

Anatomy of a PORTFOLIO

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One of the most important tasks for a high-school art teacher is helping to prepare students for life after graduation. In the midst of all of this, teachers juggle personalities, emotions, personal struggles, and the complex life of a teenager. Portfolios are now an integral part of this experience and can embody all of the above. Finding the perfect combination of student talent and drive to showcase to a variety of

portfolio outlets is not always the easiest task. So let's look at the anatomy of the "Utopian portfolio."

To begin, there are a variety of types of portfolios. You must be aware of your students' strengths to showcase their skills and artistic voice. Secondly, you must know what the type of portfolio you are creating will be used for: advanced placement, college

placement, summer institutes, international baccalaureate, or a specialty competition. These questions require personal research by you and your students. An effective portfolio will sometimes require a teacher's guidance regarding assignments, editing, or reworking to give a student his or her best chance at success.

Anatomy of a Strong Portfolio

I think about the principles of design when I'm helping students construct their final portfolios.

Movement: The goal is for the eye to follow a certain path when viewing the artwork. The same concept can be applied when constructing a portfolio. Remind students that human beings will be assessing their work and their instinct will be to judge the portfolio as a whole.

Variety: Students should show the range of their skill and talent. This is best seen in the breadth section of the AP portfolio. Consider every aspect, including media, technique, subject/genre, color, size, and medium.

Balance: How is the portfolio arranged? Is it visually balanced? Consider every aspect from color to theme, and strength to weakness when creating an order.

Harmony: The portfolio should communicate the artist's unique voice and style. It is important to make sure each artwork





displays consistent technique and vision.

Unity: Consider the body of work or vision of the student. Does the portfolio hold together and exhibit the maturity of the student? This has also been labeled “concentration” in many classrooms.

Additional Criteria

Now that you have looked at the anatomy, consider what else reviewers are looking for in a portfolio:

Creativity: Reviewers look at thousands of portfolios. Remind your student to consider what will make his or her portfolio stand out. Students must be willing to explore vivid and engaging imagery. Sometimes this will be completely intrinsic and other times it may require the instructor to provide interesting prompts.


Technical Skill: Students should work from life. Most reviewers are looking for raw skill and the ability to translate objects/ideas into images. It is important to work in a medium that will translate well; avoid very light drawings or even overly dark sculptures that do not showcase the student’s skill.

Composition: Composition is essential to a freshman college student’s skill set. Avoid MOP (middle of page); consider complexity and the whole space. If a student’s work tends to be very similar, encourage him or her to print a digital image of an artwork and play with different compositions. This might help your student see the possibility in an otherwise unsuccessful piece.

Risk taking: We live in a postmodern world and students must be willing to try new things. Encourage your stu-

dents to push themselves; you might have to step in and help challenge their visions just as they can expect to experience with college professors.

Now that you have reviewed these concepts, look closely at the examples provided

here with your students and consider why this portfolio is so successful. 

Finding just the perfect combination of student talent and drive to showcase to a variety of portfolio outlets is not always the easiest task.

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