

11 Essentials for Excellent ePortfolios

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According to the [Office of Research Consumer Guide](#), portfolios are "a collection of student work representing a selection of performance." While artists have kept them for hundreds of years, portfolios [emerged in modern education](#) (PDF) from college writing courses in the 1980s. Electronic portfolios are online versions of this tool.

If done well, portfolios can aid students in [metacognition](#) (PDF), [reflection](#), and [ownership of learning](#) (PDF). If done poorly, students and teachers may feel like portfolios are a [waste of time](#). While some see portfolios as [excellent qualitative measures](#) instead of standardized tests, we know that the subjective nature of portfolio assessment can make it an [unreliable comparison between schools](#).



You'll face 11 essential decisions in your pursuit of portfolio excellence.

1. Know Your Purpose

Will you have elements of a showcase portfolio? A process portfolio?

As outlined in [Dr. Helen Barrett's seminal paper on eportfolios](#) (PDF), portfolios fall into two categories:

1. The Positivist approach (also called Portfolios *for* Learning)
2. The Constructivist approach (also called Portfolios *as* Learning).

A portfolio *for* learning is often a short-term capstone project that will be assessed summatively. So, at the end of the year, students put selections of their work into a portfolio to assess their learning. This is often a [showcase portfolio](#), or a sample of students' best work.

A portfolio *as* learning typically has an extended timeframe. This is often formative assessment, but students will also self-reflect and assess themselves. These [process portfolios](#) promote student reflection and ownership of the learning process.

On blending elements of positivism and constructivism, Dr. Barrett says:

In order to approach a balanced solution, we must envision a solution that makes it easy for students to maintain their own digital archive of work, where they can capture a large number of examples and add their reflections and notes in an ongoing way.

As [some are doing](#), the answer can be found in different portions of the portfolio for a different purpose, or in separate portfolios altogether. So be crystal clear about your purpose, as it impacts how you design your portfolio.

2. Select Tools to Empower Students

Adding to the portfolio should be easy! It could be inside your learning management system. I prefer my high school students to select the tool for their capstone portfolio. Here are some popular choices:

Inside their electronic notebook

Perhaps one of the best ways to incorporate a process portfolio is inside shared notebooks using [OneNote](#) or [Evernote](#). The new [OneNote Class Notebook](#) allows teachers and even administrators see work in a process portfolio. Students can also keep a page linking to their best work.

Personal website

[My older students](#) select from [Weebly](#), [Webs](#), [Wix](#), or [Google Sites](#) to build their personal [eportfolio](#) website, which they'll still be using after college.

One-page collection

Sometimes students just want to link to their work published in other places. In this case, a tool like [Strikingly](#), [Glogster](#), [LiveBinders](#), or a one-page [wiki](#) may be used.

Student blog

My eighth grade students blog on a private Ning. Therefore, their eportfolio is simply a blog post with links to their other blog posts that completed different tasks. Many teachers are using this method on [Edmodo](#), [KidBlogs](#), [Edublogs](#), [Ning](#), or other class blogging tools.

Paper

Some teachers prefer some or all of the portfolio on paper. With private student work such as journal entries, this is often a good idea.

Whatever the tool, select it with your purpose in mind. Share sample eportfolios from previous classes. Use templates to help students start. They should be able to focus on selecting the work, so help them on the format.

3. Select a Variety of Content.

In addition to print media represented by text and photos, you can use video, screencasts, hyperlinks to student work, audio recordings, and annotated photographs. If you use only text and photographs, you're missing the authentic student voice you'd get from audio and video. Students struggling as writers could record a video journal as part of their process portfolio.

4. Empower Portfolio Review and Publish to an Audience

Who will review student work? Where will it be published?

There's a reason why elementary hallways are lined with student artwork -- students love an audience. Privacy should always be protected and age-appropriate safeguards should be considered, but we know that [an audience for final work improves engagement](#). As part of revision, portfolio review might include students themselves, teachers, peers, other teachers, parents, or a global audience. Review and feedback should allow a student to grow and change.

When considering publication, online is the obvious choice. But if this isn't allowed for individual students, teachers can share screenshots on the class blog. Students could also publish part or all of their work in an online space for parents to see.

5. Know Your Timeline

When will your students work on their portfolios? During a longer-term process, how will they organize their work?

You can do a portfolio at a certain time of year or over a longer period. If you're doing them throughout the year, make sure that students organize themselves to put their portfolio in a place where they can reach it any time they need it. (Fact: students often need to be reminded about putting their work in their portfolio.) I have my students do their eighth grade portfolios over a six-week time period after they learn the keyboard. My high school students built their personal portfolio website in ninth grade and update it again in tenth grade. Many of my students use these websites after they graduate from high school.

6. Empower Metacognition

How can your students reflect on their work (or think about their thinking)? Are there ways to ask [metacognitive questions](#)? There are many [resources on metacognition](#) because it's so critically important to learning, and [this level of reflection should be incorporated](#) into any portfolio of student work.

For example, a writing portfolio may have students select different pieces that demonstrate how they've learned to use voice during the school year. As students write about how they improved in this ability, they are reflecting on how their thinking evolved. Metacognition lends itself to the process portion of the portfolio.

7. Relate Portfolios to the Entire Coursework

How will the portions of your portfolio relate to standards and coursework? Can you use portfolio assignments as advance organizers?

In the Marzano Center's new book [Identifying Critical Content](#), the authors discuss the importance of effectively cueing critical information. One of the concepts discussed is the **advance organization of content**, a term

coined by psychologist David Ausubel to describe helping students understand the content of a section before it is introduced.

For a science portfolio, you could introduce a unit on water quality by informing students that they will be preparing a section of their portfolio where they'll explain how water quality can be assessed. They can write their opinion beforehand while quoting the data and charts from their learning. In this example, you've told students what will be covered so they can begin with the end in mind. So at the beginning of a unit, you can share what type of evidence they'll be collecting for their portfolio, and you can relate standards to outcomes more clearly using portfolios as advance organizers.

8. Don't Overwhelm Students

How can you share your rubric and assignment for a long-term portfolio project without overwhelming the student? If the portfolio is over a longer timespan, it can be upsetting to give students the entire portfolio assignment at one time. If you hand out all portfolio requirements, assure students that you'll be guiding them through the whole thing section by section. You can also give students the portfolio assignments as needed during the year.

9. Link Paper and Electronic Portfolios

How will you relate online and offline portions of the portfolio? Consider linking them [with a QR code](#). This makes it easier to grade the paper portfolio and see the online work without having to type a long hyperlink in your web browser.

10. Consider the Portfolio's Longevity

How will you help students preserve their portfolios for future use? They often don't consider their need for the work they've done until they're applying for jobs or want to find it later. With many schools deleting data over the summer, we promote student ownership by letting them take their portfolios with them. When the portfolio is created in an online space, students should save the files and burn them onto a CD or DVD.

11. Engage Teachers in Effective Portfolio Use

How will teachers learn and share best practices so that portfolios are implemented effectively? While perusing the [Inter/National Coalition for Portfolio Research](#), I came across an [emergent finding from Clemson University](#) (PDF) stating that one of their university's essential areas for improving portfolio use was "increased faculty support/buy-in." This seems typical, as reported in the Clemson paper:

Moreover, we know from the work of Hutchings (2010) that much of what has been done in the name of programmatic assessment has failed to engage large numbers of faculty in significant ways (Hutchings, 2010).

This emphasizes the importance of involving teachers in successful portfolio implementation.

Speaking From Experience

In my opinion, the best portfolios are part of the learning process. Students reflect on their work and learning. Two important aspects of teaching -- metacognition and advance organizing of content -- can be done powerfully through portfolios. Students can also have an audience of reviewers and readers. If done well, the final product can further their academic career or get them a job. A well-done portfolio is an essential tool in 21st-century learning. In my classroom, portfolios are essential, powerful means of learning and leveling up.

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