
EDIS Writing Across the Curriculum

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Starting the Year Off on the Write Foot: Setting Up and Using Writing Portfolios in the Classroom

There are many good reasons to implement writing portfolios in the classroom. They give students ownership of their writing, they encourage goal setting, demonstrate student growth, showcase a student's work, and act as a tool for quarterly or yearly assessment (Hewitt 1995, pgs 72-73). This list goes on. However, when I graduated from my teacher licensure program 5 years ago, I only vaguely knew this. I knew portfolios were a good thing, and I knew they had something to do with students collecting their work, but I really did not know how to implement them and they did nothing advantageous for my students.

At the end of my first year of teaching, I just told my students to take their writing folders (which was a collection of some graded work, since usually I/we forgot to put work in the folders) and keep them forever. My 2nd year of teaching we got as far as remembering to put more writing in the writing folders. My 3rd year we actually set goals and did free-writes that we were aiming to polish up at the end of the year, but then I got elbowed during a flag football game and ending up in the hospital for a week with a shut down digestive system, and effectively was absent from school when we were supposed to be finalizing portfolios. So we never wrapped them up that year either. This last year we managed to set goals, keep a running list of papers and

evaluate the contents at the end, but the evaluations from my students stunk. I got a lot of reflections that said “I put this piece in here because it got a good grade,” not “I put this piece in here because it bares my heart and soul while staying organized and grammatically correct.” At the end of the year I felt deflated and I also felt I really had not taught my students much about what makes good writing. In the back of my mind, I knew if I could get this portfolio system to work, I would be a much more effective writing teacher, but during the school year, I don’t have time to sit down and figure out the nitty-gritty of overhauling my writing system, which is why it was so important for me to focus on writing portfolios for my I-search paper. I needed to know the exact how-to, day by day, before school started in September. Therefore, this paper focuses on what I need to do at the beginning of the year, throughout each quarter and at the end of each quarter, and at the end of the year, to use writing portfolios properly and effectively in the classroom. I don’t want to end the year having helped a few good writers get better. I want to end the year knowing that every child improved and I think writing portfolios are the key to transformation.