

USING WRITING TO TEACH COURSE CONTENT

Writing assignments can

- improve student learning and thinking
- help students learn the methodology/inquiry methods and special genres of different fields (e.g., education case analysis, science lab report, business executive summary, psychology literature review).

Frequent writing assignments turn a passive learning experience into an active learning experience.

Passive & Active Learning

<p>Passive learning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• instructor's role is to deliver information• student's role is to absorb information• syllabus-based course management• interaction in the classroom exists, but is limited	<p>Active learning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• instructor primarily as facilitator• students expected to engage thoughtfully with the course material• team or collaborative activities• students responsible for self-managed learning
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A combination of "formal" and "informal" writing assignments works best.

Formal & Informal Writing Assignments

<p>Formal writing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• planned, drafted, revised, & edited• intended for an audience (usually similar to published writing in the field—case study, research report, essay, etc.)• purpose is to communicate ideas• collected by instructor• graded or evaluated	<p>Informal writing ("writing-to-learn")</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• not revised or edited• intended for self or a small audience• purpose is to stimulate thinking, explore, generate ideas• may or may not be collected by instructor• not usually graded A-F, but may be graded "+" or "✓" or "-"
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Three Popular Write-to-Learn Assignments

(1) Freewrite/Quickwrite (in-class activity)

Freewriting is fast writing, composed generally for the writer and not for other readers. Freewriting is a quick and efficient way for a writer to get onto paper what he or she already knows, and often to discover a connection or two that hadn't earlier been part of consciousness.

A freewriting session typically lasts from three to twelve minutes. Very often freewriting begins with a focus—sometimes simply a topic, such as "senior citizens," or sometimes an assertion ("Senior citizens affect the economy in several positive ways"). Focusing on the topic or assertion, student writers then write with the guidance of three don'ts: don't stop; don't censor; and don't go back.

Because one goal of freewriting is to retrieve as much prior knowledge as possible, writers are encouraged to force words onto a page by not stopping. Because another goal is to uncover connections that the writer might not previously have realized, writers are instructed to "follow their ideas wherever they may lead," and not to cut a thought in mid-flight because it initially seems inappropriate or irrelevant.

Finally, because freewriting is writing for the writer, writers are encouraged not to edit, not to worry about spelling, not to worry about "mistakes"—in other words, not to go back and "fix" their writing—

because it is not intended for others to read.

Ideally, freewriting is for the writer's eyes only. But many teachers give their students the opportunity to volunteer to read or even exchange pieces of freewriting. Some of the many possible uses for freewriting:

- use as a prelude to discussion
- use as a postlude to discussion
- use as a postlude to reading
- use as an icebreaker
- use as a beginning-of-class activity
- use as a capstone for a class.

(2) Double-entry Journal or Summary/Response Notebook(out-of-class activity)

For all or selected reading assignments, students write (two pages) in a Journal/Notebook. Half the entry is a summary; the other half is response. The structure of a Double-Entry Journal is a split page: left half is summary, right half is response. The structure of a Summary/Response Notebook is the first part is a summary, second part is a response.

The Journal/Notebook gives students practice writing summaries; helps students connect what they already know with what they are reading; increases the time students spend thinking about the reading assignment.

When you assign a Journal/Notebook, give students a guideline sheet that explains the purpose of the assignment, what is required for the summary and the response, page requirements, grading, due dates, etc.

Consider collecting the Journal/Notebook more frequently during the first half of the semester and less frequently during the last half. When you collect the Journal/Notebook:

- Skim the entries and evaluate the quality of the summary and response. Do minimal grading: "+" or "✓" or "-." Highlight exceptional ideas.
- Give detailed feedback only when students have difficulty summarizing or responding.
- Discuss common problems with the class (provide samples and explanations of good summaries or good responses).

Ask groups or pairs of students to discuss their entries at the beginning of class to jumpstart class discussion.

(3) Quick Questions (in- or out-of-class activity)

Students can be shaken from their role as "knowledge collector" by assignments that force them to go beyond simple note-taking and summarizing. Encourage them to analyze and engage with the content by answering questions that you provide.

Examples of questions you can ask students to answer in writing:

After discussing/reading/seeing X,

1. I know . . .
2. I don't know . . . And I'd like to know because . . .

After reading X,

1. The main question raised by the author is . . .
2. The author assumes that everyone knows/believes that . . .
3. The central idea raised is . . .
4. People are likely to agree with the author if . . .
5. People are likely to disagree with the author if . . .

At the end of each class session:

1. One thing I got from class today (that I didn't get earlier is) . . .
2. One question that I have after class today is . . . My question is important because . . .
3. One thing I hope we cover next class is . . . because . . .

Students can discuss their answers in small groups and present summaries to the class. When you collect the answers, use the minimal marking system ("+" or "✓" or "-"). The answers to questions like these can help you understand what concepts students are struggling with.

INFORMAL, WRITE-TO-LEARN, LOW-STAKES WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Pre-reading and Post-Reading Writing Activity

During the last five minutes or so of class, ask students to look over the next reading assignment. Perhaps ask them to write what they think the chapter and/or subheading titles suggest will be covered. And/or let them write about how these new texts might relate to previous course material. Ask: How might this material be mathematically (economically, biologically) significant? A possible follow-up, after reading, is to have students respond to these pre-reading questions again or to let them read and revise their initial speculations.

2. Microtheme

A microtheme is brief in-class essay, perhaps composed on a 3x5 card, on a topic specified by the instructor. The brevity created by the small card forces students to practice summary and concision. Microthemes deliver quick, valuable feedback to instructors and encourage students to begin shaping what they are learning. Topics may appear later on exams or may be expanded into more formal essays.

3. Mid-Semester Course Evaluations

Get a written evaluation at mid-course, at a point where there is still time to make adjustments to improve the course. Design questions tailored for the specific course and objectives for the semester. Include questions requiring feedback on writing activities—what's working well and what hasn't worked so well.

4. Counter-arguments

If an argument has been raised in class, or an alternative method of solving an equation has been shown, or more than one theory has been advanced to explain a particular phenomenon, stop for five minutes to allow students to write down all the counter arguments or counter evidence, list the benefits and drawbacks of the alternative methods, or present the case for accepting one theory over another.

5. One Minute Papers or Closure Statements

At the end of class, have students summarize a lecture or discussion, identify the key point, or pose a final question.

6. Exit Box

In large lecture halls, some teachers put boxes by the exit doors where students drop closure statements (see #5) or brief comments, queries, concerns as they leave the class. They provide valuable feedback and keep students alert during the class, planning what they will write.

7. Admit Ticket

Dropping off a brief writing—summary of a reading, two questions drawn from reading, etc.—can be required for admittance into the classroom or lecture hall.

8. Student Note-Takers

In a small class, assign one student each day to be the official note-taker. In larger classes, three or four students may be appointed. These students compare notes after class and create one polished version for distribution. For the note-takers, the activity is a valuable exercise in summarizing, organizing main ideas, and collaborative revision. This activity also provides feedback to the instructor and review material for the class as a whole.

9. Priming the Pump

Ask students to spend the first five minutes of class responding to a question that will be addressed in the lecture or discussion. ("What gene combinations make it possible for a person to have blue eyes?" "How does violence affect children?") Let them know that a few will be called on to read their responses. This encourages students to prepare their compositions with care.

10. Class Dictionary

Ask students to write brief definitions of key terms ("the law of large numbers," "risk assessment," "functionalism," "corporate social responsibility"). If students write on transparencies, their definitions can be put on the overhead for discussion and debate of differences, etc.

11. Breakthrough Metaphors

Kepler tried out various outlandish metaphors in his attempts to understand the universe. We can ask our students to do the same kind of creative and exploratory thinking. Ask them to compose metaphors or analogies to help them think through the nature of a phenomenon. Is the unconscious like a god? a devil? a mechanism? What properties does each metaphor foreground? What does each distort or leave out?