

Preparing a Teaching Dossier



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What is a Teaching Dossier?

A **teaching dossier**, also known as a **teaching portfolio**, is akin to a curriculum vitae focusing specifically on your teaching; it is a record of your teaching methods, accomplishments and goals. Like a CV, a teaching dossier is intended to represent you and your work to potential reviewers, documenting your experiences and strengths as an instructor by presenting **facts**, **evidence**, and **self-reflection**.

A teaching dossier can provide a complete picture of who you are, what you have done, and what you value as a teacher. It allows you to represent:

1. Your beliefs about students, learning and teaching.
2. Your teaching methods, responsibilities and goals.
3. Your contributions to teaching and learning in your field, at your institution, or beyond.
4. Evidence of the effects of your teaching.

Teaching dossiers are becoming increasingly common in University settings. They are often required as a part of academic hiring and performance review packages, for instance, and also play a significant role in many teaching award decisions. As Christopher Knapper and Susan Wilcox point out, however, dossiers “are also an excellent tool for developing and improving teaching through a process of documenting goals and achievements and reflecting on teaching activities and accomplishments. For this reason, faculty are encouraged to maintain a teaching dossier and update it each year even though there may be no immediate prospect of a tenure or promotion review” (p.2).

As the above description suggests, teaching dossiers serve many purposes. Different elements or arrangements of content may be required depending on the context for which the dossier is being prepared. As such, this package will provide general guidelines about some of the most commonly expected dossier components. You might use it to develop and maintain the base dossier that you update on a yearly basis. Specific teaching dossiers for job applications, for tenure/permanence and promotion packages, or for teaching award nominations might then be adapted from this base document, in accordance with the relevant expectations and requirements. Guidelines for one specific kind of teaching dossier – the teaching dossier that must be included in tenure, permanence and promotion packages at McMaster – are discussed briefly at the end of the document.

Important Note

This package contains samples from real dossiers. It includes some very strong examples and some weaker examples, representing a range of approaches.

Developing a Teaching Dossier

The following is a step-by-step list detailing one method by which to prepare a teaching dossier. It is adapted from Knapper & Wilcox (2007). *Developing a Teaching Dossier*.

Step 1. Determine criteria for effective teaching

Given that teaching dossiers are intended to document the relative success of your teaching, an essential first step in the process of crafting a dossier is determining what effective teaching actually entails. One helpful resource in this regard is Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson's "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education."

In this influential article, Chickering and Gamson describe a set of pedagogical standards derived from decades of educational research, and designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning in colleges and universities. In particular, they suggest that effective undergraduate teaching:

1. Encourages student-faculty contact;
2. Encourages cooperation among students;
3. Encourages active learning;
4. Gives prompt feedback;
5. Emphasizes time on task;
6. Communicates high expectations; and
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

These widely accepted standards provide a helpful starting point from which to craft your own set of markers of good teaching. You might emphasize certain elements of this list, for instance, based on your individual opinions, experiences and teaching contexts.

Copies of "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" are available at the Centre for Leadership in Learning. The article can also be read online at <http://www.aahea.org/bulletins/articles/sevenprinciples1987.htm>.

Step 2. Clarify teaching responsibilities

A second part of establishing the guidelines by which to judge your teaching is to clarify your teaching responsibilities. By reviewing your letter of appointment and speaking with your department Chair, determine precisely what is expected from you in terms of teaching (e.g. 'x' number of full courses taught per year, 'x' number of graduate supervisions, 'x' number of new courses developed, etc.)

Step 3. Select indicators of teaching efficacy and activity

Once you've established a framework against which to assess your teaching (via steps 1 & 2), you can begin to determine the sources of evidence that will demonstrate your success as an instructor. Subsequent sections of this package detail numerous types of information that might be included in this respect, from descriptions of course innovations to results of student teaching evaluations.

Step 4. Collect supporting evidence

Ideally, evidence of your teaching effectiveness should be gathered from the very beginning of your career as an instructor. It is highly advisable to maintain and to continually update a file of potential supporting items (e.g. references from students and colleagues, results of student evaluations, mid-semester feedback solicited to improve teaching and learning, records of participation in teaching-related professional development activities, etc.). If this type of comprehensive file exists, exemplary items that best indicate your accomplishments as an instructor can be pulled easily from it for inclusion in a dossier. If not, this type of evidence will need to be collected and assembled.

Step 5. Construct an argument

As Knapper and Wilcox suggest, "a dossier is not only a compilation of teaching-related material. It states a case for the approach you take to teaching" (p.5). Once you have completed steps one through four, you need to write the dossier proper, clearly explaining in brief narrative passages what you believe about teaching and learning (and why you believe it), what you actually do as an instructor to realize those beliefs, and how effective your approach has proven. Summaries of the evidence collected in step four should be provided to support your claims, and exemplary documents might be selected and included in an appendix.

Step 6. Review and Revise

Once you've finished writing, review the dossier for clarity, internal consistency and persuasiveness. You might also consider asking a colleague or an educational developer to read the document and offer feedback. Knapper and Wilcox suggest three questions that might be used to guide the review and assessment of teaching dossiers:

1. Is the dossier user friendly?
2. Does the dossier present an accurate and honest portrait of your approach to teaching?
3. Is your approach to teaching a reasonable one?

Step 7. Update

As mentioned previously, a teaching dossier is a living document that should be continually updated to reflect your development as an instructor. Consider returning to your dossier yearly to make any necessary additions or revisions.

For further discussion of these steps, see Knapper & Wilcox (2007). Alternate versions of the dossier-writing process can be found in CAUT (2007) and O'Neal & Wright (1993).

Components of a Teaching Dossier

Teaching Dossiers can contain several different elements. The Canadian Association for University Teachers (CAUT) dossier guide names 41 potential indicators of teaching activity and effectiveness, ranging from descriptions of courses taught to feedback from students, alumni, and parents. Here, we list some of the most commonly included teaching dossier components. Keep in mind that this is not an exhaustive collection, nor is each item mandatory. The more essential items, which should figure in every dossier, are indicated with an asterisk.

A. Teaching Responsibilities

1. Descriptions of Courses Taught *

- Include Time, Date, Number of Students.
- Short paragraph describing goals or things learned that will benefit the institution.
- Indicate courses or portions of courses where you had particular input – designing or revising.

2. Supervising and Advising

- Note graduate student supervision, and membership on supervisory committees.
- Honours thesis/independent study course supervision can also be included.

Other items that you might include:

B. Approach to Teaching

3. Teaching Philosophy *

- This should be a maximum of two pages.
- Outlines your beliefs about teaching and learning in a sound and honest way.
- Claims made here should be borne out in the rest of the dossier.
- Teaching goals can be included here, or as a separate section.

Further information about writing a teaching philosophy statement can be found on pp. 10-12 of this guide.

Sample teaching philosophies are available for consultation at the CLL.

4. Teaching Strategies/Teaching Methods

- Description of the ways you teach, along with some explanation of *why* you teach in those ways.
- Description of assessment strategies, along with an indication of how these align with your objectives and teaching methods.
- Description of the ways you encourage learning outside of the classroom.
- This section must be consistent with your teaching philosophy. In some cases it is included as part of the philosophy statement.

Other items that you might include:

C. Evidence of Teaching Effectiveness

5. Student Evaluation Scores *

- Results of the global questions (summative). These should be displayed as a summary in a way that QUICKLY gives the relevant information.

Further information about student evaluation scores can be found on p.13 of this guide.

Sample student evaluation sections from dossiers are available for consultation at the CLL.

6. Other Student Feedback

- Student Comments can be included, but be carefull. Use these more like quotes to provide evidence, and be aware that they are not permitted in some dossier guidelines.
- Letters from students (unsolicited) that you can quote from. Include the full document in the appendix.
- Emails from students (unsolicited).
- Nominations for teaching awards run by students (i.e. GSA TA Awards).

7. Student Work

- Sample student writing from assignments (with permission from students).
- Indicators of student learning (e.g. samples of work 'before' and 'after' the introduction of a teaching strategy, student standings on national tests, etc.)

8. Feedback from Others

- Evaluations from professors you have worked with.
- Evaluations from educational developers who have observed your teaching.

9. Teaching Awards & Recognition

Other items that you might include:

D. Teaching Contributions

10. Course Development and Innovation

- This can be a separate section or included with your Course Descriptions. A short description of any developments or innovations should be provided, and supporting documents can be included in the appendix. Options to consider (in terms of developments you've made) include:
 - Course materials
 - Course Handbook
 - Course Outlines
 - Interesting Assignments
 - Forms of Assessments (e.g exams you have written)
 - Web pages
 - Learning objects
 - Study guides

Several sample course development descriptions are available for consultation at the CLL.

11. Service Related to Teaching

- Committees (i.e. Undergraduate Teaching at McMaster).
- Participation in program reviews.
- Serving as a referee for teaching awards.
- Helping to train TA's.
- Consultation related to teaching (both inside and outside University).

12. Teaching Scholarship

- Articles Related to teaching and learning.
- Presentations at teaching and learning conferences.
- Grants for teaching-related activities.

13. Educational Leadership

- Serving as a teaching mentor for faculty, graduate students
- Facilitating workshops, events on teaching & learning
- Coordinating a series, conference, etc. on teaching & learning

14. Teaching Development (Professional Development)

- Include a section indicating how you have attempted to improve teaching and learning by developing yourself as a teacher. If you have evidence, you can include this in the appendix. Options include:
 - Attending Teaching workshops, Mini-Courses, Graduate Student Day, etc. (could include materials to document your participation where possible).

- Participating in conferences and symposia related to teaching (e.g. Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Conference).
- Participating in/attending sessions at a conference that relate to teaching in your discipline.
- Membership on teaching discussion lists.
- Participating in teaching Communities of Practice
- Having educational developers or peers observe your teaching.
- Applying for grants for teaching.
- Soliciting mid-course feedback that you use to improve teaching.

A description of one effective method for collecting feedback from students is included in Appendix A.

- Future teaching goals might also be described in this section.

Other items that you might include:

Writing a Teaching Philosophy

Here are a few questions to get you started writing a teaching philosophy. Your philosophy can be as short as a few paragraphs or up to two pages in length. Read over the following questions and consider which, if any, of them might trigger your thinking about teaching and learning.

A few general points:

1. How do you want to be represented to the reader? Reflective, scholarly, practical, caring, efficient?
2. Avoid 'motherhood' statements (e.g. "All students have great potential, and my job is to nurture them in the garden of the academy."). These will ring false unless supported by evidence.
3. What is the goal of the dossier? The dossier is usually used to make a decision. How you write your philosophy depends upon what decision is being made. This does not mean being deceptive or dishonest. It simply means selecting that part of your teaching you want to represent and emphasize. (You can conceive of your dossier as an argument, with some similarities to writing a scholarly paper – support your arguments with evidence. In a paper you would not only supply raw data and expect the reader to do all the analysis on their own.)
 - **For a faculty position** – you will want to represent yourself as competent and 'typical'; if you are applying for a teaching position, however, you may want to show more than competence.
 - **For tenure, permanence and promotion** – you will want to represent yourself as competent and show the development of your teaching over time.
 - **For a teaching award** – it is not enough to be competent. You need to represent yourself as unique and expert; you must stand out from the others.

The Questions:

1. When are you particularly satisfied with your teaching? *Think of a specific occasion.*
2. Describe a critical incident in your development as a teacher (e.g. a *situation that helped you form your opinions, as a student, as a teacher, or in some other situation.*)
3. How do you know you are any good as a teacher?

4. What do you do as an instructor in and out of the class? (Write this down). Now think about why you do it. (Write this down). *Extract from your writing a few general points/principles regarding what you believe about teaching and learning.*
5. What do you believe about students?
6. Under what circumstances do students learn best?
7. What do you do that makes you effective in your dealing with students?
8. What do you do to create conditions that optimize student learning and growth?

Developing a Teaching Philosophy Through Reflection

Some further questions, adapted from Stephen Brookfield's *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*

9. What would I like my students to say about me when I'm out of the room?
10. The last time I saw really great teaching was when...
11. Think back. Choose an event that caused you the greatest distress in your life as a teacher, or that made you say, "This is what makes my life as a teacher difficult."
12. Think back. Choose an event that made you say, "This is what teaching is really about" or "This is a great day in my life as a teacher."

Look back at your answers. Extract a few general principles regarding what you believe about teaching and learning.

Once Your Philosophy is Written

- Strip out any "motherhood" statements (feel-good, general statements without any evidence). They will ring false.
- Check to see that the teaching philosophy is consistent with your dossier and your course design. For example, if you explain that students are very important to you, and yet there are no words from students in your dossier, it doesn't ring true. The same could be said if you claim to promote active learning, but only use traditional lectures and multiple-choice. Make sure that your philosophy and the rest of your dossier are consistent.
- Support your statements briefly with evidence. Think of this as a way of convincing the reader that your philosophy is authentic.

Further Guidelines

(Based on discussions from Teaching Philosophy workshops held at McMaster)

What characteristics should a Teaching Philosophy AVOID?

- Platitudes – showing only lip service and jargon with no evidence to back up your claims.
- Debates – debates in a philosophy sound as if you are trying to convince yourself (this debate should have taken place while constructing the philosophy, but not be included in the philosophy).
- Spelling, grammatical mistakes.
- Sounding too mechanical, dry or old.
- Patronizing or teaching the reader.
- Much over a page is too long and makes it hard to read.
- Grandstanding: “In one of my many books....”

What characteristics should a Teaching Philosophy POSSESS or INCLUDE?

- Honesty – it should be sound and accurate.
- Acknowledgement of imperfection – it should indicate that you know you are human and fallible, but are continuing to develop.
- Clarity – it should be easy for the reader to see what you believe; they should not have to sift through unnecessary information.
- Evidence – it should include evidence to show that you do what you say you believe (e.g. describing an approach you use, showing how you apply this.)
- A personal tone – use “my” and “I” to show that you are talking about yourself rather than a theoretically perfect teacher. Keep it hands-on.
- Stories and anecdotes to show your human side.
- Markers of development – show that you are continually striving to improve your teaching. You realize that you can learn from your own experience, that you don’t just expect students to learn.
- Organization – so that it is easy to follow. For example, have the first sentence in each paragraph indicate what the content of the paragraph will be.
- Brevity – keep it to about one page. If it is longer, then use very good layout to help readers find what they need to know.
- Use of boldface, boxes, subtitles or short key words located on the left hand side to help guide the reader who only has time to skim.
- Expansion on the fundamentals.
- A short narrative of a real event that helps to help illustrate the point you are trying to make.

Several sample teaching philosophy statements are available for consultation at the CLL.

Including Student Evaluations in Dossiers

Results from student evaluations of teaching constitute one of the most common types of evidence that are required in a teaching dossier. The following is a set of general guidelines for including this information in the most useful manner possible.

1. Presented student evaluations should show the results from the global question, "How effective was the teacher overall", because this is the most useful summative information.
2. Do NOT include the raw data.
3. Summarize the data in a way that is clear and easy to read. For example, use tables, charts, graphs, etc.
4. Make it easy for the reader to get the answers that they need.
5. Include headings or labels for your tables, charts, columns or graphs.
6. Show the units (e.g. percentages, averages).
7. Report the questions that were asked clearly, and include the range of possible answers (e.g.. 1-4).
8. Indicate where the information comes from (e.g. university standard evaluation or self-made form?)
9. Don't include comments as a list, because they do not give much information (it's unclear whether you are including all comments or just those that make you look good, and if you include an off-the wall bad one, it can affect the way the rest of your dossier is viewed).
10. If you include comments, use them as quotations within the text of the dossier to support a statement that you make, or to explain why you changed some aspect of a course. Be aware of policies about including/excluding student comments, which may differ depending on the context for which the dossier is being prepared.
11. Provide contextual information wherever possible (e.g. departmental averages and medians for a given term, or for a given course).
12. Make sure that the message that you want the reader to take away is clear. Do not assume that a reader will draw the same conclusions as you from looking at your data.

Several samples of dossier student evaluation sections are available for consultation at the CLL.

Practical Considerations & Other Tips

General Considerations:

1. Always consider the purpose and the audience of the dossier. Who is reading and why? What are they looking for?
2. Ask yourself whether the first thing readers see in your dossier will encourage them to continue reading.
3. Provide the reader with the message that you want him/her to take away.
4. Remember to check for internal consistency. The various components of your dossier should build on and support one another.
5. Make a case for weaker points in the dossier (e.g. disappointing student evaluation scores), without being defensive or dishonest. If possible, find positive ways to address these elements (e.g. what are your future goals/plans based on this feedback?)
6. Consider consulting an established 'skills list.' This might help you to identify additional strengths and abilities of relevance to your teaching.
7. Consult and draw from a list of 'action verbs,' which are especially helpful to use when describing accomplishments.

Sample Lists of Skills and of Action Verbs can be found in Appendices B & C, respectively.

Overall Presentation:

1. Make sure that your layout is clear.
2. Keep the body of the dossier short (5-10 pages for job applications). Additional pages should be clearly marked as appendices.
3. Include a table of contents.
4. You can use dividers to demarcate sections clearly.
5. Use headings for the different sections.
6. You can use colour to guide the reader (e.g. different sections make use of different colours.)
7. Use a consistent typeface to improve the presentation, and to guide the reader to areas that are most important. If you are using a different font for headings, make sure you are consistent.
8. Make sure that the font is large enough for easy reading.
9. Use changes in font, boxes etc. to highlight particularly important information.
10. You can use graphics to highlight or demonstrate things.
11. Use white space well to make the presentation clearer.
12. Consider putting the dossier in something that is professional looking (i.e. binder, portfolio).

Remember that your readers are likely scanning MANY dossiers, so do what you can to make it easier to read and find the information that they need and to remember the dossier.

Teaching Dossiers to be included in Tenure, Permanence & Promotion Packages at McMaster

Like many institutions, McMaster has specific requirements for teaching dossiers that are to be included in tenure, permanence and promotion packages. These are outlined in **SPS 10: Policy on the Encouragement of Teaching Excellence**. Section III of this policy statement (The Structure of Teaching Dossiers), outlines six sections that **must** be included in teaching dossiers to be submitted in relation to tenure/permanence or promotion decisions at McMaster. Candidates for tenure/permanence and promotion should review this policy carefully, and make sure that their teaching dossiers are tailored to its specific requirements.

SPS 15B: Preparation of Dossiers for Tenure and/or Promotion will also be of interest. This document outlines the requirements and expectations for the *entire* tenure/permanence or promotion package, and describes how and where the teaching dossier (developed in accordance with SPS 10) should be included within this document. (See section 2(e)).

The full policy statements are available from the McMaster website at: <http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/faculty/Assessment/index.html>

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Appendix A – Soliciting Mid-Semester Student Feedback

As noted above, soliciting and acting upon mid-semester feedback from students is one way in which you might document your efforts to improve teaching and learning. This appendix describes a method by which McMaster instructors might gather such mid-term data: CLL's course refinement process. If you are interested in participating in a course refinement, or would like information about other methods of collecting student feedback, feel free to contact us.

Refining a Course

A course refinement is a means of collecting useful, personalized feedback about a course (or courses) you teach. In this low risk, highly popular approach, an educational consultant from the CLL will meet with you to discuss what kind of feedback you'd like to solicit, collect that data from your students, and ultimately share the results with you. This information helps you make decisions about mid-course adjustments, and can lead to a more satisfying experience for you and your students.

The Course Refinement Process

1. An instructor indicates that they would like a particular course reviewed. We discuss the goals of the course and anticipate the problems students may experience.
2. We attend the class and ask the students, by means of small groups, to arrive at a consensus on three questions.
 - a) What is working?
 - b) What is not working?
 - c) What specific changes would improve the effectiveness of the course?Additional/alternate questions can also be posed if necessary.
3. We convey the information to the instructor.
4. The instructor responds to the students by:
 - a) explaining why certain changes cannot be made; and/or
 - b) stating plans and then acting on suggested changes.

Advantages of this Approach

- Vague student comments can be probed to provide more useful information to the instructor (e.g., the textbook is useless vs. the textbook explanations are too complicated).
- Students' discussions tend to filter out individual comments, leading to a clearer group consensus.
- Within a class, students often disagree with each other about key elements of the course. The refining a course approach makes this variation of opinion public and helps to correct notions such as "everyone hates the textbook."
- Unlike end of term evaluations, this process allows instructors to respond to student feedback while the course is still ongoing. Since their feedback might therefore affect them in an immediate way, students often provide more serious and substantial commentary than is common in summative evaluations.

Appendix B – Skills List

This skills list may be useful for identifying:

- a) skills you wish to identify in your curriculum vitae or teaching dossier, or
- b) skills you plan to help students develop.

Analyzing situations or data
Anticipating problems
Assembling equipment
Attending to detail
Calculating numbers or risks
Clerical Work
Coaching, guiding or tutoring
Communicating in writing
Communicating verbally
Compiling data of facts
Computer skills
Constructing objects or buildings
Creating Ideas
Dealing with difficult people
Delegating tasks or responsibilities
Designing products or systems
Diagnosing problems
Doing precision work
Empathizing with others
Evaluating data
Evaluating performances, programs, processes
Following instructions
Handling complaints
Handling pressure
Implementing decisions
Influencing
Keeping records
Learning
Leading People
Listening
Making decisions
Managing people
Measuring
Motivating people
Observing
Observing safety regulations

Ordering equipment/supplies
Operating equipment
Organizing data
Organizing people
Planning and organizing time
Planning and organizing work routine
Processing forms
Project management
Promoting ideas
Proofing for accuracy
Providing information
Reacting quickly to changes in work situation
Remembering
Repairing equipment
Research information
Scheduling
Solving problems
Speaking in public
Supporting others
Testing
Troubleshooting
Writing reports
Word processing
Working as part of a team
Working irregular hours or shifts
Working well with people
Working with machines
Working with numbers
Working with people

Add your own:

Appendix C – List of Action Verbs

The underlined words are especially good for pointing out accomplishments.

Management

Administered
Analyzed
Assigned
Attained
Chaired
Consolidated
Contracted
Coordinated
Delegated
Developed
Directed
Evaluated
Executed
Improved
Increased
Organized
Oversaw
Planned
Prioritized
Produced
Recommended
Reviewed
Scheduled
Strengthened
Supervised

Communication

Addressed
Arbitrated
Arranged
Authored
Collaborated
Convinced
Corresponded
Developed
Directed
Drafted
Edited
Enlisted
Formulated
Influenced
Interpreted
Lectured
Mediated
Moderated
Negotiated
Persuaded

Promoted
Publicized
Reconciled
Recruited
Spoke
Translated
Wrote

Research

Clarified
Collected
Critiqued
Diagnosed
Evaluated
Examined
Extracted
Identified
Inspected
Interpreted
Interviewed
Investigated
Organized
Reviewed
Summarized
Surveyed
Systematized

Technical

Assembled
Built
Calculated
Computed
Designed
Devised
Engineered
Fabricated
Maintained
Operated
Overhauled
Programmed
Remodeled
Repaired
Solved
Upgraded

Teaching

Adapted
Advised

Clarified
Coached
Communicated
Coordinated
Demystified
Developed
Enabled
Encouraged
Evaluated
Explained
Facilitated
Guided
Informed
Instructed
Persuaded
Set goals
Stimulated
Trained

Creative

Acted
Conceptualized
Created
Customized
Designed
Developed
Directed
Established
Fashioned
Founded
Illustrated
Initiated
Instituted
Integrated
Introduced
Invented
Originated
Performed
Planned
Revitalized
Shaped

Helping

Assessed
Assisted
Clarified
Coached
Counseled

Diagnosed
Educated
Expedited
Facilitated
Familiarized
Guided
Motivated
Referred
Rehabilitated
Represented

Clerical/Detail

Approved
Arranged
Catalogued
Classified
Collected
Compiled
Dispatched
Executed
Generated
Implemented
Inspected
Monitored
Operated
Organized
Prepared
Processed
Purchased
Recorded
Retrieved
Screened
Specified
Systematized
Tabulated
Validated

More Verbs for Accomplishment

Achieved
Expanded
Improved
Pioneered
Reduced
Resolved
Restored
Spearheaded
Transformed