The Missing Semester: Portfolio Advice for Architecture Students & Graduates

Clear, professional, practical - everything school forgot to teach you.

Part 1: What a Portfolio Is (and Isn't)

A portfolio **is not** a scrapbook of everything you've ever done. It's a communication tool designed to show your thinking, your skills, and your potential as a future colleague. Employers **are not looking for** a full archive - they want to see whether you can **make your ideas clear.**

What matters most:

- **Design process** - show how an idea developed, not just the final render.

- **Clarity of drawings** - consistent line weights, neat layouts, drawings that are easy to read.

- **Your ability to explain** - projects that you can present in 2-3 minutes without confusion.

Think of it as a conversation starter. A **strong portfolio** doesn't overwhelm with everything you've done - it gives just enough to open discussion and show you're ready to contribute.

Part 2: How Many Projects and Pages?

A **common mistake** is to include too much. Employers rarely spend more than 10-15 minutes with your portfolio in an interview.

Curation is everything.

- Show 3-5 of your strongest projects. More than that risks diluting your best work.

- Each project needs only 1-3 sheets:

- Total length: 10-20 pages is more than enough for interviews.

Think **quality over quantity**. A clear 12-page portfolio with well-chosen work will always make a stronger impression than a 40-page document full of half-finished or weak projects.

Part 3: Organising a Page

1. Decide the focus of the page

- Each page should communicate one key idea (concept, atmosphere, technical drawings, materiality or final outcome).

- Don't try to mix everything at once - clarity is stronger than volume.

2. Use a grid

- Work with a 2-3 column grid. This creates alignment and balance.

- Place images and text inside the grid - avoid free-floating elements.

- Keep gutters (spaces between columns) at least 3-8 mm.

3. Image hierarchy

- Usually best to choose one dominant image → the main focus of the page.

- Support with 2–3 smaller images → diagrams, sections, or details. Arrange so the eye flows naturally from large to small.

- In special cases (e.g. sequential storytelling), images can be the same size - but only if you establish a clear order (left→right or top→bottom).

- Avoid giving all images the same size without hierarchy → it makes the page flat and confusing.

4. Text placement

- Keep all text in one block, not scattered around.

- Place it top left, bottom left, or bottom right - where it doesn't compete with drawings.

- Avoid centering text. Left-aligned is clearer and easier to read.

5. Text length

Page description: 2 - 3 sentences (max 40 - 60 words).

- Idea → one line about the project's concept.

- Content → what drawings/images are shown here.

- Message → why they matter for understanding the design.

6. White space

- Leave at least 12.7 mm margins on all sides.

- Don't fill every corner - empty space makes the design look intentional and professional.

- Remember: white space guides the reader's eye.

7. Consistency

- Place page descriptions always in the same spot

- Use consistent fonts, sizes, and colours throughout.

- Keep image ratios similar (don't mix stretched rectangles with perfect circles unless intentional).

8. Good page rhythm

- As a guide, aim for 3-5 main visual elements per page.

- Most pages work best with one large image + two smaller ones → creates rhythm and avoids overcrowding.

- If the page is about a sequence or comparison, using images of equal size can work - but keep the order clear so the eye knows where to move.

- If you only have one strong image, let it stand alone - never add fillers just to "fill space."

Part 4: Writing and Text

1. Keep it short and readable

- A portfolio is a visual document first. Text should support, not dominate.

- Max page description: 40-60 words per page (2-3 sentences).

- Employers will spend 15-30 seconds per page - they won't read long paragraphs. Keep it brief and to the point.

2. Structure every description the same way

Each page description should follow a 3-part flow:

- Idea → one line on the project's concept or design intent.

- Content → one line on what drawings/images are shown.

- Message → one line on why this matters (circulation, light, material, atmosphere).

Example structure (instructional, not actual content):
"State the main design idea in one clear sentence.
Then explain what drawings / images / photographs are included here (plan, section, render, etc.). Make sure to include scale where relevant. Finally, highlight the key quality they communicate, such as spatial clarity or environmental strategy."

3. Where text should go

- Place text in one block per page, not scattered across images.

- Best positions: bottom left, bottom right, or top left.

- Align left. Avoid centering (harder to read). Avoid hyphenate.

4. Annotations

- Use small numbered notes linked to images (1, 2, 3 in corners).

- Each annotation = 1 line max (e.g. "1. Ground floor plan at 1:200 - showing circulation and public/private split").

- Keep annotations consistent in style (same size font, same placement).

5. Tone of voice

Write factually, not dramatically. Avoid buzzwords. Be specific, clear, and concise.

- **Avoid:** "This is a groundbreaking exploration of light."

- **Instead:** "This section highlights how natural light defines the double-height space."

7. Consistency across portfolio

- Use the same font, size, and tone on every page.

- Don't switch between casual and academic voice.

- Think of it as a professional script - calm, clear, and confident.

8. Common mistakes

- Writing essays instead of short notes.

- Mixing different fonts/styles between projects.

- Over-explaining obvious drawings ("This is a plan" when it's already clear).

- Forgetting to proofread (spelling errors stand out badly in portfolios).

Part 5: Fonts and Typography

1. Choose one font family

- Stick to one to two clean sans-serif font across CV, Cover Letter, and Portfolio. (If you use two fonts, make sure there is a clear hierarchy - for example, titles in one font and paragraphs in another.)

- Recommended: Montserrat, Poppins, Helvetica Neue, Inter, Source Sans, Lato.

- Why → consistency makes your work look professional. Mixing to many fonts looks amateur.

2. Establish hierarchy with size + weight

- Headings: Bold, 14-20 pt.

- Subheadings: Semi-bold, 11-14 pt.

- Body text: Regular, 10-12 pt.

Don't go smaller than 8 pt - it becomes unreadable.

3. Use weight, not style, for emphasis

- To highlight something, use bold, not underlines, italics, or colour.

- Italics → only for drawing titles or foreign words.

4. Line spacing and alignment

Line spacing (leading):

- Body text → 120-130% of font size (e.g., 10 pt text = 12-13 pt leading).

- Headings → slightly tighter (110-115%).

- Avoid hyphenation - it always looks messy in short blocks. Use left alignment for most portfolio text. Full justification can sometimes look polished, but only works if your text column is wide enough to avoid large gaps

5. Colour

- Main text → always black or very dark grey.

- Accents (headings or dividers) → use one or two colours maximum. If you want to keep it safe use just shades of grey and black.

- Bright or multiple colours make it look like a student project, not a job portfolio.

6. Page balance

- Keep margins clean: 12.7-20 mm on all sides.

- Don't push text right against the edges.

- Leave enough white space so text feels like it's "sitting comfortably" on the page.

7. Consistency across documents

- CV, Cover Letter, Portfolio → must all share the same font and text style.

- This makes your application feel like a designed set, not random pieces.

- Before exporting, flip through → does the text look like one continuous system?

8. Common mistakes

- Using too many fonts and switching font sizes without reason.

- Tiny text that can't be read in print and over-decorative typefaces (script, futuristic, "fun" fonts).

- Export as PDF. Never send Word or PowerPoint files.

- Keep file size under 15 MB (use "smallest file size" for email, "high quality" for print).

- Name your file professionally: *Surname_Portfolio_2025.pdf.*

Part 6: Summary - Common Mistakes

1. Overstuffing pages

- Trying to fit 10 drawings on one sheet makes everything unreadable.

- Each page should focus on one main idea with 2-4 supporting visuals max.

- Remember: interviewers look for clarity, not quantity.

2. Writing too much

- Long paragraphs won't be read.

- Keep page descriptions to 40-70 words (2-3 sentences).

- Project introductions: 50-100 words max. (If you feel the need to explain in detail, the drawing is probably unclear - fix the drawing, not the text.)

3. Inconsistent fonts and styles

- Switching fonts mid-portfolio looks unprofessional.

- Use one font family throughout (CV, Cover Letter, Portfolio).

- Don't mix bold, italics, and underlines randomly on the page.

4. Inconsistent line weights in drawings

- Drawings with messy or inconsistent line weights feel rushed.

- Rule of thumb:
  Thick lines = cuts;
  Medium = edges;
  Thin = background/context.

- Consistency makes drawings look professional even if the design isn't perfect.

6. Starting weak

- The first project sets the impression.

- Never start with something average "to warm up."

- Lead with your strongest project - a memorable, thought-provoking image that sets the tone.

- Employers prefer depth (clear design thinking) over breadth (showing everything).

7. Overusing colour and effects

- Bright backgrounds, neon colours, or heavy Photoshop filters look unrefined.

- Stick to black + one or two accents.

- Let drawings and models speak for themselves.

8. Reusing university boards

- Presentation boards are not portfolios.

- Uni boards are often overcrowded and formatted for a crit, not an employer.

- Always adapt: clean layouts, consistent fonts, less text.

9. Poor file exports

- Sending a 100 MB PDF is unprofessional. Target: under 15 MB for email, high-res print version separately.

- Name files professionally: *Surname_Portfolio_2025.pdf*.

10. Lack of proofreading

- Typos or grammar mistakes kill professionalism instantly.

- Always check spelling in text blocks, captions, CV, and cover letter. If in doubt, ask someone else to read it or check grammar through ChatGPT.

Thank you for reading and good luck! Remember: clarity, confidence, and intention make all the difference.

If you'd like more support, we welcome you to explore our packs or join a workshop. They're designed to help you take the next step - whether that's improving your projects, refining your portfolio, or preparing for interviews.