

Professional Portfolios

What is a Portfolio?

Portfolios can be a powerful marketing tool in your job search. A portfolio is a compilation of items representative of your experience, skills, accomplishments and goals. These items are organized in a binder and divided into categories such as “Experience,” “Leadership,” and “Projects.”

You can bring your portfolio to interviews to supplement your answers to interview questions. For example, if an employer asks about your leadership experience, in addition to explaining your role as vice president of the National Association of Black Accountants (NABA), and your supervisory experience working at Starbucks, you could also show the employer several items from your portfolio that offer proof of your leadership experience, such as:

- A flyer from an event you planned for NABA, which featured a guest speaker from a local accounting firm
- An agenda from a meeting you led as president of NABA
- A certificate you received as “Employee of the Month” at Starbucks
- A co-op evaluation from your supervisor that praises your leadership skills and initiative

Who can use a Portfolio?

Anyone can use a portfolio. In some fields, such as art, graphic design, teaching, and writing, portfolios are an essential part of the job search process; however, in most fields portfolios are not required or even expected. In fields such as this, having a portfolio is a powerful way to stand out from other applicants. Aside from the items included, the portfolio itself is evidence of your initiative, creativity, organization, drive, and willingness to go the extra mile. If you are the only candidate who brought a portfolio to your interview, the employer will remember you in a very positive way.

Why is a Portfolio a Powerful Marketing Tool?

Provides evidence of your qualifications. Each item you include offers proof of your skills, experience, accomplishments and qualities. Just as when answering behavioral interviewing questions (see interviewing guide for more information about behavioral interviewing) you are offering examples to support your answers. Employers use behavioral interviewing so frequently because they are seeking proof that you have the skills and experience they are looking for. A portfolio will help you provide this proof.

Makes you memorable to employers. If portfolios are not commonly used in your field, a portfolio will help you stand out from other applicants. When employers are interviewing a number of candidates, very often it can become difficult to remember how each candidate was unique. The employer’s memory of the candidates starts to blur together. Employers will remember that you were the candidate who took the initiative to develop and present a portfolio during your interview.

Visual representation of your qualifications. Interviews consist mostly of verbal communication of qualifications. The portfolio adds interest to the interview by introducing a visual representation of your skills, experience and accomplishments. This new dynamic will set you apart from other candidates.

Gives you an element of control in the interview. As much as you practice for an interview (and practice is very important for interviews! See the interview guide for tips on preparing for your interview) it is impossible to anticipate exactly what questions you will be asked during the interview. The interviewer maintains most of the control of the interview. With a portfolio in hand, you can be confident that you have control over one part of your interview. Even if you received questions that you did not anticipate and stumbled over your answers, you will know that your portfolio provided a positive representation of you.

Prepares you to interview effectively. The very process of developing a portfolio will help you prepare to answer interview questions. As you brainstorm ideas for items to include, you will be engaging in the same thought process required for effective interview preparation. You will be sifting through your memory and retrieving examples of your experiences, skills and accomplishments that will convince the employer that you are the strongest candidate.

Leaves a tangible reminder of your qualifications with the employer. It is recommended that you develop a master portfolio to use in your interview, as well as a copy to leave with the employer. By leaving a copy with the employer, you give them the opportunity to spend additional time reviewing evidence of your qualifications. This will certainly give you an advantage over other candidates.

Get Started - Develop Your Portfolio

Steps

1. Research field, employer and job
2. Collect items
3. Organize items into categories
4. Assemble portfolio and create captions

Items to Include

Your portfolio should be representative, not comprehensive, so don't include every single item you consider. Use the *Portfolio Planning Activity* (page 3) to help you brainstorm some ideas for items to include. Then select only the best items to include. Shoot for three items per category.

Core Items

Start with these few core items, which should be easy for almost every student to collect. This will give you a very basic portfolio to work from. Then start collecting additional items, using the *Additional Items* list for ideas.

- Title Page
- Table of Contents
- Personal Statement (mission/goals/philosophy)
- Cover Letter
- Resume or CV
- References Page
- Transcript
- Course Projects

Additional Items

References	Education	Professional Development
• Recommendation letters from faculty or supervisors	• Excerpts from research or other papers	• Handouts from training sessions or workshops attended
• Work evaluations	• Pictures, etc. from travel abroad	• Conference agendas
• Thank you letters	• Handouts from class presentation	• Certifications or licenses
• E-mailed accolades from a faculty member or supervisor	• Outlines or PowerPoint slides from class group projects	• Professional organization brochure or membership certificate
Student Organizations	Honors	Work & Volunteer Experience
• Pictures (keep it professional)	• Letter of scholarship award	• Summary of relevant experience
• Brochure or web site home page print out	• Letter of invitation to join honor society	• Brochure or other printed materials from company
• Organization membership certificate	• Honor Society membership certificate	• Chart/graph to demonstrate sales or service improvement/increase
• Agenda for meeting you led or committee you served on	• Academic or Student Affairs Awards	• Work samples, reports, proposals (get supervisor's permission)
• Flyers for event or fundraiser you planned		• Brochure from volunteer organization
• Newspaper article about event you were involved in planning		• Flyer for event or fundraiser

Skills

For each item you include, you should be able to identify at least one skill or quality that item represents.

• Technical/computer proficiency	• Problem solving/resourcefulness	• Public speaking
• Lab equipment or procedures	• Creativity	• Presentation
• Financial	• Work ethic	• Interpersonal/rapport
• Management/training	• Attention to detail	• Teamwork/leadership
• Sales/customer service	• Organization/planning	• Counseling/teaching/influencing
• Analytical thinking	• Oral/written communication	• Proficiency in major
• Research	• Foreign language	• Well-rounded

Portfolio Planning Activity

Item	Category	Skills/Qualities	Caption
Ex: Starbucks <i>Employee of the Month</i> Certificate	Honors & Awards	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hardworking• Customer service• Team player• Dependable• Positive attitude	"An Employee of the Month Certificate, which I was awarded for providing excellent customer service and effectively working as a team player."

Putting it Together

After you have collected items, it is time to organize and assemble your portfolio. Start by organizing your items into categories, and then selecting headings for your categories.

Select Category Headings

Your category headings should describe what is included in each section. Feel free to create your own headings. Each section should include at least several items so combine smaller, related sections if necessary (for example, references and evaluations or education and honors). Here are some ideas for category headings...

• Introduction	• Course Projects	• Organizations
• References & Evaluations	• Relevant Experience	• Leadership
• Education	• Work Experience	• Honors & Awards
• Professional Development	• Volunteer Experience	• Accomplishments
• Programs & Events	• Community Service	• Community Involvement

Recreate Items if Necessary

If you had trouble finding some items you had planned to include, you can recreate items that once existed. For example, if you can't find the original flyer for a fundraiser that you helped plan for your sorority or fraternity, you could recreate that flyer. Most of your items should be originals so recreate items only as a last resort, and do so sparingly. Never recreate an official item or an item that was created by another person, such as a certificate, award, evaluation, or letter. Only recreate items such as flyers, cover letters written by you, or meeting agendas.

Confidentiality and Ownership

Only include items you own or have permission to include. You do not own work that you have done for an employer so request your supervisor's permission to include that work. Honor confidentiality of clients, customers, and patients. You can remove or obscure names and other personal information, or use initials instead. Convert figures to percentages to protect sensitive data.

Develop Captions

Captions are used to explain items and help your portfolio stand alone. You do not need to include a caption for every item. For example, you probably would not include a caption for your resume, but would include a caption for an excerpt from a paper you wrote for a class. The caption should include a brief description of the item and the context in which it was created. For example, "First page of a marketing plan for a non-profit agency, which was developed for my Marketing Management Course and presented to the class." To take your caption to the next level, you could also include a list of skills developed. For example, "This project allowed me to develop skills in marketing strategy, consumer analysis, communication, and public speaking."

Materials

- Black, ringed binders (for master copy and employers' copies)
- Clear, non reflective sheet protectors
- Card stock for mounting (only for master copy; use photocopies for employers' copies)
- Divider tabs for quick reference

Assemble

The goal is a professional, clean, polished appearance. Put each item into a sheet protector. Use card stock for mounting smaller items. You could also slip one sheet of card stock into each sheet protector, which will give the pages a heavier, more professional feel. Create a cover page that includes your name, and perhaps your contact information. For example, "Portfolio of Renita Ram." Create a table of contents. Create a cover page for each category that includes the name for the respective category. You can put your divider tabs on these pages. For example, "Introduction," "Experience," "Honors" or "Projects." Omit page numbers so that you can easily reorganize, add pages, or delete pages.

Evaluate, Revise and Update

- After completing your first draft, ask for feedback from your Career Consultant, faculty, academic advisor, mentors, supervisors, alumni, and professionals in the field.
- Your portfolio should be able to stand alone without explanation. Captions can help with this.
- Keep your portfolio updated so that you can continue using it throughout your career. Keep a file at home or work to collect items you plan to add to your portfolio.

Using Your Portfolio

Use Your Portfolio in an Interview

- Become familiar with your portfolio and be prepared to elaborate on every item.
- Bring your portfolio to mock interviews and practice referring to it as you practice answering interview questions.
- Bring your master copy to interviews, as well as a copy to leave with the employer. Do not expect the employer to return the copy.
- Don't expect the portfolio to replace the interview. Answer interview questions as completely as you would if you did not have a portfolio. The portfolio should supplement the interview. For example, if an employer asks you to elaborate on your involvement in Habitat for Humanity, you can begin by explaining what you did and what you learned. At some point during your response you can introduce your portfolio into the conversation by telling the employer, "I actually brought my portfolio with me and would like to show you some examples of my experience with Habitat for Humanity." At this point you can use the divider tabs to quickly reference your "Volunteer Experience" category and show the employer the pictures, brochure, and captions that provide evidence of your experience with Habitat for Humanity, while further elaborating on your experience. Continue to use examples from your portfolio to supplement your answers to interview questions, as appropriate.

Use Your Portfolio Throughout Your Career

- To interview effectively
- To negotiate job offers
- To prepare for performance appraisals
- To negotiate promotions/raises
- To apply for bonuses/scholarships/grants
- To manage career transitions
- To track accomplishments and successes
- To assess your professional development

Resources

VCU University Career Center Resource Library:

- [Portfolio Power](#) by Martin Kimeldorf
- [Sample Portfolio](#) available to view

VCU Career Counseling and Advising:

- Schedule an appointment with your Career Consultant for a portfolio review. Visit the VCU University Career Center's web site (www.students.vcu.edu/careers) to view a list of Career Consultants by major.

Web Sites:

- <http://www.hartwick.edu/x3440.xml>
- http://www.quintcareers.com/job_search_portfolio.html
- <http://www.amby.com/tools/>
- http://www.uwrf.edu/ccs/assets/documents/handouts/Professional_Portfolio_Development.pdf