Creating and Presenting Portfolios for Creative Careers – and Beyond

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Most students preparing for a co-op or internship search need to learn traditional job search skills, such as resume writing and interviewing. Students exploring careers in the art and design industries, however, need additional support in developing and presenting a portfolio that conveys their aesthetic, creativity, technical skills, and understanding of design principles. The process of curating and showcasing projects, and presenting work — on paper, online and in person — is integral to the practice of art and design and to success in creative careers. >>>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Co-op practitioners do not need to be designers or artists in order to coach students for success, as long as they understand the basic principles of portfolio development. As with any discipline, students should be encouraged to consult with subject matter experts, employers, and professors as they refine their work and their strategy in presenting it. While the use of portfolios is expected in certain industries (namely art, design, and architecture), the practice of curating and organizing past experiences and projects, and articulating the thinking that went into them, is an essential skill in any job search. A number of web-based tools (see resource list) make it easier than ever to showcase a variety of projects online.

‹ What is a Portfolio? ›

Employers in most art and design disciplines (e.g. graphic and web design, animation, and studio art) rely on portfolios — collections of a curated work — to assess whether a candidate has sufficient mastery of technique, design principles, and tools to be successful in a job. A strong portfolio also conveys the applicant's personality and design sensibility. In hiring for design positions, employers often invest substantially more time reviewing portfolios than resumes. Typically a resume will include a link to an online portfolio, where art and design projects are featured. If the student is invited to interview, then (s)he may also bring a paper version of the portfolio to share with hiring manager. However, it is more common for the work to be presented digitally during the interview, either on the candidate's laptop or using the company's projection system. Often the primary focus of the interview is to discuss the featured projects and understand the student's creative process and reasoning.

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‹ Components of a Portfolio ›

Aspiring artists and designers usually include a mix of assignments from classes, freelance/independent work (such as logos or T-shirts created for clubs or teams), and prior internship or co-ops. Beginners who lack a body of work should be encouraged to create personal projects: for example, an original animation, a poster for an imaginary event, or a set of branded collateral for a new venture. Even for more experienced students, incorporating personal projects can give employers a sense of their interests and artistic point of view. When employers review applications of groups of students from the same institution, they often see the same class assignments again and again. Creating independent pieces can help a student stand out.

Just as we teach all students to organize their resumes so that their most impressive experiences are prominent, we should encourage candidates for design positions to choose their best pieces and organize them strategically. It is better to include fewer stronger pieces than a mix of good and mediocre, since the selection is in itself an indicator of a candidate's judgment and taste. Improving upon earlier work is always an option: a student can modify older projects with newly acquired skill and perspective.

Students should think carefully about including pieces that could be construed as overly personal or political, and consider whether they would feel comfortable presenting every item in an interview. They should group work into general categories (e.g. digital, print, and fine art). The portfolio should have the same look and feel of the resume and cover letter, and, like any professional artifact; it should be clear, well organized, and consistently formatted.

‹ Technical Considerations for Online Portfolios ›

Portfolio websites should be visually appealing, easy to navigate, and efficient to load. Unless students want to demonstrate their coding or web design abilities, it is not necessary to hand-code their sites. For most students, it is perfectly acceptable to use specialized portfolio platforms (often free or inexpensive) that allow users to upload work using a variety of pre-existing templates, without any knowledge of coding. Ideally a student would establish his or her own domain name (e.g. janedoe.com) to make finding the portfolio simple and fast. The site should look attractive on a variety of monitor sizes, browsers, and platforms.

Most sites should include:

> A homepage that makes it easy for an employer to find individual projects or project categories

> An "about" page with a short bio that conveys the student's interests and personality

> The student's contact information, with a PDF version of her resume

> Projects with thoughtful captions and explanations

Whenever possible, students should showcase work in its natural context. For example, if the project is a train schedule, show how it looks in a station setting. If it's a menu card, demonstrate how it looks with a restaurant backdrop. If the size of the work is important, include a model or another object that indicates scale. A number of free resources allow candidates to mock up their work: to show what a design would look like if it were produced in real life (for example, what a logo would look like on a billboard, T-shirt, magazine, screen, or mobile device).

‹ Descriptions vs. Explanations ›

A strong portfolio represents not just a candidate's work and judgment, but his or her thinking process and communication skills. Each piece should include a short caption that explains the project and the role the student played in the execution, with relevant attributions. For example:

> "Multi-media campaign against bullying. Stock images were modified in Photoshop."

> "Stop-motion film created with a team of animation students. All modeling and texturing was done by me."

> "Signage for Acme Company's national conference, conforming to existing brand guidelines."

The captions provide a *description* of each project. Including an *explanation*, however, can improve the employer's understanding and appreciation of the work and the thinking behind it. Similarly, incorporating a sampling of sketches and iterations can demonstrate how an applicant's ideas evolve.

For example:

In this class assignment, students were asked to design A1 sized posters promoting a play of their choice; I selected Dark Ages. *We were challenged to use two photographic or drawn elements in the design. I chose the hourglass and the digital clock face to convey the contrast between the characters' relationship in the past and present. I created both images in Illustrator. I selected a dark color palette because the play is a tragedy; and I incorporated orange to draw attention to its hopeful aspects. I chose Topknot, a sans serif typeface, because its simplicity contrasts with the elaborate artwork.*

‹ Recommendations for presenting a portfolio during an interview ›

Students should be prepared to present their portfolios during an interview, and practice briefly describing each piece, explaining the parameters (the assignment or project guidelines), and identifying their role in the project (if it was a collaboration, or if certain elements were provided by others). In addition, students should be able to talk about the reasoning behind design decisions (e.g. why a particular typeface or color scheme was selected, the meaning of specific imagery, why some iterations were developed and others discarded). Some employers will offer feedback or critique, or ask a candidate to reflect on the less successful aspects of a piece. Students should be

ready to discuss the strengths of their work, as well as areas for improvement. While they should not include weak pieces in their portfolios, it is acceptable — and even desirable — to acknowledge room for growth.

‹ Coaching Students for Portfolio Success ›

As a cooperative learning practitioner, you can provide coaching and critique to students pursuing creative careers in the following ways. Note that most of these strategies are transferable across disciplines. The practice of showcasing and communicating one's work (whether it's through a portfolio, resume, or interview) and seeking feedback from experts is something all students should learn.

> Provide general portfolio critique, just as you provide resume feedback. Even without a creative background, a co-op practitioner can comment on a site's look and feel, flow, organization, and navigation.

> Conduct a mock portfolio presentation in conjunction with a mock interview. Ask the student to share her portfolio site and describe a project, making sure she highlights key features of the work, explains the reasoning behind design decisions, and can respond to questions (e.g. Why did you choose this color scheme/layout/typeface? What different options did you explore? If you had a chance to improve this project now, what would you change?). Emphasize that in most interviews, a discussion of a student's work is fairly informal, though very important. While students don't need to memorize a script for each piece, they should feel very confident in conveying key elements, as well as their own thought process.

- Encourage the student to solicit content-related critique from faculty and industry professionals.

- Host portfolio reviews: invite employers to provide short individual feedback sessions. Typically students sign up for a 15-minute slot in which they share their work and get input from experts in their discipline. This is an excellent way to promote students' networking while strengthening employer partnerships.

- Organize student-led portfolio reviews in which more experienced students give feedback to beginners.

Practitioners in the creative industries have a lot to teach us when it comes to showcasing and sharing our work. In most art, design, and architecture programs, students regularly present their projects in class and engage in critique with classmates and professors. In our role as co-op professionals, we can help these students transfer familiar classroom practices to workplace settings, and to teach students in *all* majors how to curate and organize their work and experiences.

While applying for jobs, students pursuing creative careers must learn to articulate their thinking and decision-making as they talk about individual projects and their portfolios overall. This skill, however, is important to the job search in any industry. Whether it's through a cover letter, resume, or an interview response, a candidate needs to describe his or her work and perspective in a focused, thoughtful, and logical way. Students in all majors need to speak confidently and thoughtfully about their experiences, and to communicate the reasoning and perspective that drive their decisions.   By helping students practice these skills, we can prepare them for success in the job search — and beyond.

RESOURCES

The following tools are used frequently used by Northeastern students to showcase their work.

‹ **Tools for Creating Online Portfolios** ›

Squarespace	**Issuu**
Carbonmade	**Vimeo**
Format	**BandCamp**
Adobe Portfolio	**SoundCloud**
Semplice	**Github**

‹ **Sources for Creating Mockups** ›

A mock-up can be used show what a design would look like if it were used in real life (for example, on a billboard, T-shirt, magazine, screen, or mobile device)

SOME POPULAR OPTIONS:

behance.net

mockupworld.co

freedesignresources.net

‹ **Web Hosting** ›

Hosting services hold files and put them on the Internet.

SOME POPULAR OPTIONS:

digitalocean.com

asmallorange.com

Github Pages