The English Major Portfolio Critical and Reflective Essay: A Guide

Why do I need to write a critical and reflective essay?
The English Department collects exit portfolios because we want to understand how our majors develop over time -- how they grow as writers and thinkers about language and literature. Specifically, our goal is that by the time they graduate, our majors can

1. Read texts carefully and analytically, with an understanding and appreciation of the complexity of their verbal, rhetorical, and/or literary characteristics.
2. Communicate/create in multiple modes (writing, speech, visual/multimedia) appropriately adapted to the purpose at hand, and with an awareness of the needs of the imagined audience.
3. Carry out independent research: conceiving of questions to pursue, identifying and accounting for other relevant voices, and appropriately registering one’s engagements with those voices using the conventions of the discipline.
4. Grow conversant with a broad range of texts (representing, e.g., different forms, different genres, different social and cultural perspectives, and different historical periods) in order to recognize something of the great variety of artistic and rhetorical expression comprehended by the field of English Studies.
5. Recognize the ways that texts are situated in their cultural and historical settings—both shaped by and shaping the cultures and moments in which they were produced—in order to appreciate both the place of those texts in larger traditions and to appreciate the ways that the examination of those texts can open onto questions of broader historical and cultural import.
6. Become acculturated to disciplinary modes of thinking and inquiry, while remaining reflexive about their influence. Students should understand the different kinds of questions that structure inquiry in the discipline and should be conversant with the kinds of critical vocabulary and theoretical frameworks that enable conversations in the discipline to proceed.

We can learn something about these matters simply by looking at the artifacts in your portfolio, but your essay will provide us with additional significant insight into your individual learning processes. Simply seeing an excellent paper doesn’t help us understand how it was nurtured by and/or grew out of your full experience as an English major at Eastern. Furthermore, we want our students to be involved in our ongoing discussions about our programs and teaching; your essay allows you to lend your voice to that conversation in a lasting and structured way. Finally, we believe that writing this essay will help you think about the skills you’ve developed and the experiences you’ve had in ways that will allow you to write or speak more intelligently and effectively about them in the future—in job interviews, for example, or on graduate school applications.

What are the basic requirements for the essay?

- It should be 750 to 1250 words in length.
- It should introduce your readers (English department faculty) to the portfolio as a whole, making clear how your portfolio reflects the sum of your education at Eastern, both within the English major and within the larger context of a Liberal Arts university.
- It should convey to us your sense of how and how well (or not so well) you have developed the skills and abilities listed as our goals for the English major.
How should I approach and organize the essay?

Before writing, gather your thoughts.

- Review your completed portfolio grid, and write down some informal notes as you consider the following: what does it tell you about how much practice you’ve had in developing different kinds of skills? About which skills are your strongest? About which are not so strong?
- Look at Eastern’s goals for all its students as reflected in the guiding principles and core abilities for the Liberal Arts Core, and write more informal notes as you think about how the artifacts in your portfolio might (or might not) show the influence of those goals on your educational experience.

After that initial idea-gathering, consider what organizational pattern makes the most sense given what you want to say about your portfolio and the educational experience it evidences. There is no one right organizational pattern, but here are some suggested approaches you might consider.

- Organize your essay chronologically, tracing your development from your first gateway course (probably ENG 202 Intro to English Studies) through the senior capstone experience. Point to specific artifacts in the portfolio that help illustrate what you see as your steps forward, your stalemates, and/or your steps backward. Consider directly quoting your artifacts to offer specific evidence and illustration for your points.
- Organize your essay by the English major goals (1 through 6) and the LAC principles and core abilities, referring whenever possible to at least one artifact in the portfolio that illustrates where you find yourself in relationship to that goal, principle, or ability as your time at Eastern draws to an end. Again, consider directly quoting your artifacts to illustrate your assessment of your abilities.
- Organize your essay artifact by artifact in order of (in your opinion) weakest to strongest or vice versa. For each artifact, discuss why you ordered it as you did. That is, why is it the strongest, second strongest, or weakest, for example?

Choose the approach that’s best for you. However, try to avoid reflecting on how particular teachers influenced you; while some professors may have had more impact on you than others, you’re the one who did the work. We want you to take responsibility for that and analyze your own work, not that of your teachers.

Overall, the reflective essay gives you the opportunity to influence how your readers see your work, to convince them why it should be read in a particular way. It can also help you to see something you didn’t realize before—specifically what, how, and how much you learned while at Eastern.

Remember, too, that to complete this requirement you need only turn in the portfolio; it will not be graded, and therefore your GPA or graduation will not be affected if you provide us with constructive criticism about your courses or other aspects of the English major.

That said, it is constructive criticism that will help us. Imagine this: several of your professors are sitting around a table reading your papers, hearing your voice comment about your own work, and thinking about using your comments to bring about change. What kind of voice do you want them to hear? What kind of voice do you think will be the most persuasive and make them consider your views thoughtfully? That’s the voice you’ll want to use in your reflective essay.