

Writing Proficiency Portfolios
for
English Majors in the Secondary Education Option
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.

Who needs to prepare and submit a writing proficiency portfolio?

- English majors in the Secondary Education option
- English Certification-Only students
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Basically, anyone who will be seeking a secondary English certificate with his/her English coursework from Penn State – Capital College 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. 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?

There are four components to the writing portfolio: 1) an introduction to the portfolio (1-2 pages); 2) a 1-2 page essay on a topic in education; 3) a position paper that requires research and argumentation (5-6 pages); and 4) a piece of writing of your choice (2-5 pages, approximately). The portfolio should be double-spaced and paginated continuously. It should have a detachable title page with your name and student information on it. The rest of the portfolio should be anonymous.

- **INTRODUCTION:** A 1-2 page piece that introduces the portfolio by contextualizing your essays by describing why you selected the topics you did, or by situating the portfolio process in your preparation to become an English teacher.
- **LITERATURE ESSAY:** This 6-8 page essay requires you to exhibit your knowledge of literary periods, genres, conventions, and criticism by responding to one of the following prompts:

1. Trace the development of a genre by comparing and contrasting literary works of the same genre from three (3) literary periods and/or cultures.

2. Utilize at least three works to identify the major characteristic conventions of a specific literary genre, and explain how the genre and its conventions reflect its cultural roots and the time period(s) in which it developed and flourished(es) .

3. Select a period of transition and change in the history of literary genres. Select three works that represent the social and cultural correlations between the decline of one genre and the rise of another within a connected or shared span of time.

All essays should incorporate a discussion of genre conventions and different theoretical approaches (formalist, Marxist, feminist, new historicist, etc.) into your own analyses. This essay, however, should be composed of your own ideas and should not involve outside research or sources, except the literary sources you select.

- **POSITION STATEMENT:** This 5-6 page essay requires you to respond to a scenario that will ask you to construct, support, and sustain a clear, concise argument about some controversial aspect of the teaching of English. You should include at least 3 outside sources as part of the essay and a works cited page that uses MLA style.

Choose **ONE** of the following scenarios:

- **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 a 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 has come to ask for your help. Because you are the most recently graduated member of the English faculty, the chair 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 review; explication of, or response to, a written or visual 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 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.

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.

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.
- 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.

* 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.

- almost flawless documentation using MLA style, 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, Olmsted Office W356, by 4 p. m. on the due date. Remember, your name should appear ONLY on a detachable title page.

When will I submit my portfolio?

Your portfolio will need to be submitted by a 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 or third Friday of classes in the semester **prior** to the semester in which you plan to student teach. A portfolio workshop will take place early in the semester to address questions students may have about the portfolio process. Be sure, however, that you do not wait until the beginning of the semester to write your portfolio essays. You need to allow yourself at least a month to draft and revise the essays in order to produce a successful portfolio.

If you intend to student teach during this semester:	Your writing proficiency portfolio will be due:
Spring 2016	September 11, 2015
Fall 2016	January 22, 2016
Spring 2017	September 9, 2016
Fall 2017	January 20, 2017

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, a volunteer faculty member will speak on the portfolio’s construction and be available to give advice about specific questions.

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

If you have any other questions or concerns about this process, please contact the English Program Coordinator, Patricia E. Johnson, at pej1@psu.edu.