

Creating a Prior Learning Portfolio for College Credit

Adult learners – including working professionals, veterans, and others with extensive real-world experience – can earn college credit by compiling a Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) portfolio. A CPL (also called Prior Learning Assessment or PLA) portfolio is a formal written presentation of your college-level learning gained outside the classroom (through work, military service, volunteering, training, etc.) along with evidence to verify that learning. Faculty experts in the relevant departments will evaluate your portfolio to determine if your knowledge is equivalent to the learning outcomes of a college course in order to award ungraded credit. This guide walks you through a simple, step-by-step process to create a clear and effective portfolio.

Important: Credit is not awarded for experience alone – you must demonstrate verifiable college-level learning that meets academic standards. All portfolios are assessed by qualified faculty and must align with institutional policies and quality guidelines (including Higher Learning Commission standards and state regulations) to ensure academic integrity. Your portfolio is a serious academic project that showcases what you *learned*, not just what you did.

Step 1: Plan, Confirm Eligibility, Get course learning outcomes

Determine which course or courses you believe your experience covers and verify that a portfolio is the right method for those courses. Triton College requires that students be enrolled in a degree or certificate program before they may request CPL credit.

Next, identify the target course(s) for your portfolio. Match a specific course: Choose an existing college course for which you seek credit, and demonstrate that your prior learning meets *all* of that course's learning outcomes.

If you're seeking assessment by portfolio, not proficiency testing or using the Crosswalk, you will need to (a) confirm with the department chairperson if they offer portfolio assessment for the course, and (b) get the official learning outcomes or syllabus for the course you are targeting from the appropriate Dean's Office. These outcomes define what a student in that course should know or be able to do at the conclusion of the course. Your entire portfolio will be built around proving that you have achieved those outcomes through your experience. Once you have a clear plan and the learning outcome criteria, you can begin documenting your learning.

Step 2: Document Your Experiences (résumé and background)

Begin your portfolio by documenting your relevant experiences. A great way to do this is to update your résumé and/or write a brief narrative of your background, focusing on experiences that contributed to your learning:

Update Your Résumé: Ensure you have an up-to-date résumé that lists your work history, training, and accomplishments. Include job titles, employer names, dates, and a summary of key responsibilities and tasks for each role. Emphasize duties or projects related to the course outcomes you identified in Step 1. For example, if you are seeking credit for a management course and you served in the military, highlight leadership roles or team coordination tasks you performed. If you underwent industry training or earned certifications, list those with details. An accurate, detailed résumé gives the faculty evaluator a snapshot of your experience.

Write a Personal Experience Overview (optional): Some portfolio guidelines encourage writing a short chronological overview or autobiographical statement describing your learning journey. This is essentially a narrative version of your résumé, where you can explain how your career and life experiences progressed and what skills or knowledge you gained along the way. Writing a one- to two-page background summary can help set the stage for your portfolio reviewers. Focus on experiences relevant to the course: for each significant role or experience, consider what you learned that is significant. This process will prepare you step four, the experiential learning narrative.

While documenting your experience, remember that the quality of your learning matters more than the quantity of years. Identify the experiences that taught you something substantial. For instance, managing a project team for one year might yield more college-level learning (in areas like communication, budgeting, and problem-solving) than doing a routine task for five years. Your goal is to gather the raw content – the who/what/when/where of your learning experiences, which you will later connect to academic learning outcomes.

Step 3: Align Your Learning with Course Outcomes

Now that you have documented your experience, map those experiences to the course learning outcomes. This step is crucial for a successful portfolio because it creates the outline for your narrative and ensures you cover everything required.

Take the list of learning outcomes or competencies for the selected course and review them individually, taking notes on how your experience relates to each outcome. Questions to ask yourself for each outcome include:

- *Where did I learn this?* – Identify the job, training, or experience in which you gained knowledge or skill in this area.
- *What did I do that demonstrates this outcome?* – Think of specific tasks, projects, or achievements from your experience that illustrate the outcome.
- *How do I know I learned it to a college level?* – Consider whether you applied theories, solved problems, created deliverables, or received training at a depth comparable to a college course. This may include formal training programs (corporate seminars, military schools), on-the-job learning that involved complex problem-solving, etc.
- *Do I have evidence for this?* – Note any document or artifact (certificate, report, letter, portfolio sample) that could support your claim for this outcome.

It may help to create a simple matrix: list the course outcomes in one column and, next to each, list the experience(s) and evidence you will use to demonstrate it. For example:

Course Outcome (Example)	Relevant Experience	Evidence to Include
Outcome 1: Apply principles of ____	Worked as a team lead implementing ____; Completed training in ____	- Certificate of Training in ____ - Work project report

Course Outcome (Example)	Relevant Experience	Evidence to Include
		demonstrating application of principles
Outcome 2: Analyze and solve ____	Solved ____ problem during project at ____ company; Developed solution using ____ methodology	- Report or letter from a supervisor about the project - Diagram or code snippet (if applicable) showing the solution
Outcome 3:etc.	...etc.

Doing this mapping ensures that you have a plan to address each required learning outcome in your narrative and evidence. It also helps you spot if any outcomes don't match your experience well – if so, you might need additional evidence or might reconsider if this course is the right match. The key is that by the end of this step, you can confidently say: “Yes, through my experiences I have learned X, Y, Z (each outcome), and I can prove it.”

Step 4: Write the Experiential Learning Narrative

The center of your portfolio is the *experiential learning narrative* (sometimes called a learning essay or competency narrative). In this section, you will explain in writing how your experiences have led to learning equivalent to the course outcomes. This is where you turn the raw material from Steps 2 and 3 into a compelling, college-level story of your learning.

General Approach: You can structure the narrative in an essay format of no less than three and no more than ten pages.

- (1) The most straightforward approach is often outcome-by-outcome (e.g., a section for each learning outcome), showing specifically how each is addressed.
- (2) Another approach that can be used is experience-by-experience (if one experience covered multiple outcomes, you might use subheadings for each major experience and address multiple outcomes under each).

When writing your narrative, follow these best practices to meet faculty expectations:

- **State the Outcome and Context:** Begin each section by naming the course outcome and describing the experience where you demonstrated it. Example: “Outcome 3: Apply project management. At XYZ Corp, I led software projects using formal Project Management methods.
- **Describe What You Did and Learned:** Explain how you gained the knowledge or skill, focusing on key tasks related to course concepts. Highlight how you applied ideas like scheduling or risk management and use industry terms to show your understanding.

- **Connect to Theory or Course Material:** Strengthen your case by linking your work experience to academic theories or models. A simple mention of a method (like the theory of XYZ) or training that mirrors course content helps show your learning is college-level.
- **Give Concrete Examples and Results:** Support your claims with clear examples and results. Use action verbs and data where possible (e.g., “reduced delays by 15%” or “trained five staff with zero incidents”) to show real-world impact.
- **Reflect on the Significance:** Go beyond description—reflect on what the experience taught you and why it matters. Explain how it shaped your thinking or improved your approach, showing that you've internalized the learning.
- **Write Clearly and Cohesively:** Use a consistent structure and professional tone. Avoid jargon or explain it, use clear sections, and proofread carefully. A well-written, organized narrative helps reviewers see how you've met each outcome.

As you draft the narrative, continuously check that each course outcome is addressed with a solid explanation of how you achieved it and why that constitutes college-level learning. It might be helpful to re-read the outcome and ask, “Did I convincingly prove this?” using both narrative and evidence. If not, strengthen that section.

When finished, consider having someone review your narrative for clarity and completeness. An external reader can tell you if anything is confusing or unproven. Revise as needed until your narrative presents a confident case that you have learned what the course teaches, through your own experience. This narrative and the documentation you will attach are essentially your “argument” for why you deserve credit.

Step 5: Collect Supporting Evidence (Artifacts)

Once your narrative is well underway, gather the evidence (artifacts) that will support your claims. Evidence is critical – remember, credit is awarded only when you provide **proof** of your learning, not just the story of it. You likely identified many of these items in Step 3 while mapping outcomes. Now is the time to compile them and ensure they are ready to include.

Types of evidence that are commonly used in CPL portfolios include:

- **Certificates and Transcripts:** Include copies of certifications, licenses, or training records. Military students should add JSTs. Use clear, legible scans or PDFs.
- **Work Products:** Submit examples like reports, code, designs, or photos that show relevant skills. Remove private info and label each item to show how it supports your claim.
- **Letters or Testimonies:** Supervisor or colleague letters verifying your work and skills can strengthen your portfolio, especially when tied to learning outcomes.
- **Awards, Evaluations, Honors:** Include performance reviews or awards highlighting your expertise. Link them to specific course outcomes where possible.
- **Other Supporting Items:** Add photos, videos, or journals if they clearly show learning. Use only if they add new value and refer to them in your narrative.

For each piece of evidence, label or number them for easy reference (e.g., “Appendix B: Project Plan from 2019” or “Evidence 3: Training Certificate”). In your narrative, you can refer to them: “...as shown in my Project Plan (Appendix B), I implemented a new scheduling method...”. This helps the evaluator connect your story to the proof. A well-organized portfolio will have *matching references* between the narrative and the evidence.

Make sure the evidence is appropriate and convincing – evaluators look for relevant artifacts that strongly support your learning claims. Including extraneous documents can dilute your case, so it’s better to have five relevant pieces than 15 miscellaneous items. Ask yourself: *“Does this document directly show or prove something I claimed to know or can do?”* If yes, include it. If not, leave it out.

Before finalizing, double-check that you have at least one piece of evidence per primary outcome (some evidence may cover multiple outcomes). If an outcome is hard to document (e.g., a soft skill like “leadership”), a supervisor’s letter or a detailed narrative example might serve as evidence. Remember, evidence can also include your own work (the narrative itself is a form of evidence of communication skills and knowledge). The combination of narrative + attached proofs should make a compelling case.

Step 6: Compile the Portfolio and Submit for Assessment

With all components (planning, narrative, evidence) in hand, it’s time to assemble your portfolio in a neat, professional format and submit it for evaluation. Organizing your portfolio well will make it easier for faculty to review and ensure you haven’t missed any required elements.

Portfolio Format: A CPL portfolio is assembled in this order (adapt as needed if there is specific guidance from a department):

1. Cover Page: Include your name, student ID, course(s), date, and a signed statement confirming the work is your own. Optionally, list portfolio contents.
2. Table of Contents: List all sections and appendices with page numbers or labels to help reviewers navigate easily.
3. Résumé: Insert your updated résumé from Step 2.
4. Introductory Essay (optional): If submitting, write a brief summary of your educational goal and how the portfolio shows your learning.
5. Experiential Learning Narrative: This is the main body you wrote in Step 4. This is your main write-up. Label narratives by course and include or reference supporting evidence for each.
6. Evidence Appendices: Attach the documents you gathered in Step 5 as appendices or a labeled section. Each item should have a label (Appendix A, B, C, or Evidence 1, 2, 3) and a title/description. It can be helpful to insert a cover sheet separating different types of documents (for example, a page that says “Appendix A: Certificates”, then the following pages are your certificates, then “Appendix B: Work Samples”, etc.).

If the portfolio is electronic, you might combine everything into one PDF or create clearly named files for each part. Mail or email the submission to the department chairperson, or your faculty evaluator if identified.

Example: *Sample portfolio cover sheet template for a Credit for Prior Learning portfolio. This cover sheet (from Triton College) outlines the required components – it lists the student’s name and program, and enumerates all included documents such as the résumé, petitions for credit, certificates, etc. A clear cover page like this helps ensure you include all necessary elements in your submission.*

Once everything is compiled, review the entire portfolio package. Use the following final checklist before submission:

- **Completeness:** All required sections and documents are included (cover page signed, résumé, narrative, evidence).
- **Clarity:** The portfolio is well-organized and easy to navigate. Sections are clearly labeled, pages are numbered, and the Table of Contents is accurate.
- **Writing Quality:** Proofread one more time. Make sure the narrative and any written portions are free of major grammar/spelling errors and written in a professional tone. A polished presentation counts towards meeting expectations.
- **Evidence Quality:** Verify that all evidence is legible, relevant, and referenced in the narrative. Remove any evidence items that are redundant or unrelated. Ensure sensitive information (if any) is handled properly (e.g., redact personal identifiers that aren’t needed for evaluation).
- **Copies/Backups:** Keep a copy of everything for yourself. If submitting physically, make a copy; if electronically, save the file. This protects you in case anything gets lost and is also useful for future reference or additional credit requests.
- **Submission Format:** Follow the department’s submission guidelines. For example, some may require a single PDF upload, some might want separate documents, and some might want a printed binder. Include a copy of your signed Petition for Prior Learning form.

Finally, submit your portfolio to the designated office - usually the academic department and include your Petition for Credit for Prior Learning form showing the details of your request and that you have paid any required fee.

What Happens Next: Evaluation and Credit Award

After submission, your portfolio will be reviewed by faculty evaluators (subject matter experts) using a standardized rubric to ensure a fair assessment. They will look at how well you demonstrated each learning outcome through your narrative and evidence, often assigning ratings like *Does Not Meet Expectations*, *Partially Meets Expectations*, *Meets Expectations*, or *Exceeds Expectations* in areas such as demonstration of learning, evidence provided, presentation, and reflection. For example, did you clearly tie your experiences to the course objectives? Did you provide sufficient evidence for each competency? Did you show not just knowledge but an ability to apply that knowledge? These criteria all factor into the decision.

The evaluation process may take a few weeks to complete (or longer, depending on the academic calendar). In some cases, the evaluator might request additional information or clarification.

Once the evaluation is complete, you will be notified of the outcome:

- If approved/passed, you will earn the credits requested. The credits will be added to your transcript and labeled as CPL for the specific course. Note that CPL credits are ungraded and do not affect your GPA, but they count toward degree requirements. Ensure you understand how many credits you received and for which course(s), and verify they are applied to your degree audit.
- If not approved, the feedback may indicate that the portfolio did not sufficiently demonstrate the learning outcomes. Don't be discouraged - take any feedback as a learning experience; it might highlight areas to strengthen (perhaps you needed more evidence, or to better explain certain technical concepts). If the submission is close to passing, a resubmission attempt may be offered, or you may decide to take the course instead.

Throughout the evaluation, academic standards and integrity are paramount. Triton College follows accreditor and state guidelines to ensure that credits awarded via portfolio are as rigorous as those earned in the classroom. For instance, Illinois' ICCB guidelines require that credit for prior learning be awarded only after thorough assessment, on a course-by-course basis, by qualified faculty, and that the student's work is equivalent to at least a grade "C" level of achievement. Likewise, national best practices (such as CAEL's standards) emphasize that evidence of learning must be provided for credit to be granted, and that faculty approval is required to maintain academic quality. The inclusion of a faculty-driven rubric, an emphasis on documentation, and alignment with course outcomes in this portfolio process all serve to meet these standards.

By following this step-by-step guide – planning carefully, documenting thoroughly, aligning with outcomes, writing a detailed narrative, providing strong evidence, and assembling everything clearly – you will create a portfolio that gives faculty a clear window into your prior learning. With a well-prepared portfolio, you are showcasing your knowledge and taking concrete steps to turn your past experiences into academic credit.