

Interviewee: Alexandra White

Why did you choose the pieces in your portfolio? How did you choose pieces that represent your skill sets?

My tagline creates three buckets: web developer, writer, and community builder. I believe that my portfolio should have representation of each bucket, though not necessarily in equal amounts. I realize some of the easier pieces to show off are that of my web development projects, perhaps because there are pretty visuals and clearer end results. I feel my blog does most of the representation of my writing skills, as do the blurbs for the individual pieces.

I try to highlight items that I am proud of. I don't ever want a future employer to look at something that I don't feel currently represents my skill set.

Now that you have some distance from Professional Writing, how would you critique your own portfolio?

The portfolio I graduated with looked pretty different than the one you see now, and not just aesthetically (though it's pretty dramatic... check it out in the wayback machine, and remember that it's not 100% accurate. My fonts were way cooler: <http://web.archive.org/web/20130330065555/http://www.designinglightning.com/>). Upon graduating, I focused a lot on recommendations from former supervisors. I also included far too many portfolio pieces. If there's one thing I've learned (and am still trying to embrace), it's better to have less than ten pieces that are really good examples of your skills than to have thirty okay class projects. Don't make future employers have to work to find the good stuff.

The best part of my past and present portfolio (which has changed the least) is my philosophy. The portfolio doesn't just sell me as a professional who is capable of doing solid work. It sells *me* as an individual. I'm fun, friendly, and I know the kind of work I want to do and the people I want to do it with. I believe that PWers have a special advantage that others don't have. We see content through a grammatical lens, structure, and through user experience. My philosophy is what sells that to potential employers.

Do you have any tips that you wish you would have known when you were starting that I should know about?

Save all of your classwork in Dropbox or on MSU's web drive. Write the descriptions of these as you finish, so when you're compiling all of the pieces in your senior year, you're not struggling to remember "ok, what was this for? What was the purpose of this?" The same goes for projects from internships and any work you do that could possibly be featured in your portfolio.

Also, get to know the PW faculty. They're awesome. They will get you internship/job opportunities and have a wealth of knowledge beyond the classes they teach. Use office hours, if not to ask questions about class, just to get to know them.

How was your portfolio used when you interviewed for jobs? What questions were you asked? Were there any surprises?

My portfolio was a huge factor in the reason I got my first and my most recent job. I built a custom WordPress theme (in WRA 410), which was key for my first position (Digital Marketing Manager). My portfolio also highlighted other web work I've done, as well as content strategy. For every bullet point regarding projects that my future employer would assign me to, I had a piece that was representative of that skill set (web design, content strategy, social media, etc).

Many questions were asked about how I built the portfolio and why I chose the featured portfolio pieces. My interviewer also pointed to specific pieces that they had looked at (after being referenced in my resume) and asked me to expand on the process beyond a general project overview.

What kind of feedback did you get on job interviews about your portfolio?

When I first went on the market, employers seemed pleasantly surprised that I had such a fleshed out website that I had built myself. I didn't get a lot of feedback on the portfolio as a whole, but I did get feedback on certain pieces that were highlighted in my resume.

The question I was most often asked, to my benefit and my disadvantage, was "What is Professional Writing?" This is a question that I encourage you to think about. PW isn't just what MSU bills it as, a major about well-crafted

writing. It can be anything you want it to be. Furthermore, it can be anything that job wants it to be (unless the job is doctor or something else where you probably need more technical training).

How did you practice presenting your portfolio?

I probably shouldn't say this, but I didn't practice. I started building it in March of 2011 and presented it in December, working on it almost non-stop for eight months. I knew the content inside and out. I did come up with a basic outline the night before to prep myself, but I didn't stick to it. Some of my fellow presenters wrote out exactly what they were going to say, had outlined notecards, etc. Everyone presents differently. Find your comfort zone.

In the end, you're talking about yourself and your work. You should know it better than anything and it shouldn't be a one night prep. Building the portfolio is helping prepare you to present it.

What did you struggle with the most when making your portfolio?

Honestly, the hardest part of building the portfolio was making intelligent decisions about what pieces to include. The types of projects would tell a story about my skill set and what I do (having a balance of web design and content strategy, at first, was key to show I was capable of wearing many hats). Once I chose the pieces, writing those blurbs that were descriptive of the project AND spoke about my skill set AND proved I learned something... that probably took more time than any other part of the process (including building my WordPress theme).

How do you articulate your visual brand?

My portfolio and my resume are the front-lines for selling me. I'd like to think they're fun and modern and feminine. I'm the girl who is going to build your website while wearing a skirt and a bow, and I'm proud of that. As a woman, it's very important to me to show that I am technically able to take on complex jobs and that I'm not going to sacrifice my personality for it.

What examples or sources did you use when putting together your portfolio?

I looked at alumni portfolios (though I'll say, they weren't as common when I graduated. 2011 and beyond is when things really picked up for website portfolios). I also tried to look at professional websites of other people in my field, other web developers and writers and content managers.

How often do you make changes to your portfolio?

I am constantly changing and updating my portfolio. It is more than a showcase of school projects; it's a tool that garners me professional advancement and freelance work. I never go more than a couple months without adding either a new portfolio piece or a new blog post, updating about my professional life. As I add new pieces, I also remove older pieces.

When it first launched, my tagline was "Writer, Web Designer, and Community Builder." This has changed over time, as I reposition myself and my skill sets. I now draw emphasis to Web Developer, as it is my primary focus.

Synthesis

From the responses I received, I learned to always present pieces of work in which you are most proud of. These projects should also show off personal skills and traits which you would like convey to future employers. For every potential task an employer could assign you, have a piece in your portfolio showing such skills. I also learned to not include too many pieces in one's portfolio. If there are too many projects on your site, your employer will have to work hard to find quality pieces of work. This should not be the case. I look to include a portion in my website which deals with my personal philosophy. As viewed on the website of my interviewee, I learned that you should sell yourself and your outlook, along with your skills, to potential employers. Another tip I understood was to save all classwork to a dropbox or to MSU's web drive so you can easily access it when putting together your final portfolio.

I have also learned to take my time when choosing pieces for my portfolio. As this can often be the hardest step in the process, I now realize that it is important to set aside ample time when choosing pieces that best represent me. When creating your visual brand, it is important to show technical skill without sacrificing your personality. Include your character in your visual brand. When creating a portfolio, looking at the work of alumni or others who are in your field can help with ideas and beginning construction. Finally, it is very important to keep your portfolio up to date. Some pieces in a portfolio can often become outdated and no longer apply to your field or skillset. Because of this, I learned that it is important to analyze your portfolio every few months to see if new pieces should be added or if old projects can be taken off.