

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. We can learn a great deal about the extent to which our majors have succeeded in mastering our department learning outcomes (listed in the appendix) just by reading your work, but we also want **your insight** into your 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 in the appendix.
- It should give us insight into how you've used opportunities and resources offered to you in your classes and at Eastern generally to grow as a thinker and writer (for example, how you used feedback from your instructor or peers to improve a piece of writing).

How should I approach and organize the essay?

Before writing, gather your thoughts.

- Review the learning goals and outcomes for the English major, listed in the appendix below, and write down some informal notes as you consider the following: which of those outcomes do the pieces in your portfolio illustrate? Have you practiced some of these skills more often than others? Which skills are your strongest? Which are less strong?
- Look at Eastern's goals for all its students as reflected in the learning outcomes 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 pieces in the portfolio that help illustrate what you see as your steps forward, your stalemates, and/or your steps backward. Consider directly quoting your work to offer specific evidence and illustration for your points.

- Organize your essay by the English major goals (1 through 4) and the LAC learning outcomes, referring whenever possible to at least one piece 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 work to illustrate your assessment of your abilities.

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!

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 work, hearing your voice comment about that 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.

Appendix: English Department Goals and Learning Outcomes

1. Adapt your use of writing, speech, and visuals to communicate effectively to a variety of audiences and purposes. Mastery of this goal includes the ability to

- a) create texts for a variety of audiences and purposes
- b) articulate how your work is designed to serve a particular audience and purpose
- c) present ideas in a visual form
- d) present ideas orally
- e) revise your work based on feedback from peers and/or instructors
- f) articulate how skills practiced in the English major are reflected in work completed in other courses and settings.
- g) articulate areas of growth and continuing challenges in their development as thinkers, researchers, readers, and writers

2. Develop convincing analyses of, arguments about, and responses to a range of texts, supported by in-depth engagement with: textual details; literary and rhetorical conventions and devices; and conversations in the field. Mastery of this goal includes the ability to

- a) summarize the contents of a text effectively
- b) craft a thesis statement
- c) incorporate evidence to support a thesis/claim
- d) craft a claim that puts two or more texts into conversation
- e) analyze textual details in depth (i.e., close reading)
- f) explain how literary and rhetorical elements and devices contribute to a text's meaning and the readers' experiences
- g) respond to the conventions of different genres and/or forms

3. Produce independent research and/or creative activity that contributes to broader cultural, artistic, and scholarly conversations, responding thoughtfully and respectfully to a variety of perspectives. Mastery of this goal includes the ability to

- a) compose research questions that meet the demands of the task
- b) cite the ideas of others ethically in ways appropriate to the genre, audience, and purpose
- c) discriminate between reliable and unreliable sources
- d) integrate quotations or paraphrases into your work
- e) synthesize the perspectives offered by multiple sources
- f) articulate why you agree with another's ideas
- g) explain respectfully how and why your perspective disagrees with or complicates another's ideas
- h) explain how your work contributes to an existing intellectual and/or artistic conversation

4. Engage with writers from a range of backgrounds and worldviews, and articulate an understanding of how cultural, historical, and ideological contexts can shape both the creation and the reception of texts across time and now.

- a) apply specific scholarly and/or artistic vocabulary and concepts to enrich your work
- b) describe how a text responds to specific historical or current events and attitudes
- c) describe how a text reflects its author's identities and experiences (e.g., race, class, sexuality, gender)
- d) analyze and/or critique representations of identities and experiences (e.g., race, gender, class, citizenship, (dis)ability, indigeneity, sexual orientation, and/or religion) in a text