

The portfolio review process

In the world of theatre, where the first language artists speak is “visual,” the portfolio may be the single most important marketing tool a designer or technician has. Each March, at the USITT Annual Conference & Stage Expo, the Costume Design & Technology Commission hosts several days of portfolio reviews. Students and professionals benefit from the feedback and encouragement they receive from costume design and tech faculty and industry professionals. Reviewers are treated to a look at the work of up-and-coming artists and have the opportunity to mentor them in a collegial environment. Portfolio reviews are one more way the Commission is working to ensure all of its members’ interests are addressed. At USITT, we have expanded the name to Portfolio Reviews & Interview Materials Prep (PRIMP), because we know there is much more to share during job interviews besides a portfolio. Your resume and your reputation from past experience are what often get you jobs. This document is to help guide you not only for your PRIMP session at conference, but for any job interview.

The weird thing about a review is that the reviewers don’t know exactly what type of job you are applying for, unlike a normal job interview. Introduce yourself (and be yourself), and tell the reviewers what kind of work you’re hoping to get, so they know what direction to lead their advice. Be prepared to show two or three items for sure - pick your favorites or the ones that you want help on. Tell us why you picked it. Be proud of your work. Talk about how the work you did supported the production and made a difference. Why was this project better because of you?

Every person who requests a review will present his/her/their work to two professionals who will offer advice on format, content, sequencing, page layout, and content. Reviews can also be geared toward individual questions or concerns. Even pre-tenure academics and mid-career costumers find feedback invaluable when it’s time to update the look of their portfolios. You will have 30 minutes total, so be prepared with what you would like to most discuss; you will likely not get through your entire portfolio.

Various career levels have different goals in a portfolio and each individual brings a unique viewpoint and personality. A portfolio should reflect that as it showcases your best work. Getting quality feedback will help ensure the portfolio does this as effectively as possible. You can also use the time to ask the reviewers how they may have done it differently, but this is mostly about how they can help you shine in a job interview. Also, know that they are there to help you, and any criticism is to be constructive. This is also the opportunity to get more people to know about your work and potentially lead to connections and other jobs, but you’ve already made the first positive step by signing up for a review. It doesn’t hurt to have a business card ready to hand the reviewers, or to follow up with them later. You’ll also now have a familiar face as you proceed through the rest of the conference.

Breathe deeply and enjoy this opportunity. Ask questions. This review is for you! Get the most out of it that you can!

Costume Portfolios

Costume Design & Technology is a multifaceted field with a number of different areas in which to carve out your own niche. The structure of your portfolio and presentation is up to you, and will likely vary based on your individual area of interest. For the purposes of this portfolio review, since you are limited to a 30-minute timeslot, you should try to focus on one completed production or one specific aspect of your work. While you can certainly include other elements of your body of

work, it is most useful for us to see the process and documentation of one design (if you are a designer) or of your skillset (in the case of those in the technical and/or managerial side.).

When including your work as an assistant or associate designer, be sure to indicate what the scope of the work on the project was and indicate the designer. All components of the portfolio should be labeled consistently with a minimum of name of show and producing company.

Choose things that help tell your story as a costumer, what kind of productions you've worked on, and what kinds of projects you've created. Paperwork is another component of portfolios - pick paperwork you are proud of and then tell the story of how you compiled it, or what its use helped accomplish. Show examples of how you organize/communicate information. Perhaps that's a budget or schedule. Or maybe that's something else for you. Share your voice as a theatre maker and bring the reviewer into your conversation.

Keep in mind the 3 C's: Clean, clear, concise. Keep your portfolio streamlined – it is not a scrapbook or a haphazard collection. If it's messy, sloppy or juvenile, skip it. Be clear about the importance of each item you present. Crystallize your articulation of each item into one or two sentences max. If we want to hear more, we will ask. Be concise. We don't need a day-by-day explanation of a build process. We DO want to know why a particular item's build was challenging for you or how it helped you grow as an artist.

Costume reviews can cover both design and construction elements, as well as managerial and show running, so choose portfolio items that make the most sense for you. Items to consider include:

- Designs, resource materials, original concept statements, and preliminary paperwork including character/scene breakdowns
- Patterns, mockups, and in-process documentation
- Final products, with photos both close up and onstage with other production elements, small swatches of fabrics used; if an item travels well, you might bring the final product itself
- Production paperwork - costume piece lists, wardrobe run sheets
- Managerial materials - budgets, schedules, inventory tracking
- Your resume – you may want to provide several copies so that reviewers can write directly on it
- A sample cover letter

Things to keep in mind:

- Redact any personal, private, or proprietary information
- If you have a digital portfolio, have it downloaded on your fully-charged computer or tablet; do not rely on wifi alone or a power supply - more discussion on websites below

Photos

Make sure that any photos you use are the best possible quality and of the appropriate resolution. Avoid pixelated images that have been overly enlarged. Likewise, make sure your text is readable from several feet away. Your reviewers will thank you!

Resume

There are many ways to organize a resume, and different employers may prefer different things. Depending on the credits you have and the type of job you are going for, you may choose to organize it by job title, academic vs professional credits, costume versus other areas, or by genre if you work on multiple types of projects. You might also have a variation of each of these types of resume to submit depending on the job. Find one that best showcases who you are and what you've done and know. The resume is usually the tool to get your foot in the door. Any additional materials should support the resume and tell a story. You may want to have the Resume Doctors on the expo floor look at your resume, and save the time of your portfolio review for the more visual aspects of your entire interview materials package.

1. **The top third of the page** - this is what will get looked at most to see if you are appropriate for this particular project. Place your most relatable credits here. If they choose to read the entire resume after that, the rest is golden. Your education information like degree earned/earning therefore could be placed more towards the bottom of the page, leaving your project or company credits more prominence.
2. **Fonts** - be judicious on the number and size of fonts you use. A special font for your name and headers is fine, but make the bulk of your resume one consistent legible font.
3. **Asterisks and other symbols** - Limit the use of asterisks or other symbols. You may choose to use it for a world premiere or a reading or something, then put a key to what the symbol means...but don't make the employer search for what each asterisk means. Sometimes it can be much cleaner to simply put (World Premiere) right after the show title, to get the point across.
4. **Dates** - you will get differing opinions about whether to include dates or not. They are most useful if you worked for a company multiple years, or if the company has done the production multiple times, like an annual version of *A Christmas Carol* or the opera *Carmen*.
5. **Paper** - a majority of resumes are submitted electronically these days. If you print, plain white paper is just fine, but if you go with something else, a slightly heavier weight of paper is nice. Be sure to print the same direction as any embedded watermark. Hold the paper up to a light source to see if you've printed the correct way.
6. **One page or two** - especially if you are new to the career, you should be able to trim your resume to a single page, tailoring it to the job at hand. As you advance, keep a working document that has every credit, and tailor it to the job or genre as needed. If you are applying for an academic job, a curriculum vitae (CV) is more appropriate, listing every credit you've ever had, including awards and publications. Start keeping track of this in your early years and you'll thank yourself later - but don't submit all of it for most costume jobs.
7. **"Special skills"/Related information** - Be judicious on the term "special skills"...are they really that special? Are the skills really applicable to the job you're applying for? Early in your career you may want to share that you have had work in the other production shops, but as your career advances, you'll have a more focused skill set or accomplishments. In addition to sewing and dyeing techniques, think about things like training in diversity and inclusion or sexual harassment awareness. Do you know any other languages, including sign language? Some like to throw in a good conversation starter, some think of that as a gimmick. Do be prepared to talk about whatever you list.
8. **References** - Go ahead and include references from the beginning. Some employers may decide that "references available upon request" is just one more step on their part that is

too much to go through to hire you. Also, if they know someone who has worked at the same theatre you list, they may contact that person rather than the reference you suggested. It's also good to have multiple references available, to once again tailor to the job you are applying for. If you work different genres, have references appropriate to that particular work. References should be able to speak to your recent body of work, and someone who worked with you five years ago may no longer be in that position. Do make sure that you ask your reference if you may use them, and which methods of contact they prefer to have listed. Do NOT list these references publicly on the internet; this is a time "references available on request" is highly recommended or to only list names/titles but not contact information.

Cover letter

Different employers give different weight to cover letters. Some read them first, some check out your resume first to see if you're even a viable candidate. The cover letter can be used to explain some of your credits, as well as how you might best fit the job. Relate yourself to the job at hand. Help the reader relate the positions noted on your resume to the job you are applying for. If you have availability concerns, or preferences for specific projects in a season, you can list those in the cover letter, too. It's also great to tell the employer where you found their posting, so they can see where they are successfully getting candidates. As a tip, try to throw in a detail you know about the theatre that isn't something just regurgitated from the job posting. Show them you took an investment in learning more about their company and why you want to work for them specifically. Be sure to check for any squiggly lines your word processing program used to inform you of a grammatical or spelling error, too.

Websites

You should have some sort of digital presence online, but you do not need to do a full paid website unless you wish to do so. If an employer does a Google search, you don't want your only hit to be photos on your social media of a wild night at the bar. Be judicious what is publicly viewable, and remember that anyone with a mutual friend may see what you post. There are also free webhosting at places like Wix and Wordpress, if you don't mind their branding. Do not plan for consistent wifi while at a job interview though (or the USITT review); have your materials downloaded.

This is for YOU

All of the above are suggestions that can help you focus on the decisions you make, depending on what you are trying to present. You will also have people give you multiple opinions about exactly the same part of your materials. Take everyone's constructive criticism, and present the best you!