

Starting in on Portfoliosâ€” Now!

from Susan Richman

[This article first appeared in Issue 70 (Spring 2000) of the *PA Homeschoolers* newsletter.]

Is this a familiar scene to you? It was January, halfway through the school year, and my daughter Hannah's homeschooling work for the year was piling up. It was stacked in various 'portfolio bins' about the house, as well as in folders and backpacks and cluttered desktops, and many computer files. But none of it was yet organized in our final 3" thick portfolio notebook for the year. That notebook was still sitting on a shelf in our project room quite empty and forlorn.

I kept on saying that we'd get to it this coming Friday, or on Sunday afternoon, or next Mondayâ€” but I kept letting these little deadlines slip away as the normal busy pace of our days took over instead. But finally we did itâ€” we took that most important step of getting started. I usually like my kids to work on their portfolios themselves, but I quickly realized that the task was too daunting for Hannah to begin herself at this point. It was my fault we'd waited so long to get going, and so it was my responsibility to get us started.

Surprisingly, the whole process of sorting work to go into the notebook by subject area, punching holes, writing some brief captions, and opening and closing the rings repeatedly as I put pages in, took only a couple of hoursâ€” and once I got going, I didn't want to stop.

And the advantages to starting in on this now, before the spring rush? It let me see where we were at this point in the year, let me see what areas were really strong (reading, math, geography, French) and which were weaker or showed little documentation (science, fitness and health). It gave us more of a sense of direction for the rest of the year, and a new motivation to try harder in subjects that are not our greatest natural interest. Much better to gain this now, rather than in late May.

Now the whole process is in motion, and entering new sample work is so much easierâ€” we don't just have to 'dump' work in an overflowing bin. Now it is easy to ask Hannah to add in more captions to field trip brochures, or to pop her latest writing club essay into the proper subject divider.

Some tips for types of work to include in this year's portfolio:

1) Sample final tests in any subject area -- that is, if they also include the questions. It's nice to see final grades for tests, but even better if the evaluator can see what the questions actually were and what the student was being asked to do. If your child has taken part in academic competitions that you've found interesting, do include that also -- just the fact that you all took the initiative to take part says a lot, regardless of how well your student did. And if you prefer not doing any summary tests at all, you can still have a fine and very interesting portfolio -- tests can just be a handy way of summarizing the types of learning your child has been focusing on this year. And tests should probably never be the only type of evidence you show.

2) Samples of best work. Some families like to have a student choose which, say, five written compositions are their very favorite pieces. These might be highlighted with little post-it note 'flags', or put in the front of that subject divider, so that an evaluator can be sure to read these specially selected writings. This can really help out during a busy evaluation meeting, so that an evaluator knows what you really want her to read carefully -- some kids write so many wonderful pieces during a year that it would be impossible to read through them all in one sitting. Adding brief notes from the student or parent about why these were considered the best would be a nice touch, and show that some real thought went into the selection. Remember, ideally a portfolio is not just 'all' of your work tossed into a pile, but a meaningful selection. Further, you should check to see that kids are showing several different types of writing, such as personal essays, formal essays showing understanding of subject matter, research writing, poetry or short stories or plays, science experiment reports, recaps of field trip outings, writing strictly for 'fun', and more. Showing only one type of writing shows you have limits - showing a range of writing shows versatility and that you've really stretched yourself. For lots of good examples of a full range of student writing, you might want to check out our book *Writing From Home* (see catalog, page 31).

3) Samples that show the range of work completed, and the different types of learning activities used over the year. Hopefully most families do something beyond using a textbook in at least some subject areas, and some sense of these other types of learning should be included to make a really complete portfolio. For instance, in world geography Hannah is completing the second half of a distance course, and she takes regular on-line quizzes and takes tests and completes readings in her textbook. But that's hardly all we do in this favorite subject area, and we also include info on the wide-ranging preparation she does for the National Geographic Bee, the many geography videos we watch and talk about together, the read-aloud articles from National Geographic magazine, newspaper articles and almanac readings, map studies using our huge map collection, computer games and atlases, as well as other resource and reference books. Relating something about these other ways of learning really broadens the portfolio, and shows that we are using the distance course as a stepping stone to much broader learning. Sometimes parents think that the only types of 'papers' that count are typical worksheets and workbooks -- lots more can really be included, and once you get going you'll find ways to document these many other ways you go about learning.

4) Samples that show the process of a major project, such as sharing a rough draft of a piece of writing that shows how extensive revisions and rewritings and corrections were made by the student after conferring with a parent, or after doing self-evaluation. Just don't think this means showing every rough draft of every piece of writing! Listing the steps a student went through to complete a major research project -- such as brainstorming to focus the topic, going to a major library, using the Internet, reading related books or magazine articles, interviewing people in the field, etc., can all give a feel for the process involved, especially for high school students who expect to earn credit for a research paper in a subject. It is not impressive for an evaluator to get a feeling that a student did little beyond paraphrasing a couple of intro reference books, again especially if this is the sole way a student hopes to demonstrate credit. Demonstrate that the project was indeed a major effort that took time, not a quickie last minute snow job.

5) Have your older students write summaries for every subject area, where they describe the approach used, what goals were met, and special things they accomplished over the year. It should be especially encouraged for kids to relate about any special initiatives they took

over the year -- such as writing for a student newsletter, developing their own plan of study, entering an academic or talent competition, start a study group or activity related to the field, or whatever. Evaluators will appreciate having copies of these summaries to help as they write up their evaluation letter afterwards. And parents might want to write up similar summaries for younger students -- as an evaluator, I can really tell you how appreciated these are! Helps me see more of the way your family went about learning, helps me see a bit of the rest of the picture that might not show up in the actual work samples.

6) Make sure your portfolio is organized in a clear way and this usually does take some parental input and advice, especially when kids are just starting to take initiative in helping put together their portfolio of work for the year. Don't just hand over a stack of textbooks, workbooks, and loose papers. Organize, put papers into notebooks or pocket folders, keep similar work together, show you took time to put this all together. This does not need to be a huge job, especially if you start in early (I'm allowed to give this advice now that I've finally followed it!). You don't need to take a 'Creative Memories' class to put together a great portfolio (though those ones are always a treat!), but you do need to make the portfolio understandable, accessible, and clear.

For more ideas on putting together a portfolio that you'll all enjoy looking through for many years, check out our [Guide to the PA Homeschool Law](#). And do get started now and avoid the late spring panic.