**What are they?**

* A collection of writings
* Longitudinal in nature (examining your writing over a period of time)
* Diverse in content
* Collaborative in ownership and composition

**Why use them?**

* They provide organization
* They allow the writer to write without feeling like their only reason for doing so is a **GRADE**
* They provide you with a strong sense of educational reflection and growth: **REFLECTIVE LEARNING**
* They focus on development and not just the pressure of writing a final copy (pressure that stunts the growth of your writing)

**How do you keep up with them?**

* Save everything! Every scratch, doodle, picture, etc. that goes into the writing process, KEEP IT! This sometimes gets ignored after a few months, so stay on top of things.
* The key word for me in trying to give you an assessment letter for the portfolio is DOCUMENTATION. I cannot document a student who thinks only in his head. You need to learn how to think on paper…it’s more effective and, well, “documentable.”
* Revise…but beware. See revision sheet within.
* Be organized and don’t fall behind
* Label everything
* Neatness sometimes masks other things…as does sloppy work. It doesn’t hurt to be neat…but it does hurt if you are sloppy.

HOW WILL I BE GRADED?

Unfortunately, this always seems to be the first question that comes out of the mouths of students. Why is this? Because you are a product of the educational system that has been developed. It certainly is understandable to want some form of barometer that indicates your standing in a large group of people. Unfortunately, what gets lost is the process of reflecting upon where we stand as learners and HOW we obtain information and skills (process-v-product). Hopefully you will gain an understanding (many of you already do I’m sure) that both aspects are important. Many kids today are product driven students (the grade) and not process driven students (what the am I learning here?). The learning of SKILLS is just as important as the learning of random facts. As you read further, understand that I’m offering all these opinions to you as fact (even I can win one-sided arguments ☺ ) You are allowed to take exceptions to any or all of this and write down what they are…be prepared to defend your own points to me in class. Understand that you aren’t in a position to criticize my teaching, but you may respectfully argue why I have put things into the portfolio. Ex. In a reflection, writing “I think not grading essays is pointless and will leave me without guidance” is disrespectful. However, writing “I’m a little afraid that not getting regular graded essays will leave me a little lost and I hope I may ask Mr. Brocato questions all the time about my progress…”. That’s more of a student-to-teacher tone and the only one that will be allowed. You can still make your point, but respectfully. I will ALWAYS encourage you to argue (respectfully). I try not to tell kids the “correct” reading of a piece of literature (differentiated thought is, after all, part of the joy of learning how to read and interpret) or demand that my opinions are accepted all the time. I had far too many teachers tell me what my literary opinions should be and I always resented the way in which that inhibited my joy of reading. I will try not to do that to you. However, my job as an old man and someone who has taught for many years is to keep you in the ballpark of analysis. If your analysis is in Yankee Stadium and the story centers on Fenway Park, I will let you know.

Any teacher’s class matches his/her personality. As such, the following pages will indicate to you exactly what my philosophy on education is. I didn’t write this to make you read some boring diatribe from some tedious teacher (although both points may be correct); rather, I hope it shows that I take my profession quite seriously. I try to teach in the best way that I know. I will not always succeed in doing a great job, but I will always try my best to help you learn. I’m not even close to perfect (we’ll laugh about the pathetic quality of my memory recall) and I will admit my mistakes. Throughout the year you will probably hear me say “sorry I don’t know” or “sorry I was wrong” to be followed by “but I’m doing the very best I can and I’ll get you an answer.” I expect the same honesty and effort level from you. This is a level 1 course, but that doesn’t mean I demand perfection. Please read the following pages carefully in order to gain an understanding of what the class may entail. We may not be able to manipulate our abilities, but we all can control our effort.

# THE PORTFOLIO AND THE GRADE

I will earmark certain essays that will be graded throughout the year. However, if I could give you an approximation, perhaps only 1 of every 4 assigned essays will get an actual grade. My hope is that this will ease some of the built-in pressures and restraints surrounding how one learns to become a better writer. You will have MANY writing assignments that go into your portfolio/binder (many one page responses to literature that will be assigned regularly, but also major essays, reflections, informal work and, mostly, personal writing). Hopefully, by grading only occasionally, you will not only realize where your writing “stands” in terms of standards, but also it will ease some of the common phobias that naturally inhibit the process within students. The portfolio as a whole will receive a grade each quarter (a LARGE one). Stay with me as I indicate to you some reasons why I chose to back off on placing a grade on top of each collected essay (don’t worry, they will ALL be read and you will get normal “teacher comments” on each).

By placing grades on the top of each and every essay, teachers have hammered the following thought into your head: **How will I improve my C to an A?** Many students focus only on the grade and where that places them. In other words, if your essay got a D then you failed and if it got an A then you were “where you needed to be.” But what if you made a radical attempt to change your style and fell flat on your face? What if, in your failure, you discovered some small element of style that helped improve your overall writing? Is that failure? By placing that horrid finality of a grade on top of a page, what a teacher does is say “don’t you dare take a chance because I’ll squash you if you fail. Stick with what you are comfortable with and don’t you dare take a risk in your writing.” I began to realize that kids were far too nervous and self-conscious to write to the best of their abilities. Grades, in many ways, cultivated writer’s block. If my goal is to TEACH you and allow you to IMPROVE, then why would I do anything to stunt that development? How is a student supposed to improve his writing if the thought of a grade hangs over his head? Isn’t he going to rely on what he already knows? More often than not, YES.

Here are a few general thoughts on grades:

* The portfolio process postpones grades on most papers until the end of the course/quarter (giving you time to develop and room to take risks), but portfolios DO NOT neglect the importance of a polished final product. You still need to understand that if you hand something in as a final, end all-be all product, it must be meticulous grammatically and at least “look” like your best effort has been injected into it. The periodic graded essay still allows you to see where your writing stands.
* “Grades serve only to satisfy the school’s and society’s demand for rank-order, while ongoing assessment helps students learn more about the complexities of writing and learning” (Nedra Reynolds). Studies show that this **FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT** does more for student writing/learning than any other classroom procedure. Your portfolio is designed as a means of **FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT.**
* “Students conditioned by grades often focus on the evaluation of writing much more than on the process of writing, on what they learn by writing, or on the critical thinking goals that assignments try to build” (Nedra Reynolds).
* Let’s face it…if you do something just to get a grade, you will most likely rely on the skills with which you are most comfortable. If you DO rely on those comfortable things, there is little growth as a writer. Period. Grades inhibit intellectual growth because you are reticent about taking risks and chances. It never hurts to TAKE a risk because you can always rely on “what you know” if you find the risks unrewarding.
* By not putting specific grades on individual writing assignments, you will focus on my COMMENTS rather than your grade. In other words, your “how will I get from a C to an A?” comment will turn into a “how will I change my passive language into more active prose?” question. Skill deficiencies, and not grade deficiencies, will fuel your desire to improve. You will be forced to make savvy choices in your writing. You obviously may be able to ascertain the grade from my comments, but at least you will get away from the obvious grade mentality. In trying to improve your WRITING and not your grade, you will be totally committed to your skills. If you don’t see the difference because your thinking has always been “if I try to improve my grade then the skills will follow suit,” then the mindset is no big deal right? If you DO see the difference, bravo. You will enjoy experimenting with your writing throughout the year in a stress-free, risk-taking environment. RISK taking? What is it? Go here: [RISKS](http://www.gailgiles.com/Taking_Risks.html)
* Because the grade is not stressed, it is NOT important to make yourself a great writer in my eyes. Rather, it is important to make yourself a great writer in YOUR eyes.
* Grades put a finality into writing. The best writers in the world publish only after a flurry of revisions. You will have the opportunity to revise as much as you like.
* What would you do with a paper that is absolutely correct but shows little ingenuity, risk or exploration? What about a paper that is a bit disjointed but shows remarkable intellectual exploration? This is the main problem with “labeling.”
* Your portfolio grade will be based on number of revisions, original pieces and the “effort” that goes into it. “Isn’t that subjective?” you say? Why yes it is. However, it’s no more subjective than placing a B+ on an essay because “I liked it.” Without the set grades, you will be forced to “sell” yourself (documentation), in a way, and your portfolio will be your main selling point. It needs to drip with sweat, with effort, with pain, with revision.
* You will see that I am a little skeptical regarding the “rubric generation.” Some say it takes the subjectivity out of grading. My thoughts are that the only thing they do is make you become subjective numerous times. Hmmm…”opening is thoughtful? Captivating? Unique? Creative?” Some people may think the following opening is “thoughtful”: **Webster’s defines persuasion as a…”** I personally do not. The next part of the rubric indicates “the first body paragraph sets a strong tone…” Again, according to whom? Now, we can all agree on overall “good writing” but we will all disagree when we break down a piece into 25 parts like rubrics do.
* English grades have always been somewhat arbitrary in a way, and it has always bothered me. It’s somewhat random and sends the wrong message. If you work diligently, show me you worked diligently (communication and documentation), then you should be fine. Everything counts in class: your effort, your participation, the random test/quizzes to “keep you honest” and provide a less subjective aspect to your overall grade, etc. Work on your weaknesses and things will work out very well. I’m not in the business to be cruel, but I will push you in order to meet new state standards and get the most out of you. I watch you very closely and your grade should be a reflection of your effort (and how well you communicated that effort to me). While natural skills will always be vital for success, effort needs to get fair play as well. Sound a little subjective? In many ways it is. While there are parameters and rubrics and policies in place, there is little way to avoid some subjectivity in English. Intelligence is far down on the list of what you need to succeed in this class (otherwise, we’d take an IQ test at the start of September, rank you and be done with it). The cynical students look at “documenting effort” as “playing the game” or kissing up to the teacher by displaying interest in the subject. Fact of the matter is that you will eventually have a boss who is looking for his employee to not only complete work, but be a model professional by displaying qualities of eagerness, passion for the job and energy. May as well learn those qualities now. These portfolios work and are proven. I have seen it for years now. But, they only work for the **mature, open minded, independent learner.**
* You have a great deal of autonomy and freedom in your development. Your goal is to avoid being that student who works a great deal but doesn’t get the credit for it. There is no way to avoid being held in comparison to your peers in terms of skill; keep in mind, though, that your effort plays a huge role in any class. If you have any doubts about where you stand in terms of a grade, let your effort ease your trepidation.
* Get to a point where you are writing for YOU and not for me. Re-writes should be an attempt for improvement not for me, but for you. I’ll read them obviously, but further comments may be minimal.
* If you have any questions at all about your PROGRESS in the class, schedule a conference with me and I should be able to give you an approximation of where you stand at any time. This communication aspect is up to you. There should be no surprises as long as you keep the lines open. Lastly, the first line of communication should be THROUGH ME. I’ll be honest in telling you that most problems can and will be worked out with close communication. This isn’t always easy for 9th graders to do, but you need to learn how to be an advocate for yourself as soon as you can. Conversely, if you feel you need more feedback on your writing, schedule a conference and we will sit down and talk about things.
* By not concentrating on grades, you will be allowed to take risks in your writing and, thus, find your best voice and style. It’s ok to write something and then say “man did I bomb on that one.” Best part of the p-folio is that you don’t get burned for taking chances. Therefore…take as many as you’d like.
* Many teachers do not assign enough writing because, quite frankly, there isn’t enough time to correct it all. This isn’t a pity party, but try to see things from another perspective. If I were to assign an essay to all my classes, I would have to read and correct 100 of them. While it may only have taken you an hour to write, each time you write an essay it takes me 12 hours to correct them all. That doesn’t include preparing for the class. You can see why not enough writing is assigned. This portfolio approach allows you to do the proper amount of writing and practice your craft without drowning the teacher. I will not read every single piece you write, because if every student wrote 6 extra essays I would have 250 to grade at the end of the quarter and it would take over 100 hours. I ask that you email me one essay per quarter for me to give detailed feedback. The rest of the writing is essentially your practicing and utilization of keys I provide in class. The folio allows you to write and work on writing over the course of the year…6 essays over a 3 month quarter is manageable.

### You will need Hard Work and an Open Mind…

How often do you think about your writing and learning? Academia has forced us to sometimes become unfeeling, grade oriented learners. How will you get to a point where you get feeling back into education if you lack some now? By working together, hopefully it won’t take long.

* Along these lines, how many things in education do you do JUST FOR YOU? Think about that for a second. Do you take any joy in your learning? Thankfully, I still find that the majority of kids still love to learn…but that number dwindles a bit each year. Let’s get kids back on the right side of learning. Good attitudes. Positive learning mindsets.
* Try to get to a point where you love to learn. My assignments are, for the most part, purposefully open-ended. Why? Because if I asked for “this, this, this and this” what am I going to get? That’s right. This, this, this and this. Most students LOVE that structure…because it does most of the work for them in a way. If you are confused about something, ask questions. Don’t, however, expect me to do the thinking for you. Many kids choose to blame an assignment on “lack of clarity” because taking personal blame is hard for both kids and adults. Here is your license: **I give you permission to ask ALL THE QUESTIONS YOU WANT ABOUT ANYTHING…AND KEEP ASKING UNTIL YOU ARE SATISFIED WITH THE ANSWER.**  I am going to frustrate you a bit because I may just say “the theme is man’s inhumanity to man…do something with it and present it to the class.” WONDERFUL room for exploration and intellectual growth, but also tremendous cause for frustration. If you are in a class that doesn’t frustrate you a bit, chances are you aren’t learning much. Do you agree with this? Will you accept the adversity or will you resent it?
* Communication is, arguably, the most important skill you can have (with writing being a large part of the equation). If taking risks, making mistakes, and learning from errors frightens to a point of avoidance, perhaps you haven’t discovered your potential yet. Learning is not a destination, it’s a journey.
* I cannot stop students from “playing the game.” Ex: doing things last minute, subtle to overt cheating, kids who read synopses rather than the literature. Unfortunately, those who have a passion to learn and are building strong character traits sometimes get the same grade as the shortcut artists…must be VERY frustrating! I hope that the true learners understand that, in the grand scheme of things, the only thing that is important is their own learning and not some group competition. Lifetime success comes from determination, work ethic, being true to yourself, perseverance, and pure effort. You are forming your lifetime character traits right now, hard as that may be to fathom. If you want to have a future you to be proud of, start caring for the foundation now. What if, in the future, you had a person in your family in need of medical care. Do you want a doctor who cut corners and “played the game” in high school? An “internet short cutter?” Someone who read summaries of the medical journals? If he did these things in high school, don’t kid yourself into thinking he didn’t do it in college as well. You personal habits are formed here. So, look around and take note. You all know those kids who cut corners and seemingly have everyone bamboozled. Do they *really,* though. If you are frustrated because you follow rules and get the same grade as Mr. Shortcut-Cheater, ask yourself “who truly is winning here?” Well, YOU are.