

Documenting Your Career for Success

IHE [insidehighered.com/advice/2017/11/02/how-create-strong-reappointment-tenure-or-promotion-file](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/11/02/how-create-strong-reappointment-tenure-or-promotion-file)

Last week [we reviewed](#) the reappointment, tenure and promotion process. In this article, we will discuss strategies for assembling your file for it.

The typical file should include a copy of your CV, a narrative and documents providing evidence of your accomplishments in the three areas of faculty work: teaching, research and scholarship, and service. Those three components of the file should be tightly integrated to tell a compelling story about your accomplishments.

For some of us, the idea of putting together a file of our accomplishments feels like bragging and is an uncomfortable task. Doing so may even bring forward the feelings of being an impostor: we may feel like the accomplishments you describe are not really ours, that others will not believe us or that what we did will not be good enough.

Others of us might not trust the process. Such feelings may cause us to document every single thing we have done in our professional life, resulting in an unbearably large file. Such a file taxes us and the committees that review it and can result in high-quality work getting lost in the mix with less valuable efforts and contributions. We encourage you to fight that temptation.

You should build a file that shows your best work. To do so, you should focus your efforts on the CV, the narrative and specific components of that narrative.

The CV

Your CV is like the overview or broad catalog of your accomplishments in your current and perhaps prior roles. You should be updating it often, so it should take little energy at this stage to include it in your file. Your campus may ask you to make it clear which activities you completed during the review period (e.g., since you arrived on the campus or during the last three years). Even if it is not a requirement, clearly delineating the entries under review is helpful to your review committee and decreases the impression that you are trying to get credit for things that are not covered.

The Narrative

The narrative provides the readers with an understanding of your professional work that a CV alone cannot do. You write about your teaching philosophy, scholarly and creative agenda, and service in your narrative. You explain how and why you made the professional decisions you have, how your line of inquiry fits into the broader discipline, and how you are crafting your career. That is, you should show reviewers that you have a scholarly agenda or research agenda.

As you lay out your story, the committee can see that you have an overall plan as a teacher or that you are doing more than just cranking out the required number of papers or projects in a haphazard fashion that might end as soon as you are granted tenure. A good narrative tells a story and shows the reviewers how you are thoughtfully crafting your career even as you lay out the case for meeting their expectations for tenure and life beyond it.

Your narrative should be written for intelligent readers but not filled with jargon or insider language. Remember that most of your readers will be outside your discipline, so you probably need to educate them via the narrative. Part of your task when writing your narrative will be to position your accomplishments within a larger context. For example, what distinct contributions are you making to the scholarship? Why you are selecting particular pedagogies? There may be page limits on this narrative, so know that you cannot write about everything. Whatever you write, however, should be tightly integrated with the exhibits you provide as evidence.

Writing the narrative is challenging. Some of us have a hard time tooting our own horn. Our advice: do not write about yourself; write about the work.

As you put together the narrative, pay attention to two documents: the guidelines and the form the committees must fill out after reviewing your file. Anything you can do to organize your narrative in ways that help the committee fill out their form, the better.

We encourage you to organize your narrative sections around the main categories by which you will be reviewed. For instance, you might have a section on instruction, with subsections related to teaching philosophy, approach and strategies, and student response. Structuring your narrative and your evidence files in this way helps you be organized and helps the reviewing committees with their work, which often leads to a much happier committee.

Using language from the policy can also enable you to show how you have met certain criteria. For example, when writing about your scholarly efforts, you might say, “The department document requires faculty to have three peer-reviewed articles and at least one conference paper/poster/presentation every other year. In this past review period, I have published four peer-reviewed articles and presented seven times.”

Be transparent and make a case for how each component fits in a particular part of faculty work. While some activities might address two or three of the primary areas (e.g., a service-learning course fits into instructionally related activities and service), you need to decide if you want to use this as an example of your teaching efforts or service, or both, and then explain carefully. For example, in the case of a service-learning course, the teaching strategies and course structure are part of instruction and teaching, while the connections and outreach to the community might be service.

If you are using the same activity as evidence for both teaching and service, be sure to delineate how distinct aspects of the work fit each category.

Do not try to count the same parts of the work for two different areas. You want to be efficient and find ways to describe synergies in your work, but you do not want to give the appearance of double-dipping

If prior reviewing committees have done a good job, you will have received actionable feedback (e.g., do less service, adjust a particular aspect of teaching, get a publication that includes student co-authors, submit a grant proposal). Look at the things you are doing well and celebrate them. Then pause and look at the feedback that identifies areas for improvement. It is in your best interest to respond to it both in action and in the narrative for your next review round. Doing so allows you to showcase how you have tried to improve.

Be explicit about this. For example, you might say, “In my third-year review, the departmental committee indicated that I needed to work more on providing feedback to students. I have attempted to do this by ...” If you choose not to act on recommendations from earlier reviews, make a case for why you did not.

Specific Narrative Components

In the narrative, you should explicitly make the connection between your teaching philosophy and what you actually do in classes, how you plan for classes and how you shape assessments and use assessment data to inform your practice. Consider addressing questions such as:

- How does your instructional philosophy impact your instructional decisions?
- What evidence do you have beyond a syllabus, course exams, end-of-course grade distributions and student evaluations that showcases your accomplishments and growth as a teacher?
- What sorts of feedback do you provide to students? How do you know if it works?
- How are assessments aligned with the course’s student learning outcomes, and how have you used assessment data to inform your practice?

- What sorts of professional learning opportunities related to teaching have you attended? What impact have they had?
- If your course has changed, can you document this via changes to syllabi and assignments? What is the rationale for those changes?
- Have you tried something new and had unfavorable results? (Own it, talk about what you changed -- and why -- and explain what you are continuing to change to improve instruction.)

You should provide clarification in your narrative whenever questions arise about a publishing venue or authorship. Online and open-access journals are increasingly prevalent. However, reviewers are unlikely to know which are peer reviewed and high-quality or pay-to-publish sorts of journals of questionable merit. Gathering data such as impact factor, journal acceptance rates and the like -- and providing the sources of that information within your narrative -- helps your reviewers make informed evaluations of your work.

If you collaborate with others, we suggest getting letters from co-authors indicating the level of your contributions. This is imperative if all of your published work is multiauthored or the pieces you are citing as having met the minimum criteria are collaborative endeavors. The committee wants to know that you made a substantive contribution to the work. Letters from collaborators indicating your contributions (and theirs) help substantiate claims you make in your narrative. Any time you make the review committee guess, it increases the chance for misinterpretation.

As with the other sections of your narrative, you set the context in discussing service. If you made strategic decisions for how your service fits into a larger plan, describe those decisions. For instance, perhaps you wanted to learn about curriculum development and how to propose a new course, so you joined the department curriculum committee. If you were an opportunistic service provider (i.e., you served on a committee because it was required to keep your job), do not turn it into something it was not. A committee where all you did was count votes once per semester or you were a marshal at graduation is a smaller level of commitment and work than chairing a committee. Remember that your colleagues are reviewing your file and they are familiar with many of the service opportunities. Exaggerating service contributions can cause reviewers to wonder what else you are exaggerating.

Compiling Your Evidence

You may have limitations on how much evidence you can include. Being judicious in what you include increases the amount of time reviewers spend on the good stuff. So how do you decide?

First, your campus may require certain artifacts: course syllabi, sample assessments, student work samples, summaries of student evaluation results. Obviously, include the required elements. Then check with colleagues to know what is expected and typically included. Asking to see the files of those who are just ahead of you in the process is a great way to get ideas both for evidence to include and how to organize your file.

Second, be sure that your evidence is tightly integrated with your narrative so that readers can see and read both in parallel. Creating a clear, easy-to-navigate file makes it easier for the reviewing committees to read and evaluate your information.

It is better to include fewer high-quality artifacts than a large number of insignificant artifacts mixed in with the high-quality ones. Remember that your goal is to provide evidence that demonstrates how you have met or exceeded the requirements for retention, tenure or promotion, so choose your evidence accordingly.

Survive and Thrive

As efficient and effective as we hope these tips are, maintaining, compiling and submitting your file is still a stressful process. The logistics alone are challenging. Then add the ambiguity of the process, self-doubt that arises and general angst about preparation for and the process of review. With those factors in mind, we offer the following

reminders and suggestions:

- Seek allies. See if those who are at or near the same career stage would share their files with you, allowing you to see what they included, how long their file was and so on. Keep in mind that guidelines may vary and that no two files are alike, but seeing someone else's can be helpful as you think about what yours should look like. Find a colleague, read each other's narrative drafts and provide feedback. Look at each other's evidence. Doing so with people outside your department can also be helpful; if they can understand what you wrote, so will committee members outside your department.
- Reach out to your peer network. Your graduate school friends are on the same timeline as you. Are you still close to your graduate adviser? These people know you better than most. They have seen how you survived the dissertation process, so they may have some suggestions to help you live through this process, too.
- Write about the work, not about yourself. One of us got this advice when writing our file, and it made the process of writing easier. It is about the product and process, not about you as an individual.
- Take your time. Do not try to compile materials or write the entire narrative at once. Work methodically and in brief regular sessions, just like you would on teaching and scholarship. Work on sections and come back to the project over time. Done this way, it is actually kind of cool to see all that you have accomplished.

Finally, know that the process should not dictate your life and all your academic decisions. You certainly cannot ignore the requirements for gaining tenure, but you want to chart your academic pathway to be more than just meeting a checklist. You are building a career that will be significantly longer than six years, so map out a plan that will have you being productively engaged in a course of action that makes you happy while meeting your institution's guidelines. The file that you put together is just a way of sharing that story with others.