

Tips on Creating a Career Portfolio

Dr. Renée J. Fontenot
Georgia College & State University

Finding a job after graduation can seem like a daunting task. Even if you worked while in school, you may not feel as though you know how to find a “real job”, that career position you have been training for over the past four years. There are no magic bullets but there are some things you can do to help differentiate yourself from other fresh college graduates that may be applying for the same positions.

The first step is to have a résumé that speaks to the employer. For help on creating a résumé make an appointment with Ms. Gerri McCord, Career Advisor, J. Whitney Bunting College of Business, Atkinson 205.

Career Portfolio

Your résumé is a brief synopsis of your work experience. A career portfolio is a detailed collection of documents that provides substance and evidence to substantiate your résumé. The career portfolio is not something that you send with your résumé or that you leave behind during an interview. It is supporting evidence of your accomplishments and abilities that you share with the interviewer during your interview. Your portfolio should reflect your style, the breadth of your accomplishments, and the relevant skills and knowledge that an employer will recognize and value.

To create your career portfolio begin with a suitable notebook or portfolio that allows you to add and remove items as needed. A notebook that has the clear sleeve on the outside so that you can put your name on the spine and a copy of your résumé on the front cover is appropriate. Doing this provide you and the interviewer cues during your interview to help remember important facts: the interviewer can easily see your name and you can easily see your résumé to prompt you if you draw a blank.

Contents of a Portfolio

The contents of your portfolio, like your résumé, should be carefully selected and customized for each interview to highlight those aspects of your experience, be it work, academic, or personal, that will be most important to the employer with whom you are meeting. A table of contents will allow you an interviewer to easily find those elements that are most important to them. Consider using dividers to help organize your portfolio into three section: the first section is the fundamentals of who you are to an employer; the second section is a demonstration of what you have done; and the third section is validation that others found value your contributions.

First Section: Who I am

The first section begins with a current copy of your résumé. To make the most of your portfolio consider putting the necessary information that you will need to complete a job application after your résumé. Most job applications will ask for a list of former employers, including dates of employment, contact information, and possible salary/wage. In addition, a list of institutions where you have received training and the address for these is commonly required. A list of at least three references is usually also required. Your references should be individuals who can speak to your past work experience. Occasionally, you might be asked for personal references, consider these long time acquaintances who will speak to your character. Inclusion of your current transcript showing acceptable grades shows the breadth of the course knowledge you have acquired. If you have less than admirable grades consider a sheet listing the courses you have completed. Also include a copy of your experiential transcript. This document differentiates you significantly as very few schools do this level of tracking of service contributions by students. By preparing these documents and having them in your portfolio you will always have the complete information necessary if you are asked to complete a job application.

Second Section: What I have done

The second section of your portfolio is the heart. Start this section with a one page summary of the major projects that you have done that are relevant to marketing or to the position for which you are interviewing. This is an elongated explanation of what you placed in the résumé. Consider having copies of this sheet with the same header information as your résumé. This page you might consider leaving behind after you have discussed the projects in your interview.

In this section you should put examples of your work that most closely relates to the position for which you are applying. These may or may not be from jobs that you were paid but can include papers that you wrote for classes, or examples of things you created as part of a volunteer experience where the skills and knowledge relevant to your desired position were learned or applied. It is likely that you have had one or more classes where you worked for a real client or did case work where the skills that an employer is seeking were learned and practiced. Even if you were not paid these represent your experience.

Some examples of projects and papers that might be common to marketing majors at GCSU that represent viable experience to a future employer include: business plans, strategic marketing plans, integrated marketing communications plans, distribution or pricing strategies for clients, marketing research reports, analysis of target markets, development of advertising or other marketing communications pieces, creation and analysis of databases, ...

Often these projects have been done in small groups, make sure that you can explain the entire project and highlight the role that you played. Teamwork is an important business skill. Having been part of a team that successfully met the goals of a client and/or course requirement shows future employers that you can be a team player for them as well. When working in teams make sure you always have a final copy, in electronic form for easy reproduction, of the original paper or project.

In your career portfolio consider placing a copy of the final report. If you have several such experiences, inclusion of the entire report for each example will make your portfolio too cumbersome and not as useful. Your portfolio should be easy to flip through and see a wide variety of your talents. As your experiences grow consider placing the executive summary or abstract of the projects or papers in the portfolio and include only the best example in its entirety.

Not all work presented in your portfolio needs to be formal projects or papers that you have written. Perhaps you help create a flyer for your church youth camp, wrote a press release for your sorority or fraternity's efforts in helping a local charity, or designed a web page for a small business. These represent work experiences that are likely to be relevant to a future employer.

As you select the items to include for any particular interview, think about the key thing that the item represents to the prospective employer. From the job placement announcement and your research about the company you should have an understanding of the important skills and abilities that the employer is looking for in a new hire. The interviewer will not have time to look at every item, you need to provide in a sentence or even a few key words a summary of each example. These small notes can be footers or headers across the examples, or might be labels or yellow sticky notes attached to the front of each example in the lower right corner.

Whatever you decide, be consistent throughout your portfolio. You want these notes to be easy to read as the interviewer flips through your portfolio. You also would like them to be interesting enough for them to take a moment longer and give further inspection to the example. A note that simply says "Flyer" is not as intriguing as "Flyer, three color printing, placed on campus bulletin boards".

Third Section: What others think of my abilities

The third section of your portfolio is to show your accolades. In this section include a letter that you solicit from a professor that you felt can speak to your accomplishments. This would be like an open letter of recommendation. If you have received awards or honors include the certificates or copies of the certificates. Letters of praise from organizations where you might have volunteered or participated in a leadership role can also be worthy of an employer's notice.

Be choosy in the items you include in your portfolio. You want them to speak well of you and to be credible. Think about what is meaningful to your prospective employer. Participating in a bike club as president may demonstrate leadership skills but it also indicates an interest that is not necessarily work related – biking. Most would see biking as a suitable recreational activity. However, president of an extreme sports group not only demonstrates leadership but might also be interpreted as someone who takes unnecessary risks. For the prospective employer, does the leadership skills you learned as president outweigh the potential risk taking behaviors that you might bring to the work place?

Using Your Portfolio

The final part of this portfolio is the use of it. When you walk into an interview have it on top ready to discuss. Do not leave it in your briefcase or on the floor next to your chair,... Having it in front of you signals the employer it is something you will share with them. If you are using a notebook with your name on the spine, place the notebook so that the spine faces the interviewer – this keeps your name in front of them. Remember that the interviewer will be seeing many candidates, you need to distinguish yourself from the rest. Do not rush to have the interviewer look through your portfolio.

After you get into the heart of your interview, an opportunity should present itself when you are talking about your experience, open the portfolio and turn it so that the interviewer can see your work. Consider directing them to specific elements that demonstrate a skill or ability that they have listed in their ad or have mentioned in the interview. Do not leave copies of your projects behind, or allow copies to be made. These were done with the understanding to the client that the information would not be shared or used by others.

Final Comments

Students often ask how to list class related work on their résumé. The following are two examples:

Cards From Heaven, Milledgeville GA. Spring 2007 Strategic Marketing Course client project.. Researched, developed, and presented a yearlong distribution strategy to aid Danish client in reaching the U.S. market. Plan included product assortment decisions and channel decisions. The final project included a formal presentation including a budget and timeline. In small group as part of the capstone marketing course, worked with client to create a viable solution to her strategic distribution problems. Presentations were made to the client in a competitive environment with multiple teams vying for the clients' acceptance. Served as team captain, reported directly to the course instructor and served as the primary contact for the client.

Milledgeville Country Club, Milledgeville, GA. Fall 2006. Working in a small group in Advertising & promotions course, worked closely with general manager to develop a yearlong Integrated Marketing Communications plan to attract new members and increased participation of existing members at the country club. Project required research and analysis of the marketing environment and the assessment through a situation analysis that lead to development of the yearlong campaign. Campaign included development of proto type implementables, yearlong budget, and timeline. The completed project included written report and an oral presentation using PowerPoint to the client and other interested parties. Presentations were made to the client in a competitive environment with multiple teams vying for the clients' acceptance. Served as team secretary, kept log of meeting notes and posted on web page for team members, instructor and client to review.

If you are applying for a wide variety of jobs where you might be rearranging the contents of your portfolio frequently, consider using plastic sleeves for your contents. Alternatively you might use hole reinforcers to help protect your documents from tearing on the binder rings. Never allow torn or soiled items to remain in your portfolio; always replace them with a clean fresh copy.

There is not a standard template that you need to follow for creating your personal portfolio. The ideas presented here are not meant to cover all examples but provide a basic framework. The internet provides a plethora of examples. As your experience through interviewing and work increases you will gain a better understanding of those things that work best for you. The best working portfolio is one that provides employers with a reason to hire you!