

The Ten Commandments of Effective Portfolios

BY KIRK R. ST. AMANT
Twin Cities Chapter

Technical communication teachers often encounter the question, “What should I know about portfolios?” A set of steps or “commandments” that focus on portfolio development can help students get jobs in the technical communication industry. This article presents ten commandments of portfolio development. While these commandments are designed for students looking for their first technical communication job, they can also be of help to seasoned technical communicators who are on the job market.

#1: Thou Shalt Have a Portfolio

A portfolio is a *must* if you wish to go into a career in technical writing. Even if job ads don't directly ask for you to submit a portfolio, anticipate that you will be asked to submit one later in the job screening process.

#2: Thou Shalt Include Multiple Samples in a Portfolio

A portfolio should contain three to five writing samples,

and a reviewer should be able to read each writing sample in a single sitting. The more items you include in your portfolio, the shorter, more concise, or more graphically oriented they should be.

#3: Thou Shalt Display Layout and Design Skills in Portfolio Pieces

Most technical communicators are expected to have some basic layout and design skills as well as some familiarity with different software tools (and to some extent, basic online programming or online design tools such as *Dreamweaver*). The portfolio is your chance to display the range of your skills. Thus, a portfolio should include pieces done in a given layout program (for example, *QuarkXPress* or *PageMaker*) or printouts (full color if possible) of Web sites you've designed. The greater variety of media and programs you can demonstrate proficiency in, the better your chances of landing the job.

#4: Thou Shalt Include a Cover Sheet in the Portfolio

Perhaps the most important but least remembered part of the portfolio is the cover sheet.



The people reviewing your portfolio should have a guide that explains the following points:

- What they are looking at.
- What each sample represents in terms of type and purpose of writing.
- What layout programs or software were used for the design.

In short, portfolio reviewers should understand what they are looking at and what skills each entry demonstrates. The cover sheet can be a single page at the front of the portfolio or a half-page that introduces each entry in the portfolio.

When designing a cover sheet, remember to be brief. Rely on short sentences, short paragraphs, and bulleted lists to maximize your reviewer's time. Also, do not take credit for work you did not do. Instead, in the cover sheet (or sheets), make sure to use notations such as "Layout done by colleague at company X; photography provided by company Y." Remember that while such a step might seem self-evident, it is often forgotten in the rush to assemble a portfolio.

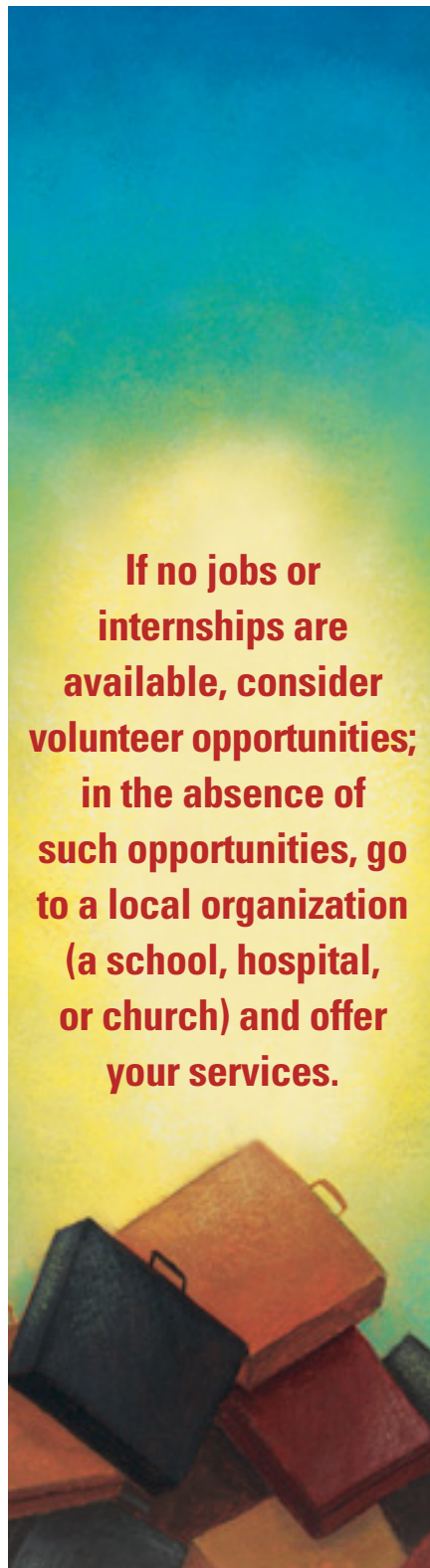
#5: Thou Shalt Present Different Genres/Styles of Writing in a Portfolio

It is important to include different kinds of writing in a portfolio. Reviewers want to see that you are comfortable writing in a variety of styles (and media) to achieve various purposes with different audiences. For this reason, the entries in your portfolio should demonstrate your ability to write for different audiences about different subjects in order to achieve different purposes. A basic portfolio for a technical writer should include the following:

1. A set of instructions (for example, an explanation of how to use Adobe *Photoshop* to convert full color images to black and white ones)
2. A report on a key issue affecting a given industry (for example, a synopsis of how globalization might affect development in the software industry)
3. An evaluation of a particular product,

idea, or strategy (for example, the benefits of using a particular kind of layout software)

Do not use the same piece of writing three times in three different formats or



media. For example, your portfolio should not include a paper on how to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), a magazine spread of that same subject, and a Web page that also shows how to perform CPR. Rather, to showcase your writing and your design abilities, present three different kinds of writing in three different media.

#6: Thou Shalt Use Samples of Professional Work in a Portfolio

While papers from classes are acceptable for portfolios, professional pieces are better. For this reason, you might want to accept jobs or internships that will allow you to create professional materials (brochures, magazine articles, Web pages, etc.). If no jobs or internships are available, consider volunteer opportunities; in the absence of such opportunities, go to a local organization (a school, hospital, or church) and offer your services. In presenting yourself, you might say "Hi, I'm Jane Doe, and I've noticed that you might be able to use this kind of communication piece to help with your daily/weekly/monthly activities." Again, the goal is to produce documents that look professional and that are used to achieve professional objectives.

One key thing to remember when using work or volunteer materials as part of a portfolio is to get the permission of the organization in writing first. Never include materials that were produced as part of a job or volunteer activity unless you have permission to do so, for you could be violating company policy, breaking copyright law, or even divulging trade secrets. To avoid legal and ethical problems, always make sure you have the approval of a manager—either in the form of a printed e-mail message or a signed and dated letter or memo—before you include materials in your portfolio.

#7: Thou Shalt Make Multiple Copies of the Portfolio

Don't rely on a single portfolio and don't become attached to any particular portfolio. (If you have only a single portfolio and it gets destroyed the day you

are supposed to present it to a prospective employer; what will you do?) Also, because different employers will want you to display different types of skills, it will be difficult to create a single portfolio that meets the expectations of all prospective employers. Here's how to create multiple portfolios:

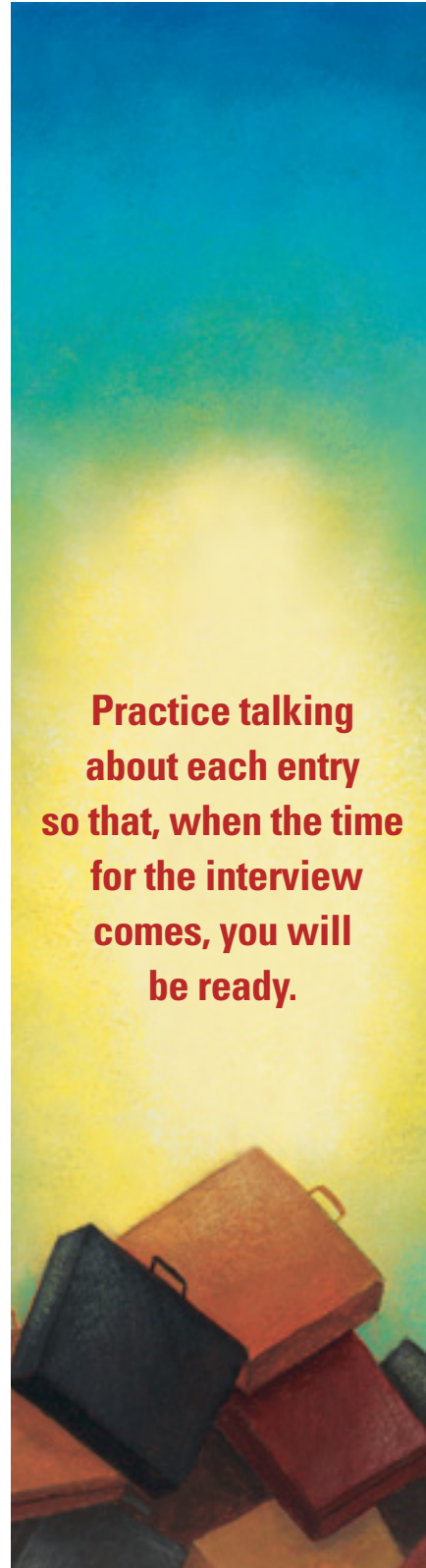
1. Figure out all the skills a prospective employer might be looking for. These skills would include writing in different styles, designing different kinds of materials, using different programs, and designing materials for different media. A review of the job ads or even a call to a contract/temp work agency can help you learn what skills employers in a particular field or at a particular company will want to see.
2. Design at least one example you can use to demonstrate each of the skills you identified as critical.
3. Make multiple copies of each sample. If possible, make the copies in color, and always use original printings. Photocopies give the portfolio an unprofessional appearance, and certain aspects of layout and design might be compromised in a photocopy.
4. Use job ads or phone calls to prospective employers to determine what kinds of pieces to put into a portfolio.

Don't get attached to any portfolio you mail out—you might not get it back. Many companies assume that, if you did not send a self-addressed, prepaid return envelope with your portfolio, you do not want it back. And even when you include the necessary envelope, there is no guarantee you will get the portfolio back.

#8: Thou Shalt Make the Portfolio Easy to Mail

Make sure your portfolio can be mailed easily and cheaply. Keep in mind that anything larger than 10" x 12" may be problematic with respect to mailbox size or express mail service regulations. Also think about how easily

a reviewer could hold your portfolio in one hand and turn the pages with the other. This "rule of handling" should be your guide for what items to include in a portfolio.



#9: Thou Shalt Include Only Pieces That Thou Knowest Well

Include in your portfolio only those items that you feel comfortable talking about. In many cases, the interview process will involve you discussing the works in your portfolio. Practice talking about each entry so that, when the time for the interview comes, you will be ready. Also, when explaining a particular portfolio piece, don't forget to discuss what skills it displays and what materials (software, computer platform, art) you used to create it.

#10: Thou Shalt Keep the Portfolio Current

Keep the materials in your portfolio recent. Dated materials can be interpreted as a lack of skill, creativity, ambition, or ability. If possible, include only pieces created within the past one to three years. If you have been doing the same kind of writing for more than three years, you can use older materials, but in your portfolio cover sheet, explain why you are doing so. Also, if you do include older materials in your portfolio, make sure they don't contain news stories, design conventions, or fashion and style elements that might appear dated.

Following these commandments alone won't guarantee that you land your dream job. But ignoring them will eliminate you from the running. Remember, until the interviewer meets you in person, you *are* your portfolio. **i**

Kirk St. Amant has taught technical communication courses for James Madison University, Mercer University, and the University of Minnesota. He has also served as an undergraduate advisor and a career advisor for the Institute of Technical and Scientific Communication at James Madison University and for the Department of Rhetoric and Scientific and Technical Communication at the University of Minnesota. He is currently finishing his degree in rhetoric and technical and scientific communication and will begin teaching at James Madison University's Institute of Technical and Scientific Communication in the fall of 2002. He can be contacted at stam0032@umn.edu.