

What Makes a Portfolio a Portfolio?

What Distinguishes a Portfolio from a Folder?

Today's portfolios differ in several significant ways from the folders in which you may have kept your work in grade school.

Unlike folders, whose purpose was simply to serve as a repository for student work, portfolios usually have three **clear instructional purposes** :

1. Helping students learn;
2. Assessing what students have learned; *and*
3. Providing feedback to the portfolio's audience on what students have learned and how their learning might be improved.

Unlike folders, whose contents were specified by the teacher, **students participate** in choosing what goes in their portfolios, using **selection criteria** provided by faculty. Students might be asked to include, for example, four assignments, each no longer than three pages: the one assignment that best shows their research skills, the one assignment that best shows their writing skills, the one assignment that best shows their ability to apply a particular concept to solve a problem, and the one assignment from which they learned the most.

Unlike folders, which were often not evaluated systematically or comprehensively, portfolios are evaluated holistically, with faculty providing **evaluation criteria** , usually in the form of a scoring guide (rubric).

Unlike folders, which were often composed only of final products, portfolios often illustrate **growth** , either by including student work from the beginning as well as the end of a course or program or by including documentation of the process students went through in producing their work (e.g., notes, drafts).

Unlike folders, whose contents were added to but not refined, portfolios are **continually updated** with one assignment substituted for another. As students' writing skills evolve, for example, students may substitute a different assignment for the one they think best shows their writing skills.

Unlike folders, which often did not represent a learning opportunity, portfolios include written **student reflections** on the significance and contribution of each item in the portfolio. In this way, portfolios help students develop the ability to synthesize what they have learned and develop metacognition (the ability to "learn how to learn" by reflecting on what and how one has learned).