papers written during the semester
- Rewritten, revised, polished, final drafts of two of the papers
- A letter in which the students discuss their writing and their portfolios.

There are two drawbacks to using portfolios: (1) Procrastinators often do poorly in a portfolio class and add a great deal of stress to their lives, and (2) students sometimes are unsure about their grades. Portfolios could actually help procrastinators if the writers put off the writing because they want each line to be perfect before committing it to paper. With the portfolio system, students can revise as many times as they want and therefore should not be concerned about early drafts. Conferences can help with the second problem, but reassuring students to ask the teacher about paper grades could also help. Students who do not attend on a regular basis usually do poorly with the portfolio system.

e-Portfolios are portfolios that are collected and stored electronically.