

## English

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**A Portfolio Approach to Evaluating Student Writing**

To inhale the air in most public schools today is to be at least minimally exposed to creative approaches to teaching language. During the past quarter century, the mandate that those preparing to teach English must study language and composition in addition to the standard literature has ensured that nearly every teacher certified to teach English since the '60s has been exposed to some of the vastly expanding body of research in rhetorical theory.

Not everyone subjected to this exposure has reacted well to it. Every school still has its diehards who reward the use of the passive voice, eschew the use of the first person singular pronoun, prohibit split infinitives, and, quite incorrectly, would banish from the ends of all English clauses words that look like prepositions. (In actuality, such words usually are not prepositions at all but are particles used adverbially in such compound constructions as "look out" or "shut up." Can any sane person argue in favor of "his wife told him out to look" over "His wife told him to look out"?) Even teachers who cling pertinaciously to traditional grammar, though, have imbibed some of the spirit of the inventive approaches to language and composition in classrooms today.

Andrea Lunsford and Cheryl Glenn, in their essay entitled "Rhetorical Theory and Writing" in *On Literacy and Its Teaching*, call for a way of evaluating student writing that reflects the more recent approaches.<sup>1</sup> They write, "One should be the days when one draft—the first and final—is handed in for an unchangeable grade" (p. 185). Many schools, Lunsford and Glenn point out, are moving toward the portfolio method of evaluating student writing. Borrowed from the graphic arts, the portfolio method works extremely well

in English classes, where it offers many benefits beyond mere evaluation.

To begin with, people learn to write by writing. Successful writers write every day. English teachers who deal with a hundred or more students a day cannot evaluate all of their writing, so they often throw up their hands and decide to require only as much writing as they can reasonably evaluate. This is patently absurd. Not all student writing *needs* to be evaluated, nor should it be. English teachers who think they are not doing their jobs if they fail to grade every bit of writing their students do might glean a pedagogical lesson from piano or violin

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teachers, who would never think of sitting in on every practice session their students undertake.

Obviously, in the arts—and writing of any kind *is* fundamentally an art—competence is achieved through regular practice. Much of that practice is solitary and ungraded. English teachers need to create situations in which their students write every day. They need to suggest topics to their students that are relevant to their lives, topics that they can explore and communicate about in writing. Much of the writing they produce may be informal, including such items as lists, outlines,

random notes, reading notes, and composition maps. All of this writing ideally leads to more writing, some of it, perhaps, formal and polished.

Teachers should, of course, periodically flip through student portfolios to ensure that everyone is keeping up with the writing demands of the course. Then, every month or so, students should hand in portfolios that contain everything they have written to date. These should be evaluated in whatever way seems most feasible in a given situation. Evaluation can be on the basis of any of the following:

1. the total portfolio;
2. one or two pieces that the teacher selects from the portfolio and grades randomly;
3. one or two pieces among several that each student has indicated with a checkmark he or she is willing to have used for evaluation.

In most situations, the third of these options is probably the fairest, although the other two can work well in certain contexts.

Using the portfolio method to evaluate composition enables teachers to handle a reading load sligher than the writing load of each student, as well as to gain insights into how each student thinks and communicates that thinking individually. Students, in turn, realize that writing is an ongoing process. As they become aware that writing improves and is easier to do when they practice it regularly, they are motivated to write more often. And frequent writing is a major key to successful writing. □

<sup>1</sup>A. Lunsford and C. Glenn, (1990), "Rhetorical Theory and Writing," in *On Literacy and Its Teaching*, edited by G. Hawisher and A. Soter, (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press).

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