Writing portfolio assessment offers a holistic means of grading your students work — and their progress — across a period of time. Typically, a writing portfolio includes a reflective cover letter and annotated copies of students’ major writing projects (including the process work associated with them). The portfolio is curated and organized by students to communicate something specific about their writing and their development as writers to you. Rather than make a case for a particular grade, the portfolio gives students an opportunity to invite their audience to read their oeuvre of work in a particular way.

Writing is a process — an ongoing, often recursive process. Even competent and confident writers can falter in new writing situations, which are complex and dynamic. Research has shown that writers faced with new or challenging writing tasks often produce less effective prose than they might otherwise. Writing portfolios account for these well-documented characteristics of writing. By assessing your students work in a portfolio, you offer them an opportunity to show you how they’d like you to see their work, to share with you their own evaluations of their strengths and weaknesses, and to describe you the where they’ve come from and where they see themselves headed as writers. Your students will already be accustomed to writing portfolios; every composition course offered at UCI is assessed using portfolios.

If you opt for portfolio assessment in your UDW course, design your syllabus, your course calendar, and your grading schema with this end goal in mind. You can choose to grade writing projects individually and then offer students a (typically hefty) grade on their portfolios at the end of the quarter. Alternatively, you can assign grades for participation and process work throughout the quarter but allow the portfolio to be the heaviest weighted project in your course. Revision is at the heart of the portfolio-style course.

Portfolio assessment requires a rethinking of drafting, commenting, and evaluating student work. The CWCC can work with you to think through some of these changes. Portfolio prompts and rubrics can be adapted from LDW courses, designed in tandem with the CWCC, or co-created with your students early in the quarter.

Logistically, your students can submit paper portfolios to you, produce an “offline” portfolio using word processing software, or build an online e-portfolio using Canvas. (Students will typically have used Canvas e-portfolios in their LDW courses.) You can also experiment with more “live” portfolio options, like student blogs or websites.

For more information about portfolio assessment, check out Chapter 5, “Guiding Students to Construct Reflective Portfolios,” in Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition (Eds. Roen et al; NCTE, 2002), or contact the CWCC.