

English 131 Portfolio: Selecting Your Essays

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We have been working with concepts of argumentation, development and support, organization, rhetorical choice, and conventional usage throughout the quarter. However, the criteria for selecting essays can be highly subjective. Here are some questions and criteria for judging the qualities of an effective final portfolio essay. The following list and explanations will also give you a good idea of what I will be looking for as I evaluate your work.

Does the paper satisfy the assignment?

The first question you should ask yourself is whether the paper satisfies the goals of the assignment. Look at your assignment sheet, look over your draft and my comments, and consider whether your paper is on task. Satisfying the assignment also includes conventional formatting, mechanics, and required length.

Does the paper offer a significant argument?

Your final essays should offer an argument with political, cultural, or intellectual importance. In other words, your argument would do more than merely respond to an assigned writing topic. Instead, the essays should generate a new or different perspective on an issue related to your chosen topic that is relevant to your audience.

Does the essay provide evidence that is necessary, sufficient and relevant to your argument?

If you cannot prove your claim without using a specific quote, textual reference, or personal example, then your evidence is necessary. If you can make your case without citing your evidence, then you might want to cut that section out of your paper. Unnecessary evidence usually crops up when you use multiple quotes or references to prove a single quote. At the other end of the scale is the issue of sufficient evidence. After re-reading the evidence provided, are you convinced by your claims? If not, you probably need to reevaluate your chosen quotes, references, other data, or examples. Insufficient evidence often occurs when you provide very brief explanations or paraphrase or brief excerpts of quotes. To be truly effective, your evidence should be relevant to the claim you are making. Relevance refers to an obvious relationship between your evidence and your primary claim. Problems with relevance tend to arise when authors employ quotes with one or two key words related to their arguments without examining the other aspects of a particular passage or section of the text. Beware of statements that make sweeping claims about life, reality, beliefs, or the universality of experience—such claims lend themselves to unsubstantiated generalizations.

Does the paper effectively demonstrate the course outcomes? Which ones?

Part of your selection process should consider what course outcomes are being employed and practiced by the assignment. Take a look at the course outcomes in your course policies. Which of the skills or concepts are used, for what purpose, and to what degree? How does your paper demonstrate your understanding of the outcomes and what is the importance of the outcomes to your writing? You may wish to choose several different assignments to reflect the range and depth of the outcomes.

How much work does the essay require to provide a well-organized, logical argument supported by appropriate evidence?

While the ease of revision should not be your sole reason for selecting an essay, you don't want to choose an essay that would require a monumental investment of time and energy to produce a coherent argument. Go with the essays that stir interest, have a number of positive aspects upon which to build, and received positive feedback from your peers and other readers. Also consider whether you, yourself, are interested in and excited by the essay. Why work on something you are not energized about?