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Prior Learning Assessment and the Prior Learning Portfolio

The University Without Walls program offers a robust Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) program to support your goal of completing your undergraduate degree. Prior Learning can be divided into sponsored or classroom learning and un-sponsored or experiential learning.

**Sponsored Learning**

Some of your prior learning occurred at another college, or sometimes several other colleges. Prior learning from other colleges can apply to your UMass Amherst degree through official transcripts. Some of your college-level prior learning occurred through training programs in your professional or volunteer positions. Training hours may be applied to your UMass Amherst degree through the special transcript process, with the requirements that you can document this training and the training is relevant to your Area of Concentration. Previously completed college courses and training programs are aspects of prior learning that are in the category of “sponsored” learning, or formal learning, because an institution or organization structures the learning and assessment. The assessment of learning occurs within the class or training structure and the institution validates the credit or hours for the course or training. This learning happens outside of UMass Amherst through other sponsored learning contexts and is transfer credit.

**Experiential Learning**

You also have prior learning that was developed outside of a classroom. All learning includes increased understanding and knowledge, but experiential learning and academic learning differ in the contexts in which one learns. Experiential learning occurs in the context of your life and work experiences. The University Without Walls, alone among University of Massachusetts Amherst degree programs, awards university credit for the learning gained in the often unstructured arenas of experience. Some of you with just a few years of work experience may have gained
an introductory knowledge of a field; others will have a rich well of knowledge from decades of holding increasingly complex positions or a range of diverse experiences. At UWW we have developed a process to assess this learning and assign credit based on the demonstration of learning gained through your experience. The process is documented in the Prior Learning Portfolio, a written manuscript that details your experiential learning.

The development of your Prior Learning Portfolio provides a way for you to analyze and reflect on your experience in order to demonstrate experiential learning through your writing. In this way, the Prior Learning Portfolio is a bridge between your experience and your academic degree, and is a central component of your Prior Learning Assessment that may be applied towards your UMass Amherst degree. At the heart of the UWW approach to the Prior Learning Portfolio is the conviction that understanding your experiential learning, writing about it, and putting it in various contexts is a sophisticated intellectual process that expands a student’s knowledge. As the process is rigorous and offers pathways to new knowledge, the Prior Learning Portfolio credits are designated resident credits.

“PLA institutionalized the recognition that knowledge gained outside the walls of the academy could be both credible and creditable, and that knowledge was created through human activity in many places and forms.”

Elana Michelson, “Multicultural Approaches to Portfolio Development” in Assessing Adult Learning in Diverse Settings 1997, p. 42

- Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)
  - Sponsored learning
    - Prior college coursework (official transcripts—transfer credit)
    - Training that is relevant to your Area of Concentration (special transcript—transfer credit)
    - National standardized exams, such as College Level Examination Program (CLEP) (test scores—transfer credits)
Experiential Learning (Prior Learning Portfolio—residence credit)

“The portfolio is a complex written document through which a student assesses learning from prior work/life experience and demonstrates that this learning meets the substantive theoretical and practical learner objectives commensurate with a college level course (Whitaker 1989; Fidder, Marienau, and Whitaker, 2006). Experience, per se, does not necessarily mean learning took place. Credit is awarded for learning and not simply for experience.”


Experiential Learning

“Much learning across the lifespan is unplanned, experiential, and emergent. The key to this sort of learning is reflection, which turns experience into learning” (Bond et al) as quoted in Tom Bourner, “Assessing reflective learning” Education + Training, 2003 (45.5), p. 267.

UWW recognizes learning that results from life and work experiences. Credit is not awarded for experience alone, however. Credit is awarded for the learning you gained from the experience, which is written about in UWW 370. In order to articulate your experiential learning, you will engage in a process of identifying and describing significant experiences, and critically and reflectively analyzing the experiences to articulate your learning. As you encounter a typical situation again and again, you find ways of dealing with this situation more effectively. As new, less typical situations arise, you assess them and make adjustments to your standard responses, and with each adjustment you expand your “tool box” of techniques and acquire more knowledge. Your Prior Learning Portfolio documents your experience and the learning gained from the experience in a series of analytical and reflective essays. When appropriate, a student may incorporate video or images to demonstrate knowledge.
At UWW, we rely primarily on David Kolb’s (1984) theory of the experiential learning cycle in order to understand how we can move from experience to experiential learning, (see Kolb, D. *Experiential Learning*, Prentice Hall). This cycle involves identifying and describing a significant, concrete experience with as much detail as possible, and then critically and reflectively analyzing this experience by asking yourself questions about the experience. Once you have critically and reflectively analyzed the experience, you can then move into thinking about what you learned from the experience, and finally you can consider how this experience and the knowledge has changed you—what you now do differently or will do differently based on your new knowledge.

![Experiential Learning Cycle Diagram](image)

**Concrete Experience:**

Concrete description of experiences and/or observations are the foundation of your portfolio. It can be hard, though, when you have years of experiences, to make choices about which stories you should use to show your learning. Stories that are particularly useful for demonstrating learning include ones that:

- Demonstrate different points of view
- Show or lead to a change in perspective
• Provide comparison and contrast between people, ideas, or even between a “younger self” and a “more experienced self”
• Illustrate a conflict or problem and how you or someone else defined the problem and resolved it
• Show how you applied learning from a previous experience to a new and/or different context
• Show mistakes you made and something that you would do differently if faced with the same situation again
• Illustrate “Ah ha” moments, or stories that represent turning points for you
• Present descriptive examples of scenes to set experiences in narrative

"Adults examine the underlying assumptions on which they have built their lives. This self-reflection is often triggered by a major dilemma or problem, and may be undertaken individually as well as collectively with others who share similar problems or dilemmas. The end result of this process is a change in one's perspective" (Rosemary Caffarella and Sharan Merriam, “Perspectives on Adult Learning: Framing Our Research” from the Adult Education Research Conference, 1999, p. 2. Published by Kansas State University Libraries.

Critical and Reflective Thinking:

A student can demonstrate reflection, analysis, and critical thinking in a variety of ways. Sometimes students compare and contrast in order to draw conclusions from observations or experiences. Or, a writer can examine his or her own and/or other people’s assumptions in order to understand how these underlying assumptions affected outcomes. A student can analyze various contexts for the experience in order to show how policy, workplace culture, or cultural assumptions affect the experience and its outcome. There are many ways to demonstrate critical thinking and the learning you gained from your experiences, and your writing teacher in UWW 370 will help you develop and apply such strategies. Mainly, you do not want to stop at a description of experiences. Instead, follow-up these descriptions with an analysis that helps you articulate the meaning you took away from these experiences. The critical and reflective thinking lead you to abstract conceptualization and application—the next steps in the experiential learning cycle presented above.
From “Assessing Reflective Learning” adapted from Bourner (cited above):

Table I: Questions as tools for critical thinking

1. What explicit assumptions are being made? Can they be challenged?
2. What implicit/taken for granted assumptions are being made? Can they be challenged?
3. How logical is the reasoning? Avoid emotional conclusions: “I feel this way; it must be true.”
4. How sound is the evidence for the assertion(s)?
5. Whose interests and what interests are served by the assertions?
6. What values underpin the reasoning?
7. What are the implications of the conclusions? Is uncertainty tolerated?
8. What meaning is conveyed by the terminology employed and the language used?
9. What alternative conclusions can be drawn from the evidence?
10. What is being privileged and what is off-the-agenda in this discourse?
11. What is the context of this discourse? What other perspectives might be informative?
12. How generalizable are the conclusions?

From “Assessing Reflective Learning” adapted from Tom Bourner (cited above):

Table II: Questions as tools for reflective thinking

1. What happened that most surprised you?
2. What patterns can you recognize in your experience?
3. What was the most and least fulfilling aspects of the experience? What does that suggest about your values?
4. What happened that contradicted your beliefs? What happened that confirmed your beliefs?
5. How do you feel about the experience now compared with how you felt about it at the time?
6. What does the experience suggest to you about your strengths?
7. What does the experience suggest to you about your weaknesses and opportunities for development?
8. How else could you view that experience?
9. What did you learn from that experience about how you reacted? What other options did you have at the time?
10. What might you do differently as a result of that experience and your reflections on it? What actions do your reflections lead you to?
**Abstract Conceptualization:**

During the abstract conceptualization stage you articulate what you have learned from an experience or a series of experiences. You have a specific experience, you analyze and critically reflect on the experience, and this gives you information that is relevant beyond the specifics of your concrete experience—information or knowledge that can be transferred to a new context. The ability to conceptualize or theorize what you have learned, allows you to access that learning as transferable learning and hence available to you when you encounter a new experience, context, or problem. For example, you have described a problem, shown how you or others addressed the problem, and then analyzed what you would do differently if faced with this difficulty again. These steps take you through concrete experience and critical and reflective thinking. Now you have an opportunity to provide clear statements of learning from the situation. These clear statements of learning are a result of abstract conceptualization. You are moving beyond the specific, concrete experience to abstract knowledge that may be helpful to you in future experiences. This allows you to draw meaningful conclusions and generate possible explanations for your findings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Here are some examples of statements of learning:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I found...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I discovered... I realized...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What I gained from this experience was...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In retrospect, I now understand...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The problem was...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From that moment on, I changed my approach...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This experience helped me to understand... helped me to develop...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This experience has stayed with me for the rest of my life because...

Resolving this conflict helped me understand...

It became clear to me...

**Application of Learning:**

Some people would argue that we do not really learn something until we are able to apply the learning to a new situation in our lives. In the application of a new concept students deepen their knowledge of an idea or principle, learn new dimensions of the concept, and begin to understand the concept or principle with greater complexity. At this stage of the writing process you will consider how your learning evolved and deepened over time through an application of your knowledge to new and different contexts. Reflect on what you learned from each context: what was different or same? Don’t settle for simplicities. Dig into the complexities of different situations and show how you addressed or learned from the complex, or even contradictory, aspects of an experience.

“Each new experience with reflection should lead the individual to broadened and deepened understanding, an enhanced array of choices, and a more sophisticated capacity to choose among these choices and implement them effectively.” Russell R. Roger, “Reflection in Higher Education: A Concept Analysis” *Innovative Higher Education*, (26.1) (2001)

**The Prior Learning Portfolio and the UWW Curriculum**

The four courses in the University Without Walls curriculum are designed to help you identify and articulate your experiential learning. The Prior Learning Portfolio asks for a specific narrative and takes a good deal of work and time to develop, and the core UWW courses support you in this process.
The Degree Plan and the Prior Learning Portfolio

Some of the early planning for your portfolio happened in your first UWW course (either Frameworks of Understanding or Concepts in Learning Integration) as you began to consider your experience and the learning you acquired. On the final section of your degree plan, you thought through several components of the Prior Learning Portfolio and its role in your overall degree. These first steps can be critical in guiding you as you begin to establish the scope, purpose, and context for your writing. In the degree planning process you began to consider your areas of learning and the experiences that provided the life and work contexts in which you developed your learning.

- **Area of Learning:** The area of learning is a topic, not a job title. For example, you may work in early education and one area of learning you may have gained is in Parent Communication in Early Education. The appendix offers more examples of areas of learning. You created a draft of ideas in your degree plan. These can change as you begin the writing process, but the work in the degree planning process is a good starting place.

- **Work and Life Context:** the areas of learning were developed in particular professional, volunteer, or personal contexts or roles, and the brief resume on the degree plan outlines these contexts and roles for your experiential learning.

The degree plan also asked you to map out how many credits you aim to seek for the Prior Learning Portfolio. There are various questions to consider in order to determine your credit goal for the portfolio. One way to think about it is how many credits you need to reach that magic number of 120 required for a UMass Amherst degree. This might be determined as you calculate the number of credits remaining after listing transfer, residence, and special transcript courses that fulfill UMass Amherst and UWW requirements. Your instructor in the UWW 370 course will also advise you on whether the number of credits you are seeking for prior, experiential learning seems appropriate, given your experience, demonstrated critical thinking, and writing skills. The degree planning stage established a potential goal even though this can change.
Finally, in the degree planning process you tentatively determined whether the Prior Learning Portfolio credits would be related to your Area of Concentration or would support your degree by providing elective credits that are not related to your Area of Concentration but still helpful to your degree completion. You can earn credit towards your Area of Concentration if your work or life experience is related to your academic degree work. If your academic degree is in a different area than your experience, you can still leverage your experiential learning for credits towards your overall credit goal for graduation. You could also decide to aim for a combination of some Area of Concentration credit and some elective credit.

**The Experiential Reflection Courses and the Prior Learning Portfolio**

The Experiential Reflection courses also support the development of your portfolio as these courses center around reflective thinking and the process of moving from experience or observation to reflection and learning. The UWW curriculum requires two experiential reflection courses and you can choose topics that are relevant to your experiences or interests. The courses help you develop your facility in critically and reflectively thinking about your experiences, as well as supporting your ability to abstract your learning from your experience (abstract conceptualization). The main goal of these courses is to develop the methodology of the experiential learning cycle so that you can then use that methodology in the writing class. Some students produce writing that can be reworked for the portfolio, but typically the courses are useful for the development of the methodology. If you do hope to use some of the writing from your reflections courses in your portfolio, be sure to discuss this with your UWW 370 instructor.

**UWW 370 and the Prior Learning Portfolio**

The final course in the UWW curriculum, UWW 370 Writing About Experience, is a structured writing course dedicated to the development of the Prior Learning Portfolio. Your faculty member in the UWW 370 Writing About Experience will guide you through the process of writing the Prior Learning Portfolio and will assist you as
you critically and reflectively analyze your experiences in order to articulate your learning. This course satisfies the UMass Amherst Amherst General Education Junior Year writing requirement and supports the development of your prior learning portfolio.

**Junior Year Writing requirement**

All UMass Amherst students are required to take two writing specific courses as a requirement of graduation. The first course, College Writing (CW) introduces the expectations of writing at the college-level. The second required writing course is Junior Year Writing (JYW).

Here is the language from the [UMass Amherst General Education website](https://www.umass.edu/education) that describes the university-wide approach to writing:

Instruction within the First Year Writing course operates on the following key principles:

- Writing is a series of choices (about genre, organization, style, etc.) made in response to the context, purpose, and audience of a given text
- Writing can serve a variety of purposes for writers throughout their lives, including but not limited to personal, academic, civic, and creative purposes
- Writing is a recursive process of continual revision, reflection, and response from others
- Writing exists to be read, and thus writers must also be readers—of other texts, of contexts, of culture—in order to read their own texts and assess its effects on potential readers

The Junior Year Writing course follows the same approach to writing as the College Writing course in that the focus is on writing as a process (as outlined in the third bullet point above), but in JYW the writing assignments are specific to a student’s major. As experiential learning is the focus of the UWW curriculum, the Junior Year
writing course (UWW 370) is a course that helps students develop their experiential learning in the Prior Learning Portfolio.

The UWW 370 class requires that students produce a polished collection of writing that includes an introduction, essay one, essay two, and a conclusion. This collection of writing should be revised and edited for the final submission: a completed document of approximately 25 pages. You receive a grade for this three-credit course based on your final submission of polished writing but also on your participation in the writing process, such as discussion about the writing, submissions of drafts within the time frame set-up in the course, engagement in peer review, and revision based on feedback.

Each analytical essay you write for the Prior Learning Portfolio focuses on one or sometimes several related areas of learning. Each essay is approximately 10-12 pages of writing. These analytical essays are the workhorses of the portfolio. The essays are where you demonstrate your learning and knowledge. You mapped out some initial ideas about areas of learning when you completed the degree plan, but sometimes once you begin the writing process these areas of learning can change. Please see the sample areas of learning in the appendix if you want to reconsider your areas of learning. As you move through the writing process, you will identify concrete experiences related to your area of learning for the essay, and then move through the experiential learning cycle to closely examine these concrete experiences and identify and articulate your learning. Your writing instructor and your peer reviewers support you in the development of your portfolio. You are encouraged to seek the guidance of your instructor in this process as the writing is integrated into the structure of the course so that you are guided through the work of drafting and revising the Prior Learning Portfolio.

The introduction of the prior learning portfolio is a more personal space that provides context for your analytical essays. Sometimes students give a personal context to their professional career, for example, or a personal context to the development of certain skills. The introduction is approximately five pages.
The conclusion is an opportunity to reflect on the themes in the portfolio, consider the process of developing the portfolio, and discuss the student’s journey ahead. The conclusion for a Stage I portfolio is approximately three pages. The conclusion for a Stage II portfolio is longer (approximately five pages) as the Stage II conclusion should integrate the three essays in some way, and allows the writer a final chance to reflect on the overall learning presented in the portfolio.

You will develop your introduction and conclusion with the support of your UWW 370 instructor. In order to pass UWW 370 you must have a completed portfolio (25 pages minimum, revised) even if you intend to write more for a higher portfolio credit award. You are earning credit for the Junior Year Writing requirement and so the Stage I writing must be submitted as a final, revised version to pass the class.

**UWW 296Y and the Prior Learning Portfolio**

In order to have your completed portfolio evaluated for Prior Learning Portfolio credit, you also need to sign up for UWW 296Y. UWW 296Y has no work associated with it, as this is not a course. UWW 296Y is a fee for the evaluation and processing of the Prior Learning Portfolio credits. The cost of UWW 296Y is a flat fee. The UWW 296Y is listed on SPIRE as a course, but it is the space holder for the number of prior learning credits you receive after the evaluation of your experiential learning, which will appear on your UMass Amherst transcript. UWW 296Y credits may range from 3-30. The cost of 296Y includes a prior learning assessment fee of $800 + the cost of one UWW credit ($390) for a total of $1190.

The Prior Learning Portfolio credits are separate from the UWW 370 course, even though the writing from the UWW 370 course is the writing that may be submitted for Prior Learning Experiential credits through the UWW 296Y evaluation process.

**First stage portfolio (3-15 credits) in UWW 370: Writing about Experience**

In UWW 370 Writing about Experience, you will draft, revise, and submit a portfolio of a minimum of 25 pages. This is a Stage I portfolio and your writing may be submitted for evaluation of up to fifteen residence credits.
Second stage portfolio (16-30 credits): After Writing About Experience

The second stage portfolio (introduction, three essays, and a conclusion) is typically about 35-40 pages, but some are longer. This limit applies to the written sections only and does not include supplementary materials, such as supporting documentation. Students are encouraged to complete the third essay and integrative conclusion sooner rather than later so that the learning that takes place in Writing about Experience may be fully utilized. Students may opt to complete a second stage portfolio either by working independently or by signing up for UWW 396E Portfolio Extension for one credit to work with an instructor to complete the additional writing. UWW 396E is offered during the summer.

Students seeking more than fifteen credits for prior experiential learning will have until October 1st of the following year if they took Writing about Experience in the fall semester, and February 1st of the following year if they took the course in the spring semester, to submit the second stage portfolio. Please be in touch with your writing instructor to make a plan for completion. Some instructors permit strong, analytical writers to submit a second stage portfolio late in the semester of the Writing course, but this is up to the individual instructor.

The Prior Learning Portfolio credits and areas of learning will appear on your transcript either after the completion of the semester in which you register for 296Y or after the credit evaluation of your Stage II portfolio, if this happens later than the semester in which you register for 296Y.

The Prior Learning Portfolio credits and areas of learning are added to your transcript through the Prior Learning Transcript Statement (PLTS). This document is completed during the UWW 370 course but can sometimes be revised after the course or after the assessment of a Stage II portfolio, both for the credit total and for the areas of learning as determined once the portfolio is complete.
Use of Video and Digital Media for the Prior Learning Portfolio

Some learning is hard to articulate with words alone, such as your knowledge of dance and choreography or your knowledge of photography or painting. With writing instructor and advisor permission, students have the option of creating a video or some other form of digital media production for one chapter of their prior learning portfolio.

Video or digital media portfolios must also include a 3-5 pages of written explanation describing how you used the visual and auditory media to convey learning. This writing might consider the artistic choices you made, an overall description of how the digital media conveys direct experience in the topic area, and some of your process of learning (and the application of the learning).

All students still need to complete twenty-five pages of revised writing in the UWW 370 course as this fulfills the Junior Year Writing requirement. The video or other form of digital media can supplement that writing or serve as the additional chapter needed for a second stage portfolio.

Digital media presentations must meet the same criteria for demonstrating prior experiential learning as required for the written portfolios. There are many ways to demonstrate prior experiential learning through visual digital media. Students may take UWW 397V: Documenting Experiential Learning: The Theory and Practice of Digital Narrative Production for instruction on how to create a video that can be included as a chapter in their prior learning portfolio. Please discuss your choices with your faculty advisor or your UWW 370 instructor (if different from your faculty advisor).

Use of Secondary Sources

The rubric includes the optional use of secondary sources that may provide 1-2 credits. Some students incorporate secondary sources to situate experiential learning within relevant contexts. References to the literature and theories in your
field and citations of statistics from reputable studies help your readers understand how your experiences connect with important issues within the field. Nevertheless, a prior learning portfolio is distinctly different from a research paper. It is your experiential learning and your application of this learning that is being assessed, not learning gained from books or websites, so the references should only be used to further contextualize or enrich the demonstration of your learning through experience. If you use secondary sources, be sure to cite your sources with in-text citations using APA or MLA, (or a different style guide depending on your instructor’s guidelines); also list the full source citation on a separate References page. For some guidelines in how to incorporate secondary sources into your portfolio, consider the following:

- Examining principles and theoretical ideas
- Engaging with concepts and ideas, rather than using literature/research/quotes to reassert own perspective
- Analyzing extent to which literature/research/quotes support or differ from what was learned through experience
- Selecting experts in the area of learning to interact with, and introducing what that author’s expertise is

**Use of Supporting Documentation**

Finally, the rubric includes the option of documentation. This optional documentation can include certificates of your training in a topic you discuss in the portfolio, or training that you wish the evaluators consider in addition to the topics you discuss in your portfolio. It can also include examples of your work, if relevant. This final category is in the range of 1-2 credits. Please note that if you have previously earned credit through the special transcript process, you cannot also include the documentation for portfolio credits.

If you have substantial training that you cannot bring in through the special transcript process, then you do have the option of writing about the training AND how you applied the training in your experience, as this then develops new experiential learning. You can discuss this option with your UWW 370 instructor.
**Assessment**

UWW has developed a rubric based on the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) process that is used to assess the Prior Learning Portfolio for demonstrated experiential learning and assign credit awards. The rubric describes the criteria used in the assessment, and these match the experiential learning cycle as described above. The rubric designates credits for experiential knowledge demonstrated through:

1) Concrete description of specific experiences related to the learning topic area;

2) Critical analysis and reflection of these experiences and learning;

3) Abstract Conceptualization

4) Application of Learning

**Rubric**

**Concrete Experiences and Learning Demonstrated**

Description of Experience: Has the student provided descriptions/narrative/concrete examples of specific experiences that they engaged in, as these are the basis of the reflection and analysis?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>0</th>
<th>1, 2, 3, 4, 5</th>
<th>6, 7, 8, 9, 10</th>
<th>11, 12, 13, 14, 15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fails to present concrete experiences; few or superficial</td>
<td>Few concrete examples of experience to illustrate learning; experiences are similar and do not develop in complexity.</td>
<td>Includes concrete learning experiences; examples demonstrate a diversity of experiences and learning; development in complexity;</td>
<td>Includes concrete learning experiences from a variety of contexts OR situations within one context; demonstrates an increasing complexity of understanding over time. Reflects on experiences to demonstrate learning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Critical Analysis and Reflective Thinking; Abstract Conceptualization; Application of Knowledge**

Critical and Reflective Thinking: Does the student demonstrate a process of reflection on the experience and its conceptual meanings? Does reflection lead the student to change his or her perspective or understanding of the experience and its meanings? Does the writing demonstrate critical reflection through an awareness of one’s own perspective (and alternative perspectives), context, and assumptions?

Abstract Conceptualization: Does the student move from concrete experiences to broader, theoretical understandings of what these experiences mean? What are the principles or concepts that the student develops, based on the experiences? Does the student develop conclusions and/or interpretations of the experience? Does the writing demonstrate an awareness of foundational principles in the field?
Application of Learning: How does the student apply the above concepts to similar or new/different contexts or circumstances? Does the student demonstrate a deepening complexity of understanding over time?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>0</th>
<th>1, 2, 3, 4, 5</th>
<th>6, 7, 8, 9, 10</th>
<th>11, 12, 13, 14, 15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Little critical thinking about the experience is provided to demonstrate learning</td>
<td>Writing demonstrates some reflection on the experience and minimal abstraction and conceptualization. Few principles and concepts applied to the learning.</td>
<td>Writing demonstrates learning through reflection, personal insight about experiential learning, problem-solving. Principles and concepts applied to the learning.</td>
<td>Writing demonstrates complex analysis, personal insight and awareness, abstract conceptualization of learning. Context, concepts, terminology, and principles developed throughout.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Optional Use of Literature and theoretical ideas:**

1 point: Some reference to scholarly or technical literature, but little attempt to engage directly with ideas; references used to reassert own perspective.

2 points: Scholarly or technical literature and theory integrated throughout; engages directly with ideas; may offer conceptual framework for understanding learning from experience

**Optional Supporting Documentation:**

1-2 points: Provides thorough training documentation of college level training and education addressed in portfolio essays.

**The maximum credit award for Prior Learning Portfolios is 30.**
For Stage I portfolios (1-15 credit award) the UWW 370 instructor is the main evaluator for the 296Y prior learning credit award. This award is based on the rubric and the student’s presentation of prior learning, and is separate from the evaluation for UWW 370. In other words, the grade you receive in UWW 370 is based on your participation in the writing process and class discussion, as well as other aspects of the course as established in your UWW 370 course syllabus. The credit award for the portfolio is based on the rubric and the completed portfolio.

For Stage II portfolios (15-30 credit award), the portfolio is evaluated by an Academic Review Team. The Academic Review Team is comprised of UWW faculty but your UWW 370 instructor does not participate as an evaluator in this process. In order to include your voice in the process, you, the writer, must submit a Student Self-Assessment Cover Sheet that highlights aspects of the portfolio and hence guides the evaluation process.

**Student Self-Assessment of Prior Learning Portfolio: Template**

This self-assessment is to be completed and submitted with your final PLP materials.

Student self-assessment applies student-selected critical thinking methods from a glossary in demonstrating prior learning in writing the portfolio. Self-Assessment is a process that helps a learner reinforce their learning. When performed thoroughly and earnestly, self-assessment leads to new learning and deeper self-discovery. Also, the self-assessment process gives you a chance to present the ways that you demonstrated creditable learning in your portfolio.

From the Critical Thinking Glossary below, please select each of the critical thinking skills that you successfully incorporated in your portfolio. This may be a bulleted list. For each, please explain how they helped you to demonstrate your experiential learning in your prior learning portfolio. Refer to passages in your portfolio with in-
text citations and page numbers. The total self-assessment may range from 1-3 pages.

1. Concrete experiences
2. Critical reflection and analysis
3. Abstract conceptualization
4. Applications of learning
5. Use of literature (optional) and Supporting Documentation (optional)

Glossary of Critical Thinking Terms

This is a list of critical thinking skills that many students perform in order to demonstrate critical thinking in their prior learning portfolios. Please refer to any of these Critical Thinking skills, where appropriate, when writing your self-assessment. You can also review the Prior Learning Portfolio Handbook for ideas about how to name the experiential learning process you used in your writing.

Commonly used for presenting Concrete Experiences

- Providing concrete experiences that demonstrate learning
- Presenting descriptive examples of scenes and learning moments
- Defining the problem
- Setting experiences in narrative
- Demonstrating steps of problem-solving
- Closely examining a learning moment or situation—to tease out what is learned

Commonly used for presenting Critical Reflection and Analysis

- Asking questions; being willing to wonder
- Examining the evidence
- Analyzing assumptions and biases
- Avoiding emotional reasoning: “If I feel this way, it must be true”
- Developing complex interpretations (Not oversimplifying)
- Considering other interpretations
- Tolerating uncertainty
- Learning from mistakes
- Providing alternative points of views/conclusions
- Reflecting with critical analysis
- Presenting one’s self-discoveries throughout the portfolio
- Examining problem-solving processes
• Contextualizing experiences within field of learning
• Drawing meaningful conclusions; generating possible explanations for findings

Commonly used for presenting Applications of Learning

• Applying concepts and ideas to new experiences
• Demonstrating applied learning (learning from one experience applied to another)
• Demonstrating transferable learning (learning from one context applied to another)
• Showing how one’s approach to a situation has changed/improved/developed over time

Commonly used for Use of Literature and Theoretical Ideas

• Examining principles and theoretical ideas
• Engaging with concepts and ideas, rather than using literature/research/quotes to reassert own perspective
• Analyzing extent to which literature/research/quotes support or differ from what was learned through experience
• Selecting experts in the area of learning to interact with, and introducing what that author’s expertise is

Final Submission Guidelines

Your portfolio should follow a style guide for both formatting and the integration of reference sources should you use outside sources. Most UWW students use APA style and this style includes the use of a standard font (such as Times New Roman) 12-point, double-spacing throughout the document, left-aligned text, and one-inch margins on all sides. Indent the first line of each paragraph one-half inch. However, your instructor may be open to the use of a Style associated with your Area of Concentration or Areas of Learning. Check with your instructor for which Style to use for your portfolio.

You should have a clear title for each essay that captures the central area of learning for the essay. Subheadings within the essay are a useful way to designate the separate components of your area of learning for the essay, but this is a choice you can make in consultation with your writing instructor.
The final portfolio document should include:

- Title page (includes your name, the date, and a title if you have one for the overall portfolio)
- Table of contents for each item (complete this once you have finished and added in page numbers)
- Resume relevant to your learning topics; this provides the context for your learning
- The introduction
- Essay one (beginning on a new page)
- Essay two (beginning on a new page)
- Essay three if submitting a Stage Two (16-30 Cr) portfolio (beginning on a new page)
- Conclusion
- OPTIONAL References (beginning on a new page)
- OPTIONAL supporting documentation

You submit your final portfolio to your UWW 370 writing instructor, regardless of whether you are submitting a Stage I or a Stage II portfolio. The writing instructor will submit a Stage II portfolio to the Academic Review Team for a credit determination.

**Student Appeal Process**

Students, after they are notified that the ART has made a credit award decision, will have the right to appeal that award. Students will have fifteen (15) days from the date of notification to submit a written appeal. The petition must make its case by identifying learning clearly and succinctly using the criteria of the rubric. The appeal must provide sufficient supporting information so the ART can use it alone, or in combination with other evidence, as the basis for the re-evaluation. The ART reviews these appeals first. If questions still remain regarding the outcome of the assessment, the case may be sent to the Chief Academic Advisor for the University Without Walls who makes the final decision on disputes over the awarding of credit.
Useful Resources

Resources for Writing

- **Writing tutoring** is available through the UMass Amherst Writing Center.

- **A Writer's Reference** or **Rules for Writers** by Diana Hacker (Bedford/St. Martin, 6th edition). One of these handbooks should be kept by your side as you write, along with a good dictionary. They offer excellent advice on composing, revising, grammar, research, etc.

- **Purdue University Online Writing Laboratory** (OWL). This online site should be bookmarked for readily accessible writing help, especially on the **APA guidelines for documenting sources**.

- **APA Style Guidelines** on OWL. This is an excellent resource for detailed information on managing in-text citations and reference lists.

- **“APA Exposed”**. A PowerPoint presentation clarifying the purpose and conventions of the APA style.

Resources for Research

- **UMass Amherst libraries**. This should be the beginning point of all your research activities, so remember to bookmark the site. Its amazing wealth of online resources may make it unnecessary to go physically to the library to find the information that you need. Within the library site, pay close attention to the following resources made available to you as a member of the UMass Amherst community. Your OIT NetID and password will give you access from home. If you have a **UMass student ID** (either a UCard or a Distance Learning Card), you can have UMass Amherst library books and articles mailed to your home through a service called Library Express!

- **The Learning Commons**. If you live close enough to visit the UMass Amherst W.E.B. DuBois Library, then by all means begin with the Learning Commons on the lower floor in a space that "brings together library, technology, and other campus services in an environment that fosters informal, collaborative work, and social interaction."

- **Special library research page for UWW students**. The research librarians have prepared a page on the library web site designed to help UWW students in
the research process. Click on the “Search Strategies” tab for brief videos guiding you through the process of finding online library materials. It is here that you can reach UWW’s librarian Dave. Feel free to call or email him. He’s here to help.

- **RefWorks.** Go to the Special library research page for UWW students and click on the RefWorks tab. RefWorks is citation management software that can be downloaded to your computer to manage all your references and to then create the appropriate citation format. RefWorks is free to all members of the UMass Amherst community. If you're baffled by the APA style, let RefWorks sort it out for you automatically.

- **Library subject guides.** If you don't know where to begin with finding materials in your field in the library, start with a library subject guide. Reference librarians have created these pages to help students and faculty find the resources they need within the rich repository that is the library web site.

- **Ask a Librarian.** Communicate with a UMass Amherst reference librarian by phone, e-mail, chat, or IM.

### UWW Prior Learning Policies

#### Deadlines and policies for first-stage and second-stage portfolio submission

**First-stage portfolio completion within Writing About Experience:**

All students enrolled in Writing About Experience (UWW 370) are required to complete a full reviewable first-stage prior learning portfolio by the end of the writing course semester. At this point the student may elect to submit the portfolio for assessment or prior learning and additional credit. This portfolio consists of an introduction and two analytical essays focused on learning areas, as described above in this handbook. Those seeking up to fifteen credits must have completed the review process by the beginning of the semester following UWW 370.
Incomplete grades for Writing About Experience:

Sometimes an instructor will agree to give a student a grade of INC if circumstances beyond the student’s control interfere with progress during the last few weeks of the writing course, assuming the student has made continued progress through the earlier part of the semester. The student will have until the end of the following semester to complete the portfolio or the grade turns automatically to IF (Incomplete Failure). At that point, the student may elect to turn in the portfolio as is without further development to have the grade changed from an IF.

Second-stage portfolio completion after UWW 370 Writing About Experience:

Those students seeking more than fifteen credits through prior learning assessment will submit a final portfolio consisting of the introduction and two essays written in Writing About Experience, as well as the additional essay plus conclusion in the period indicated below following UWW 370. Portfolios are to be submitted for one review only after the full portfolio has been completed. Second-stage portfolios must be submitted by October 1st for students enrolled in UWW 296Y the previous fall semester and February 1st for students who completed UWW 296Y the previous spring semester. These deadlines apply even if the student is inactive in the semester following the writing course. Students who miss their Stage Two Portfolio deadline will be awarded no more than 15 credits.

Revisions required by evaluators:

If additional work is required by the faculty evaluator as a result of the review process following the submission of the portfolio, the writing course instructor will indicate the deadline for the completion of the revisions and final submission.
Glossary for the UWW Prior Learning Process

Analytical essay: One of the major essays of the prior learning portfolio in which students analyze a topic, theme, or issue they have learned about through experience. May also be referred to as a chapter.

College level learning: Experiential learning that is demonstrably the equivalent of the level of understanding required in college courses.

Conclusion: A short essay at the end of the prior learning portfolio that ties the major themes of the portfolio together.

Critical thinking: A statement by Michael Scriven & Richard Paul for the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking Instruction captures much of way the term is used in UWW: “Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication…”

Documentation: Materials presented with the prior learning portfolio to document and supplement the portfolio essays, specifically non-credited college level training or education.

Faculty evaluator: A member of the UMass Amherst or Five College faculty who evaluates the prior learning portfolio for students with a specialized area of concentration.

Introduction: The introduction offers an overview of experiences that will be reflected in the analytical essays and introduces those essays.

Portfolio learning areas: The portfolio learning areas are those topics for which UWW seek credit through experiential learning demonstrated in the portfolio. These learning areas are first identified in the degree plan to show how the portfolio will fit in the overall degree. At the end of the portfolio process, the areas will be re-
examined before entry on the prior learning transcript statement and ultimately on
the transcript.

**Prior learning rubric**: An assessment tool to guide the credit award process
related to prior learning. The rubric describes levels of achievement and
understanding in four assessment criteria: knowledge demonstrated, critical
thinking demonstrated, use of literature and theory, and supporting documentation.

**UWW Academic Review Team (ART)**: A team of UWW faculty who review
degree plans and prior learning portfolios of more than 15 credits.

**UWW 191G Frameworks of Understanding**: A required UWW first-semester
course. Frameworks of Understanding focuses on the development of critical
thinking and writing skills and for Professional Studies students, the development of
an individualized interdisciplinary degree plan.

**UWW 296Y Assessment of Experiential Learning**: A 3-credit “place-holder”
course number under which prior learning credits are listed on the UMass Amherst
transcript once awarded.

**UWW 370 Writing About Experience**: UWW’s writing course that satisfies the
UMass Amherst junior year writing requirement. It is also the course in which the
first-stage prior learning portfolio is completed.

**UWW 396E Portfolio Extension**: The one-credit optional course available to
students enrolled in UWW 370 who are seeking a prior learning award over fifteen
credits, depending on the amount of work to be written as part of the stage-two
portfolio.