Ten Tips For Writing an Effective Autobiographical Form
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The purpose of the autobiographical file:
* to clearly demonstrate to the department and college committees, your dean, and the provost the significant work you’ve done in scholarship, teaching and service.
* to show you’re a valuable, committed and hard-working member of the Weber community.
* to indicate your ability to grow and develop as a part of that community.

This presentation could be summed up in two words: Audience Awareness. You are writing to peers and colleagues – yes, real live people. You don’t usually meet the committee members through the process, and many of them are unfamiliar with your work. Therefore the written presentation you make of yourself is critical to your success.

1. Start early:
   • Make a file where you throw in any materials that could be tenure-related. Once a semester, go through it and add the new material to the computer form you maintain.
   • Make a time line for yourself. When will you complete a first draft? When will you show your draft to a trusted colleague so s/he has a week to read your work? When is the final document due?
   • Do a little at a time. This is a big job.

2. Write a narrative explanation:
Most of your readers will be unfamiliar with your specific area of academic interest. They won’t know whether a publication is significant or a conference presentation prestigious unless you tell them. It’s not enough to write a list of your accomplishments and expect your reader to intuit the significance of that list. Your narrative should answer such questions as:
   • What is (the article) exactly?
   • Why is (the article) significant?
   • Where does it fit in your discipline’s professional publications?
   • For teaching, explain any classes you’ve created that are new to the department, or created for Honors. Have you revamped a standard class for your department?

3. Make the reading of your file easy by being well-organized:
Tenure files are thick documents, and a committee usually has to wade through a number of them. You can irritate your committee members by throwing everything in and asking your readers to do the work (frustrating reading), or you can organize your material so you lead your reader through your file in a smooth and logical way (pleasurable reading).
For example, a common way to organize your publications and presentations in order of their importance:
- Refereed National Journals
- Refereed Regional Journals
- Non-Refereed Journals

You can organize other sections in terms of **chronology**, starting with the most recent activity and working backward. It’s important to be consistent. For example, if you organize one section from earliest to most recent, don’t reverse the process in the next section.

Be aware of the “micro” organization (individual sections) and also “macro”: is the whole portfolio attractively put together? Is there a file of supplemental materials that includes copies of articles you’ve written and books published?

4. **Don’t repeat** information as it looks like padding. If you cross-reference, be up-front about it so your readers can easily see where and why you’re mentioning something twice.

5. Consider including **failure** as well as success as part of your discussion of your professional growth. Focus on what you learned from the experience and how you applied the lesson rather than on the causes of your lack of success.

6. **You don’t have to be fabulous at everything.** The track system allows for you to be weaker in some areas and stronger in others. Your committees will match you with the track that best reflects your strengths.

7. **Don’t forget your teaching:**
   As we work at a teaching institution, it’s appropriate to spend some time on paper explaining your teaching philosophy and how you apply that to your work in the classroom. You may be asked to present a teaching portfolio to your department committee.

8. Write a cover page that **summarizes** your accomplishments. Make life easy for your readers by giving them a snapshot of who you are and what you’ve done when they first open your file.

9. In terms of **writing style**:
   - Remember your audience: You’re addressing colleagues who work outside your discipline, so use plain English; avoid jargon, cliches, and discipline-based lingo to be sure your readers can understand what you’re saying.
   - Be concise but clear: no “puffy” language.
   - Be meticulous about correctness: no spelling or grammar errors. If this is a weak area for you, ask someone else to check it.
   - Don’t be defensive: these are your colleagues and peers reading your file, not your enemies.
10. Write, rewrite, show your file to a colleague or two, and revise again. Consult with your chair or dean.

**Useful Reading:** “Demystifying the Profession: helping Junior Faculty Succeed.” A packet of three articles available from the Teaching and Learning Forum.

“I'm not a very good writer, but I'm an excellent rewriter.” ~James Michener
“Easy reading is damn hard writing.” ~Nathaniel Hawthorne

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**Advice from the Deans**

**Warren R. Hill, former dean of Applied Science and Technology**
-- Study the College's Promotion, Tenure and Post-Tenure Review Policy (DATE: 6/1/93; REV: 9/20/00; the most recent revision).
  - Focus on the last five years.
  - Ask yourself this question: What have you done in the three areas lately?
  - Address anomalies in student evaluations. Give reasons or explanations why a course went well or badly.
  - Make sure the evaluators, at all levels, can find the information they need. Don’t bury the material. Don’t leave it incomplete. Don’t spread it out.
  - Have a one or two page overview memo at the beginning of your file that outlines your major accomplishments for the past few years.
  - Feel free to have someone who will not be involved in the process review your file.

**Madonne Miner, Arts and Humanities**
-- Focus on key accomplishments. After you’ve listed an entry, annotate it. If you have listed a publication, provide a short summary of the quality of the outlet (“top journal in this area,” or “has an acceptance rate of 10%,” etc.). If you have listed a performance, tell your readers if this performance was invited, judged, etc. In other words: Interpret accomplishments for reviewers since they are not all from your discipline.
  - Make your summary/cover sheet one page. Learn how to summarize.
  - Don’t list the same information in four or five places. Avoid padding or the appearance of padding.
  --“Published” means published. Place "accepted for publication," “revised and resubmitted,” and “submitted” in other categories.
– In addition to formal student evaluations of your teaching (with information on how you compare to other faculty in your department) consider preparing a teaching portfolio (at least at the departmental level). Include your philosophy of teaching and methodologies you use. Discuss teaching innovations. Talk about performance-based assessment. Provide some sample syllabi, assignment sheets, or exams.
– Ask a colleague or friend from outside your discipline area to read your file. Then ask your reader what she or he remembers from the file: what is striking? What is puzzling? Does your reader feel that the file effectively represents you as a professional?

Jeff Steagall, Business and Economics
– Write well. You want your audience to be in a good mood as they evaluate you.
– Have others read your materia before you submit it. They’ll find problem areas that you don’t see as the author.
– Provide a concise, informative executive summary that sets the stage for the reader
-- Ask yourself this question: Since your last promotion or tenure evaluation, what have you done?
– Use a one-page spreadsheet to display quantitative information. Include data on every class taught, or state why you did not include it. Don’t just let that page stand on its own–include text that highlights what you want the reader to glean from the spreadsheet.
– Assume that a reviewer will spend an hour or less on your file. Use the 80/20 rule. In 20 minutes, a reviewer should be able to find 80% of the needed information.
– Make sure your complete file presents a continuous picture from the first review to the present. If a problem has been pointed out, acknowledge it, and then tell what you have done to fix it (say, for example, in your teaching). Don’t argue with the critique.
– Be careful about asking for letters of recommendation from colleagues or someone off campus. Do so only if the writers can discuss specifically some professional contribution you have made. Don’t ask them to discuss your suitability for tenure/promotion.
– It’s helpful to your reader if you organize your research thematically. Show them how you have evolved as a scholar.
– The “currency of choice” for scholarship varies widely across disciplines. Don’t assume that your reader believes that your scholarship appears in appropriate outlets. Explain clearly whether your discipline places most value on peer-reviewed journal articles, books, proceedings, exhibits, performances, etc.
– Classify your research into at least one of these three categories (a) contributions to practice, (b) learning and pedagogical research, c) discipline-based scholarship.

Jack Rasmussen, Education
– Don’t assume that reviewers can read between the lines. Interpret your accomplishments for them.
– Remember: organization is everything.
– Clarify and highlight the important things you have done.
– Strive to improve. Look carefully at your student evaluations and your peer evaluations. Then take the necessary steps to make adjustments or improvements. Describe those steps or actions in your narrative.
– Separate the refereed from the non-refereed in your list of publications.
– Take the review process seriously.

Yasmin Simonian, Health Professions
– Please notice that the College document for Tenure Review establishes “minimum” standards of performance for all of the departments within the college. But pay particular attention to the more “stringent” standards specified in the Department Tenure Review documents. For DCHP please see Julie Austin and the DCHP website for more information and forms.
– Make sure your Autobiographical Form, along with the cover letter or summary sheet, looks professional. Use headings, subheadings, and bulleted items with factual information clearly supported. Make your summary short, one page and easy for the reviewers to read. Please see the DCHP website.
– Proofread your Autobiographical Form to make sure there are no spelling or typographical errors.
– Provide supporting materials separate from the information contained in your Professional File. Make sure the readers know where to find each specific material. Consider using a three-ring binder, tabbed Table of Contents, and specific samples of published materials, seminar materials, or other information you feel would show, in detail, what you may have only summarized on your Autobiographical Form.
– Divide your publications into categories (refereed publications, a chapter in a book, papers published in the Proceedings of a conference); then list your entries chronologically within each category. Don’t list them twice.
– Remember to list your research projects.
– Have a colleague (insider and/or outside your department) review your professional file to provide you with feedback.
– Get a faculty mentor!
– Be sure to review all rank and tenure documents in Section 8.
– Very important: PPM 8-11, (Evaluation of Faculty), 8-12 (Dated guidelines), 8-13 (Maintenance of File).
– Attend the university seminar on how to put your file together by Provost Vaughan and Judy Elsley. We will let people know when this is.
– Be familiar with all of the rank and tenure documents 8-11 thru 7-27.
– Look at the forms the committees fill out (peer review forms, promotion -recommendation form, and tenure summary form. (Julie Austin at DCHP) has these and gives them to the chair of the committees before they meet.)
- Attend the DCHP Dean’s meeting regarding rank and tenure and ask questions.
- Ask lots of questions. Don’t assume you are the only one who doesn’t know about the process. It is complicated and we are going to streamline it.
- Review someone else’s file who has reputation of a good file. Get permission to review the file and contact Julie Austin in the Dean’s Office to access it.
- Your colleagues do care, just ask.
- Get started early and all the best during this process.

Dale Ostlie, former dean of Science
- Be sure to study the College of Science’s tenure document carefully (approved Spring 2003). It is incumbent upon you to know what the standards and requirements are.
- Remember that this College has a strong emphasis on “refereed” publications. There are two tracks you may follow: (1) publications; or (2) other significant scholarship, but strongly documented. If you have any questions about this requirement, please resolve them with your Department Chair.
- Make sure that you present your credentials in your Autobiographical form clearly, specifically, and concisely. Do not “pad” the document. Edit it carefully before the due date, paring away superfluous materials.
- Annotate your significant accomplishments so readers outside your discipline can understand why it is significant; but be brief.
- In each of the main sections of your form, begin with the main accomplishment followed by specific data.
- Show evidence of ongoing activity in teaching, scholarship, and service. In teaching especially, discuss how you are improving your pedagogy. Make sure that you have been, are, and will continue to be a strong contributor to your College and Department. There will be no “resting on your laurels.”
- Let the reader know of any supporting documents, such as a teaching portfolio, and where the materials can be found.

Frank Harrold, Social and Behavioral Sciences
- Remember that the more complete and organized and chronological the file, the better. Your file will be looked at by many different people, some of whom don’t know you, your discipline, or your contributions to the university. Tell them!
- Carefully craft the cover letter (about 1 to 1 ½ pages), focusing on key ideas and accomplishments. Address your letter TO: Those Who Review My File. If you have supplemental materials, state specifically that they are in a box in my office ready to be reviewed.
- Make a case for your most significant accomplishments. Say what channels you’re strongest in and why.
- Have a colleague or two read your file and cover letter. Other eyes are often better than ours. Build collegiality with others by exchanging views.
- Be clear and direct.
- Read your file, and give yourself a "5-minute exam." Ask yourself: Can I find all of the important information in that period of time?
- Make it easy for the reviewer.

Advise from two department chairs

Gene Bozniak, Former Botany Department Chair
-- The Professional File is the Official (and hence, legal document) and should be treated as such. A dangerous trend I have observed on this campus, some colleges especially, is an over-emphasis on supplemental materials outside of the Professional File. These are not only voluminous Teaching Portfolios but binders that cover the other two areas. So much emphasis is placed on the effort put into these supplemental materials that candidates often simply refer the reviewer to these. EVERYTHING OF IMPORTANCE for making judgements on candidates MUST be in the Professional File!! As an outside reviewer I don't have six hours to spend hunting information that should be in the Professional File.
-- For candidates in a first time review: Seek a mentor and/or model file. There are a number of fantastic files out there that only a small number of folks have seen. I encourage candidates being reviewed to access recommended successful candidate files to read and get ideas on how to organize a great file. The chair could recommend to the candidates preparing files to seek permission from successful faculty to look at their professional files and teaching portfolios. I found that such folks are honored to be asked to have their files act as models for newer faculty.
-- For candidates on subsequent reviews: Summarize accomplishments since the last review. Make it very clear in the summary page what was accomplished since the last review. Also, what were the recommendations made in the past at all levels of review and what did you do about them?
-- Give attention to the art and science of summarizing. More is NOT better but padding. More important than organization (the candidate is at the mercy of the developers of the layout of the Autobiographical Form) is a clear and concise summary with interpretation for the reviewer.
- Proofread all documents. There is no bigger turn-off to the reviewer than typos....especially on the summary page.
- Don't present yourself as defensive. Whether it is a comment on a previous evaluation, peer assessment, or student evaluation you can craft a response that is NOT defensive. Perhaps simply explain the nature of the subject matter in question. As a reviewer, I regard a bad or negative evaluation (by a minority) as a positive for the candidate if the subject matter is controversial. I do need to have this pointed out to me, however.
Kathy Herndon, English Dept Chair
-- Make it clear and concise. That doesn't mean leave things out that are important and useful to the reviewer. Remember volume works against you as reviewers are searching your material for certain bits of information. Make your organizational strategy clear to the reviewers.
-- Make use of your peer review committee. The best portfolios I have read the past few years are from candidates whose peer review committee has been actively involved in the generation and presentation of materials on teaching.
-- Don't ignore possible problems. If you think there may be questions about a publication, i.e. quality, range, audience, answer those questions for the reviewers.
-- Address weaknesses pointed out in previous reviews. "This is what I have done since then to address this problem." Remember many reviewers look at the previous reviews for indicated weakness and how the candidates have addressed them.