

Professional Portfolios

Showcasing your Technical Communication Skills

Louellen Sue Coker

A portfolio is a technical communicator's most important marketing tool. It showcases talents and abilities while giving prospective employers or clients an opportunity to learn about the candidate's skills and career direction. Often, communicators either do not have a portfolio or have not presented their works in the best possible manner.

Professional portfolios are as indispensable as a résumé. As the focus of technical communication expands, the need for multiple media to present a communicator's work is inevitable. Rather than a portfolio, multiple portfolios—in hard and electronic—formats are necessary to successfully portray your skills and career direction.

YOUR PORTFOLIO

Your professional portfolio—whether hard copy, digital, or both—is your showcase. You have the unique opportunity to show prospective employers or clients the samples of your work that best portray your skills and career direction.

Portfolios are almost a living, breathing thing that change and evolve according to your purpose and your audience. So, for those who think you are going to get a job offer or business by throwing together a few samples of your work, rethink your assumption. With careful planning, organization, and ongoing assessment, your portfolio in its various forms will be an indispensable asset.

Types of Portfolios

As you gather your artifacts, or samples, consider the various forms your portfolio will meld into

- **Archive:** Your “master portfolio,” a collection of every possible artifact you could include in your portfolio.
- **Presentation:** A collection of the artifacts that you choose to use in a face-to-face meeting. Usually you will bind it in a professional manner.
- **Sample/Leave-Behind:** A smaller collection of artifacts, often only specific portions of your work, used to submit with an application or to leave with a face-to-face interviewer. This collection, while still

very professional, is less costly to produce and is intended to leave your hands permanently.

- **Digital:** Can be any and all of the above. Can accompany a hard copy portfolio or stand alone. An excellent way to showcase additional talents (HTML, CSS, web graphics, etc.)

Planning your portfolio

Planning is vital to a successful portfolio. You must pay careful attention to

- Your main purpose in creating the portfolio.
- Your primary audience.
- Your artifacts and their portrayal of you.
- Your intended delivery method: hard copy, digital, or both.

Planning allows you to create a portfolio that is a creative and robust expression of yourself. During this planning stage, you must gather artifacts. Artifacts include, but are not limited to:

- Your résumé.
- Samples of your writing, graphic design, document design, editing, web design, or anything you can use to promote yourself.
- Certificates or list of awards and honors.
- Fact sheet of your skills, interests, community involvement, and other information that does not fit on your resume.
- Letters of recommendation or thanks.
- Newspaper articles that address some sort of achievement.
- Reflection or process summary of each item.

As you archive your artifacts, you will want to maintain some sort of organization. Without organization, the sudden interview with just an evening's (or less) notice can turn into a nightmarish experience. In addition, you will need to consider intellectual property rights for some items and obtain permission to include them in your portfolio. If an owner does not grant permission, consider some other way to document that effort, such as a simple description or a mockup that you can include in the appropriate section.

Organizing your portfolio

Whether paper or digital, your portfolio should reflect your ability to work on different types of projects, while meeting the needs of the audience or client.

Coroflot.com, just one of many portfolio hosts advises, “To rise above the rest and truly stand out in an extremely competitive field, your work needs to go the extra mile.... Keep it simple, let the work stand for itself.” Always consider what your audience or client wants to know about you, as well as how that audience prefers to obtain that information.

Your presentation portfolio should be a culmination of your work that is consistent, organized, descriptive, and easy to use as a marketing tool. Arrange your artifacts in a meaningful way for both you and your audience. Even though you are presenting your work to your audience, your portfolio will be viewed in many different ways. Most commonly, you will have control of your portfolio and will be able to guide people through it. Sometimes, however, your portfolio will be passed around the room during the discussion or someone else will click through the pages of your digital portfolio. Your audience will evaluate both how well you can navigate your own portfolio and their own ability to navigate the portfolio.

Use some kind of connecting thread throughout your portfolio to enhance its organization. For hard copy portfolios, divider pages and tabs help you and your audience navigate artifacts quickly. A color scheme and logo or other graphical element lends consistency. Chunking similar artifacts together in any type of portfolio contributes to usability. Finally, all of these things make your portfolio memorable and give your portfolio a professional look and feel.

Inevitably, you will be asked to provide samples of your work with your application or leave samples after your interview. When doing a full-scale job search, this can become quite costly. A sample/leave-behind portfolio, in essence a “mini-portfolio,” is a good solution that meets the needs of your audience as well as your pocketbook. Rather than original documents, this portfolio contains partial documents copied onto good quality paper. For independent contractors and consultants, the leave-behind portfolio will take the form of a pamphlet or brochure. As you will not be present when your work is reviewed, it is important that you present the information in a professional manner that will compel the decision maker to contact you for further consideration.

Digital portfolios give your prospective employer or client a different method of reviewing your work. This type of portfolio can be presented via the World Wide Web or on a CD or DVD. Unlike your hard copy

portfolios, the user will be accessing your information with limited direction from you. They will make their way through the information as their motives guide them without any verbal explanation or descriptions from you.

This type of portfolio allows the prospective client to view you the source of your work and view how you work with style sheets, word processing software, HTML, web development software, and page layout software. You will want, again, to present your information in a consistent, organized, descriptive, and navigable manner. Louise Keeton explained, “Templates and consistent navigation schemes for HTML pages in a digital portfolio act like divider pages and tabs and provide the same benefits.”

Assessing your portfolio

Portfolios are never “complete.” Instead, they are a dynamic, ongoing process. You should have an update plan in mind even as you start to put together your first portfolio. There are always new artifacts to add, new skills to highlight, and less effective artifacts to remove or replace. Keeping your portfolio up-to-date is a good idea but, unfortunately, updates are frequently usurped by “real work.”

Nonetheless, just as you would update your résumé, you should also do periodic updates on your portfolio—whether digital or hard copy. To make this task a little easier, consider using some type of reminder system so that you do not forget to include artifacts at update time. Some ideas to accomplish this include:

- Keeping a special folder on your desktop and place electronic copies in it as you finish projects.
- Keeping a folder close at hand and place copies of everything you do in that folder.
- Keeping a simple list of items with dates and file locations

Any combination of these will work as long as you use it consistently. This is easier said than done but it is well worth the extra effort when you begin the process of updating your portfolio.

Finishing up

Whether hard copy or digital, you must be diligent in creating and updating your portfolio. To be competitive in our information society, you need to be able to present yourself in both hard and electronic ways. With consistency, creativity, and flexibility between your portfolios, you will be able to put your best foot forward and make yourself stand out among the competition.

REFERENCES

- (1) Ball State University Career Center,
<http://www.bsu.edu/students/careers/documents/portfolios/>.
- (2) Campbell, Dorothy M, et. al. (1997). How to Develop a Professional Portfolio. Allyn and Bacon: Boston, MD.
- (3) Coker, L. & Keeton, L. (2004) Hard Copy and Digital Portfolios: A Both/And Solution. Proceedings of the 2004 Region 5 Conference, Society for Technical Communication. Salt Lake City, UT. Oct. 21-24.
- (4) Electronicportfolios.org (Helen Barrett)
<http://www.electronicportfolios.org/distance/index.html>.
- (5) Keeton, L. & Reece, G. (2004). Résumés, Portfolios, and All the Rest. Proceedings of the 51st Annual Conference, Society for Technical Communication. Baltimore, MD. May 8-10.
- (6) Penn State Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, <http://www.psu.edu/celt/portfolio.html>
- (7) Portfolios, Advice and Resources,
http://www.coroflot.com/public/portfolio_tips.asp.
- (8) University of Washington. Educational Partnerships & Learning Technologies/Catalyst Project.
<http://catalyst.washington.edu/home.html>

Louellen S. Coker
Owner, Publications Architect
Content Solutions
1413 E. McKinney St.
Denton, TX 76209
940-384-9407, x 227

Louellen owns Content Solutions, a technical communications business, and has taught at the community college level. She has over ten years experience as a technical communicator and instructional designer. Louellen currently serves as the 2005-06 President for the Lone Star Community and has won several Technical Communication awards for quick-reference guides, monthly publications, and brochures. She holds a Master's degree in Technical Communication from the University of North Texas.